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Questions over Swiss neutrality

After initially hesitating, the Federal Council adopted all the EU sanctions against Russia. This has ignited a political debate about Swiss neutrality.

THEODORA PETER

Russia's attack on a sovereign European country is intolerable "under international law and on political and moral grounds", President of the Swiss Confederation Ignazio Cassis told the media four days after the invasion began at the end of February. "Playing into the hands of an aggressor is not neutral," he added, explaining why Switzerland was adopting the EU's full package of severe economic sanctions against Russia. This was a clear departure from the Federal Council's previous stance, which had been limited simply to preventing Russia from evading sanctions. The Swiss government had refused to apply EU sanctions directly following the annexation of Crimea back in 2014, referring to the country's neutral status.

This U-turn by Berne drew worldwide attention. The "New York Times" went so far as to declare that Switzerland was abandoning its tradition of neutrality, but the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) rejected this interpretation. "Switzerland continues to uphold its neutrality in the strict sense of the term," it wrote on its website, i.e. the law of neutrality and not favouring any warring party militarily. Codified in the 1907 Hague Convention, the law of neutrality obliges neutral states to refrain from engaging in war and to ensure equal treatment for belligerent states in terms of providing war material.

Neutrality versus political reality

However, Switzerland is not bound by international treaties with regard to how it applies its neutrality. All the Federal Constitution says is that the Federal Council and parliament should take measures to safeguard the neutrality of Switzerland. How they actually go about this depends on the individual circumstances and how these are interpreted. "Swiss neutrality has always been stretchable and kneadable like chewing gum," said historian Hans-Ulrich Jost in an interview with the "SonntagsZeitung".

Jost noted that Switzerland was practically integrated into Germany's armaments economy during the Second World War. Berne even gave the Nazis loans to buy ammunition and weapons in Switzerland. The Confederation's close economic and financial ties abroad meant that its mythical neutrality was often in-



Russia's attack on Ukraine brought tens of thousands of Swiss people on to the streets. Thousands of Ukrainian flags have also been hanging from Swiss balconies. Photo: Keystone

compatible with political reality. There is no ideal neutrality, Jost concluded.

SVP wants a popular initiative

The Ukraine war has reignited debate over the extent to which Swiss neutrality can be reconciled with real world events. By joining the economic sanctions against Russia, Switzerland has become a party to the war, laments the SVP. The right-wing party therefore plans to launch a popular initiative aimed at enshrining the concept of 'integral neutrality' in the Federal Constitution. However, the other political parties believe that Putin's 'attack on Western values' spells the end of traditional Swiss neutrality. Politicians from The Centre and the FDP even want to allow arms shipments to friendly nations, while alignment with the NATO defensive alliance no longer appears taboo for some. In other words, Switzerland is in the process of re-defining its neutrality.