

**Swiss politics**

## Activists trigger referendum that could end Swiss sanctions on Russia

Campaign seeks to tighten terms of country's long-held neutrality in era of geopolitical and trade tensions



Boxes containing thousands of signatures seeking a vote on a so-called 'neutrality initiative' are handed over at the Swiss federal chancellery © Fabrice Coffrini/AFP/Getty Images

**Sam Jones** in Berlin YESTERDAY

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Activists in Switzerland have triggered a referendum on proposals that would end the country's harsh economic sanctions on Russia and rule out any punitive restrictions on trade with China.

A delegation for the "Neutrality Initiative" handed in a petition of 130,000 signatures to government officials in Bern on Thursday, making a national vote on a constitutional amendment proposed by the campaign group almost certain to go ahead in the next few months.

Backed by the rightwing populist Swiss People's party (SVP), Switzerland's largest political movement, the campaign proposes four new clauses that would more precisely define what the Alpine country's long-held neutrality means in practice.

The changes would prohibit Switzerland from entering into any military alliance unless it was itself attacked. They would also explicitly prevent the government from imposing or joining any form of coercive sanctions regime — as it has done against

imposing or joining any form of coercive sanctions regime — as it has done against Russia since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine — unless it was granted a mandate to do so by the UN Security Council.

As China and Russia have the power of veto over any vote by the Security Council, such a condition would guarantee the status of Switzerland, Europe's seventh largest economy and the world's largest centre of offshore wealth, as a permanent safe haven for Moscow and Beijing's financial and trade interests.

“If all states behaved like Switzerland, there would be no war,” the SVP said in a statement welcoming news of the referendum's acceptance, adding that sanctions against Russia “are endangering the internal peace and stability of our country . . . a unique success story in the middle of Europe”.

The party also denounced “targeted attempts to undermine [Swiss] neutrality”.

The proposals come as Brussels is racing to assess the impact of another hole [that has opened in its economic front](#) against Moscow. On Wednesday, a top European court removed Russian oligarchs Mikhail Fridman and Petr Aven from the EU's sanctions list, raising the prospect of legal action by other Russian citizens.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine two years ago, Bern has [moved in lockstep](#) with the EU in placing sweeping restrictions on Russian individuals and companies connected to President Vladimir Putin's regime, freezing their assets in Swiss vaults and stopping the country's banks from doing business with them.

The unprecedented measures have raised questions about what Switzerland would do in the event of a further souring of relations between China and the west. Wealthy Chinese have been among the most important sources of money for Switzerland's powerful financial sector in recent years.

The sanctions, and a row over whether Switzerland should help support Ukraine directly, have prompted an increasingly fierce national debate, pitting conservative traditionalists, social democrat pacifists and free-market financiers against a largely younger generation of pro-Europeans and social liberals.

Appearing to present the signatures at the federal chancellery in Bern, Christoph Blocher, the SVP's billionaire “godfather” and its main financial backer, was accompanied by four bodyguards in anticipation of protests.

Polling indicates that the debate over neutrality is not a high concern for most Swiss — but its relevance has been growing, particularly as the issue becomes caught up in

other politically-charged topics considered to be fundamental to Switzerland's strong sense of national identity and independence, such as relations with the EU and immigration.

Green MP Christine Badertscher told reporters that "the 'neutrality' initiative benefits dictators and war criminals and harms Switzerland's security".

According to the Swiss constitution, Switzerland's parliament may first propose a compromise option, which the initiative's organisers can choose to accept instead of a popular vote.

But that is considered unlikely to happen, analysts said, given the strong demands presented in the referendum campaign's proposals.

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