

Neutrality means sovereignty, independence and freedom

It protects our federal direct democracy

Interview with Dr oec. HSG Matthias Buob*



Matthias Buob.
(Picture <https://matthias-buob.ch>)

Zeitgeschehen im Fokus:

You are a member of the Neutrality Initiative's steering committee. What motivated you to get involved?

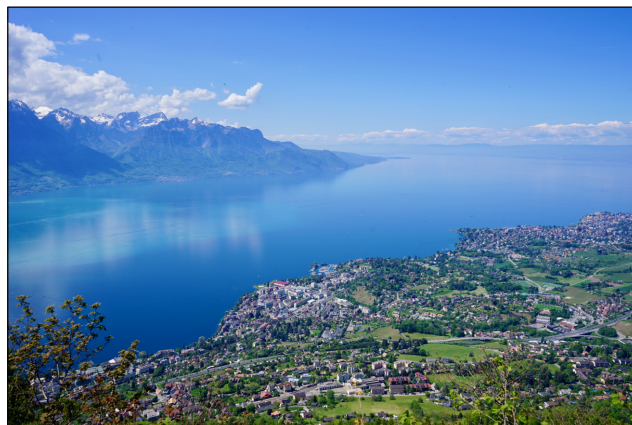
Dr Matthias Buob: As a liberal-minded and freedom-loving person, I consider it my duty to stand up for the Neutrality Initiative. For

me, freedom is linked to independence. It means taking an independent stance without hastily aligning oneself with the doctrines of one or the other party to a conflict. One is free to express both positive and negative criticism in all directions, and that is neutral.

Neutrality is a liberal principle. My freedom ends where another's freedom begins. One cannot disregard the sovereignty of other states and expect this to remain without geopolitical consequences. As a neutral, I respect the boundaries of others. Of course, I am also entitled to point out that I do not agree with where the other party has drawn its line. As a neutral, one is allowed to do that.

What are the benefits of Switzerland's neutrality as a country, and what does it offer the individual citizen?

I'm not sure whether the question of "what are the benefits of neutrality" is the right one to ask. That would be the wrong approach – doing something simply so that we can benefit from it again. Neutrality is, rather, a fundamental value that has clearly positive effects. Incidentally, neutrality is also a core value of Christianity.



View of Lake Geneva, La Tour-de-Peilz and Vevey.
(Picture jpv)

People often forget that our roots also lie in this tradition. The philosophical and cultural-historical roots of our country are closely linked to Christian humanitarian values. The commandment to love one's neighbour ultimately calls for peaceful coexistence.

A single commandment – it could scarcely be put more simply. Let us, by contrast, look at our libraries full of law books.

Neutrality is a fundamental value. And I believe that for us as a country, as a nation – at least originally – a freedom-loving nation, it is essential to be neutral. From the perspective of the idea of freedom, as I have already said, freedom is independence, and independence is freedom. That is what neutrality brings us.

Neutrality leads us to the fundamental principle of personal responsibility. This requires us to think independently, act with sovereignty and call out injustices worldwide without censorship. We may – indeed, we must – denounce injustices at any time without censorship. But we do not point the finger at others; rather, we try to perceive different positions objectively.

The benefit of this is clear. We see the conflicts in today's world from a completely different perspective. Suddenly, we realise that things are not simply black and white, nor good and bad. Geopolitical conflicts are rarely one-dimensional. If you look closely, you will recognise complex

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shades of grey rather than simple black-and-white thinking. There is no such thing as the guilty party and the innocent party. Everyone is a little bit to blame. And the fundamental principle we learnt from our parents is: "It always takes two to have an argument." People don't bash each other's heads in for no reason – that simply doesn't happen. This is what neutrality brings us: independence, freedom. It is enshrined in our *raison d'état*.

How do you view the significance of the neutrality initiative?

Neutrality is a set of values. From a strictly liberal point of view, it is actually nonsensical to enshrine a set of values in a constitution. But it is evident that the Neutrality Initiative has already sparked a debate, and in many areas the Federal Council and Parliament have suddenly become somewhat more restrained in their political actions. They would probably have acted differently had the initiative not been on the table. The initiative has prompted reflection.

Whether the initiative will achieve anything if it is enshrined in the Constitution remains to be seen. We have enough constitutional articles that are apparently violated daily by our parliamentarians and executive authorities, and nothing happens. But ultimately, the aim of the initiative is to remind people once again of the core value of neutrality and to demonstrate its significance.

The Neutrality Initiative also has its opponents. Who is against neutrality?

In Switzerland, from a financial perspective, we now find ourselves in a system of net beneficiaries. We are seeing a growing structural dependence of broad sections of the population and the public sector on the state system. Those who benefit financially from the status quo often shy away from far-reaching changes. What does this have to do with this initiative? You don't bite the hand that feeds you. Politicians have a financial interest, an interest in power and an interest in being re-elected. This means that, as a politician, one curtsies to a system of power that secures all of this for them in the long term.

When one looks at the issue of framework agreements – integration with the EU – or the increasing institutional interdependence with NATO, it becomes clear that some political figures are evidently more drawn to the grand inter-



A 'Path of Peace' leads from the Catholic church in Degersheim to Magdenau Abbey. Ten posts encourage reflection on peace. (Picture ms)

national political stage than to focusing on the core tasks of our militia army. And these are our political leaders who benefit from this system. They are neatly embedding themselves within this system. The guardians of power and financial structures do everything in their power to preserve these structures and prevent any disruptive interference that might spoil their plans.

So, would the Neutrality Initiative effectively be a career-killer?

I don't know if "career-killer" is the right term. I believe "power-structure-killer" is the right term. Federalists, true democrats, our direct democracy and federal, strictly liberal structures have always been a thorn in the side of those in power. Why should the people, why should the individual, have a say? The fact that the committed citizen, the farmer or the tradesperson rises and exercises their democratic right of veto – that is precisely what the political elite is trying to restrict. They do not want the federal system, the original democracy.

And just look where democracy has ended up in this country. We still market ourselves as an original democracy. But what can we decide on anymore? On popular initiatives that, in the end, are no longer implemented? The whole system has been reduced to absurdity.

We have created a caste of professional politicians. Even when the federal state was founded in 1848, being close to the people was the highest ideal. Today, however, we are witnessing increasing alienation caused by a professionalised political establishment. I have just been elected to the local council. There, allowances

are paid which I have just been fighting against at the municipal assembly – unfortunately without success. These are no longer mere allowances; they are wages.

Is a political office no longer an honorary position?

It is no longer about contributing to the common good; it is not about federalism. It is about careers, power, finances – and about manifesting and consolidating these. A class of professional politicians has established itself, whose careers have unfolded almost entirely within the state-subsidised sphere and who have either never experienced a connection to the real economy or have lost it. They studied at the state's expense, they live at the state's expense, and at the state's expense they tell us how the world works. They want to consolidate their power and influence and secure a sustainable flow of funds within this clique of political power structures.

In our neighbouring countries, everyone has long since been a professional politician. Here, on the other hand, part-time politicians are a dying breed. We are creating a new generation of professional politicians. And the Neutrality Initiative is putting a spoke in the works for all of them. And they are doing everything in their power to safeguard their interests. That is why the initiative is being so fiercely opposed: because it helps to preserve our federal, fundamentally democratic structures.

Does that mean we mustn't underestimate the problem of power?

Yes, we'd be spoiling the party for all the surrounding governments. If, as a neutral state, you were suddenly to say: "Hey, aggressors, it's a 'no-go' to simply invade a country. That's completely out of the question." And then: "Hey, the other side, banning religion, banning the language. That's simply not on." Then you find yourself caught between the blocs. You must be able to bear that. But unfortunately, we have a political class that lacks both courage and backbone.

As a free, independent, democratic and neutral state, however, we must be able to stand between the warring parties. We must call out injustice for what it is and find solutions that foster peace. That takes backbone. That is why we must have the most independent, the best, the most critical and the most inconvenient minds in politics.

How should Switzerland, as a neutral country, conduct itself in the Ukraine conflict?

I have a clear stance on this. Switzerland, as a liberal, democratic and independent nation, must not adopt sanctions that it has not imposed itself. The Federal Council reacted correctly in the initial phase by freezing trade relations at the levels they were at before the conflict. This means no one can accuse it of profiting from a conflict. By maintaining trade at pre-war levels, we ensure that we do not capitalise on the suffering without engaging in economic warfare.

Of course, the composition of trade volumes is also a key consideration. It is unacceptable to shift trade with a party to the conflict towards military equipment. From a neutral perspective, trading in military equipment is simply not an option. Switzerland must not participate in this conflict, either directly or indirectly.

Why must neutrality be perpetual and armed?

Recently, a senior military officer told me a funny analogy. He asked me: "Whose packed lunch did you steal in the playground? First, you want the best packed lunch – so who do you steal it from?" "Well, from the weakest one." I don't really need to say any more than that. We are a country which, in my opinion, has a great deal to offer – a big, packed lunch.

And if you can't defend that packed lunch, then you're simply lost. And defence means all areas: from politicians who stand up and defend our country, right through to an army which, when the country is threatened from outside, says: "Lads, you can come on then. Go on, then. But I'll tell you one thing. You'll end up with at least one black eye!"

When I joined the army back then as a young recruit, I always said that, for me, standing up for the country meant ensuring that my sisters – I have four – and my girlfriend weren't raped, and that men weren't murdered. I'll stand my ground for a long time – right up to the last shot – before I let that happen. And that has always been my motivation for saying: "We're not aggressive. We're a defensive army."

But if someone comes along, if someone punches me in the face, then I'll hit back. But I would never be the first to strike.

Incidentally, that's what I've always told my children too: "In a conflict, you don't strike first. You don't do that. You can also talk to the other

person. But if someone hits you, then hit back with all your might." I don't see it the way the New Testament does, and I don't turn the other cheek.

And that is why we must have a strong defence force. But let's be honest, we've long since strayed far, far from that. Over the 28 years I've been in the army, it has been systematically dismantled with the support of the centre right.

All the military equipment has been sold off

Valuable military equipment has been hastily disposed of over the years. Furthermore, I feel that parts of the military leadership lack the courage for unconventional, strategic thinking. A lot is going wrong in the selection of our military leaders, and that worries me. And the capable people who certainly exist within the professional corps are systematically defamed, undermined and kept down.

At the same time, I see that committed people in the professional corps often find it difficult to get their constructive proposals accepted. I experience this time and again in my day-to-day military life. It amazes even me that I have got this far in the military. I regularly put forward proposed solutions, even if they do not always fall on receptive ears. As already mentioned, this means we are once again operating within the same old clique, the same power structures.

That's how it is; the army has been run into the ground. Strategically, too, the army has repeatedly been steered in completely the wrong direction. That is my personal view.

I am no specialist in armaments development, but I am an observer. If you look at the conflicts of the last 50, 60 or 70 years – you can go back as far as the Vietnam War – and ask yourself who won those conflicts? In my view it was always the army with a huge amount of manpower that came out on top: not the heavily armed, high-tech army, but the army with plenty of manpower and high morale, from Vietnam through Iraq and Afghanistan to Iran.

I'm no historian, but these are my personal observations.

And we must now apply this to Switzerland. The legendary *Army 61* mobilised over 600,000 soldiers from a population of five million. Today, with a population of almost 9.5 million, the target strength has shrunk to a meagre 100,000. The critical mass is lacking. If we extrapolate the figures from back then, we should be well over a million, or at least at one million.

Now, of course, I am accused of being stuck in the past, of looking backwards, of glorifying the old days and of being opposed to change. That is not the case at all. I am very open to new technologies. But whichever way you look at it, even if we are facing robots – and that won't be long now – manpower, a million men, will achieve more than a few drones and a handful of tanks.

Reports from the conflict in Ukraine show just how vulnerable high-tech, large-scale systems such as main battle tanks have become in modern drone wars. This underlines the importance of a decentralised defence.

With a defensive army of a million men under arms – by which I mean an assault rifle and a bazooka – one could achieve a great deal. This would put even the most technologically advanced army under severe pressure. If, at every street corner, a Bazooka is fired at you, or a small bullet is fired. That is demoralising. It wears you down.

The issue of the army is also about a matter of principle. We have failed to explain to our people why we have an army. I've spoken to people who have refused to do military service. I asked them: "If you own a house, do you have a fire insurance?" They looked at me a bit strangely and replied: "Yes, of course I do." Then I asked: "Do you know anyone in your circle whose house has burnt down?" They said: "No."

I replied: "I, too, don't know anyone in my circle whose house has burnt down. But everyone has a fire insurance. Everyone. It costs a lot of money. Our army is our fire insurance. It'll never be needed in a lifetime – not for two generations, not for three generations – never, hopefully!

Hopefully we'll never need this insurance! But I'll tell you one thing: when the fire comes, we'll be ready with great fanfare, perhaps with the most primitive weapons, with the most primitive fire-fighting manoeuvres. But that fire – we'll put it out with our combined forces." And I believe that's what's been overlooked in the army: explaining the purpose of our army to our people.

We want to equip our army with the most modern weapons. It's just cool to visit technology fairs and marvel at equipment with the latest features. Bad purchases, such as the drone system procured from Israel – which, under Swiss conditions, struggled for years with massive certification problems – highlight the

strategic stagnation in the procurement system. It's completely absurd, this nonsense that's going on.

We don't need to be any more than we are. Our army doesn't need to be anything more than a fire insurance – even if it is perhaps a bit primitive, but we do have one.

But communication to convey the purpose is essential. Our army doesn't need to be among the best, the largest or the most technically advanced; it is simply a fire insurance – and a potent one at that, in terms of its numbers. A mil-

lion people with a bucket of water in their hands are more effective than 1,000 with a fire hose when there's a major fire.

Mr Buob, thank you very much for speaking to us.

(Interview conducted by Henriette Hanke Güttinger and Ursula Cross)

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(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")