

Master Thesis

Navigating Swiss Neutrality

Switzerland, the UN and Right-Wing Discourse on Neutrality

2002-2022

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Abstract

Swiss neutrality, once seen as straight-forward, has become a disputed concept. Recent events, such as Switzerland's election to the UN Security Council and the Russo-Ukrainian war, have put the country's neutrality into question. This thesis aims to fill the gap in understanding the evolution of public debate on Swiss neutrality from the government's successful campaign to join the UN in 2002 to the recent criticism from the right-wing, represented by the *Swiss People's Party* (SVP). The impact of domestic discourse on foreign policy, particularly from the right-wing, has received limited attention in previous research. Public debate, including political and demographic data, is examined through the lens of neutrality as a decision-making framework. Findings reveal that the UN accession provided a starting point for the SVP to refine their neutrality definition. The 'neutrality initiative' symbolises the preliminary climax of the shift of the right-wing from a reactive to a proactive stance on neutrality. The government seems to merely react to the SVP's efforts to anchor their neutrality definition in the constitution. This thesis sheds light on the complexities of Swiss neutrality and underlines the need for a comprehensive and robust neutrality definition to shape public discourse and policy decisions.

Preface and Acknowledgements

I was born in Switzerland in the late 1990s. While I was growing up, neutrality was there, and it was promoted. But it was never questioned, neither by people surrounding me nor in political discourse. Only towards the end of my school years, that must have been after 2015, we discussed Switzerland's role in the Second World War in history class. And by the time I went to university, it had become much more natural to question Switzerland's international responsibility. The findings of this master's thesis confirm my impression that my personal perception was in line with the evolvement of public discourse. Switzerland's accession to the UN, and more recently, the imposition of sanctions against Russia fuelled a debate that had already been carried on by the right. The issue was and is not whether Switzerland should be neutral, but how.

Writing this thesis at Utrecht University has allowed me to take a stranger's perspective, at least to a certain extent. What is self-evident for me that is not understandable to others? And how is it possible that a concept so strongly associated with Swiss identity undergoes a historic change within the span of a few decades? These are the questions I pondered while writing this thesis. Therefore, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor Dr Liliane Stadler for her guidance, patience and helpful hints and reminders. Without her help, and the support of my family, friends and reviewers, this work would not have come about. My heartfelt thanks go to them.

Kathrin Plüss

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Abbreviations

BDP	Bürgerlich-Demokratische Partei der Schweiz, spin-off of the SVP
BGP	Bauern-, Gewerbe- und Bürgerpartei, predecessor of the SVP
CSS	Center for Security Studies at ETH Zurich
EEA	European Economic Area
EU	European Union
FDFA	Federal Department of Foreign Affairs
FDP	Free Democratic Party
GLP	Green Liberal Party
PfP	Partnership for Peace
SP	Sozialdemokratische Partei, Social Democratic Party
SVP	Schweizerische Volkspartei, Swiss People's Party
NZZ	Neue Zürcher Zeitung
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
WEF	World Economic Forum

Definitions

Federal Assembly	The Swiss parliament. Composed of the National Council (200 seats) and the Council of States (46 seats).
Federal Council	Highest executive authority consisting of seven members (Federal Councillors) from the 4 strongest Swiss parties in parliament. Elected every four years by the Federal Assembly.
Good offices	Offer by a third or neutral party to mediate a conflict. Defined in the UN Charter.
Integral Neutrality	Refers to absolute neutrality, in contrast to differential neutrality, that Switzerland adopted at the beginning of the World War II. ¹

¹ Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 'Vor 80 Jahren: Völkerbund billigt Antrag auf absolute Neutralität der Schweiz', bpb.de, 11 May 2018, <https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/hintergrund-aktuell/269019/vor-80-jahren-voelkerbund-billigt-antrag-auf-absolute-neutralitaet-der-schweiz/>.

Mandatory referendum	Certain laws approved by parliament have to be voted on automatically. Namely, “revisions of the constitution, accession to collective security organisations or supranational communities, and emergency laws that have no constitutional basis and whose validity exceeds one year”. ²
Neutralitätsinitiative	Translates to ‘neutrality initiative’. People’s initiative by the SVP on 19 October 2022. Signatures can be collected until 8 May 2024.
Neutrality law	Codified in The Hague Conventions from 18 October 1907. Legal rights and obligations of a neutral state. ³
Neutrality policy	Not governed by law. Measures a state takes to ensure credibility of its neutrality. Implemented according to the current international context. ⁴
Optional referendum	Allows every Swiss citizen to “launch a referendum against a law or decree that has been approved by parliament”. At least 50.000 signatures must be collected within 100 days after the parliament’s decision for a nationwide vote to be held. ⁵
People’s initiative	Allows every Swiss citizen to propose a total or partial reform of the constitution. To be considered valid, an “initiative must collect at least 100.000 signatures from citizens within 18 months”. ⁶ Then, a nationwide vote is held.

² Swissinfo.ch, ‘Direct Democracy’, *SWI swissinfo.ch*, 23 June 2022, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/politics/direct-democracy/47697554>.

³ Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA, ‘Neutrality,’ accessed 2 May 2023, <https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/home/foreign-policy/international-law/neutrality.html>.

⁴ FDFA, ‘Neutrality.’

⁵ Swissinfo.ch, ‘Direct Democracy.’

⁶ Swissinfo.ch, ‘Direct Democracy.’

Introduction

“Neutrality does not mean standing on the side-lines”.⁷ This is how Ignazio Cassis, Foreign Minister of Switzerland, described his vision for neutrality at last year’s *World Economic Forum* (WEF) in Davos. Twenty years after having joined the *United Nations* (UN) in 2002, Switzerland was elected in June 2022 to participate as a non-permanent member of the *UN Security Council* (UNSC) as of 2023-2024. This marks the first time Switzerland actively participates in the UNSC.⁸ As Cassis announced: “Switzerland is ready to contribute constructively and take responsibility”.⁹ However, the election also led to criticism, especially by right-wing politicians. How would such an active position comply with Swiss neutrality?

Not only the Swiss participation in the UNSC has brought the country’s position to the spotlight last year – in view of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the international community and organisations such as the UN and the *European Union* (EU) have called for clear sanctions. Switzerland’s relations with the EU were primarily based on shared economic aspirations. As Switzerland is geographically located in the middle of Europe, economic connections are necessary for survival. However, in recent years Switzerland has not only adapted economic but also political EU policies, such as the sanctions against Russia. Recurrent discussions on a so-called ‘framework agreement’ to replace the previous bilateral agreements illustrate this integration process. This reinforces the criticism on Switzerland’s neutrality. British newspaper *The New European*, for example, described Switzerland as “the EU’s new problem child”, both in terms of political and economic agreements.¹⁰

Furthermore, on a domestic level the debate is divided between insistence on more alignment with other states and fear of an apparent loss of Swiss neutrality. Switzerland struggles between its traditional position as a neutral mediator and the demand for moral responsibility.¹¹ In right-wing discourse, especially among the conservative *Schweizer Volkspartei* (SVP), neutrality is used as a key term and synonym for non-involvement. By

⁷ Ignazio Cassis, ‘Reality is multilateral,’ Transcript of speech delivered at Davos, Switzerland, 23 May 2022, <https://www.admin.ch/gov/en/start/documentation/media-releases.msg-id-88955.html>.

⁸ A Plus for Peace, ‘Switzerland in the United Nations,’ accessed November 13, 2022, <https://www.aplusforpeace.ch/switzerland-united-nations>.

⁹ Original: «Die Schweiz ist bereit, sich im #Sicherheitsrat konstruktiv einzubringen & Verantwortung zu übernehmen». Ignazio Cassis, ‘20 Jahre nach dem UNO-Beitritt wird die #Schweiz in den Sicherheitsrat gewählt,’ LinkedIn Post, accessed 13 November 2022, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/ignaziocassis_schweiz-sicherheitsrat-activity-6940730885725941760-5Lxs/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop.

¹⁰ Suna Erdem, ‘Switzerland Is the EU’s New Problem Child - Why Would Anyone Want to Copy That?’, *The New European*, 22 November 2022, <https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/switzerland-is-the-eus-new-problem-child-why-would-anyone-want-to-copy-that/>.

¹¹ Mark Fox, ‘Swiss Neutrality: From Policy to Doctrine,’ *Orbis* 66, no. 4 (1 January 2022): 480, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2022.08.003>.

extension, the party harshly criticises other conceptions of neutrality, such as ‘active neutrality’ as proposed by former Swiss Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey, or ‘cooperative neutrality’ as a possible new leitmotif of the Swiss government. Most recently, the SVP launched the ‘neutrality initiative’ (*Neutralitätsinitiative*) in October 2022, after sanctions against Russia were adopted at the beginning of 2022. In Swiss democracy, any person can propose an amendment to the constitution by collecting 100,000 signatures within 18 months. In the event of a successful initiative, the Swiss electorate will vote on the amendment.¹² The relevance of the neutrality initiative is two-fold. First, the initiative aims to define neutrality in the constitution instead of being based on mutual agreements and acceptance as it has been until now. In consequence, Switzerland would be legally bound to abstain from any sanctions proposed by any other institution other than the UN. Should the initiative come to fruition, the Swiss government would no longer be allowed to impose sanctions such those against Russia.¹³ These current developments lead to the following research question:

How has public debate on Swiss neutrality evolved since Switzerland joined the UN in 2002?

Based on the main question, the scope of the thesis entails three sub-questions, focusing on the perception of the right-wing spectrum in relation to the ‘neutrality initiative’ and in contrast to the government.

First, how has the position of Switzerland towards neutrality changed since becoming a UN member state? The question includes debates on neutrality as a framework as well as terms such as ‘active neutrality’ and ‘cooperative neutrality’.

Secondly, how has neutrality been used to justify political actions such as acting as a member of the UN and eventually of the UNSC, and the realisation of the ‘neutrality initiative’?

Thirdly, to what extent does the position of the right-wing towards neutrality differ from the position of the Swiss government? In particular, how does a highly influential right-wing politician define neutrality? Since the 1990s, Christoph Blocher has played a significant role in shaping public discourse through his political engagement for the SVP. Most recently, the promotion of the ‘neutrality initiative’.

¹² Federal Chancellery of Switzerland, ‘Volksinitiativen,’ accessed January 17, 2022, <https://www.bk.admin.ch/bk/de/home/politische-rechte/volksinitiativen.html>.

¹³ Dennis Bühler and Lukas Häuptli, ‘Aber sicher neutral,’ *Republik*, 27 August 2022, <https://www.republik.ch/2022/08/27/aber-sicher-neutral>.

Historiography and Academic Debate

Swiss neutrality is a contested concept, both in academics and politics. This thesis aims at bridging three entities: the government, the right-wing as represented by the SVP and the electorate. Therefore, the thesis contributes a novel analysis of the connection between neutrality as a foreign policy strategy and domestic politics, specifically right-wing discourse.

To embed the proposed research into former academic debate, two pillars will serve as the foundation. First, Switzerland's role as a small state and the use of neutrality in foreign policy to counter power imbalances. Second, the contested concept of Swiss neutrality itself. This thesis does not aim at answering the question of whether Switzerland has always acted as a neutral state in past and current times. Nonetheless, since the argument of 'true neutrality' or the lack thereof is often raised in right-wing debate, the history of Swiss neutrality and foreign policy will be considered carefully. Previous research has covered Swiss foreign policy between 1945-2002, such as the detailed descriptions by political scientists Thomas Fischer and Jürg Martin Gabriel. Their edited volume contains in addition Daniel Möckli's insights into the Swiss-UN relations until the accession in 2002. In contrast, this thesis covers the developments of the last twenty years.

More specifically, this research will fill the gap in examining the relationship between the concept of Swiss neutrality and right-wing discourse. To date, a focus on right-wing discourse and its impact on Swiss neutrality, as well as an analysis of how neutrality is used as a concept for the political agenda of the right, has been omitted. As further detailed in Methodology II below, the political right, represented by the SVP, is the strongest voice in the Swiss parliament. The campaign against the EU and UN accession as well as the current debates on sanctions and the 'neutrality initiative' are prominent examples of the SVP's extensive use of neutrality in political framing.

The analysis of the example of Switzerland is embedded in and enhances research on neutral small states. In the tradition of realism, international relations have often focused on relations between great powers. Typically, states and their power are defined through 'capabilities' such as their population or GDP. In contrast, political scientists Robert Steinmetz and Anders Wivel propose the working definition of a small state "as the weak part in an asymmetric relationship".¹⁴ This definition considers that small states can be weak or powerful in *relation* to other states, which shifts the focus "from the power that states possess to the power that they exercise".¹⁵ Switzerland, for example, can be described as weak in comparison

¹⁴ Robert Steinmetz and Anders Wivel, *Small States in Europe: Challenges and Opportunities* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 5-7.

¹⁵ Steinmetz and Wivel, *Small States*, 7.

to the EU in terms of population and trade dependency, but powerful in terms of GDP, wealth and diplomatic mediation.

The definition relates to the discussion on neutrality as a survival strategy for small states.¹⁶ John Dreyer and Neal G. Jesse employed the German term *Sonderfall* to describe that while neutrality did not last in other countries, Switzerland succeeded as the exception.¹⁷ Various reasons for this success have been discussed in the literature. Marc R. DeVore and Armin Stähli asserted that the long-held belief in neutrality as the main factor, as depicted in literature and politics, is contradicted by their findings. They demonstrate that since the establishment of Swiss neutrality in 1815, it is mainly international organisations and other states that have contributed to Switzerland's stability.¹⁸ Furthermore, historians such as Marco Wyss have concluded that Swiss neutrality was undermined at times by the Swiss themselves. By importing British weapons and aligning with Western economy during the Cold War, for example, Switzerland positioned itself indirectly as a supporter of the Western bloc.¹⁹ Thomas Fischer and Daniel Möckli, among others, argued that Switzerland used neutrality as a survival strategy against the backdrop of the Cold War. To secure its status, the country acted as a neutral mediator, offering neutrality as compensation for international acceptance.²⁰ Harto Hakovirta observed that European neutral states, by positioning themselves as Western neutrals during the Cold War, experienced a loss of credibility. Hakovirta emphasised that states require flexibility and ambiguity in applying norms such as neutrality to adapt to a changing international environment. Thus, neutral states must strike a delicate balance between change and maintaining credibility.²¹

However, relying on compensation as a strategy has its limitations, as it hinges on the acceptance of other states and, in the case of Switzerland, the support of its population. Switzerland is considered a direct democracy with many veto players. Therefore, the government must acknowledge that the success of international negotiations depends not only on the outcome but also on "broad political acceptance at the national level".²² In the past, Swiss

¹⁶ Fox, 'From Policy to Doctrine,' 477.

¹⁷ John Dreyer and Neal G. Jesse, 'Swiss Neutrality Examined: Model, Exception or Both?' *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 15, no. 3 (2014): 60, <https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/jmss/article/view/58112>.

¹⁸ Marc R. DeVore and Armin Stähli, 'From Armed Neutrality to External Dependence: Swiss Security in the 21st Century,' *Swiss Political Science Review* 17, no. 1 (2011): 21, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1662-6370.2011.02003.x>.

¹⁹ Marco Wyss, 'Neutrality in the Early Cold War: Swiss Arms Imports and Neutrality,' *Cold War History* 12, no. 1 (1 February 2012): 40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2010.536534>.

²⁰ Thomas Fischer and Daniel Möckli, 'The Limits of Compensation: Swiss Neutrality Policy in the Cold War,' *Journal of Cold War Studies* 18, no. 4 (1 October 2016): 12-13, https://doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00678.

²¹ Harto Hakovirta, *East-West Conflict and European Neutrality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 249, 252-253.

²² Original: «Entscheidend für den Erfolg allfälliger Verhandlungen sei neben dem Verhandlungsergebnis auch dessen breite innenpolitische Akzeptanz.» Bluewin, 'Bundesrat will die Sondierungsgespräche mit der EU

voters rejected efforts to liberalise Swiss foreign policy such as the EU accession. Recently, the SVP's 'neutrality initiative' exemplifies that Swiss neutrality is closely intertwined with the Swiss referendum system.

For a long time, the works of the historian Edgar Bonjour, published mainly in the 1960s, were considered authoritative on the history of Swiss neutrality. However, in April 2023, concurrent with this thesis, historian Marco Jorio released a revised review of the last 400 years. Jorio characterises the period from 1990 to 2023 as "Die Schweiz (ver)zweifelt an ihrer Neutralität", implying both doubt and despair.²³ During the 1990s, numerous academics dismissed neutrality as outdated. Jorio contends that the government's attempts to redefine neutrality upon joining the UN fell short. An outdated Cold War-era conception persisted among a significant amount of the population and political elite. Furthermore, the current implementation of Swiss neutrality lacks coherence, making it difficult to justify. Therefore, Jorio advocates for Switzerland to rethink neutrality, guided by the UN Charter and the Federal Constitution, to establish a new and relevant concept.²⁴

Methodology I: Concept and Historical Background

This thesis examines the concept of neutrality and utilizes it as framework to analyse the main and sub-research questions. As outlined in Methodology II, various sources will portray different perspectives on Swiss neutrality. Public discourse by the Swiss government and right-wing parties and politicians is embedded in the historical context of Swiss neutrality since 1815, briefly highlighting how the concept evolved after the Second World War. The main timeframe spans over the last twenty years since Switzerland joined the UN in 2002.

According to the international law of neutrality, as laid down in The Hague Conventions, a neutral state is obliged to not participate in international armed conflicts and to neither provide troops nor its territory to the warring parties. Conversely, the inviolability of the neutral state's territory has to be respected at all times.²⁵ Swiss neutrality, as defined by the *Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA)*, encompasses both the law of neutrality and neutrality policy. Neutrality policy, in contrast to neutrality law, allows for a certain degree of

weiterführen,' accessed 23 November 2022, <https://www.bluewin.ch/de/news/international/bundesrat-will-die-sondierungsgespraechе-mit-der-eu-weiterfuehren-1488510.html>.

²³ Marco Jorio, 'Die Schweiz und ihre Neutralität. Eine 400-jährige Geschichte', filmed 25 April 2023 at Polit-Forum Bern im Käfigturm, <https://www.youtube.com/live/YYn7uvEKHg4?feature=share>, min. 34:40.

²⁴ Marco Jorio, 'Die "wahre" Neutralität?', *Blick*, 7 May 2023, <https://www.blick.ch/meinung/kommentare/wandelbares-konzept-die-wahre-neutralitaet-id18552170.html>.

²⁵ N.a., 'Laws of War: Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers and Persons in Case of War on Land (Hague V),' The Avalon Project, 1907a, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hague05.asp, Art. 1.

N.a., 'Laws of War: Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers in Naval War (Hague XIII),' The Avalon Project, 1907b, accessed 26 January 2021, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hague13.asp, Art. 1.

manoeuvre. While the constitution does not explicitly define neutrality, it designates “the preservation of neutrality” as a task of the Federal Council and the Parliament (Art. 173 and 185).²⁶ Specifically, Switzerland’s neutrality is “of its own choosing, permanent, internationally recognised and armed”.²⁷ This means that Switzerland has an army and retains the right to defend itself. Additionally, given its association with founding of the Red Cross, Swiss neutrality has a strong humanitarian orientation.

To some, neutrality is an outdated concept. As former Swiss ambassador Thomas Borer stated in April 2023: “In short, our neutrality has become obsolete”.²⁸ In public debate and in political practice, however, neutrality remains vivid. Whether neutrality is obsolete thus depends on how it is defined and applied. As highlighted by Mark Fox in a recent article, discourse on Swiss neutrality has shifted from an “unchallengeable generic moral stance” to a “case-by-case” decision, notably in the context of sanctions against Russia.²⁹ In political practice, neutrality serves as a framework for decision-making rather than a principle to be followed blindly.³⁰ This underlines the importance of researching public debate on neutrality.

Methodology II: Sources

To trace the evolution of public discourse on neutrality, various sources with differing perspectives will be examined. Two reports published by the Federal Council in 1993 and 2022 hold significant relevance for the government’s perspective on neutrality. These reports were commissioned by the parliament in response to key events, e.g., the end of the Cold War in the 1990s and the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022. Perhaps surprising, no other neutrality reports were released in between. The reports thus mark two milestones, offering insights into Switzerland’s official position and strategies as a neutral country.

These insights are complemented by the perspectives of former Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey (2003-2011), who promoted so-called ‘active neutrality’, and current Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis (since 2017). In Cassis’ opening speech at last year’s WEF in Davos, he presented his suggestions for ‘cooperative neutrality’ as a representative of the Swiss

²⁶ Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), ‘Swiss Neutrality,’ accessed 12 December 2022, https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/fdfa/fdfa/publikationen.html/content/publikationen/en/eda/schweizer-aussenpolitik/Neutralitaet_Schweiz.

²⁷ Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), ‘Swiss Neutrality.’

²⁸ Thomas Borer, ‘Opinion | It’s Time for Switzerland to Ditch Neutrality,’ *Washington Post*, 27 April 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/04/27/switzerland-neutrality-obsolete/>.

²⁹ Fox, ‘Swiss Neutrality: From Policy to Doctrine,’ 477.

³⁰ Fox, ‘Swiss Neutrality: From Policy to Doctrine,’ 495.

government.³¹ The speech addressed reasons for Switzerland adopting the EU's sanctions and the compatibility of that decision with neutrality. Furthermore, the speech entailed visions of a multilateral future involving Switzerland as a strong partner.

The right wing of the Swiss political landscape is primarily represented by the SVP, whose party programmes and public statements on neutrality will be analysed. With a parliamentary share of over 25%,³² the SVP is not only the strongest party in the Swiss parliament, but has also established itself as a rallying point for right-wing conservatives in Switzerland. Other right-wing parties such as the *Schweizer Demokraten* and the *Autopartei* have been completely absorbed by the SVP.³³ Cassis' statements, as well as the government's reports, were criticised in right-wing circles as 'a breach of neutrality' and fuelled the debate on neutrality. Accordingly, the launch of the 'neutrality initiative' could not have come at a more apt time. The text of the initiative and its corresponding campaign, including a website, serve as primary sources.³⁴

One of the party's best-known representatives is Christoph Blocher. Through his political engagement, he plays a prominent role in the public debate on neutrality. He serves as the president of the SVP Zurich for thirty years, was a member of the Swiss government from 2003-2007 and continued to hold influential roles within the SVP party leadership. He primarily gained prominence through his opposition to Switzerland's potential accession to the *European Economic Area* (EEA) in 1992, which could have led to Swiss EU membership.³⁵ In 2002, he supported the SVP's campaign against Switzerland joining the UN, claiming that Switzerland would lose its neutrality and freedom.³⁶ Blocher is considered a leading figure in right-wing discourse in Switzerland, with his statements regularly publicly published and discussed. He shares articles on his personal website, interviewed weekly on his own television format³⁷ and

³¹ Ignazio Cassis, 'Address by Ignazio Cassis, President of the Swiss Confederation – WEF – Open Forum', Transcript of speech delivered in Davos, Switzerland, 24 May 2022, <https://www.admin.ch/gov/en/start/documentation/media-releases.msg-id-89004.html>.

³² Federal Statistical Office, 'Parteistärken,' accessed 10 December 2022, <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/politik/wahlen/nationalratswahlen/parteistaerken.html>.

³³ Benjamin von Wyl, 'Gross geworden gegen alle Anderen und die EU,' *Swissinfo.ch*, 2 December 2022, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/ger/politik/gross-geworden-gegen-alle-anderen-und-die-eu/48081628>.

³⁴ Text of the initiative: Fedlex, The Publication Platform for Federal Law, 'Eidgenössische Volksinitiative "Wahrung der schweizerischen Neutralität (Neutralitätsinitiative)"', Bundeskanzlei, BBl 2022 2694, Bern, 8 November 2022. <https://fedlex.data.admin.ch/eli/fga/2022/2694>. Website: Neutralität-Ja-Komitee, 'Neutralitätsinitiative,' accessed 12 January 2022, <https://www.neutralitaet-ja.ch/initiative>

³⁵ Wyl, 'Gross geworden gegen alle Anderen und die EU.'

³⁶ Andrea Tognina, 'Die Schadenbilanz bei einem UNO-Beitritt wäre enorm,' *Swissinfo.ch*, 3 March 2022. https://www.swissinfo.ch/ger/wirtschaft/schweiz-uno-sicherheitsrat_-die-schadensbilanz-bei-einem-uno-beitritt-waere-enorm-/47391836.

³⁷ Teleblocher, 'Das Blocher-Prinzip,' accessed 11 December 2022, <https://www.teleblocher.ch/>. Also:

shareholder in Swiss media companies.³⁸ He thus wields considerable influence on right-wing discourse and public opinion on right-wing issues.

Lastly, demographic data sheds light on the Swiss population's stance on neutrality. The study *Sicherheit 2022*, conducted by the *Center for Security Studies (CSS)* and the *Military Academy (MILAK)* at ETH Zürich, is particularly noteworthy. The study, conducted partially before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in January 2022, was supplemented by a follow-up survey between May and June 2022 to gauge the impact of the war on perceptions of Swiss foreign and security policy. The results revealed a decline of Swiss neutrality after the outbreak of the war, with an increase in the number of critical voices. Contrary to the right-wing perception, 77% of the Swiss population supported Switzerland's sanctions against Russia, and 71% deemed the sanctions compatible with Switzerland's neutrality.³⁹ It is important to note that although the neutrality debate is often only visible in public, e.g., politicians' statements, the topic is also discussed among the population. Drawing on these studies, the statements of the government, parties and politicians can be compared with quantitative public opinion. The comparison illustrates in particular the perceived and actual political opinions prevailing in the population.

Structure

To research competing neutrality perceptions in public discourse, the first chapter explores the conceptual framework of neutrality. This includes a concise historical overview of the evolution of Swiss neutrality and introducing key concepts such as military engagement, collective security and morality.

The second chapter focuses on the Swiss government's neutrality definition, encompassing Switzerland's accession to the UN in 2002 and the successful election to the UNSC in 2022. To embed the government's conception, reports published in 1993 and 2022 are analysed. The chapter critically assesses the concepts of 'active neutrality' and 'cooperative neutrality' as advocated by foreign ministers Micheline Calmy-Rey and Ignazio Cassis, respectively. Furthermore, it explores the shift of the right-wing's approach to neutrality from a reactive to a proactive stance.

³⁸ Rainer Stadler, 'Blochers kaum beachtete Basis,' *NZZ*, 24 November 2018, <https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/medien/christoph-blocher-das-politische-potenzial-seiner-gratis-blaetter-id.1438025?reduced=true>.

³⁹ Center for Security Studies (CSS) and Militärakademie (MILAK), ETH Zürich, 'Nachbefragung der Studie "Sicherheit 2022" aufgrund des Krieges in der Ukraine. Aussen-, Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitische Meinungsbildung im Trend,' Szvircsev, Tibor et al., Zürich, 14 July 2022, <https://css.ethz.ch/ueber-uns/css-news/2022/07/nachbefragung-der-studie-sicherheit-2022-aufgrund-des-krieges-in-der-ukraine.html>.

The third chapter analyses the development of right-wing discourse on neutrality leading up to the ‘neutrality initiative’ in October 2022. This chapter explores the SVP’s origins, ideology, and neutrality framing in contrast to the government’s conceptions. Additionally, it examines Christoph Blocher’s role as an opinion leader in Swiss right-wing discourse, before the final conclusion discusses the findings of the thesis.

1. A Role Model for the Whole World? – Neutrality as a Framework

“How neutral is Switzerland, really?” This was the headline of *Swissinfo.ch*, a ten-language online magazine on Swiss politics, on June 10, 2022.⁴⁰ Almost five months had passed since Russia invaded Ukraine and Switzerland had first complied with sanctions imposed by the EU. As the headline illustrates, neutrality can still be considered an integral part of Switzerland. However, questioning Swiss neutrality is no longer taboo in public discourse.⁴¹ Previously, neutrality had been regarded as a guarantee of success and stability. After the invasion, it became publicly denounced as outdated and “opportunistic”, as one of the many international and national critics phrased it.⁴² The war and the EU sanctions meant that the very existence of Swiss neutrality had come into question: How is it possible to remain neutral and at the same time implicitly side with Western Europe? Two positions have emerged in Switzerland in response to this question. The conservative approach, mainly embodied by the SVP, still adheres to a strict understanding of neutrality. As a result, a people’s initiative to anchor neutrality in the constitution was initiated in October 2022 and will continue until May 2024. In contrast, the liberal position represented by the government insists on so-called ‘active neutrality’. The resulting debate and the neutrality initiative will be laid out in further detail in the second and third chapter of this thesis. To provide the framework for the analysis, the present chapter examines the historical background of Swiss neutrality from the perspective of legal and academic discourse. Further, recurring topics of debate are discussed as important concepts. The first chapter therefore aims to make neutrality as a framework workable, and delivers the groundwork to answer the research question.

1.1 The Historical and Legal Context of Swiss Neutrality

To give context to the research question, which focuses on events after 2002, the historic and legal roots of neutrality are briefly outlined. This way, it will further be possible to distinguish the parts of the public discourse that revolve around the law of neutrality from the parts that concern the policy of neutrality. The law of neutrality is defined in legal treaties. The policy of neutrality, on the other hand, is defined through historically and politically evolved

⁴⁰ Sibilla Bondolfi, ‘How Neutral Is Switzerland, Really?’, *SWI swissinfo.ch*, 10 June 2022, https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/focus-page-foreign-policy_how-neutral-is-switzerland--really-/45810276.

⁴¹ John Reville, ‘Analysis: Swiss Neutrality on the Line as Arms-for-Ukraine Debate Heats Up,’ *Reuters*, 7 February 2023, sec. Europe, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/swiss-neutrality-line-arms-for-ukraine-debate-heats-up-2023-02-06/>.

⁴² Bondolfi, ‘How Neutral Is Switzerland, Really?.’

interpretations. Swiss neutrality was first recognized in 1815 by the Great Powers at the Congress of Vienna. When the Swiss constitution was drafted in 1848, neutrality was set out to be a tool to maintain the country's independence. To this day, neutrality has not been defined in the constitution. Instead, "to safeguard external security and the independence and neutrality of Switzerland" is designated a task of the Federal Council and the Federal Assembly (Art. 173 and 185).⁴³ In this context, the Federal Council has repeatedly stated "that it does not consider it expedient to further anchor the core definition of neutrality in the Federal Constitution or in national laws," as this would limit "Switzerland's room for manoeuvre in terms of security and foreign policy".⁴⁴ The fact that Swiss neutrality is not defined in the Swiss constitution has two implications. First, its meaning is negotiable. Second, it can be used as a political tool; depending on the understanding of neutrality presented, it can justify the introduction of sanctions as well as strict non-commitment. As neutrality is currently enshrined in the Swiss constitution, it is by definition subject to historical and political change. Defining neutrality in the constitution, as the SVP plans to with their people's initiative, would therefore result in a drastic change. In foreign policy in particular, Switzerland would be restricted by its constitution. Furthermore, much greater weight would be given to the national legal definition than at present, where neutrality measures can be adapted to the international context and international law.

On 18 October 1907, "the rights and duties of a neutral state" were for the first time anchored in international law in The Hague Conventions. Thenceforth, neutral countries were to be spared from war if they did not participate in wars, treated all parties equally and neither contributed arms nor troops to a conflict.⁴⁵ Further, the first article of the Convention states that "the territory of neutral Powers is inviolable".⁴⁶ The rules laid out in the Convention not only concern the neutral state itself but also the belligerents. The sovereignty and the neutrality of a neutral state have to be respected at all times.⁴⁷ International law hence provides guidelines for neutrality established in times of peace for the event of war in the future. Despite the legal definition, the architects of The Hague Conventions were aware that neutrality would remain a

⁴³ Fedlex, The Publication Platform for Federal Law, SR 101 - Federal Constitution of 18 April 1999 of the Swiss Confederation,' accessed 15 May 2023, <https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/1999/404/en>.

⁴⁴ Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA, 'Swiss Neutrality,' accessed 15 May 2023, https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/fdfa/fdfa/publikationen.html/content/publikationen/en/eda/schweizer-aussenpolitik/Neutralitaet_Schweiz.

⁴⁵ Swissinfo.ch, 'Neutrality,' *SWI swissinfo.ch*, 23 June 2022, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/neutrality/29289102>.

⁴⁶ N.a., 'Laws of War: Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers and Persons in Case of War on Land (Hague V),' *The Avalon Project*, 1907a, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hague05.asp, Art. 1.

⁴⁷ N.a., 'Laws of War: Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers in Naval War (Hague XIII),' *The Avalon Project*, 1907b, accessed 26 January 2021, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hague13.asp, Art. 1.

contested concept. Hence, they intended the Constitution to harmonise “the divergent views [...] on the relations between neutral Powers and belligerent Powers” in the event of war and anticipated “the difficulties to which such divergence of views might give rise”.⁴⁸ These difficulties became clear not least when Switzerland’s relations to Russia and Ukraine began to be discussed internationally and internally in the course of the Ukrainian crisis. In relation to the research question, it is hence significant to not only consider law when studying the development of Swiss neutrality, but also differing views on neutrality. The framing of neutrality in politics over time holds particular importance. Therefore, the following section examines the conceptualisation of Swiss neutrality after the Second World War.

1.2 Swiss Neutrality in the 20th Century

In its colloquial sense, ‘remaining neutral’ refers to any state or person not taking sides in a conflict. As mentioned above, neutrality is a legally established status under international law, which can be conceptually divided into permanent and temporary neutrality. The latter is only proclaimed in the event of war. Switzerland, on the other hand, serves as a typical example of a permanently neutral state, remaining neutral in both war and peace.⁴⁹ Despite the legal framework, permanent and temporary neutrality have been violated throughout the twentieth century, e.g., Dutch neutrality.⁵⁰ Why Switzerland was spared an attack remains open to debate – along with fortunate circumstances, economic ties or military strength are cited as possible reasons.⁵¹ Regardless, Switzerland’s permanent neutrality played a significant role for the framing of neutrality and Swiss foreign policy in the post-war era.

Throughout the Cold War, Swiss neutrality was upheld and became increasingly strict compared to other neutral states. The Swiss neutrality understanding dominant at the time, from the 1950s to the 1980s, was largely influenced by diplomat Rudolph Bindschedler. He first published his views on neutrality in 1954, which quickly became authoritative for Swiss foreign policy. Possibly, because his conceptions were simplistic and easy to apply. Bindschedler differentiated between permanent and customary (*gewöhnlicher*) neutrality. A customary neutral state would not participate in war, but also not admit to any regulations in times of

⁴⁸ N.a., ‘Naval War,’ Art. 1.

⁴⁹ Boleslaw Boczek, ‘Introduction: The Conceptual and Legal Framework of Neutrality and Nonalignment in Europe,’ in *Europe’s Neutral and Non-Aligned States: Between NATO and the Warsaw Pact*, ed. S. Victor Papacosma and Mark R. Rubin (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1989), 5.

⁵⁰ The Netherlands was neutral for a century before being invaded by Nazi Germany in the Second World War. ‘The German Invasion of the Netherlands,’ *Anne Frank Website*, 28 September 2018, <https://www.annefrank.org/en/anne-frank/go-in-depth/german-invasion-netherlands/>.

⁵¹ Tobias Straumann, ‘Warum wurde die Schweiz im Zweiten Weltkrieg verschont?’, *Finanz und Wirtschaft*, 3 June 2013, <https://www.fuw.ch/article/nmtm-warum-wurde-die-schweiz-im-zweiten-weltkrieg-verschont>.

peace. A permanently neutral state like Switzerland, on the other hand, would undertake to be neutral at all times, leading to political, military and economic obligations. Bindschedler argued that those obligations would not be limiting, but the only possibility to ensure the trust and credibility of Swiss neutrality.⁵² His writings were referred to as the *Bindschedler-Doktrin*, giving them the status of an official doctrine. Almost all foreign policy decisions of the time were indeed measured against Bindschedler's definition of a permanent neutrality.⁵³ In consequence, the Swiss conception of neutrality became rigid, as the framing prevented any significant evolvement of neutrality as a concept or instrument for foreign policy.⁵⁴ This only changed in the context of the end of the Cold War, as will be discussed in the second chapter.

Nevertheless, the influence of the Bindschedler doctrine continues to this day. As the introductory question on 'how neutral Switzerland really is' illustrates, there still remains an unspoken agreement on what Swiss neutrality does and does not include. Examining Bindschedler's definition allows to trace the evolvement of this passive neutrality understanding and its establishment as a benchmark for Swiss neutrality. It possibly explains why Switzerland currently has to defend its policy of neutrality, even though the country remains committed to the law of neutrality. To further clarify neutrality as a concept is the aim of the next section.

1.3 Key Concepts in Understanding Swiss Neutrality

Neutrality may seem easy to define at first glance. However, it can be captured in various ways, of which this thesis certainly does not cover all. As established above, only temporary neutrality during wartime is legally defined. Permanent neutrality is subject to a country's self-imposed obligations. When a country declares temporary neutrality, three key aspects are commonly agreed on: the military operations it can undertake, its contribution to collective security, and the moral implications of its neutrality. In contrast, there is limited consensus on these aspects for permanently neutral countries. In short, the concept of permanent neutrality is inherently susceptible to public debate.

⁵² Rudolf Bindschedler, 'Der Begriff der Neutralität,' *Diplomatische Dokumente der Schweiz Dodis*, 26 November 1954, B.51.10, <https://dodis.ch/9564>.

⁵³ Alois Riklin, 'Neutralität', *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz HLS*, 9 November 2010, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/articles/016572/2010-11-09/>.

⁵⁴ Boczek, 'Introduction,' 25.

1.3.1 *Neutrality and Military Engagement*

It could be easily assumed that because of neutrality, Switzerland does not engage in military cooperation nor has much need for an army of its own. However, to be prepared in the case of an attack, Switzerland always remained an ‘armed’ neutral state. The Swiss army is a militia army, with male citizens required to serve in the military or carry out community work after turning eighteen. The Swiss army is thus anchored both in the Constitution and the population.⁵⁵ Further, Switzerland allows weapons to be manufactured and exported. However, weapons must not be sent directly or indirectly to war combatants, as stated in neutrality law. Buyers of Swiss arms are legally prohibited from exporting them.⁵⁶

The re-export of arms came to debate in February 2023, initially considered since early 2022. As Russia’s assault on Ukraine intensified, several European states urged Switzerland to allow re-exports of Swiss arms. A growing public “pro-Ukraine shift” intensified pressure on the government. “Switzerland is close to breaking with centuries of tradition as a neutral state,” international newspapers titled.⁵⁷ A motion by Thierry Burkart, leader of the centre-right *Free Democratic Party* (FDP), sparked further debate. Burkart called for arms re-exports to countries sharing democratic values with Switzerland, arguing that denying support meant indirectly supporting Russia’s aggression. He flagged the issue as a potential risk to Europe’s stability and safety.⁵⁸ 55 percent of respondents to a survey by the Swiss poll institute Sotomo in the same month approved of re-exporting arms.⁵⁹ Representatives of other parties, however, held differing views. Green parliamentarians asserted the incompatibility with Swiss neutrality, while the SVP worried about the destruction of “peace and prosperity in our country”.⁶⁰

The question of how much leeway neutrality can or should offer in supporting military interventions is also disputed in academia. As mentioned before, neutrality law is legally binding, while neutrality policy can be internationally contextualised, historically adapted and politically discussed.⁶¹ To a certain extent, this also applies to the military engagement of

⁵⁵ Swissinfo.ch, ‘Neutrality,’ *SWI swissinfo.ch*, 23 June 2022, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/neutrality/29289102>.

⁵⁶ John Revill, ‘Analysis: Swiss Neutrality on the Line as Arms-for-Ukraine Debate Heats Up,’ *Reuters*, 7 February 2023, sec. Europe, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/swiss-neutrality-line-arms-for-ukraine-debate-heats-up-2023-02-06/>.

⁵⁷ Revill, ‘Arms-for-Ukraine Debate.’

⁵⁸ Revill, ‘Arms-for-Ukraine Debate.’

⁵⁹ Danny Schlumpf, ‘Alte für Waffenlieferungen – Junge für Neutralität’, *Blick*, 19 February 2023, <https://www.blick.ch/politik/ukraine-krieg-spaltet-die-schweiz-alte-fuer-waffenlieferungen-junge-fuer-neutralitaet-id18330740.html>. Survey: ‘Die Schweiz und der Ukraine-Krieg – Sotomo’, accessed 17 May 2023, <https://sotomo.ch/site/projekte/die-schweiz-und-der-ukraine-krieg/>.

⁶⁰ Revill, ‘Arms-for-Ukraine Debate.’

⁶¹ Marjorie Andrey, ‘Security Implications of Neutrality: Switzerland in the Partnership for Peace Framework’, *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 9, no. 4 (2010): 83, <http://dx.doi.org/10.11610/Connections.9.4.06>.

neutral Switzerland. Therefore, the country's military engagement or non-engagement is a relevant point in the evolution of the public debate on neutrality. In an article published in 2010, Marjorie Andrey focused on Switzerland's position in the *Partnership for Peace* (PfP) framework, and hence on Switzerland's relationship with NATO and its military engagement. As Andrey demonstrated, Switzerland does indeed take part in the NATO and other international missions, albeit with small room for impact or manoeuvre. Examples are the adherence to sanctions and cooperation in the fight against terrorism.⁶² Effectively, she was calling for Switzerland to radically shift "from a Cold War security concept to a true cooperative approach".⁶³ In view of the limited influence of the Swiss army, she argued, European cooperation would be needed in the coming years. In contrast to the conception of Bindschedler, who promoted a narrow understanding of neutrality during the Cold War, Andrey recommended a neutrality policy that entails international collaboration. Further, Andrey linked the Swiss army's lack of influence with a wider shift of how competence is recognized in the fields of defence and security. Since the army gradually lost its perceived significance, politicians and the public have been gaining authority.⁶⁴ As became apparent in the course of the Russo-Ukrainian War, decisions on Switzerland's military engagement are currently discussed by politicians and the public, not only generals.

Since the early 2000s, there has been a growing awareness of the effects of globalisation and interdependency. Cross-border threats such as terrorism, have raised questions about Switzerland's Cold War position as a non-involved. Building on Andrey's observations, the rigid neutrality policy influenced by Bindschedler, had delayed significant debates on Swiss neutrality. As long as Switzerland acted as a neutral mediator without moral, economic or political responsibility, the public's focus remained on the parties in conflict. Switzerland's possible agency or complicity went largely unquestioned. However, the international community's requests for unanimous support against Russia in the course of the Russo-Ukrainian War opened up a platform for discussion. The requests to provide aid in the form of arms export or sanctions challenged Swiss neutrality and triggered significant debates, thus marking a remarkable change after centuries of established practice. Neutrality certainly limits military engagement and international involvement. Disputes over the export of arms, for example, touch on the question to which extent Switzerland can contribute to collective security while adhering to the boundaries of neutrality. Specifically, which framing of neutrality and

⁶² Andrey, 'Security Implications of Neutrality,' 85.

⁶³ Andrey, 'Security Implications of Neutrality,' 90.

⁶⁴ Andrey, 'Security Implications of Neutrality,' 90-91.

associated policies allow for active contribution to collective security. This will be discussed next.

1.3.2 *Neutrality and Collective Security*

In international relations, collective security defines a cooperative system of a group of states. In the case of an attack on one member, the attack is considered to be an attack on all members and therefore will be defended collectively. The UN is a well-known example. Collective security hence offers an alternative to a system of balance of power, in which every state has to rely on their own military capacity. This arguably benefits a small state like Switzerland. On the other hand, implementing collective security agreements often leads to challenges when trying to achieve consensus.⁶⁵ While neutrality obliges Switzerland to refrain from military conflict, membership in international bodies requires adherence to collective security. As a result, Switzerland finds itself navigating a field of tension being a neutral state and a member of international organisations, for example the UN.

The apparent question arises whether isolation could be a viable solution to avoid such tension. However, apart from difficulties to assess and solely rely on the strength of the Swiss army, scholars clearly argue against an isolationist strategy. Historian Jacques Freymond already predicted in 1971 that “isolation in the twenty-first century is not only a crime, but a political blunder”.⁶⁶ Neutrality, derived from the Latin term *neuter*, meaning ‘of neither side’, does not occur in a vacuum, but in relation to at least two warring parties. Being neutral without any interference with other states is therefore an illusion, but solidarity can offer an alternative to military engagement, Urs Loeffel argues.⁶⁷ In particular during the Cold War, solidarity allowed Switzerland to contribute to collective security while benefitting from permanent neutrality, e.g., through offering good offices. Good offices refer to “diplomatic and humanitarian initiatives by a third country or a neutral institution” to resolve or bridge conflicts, a long-standing tradition that Switzerland in its official communication takes great pride in.⁶⁸ However, it could be further discussed whether a solidarity strategy is sufficient to ensure credibility as a small neutral state in the post-Cold War era.

⁶⁵ The Kootneeti Team, ‘What Is Collective Security in International Relations?’, 14 September 2022, <https://thekootneeti.in/2022/09/14/what-is-collective-security-in-international-relations/>.

⁶⁶ Cited after Andrey, ‘Security Implications of Neutrality,’ 83.

⁶⁷ Urs Loeffel, *Swiss Neutrality and Collective Security: The League of Nations and the United Nations* (Monterey, California: Naval Postgraduate School, 2010), <http://archive.org/details/swissneutralityn109455401>.

⁶⁸ Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), ‘Good Offices,’ accessed 3 March 2023, <https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/fdfa/foreign-policy/human-rights/peace/switzerland-s-good-offices.html>.

In many aspects, the political debate mirrors the academic discourse. Publicly, the focus is on whether Switzerland should be allowed to remain out of conflict even when geographic closeness and economic ties to the surrounding countries suggest otherwise. At its core, the conflict revolves around the question of whether neutrality is feasible in isolation or whether a certain degree of cooperation is a prerequisite, not only for Switzerland but also for other countries to trust Swiss neutrality. In turn, this reveals that the concept of Switzerland's permanent neutrality, as Bindschedler envisioned it, has its limits. These limitations become apparent under the pressure of public discourse. While the Swiss right still favours an isolationist neutrality policy in the tradition of the Cold War, the liberal camp pushes for increased cooperation. Thus, the issue of isolation versus cooperation has become a recurring subject of political discourse. Moreover, it leads to the question as to whom neutrality should serve, the international community or foremost the neutral state itself. Because the purpose of neutrality is tightly linked to morals, the morality of neutrality is briefly discussed in the following.

1.3.3 *The Morality of Neutrality*

Military intervention and contributions to collective security are not the only issue being questioned in recent discourse on Swiss neutrality. As it has become particularly clear in the wake of the Russo-Ukrainian War, neutrality is also criticised on a moral dimension. In times of crisis, critics argue, neutrality has been used by Switzerland to suggest moral superiority. Neutrality was criticised as “an unwillingness to judge” when injustice occurs.⁶⁹ The *Washington Post* raised the question, “[w]hat value remains, and what message is transmitted, in clinging to neutrality in the face of an illegal invasion of a sovereign nation?”⁷⁰ In the context of moral responsibility, neutrality is not considered ideal to solve a conflict anymore – a statement that was long unthinkable. In agreement with the critics, it needs to be noted that neutrality was intended to be an instrument, not an end in itself. As established before, neutrality as an end risks a state of isolation and thus the “loss of credibility”.⁷¹ In stark contrast, representatives of the right-wing come to a very contradictory conclusion. In the tradition of Bindschedler, neutrality is framed to be an all-encompassing, fixed policy. Any exception or adaption of the policy would weaken the credibility of Swiss neutrality. From this perspective,

⁶⁹ Original: «Unwille zu urteilen». Simon Trüb, ‘Die Gefahr der Schweizer Neutralität’, SWI swissinfo.ch, 21 February 2021, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/ger/wirtschaft/-die-gefahr-der-schweizer-neutralitaet-/46310236>.

⁷⁰ Editorial Board, ‘Opinion | The Ukraine War Led to a Head-Spinning Shift in European Neutrality,’ *Washington Post*, 6 April 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/04/06/switzerland-neutrality-europe-ukraine-war/>.

⁷¹ Andrey, ‘Security Implications of Neutrality,’ 93.

neutrality becomes morally sacrosanct. “Neutrality is not morally condemnable,” writes SVP politician Claudio Zanetti, “Our country is a role model for the whole world”.⁷² He argues that every state must first and foremost protect its own population. Further, he explains that it is also advisable in everyday life to stay out of conflict, that is, to act neutral in a colloquial sense. What is morally respected in the small, should also be in the large, he contends. True virtue lies in non-interference and the renunciation of violence. Military conflicts will take their toll and innocent victims’ life either way, regardless of being soldiers or civilians, attackers or attacked – and as he insinuates, regardless of Switzerland’s moral stance.⁷³ Zanetti’s comments are an example of how a traditional understanding of permanent neutrality can be accompanied by a lack of moral responsibility and empathy. His remarks exemplify the analysis of Swiss political scientist Christoph Frei. According to Frei, neutrality has become a source of identity,⁷⁴ which an individual or group can hold higher than other moral values. In times of global interdependence, being neutral is a distinct position. It allows for benefits such as Switzerland being part of the Western hemisphere – ideologically, politically, and economically – while not having to actively participate in military interventions or putting the country’s safety at direct risk. Still, Swiss neutrality can and should be discussed as a moral dilemma too.

Neutrality represents the “schizophrenia of Swiss foreign policy”, says Jean Ziegler. The left-wing politician criticises the Swiss government’s approach to neutrality for vastly different reasons than Zanetti.⁷⁵ By ‘schizophrenia’ he means that Switzerland has deviated from moral values while portraying itself as morally superior. Ziegler argues that economic participation can undermine political neutrality; by allowing global corporations to operate from Switzerland and accepting their wrongdoings, global conflicts are fuelled.⁷⁶ In contrast, Roger Köppel, journalist and SVP parliamentarian emphasises that Switzerland’s existing practice of neutrality has maintained internal and external peace.⁷⁷ Hence, he cautions against abandoning neutrality or its benefits by moral questioning, as “small, vulnerable Switzerland”

⁷² Original: «Neutralität ist moralisch nicht verwerflich [...] Unser Land ist ein Vorbild für die Welt.» Claudio Zanetti, ‘Neutralität ist auch moralisch richtig: Wer die Zurückhaltung der Schweiz kritisiert, liegt falsch. Unser Land ist ein Vorbild für die Welt’, *Die Weltwoche*, 28 April 2023, <https://weltwoche.ch/daily/neutralitaet-ist-auch-moralisch-richtig-wer-die-zurueckhaltung-der-schweiz-kritisiert-liegt-falsch-unser-land-ist-ein-vorbild-fuer-die-welt/>.

⁷³ Zanetti, ‘Neutralität ist auch moralisch richtig.’

⁷⁴ Matthias Pflume, ‘Standpunkt zur Neutralität: Neutral ins Abseits,’ *Beobachter*, 27 March 2023, <https://www.beobachter.ch/politik/kommentar-zur-schweizer-neutralitaet-dient-sie-nur-der-identitaet-und-als-politisches-mittel-587227>.

⁷⁵ Jean Ziegler, ‘Die Antwort von Jean Ziegler oder Die Schizophrenie der schweizerischen Aussenpolitik,’ in *Die Neutralität: Zwischen Mythos und Vorbild*, ed. Micheline Calmy-Rey (Basel: NZZ Libro, 2020), 71.

⁷⁶ Ziegler, ‘Schizophrenie,’ 71.

⁷⁷ Roger Köppel, ‘Die Antwort von Roger Köppel oder Der Kampf für die bewaffnete Neutralität,’ in *Die Neutralität: Zwischen Mythos und Vorbild*, ed. Micheline Calmy-Rey (Basel: NZZ Libro, 2020), 76-77.

could easily be drawn into a conflict. Köppel believes that Switzerland should support other states through its neutrality rather than seeking influence.⁷⁸

Neutrality seems easy to narrow down as a concept at first. However, in exploring the legal and historical roots of the principle, it becomes clear that it does not fit into rigid boundaries. Despite strong efforts to theoretically and legally define neutrality, in practice, neutrality remains a contested concept. There are strong indications that the international community is no longer willing to accept an isolationist Swiss neutrality practice rooted in the Cold War era. These sentiments are supported by scholars. The fact that neutrality is not easy to define and contested even within Switzerland indicates that the public discourse on the matter is by no means static either but has evolved over time. In the beginning of the twentieth century the Great Powers defined neutrality in international law. After the Second World War, policy makers such as Rudolph Bindschedler gained influence. In particular, conservative approaches began to dominate the issue of neutrality. In reference to the research question, it becomes evident that recent debates are the result of changes evolving for a while. For example, growing awareness on globalisation and interdependence, which can be welcomed or rejected. Both the accession to the UN in 2002 and Switzerland's reaction to the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022 were turning points in the conception of Swiss neutrality. The following chapters will explore the position of Switzerland towards the UN and the changing neutrality conception between 2002-2022 in more detail.

⁷⁸ Original: «Die kleine, verwundbare Schweiz». Köppel, 'Antwort,' 77.

2. A Modern Framework? – Re-Definition and Positioning 2002-2022

The second chapter focuses on how Switzerland's official position towards neutrality has evolved since becoming a UN member state in 2002, thus mainly addressing the second first-sub-question. Building on the concepts of neutrality introduced in the first chapter, i.e., temporary and permanent neutrality, the chapter examines so-called 'active neutrality' and 'cooperative neutrality'. This sheds further light on the second sub-question on how neutrality is used as a justification for political actions. The chapter examines the initial rejection of UN membership on the grounds of neutrality by the Swiss population and politicians alike, and the eventual approval in a referendum in 2002 – a gap that could be analysed in more detail in further research. Twenty years later, in 2022, Switzerland even became member of the UNSC and started to participate in one of the most influential UN bodies. Both decisions were scrutinised in terms of Switzerland's neutrality and accompanied by heated public debates. Thus, both points in time are relevant to analyse the evolution of public discourse on Swiss neutrality and serve as the start and end point for the main timeframe from 2002-2022. The second chapter delves into the government's re-definition and positioning on neutrality, which is crucial to understanding the contrasting position of the right-wing outlined afterwards.

2.1 The Neutrality Reports of the Federal Council: An Analysis

In both 1993 and 2022, the Swiss government released reports on its stance on neutrality. Since the Swiss government consists of seven Federal Councillors forming the Federal Council, this understanding does not necessarily reflect the opinion of a specific party. Rather, the reports provide an insight into the practice and design of neutrality that the highest Swiss executive considered most appropriate at the time. The first report from 1993 was a response to parliamentary requests and in fulfilment of targets set for the 1991-1995 legislature. Since the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, it had become clear that the Cold War era was ending. The authors found themselves "no longer in the static of the post-war bipolar order".⁷⁹ Hence, the report aimed to present a foreign policy concept meeting the requirements of the new international landscape of the 1990s, in specific, global integration. In the past, the report

⁷⁹ Federal Council. 'Bericht zur Neutralität: Anhang zum Bericht über die Aussenpolitik der Schweiz in den 90er Jahren vom 29. November 1993,' Bern, 29 November 1993, https://www.eda.admin.ch/dam/eda/de/documents/aussenpolitik/voelkerrecht/bericht-neutralitaet-1993_DE.pdf, 158.

argued, neutrality had been given too much weight. From now on, the focus would be on the cooperation with foreign partners.⁸⁰

Foreign policy was defined in the report as “safeguarding Switzerland’s interests abroad.”⁸¹ Switzerland’s interests then formed the reference point for neutrality as portrayed in the report. In accordance with the constitution, the government described neutrality as an instrument for the advancement of Switzerland. This means that neutrality does not necessarily include the interests of other countries or what would be best for them, nor does it mean that humanitarian and moral concerns have to be taken into consideration. Of course, they can. Peace promotion, for example, is stated as one of the main aims of Swiss foreign policy. In addition, as the reports points out, foreign policies have to be supported by domestic powers. The report was explicitly dedicated to the “basic needs” of the Swiss population, such as safety and prosperity.⁸²

The 2022 report was written in response to a postulate dating back to April 2022, only a few months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In contrast to the first report covering more than ninety pages, the second report is much more concise. A parliamentary commission responsible for foreign policies mandated the Federal Council to outline the opportunities and limitations of Swiss neutrality. More specifically, to clarify to what extent Switzerland can impose sanctions and allow military cooperation while respecting its neutrality.⁸³ The 1993 report assumed that “the division of Europe into two antagonistic blocs [...] was over”.⁸⁴ Thirty years later, however, the commission emphasised, this premise had been drastically challenged through the invasion of Ukraine.

The Federal Council reiterated its position that neutrality should not be codified in the Swiss constitution or national laws, thus leaving sufficient room for manoeuvre in foreign policy and portraying neutrality as an instrument, not an end in itself.⁸⁵ The report used the analogy of an atomic molecule to further illustrate the relationship between neutrality, “anchored in international treaties and customary international law”, and neutrality policy, “all measures that serve the effectiveness and credibility of neutrality”. While international law forms the solid core, neutrality policy moves freely within the atomic shell, i.e., the concept of

⁸⁰ Federal Council, ‘Bericht zur Neutralität’, 159.

⁸¹ Federal Council, ‘Bericht zur Neutralität’, 155.

⁸² Federal Council, ‘Bericht zur Neutralität’, 158.

⁸³ Federal Council, ‘Klarheit und Orientierung in der Neutralitätspolitik. Bericht des Bundesrates in Erfüllung des Postulats 22.3358, Aussenpolitische Kommission SR, 11.04.2022,’ Bern, 25 October 2022, <https://www.admin.ch/gov/de/start/dokumentation/medienmitteilungen/bundesrat.msg-id-90895.html>, 35.

⁸⁴ Federal Council, ‘Klarheit und Orientierung in der Neutralitätspolitik’, 35.

⁸⁵ Federal Council, ‘Klarheit und Orientierung in der Neutralitätspolitik’, 35.

neutrality.⁸⁶ The report defended the government's reaction to the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war as an interplay between neutrality law and policies established after an emergency UN meeting. This included adhering to neutrality law and act neutrally towards both countries, condemning any violations of international law. Further, it was agreed that all countries are obliged to sanction violations of international law, in specific humanitarian law. This also applies to neutral countries, since "neutrality does not mean indifference".⁸⁷ Imposing sanctions was justified, even as a neutral country, as the invasion of Ukraine was considered an attack on values like freedom and democracy. In contrast to the 1993 report, the moral value of neutrality seemed to have increased. The law of neutrality was not violated, the government argued, as sanctions were subject to neutrality policy.⁸⁸ The phrasing of the postulate and the report illustrate that not the sanctions itself, but the gap between an active and a passive understanding of neutrality had become an issue. While neutrality law can be seen as passive and steady, neutrality policy serves to actively review and adjust neutrality. The report challenged the long-held notion that Swiss neutrality must be rigid to be credible. Instead, by building on the 1993 report, the 2022 report highlighted international cooperation and flexible adaption to changing circumstances as crucial for Swiss neutrality.

The 1993 report has been described as a "key turning point" in the Swiss government's conceptual definition of neutrality. The concept of neutrality presented in the report was "radically different", political scientist Daniel Möckli explains.⁸⁹ Scholars such as Jürg Martin Gabriel and Thomas Fischer agree that Swiss foreign policy including neutrality underwent a "slow but fundamental change [...] of historical proportions" after the end of the Cold War.⁹⁰ In contrast to the Bindschedler doctrine from the Cold War era, international cooperation and integration were suddenly defined as compatible with neutrality. Furthermore, the Swiss government began to recognise the UN as a global power that represents the international community and goes beyond a bilateral understanding of conflict. In this understanding, Switzerland would not violate the law of neutrality when supporting the UN. Consequently, Switzerland began to match the UN in economic sanctions and fostered deeper connections, which eventually led to the full membership in 2002.⁹¹ Switzerland's path to joining the UN

⁸⁶ Federal Council, 'Klarheit und Orientierung in der Neutralitätspolitik', 4.

⁸⁷ Federal Council, 'Klarheit und Orientierung in der Neutralitätspolitik', 19.

⁸⁸ Federal Council, 'Klarheit und Orientierung in der Neutralitätspolitik', 1.

⁸⁹ Daniel Möckli, 'The Long Road to Membership: Switzerland and the United Nations,' in in Jürg Martin Gabriel and Thomas Fischer, *Swiss Foreign Policy, 1945-2002* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 47.

⁹⁰ Gabriel and Fischer, *Swiss Foreign Policy*, viii.

⁹¹ Möckli, 'Switzerland and the United Nations,' 63.

and involvement with the organisation and the accompanying neutrality understanding of the government are examined in greater detail in the following.

2.2 Switzerland's Engagement in the UN: The Concept of 'Active Neutrality'

Switzerland's path to the UN was not a straight-forward one. Despite the efforts of the government, a referendum for accession was rejected in 1986. This raises the question why the Swiss population eventually approved of joining the UN in 2002 – a question which cannot be fully answered within the scope of this thesis – and how Switzerland's UN relation evolved from a passive member to gaining a seat in the UNSC.

2.2.1 Switzerland's Path to UN Membership

A changed understanding of neutrality serves as a possible explanation of the eventual approval of the UN accession. Switzerland's relations to and involvement with the UN are a strong example of the ambivalence of the country's understanding of neutrality and its foreign policy. In many ways, Switzerland had been involved with the UN since the organisation was founded in 1945. For instance, by providing financial and non-material support for development programmes, or by hosting the organisation in its headquarters in Geneva. Nonetheless, as political scientist Daniel Möckli explains, until 2002 “non-membership was a defining feature of Swiss UN policy”.⁹² He argues that the relations between Switzerland and the UN “are by and large a reflection of the country's changing interpretation of neutrality”.⁹³

In a foreword dated January 2003, Anton Thalmann, then Swiss Ambassador to Belgium and Head of the Swiss Mission to NATO, remarked that Swiss foreign policy had undergone several changes since the fall of the Berlin Wall. According to Thalmann, Switzerland had begun to gain security through cooperation, which allowed the integration into a globalised world whilst remaining neutral. That way, Switzerland could persist on being involved in international affairs and at the same time stay out of focus.⁹⁴ Political scientist Jürg Martin Gabriel underlines the complex dualism of Swiss neutrality and foreign policy. Regardless of dependence on international economic, scientific and cultural collaboration, independence in political terms has always been valued highly. As Gabriel describes, Switzerland usually participates in ‘low politics’ on a global scale, while handling ‘high politics’ and issues of

⁹² Möckli, ‘Switzerland and the United Nations,’ 46.

⁹³ Möckli, ‘Switzerland and the United Nations,’ 47.

⁹⁴ Anton Thalmann, ‘Foreword,’ in Jürg Martin Gabriel and Thomas Fischer, *Swiss Foreign Policy, 1945-2002* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), vii.

security with national preferences in mind first.⁹⁵ Switching back and forth between seemingly contradictory positions, Switzerland has earned a reputation as the cherry-picker of international politics.⁹⁶

During the war and in the post-war period, identification with neutrality was so strong that neither the government nor the population agreed to a re-definition of the concept, let alone the UN accession. 1977 seemed to be a turning point. The government framed the collective security power of the UN as so weak that Swiss neutrality would not be affected even when becoming a member. While being pragmatic, the argument did not convince the public. Neutrality had become a “characteristic feature of [...] an isolationist mentality”.⁹⁷ The government’s defeat in the 1986 vote reflected the adherence to a passive, non-involved understanding of neutrality in the midst of the turmoil of the Cold War. Yet, Möckli, Thalmann, Gabriel and Fischer agree that the collapse of the Berlin Wall a few years later had a decisive influence on the prevailing understanding of neutrality in Switzerland. With the UN accession in 2002, Switzerland’s position permanently shifted from bystander to active player. As Möckli points out, throughout the entire referendum campaign, the compatibility of the UN with Swiss neutrality was emphasised. At no point, a potential loss of significance of Swiss neutrality in the post-Cold War era was addressed.⁹⁸ This means that giving up neutrality altogether was and is out of the question.

Möckli concluded by the fact that the people’s approval took so long was a sign “of the delicate and controversial nature of the issue. The acceptance process also demonstrates how powerful the institution of direct democracy can be in shaping the course of Swiss foreign policy”.⁹⁹ In the coming years, he predicted, the Swiss electorate would continue to obstruct European and global integration due to political short-sightedness and the adherence to a narrow understanding of neutrality. The dilemma between passive neutrality and multilateral participation would remain.¹⁰⁰ This multilateral approach of Switzerland was significantly shaped by Micheline Calmy-Rey, as will be discussed next.

⁹⁵ Jürg Martin Gabriel, ‘The Price of Political Uniqueness: Swiss Foreign Policy in a Changing World,’ in Jürg Martin Gabriel and Thomas Fischer, *Swiss Foreign Policy, 1945-2002* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 1.

⁹⁶ ‘EU Cannot Accept Cherry-Picking by Switzerland | News | European Parliament,’ 25 February 2014, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20140221IPR36669/eu-cannot-accept-cherry-picking-by-switzerland>.

⁹⁷ Möckli, ‘Switzerland and the United Nations,’ 47.

⁹⁸ Möckli, ‘Switzerland and the United Nations,’ 48.

⁹⁹ Möckli, ‘Switzerland and the United Nations,’ 66.

¹⁰⁰ Möckli, ‘Switzerland and the United Nations,’ 67.

2.2.2 Switzerland's Approach to Active Neutrality

The term 'active neutrality' was advocated by Micheline Calmy-Rey and arguably influenced the course of Swiss neutrality policy after joining the UN in 2002. In December 2002, Calmy-Rey was voted to become Federal Councillor representing the left-wing *Sozialdemokratische Partei* (SP). In her role as Federal Councillor, she led the Foreign Ministry from 2003 to 2011.¹⁰¹

During her term of office, active neutrality substituted passive neutrality. In Calmy-Rey's own words, a policy of active neutrality means that Switzerland does not take sides, but the side of international law. Calmy-Rey argues that neutrality should be understood on the basis of international law, in particular the legal definition of neutrality and humanitarian law. From her point of view, neutrality can be discussed and adapted, but should always refer back to the legal framework. Consequently, any violation of international law such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine should be condemned. "Being quiet and remaining silent is not enough",¹⁰² she says, which reads similarly to Cassis' statement that "neutrality does not mean standing on the side-lines".¹⁰³ Following these sentiments, Switzerland's involvement in global affairs is essential for maintaining its neutrality.

In her position as Foreign Minister, Calmy-Rey initiated Switzerland's application for a seat on the UNSC in 2011. As she stated, the candidacy was compatible with neutrality since the UNSC only acts militarily representing the international community. Hence, she argued, the law of neutrality for interstate conflicts is not applicable. Further, she mentions that Switzerland had already taken positions in the UN General Assembly, and Switzerland's influence on global affairs as a small state would increase. Naturally, this confirms the SVP's criticism that Switzerland does not take a neutral position on issues of opinion in the UN. Calmy-Rey, however, argues that Switzerland best fulfils its role as a mediator by becoming more involved in international affairs.¹⁰⁴ Calmy-Rey's arguments for the election of Switzerland to the UNSC illustrate her understanding of neutrality as an instrument to avoid conflict and at the same time increase power. This aligns with Jürg Martin Gabriel's observations that Swiss politicians

¹⁰¹ 'Micheline Calmy-Rey,' Council of Women World Leaders, accessed 26 May 2023, <https://www.councilwomenworldleaders.org/micheline-calmy-rey.html>.

¹⁰² Original: «Die Schweiz ist auf der Seite des Völkerrechts, sie stellt sich nicht auch die eine oder andere Seite eines Konflikts, sondern auf die Seite des Rechts. Natürlich ist es angebracht, sich zu äussern und Verletzungen des Völkerrechts zu verurteilen. Still sein und schweigen genügt nicht.» Micheline Calmy-Rey, 'Die Schweiz und ihre Neutralität stehen vor grossen Herausforderungen,' interview by Sibilla Bondolfi, *Swissinfo.ch*, 21 January 2021, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/ger/wirtschaft/-die-schweiz-und-ihre-neutralitaet-stehen-vor-grossen-herausforderungen-/46298838>.

¹⁰³ Cassis, "Reality is Multilateral."

¹⁰⁴ Micheline Calmy-Rey, 'Die Schweiz hat in der UNO einen guten Ruf,' interview by Sibilla Bondolfi, *Swissinfo.ch*, 12 January 2022, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/ger/wirtschaft/-die-schweiz-hat-in-der-uno-einen-guten-ruf-/47206848>.

distinguish between ‘high’ and ‘low’ politics. Depending on the context, involvement or non-involvement is favourable. Calmy-Ray admits that Switzerland does “maintain political and economic relations with states that systematically violate human rights or are involved in conflicts”.¹⁰⁵ However, she argues, if Switzerland abstains or only passively engages in international relations, Switzerland’s humanitarian role becomes questionable. In other words, if Switzerland wants to be part of the team, it has to play along or be the referee. Only when the country joins the ranks of the spectators would it endanger its neutrality. When all eyes are on the game, it is the complicity off the pitch that is dangerous. In official communication, the Swiss humanitarian role is embraced just as much as neutrality, for example by highlighting good offices. Calmy-Rey, on the other hand, highlights that abstention can have consequences as well when not actively communicated. Hence, she emphasises the moral and legal obligations of neutrality.

Calmy-Rey suggests defining neutrality as always taking the side of international law. However, as established in the first chapter, neutrality is composed of both law and policies. As stated in the Swiss constitution, neutrality is an instrument meant to be discussed and adapted. In particular, neutrality policy is defined by the country’s own understanding of neutrality. Moreover, despite stating that neutrality has already been defined, Calmy-Rey still campaigns for a specific neutrality concept herself. Calmy-Rey’s neutrality definition is largely based on international law and human rights, but also influenced by her own views. Therefore, she presents neutrality as an end in itself – even if that might not have been her intention. Further, as a neutrality definition solely based on law is neither intended by the Swiss constitution nor convincing, Calmy-Rey’s argumentation is therefore flawed. In the following, the further development of ‘active neutrality’ by Calmy-Rey’s successor is discussed.

2.3 Ignazio Cassis’ WEF Speech: Sanctions and ‘Cooperative Neutrality’

In his speech at the WEF in Davos on 23 May 2022, Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis commented on the sanctions imposed by Switzerland. In doing so, he also introduced ‘cooperative neutrality’ as a possible new guiding principle of the Swiss government. The title ‘Reality is multilateral’ summarises a core statement made in the speech. During the Cold War, Switzerland had often acted unilateral. In the 1993 neutrality report, foreign policy was still

¹⁰⁵ Original: «[...] politische und wirtschaftliche Beziehungen zu Staaten unterhält, die systematisch Menschenrechte verletzen oder in Konflikte verwickelt sind». Micheline Calmy-Rey, ‘Die Schweiz und ihre Neutralität stehen vor grossen Herausforderungen,’ interview by Sibilla Bondolfi, *Swissinfo.ch*, 21 January 2021, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/ger/wirtschaft/-die-schweiz-und-ihre-neutralitaet-stehen-vor-grossen-herausforderungen-/46298838>.

defined as serving the interests of Switzerland. Using the sanctions against Russia at the beginning of 2022 as an example, Cassis argued that the adjustment to a multilateral reality had become necessary out of international and national interests. Indeed, Switzerland was obliged to impose these sanctions under international humanitarian law, but also based on Swiss values. “There is no neutral attitude towards the brutal violation of fundamental values”, Cassis stated, “Passivity tolerates the violation of law and can play into the hands of the aggressor”.¹⁰⁶ Besides being morally responsible, he framed ‘cooperative neutrality’ as a continuation of neutrality law and established neutrality practice, value-based and peace-oriented. In the tradition of Calmy-Rey’s ‘active neutrality’, Cassis portrays neutrality to be mainly based on international law. As established before, such a definition runs the risk of disregarding the importance of neutrality discourse and policy. This means that a law-based narrative tends to downplay Switzerland’s agency in interpreting neutrality.

2.3.1 Switzerland in the Security Council

In 2022, Switzerland was voted to become a non-permanent member of the UNSC during the period of 2023-2024. This was preceded by the accession to the UN, a lengthy candidacy process and an extensive debate within Switzerland. Therefore, the election reflects a key moment in the history of Swiss neutrality. The discourse on the candidacy illustrates the government’s shift towards a cooperative understanding of neutrality in the preceding years. A report addressing criticism on the candidacy published by the Federal Council in 2015 serves as an example. The report acted as a pronounced statement of the government on doubts expressed by parliamentarians as to whether neutrality would be compatible with a seat on the UNSC. Various key elements are addressed. First, the report stressed the need for a foreign policy capable of protecting “the independence, security and welfare of Switzerland”.¹⁰⁷ It underlined that Switzerland’s foreign policy already aligns with UN policies. The UNSC’s objective of maintaining peace and guaranteeing security would not conflict with Swiss neutrality, but become enhanced by Switzerland’s unique position. Neutrality was highlighted as an instrument, not as an end in itself.¹⁰⁸ Austria, among others, was mentioned as a successful example of a neutral member to the UNSC. Further, the UNSC was portrayed as a mediator

¹⁰⁶ Cassis, ‘Reality is multilateral.’

¹⁰⁷ Original: «Unabhängigkeit, Sicherheit und Wohlfahrt der Schweiz». Federal Council, ‘Die Kandidatur der Schweiz für einen nichtständigen Sitz im Sicherheitsrat der Vereinten Nationen in der Periode 2023-2024. Bericht des Bundesrates in Erfüllung des Postulats der Aussenpolitischen Kommission des Nationalrats (APK-N) 13.3005 vom 15. Januar 2013,’ 5 June 2015, <https://www.news.admin.ch/news/message/attachments/39665.pdf>, 4.

¹⁰⁸ Federal Council, ‘Die Kandidatur der Schweiz,’ 5.

acting on behalf of the international community, rather than a conflict party on its own. According to the report, as a UNSC member, Switzerland would act towards collective and state security.¹⁰⁹

The right wing of parliament in particular expressed criticism of the candidacy. This is illustrated, for example, by a motion by Roland Rino Büchel in 2018. Büchel had been a member of the National Council for the SVP since 2010.¹¹⁰ He criticised the UNSC's ability to impose binding measures on its members. In his opinion, these measures would limit Switzerland's independence, as they could lead to sanctions or military intervention. In short, Büchel's criticisms that Switzerland would contradict its own principle of neutrality.¹¹¹

The period between 2002 and 2022 witnessed significant shifts in the neutrality discourse. These changes were arguably driven primarily by the shift of the right-wing SVP from a reactive to a proactive role in the neutrality discourse. The campaign against UN accession in 2002 provided a starting point for the SVP to reframe neutrality as a strategic argument and highlight concerns about potential compromises to Swiss sovereignty and national identity. The right-wing's transition to a proactive stance occurred gradually, gaining momentum in the years leading up to the UNSC candidacy and culminating, for the time being, in the 'neutrality initiative'. While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when the SVP recognised the value of neutrality as a strategic political asset, from the early 2000s onwards they began to actively shape the discourse surrounding neutrality and advocate their position more assertively. The SVP's definition of neutrality became increasingly explicit, leading to a cohesive alignment among party members in their arguments on neutrality. Through their proactive approach and by emphasising the importance of neutrality for the preservation of national autonomy, the SVP managed to position itself as the 'defending force' of Swiss interests and sovereignty vis-à-vis the government. It can therefore be argued that the most important changes in the neutrality discourse between 2002 and 2022 were caused by the SVP's shift from a reactive to a proactive stance and the government's reaction to this shift.

In their reply to Büchel's motion, the Federal Council highlighted the extensive consultation process that accompanied the application. The report from 2015 was mentioned as still being the "core reference document for the Swiss candidacy".¹¹² Further, Switzerland's

¹⁰⁹ Federal Council, 'Die Kandidatur der Schweiz,' 21.

¹¹⁰ The Federal Parliament, 'Büchel Roland Rino | Nationalrat | Ratsmitglied | Das Schweizer Parlament,' accessed 3 March 2023, <https://www.parlament.ch/de/biografie/roland-rino-b%C3%BCchel/4025>.

¹¹¹ Büchel, Roland Rino Büchel, 'Verzicht auf eine Kandidatur für den UNO-Sicherheitsrat,' The Federal Assembly – The Swiss Parliament, Motion 18.4123, 29 November 2018, <https://www.parlament.ch/de/ratsbetrieb/suche-curia-vista/geschaefft?AffairId=20184123>.

¹¹² Original: «zentrales Referenzdokument für die Schweizer Kandidatur». Büchel, 'Verzicht auf eine Kandidatur für den UNO-Sicherheitsrat.'

participation in economic and political events of a globalised world that no longer could be evaded was emphasised. According to the government, the country was already forced to position itself when faced with world politics. Now, there was an opportunity to actively shape these events. Switzerland's role should be one of "building brides".¹¹³ In this respect, Büchel's criticism was not denied, but interpreted adversely – involvement as a necessary deed rather than a betrayal of neutrality. While Büchel preferred Switzerland to avoid engaging in world politics, the government wanted to exert its influence. This again highlights the dilemma between the government's 'active neutrality' policy and the SVP's understanding. While the government claimed it as its duty not to shirk moral responsibility and thus justified the candidacy as being compatible with neutrality, the SVP considered values such as independence and stability endangered.

Interestingly, neither the government nor the SVP addressed possible consequences of a successful application beyond exercising influence outside of its domestic realm. Security threats and possible positive or negative outcomes of a membership in the UNSC were neglected, despite political entanglements or terrorism being among the conceivable possibilities. Seemingly, neither side wanted to commit to future predictions. This leaves two questions open. On the one hand, which advantages, apart from the vague expressions of influence and peacekeeping, was the government hoping for? For instance, Switzerland is considered to be one of the safest countries of the world according to rankings such as the Global Peace Index.¹¹⁴ In the report and statement towards Büchel, the government remained reticent about other motives. On the other hand, what tangible consequences did the SVP fear for Switzerland? Both the government and the SVP were seemingly dissatisfied with the status quo. While one sought participation as a solution, the other had the opposite in mind. How have both positions co-existed since? The SVP and the government seem to give either more weight to independence or to security, both of which can be associated with neutrality. Either it is then argued that neutrality should be linked to independence, or it is argued that neutrality should be linked to security and international cooperation. Therefore, since the concept of neutrality itself is not defined in the constitution, it provides a projection surface for various political agendas.

The submission of the motion more than three years after the publication of the Federal Council's report amplified the continued relevance of the issue on the political agenda of right-wing politicians. In March 2022, an extraordinary parliament session was convened as a last-minute attempt to prevent Switzerland's candidacy. SVP politician Roger Köppel argued that

¹¹³ Büchel, 'Verzicht auf eine Kandidatur für den UNO-Sicherheitsrat.'

¹¹⁴ Wisevoter, 'Safest Countries in the World 2023,' accessed 3 March 2023, <https://wisevoter.com/country-rankings/safest-countries-in-the-world/>.

neutrality had historically proven to secure Switzerland: “The state principle of armed neutrality has guided us through the storms of history and countless wars”.¹¹⁵ Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis countered that the candidacy was part of Switzerland’s good offices, i.e., offering humanitarian and diplomatic assistance to mediate in conflicts. Further, the European security culture was in a state of flux, and Switzerland had to adapt to it, argued Cassis. Eventually, the parliament supported the government’s stance. Relating Swiss neutrality to the accession to the UNSC possibly opens rhetoric opportunities for joining other international bodies in the future. Therefore, the accession further evolved the public debate of Swiss neutrality.

This chapter aimed to examine ‘active’ and ‘cooperative neutrality’ in contrast to passive neutrality. Further, to understand how the Swiss government re-positioned itself and redefined neutrality by joining the UN in 2002 up to becoming a member of the UNSC in 2022. Significant shifts in the understanding and application of Swiss neutrality were revealed. The initial rejection of the UN accession due to neutrality and the approval in 2002 illustrate this evolution. Probably, the post-Cold War era necessitated the adoption of a neutrality understanding based on cooperation, as reiterated in both the 1993 and 2023 government’s reports. While Switzerland engages in ‘low politics’ such as economic collaboration on a global scale, ‘high politics’ such as security and neutrality are approached from a national perspective. Micheline Calmy-Rey, Foreign minister from 2003-2011, promoted the term ‘active neutrality’ and initiated Switzerland’s application to the UNSC. She argued that neutrality means taking the side of international law. However, this can be seen as an oversimplified approach to neutrality policy. Ignazio Cassis, Foreign Minister since 2017, continued Calmy-Rey’s approach by introducing ‘cooperative neutrality’. This stance received criticism from the right-wing, which favours a passive definition of neutrality. The neutrality understandings brought forward by the government and the SVP underscore different political agendas, which either link neutrality with collective security or independence. It is precisely because neutrality is not defined in the constitution that it can effectively be used as a tool for political purposes. The SVP’s shift from a reactive to a proactive role, sparked by the UN accession, arguably influenced significant changes in neutrality discourse. The following chapter explores the

¹¹⁵ Original: «Die Staatsmaxime der bewaffneten Neutralität hat uns durch die Stürme der Geschichte und unzählige Kriege geführt». Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen (SRF), ‘Schweiz im UNO-Sicherheitsrat – “Neutralität darf nicht mit Gleichgültigkeit verwechselt werden”’, 10 March 2022, <https://www.srf.ch/news/schweiz/schweiz-im-uno-sicherheitsrat-neutralitaet-darf-nicht-mit-gleichgueltigkeit-verwechselt-werden>.

relationship between the political engagement of the right-wing and the evolution of public debate on neutrality.

3. *Back to Integral Neutrality?* – Right-Wing Discourse on Neutrality

Having discussed the Swiss government's position on neutrality, the final chapter of this thesis analyses the extent to which the position of the right-wing differs, thereby addressing the third sub-question. This includes a brief analysis of how Christoph Blocher, leading representative of the SVP, defines neutrality through his political engagement. European right-wing populism can broadly be described as a political ideology that uses anti-establishment rhetoric and is usually opposed to immigration and European integration.¹¹⁶ The 'neutrality initiative' will provide an example of how neutrality can be strategically used for political action. The people's initiative was launched by the SVP on 19 October 2022 and will continue until 8 May 2024. Since the initiative is decided domestically, this chapter will home in on neutrality in relation to domestic political developments. The close link between foreign and domestic policy is highlighted, with particular emphasis on the influence of the Swiss referendum system on this relationship. Previous studies have not yet examined in depth the impact of right-wing discourse on Swiss neutrality. In relation to the research question, this chapter hence addresses the evolution of Swiss neutrality specifically in right-wing discourse.

3.1 SVP's Definition of Neutrality: Understanding the Origins and Ideology

Understanding the origins of a political party is imperative to comprehending its ideology. Further, the SVP's understanding of history and traditions has arguably shaped their political agenda and influenced their stance on neutrality.

3.1.1 SVP's Origins

The roots of the SVP can be traced back to the early twentieth century when the *Bauern-, Gewerbe- und Bürgerpartei* (BGB) was founded. The party acted as the conservative political representative for farmers and had a seat in the Federal Council since 1928, but no significant success with other voters. This changed in 1971 when the party renamed itself SVP, short for *Schweizerische Volkspartei*, which translates to Swiss People's Party. The name was a symbol of the party's shift from addressing a rural audience to attracting the entire population and laid the foundation for its success. Still, it was not until the 1990s that the SVP transformed from a centre-right to a right-wing populist party, as it is now classified in comparative political

¹¹⁶ European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS), 'Right-Wing Populism,' accessed 7 June 2023, <https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/right-wing-populism/>.

science.¹¹⁷ After Christoph Blocher became the leader of the SVP's section of Zurich in February 1977, the regional branch began to pursue a more right-wing path. In 1991, the section proposed their first people's initiative to restrict immigration, which 46 percent of voters agreed on. In the same year, the national share of votes increased from 11.9 to 28.9 percent. This increase was an unprecedented result in Swiss politics, and a sign of the SVP no longer being a party of regional, but of national significance. In 2003, the SVP won a second seat in the Federal Council due to their strength in parliament, and established itself as a permanent political force.¹¹⁸

3.1.2 SVP's Political Ideology

To grasp the SVP's understanding of neutrality, various sources could be considered. However, within the scope of this thesis, the primary focus is on the most recent party programme. It was published in 2019 and encompasses the years up to and including 2023. The title 'Free and safe' (*Frei und sicher*) emphasises two values that the SVP links with neutrality and promises their voters to protect against external pressure. According to the SVP, both the government and the foreign ministry are no longer maintaining a neutral stance.¹¹⁹ This discourse has been applied to other events such as Switzerland's application to the UN and to the UNSC before. In combination with freedom and independence neutrality then forms a dogmatic triad in the party's rhetoric.

In a political discussion broadcast in July 2022, other parties portrayed varied interpretations of what neutrality entails. The *Green Liberal Party* (GLP) and the *Free Democratic Party* (FDP) emphasised the importance of cooperation with other nations, viewing neutrality as a means to safeguard Swiss security. The *Social Democratic Party* (SP) advocated an active policy of neutrality that upholds international law and the multilateral order, and was thus most in line with the government's position. In contrast, the *Greens* criticised any alignment with military alliances and called for imposing stronger sanctions on Russia, therefore sharing the SVP's position to a certain extent.¹²⁰ The debates on arms re-exports in May 2023 fostered an unusual alliance as both the *Greens* and the SVP, as both emphasised

¹¹⁷ Damir Skenderovic, 'Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP),' *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz (HLS)*, 20 March 2017, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/017389/2017-03-20/>.

Also: Marius Hildebrand, *Rechtspopulismus und Hegemonie: der Aufstieg der SVP und die diskursive Transformation der politischen Schweiz*, Kultur und Kollektiv, Band 4 (Bielefeld: transcript, 2017), 20.

¹¹⁸ Skenderovic, 'Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP).'

¹¹⁹ Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP). 'Frei und sicher. Ich will's – Ich wähl's. Parteiprogramm 2019 – 2023.' Accessed 30 March 2023. <https://www.svp.ch/positionen/parteiprogramme/>, 3.

¹²⁰ Stephanie Caminada, '«Arena» zur Neutralität - Grüne greifen GLP frontal an', *Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen (SRF)*, 2 July 2022, <https://www.srf.ch/news/schweiz/arena-zur-neutralitaet-gruene-greifen-glp-frontal-an>.

Switzerland's role as a neutral country and advocated mediation as opposed to “exacerbating wars”.¹²¹

The recourse to international law as a framework for neutrality, as proposed by Micheline Calmy-Rey, former left-wing Federal Councillor, is firmly rejected in the SVP’s rhetoric. The party claims that international law risks to override the national democratic rights of the Swiss people. In particular, the party expresses concern that neutrality and foreign policy might be altered to prioritise international interests over national ones. If Switzerland aligns too closely to other countries or organisations, so the argument goes, Swiss security and independence are jeopardised. Instead of promoting ‘active’ or ‘cooperative neutrality’, the SVP argues, the Federal Council should re-embrace a “permanently armed, perpetual and comprehensive understanding of neutrality”.¹²² The concept of a comprehensive or integral neutrality (*umfassende Neutralität, integrale Neutralität*) is reiterated throughout the programme. However, this terminology can be misleading. To the SVP, ‘comprehensiveness’ does not imply an expansion of neutrality to include other states’ interests. Rather, it calls for the strengthening of neutrality in its traditional form, i.e., integral neutrality. Integral neutrality refers to absolute neutrality, as opposed to differential neutrality, which Switzerland adopted during the twentieth century.¹²³ To exemplify, the SVP supports liberalisation through measures such as free trade agreements. However, in foreign policy, the government should adhere “to impartiality and non-interference at all times”.¹²⁴ The party argues that participating in the “struggle for power and prestige” on the international stage would only be detrimental to a small state like Switzerland.¹²⁵ Assuming a certain Swiss uniqueness, the SVP prefers neutrality to be a gatekeeper. This arguably leads to power, e.g., allowing Switzerland to participate in free trade while disregarding sanctions.

Two aspects are particularly evident in the SVP’ rhetoric of neutrality. First, the strong opposition of the establishment and thus the position of the government. Criticism on the establishment is expressed through “a narrative of a left-liberal dominated state apparatus

¹²¹ Original: «Als neutrales Land und als Depositarstaat der Genfer Konventionen soll die Schweiz in Konflikten vermitteln und schlichten - statt mit Waffenexporten Kriege zu nähren». Isabel Pfaff, ‘Schweiz: Grüne gegen Waffenlieferungen’, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 4 March 2023, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/gruene-partei-in-der-schweiz-ploetzlich-im-boot-mit-den-rechten-1.5762191>.

¹²² Original: «dauernd bewaffnetes, immerwährendes und umfassendes Neutralitätsverständnis». SVP, ‘Frei und sicher,’ 3, 13.

¹²³ Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, ‘Vor 80 Jahren: Völkerbund billigt Antrag auf absolute Neutralität der Schweiz’, bpb.de, 11 May 2018, <https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/hintergrund-aktuell/269019/vor-80-jahren-voelkerbund-billigt-antrag-auf-absolute-neutralitaet-der-schweiz/>.

¹²⁴ Original: «das gesamte Handeln der Regierung in der Aussenpolitik jederzeit zur Unparteilichkeit und Nichteinmischung verpflichtet». SVP, ‘Frei und sicher,’ 12.

¹²⁵ Original: «Gerangel um Macht und Ansehen». SVP, ‘Frei und sicher,’ 10.

sabotaging the public will”.¹²⁶ This narrative omits that the SVP has two out of the seven seats that form the Federal Council, the Swiss government. Further, the SVP has a parliamentary share of more than 25 percent.¹²⁷ Therefore, it can be argued that the SVP is an influential part of the establishment that they criticise. Secondly, the party is deliberately utilising the division between supporters and opponents of globalisation.¹²⁸ This ‘us versus them’ dynamic is repeatedly used to unify voters despite structural differences.¹²⁹ Hence, the party acts doubly antagonistic in their right-wing discourse; against established elites and socially marginalised groups such as foreigners. The SVP’s politics are supposed to serve the ones in between those poles.¹³⁰ While the party became increasingly nationalist on questions of migration and European integration since the 1990s, it remained liberal on economic issues.¹³¹ For the SVP, as for other European populist parties, economic liberalisation does not contradict cultural conservatism. Unlike the extreme right, right-wing populists are not against a democratic form of government. Rather, they portray themselves as the only party that stands for authentic democracy and the rights of the constitution. In particular, they claim to protect the people from the self-centred and elitist government.¹³² Following this narrative, the SVP’s perspective, external factors, such as the globalisation, foreigners or the EU, are harming Switzerland. The fact that the government adapts to such external factors puts Switzerland and Swiss neutrality at risk. At the same time, the SVP presents neutrality as the means that offers independence and protection.

3.1.3 SVP’s Perception of History and Tradition

The neutrality understanding of the SVP is accentuated with an idealised perspective on Switzerland’s history and traditions. The party attributes Switzerland’s present success to permanence rather than change and consequently advocates against readily discarding decisions and values of the past.¹³³ This stance is particularly evident in an article of SVP parliamentarian Peter Keller from July 2022. He emphasises the essential role of neutrality in promoting peace

¹²⁶ Original: «Narrativ eines linksliberal dominierten, den Volkswillen sabotierenden Staatsapparates». Marius Hildebrand, ‘Populistische Kontestation als nationalkonservative Anti-Politik. Die SVP und die Hegemonisierung des Schweizer Sonderfalls’, in *Populismus, Diskurs, Staat*, ed. Seongcheol Kim and Aristotelis Agridopoulos (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2020), 191, 205.

¹²⁷ Federal Statistical Office, ‘Parteistärken.’

¹²⁸ Skenderovic, ‘Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP).’

¹²⁹ Hildebrand, *Rechtspopulismus*, 27-29.

¹³⁰ Hildebrand, ‘Populistische Kontestation,’ 205.

¹³¹ Skenderovic, ‘Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP).’

¹³² Hildebrand, *Rechtspopulismus*, 18.

¹³³ SVP, ‘Frei und sicher,’ 3, 10.

and stability, criticising what he perceived as the negligent abandonment of neutrality by the Federal Council and other parties by imposing sanctions.¹³⁴

In a press statement on 7 September 2022, the Swiss government reacted to these allegations by emphasising the continuation of the neutrality policy outlined in the 1993 report. Considering the severe violation of international law by Russia in its aggression against Ukraine, Swiss neutrality was deemed compatible with the EU sanctions. The government further highlighted that they were confronted with military aggression unprecedented in Europe since the Second World War.¹³⁵ In contrast, according to Keller, Switzerland was only spared two world wars thanks to its neutrality. “If every country were as neutral as Switzerland,” he claims, “there would be no wars in the world”.¹³⁶ He disregards that these statements fall short in their simplicity yet provide a typical example of the SVP’s rhetoric. Entanglements of the Swiss banking sector with fascist powers during the Second World War came to light in the 1990s, harming the identity and image of a neutral, humanitarian Switzerland. Struggling over the interpretation of history and remembrance politics, Christoph Blocher and the SVP preferred a traditional depiction. Relying on the populist distinction between ‘elitist conformity’ and ‘popular resistance’, Blocher argued that the ones in power at the time fearfully adapted to the great powers surrounding them. The people, on the other hand, remained committed to independence and neutrality. In a similar logic, the SVP is now arguing that neutrality must be defended against the EU and other multinational institutions.¹³⁷ Since the 1990s, Blocher has been a leading figure in this campaign. In the following, his arguments regarding Swiss neutrality are discussed.

3.2 Christoph Blocher: Shaping Neutrality Perceptions as an Opinion Leader

“A fundamental and traditional aspect of Swiss traditional political culture is its distaste for popular leaders,” political scientist Kris W. Kobach constituted in 1993.¹³⁸ This changed with the rise of Christoph Blocher. To some he is a ruthless self-made entrepreneur, a neoliberalist

¹³⁴ Peter Keller, ‘Die Neutralität ist fundamental für die Schweiz,’ *SVP-Klartext*, 28 July 2022, <https://www.svp.ch/aktuell/parteizeitung/2022-2/svp-klartext-juli-2022/die-neutralitaet-ist-fundamental-fuer-die-schweiz/>.

¹³⁵ Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), ‘Fragen und Antworten zur Neutralität der Schweiz,’ accessed 13 June 2023,

<https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/de/home/daseda/aktuell/newsuebersicht/2022/03/neutralitaet.html>

¹³⁶ Original: «Wenn jedes Land so neutral wäre wie die Schweiz, gäbe es keine Kriege in der Welt». Keller, ‘Neutralität.’

¹³⁷ Hildebrand, ‘Populistische Kontestation,’ 201.

¹³⁸ Kris William Kobach, *The Referendum: Direct Democracy in Switzerland* (Aldershot, Hants, England ; Brookfield, Vt., USA: Dartmouth, 1993), 180, as cited in Hildebrand, *Rechtspopulismus*, 160.

or a right-wing extremist. To others he is the only politician who defends Switzerland's neutrality, sovereignty and welfare state.¹³⁹ He supports the SVP ideologically and financially. As a successful entrepreneur he benefits from globalisation, as a politician from nationalisation, his critics remark.¹⁴⁰ As a member of the SVP since the 1970s, he has held various positions within the party as well as serving in the Federal Assembly and Federal Council.¹⁴¹ Through his involvement in opinion-making campaigns, his political career is closely linked to the development of right-wing discourse in Switzerland. For example, he vigorously campaigned against Switzerland's accession to the *European Economic Area* (EEA) in 1992, the predecessor of the EU. While the Swiss government had requested approval in Brussels, Blocher and the SVP set out to oppose the decision in the mandatory referendum – and won, albeit by a narrow margin. With a relatively high turnout of 78 percent, 50.3 percent voted against accession.¹⁴² Since then, Switzerland's relations with the EU have been under public scrutiny, and Blocher became a leading figure of Swiss conservatives. Possibly, the right-wing discourse against the Russian sanctions caused so much turmoil because they had been originally proposed by the EU.

In response to the implementation of the sanctions, Blocher took the initiative to spearhead the 'neutrality initiative'. The initiative reflects his aim for Switzerland to return to 'integral neutrality'. This conception meant that during the Second World War, for example, Switzerland did not impose any sanctions on the belligerent states. Instead, the country continued trade with all states. Similarly, Switzerland did not support the UN sanctions against the apartheid regime in South Africa in the 1990s. The fact that 'integral neutrality' offers economic advantages at the expense of moral responsibility is "not a disgrace" (*Schande*) to Blocher.¹⁴³ In 2003, political scientist Hans Jörg Hennecke questioned whether Blocher's "strict, historically based understanding of neutrality can still be authoritative for Switzerland in view of changed security risks".¹⁴⁴ Twenty years later, this still forms a relevant question, especially with the recent launch of the neutrality initiative.

3.3 Exploring the 'Neutrality Initiative': Launch, Content and Implications

¹³⁹ Hans Jörg Hennecke, 'Das Salz in den Wunden der Konkordanz: Christoph Blocher und die Schweizer Politik', in *Populismus: Populisten in Übersee und Europa*, ed. Nikolaus Werz, Analysen (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2003), 145, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-663-11110-8_8.

¹⁴⁰ Gabriel, 'Political Uniqueness,' 16.

¹⁴¹ Christoph Blocher, 'Werdegang,' accessed March 29, 2023, <https://www.blocher.ch/career/>.

¹⁴² Swissvotes, 'EWR-Beitritt,' accessed 19 April 2023, <https://swissvotes.ch/vote/388.00>.

¹⁴³ Bühler and Häuptli, 'Aber sicher neutral.'

¹⁴⁴ Original: «Fraglich ist vor allem, ob sein striktes, historisch begründetes Neutralitätsverständnis angesichts gewandelter Sicherheitsrisiken für die Schweiz noch maßgeblich sein kann». Hennecke, 'Christoph Blocher,' 145.

The entire world looked in disbelief at the *United Kingdom* (UK) when David Cameron, then Prime Minister, announced a referendum to be held in 2016 on the UK's membership in the EU.¹⁴⁵ Swiss politicians, concurrently, could only give a weary smile. As in other representative democracies, politicians in Switzerland are elected to represent the citizens. However, it is not solely their power to decide on laws and the constitution. Public referendums are held up to four times a year. In global comparison, the Swiss population is thus the most involved in policymaking. This makes Switzerland a representative democracy with strong direct-democratic elements. People's initiatives in particular date back to the founding days of modern Switzerland. Such an initiative allows every Swiss citizen "to propose a total or partial reform of the constitution".¹⁴⁶ To be considered valid, an initiative must collect "at least 100.000 signatures from citizens within 18 months" before a nationwide referendum is held.¹⁴⁷ However, assessing the impact of initiatives in terms of successful political outcomes is quite challenging; over the last century, out of 200 initiatives, only 22 have been accepted by voters. It remains unclear why exactly the acceptance rate is so low. One possible explanation could be that the number of required signatures is relatively minor compared to the necessary voting majority. Nevertheless, the opportunity to exert influence exists. Few parties utilise this avenue as effectively as the SVP. Most recently, the initiatives for the 'deportation' of criminal foreigners (*Ausschaffungsinitiative*) and for immigration quotas (*Gegen Masseneinwanderung*) took the voting hurdle in 2010 and 2014 respectively.¹⁴⁸ As the political scientist Jürg Martin Gabriel argues, moments of political tension do not occur "when the Swiss elect, but when they vote. It is direct democracy that divides the public, polarises and is often accompanied by populist rhetoric".¹⁴⁹

It is worth noting that the Russian invasion of Ukraine served as a catalyst for international and national discussions on Swiss neutrality; however, the topic had already been on the SVP's agenda beforehand. The party had actively campaigned for their understanding of neutrality since the government's plans in the early 2000s to join the UN, gradually sharpening their proactive approach. When the Russo-Ukrainian war erupted in February 2022, and neutrality came under scrutiny, the SVP was prepared to present a well-defined neutrality concept. The government, on the other hand, appeared to be caught off guard. Seemingly only

¹⁴⁵ AP NEWS, 'Timeline of Events in Britain's Exit from the European Union,' 29 April 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/europe-general-elections-elections-referendums-david-cameron-f673af169925d30e524169ef92c4f386>.

¹⁴⁶ Swissinfo.ch, 'Direct Democracy.'

¹⁴⁷ Swissinfo.ch, 'Direct Democracy.'

¹⁴⁸ 'SVP-Initiativen: Die grössten Erfolge und Misserfolge', *Handelszeitung*, accessed 13 April 2023, <https://www.handelszeitung.ch/beruf/svp-initiativen-die-grossten-erfolge-und-misserfolge>.

¹⁴⁹ Gabriel, 'Political Uniqueness,' 5.

in response to the international pressure, the concept of ‘cooperative neutrality’ was presented on the international stage at the WEF in May 2022, without first presenting it to a national audience. Comparing the timestamps of the 1993 and 2022 report reveals that the government had not actively addressed neutrality for three decades, creating a void that the SVP and their neutrality discourse were able to fill. Despite increasing criticism, the Federal Council seemed to avoid any public discussion or substantial redefinition. The 2022 report minorly expanded the idea of cooperation outlined in the 1993 report¹⁵⁰, with an additional emphasis on the importance of maintaining flexibility in the definition of neutrality. This emphasis can be interpreted as a reaction to Blocher’s announcement in July 2022¹⁵¹ of his intention to anchor the SVP’s definition of neutrality in the constitution through a people’s initiative – which would limit the government’s room for manoeuvre. The chronological correlation suggests an intertwined process between Christoph Blocher’s announcement and the government’s framing.

On 19 October 2022, the SVP began collecting signatures for their people’s initiative on neutrality. The initiative’s title *Wahrung der schweizerischen Neutralität* translates to ‘the safeguarding of Swiss neutrality’. The choice of wording gives prominence to two of the party’s main concerns. First, the term ‘safeguarding’ refers to the traditional and conservative approach the party stands for. Rather than adapting neutrality, keeping it the same is preferred. Second, the emphasis lies on *Swiss* neutrality, and thus implies that neutrality should serve Swiss interests. This aligns with a neutrality understanding found in the Bindschedler doctrine. If the initiative is accepted in a nationwide referendum, the text of the initiative will form a new paragraph in the constitution.¹⁵² Since the initiative wants to define neutrality, the proposed text first establishes that Switzerland is a neutral country and that its neutrality must always be perpetual and armed. It also states that Switzerland shall not join any military or defence alliance, except in the event of an attack or planned attack. In accordance with the law of neutrality, Switzerland may not intervene in military conflicts of other states. In addition, and here the initiative would mean a drastic change, all “non-military coercive measures” (*nichtmilitärische Zwangsmassnahmen*) against states at war would be forbidden. Switzerland would no longer be allowed to impose sanctions, unless obliged to do so by the UN, or when

¹⁵⁰ Tobias Gafafer, ‘Neutralität: Blochers Initiative hat auch etwas Gutes,’ *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 8 November 2022, sec. Meinung, <https://www.nzz.ch/meinung/schweizer-neutralitaet-der-rueckzug-ins-schneckenhaus-ist-der-falsche-weg-doch-blochers-initiative-hat-auch-etwas-gutes-ld.1711160>. Also: Marco Jorio, ‘Die Schweiz und ihre Neutralität,’ min. 34:40.

¹⁵¹ Thomas Kirchner, ‘Schweiz: Blochers letzte große Schlacht,’ *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 27 July 2022, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/schweiz-blocher-neutralitaet-1.5628939>.

¹⁵² The original text of the initiative (in German) can be found in the appendix.

sanctions imposed by other states are circumvented.¹⁵³ The exemption for the UN had to be included because Switzerland committed to adopting the organisation's measures upon its accession – “Unfortunately, we cannot undo this mistake right now,” Christoph Blocher commented succinctly.¹⁵⁴ Instead of actively contributing to international cooperation, the SVP would rather see Switzerland as a neutral observer. In alignment with this object, the last part of the proposed text designates Switzerland's role in the prevention and resolution of conflicts as a mediator.¹⁵⁵ In the SVP's own words, the party's initiative calls for freedom, safety, prosperity and maintaining good relations with all states.¹⁵⁶

Arguments opposing the initiative often lack strong storytelling, Andreas Müller criticises. Müller is programme director at *Pro Futuris*, a Swiss think tank that wants to contribute to an open and capable democracy.¹⁵⁷ Müller argues that the SVP strategically uses the myth of an elite that disregards the perennial, universal concept of Swiss neutrality and thus the will of the people. By claiming to defend the ‘true’ definition of neutrality, SVP representatives such as Christoph Blocher assert their proactive stance in shaping neutrality discourse. Consequently, other politicians find themselves in a reactive position, compelled to respond to the SVP's narrative. If they attempt to argue for ‘cooperative neutrality’ instead of the SVP's definition, they inadvertently reinforce the image of being part of an elitist political class – seemingly an endless dilemma. However, Müller calls on politicians to recall the constitution. As he argues, the Swiss constitution can be changed by every citizen and yet neutrality was never defined in it. Therefore, he concludes, not only politicians, but also the population must be in favour of adaptive neutrality.¹⁵⁸ While his arguments are captivating, the question remains whether times may have changed. Drawing conclusions about the future based on the past can lead to a fallacy. Perhaps, the population is now ready to define neutrality in the constitution. Neutrality is an identity-building factor in Switzerland. This is exemplified through the yearly surveys by the *Center for Security Studies (CSS)* in Zurich. In 2022, 89 percent of the Swiss population approved of neutrality. For 78% of respondents, neutrality is

¹⁵³ Fedlex, The Publication Platform for Federal Law, ‘Eidgenössische Volksinitiative “Wahrung der schweizerischen Neutralität (Neutralitätsinitiative)”’, Bundeskanzlei, BBI 2022 2694, Bern, 8 November 2022, <https://fedlex.data.admin.ch/eli/fga/2022/2694>.

¹⁵⁴ Edgar Schuler, ‘Volksbegehren zur Neutralität. Der Initiativtext steht – jetzt greift Blocher an’, *Tages-Anzeiger*, 20 June 2022, <https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/blocher-greift-an-im-herbst-beginnt-die-unterschriftensammlung-503642906838>.

¹⁵⁵ Fedlex, ‘Neutralitätsinitiative.’

¹⁵⁶ ‘Wahrung der schweizerischen Neutralität’, SVP Schweiz (blog), accessed 14 April 2023, <https://www.svp.ch/aktuell/kampagnen/wahrung-der-schweizerischen-neutralitaet/>.

¹⁵⁷ ‘Über uns,’ *Pro Futuris*, accessed 24 May 2023, <https://profuturis.ch/ueber-uns/>.

¹⁵⁸ Andreas Müller, ‘Die richtige Antwort auf die SVP-Initiative’, *Pro Futuris*, 11 August 2022, <https://profuturis.ch/blog/die-richtige-antwort-auf-die-svp-initiative/>.

inseparably linked to the ideal Swiss state.¹⁵⁹ The SVP can therefore consistently and confidently build on an already strong identification with neutrality as an inherently Swiss concept.

This chapter examined the divergence between the right-wing's and the government's position on neutrality, with a particular focus on SVP politician Christoph Blocher and the 'neutrality initiative'. Since the SVP became a party of national importance in the 1990s, their 'us versus them' rhetoric reflected a strong opposition to the establishment – despite arguably being part of it. Disregarding historical complexities, the SVP advocates a return to 'integral neutrality'. While the Russian invasion of Ukraine triggered international questioning of neutrality, the SVP had already prioritised the topic since the early 2000s, spurred by the government's intention to join the UN. Over the last twenty years, the SVP gradually refined their neutrality definition, culminating in the 'neutrality initiative'. In contrast, the government's stance on neutrality appeared primarily reactive, lacking a persuasive and well-defined position. The concept and wording of 'cooperative neutrality' and the 2022 report seem to be a reaction to the SVP's rhetoric. Possibly in response to the party's efforts to anchor their neutrality definition in the constitution, limiting the room for manoeuvre, the government henceforth emphasised the importance of a flexible neutrality definition. This demonstrates the power of the Swiss referendum system, in exerting pressure on the government and tangible outcomes. Internal sentiments subsequently reverberate in foreign policy. The chronological correlation observed between the right-wing's actions and the government's reactions highlights the need for caution by opponents of the neutrality initiative. Merely reacting to the allegations of the right-wing risks reinforcing the image of an elite disregarding the will of the people. The findings highlight the power dynamics at play and the importance of a robust and convincing definition of neutrality in shaping public discourse and policy decisions.

¹⁵⁹ CSS and MILAK, 'Studie "Sicherheit 2022".'

Conclusion

Historically, neutrality was defined in The Hague Conventions in 1907 to provide clarity in times of war – but what to do in times of peace? In contrast to temporary neutrality, permanent neutrality, which Switzerland aspires to, does not have a confined framework in international law. As a result, the concept inherently sparks public debate. In recent years, the Swiss government has sought to redefine neutrality policy, especially since the end of the Cold War. The outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022 heightened scrutiny of Switzerland's neutrality and its evolving conception. The analysis of this thesis contributes to understanding the evolution of public debate on Swiss neutrality since joining the UN in 2002. Additionally, the thesis explored three sub-questions related to the right-wing's perspective on neutrality and the 'neutrality initiative'.

The first sub-question examined the evolution of Switzerland's stance on neutrality following its accession to the UN in 2002. Neutrality was explored as a framework, including the concepts of 'active neutrality' and 'cooperative neutrality'. The Swiss government began to expand the scope of its neutrality policy after the Cold War ended, as exemplified by the 1993 neutrality report. However, almost thirty years later, the 2022 neutrality report largely reiterated the neutrality conception of its predecessor, with an added emphasis on keeping neutrality a flexible concept. This emphasis can be understood as a counteraction to the SVP's efforts to anchor the party's neutrality definition in the constitution, therefore potentially limiting neutrality, e.g., the ability of the government to follow sanctions.

The second sub-question explored how neutrality has been employed to justify political actions, including Switzerland's UN membership, the eventual election to the UNSC, and the 'neutrality initiative'. Complementing Switzerland's accession to the UN, former foreign minister Micheline Calmy-Rey advocated the flexible concept of 'active neutrality' from 2003-2011 and spearheaded Switzerland's application to the UNSC. Ignazio Cassis continued this multilateral approach with his concept of 'cooperative neutrality' upon receiving international pressure after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While The government struggled with providing a coherent and compelling definition of neutrality, the SVP contended that the government had disregarded neutrality when invoking sanctions. Conversely, when Christoph Blocher announced the 'neutrality initiative', he relied on the SVP's proactive stance in promoting their neutrality conception.

This leads to the third sub-question, to what extent the right-wing differs from the government regarding their neutrality conception and how a highly influential right-wing

politician such as Christoph Blocher defines neutrality. In contrast to the government, the SVP, arguably a strong force in the government, emphasises a passive understanding of neutrality in the tradition of Switzerland's 'integral neutrality' in the 20th century. Furthermore, the SVP strongly emphasises independence, while the government attaches more value to international cooperation. Given that the constitution does not explicitly define the concept of neutrality at the moment, it serves as a blank canvas for different political agendas. Although the SVP aims to define neutrality in the constitution, the current non-definition arguably also helps the party to employ neutrality as a political tool.

Two aspects in the current discourse are particularly striking. First, the right-wing as represented by the SVP, has taken over the agenda-setting power on neutrality discourse. Hence, the government is solely responding to an ongoing debate, risking confirming the narrative of an elite that ignores the will of the people. Secondly, in its response, the government places significant emphasis on international law and commitments, inadvertently bolstering the arguments of right-wing opponents who perceive this as a violation of Swiss sovereignty and the rights of the citizens. Furthermore, a law-based narrative tends to downplay Switzerland's autonomy in interpreting neutrality, ultimately lacking persuasiveness. The central claim advanced by this thesis is that the 'neutrality initiative' symbolises the SVP's shift from a reactive to a proactive stance on neutrality, contrasting with the government's predominantly reactionary approach. Consequently, the close link between foreign and domestic policy within the Swiss referendum system was explored, shedding light on an aspect that has received limited attention in previous research. Agreeing with Marco Jorio, there is an urgent need for the government to find a solid and clearly defined conception of neutrality.

Past research predominantly focused on Switzerland's neutrality during times of war, especially the Cold War, and placed significant emphasis on whether Switzerland consistently upheld a neutral position. However, this approach created a binary scenario, leading scholars to moral judgements. In contrast, this thesis argues that Swiss neutrality has undergone significant changes specifically since the end of the Cold War up to the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war. In doing so, this thesis deviates from evaluating neutrality itself and instead analyses the evolution of the prevailing neutrality conceptions. Building on Marco Jorio's findings, future research should shift the focus from questioning neutrality to critically examining how neutrality is conceptualised in politics and public opinion.

Three possible directions of future research stem from this work. First, there is a need for further exploration of the relationship between the government's neutrality policy and the emergence of anti-government sentiments beyond right-wing circles. As recent media reports

reveal, critics of corona measures have extended their criticism to the government's stance on neutrality, advocating for a passive form of neutrality. Such research would highlight the impact of the ongoing neutrality debate on polarisation dynamics.¹⁶⁰ Secondly, an extensive analysis of the 'neutrality initiative', especially focusing on the period following the completion of signature collection in May 2024. could lead to valuable insights. This research endeavour would provide a deeper understanding of the impact of the initiative on neutrality in public discourse. Lastly, it would be insightful to examine the neutrality perception of the left-wing.¹⁶¹ By examining the unusual alliance of the *Greens* with the SVP, researchers can shed light on the ideological motivations and evolving dynamics of alliances formed within the ongoing debates on Swiss neutrality.

¹⁶⁰ Donat Hofer, 'Groll nach Corona – Was ist aus Massnahmenkritischen nach der Pandemie geworden?', SRF Dok, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ekv1R8M_nvY&list=WL&index=, min. 11:00.

Also: Andres Marti, 'Umstrittene Friedensdemo in Bern – Corona-Leugner und Junge SVP mobilisieren für den Weltfrieden', *Berner Zeitung*, 10 March 2023, <https://www.bernerzeitung.ch/corona-leugner-und-junge-svp-mobilisieren-fuer-den-weltfrieden-609592195006>.

¹⁶¹ Hans-Rudolf Isliker, 'Schweizer Neutralität', *SGA ASPE (blog)*, 1 June 2023, <https://www.sga-aspe.ch/schweizer-neutralitaet/>.

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https://www.linkedin.com/posts/ignaziocassis_schweiz-sicherheitsrat-activity-6940730885725941760-5Lxs/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop.
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Appendices

Appendix 1: Eidgenössische Volksinitiative 'Wahrung der schweizerischen Neutralität (Neutralitätsinitiative)'

Die Bundesverfassung¹ wird wie folgt geändert:

Art. 54a² Schweizerische Neutralität

¹ Die Schweiz ist neutral. Ihre Neutralität ist immerwährend und bewaffnet.

² Die Schweiz tritt keinem Militär- oder Verteidigungsbündnis bei. Vorbehalten ist eine Zusammenarbeit mit solchen Bündnissen für den Fall eines direkten militärischen Angriffs auf die Schweiz oder für den Fall von Handlungen zur Vorbereitung eines solchen Angriffs.

³ Die Schweiz beteiligt sich nicht an militärischen Auseinandersetzungen zwischen Drittstaaten und trifft auch keine nichtmilitärischen Zwangsmassnahmen gegen kriegführende Staaten. Vorbehalten sind Verpflichtungen gegenüber der Organisation der Vereinten Nationen (UNO) sowie Massnahmen zur Verhinderung der Umgehung von nichtmilitärischen Zwangsmassnahmen anderer Staaten.

⁴ Die Schweiz nutzt ihre immerwährende Neutralität für die Verhinderung und Lösung von Konflikten und steht als Vermittlerin zur Verfügung.

¹ SR 101

² Die endgültige Nummerierung dieses Artikels wird nach der Volksabstimmung von der Bundeskanzlei festgelegt; dabei stimmt diese die Nummerierung ab auf die anderen geltenden Bestimmungen der Bundesverfassung.

PLAGIARISM RULES AWARENESS STATEMENT

Fraud and Plagiarism

Scientific integrity is the foundation of academic life. Utrecht University considers any form of scientific deception to be an extremely serious infraction. Utrecht University therefore expects every student to be aware of, and to abide by, the norms and values regarding scientific integrity.

The most important forms of deception that affect this integrity are fraud and plagiarism. Plagiarism is the copying of another person's work without proper acknowledgement, and it is a form of fraud. The following is a detailed explanation of what is considered to be fraud and plagiarism, with a few concrete examples. Please note that this is not a comprehensive list!

If fraud or plagiarism is detected, the study programme's Examination Committee may decide to impose sanctions. The most serious sanction that the committee can impose is to submit a request to the Executive Board of the University to expel the student from the study programme.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the copying of another person's documents, ideas or lines of thought and presenting it as one's own work. You must always accurately indicate from whom you obtained ideas and insights, and you must constantly be aware of the difference between citing, paraphrasing and plagiarising. Students and staff must be very careful in citing sources; this concerns not only printed sources, but also information obtained from the Internet.

The following issues will always be considered to be plagiarism:

- cutting and pasting text from digital sources, such as an encyclopaedia or digital periodicals, without quotation marks and footnotes;
- cutting and pasting text from the Internet without quotation marks and footnotes;
- copying printed materials, such as books, magazines or encyclopaedias, without quotation marks or footnotes;
- including a translation of one of the sources named above without quotation marks or footnotes;
- paraphrasing (parts of) the texts listed above without proper references: paraphrasing must be marked as such, by expressly mentioning the original author in the text or in a footnote, so that you do not give the impression that it is your own idea;
- copying sound, video or test materials from others without references, and presenting it as one's own work;
- submitting work done previously by the student without reference to the original paper, and presenting it as original work done in the context of the course, without the express permission of the course lecturer;
- copying the work of another student and presenting it as one's own work. If this is done with the consent of the other student, then he or she is also complicit in the plagiarism;
- when one of the authors of a group paper commits plagiarism, then the other co-authors are also complicit in plagiarism if they could or should have known that the person was committing plagiarism;
- submitting papers acquired from a commercial institution, such as an Internet site with summaries or papers, that were written by another person, whether or not that other person received payment for the work.


The rules for plagiarism also apply to rough drafts of papers or (parts of) theses sent to a lecturer for feedback, to the extent that submitting rough drafts for feedback is mentioned in the course handbook or the thesis regulations.

The Education and Examination Regulations (Article 5.15) describe the formal procedure in case of suspicion of fraud and/or plagiarism, and the sanctions that can be imposed.

Ignorance of these rules is not an excuse. Each individual is responsible for their own behaviour. Utrecht University assumes that each student or staff member knows what fraud and plagiarism



entail. For its part, Utrecht University works to ensure that students are informed of the principles of scientific practice, which are taught as early as possible in the curriculum, and that students are informed of the institution's criteria for fraud and plagiarism, so that every student knows which norms they must abide by.

I hereby declare that I have read and understood the above.
Name: Kathrin Plüss
Student number: 0095109
Date and signature: 15.06.2023 

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