It is up to Switzerland to shape the future of Europe!

European states can either embrace nostalgia on a continent that is lost in a transition or finalize this transition by living up to a shared responsibility for a future in which people regard themselves as human beings in democracies of the 21ˢᵗ century. This also applies to Switzerland as a regular European country that is caught-up in this transition as well. And this is why Switzerland cannot evade a shared responsibility to shape a transition with its neighbours in- and around Europe.

A transition requires history to get one`s bearings straight. And in the case of Europe, modern history is about empire: starting from the second half of the 15ᵗʰ century, until it backfires on Europe in the first half of the 20ᵗʰ century with two global wars between colonial empires. These wars mark the [end](#) of those empires. And that sparks off a decolonization in which fragments of former empires continue as independent states. Europe is therefore in a transition into a post-imperial political space today.

This transition is made possible by a post-imperial geopolitical framework, known as a rules-based international order. This order is not only maintained by the UN, but also by the EU and NATO, not to mention the Council of Europe. All these international organizations legitimize and facilitate t   he functioning of self-determining states after empire with democracy, rule of law, and human rights. And Switzerland would not be the country it is today without a post-imperial geopolitical framework.

All of this is contested by Russia that aspires to re-assert itself as a colonial empire, among others by attacking a "Switzerland at the Black Sea" which is also known as Ukraine. Russia does not recognize Ukraine as an independent country and even considers Ukraine to be a historical aberration, implying that a "Switzerland in the Alps" should also not exist in Europe today. Switzerland can therefore only respond by re-assessing its actual position as a country in a post-imperial Europe of the 21ˢᵗ century.

The end of empire

Any re-assessment starts with acknowledging a basic premise, such as recognizing that the world at the beginning of the 20ᵗʰ century is a world of global (colonial) empires. And these empires face stiff competition from new players: Italy, Japan, and Germany namely aspire to be global powers too in a world that is already carved up and divided by European (colonial) empires at the beginning of the 20ᵗʰ century. All this translates into tensions between global empires, resulting into two global wars.

In the years prior to the Second World War, Germany figures out that being like a British Empire with its own Australia is impossible on a planet on which there is only one Australia to be found. Within the realm of possibilities however is to transform Europe into an "[Australia](#)" for a German colonial empire, figuratively speaking. This entails using a template, established by European powers that create colonies by killing people on conquered lands in order to replace killed people with settlers.

European imperialism therefore lies at the heart for what happens on the continent in the 1930s and 1940s. With the Volga River as a "Mississippi" for a German colonial empire, given that the American conquest of the West in the 19ᵗʰ century serves as a template for Hitler`s war in the East in the 1940s. Not to mention the fact that western powers subscribe to racist ideas from the 18ᵗʰ and 19ᵗʰ century that are regarded as [science](#) in order to legitimize a suppression of populations in western empires.

All of this comes into play in Auschwitz because this place serves as a site for German [settlers](#) in the 1940s. With a plantation with slaves that is part of a network a network of (industrial) plantations in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. A selection of slaves takes place at Auschwitz with those not making the cut being murdered immediately. Millions of human beings end up shipped as cattle throughout Europe, exactly like the Transatlantic slave trade in which human beings were apparently gassed [too](#).

Killing human beings in the millions is not the only thing that marks Germany as a typical European empire. Because it also conducts "special military operations" in the East, exemplified by the attack on Poland in 1939. In doing so, Germany behaves like an empire because empires do not recognize colonial subjects as human beings. This is why "special military operations" take place in lawlessness, whereas war is recognized as a conflict between parties, bound to rules, standards, and conventions.

Nazi-Germany therefore deploys tactics that are in use in all European colonial empires in modern history. And Europe sees no reason to stop with "special military operations" after 1945 in parts of the world, such as Algeria and Indonesia. Not to mention the fact that a "special military operation" is currently being deployed by Russia to eradicate Ukraine with a (cultural) genocide, as if Ukraine is a colony that belongs to an empire of old, like Algeria, Poland, Vietnam, Angola, and Indonesia once.

The 20th century can therefore be characterized as a century in which the horrors of imperialism and colonialism hit Europe like a boomerang, as Hannah Arendt states in her work on totalitarianism. And that marks the end of European imperialism. Because from that point on, European powers lose wars and with that their empires, as historian Timothy Snyder mentions in his work over the past years. A defeat of Germany in 1945 is therefore significant because it marks the end of European imperialism.

In transition towards a post-imperial world

As such, one can speak of a process in the decades after 1945 with European empires losing colonies in Indonesia, Kenya, Angola, Vietnam, and Algeria. But even today, Europe shies away from regarding these lost conflicts as actual wars. This is why the old continent is marred with historical amnesia, not to mention a fear for being sued for atrocities during "special military operations" after 1945. Europe therefore speaks of "75 years of peace" without considering, whether this is historical fact or fiction.

Fact is that a decolonization forces European colonial powers to return to Europe in the decades after the Second World War. Like the Netherlands that would have never ended up as an EU-member state had it regained control of its imperial possessions in Indonesia with a "special military operation" that was conducted in the second half of the 1940s. This is why decolonization translates into a European cooperation with European states losing their global empires and colonies in the decades after 1945.

This is exemplified by the British Empire: the largest European empire in modern history. And Britain assumed that it could continue as a global empire without Europe, as Winston Churchill indicated in a speech in Zürich in 1946. But this turns out to be unfeasible with a British Empire unravelling fast and the United States spearheading a new post-imperial international order in which decolonized states are acknowledged as countries by the UN, not to mention a Cold War between the US and the USSR.

It explains why Britain joins the European Economic Community (EEC) in the 1970s as a country that resembles Austria without a Habsburg empire in the 1920s. Britain namely joins the EEC out of necessity as a country that does not thrive without a global market to guarantee prosperity, leaving Britain also without resources to secure its borders. All of which is reflected by winters of discontent and Argentina seeing an opportunity to roll a dice on the status of the Falkland Islands in 1982.

This points out to two major structural flaws of states after empire, namely being too small to have an economy that provides a level of prosperity that people are accustomed to today, coupled with another problem, given that countries without empires are too small to provide in their own security. And this explains why states in the Middle-East, Africa, South- and Central America, and Asia are not functioning, whereas Europe responded to this issue by creating a framework for states after empire.

This new framework is shaped and maintained by organizations, such as the EU (economy), NATO (security), and the Council of Europe (human rights) with which states function as *democracies* after empire. This is why European cooperation starts in Western-Europe as a result of a decolonization

after 1945 and continues with a decolonization in Eastern-Europe in the 1990s. The war in Ukraine is therefore also about a question, whether Europe re-affirms itself as a post-imperial space, or not.

But this is not how people in Europe think because imperial history is still pretty much a taboo on the continent, especially in Britain, France, and Holland, but also in Spain, Portugal, Italy, Germany, and Türkiye, not to mention countries in Central- and Eastern Europe that have been shaped by (colonial) empires throughout modern history, until a Soviet-Empire collapses in the 1990s. Europe is therefore in a transition between empire and post-empire without an official history to make sense of it all.

Human beings in Europe are therefore living on a continent without history. And without history, all that is left is memory. Memory can be shared as a collective trauma and/or national myth. And both hamper human beings in closing off a past, making it impossible to finalize a transition into a present. Myths are detrimental to transitions because they pose a temptation to be nostalgic about an open past that is romanticized as a paradise lost, exemplified by Brexit to restore Britain to its former self.

Switzerland: the poor house of Europe

People in Europe therefore need to get their story straight by acknowledging that the story of their countries stands or falls with the stories of European empires. And the stories of those empires shape the story of Europe since the 15th century. Which is a shared story with former European colonies in a history of the world over the past 500 years. The history of Switzerland is the story of a country that used to be an exception that proved the rule of an imperial Europe that existed into the 20th century.

Switzerland is namely locked out of European politics when the old Swiss confederacy loses a battle at Marignano (today: Melegnano) in Northern-Italy in 1515. This loss turns out to be decisive for how Switzerland develops afterwards. Because winning would have meant that the old Swiss confederacy could have gained access to harbours in Northern-Italy. Without which Switzerland cannot establish itself as an empire in an age of empires in which Europe shapes the world in the centuries that follow.

Instead, Switzerland becomes a country defined by its geography as a place without harbours that can only participate indirectly in a European conquest of the world. For example, by investing in the Transatlantic slave trade. Or, by reaping the fruits of European imperialism in general with "colonial shops" in the streets of Switzerland until the emergence of supermarkets in the 1980s. Switzerland ends up proving that states fail on their own by being Europe`s "poor house" until the 20th century.

In normal geopolitical circumstances, any country in such a position in that era of history would have been questioned in its existence by other powers. But that does not happen because Switzerland has nothing to offer to European empires: no strategic harbours nor resources that empires find useful, like coal, oil, silver, or agricultural land that settlers in colonies use to farm. Switzerland is so poor that farmers leave everything behind by migrating to Argentina to become European colonists themselves.

Poverty in those days explains why there is such a thing as Swiss neutrality. Because there is nothing to gain for European empires by quarrelling over land that has nothing to offer. Whereas European global colonial powers have a world to win by venturing out into Africa and Asia in the 19th century. Which goes well beyond the deliberations of a famous congress in Vienna in 1814-1815. All of this is reflected by a strategic need for peace in a backyard of European empires with a Swiss neutrality.

Swiss neutrality therefore acts as a reflection of the interests of others. In the 19th century in a period that is known as a "long peace" in Europe because empires use peace to free up resources to engage in "special military operations" across the globe. A similar thing happens in the 20th century with two superpowers needing a place to talk. This is why Switzerland is allowed to remain neutral in the Cold War. And such notions seem lost to a country in which history is as absent as in other parts of Europe.

People in Switzerland therefore do not know better than that their country is an exception, reflected by a widely shared sentiment. Which is addressed by right-wing populists in order to nudge people to keep on thinking that Switzerland is a country that lies in Europe without belonging to the rest of the continent for over 200 years now. But the world has changed since the empires of old decided that Switzerland had to be neutral, not to mention the fact that those empires are gone in a world today.

The situation today

Europe is in a transition, as mentioned before, with a successful framework that supports democratic states. There is a prospect in extending this framework beyond Europe, given that the Middle-East and Africa are also "littered" with states that cannot function without a framework after empire. And this explains why there are failed states around Europe. Which is why the Arab spring revolutions are a missed opportunity to boost democracies around Europe by giving states access to this framework.

Another reason to extend this framework in the 21st century is [climate change](). This will cause shocks in the [economy]() with heat affecting productivity and human [health](). With droughts causing scarcity of water and food insecurity. And so, people start to move with mass migration in- and around Europe already a new reality. This is why a framework is needed to mitigate the impact of climate change in this part of the world. And Europe has a successful framework in place for states with democracies.

All of this is easier said than done on a continent on which global history is not taught at [schools]() and universities. Given the fact that students are taught a [myth]() about peace between "nation states" that never existed on a continent with an imperial history over the past 500 years. Europe is therefore a place with a lot of historical memory, but without an actual history, as mentioned before. This means that even experts lack insight about the development of European states after empire since 1945.

This leaves Europe vulnerable as a place that is essentially lost in a transition without any perspective on a future whatsoever. European politicians are therefore left with one option: living in the moment as crisis managers. This in turn leaves the rest of the population behind in a world that does not make sense to anyone. History is therefore needed to provide a frame of reference to help people to relate to themselves, each other, and the world. Instead, Europe is left to work with a lot of shared memory.

Memory manifests itself in myth and/or trauma, as mentioned before. And with the traumas of WWII fading away, Europe is left with myth. Myth is what the far-right does best by [weaponizing]() nostalgia about a paradise lost in states with an open past. And this explains populism since the 1990s because people, lost in a transition, either feel a need to hold on to something with national pride, or, fall prey to a temptation to project their anxieties onto anyone and/or anything that can serve as a scapegoat.

Switzerland is no exception with a right-wing populist party that has 25% of the vote. Suggesting that the question what this country is about in this century is open to at least a quarter of the population, leaving people vulnerable to a nostalgia about a mythical Switzerland that is supposed to be an [island]() in the mountains without responsibility for Europe. Which is a risky proposition for Switzerland in the 21st century, especially when other political parties leave a field open for populists to shape a debate.

Not again!

The war in Ukraine namely re-opens all kinds of issues that were supposed to have been settled in Europe with the defeat of a German empire in 1945. First and foremost, the question on what it means to be human. Are people on this planet human beings? Or, expressions of distinctive biological races (or peoples) that each need states to nurture or cultivate a soil in which biological races can thrive? This [question]() is literally back on the political agenda, even though one ought to know better.

Right-wing populist parties are namely advocating a Europe of peoples (aka biological races) with separate states to safeguard a culture (in a biological sense as a soil), as if human beings are potatoes with countries as farms. This view on humanity contrasts with another view, in which Europe is seen as a place for human beings with a shared humanity that share a framework to avoid state failure after empire. All these notions of a shared humanity are now being dismissed as *woke* by the right.

This also explains why right-wing populists abhor transnational rights within a framework of the UN and EU. Because international law signifies that the world is a place with human beings with a shared humanity. Expressed by human dignity that is to be respected by rights, no matter a country in which a person resides, regardless of one`s gender, sexuality, class, ability, creed, conviction, or colour. The alternative is a society in which people have no rights, but privileges that are granted by an autocrat.

Ukraine is on the frontline of these contesting views on humanity with their respective translations into democracy or autocracy. Because Ukraine is a "Switzerland at the Black Sea" with a multicultural state in which people speak various languages, such as Ukrainian, Russian, Hungarian and a minority speaking Crimean Tartar, exactly like Switzerland with a Swiss-German speaking part, a Romandie, speaking French, an Italian speaking Tessin, not to mention Graubünden with a Romansch language.

All of this is contested by right-wing populists in Europe and attacked by a neo-imperialist Russia that expresses in its propaganda that Ukraine is an historical aberration and/or an unnatural state (when one believes in human races that need separate states to tend specific cultures for such races to thrive). And if Russia is right in its "assessment" about Ukraine, then Europe should also be without a Switzerland, meaning that the invasion of Ukraine is an attack on a legitimacy of Switzerland as well.

There is another risk for a legitimacy that is shared by Switzerland and Ukraine. The rest of Europe could decide to compromise with Russia. And a Europe deciding to compromise on Ukraine, is a Europe that also compromises on states, like Austria, Belgium, Italy, and Switzerland. A referendum in the Donbas to ask people, whether Russian speakers, are Russian, or not, would namely re-open a debate, whether people, who speak German, are German, or not, as happened in Austria in 1938.

Not to mention a possibility that a Europe that compromises with Russia on Crimea (among others by leaving Ukraine no other option than to settle), is also a Europe that leaves a door open for another discussion, whether Alsace, the former lands of Prussia and a part of the Czech Republic are "homelands" that belong to Germany. No wonder the AfD favours a different Europe in which Russia is allowed to [continue](#) where Germany was supposed to have stopped as a colonial empire in 1945.

Bilateral agreements

All of this was far from the horizon when the Berlin Wall fell in a Europe that believed that history had ended on a continent with a collective [trauma](#) instead of a history. As such, the bilateral agreements constitute a perfect political compromise from the 1990s for a society with two views on Europe. One view characterizes Switzerland as an island in the mountains in the middle of an imperial Europe of the 19th century, whereas another view sees Switzerland at the heart of a post-imperial Europe today.

The beauty of the bilateral agreements is that they serve both views in Swiss society as a political compromise. And this allows Switzerland to be an unofficial EU-member state without officially being recognized as such. In doing so, the bilateral agreements granted Switzerland access to a shared (economic) framework for democratic states (aka the EU), while the country also moved on its neutrality by joining in on peace keeping operations, exemplified by a mission in Kosovo today.

A country, like Switzerland, is therefore anything, but set in stone! Even though a right-wing populist party is set to sway a populace with a referendum, playing off on a nostalgia about a neutrality that was always intended to serve the interests of others over the past 200 years. Bilateral agreements

and Swiss neutrality therefore serve a purpose in a country that can either re-assess its position in the 21st century, or, let a right-wing populist party shape a public debate with myths about Swiss identity.

If myth prevails over history, then there will be a "Brexit" in the Alps with a Switzerland that chooses to let go of a framework in which this country flourishes today. In that case, Switzerland will cut itself off from its main markets on the continent, affecting industries, such as farming, pharma (Basel) and engineering (St. Gallen). And then Europe will be weakened as a whole and that opens a door to a future in which China and Russia hollow-out the UN to re-imperialize the globe in the 21st century.

An alternative is accepting the fact that the world today consists of (small) states that mostly came into being as a result of a decolonization after 1945. Which is legitimized by the UN with a global framework, known as a rules-based international order. One could also forget all about this, but that requires Russia losing a war and the rest of Europe agreeing on an extension of the bilateral agreements. All of which is outside of control of anyone elected to serve after the elections this year.

Switzerland is therefore left with only one viable option to claim ownership of its own future by formalizing an unofficial EU-membership into actual membership. This will strengthen Europe, which in turn will keep Switzerland in a top position as the most innovative economy globally, according to the World Economic Forum in its yearly rankings. Given the fact that Switzerland stopped being the poor house of Europe a long time ago. Switzerland therefore cannot evade its responsibility for itself!

Because there are prerequisites for having the most innovative economy of the world. Switzerland namely needs access to European grants for education and research so that Swiss industries have the best professionals trained in their own vocational colleges and universities. Unlike the UK that faced a collapse of funds for research over the past years as a result of Brexit. Unrealized research cannot be translated into applications for British industries, creating a competitive disadvantage for the UK.

This also applies to Switzerland because bilateral agreements expired that gave the country access to a European framework for education and research. This means that so many talent already missed out on opportunities that brighten (professional) lives. The fact that Switzerland let these programs expire, is a signal to any observer that this country is taking its prosperity for granted by letting its economic foundation slide in the 21st century. Which could translate into a "Brexit" in the Alps.

A shared responsibility

Switzerland therefore needs to acknowledge its economic position in a Europe of the 21st century in which Russia is re-asserting itself as an empire in one of its former territories at the Black Sea. With a "special military operation" that is taking place in utter lawlessness, as if Ukraine is a colony of an empire of old, exemplified by horrors in places, such as Bucha. And Russia will not stop in Bucha because the war in Ukraine is part of a global campaign against democracies for two decades now.

Russia can namely deploy a cyber-attack to put out the lights in any European hospital with impunity, not to mention interference in democracies globally (especially in the US). Or, recently, a disruption of grain supplies to Africa, even though that could translate into 20 million lives lost and chaos in states, whose fate is tied to that of Europe, whether people in Europe, like it, or not. And this is not solved by politicians, acting as crisis managers that compromise democracies by being involved with autocrats.

Europe namely needs leaders that live up to a responsibility to close off a chapter of history that lasted from the 15th century up to the 20th century - as an age of modern empires - which requires Switzerland taking up responsibility as well to work together with its neighbours in Europe. To finalize a transition into a post-imperial world with a shared framework for states after empire. And this not only entails re-thinking Switzerland`s unofficial EU-membership, but also re-assessing its neutrality.

Any neutrality of a small country is namely meant to serve the interests of others by default. This is why it can be advantageous for small countries to position themselves in a no-man`s land in between the interests of global powers by pursuing a neutrality. An example is Holland that existed in between the interests of global powers during World War One, until the calculations of those powers changed, after which Holland was attacked by an empire and looted as a colony for five years up to 1945.

This is why neutral small states need to serve a mutual interest of other powers. Else, a neutrality is a declaration of a position without admitting it. Not to mention the fact that neutrality makes no sense when a country is denied in its legitimacy by global powers that are supposed to respect a neutrality. Finland and Sweden were therefore right by showing responsibility to foreswear their neutrality after Russia abandoned a rules-based international order by a full invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022.

This is why Switzerland needs to re-assess its security by rethinking its position on neutrality. Which is possible without losing a neutrality for which Switzerland is famous for in the world. A neutrality can namely be coupled to the state of a rules-based international order that legitimizes Switzerland in its current form. Switzerland can therefore be neutral, except when the rules-based order is threatened, which would allow Switzerland to aid its twin sister state at the Black Sea instead of blocking supplies.

Making a choice for a future

There is ample room for Switzerland to do so without abandoning its traditions and identity in order to continue Switzerland as a success story over the past 175 years. Which is marked this year with a celebration of the Swiss constitution that was written during democratic revolutions all over Europe in 1848. As such, Switzerland can either be engaged with its neighbours in accepting a responsibility for a post-imperial world, or, wallow away in a nostalgia about a Europe that does not exist anymore.

In that sense, Switzerland is a regular European country that is at risk of falling prey to a continental wide nostalgia. And if that happens, then there will be a "Brexit" in the Alps with Switzerland cutting itself off from its main markets that it shares with its neighbours. All of which is detrimental to the economy and prosperity of Switzerland as a democracy among peers in a Europe of the 21st century. This requires a debate in which political parties engage on Europe, especially with elections this year.

The alternative is voters letting being swayed by right-wing populists to give in to nostalgia instead of taking responsibility for maintaining a rules-based international order that legitimizes the existence of self-determining (small) states within a post-imperial framework, guaranteeing prosperity, security, and a democratic way of life in which people are acknowledged in their dignity by human rights. All of which is under attack by Russia all over the world with a hybrid war for more than two decades now.

This makes Putin an enemy of humanity and not only in Switzerland`s twin sister state at the Black Sea. Neutrality can therefore never be an excuse to allow Russia to destroy a multicultural state in Europe. Not to mention the fact that far-right thought boils down to German nationalism with which a country, like Switzerland, cannot exist either. People in Switzerland therefore need to decide in what kind of Europe they want to live in the 21st century, starting with a debate on actual EU-membership.

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