



AUSTRIAN INSTITUTE FOR
EUROPEAN AND SECURITY POLICY

Austria's Neutrality

Role and Options in an Evolving World Order

AIES Study
by Christoph Schwarz, MSc
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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AUTHORS

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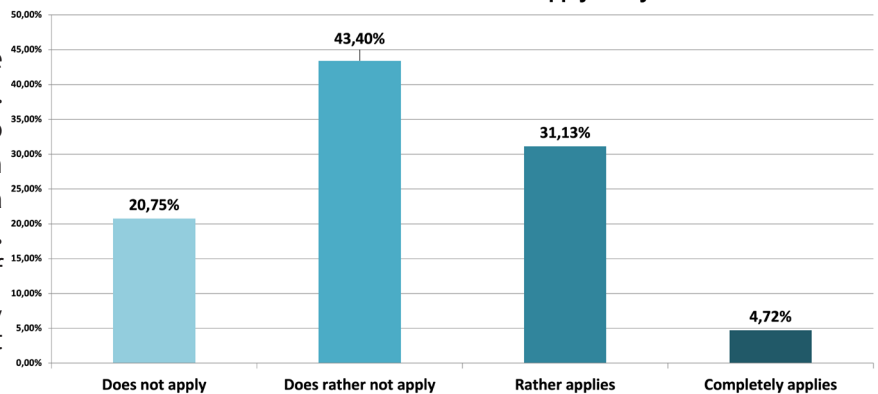
The AIES study, Austria's Neutrality – Role and Options in an Evolving World Order, aims to contribute to the debate on Austrian neutrality, as well as to identify and critically examine options for Austrian foreign, security, and defence policy. Based on a survey with more than 100 experts, especially from the fields of research, diplomacy, and military, about 50 questions and propositions concerning Austria's approach of neutrality and related issues were analysed. The results of a social network analysis of more than 65,000 tweets on Austrian neutrality from the beginning of 2021 to the beginning of 2023, which was also conducted by the AIES, are also covered in this study.

EXPERT SURVEY

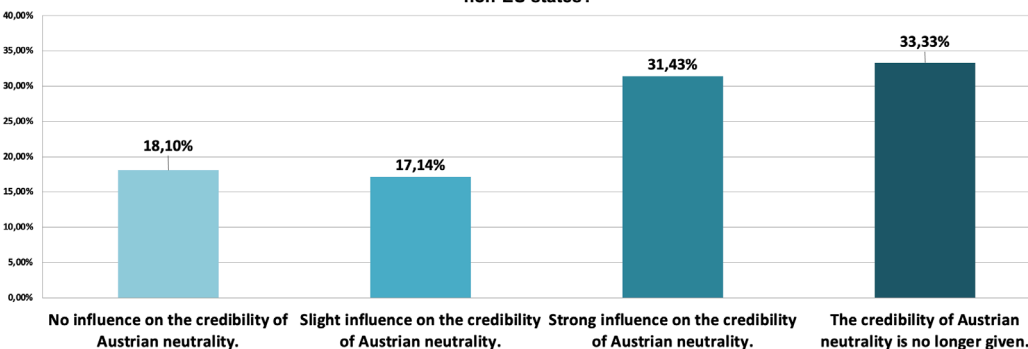
ASPIRATION AND REALITY – AUSTRIA AS MEDIATOR

The starting point of the survey was the assessment of Austria's current mediating role. The survey data indicates that there seems to be a certain discrepancy between aspiration and reality regarding **Austria's actual role as a mediator in the international state system**. About two-thirds of the respondents are of the opinion that, from today's perspective, this status applies only marginally or does not apply at all.

By providing "good offices", Austria has repeatedly played the role of a mediator and bridge builder in the international community since 1955. How much does this status still apply today?



Austria has been a member of the European Union since 1995 and participates fully in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). How do you assess this circumstance with regard to Austria's credibility as a neutral actor towards non-EU states?



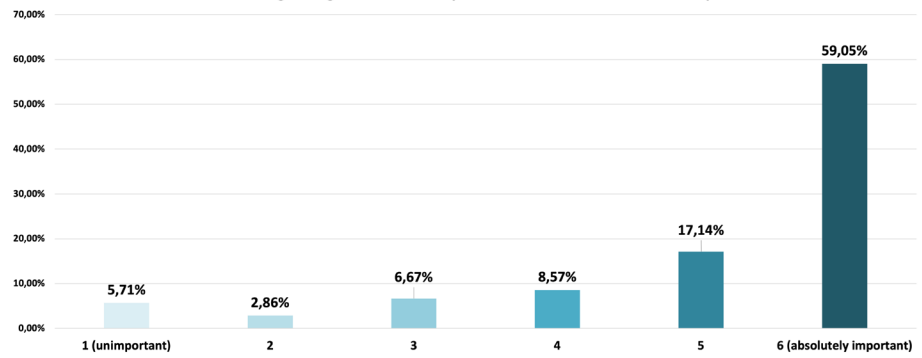
EU MEMBERSHIP AND THE CREDIBILITY OF NEUTRALITY

One third of the experts believe that Austria's EU membership and its participation in CFSP/CSDP have a **strong influence on the credibility of neutrality** vis-à-vis non-EU states or **credibility is no longer assured** in this context. ➔

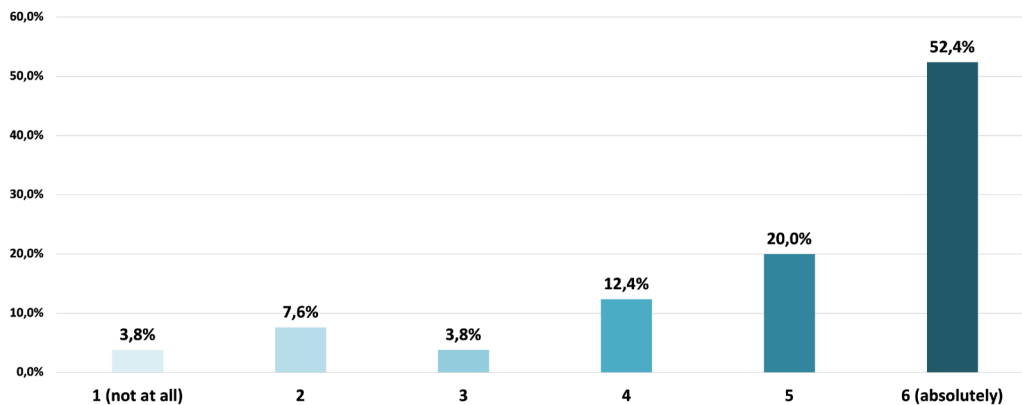
AUSTRIA AND NATO

A distinct majority of the respondents supports the view that a further shift toward NATO as the central framework for action and design in European security and defence policy has far-reaching implications for Austria as well, suggesting a **further development of cooperation and strengthening of interoperability** with the defence alliance.

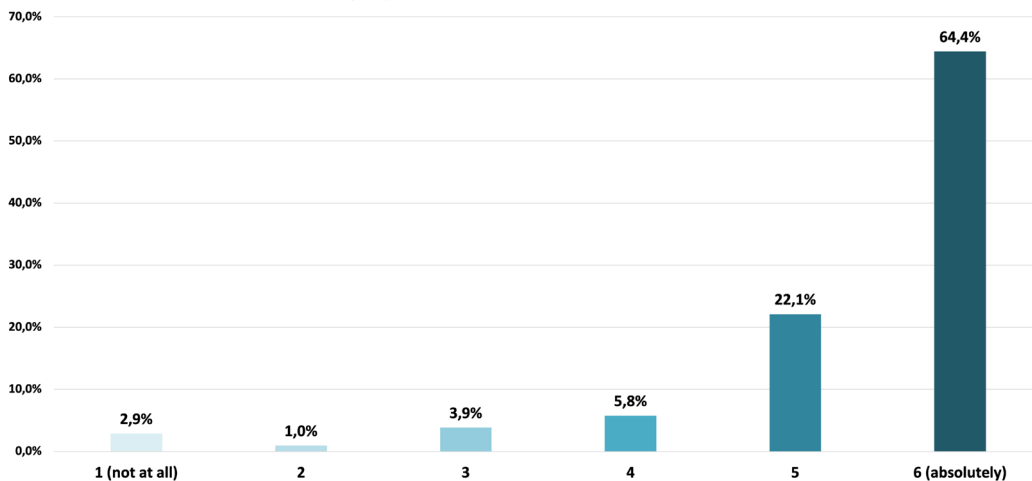
Austria must strengthen its military interoperability with NATO to such an extent that it would be able to fight together with its partners in the event of a Europe-wide war.



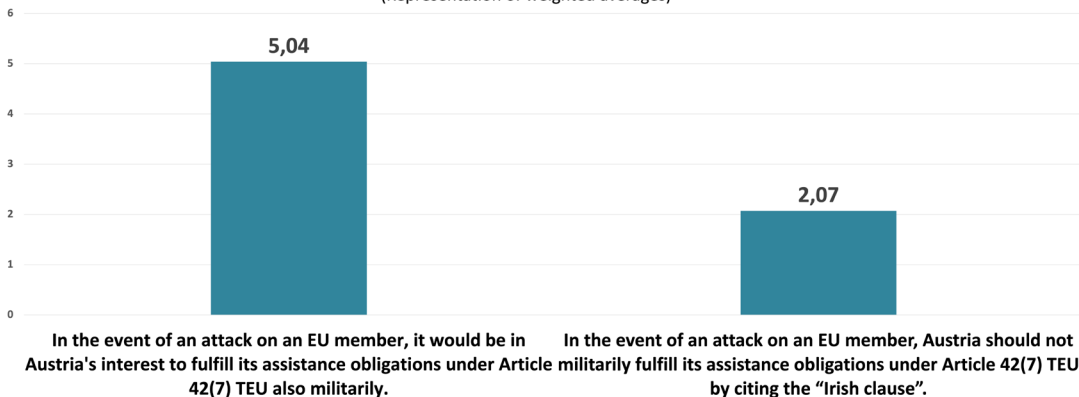
In the medium to long term, progressive integration in the area of EU security and defense policy will lead to an irresolvable tension between Austrian neutrality and European solidarity.



Clarity must be created at the domestic and European level as to what type of assistance Austria is willing to provide in the context of an EU defense case.



On a scale from 1 (not at all) to 6 (absolutely), how much do you agree with the following statements?
(Representation of weighted averages)



A TENSE RELATIONSHIP: NEUTRALITY & SOLIDARITY

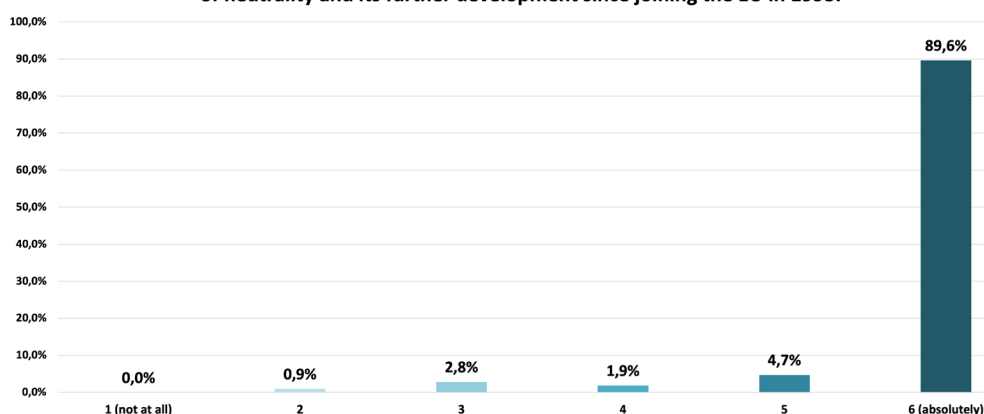
A central insight concerns the necessity of a profound discussion on the **tension between Austrian neutrality and European solidarity**, which a large part of the experts consider to be insoluble in the long run.

This primarily concerns the existing **ambiguity in Austria's relationship with the mutual defence clause** within the framework of the European Union. In this context, a very **clear majority is in favour of military support** from Austria in the event of an assistance requirement by a Member State and against invoking the so-called Irish clause. ➔

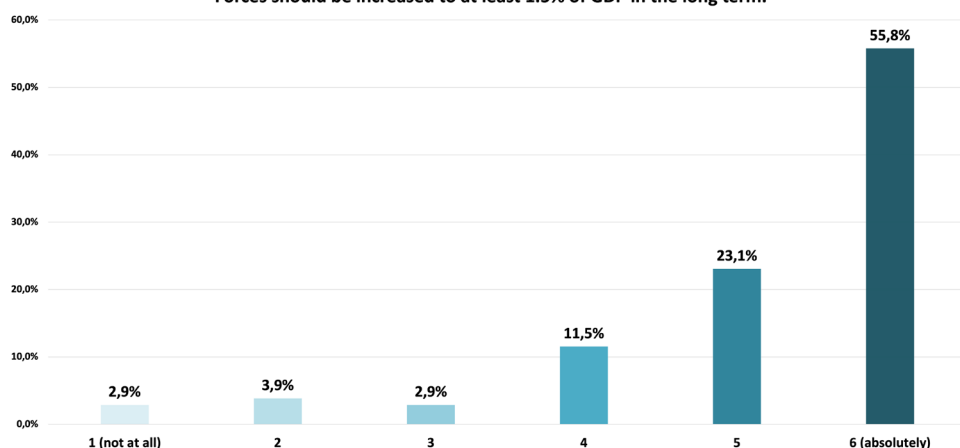
A NEED TO INFORM THE POPULATION

The participants identified an urgent need for action when it comes to **informing the Austrian population** about the actual legal status of neutrality and its further development since EU accession in 1995.

There is an urgent need to educate the Austrian population about the actual legal status of neutrality and its further development since joining the EU in 1995.



In order to be able to adequately carry out the tasks of national defense, domestic assistance operations and international crisis management, annual spending on the Austrian Armed Forces should be increased to at least 1.5% of GDP in the long term.



APPEAL TO AUSTRIA'S DEFENSIBILITY

The experts were also unanimous on the issue of Austria's defence capability, which is to be addressed against the backdrop of a modified foreign policy environment by **increasing defence capabilities and expenditures**. According to the majority opinion, however, a corresponding increase in spending would also require more clarity in the strategic orientation of the Austrian armed forces.

The perspectives on neutrality discussed in this study based on the available survey results have shown first and foremost that **stalemate in the debate on neutrality** conflicts with Austria's domestic and foreign policy interests and that **further development of Austrian neutrality policy** in certain areas is urgently needed. ■

Social network analyses provide a **bird's-eye view** of complex discussions and enable the identification of revealing patterns and insights in large amounts of data. As one of the first think tanks in the field of European foreign and security policy research and consultancy, the AIES has incorporated this method into its repertoire. Given the growing complexity of global challenges, it is becoming apparent that this tool will become increasingly significant in the world of security and foreign policy analysis and consultancy. It enables professionals to generate new knowledge and validate or disprove existing hypotheses through innovative visualizations, strengthening evidence-based policy guidance quickly and intuitively.

TWITTER (X) SOCIAL MEDIA ANALYSIS

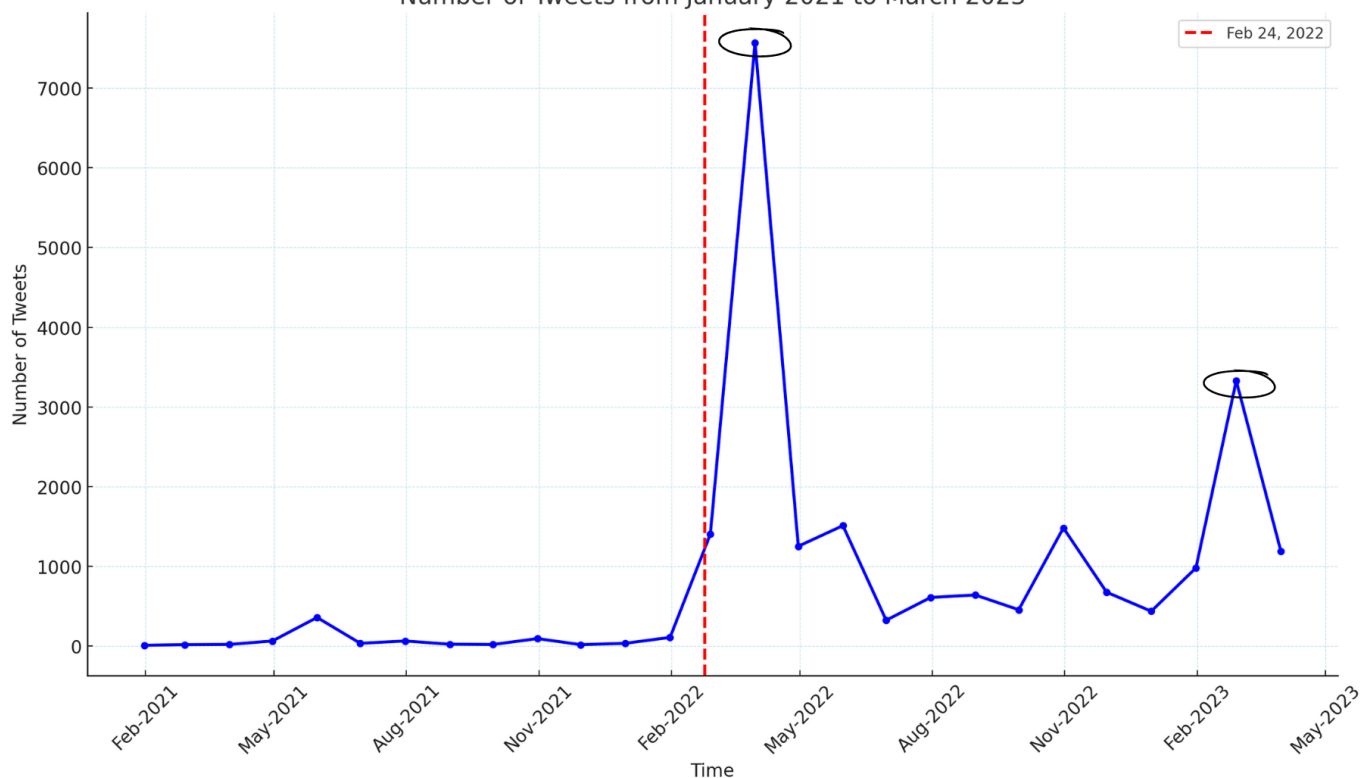
The time series analysis shows that the **Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 had a significant impact on the debate on Austrian neutrality**. In particular, the number of tweets and users involved has increased dramatically since that time. The discussion, which until February 2022 was primarily conducted by German-speaking accounts, has since evolved into a more international arena. **The majority of related posts are now in English**, and the topic is strongly anchored in the context of the Russian invasion and associated ➤

European political developments. This shift suggests that the **debate has a more reactive nature** and is strongly driven by current events, rather than continuously addressing the issue of Austrian neutrality regardless of external events. Moreover, a machine sentiment analysis of the tweets shows that the average emotional orientation of the posts has moved in a slightly more negative direction since the invasion.

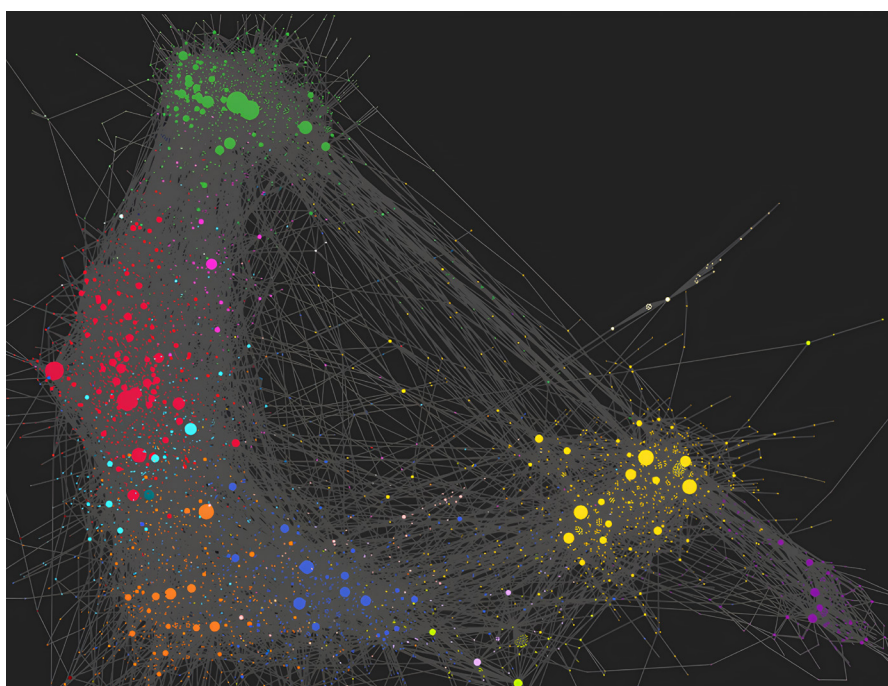
Methods for **detecting opinion clusters** in social network analysis open a wide range of possibilities in political research. They make it possible to disentangle

complex networks of relationships in large data sets and to make different opinion patterns visible. This technique is essential for identifying key actors, analysing the relationships between different groups, and understanding which issues are in the spotlight at which point in time. By applying this method, we were able to gain several insights. A particularly noteworthy one is the **unexpected link in retweet behaviour between an Austrian populist right and an international anti-capitalist left group.**

Number of Tweets from January 2021 to March 2023



While the debate over Austrian neutrality is a central concern for the Austrian populist right, it plays a more marginal role for the international anti-capitalist left, but one that feeds into a broader “anti-imperialist” and “anti-liberal” narrative. Both groups, however, are **united in using the cipher of peace and neutrality as a cover for their rejection of the liberal, rules-based international order** and in support of autocratic regimes, especially Russia. ■



RECOMMENDATIONS

A comprehensive and fact-based **debate on Austrian neutrality and its purposeful design must be conducted with a high level of public awareness.** Given the reactive nature of the discussion, as shown by the social network analysis, this **debate should be accompanied by a continuous educational campaign.** This should aim at comprehensively informing the public about key issues, to proactively promote an informed public discourse. Thereby, a more robust consensus on these issues could be created, which would be beneficial for long-term policy planning.

A debate on the **long-term compatibility of Austrian neutrality and European solidarity or integration respectively,** especially in the areas of foreign, security, and defence policy, must be comprehensively conducted and clarified.

It is in Austria's domestic and foreign policy interest to clarify **what kind of assistance it is willing to provide in the context of an EU mutual defence case** (Art. 42/7) to be prepared militarily as well as socially if necessary, and to create confidence vis-à-vis European partners.

Should Austria find itself in a situation in the future in which **military assistance for an EU member state appears necessary, majority support from the population would be a basic prerequisite for the ability to act politically.** However, the basis for this would have to be established in advance by addressing the issue in a way that would raise public awareness.

In consideration of the increased threat situation and the changed environment of European security and defence policy – among other things through the NATO-accession of Finland and Sweden – it is in **Austria's interest to strengthen its cooperation with NATO and to ensure interoperability with NATO countries** in the event of collective defence.

There is an **urgent need to raise awareness among the Austrian population about the actual legal status of neutrality and its further development since Austria's accession to the EU in 1995.** Insufficient awareness, false assumptions and an outdated understanding of neutrality among the population can limit the ability of policy makers to act in accordance with Austria's foreign policy interests.

According to the majority of experts, the strategic orientation of the Austrian Armed Forces in recent years has been **caught between the parallel goals of "Renationalisation" and "Europeanization".** In addition to national military defence, the Austrian Armed Forces should in the future focus more on contributions to the EU's CSDP and international missions to ensure clarity in the strategic orientation as well as to prioritize capabilities accordingly.

In order to be able to adequately perform the tasks of military national defence, domestic assistance operations, and international crisis management, as well as to meet the requirement of defensive neutrality, **spending on the Austrian armed forces is to be increased to at least 1.5% of GDP** in the longer term.

If Austria wants to meet its own historically high ambitions with regard to its – diplomatic – relevance in international relations, an **increase in both human and financial resources for the foreign service** is urgently needed.

In the context of **Austrian mediation activities in the international state system and against the background of increasing polarization, more pan-European approaches are to be sought** that combine existing Austrian expertise in this field with the geopolitical weight of the European Union to exploit synergy effects accordingly.

Since a fundamental change of the status quo with regard to Austrian neutrality is not foreseeable from the current perspective, a debate on this issue should **not be reduced to the binary question of maintaining or abolishing neutrality** but should rather be directed towards the **further development of it.** ■