

Neutrality put to the test by sanctions

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The adoption of the sanctions against Russia revived, in Switzerland, an old debate on neutrality, whose origins Parts C and F have traced. Swiss neutrality, recognised in 1815 and practised in various forms since then, prohibits Switzerland from taking part in an armed conflict and requires it to treat belligerents equally in military matters. According to the prevailing doctrine, it does not oblige Switzerland to observe economic neutrality. Switzerland has, moreover, already adopted economic sanctions in the past.¹

Critics of the adoption of the sanctions argued that Switzerland was abandoning its neutrality and compromising its capacity to offer its good offices. A popular initiative seeking to enshrine strict neutrality in the Constitution, prohibiting in particular the adoption of sanctions not decided by the United Nations, was launched.² Supporters of adoption contended that neutrality did not imply indifference in the face of aggression and that Switzerland's international credibility required alignment.

For the Geneva financial centre, this debate has a direct bearing. A Switzerland that did not apply the sanctions of its principal partners would expose itself to retaliatory measures and to exclusion from Western markets, which would ruin its financial centre. A Switzerland that applies them loses part of its business with the countries targeted and sees its neutrality contested by them. The position adopted since 2022 — adoption of European sanctions, maintenance of good offices, reservations on the use of frozen assets — seeks a balance that events will continue to test.

1 Notes

1. Report on Neutrality of 1993, whose validity the Federal Council confirmed on 7 September 2022: distinction between the law of

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neutrality, derived from the Hague Conventions of 1907 and limited to the military sphere, and the policy of neutrality; the adoption of the European Union's sanctions on 28 February 2022 does not infringe the law of neutrality; Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, "Questions-réponses au sujet de la neutralité de la Suisse", eda.admin.ch (accessed September 2026). ↩

2. Popular initiative "Sauvegarder la neutralité suisse" (Safeguarding Swiss neutrality), put to the vote on 27 September 2026: perpetual and armed neutrality enshrined in the Constitution, prohibition of sanctions against belligerent states outside a UN mandate; Federal Council dispatch of 27 November 2024 recommending rejection without a counter-proposal, followed by Parliament; Federal Chancellery, "Initiative sur la neutralité", admin.ch, and press release of 27 November 2024 (accessed September 2026). ↩

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