



## **The importance of multilateralism for neutral Switzerland**

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Never before has civil society been so actively engaged in global politics than today. While in Iran, the population is fighting for women's rights following the death of Jina Mahsa Amini and causing women worldwide to cut their hair in support, climate activists are closing roads in Berlin<sup>1</sup> and Geneva<sup>2</sup> and occupying Black Rock headquarters in New York.<sup>3</sup> The activists are asking for something their countries already have signed-up for and should be implementing: basic human rights, protected by the Charter of the United Nations (UN) which to this day, 193 countries have signed.

Civil society is not only extremely active in standing-up for human rights. Numerous peacebuilding initiatives and projects to advance minority rights, implement sustainable actions or protect the environment are being created by communities at a local level. In doing so, these initiatives are supporting the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the UN - oftentimes without conscious knowledge of the fact, that both are working towards the same goal. For many, the UN seems to be an abstract, complex and ill-working construct. The war in Ukraine and the COVID pandemic have only reinforced the perception that the UN is immobilized between power blocks. However, in order to solve ongoing and emerging global challenges, only multistate actions can bring solutions. Functioning multilateralist institutions are therefore more important than ever.

Building connections in order to reinforce communication between civil society and UN entities and reinforcing the importance of implementing the commitment Switzerland has made by signing multilateral treaties, is the Swiss-UN Association's (SUNA) core mission. As a member of the World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA), we represent civil society towards the UN and the Swiss authorities in all matters concerning the UN. The complexity of the Swiss direct democratic political system and its principle of neutrality mixed with its humanitarian and human rights tradition make Switzerland a truly unique case, which is not easily understood.

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However, it is this complexity that makes Switzerland a champion in understanding and tackling complex challenges, being a space for dialogue and a true hub for actions by civil society. Its political system enables its population to be truly engaged in foreign politics. Because the voting population is also the political decision-maker, it is particularly important that people are well informed. Our work at the SUNA is therefore based on informing, facilitating exchanges between civil society, the government and the UN-entities and open channels for communication, in order to pool forces to tackle global challenges and advance the SDGs.

To understand the complexity behind our work and the relationship between Switzerland and the UN, it is worth diving into the problematic of this unique system. In this regard, two factors are largely contributing to making Switzerland a «Sonderfall» (special case): its principle of neutrality and its political system of direct democracy.

### «I don't take sides. I'm Switzerland» - The Culture of Neutral Dialogue.

Its neutrality has made Switzerland world-famous - even in pop-culture and short behind Roger Federer. The principle, which is enshrined in the Constitution and closely linked to the Swiss identity, has always been a subject for debate. Some see it as a myth and criticize it as hypocritical, referring to Switzerland collaborating with both, the Nazi-regime, and the Allies during the World War II. Others see it as the silver bullet for staying independent and protecting the country from invaders.<sup>4</sup> What can be said for sure, is that Swiss neutrality has had two positive impacts: it has contributed to Switzerland maintaining stable relations with most countries and it has enabled Switzerland to act as an intermediate in interstate conflicts and ensured humanitarian aid for all parties involved, with the help of the ICRC.<sup>5</sup>

Recently, two major events have put the question about the definition of Switzerland's neutrality at the forefront of Swiss internal politics: Switzerland's election as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2023-24 and the countries alignment with the EU on the economic sanctions against the Russian Federation. While the legal definition of neutrality is clear and codified in The Hague Conventions,<sup>6</sup> the political dimension leaves room for interpretation. For a long time and again during World War II, Switzerland's neutrality could be defined as *absolute neutrality*, which means that Switzerland would not take sides in any way, especially not in military interventions or economic sanctions. After World War I and in order to join the League of Nations however, Switzerland was forced to adopt what is called *differential neutrality*,<sup>7</sup> which means that Switzerland had to support economic sanctions imposed by the League of Nations.

In the context of the military aggression of Russia in Ukraine, the question about applying a differential neutrality is back on the table.<sup>8</sup> After hesitation, the Federal Council decided to join the economic sanctions of the European Union (EU) against Russia because of the «serious violation of the most fundamental norms of

international law [...] within the scope of its political room for maneuver».<sup>9</sup>

Before joining, Switzerland had been harshly criticized by Western countries as well as by some actors of Swiss civil society for its hesitation to follow the economic sanctions of the EU and condemning the Russian military invasion. After joining, the Russian Federation condemned Switzerland for following the EU-sanctions and as a consequence, rejected its proposal to mediate between the parties, saying Switzerland had given-up its neutrality.<sup>10</sup>

Switzerland and our work at the SUNA? Despite being a small country with little commodities, Switzerland has managed to make itself relevant for global politics by establishing itself as a credible actor to facilitate an open dialogue between conflicting parties. With its host-state policy, Geneva provides a neutral physical space for peace negotiations. Only a little more than a year ago, it hosted the Biden-Putin Summit which tried to prevent an escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. With its «good offices», Switzerland further provides mediation between conflicting parties and can even stand in for consular or diplomatic services abroad. Because of its neutrality, «Switzerland can build bridges where others are prevented from doing so, because it does not belong to any power bloc and does not pursue a hidden agenda[...]. »<sup>11</sup>

This culture of facilitating a space for dialogue (especially for conflicted parties) which is well reflected in Switzerland's own domestic political system, is in many ways connected to the values of the UN: «The [UN] Charter brings us together. It defines the United Nations as 'a center [...]', where each member is treated as an equal across social, economic, or political differences. »<sup>12</sup> It is therefore not surprising that Switzerland was chosen to host first the League of Nations and later UN's European headquarters as well as the Human Rights Council. Russia's rejection shows the impact the different applications of neutrality can have for Switzerland. When the question of a seat in the UN-Security Council was first raised, critics underlined that Switzerland would have to refrain from any votes that implied taking side against another state.

However, by signing the UN Charter, Switzerland committed to its principles and values that include respecting humanitarian law and basic human rights. The work of the SUNA includes recalling this commitment towards the 192 other nations signing the Charter. In a statement to the Federal Council, the SUNA together with other actors of Civil Society underlined that «the coercive measures that it takes vis-à-vis a state that threatens or breaches the peace do not constitute acts of war within the meaning of the law of neutrality, but are intended to induce the State to comply with the obligations it has voluntarily entered into by acceding to the Charter»<sup>13</sup>

**The Swiss Direct Democracy and the UN: Empowering Civil Society.**

The direct democratic political system enables Swiss citizens to initiate and vote for binding referendums in all areas of political relevance. Even the adhesion of Switzerland to international organisations, such as the UN for example, is subject to a mandatory popular vote. In order to ensure high quality political decision-making, it is therefore crucial that the People have access to a variety of high-quality and independent information and are able to engage in the political dialogue and process. It is the mission of the media, the government, the educational system, politics, as well as of civil society to insure independent and fact-based information, which is why the SUNA provides different formats to access information about Switzerland's work in relation to the UN.

Switzerland is not only a direct democracy, but also led by a milice parliament and a multi-party government. The so-called principle of collegiality ensures that every major political party is represented among the seven federal counsellors, who act as an executive force, and decisions are made by consensus. Furthermore, the principle of federalism ensures that the cantons are represented equally in the legislative.<sup>14</sup> The advantage of this complex system is that Swiss voters feel represented on a political level. And if they don't, they usually feel free to change something about it. The population is used to engaging in political debates and the fact that we have to vote upon a variety of issues gives us a sense of purpose in politics. It also gives us a feeling of freedom and total independence from any authorities - which can stand in the way of the idea of multilateral actions and international Organisations.

2022 marks the 20 years anniversary of Switzerland joining the UN as a member state - 50 years after the San Francisco Conference of 1945 creating the UN. In the context that Switzerland has been a great supporter of human rights, is the birthplace of the Geneva Conventions and the ICRC, was home to the League of Nations and has always been host to Europe's main UN-headquarters as well as of the Human Rights Council, this might seem surprising. In fact, the engagement of the population in the political sphere is at the same time the reason why Switzerland didn't adhere in the first place and why Switzerland adhered in the end to the UN. Juggling between the tensions of maintaining peace, advancing human rights, and providing humanitarian aid and at the same time respecting the principle of non-interference as a neutral state, the Swiss government has remained hesitant of joining International Organisations. Switzerland would not be Switzerland, if it hadn't been a «Sonderfall» (a special case) in joining the UN as a member. For a long time, the government was supported in its strategy of non-adherence to the UN by a majority of the voters, who in 1986 voted against a Swiss membership. The main argument was the fear of losing Swiss neutrality.

However, from the early beginnings of multilateralism, it was also the Swiss population and civil society - oftentimes cross-party associations - which stepped in mobilizing in favor of Switzerland supporting and engaging in the multilateral dialogue.<sup>15</sup> As

Switzerland finally joined the UN in 2002, it was the 190th country to join, the last at the time except for the Vatican.<sup>16</sup> It was also the only country to do so on the basis of a result of a popular vote. 57.6% of the population eligible to vote participated and voted to 54.6% in favor of the membership. This large support was mainly due to a relatively stable geopolitical context<sup>17</sup> and great efforts of mobilization by civil society - the SUNA being one of them.

### **Switzerland, it's Your Time to Shine.**

In these times filled with one global challenge following the next and traditional power blocks shifting, it is more important than ever to maintain the dialogue between the different parties and reunite civil society in order to tackle the problems at the local as well as at the global level. Only if we pool forces, can we work towards a more stable, peaceful, and sustainable future. Building bridges between the different states, between the private and the public sector and between the different local communities is crucial. Switzerland must act as an example.

With its seat in the Security Council, Switzerland will be able to put issues on the agenda at a global level. This is a unique opportunity that we mustn't miss. More than ever, SUNA's work of maintaining the dialogue and ensuring that civil society has a place at the table is relevant. Being accompanied by a civil society which is used to participate in the political dialogue is a great resource. To say it in the words of SUNA's president of honor, former Federal Council, and former president of the UN General Assembly: «I call on the authorities and the people of our country to seize the opportunity provided by our accession to the Security Council, to take up the challenge by taking action commensurate with the generosity of our people and the peaceful ambition of our State. It is an opportunity to demonstrate that neutrality is not synonymous with selfishness, indifference or even cowardice, but with intelligence, courage, and charity. It is a unique opportunity in history, at a time when even the great powers are admitting the need to reform the system of multilateral peacekeeping»<sup>18</sup>

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14 In the so-called «small chamber», 20 cantons have 2 representatives and 6 half-cantons each have 1 representative.

15 For example, William E. Rappard, a Swiss economist, together with the former federal council, Gustave Ador, successfully promoted Geneva as headquarters for the League of Nations (see: Burnand, Frédéric (2019). «Switzerland, the League of Nations, and the Shadow of Revolution»:

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Maria Isabelle studied political sciences, law and European studies with a focus on gender and feminist foreign policy at the universities of Lucerne and Geneva respectively. Before taking over as director of Romandie in September 2018, she worked as an academic associate for the Swiss Embassy in Washington D.C and co-founded the forums Gender programme, which was launched in May 2017. She is currently the Managing Director of Suisse-ONU.