Switzerland has formulated a "digital foreign policy". It shows the country's self-image in the digital age.

(Translation from original German text into Eglish language with Deepl.com). The text is also available in the following four languages:

- (IT)Costruttrice di ponti nel mondo digitale
- 中文(ZH)瑞士在数字化外交中的优势
- Français(FR)La Suisse, une médiatrice honnête dans le monde numérique
- عربي(AR)سويسرا.. وسيطٌ نزيهٌ في عالم رقمي

The Internet was to become an open, global place that all people are entitled to. That was once the hope. But it has long since become a venue for new power struggles - the Internet is now the continuation of classic geopolitics by digital means.

Internet freedom is in retreat, as the Center for Security Studies at ETH Zurich recently noted in a study. Digitalized national borders - China is the best-known, but by no means the only example - are fragmenting the global net public sphere, and state regulations are gaining more and more influence. While social media were still considered a driver of revolution during the Arab Spring, for example, it has now become the norm for authoritarian regimes to cut off access to the Internet during unrest. Digital control instruments are now part of the arsenal of authoritarian regimes - and not only.

The new boundaries and power relations on the Net also have implications for interstate relations. Diplomacy and multilateralism are increasingly shaped by developments in cyberspace. Moreover, the boundaries between state and para-state actors are blurring on the Net.

Many governments have recognized the importance of this development and are now formulating corresponding strategies, which can vary greatly depending on resources and ambitions. Switzerland recently published its Digital Foreign Policy Strategy 2021-2024 outlining how it intends to expand its foreign policy into the digital space. In it, the FDFA defines the fields of action that it considers relevant for Switzerland in the coming years. The importance Switzerland attaches to this field is reflected in its strategic embedding: digitization, which is one of the four thematic priorities in the Foreign Policy Strategy 2020-2023, is not defined solely as an instrument, but is specified in more detail as an independent foreign policy topic.

Neutral on the Internet?

The focus is on two things: On the one hand, it is about consolidating international governance on the Net. The keyword here is digital multilateralism. On the other hand, Switzerland wants to position itself as the central location for digitalization and technology debates - with Geneva as a leading global hub.

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The four fields of action

1 With the help of digital governance, Switzerland wants to contribute to ensuring that generally binding rules of international law also apply in the network. This is particularly important for a small country like Switzerland with limited political power.

2 Global prosperity and sustainable development are prerequisites for the Swiss economy, which is strongly networked internationally, to continue to exist - and also to be able to establish itself in new digital business areas.

3 Cybersecurity is increasingly coming into focus. The Corona pandemic, in the course of which critical infrastructure in the healthcare sector, for example, was attacked, has made it clear that security issues in the network will become even more important in the future.

4 With digital self-determination, Switzerland also wants to bring human rights into the debate: These should apply without geographical boundaries both online and offline.

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As a neutral country with a long tradition of good offices, Switzerland sees itself in a good position, according to the strategy, to act as a mediating voice in conflicts that affect the Net. And as a host state to numerous organizations, it wants to build on proven relationships. In this way, Switzerland presents itself as an "honest broker on the Net" that advocates equal rules for all on the Internet and wants to provide a stage for future negotiations on issues related to digitization.

Of course, the strategy is also about pursuing classic foreign policy goals: Switzerland should remain attractive and competitive as a business location, and universities and research institutes should benefit from international networking. And by strengthening the "Genève internationale" brand, political and economic capital will continue to accumulate in Switzerland.

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The Digital Geneva

Geneva is already home to numerous organizations active in the technological field. Most of them are not known to the general public, but are all the more significant in their field. This digital cluster increases the Rhone city's chances of capitalizing on continuities and continuing to play a leading role in the field of digitization.

How "Genève internationale" is affected by digitalization and how Switzerland can react in accordance with its new strategy recently became apparent: In November, the Confederation updated the Headquarters Agreement with the International Committee of the Red Cross ICRC with a protocol. The agreement explicitly addresses issues related to digitalization: in order to fulfil its mandate, the ICRC must be able to access large amounts of data and sensitive information. This should be better protected in the future.

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But what are such strategies good for? Where does it apply in reality? [Daniel Stauffacher](#) takes a positive view of Switzerland's new strategy: "It is a very comprehensive approach that brings the essentials under one roof." Switzerland's concerns are quite legitimate, he says. The former diplomat is the founder and president of the [ICT4Peace Foundation](#), which is primarily concerned with cyber security. Stauffacher has acted as an advisor to numerous governments and international organizations and knows that sovereignty on the Internet is only possible to a limited extent. This makes the greatest possible self-determination all the more important.

"Switzerland is in a good position in this respect. In the network age, the size of the state plays a less important role - which makes it all the more important to have rules of the game that everyone abides by," says Stauffacher. The multilateral approach is elementary for states like Switzerland. "We are now

entering the digital age, the framework conditions in the digital world have not yet been set - we have to use this moment to be proactive."

In doing so, the wheel does not have to be completely reinvented. Switzerland has been active in politics and digitalization for a long time and can be considered a real pioneer: In 2003, the [World Summit on the Information Society](#) took place in Geneva, in which Stauffacher was also significantly involved. The World Summit was attended by 13,000 people, including 200 ministers and 80 heads of state and government. "So the timing of this strategy is not too early," says Stauffacher.

Is the strategy too ambitious? No, the former ambassador is convinced: "First and foremost, the guidelines must be defined. In day-to-day business, it will then be a matter of forging alliances and taking up those topics for which one has the necessary competencies." Switzerland has strategic partnerships with like-minded countries, resulting in numerous synergies.

For example, with the EU. So far, Stauffacher believes, the EU has been bogged down in its approach - which, however, is partly a testimony to the wrangling over competences between the Union and the member states, especially in foreign policy, a policy area to which great importance is attached and where no one likes to cede competences. However, it is foreseeable that relevant strategic decisions will be taken in Brussels that will concretize the pan-European approach to the network.

Switzerland as a role model?

However, the strategy is not free of contradictions. [Nicolas Zahn](#) of the foreign policy [think tank foraus](#) points to the discrepancy between foreign policy claims and domestic political realities. "For example, according to the strategy, Switzerland should - and in our opinion rightly - represent net neutrality to the outside world, while parliament has struggled with this issue for a very long time." In addition, Zahn says, it is generally questionable to what extent Switzerland is really suitable as a global role model for digitalization.

Nevertheless, he also assesses the strategy positively. What particularly strikes him is that while such strategies usually deal with the level of the state or, at best, the economy, Switzerland puts the individual in the foreground. It also contains interesting ideas such as a Swiss data room.