

Neutrality and the sanctions debate

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The adoption of the sanctions has raised questions about Swiss neutrality that go beyond the economy of Zug. Swiss neutrality is a principle of foreign policy that prohibits participation in wars between other states without in itself prohibiting economic sanctions. Although Switzerland adopted sanctions of the United Nations and, since 1998, of the European Union in several cases, the scope of the sanctions against Russia was unprecedented. Critics on the political right argued that it compromised Switzerland's neutrality and its ability to act as a mediator. In 2024, they submitted a popular initiative to enshrine a strict interpretation of neutrality in the Constitution, which would restrict the adoption of sanctions to those decided by the United Nations.¹

The voters clearly rejected the initiative on 27 September 2026, as this book went to press.² Had it been adopted, Switzerland could no longer have adopted European sanctions against Russia or other states. The Swiss traders could then have resumed trade that their European competitors are prohibited from doing, although they would have faced the risk of secondary sanctions from the United States and the European Union and the loss of access to Western banks and markets. Most Swiss business associations opposed the initiative for that reason. The experience of 2022 showed that the practical reach of foreign sanctions is greater than the formal reach of Swiss law.

1 Notes

1. Swiss Parliament, business 24.092 "Wahrung der schweizerischen Neutralität (Neutralitätsinitiative)", Volksinitiative, parlament.ch: submitted 11 April 2024; Federal Council dispatch of 27 November 2024 recommending rejection without a counter-proposal; initiative rejected by both chambers in the final votes of 20 March 2026 without a counter-proposal; the text would permit sanctions only on the basis

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of UN Security Council decisions. No popular vote had been held as of the summary's update of 17 August 2026; the vote date remains open.

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2. swissinfo.ch, "Resultate der Abstimmung vom 27. September 2026 in der Schweiz", 27 September 2026: "Die Neutralitätsinitiative wird deutlich abgelehnt"; SRF reported 70.2 per cent No and no majority of the cantons. ↩

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