

“Great powers never like neutral countries”

Former Ambassador Paul Widmer on Switzerland's current situation



Paul Widmer. (Picture BBCLCG/Wikipedia)

(Ed. Globalbridge) At last! At last, the “*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*” has also published an article setting out key arguments in favour of a “yes” vote on the neutrality initiative.¹

It is an interview with former Ambassador Paul Widmer. For copyright reasons, the full interview will not

appear here, but we have taken the liberty of quoting some specific statements by Paul Widmer verbatim.

When asked how other countries react to Swiss neutrality: “When I was in the diplomatic service – that is, up until 2014 – neutrality was actually viewed very positively almost everywhere.”

“Neutrality is a central pillar of our Swiss democracy. Our entire system of government is designed to leave as many decisions as possible in the hands of the individual citizen. This begins with the principle of collegiality – we do not want a concentration of power in the hands of a single person. Added to this are direct democracy with its extensive popular rights, federalism with its bottom-up structure, and neutrality, which limits power vis-à-vis the outside world.”

“It is inherent in perpetual neutrality that the government’s power is restricted. Anyone who declares themselves to be perpetually neutral undertakes not to start a war or to support any belligerent party. It deliberately imposes foreign policy constraints upon itself in order thereby to serve the cause of peace.”

“Switzerland has recently suffered a massive loss of prestige, particularly amongst our neigh-



View from Laupen Castle towards the Bernese Alps. (Picture jpv)

bours, but also worldwide. The reactions spoke for themselves when Switzerland adopted the sanctions against Russia following the Russian invasion. The American President *Joe Biden* and the Russian President *Vladimir Putin* both felt that Switzerland was no longer neutral. If the two main antagonists agree on this point, then something has gone wrong.”

“Great powers have never liked neutral nations. They expect allegiance and therefore favour systems of collective security. This is not a new phenomenon. A striking example was the American President *Woodrow Wilson* during the First World War. As long as the USA remained neutral, he saw himself as its leader. After the US declared war following a German torpedo attack, he declared that neutrality was no longer possible. This has been repeated time and again throughout history. Switzerland has had to withstand massive pressure on several occasions.”

On the Federal Council’s decision to adopt the sanctions against Russia in their entirety:

“Switzerland has made a series of unfortunate decisions. First, it changed course and adopted the entire package of EU sanctions. Then Federal Councillor *Ignazio Cassis* pursued an unfortunate policy towards Ukraine.” “I am referring to his fraternisation with the Ukrainian President *Volodymyr Zelensky* and the conference at Bürgenstock. Of course, Switzerland is free to openly state its position on Russia and any other

* Former ambassador *Paul Widmer* served in the Swiss diplomatic service from 1977 to 2014. Following posts in the USA and Germany, he served, amongst others, as ambassador to Croatia, Jordan, the Council of Europe and the Vatican. He has authored several books, including a handbook on diplomacy.

power at any time. The government has done just that. However, a Federal Councillor must not fraternise with a party to the conflict. When, at the same time, there is public debate about whether to invite the Russian President, this contradicts the logic of mediation. Discretion and impartiality are the essence of good offices.”

“Ultimately, a diplomatic solution is needed in this conflict (in Ukraine) too. And Switzerland must offer one, just as it has always done in the past. This time, it has not. The result is plain to see. There are states that are mediating, but Switzerland is no longer among them.”

“Mediation sometimes takes a very long time. We experienced this ourselves during the Algerian War, where Switzerland played a major role. Don’t forget: we would not be the only one if we had not imposed sanctions on Russia. Among the major industrialised nations, the G20, half have not done so. Outside Europe, there is a clear consensus that neutral mediators are needed. We have a major asset, particularly in the form of the international community in Geneva. But with such failed actions, we are weakening our own position.”

“Switzerland does not need the Good Offices to justify its foreign policy. Nevertheless, we sought early on to offset the privilege of neutrality with specific contributions: at the political level through the Good Offices, and at the humanitarian and legal levels, notably through the ICRC and the *Geneva Conventions*.”

In response to a question from the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* interviewer *Tobias Gafafer*: “Opponents, from the Left to the FDP, are talking about the ‘pro-Putin initiative’. Has that affected you?” Paul Widmer’s reply: “That is a malicious smear campaign. Labelling advocates of strong neutrality as Putin’s agents is unacceptable. It would be just as if one had portrayed Federal Councillor *Motta* and all those who wanted to re-

turn to integral neutrality in the 1930s as *Mussolini* supporters.”

“Neutrality consists not only of the law of neutrality but also of neutrality policy. It is a political instrument and is therefore also flexible. But that flexibility has its limits. Otherwise, we would not have committed ourselves under international law to being neutral. Our neutrality is only of any value if we credibly demonstrate to others that we will indeed behave neutrally in the event of an acute conflict. We achieve this by pursuing a consistent and predictable foreign policy. And the initiative contributes to this.”

“The UN cannot fulfil its role (because of the veto rights of certain states). That is precisely why our neutrality is justified. Despite the prohibition on the use of force, we have already seen hundreds of conflicts since the UN was founded. Every conflict justifies neutrality anew.”

“Switzerland needs a strong army to maintain its perpetual neutrality. Other countries must sense that we are prepared to defend ourselves. This has not been the case to a sufficient extent since the end of the Cold War. A credible foreign policy rests on three pillars: firstly, an army that is ready for action. Secondly, on our strict adherence to our obligations of neutrality. It would be disastrous if other states were to gain the impression that we only fulfil these obligations at our own discretion. And thirdly, we need credible diplomacy – diplomacy that is supported by our own people and conveys to the outside world that Switzerland is not pursuing any hidden agenda.”

Source: Globalbridge. <https://dieschweiz-online.ch/befuerworter-einer-starken-neutralitaet-als-putin-agenten-abzustempeln-ist-inakzeptabel>, 27 August 2026

(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)

¹ Original article: <https://www.nzz.ch/schweiz/befuerworter-einer-starken-neutralitaet-als-putin-agenten-abzustempeln-ist-inakzeptabel-ld.10020437>