



Switzerland seen from abroad in 2017

18. December 2017



Switzerland's image in the foreign media was affected by various natural phenomena, including the partial collapse of the Trift glacier (Valais). Foreign media reports discussed the consequences of global warming for Switzerland, famous for its mountains, and the effectiveness of the country's safety infrastructure.

Financial and tax-related topics continued to draw some attention in 2017. In the absence of major scandals, the foreign media paid less attention to Switzerland than in the previous two years, but it did cover occasional tension with certain countries and various natural phenomena that affected the country.

Popular referendums, the sporting achievements of Swiss athletes (Roger Federer in particular) and the Swiss economy continued to generate interest. During this period of relative media calm, foreign coverage focused more on other aspects, such as research, science and innovation. Finally, the image of Switzerland among the general public abroad has remained rather positive, in some respects dovetailing that presented by the foreign media and in others at odds with it: Switzerland's ways of governance and attractiveness as a country in which to live, work and invest are valued and constitute, along with aspects such as innovation, clear assets in terms of image.

Finally, how countries are represented on social media also affects their international image. To take this reality into account, in 2017 Presence Switzerland carried out, for the first time, an analysis of Switzerland's presence on Instagram. It found that while the tendency of Instagram users to post images of Switzerland's landscapes boosts Switzerland's image as a country of great natural beauty, other aspects, such as urban architecture and Swiss cuisine, receive less attention.

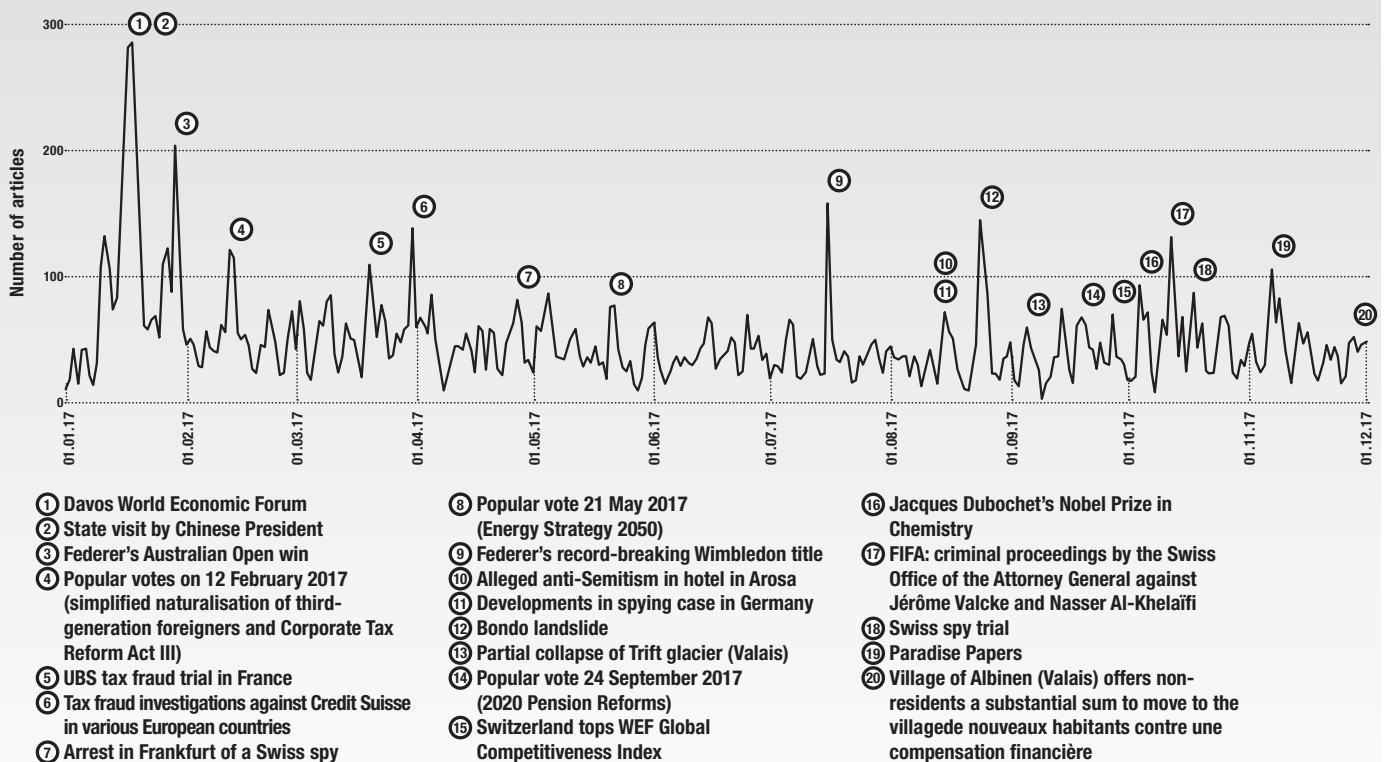
As part of its international communication work, Presence Switzerland is legally mandated to assess the perception of Switzerland abroad and report on the results of its assessment¹. This year's assessment is mainly based on the international media coverage of Switzerland in 2017², which is discussed in the first part of this analysis. The second part focuses on Switzerland's image among the general public in 20 countries. Based on these observations, we will conclude with a brief comparison of Switzerland's image in the foreign media and among the general public abroad. Switzerland's perception on Instagram is analysed in an excursus.

The figure below provides an overview of the development of foreign media coverage of Switzerland in 2017. It shows events that generated the most coverage and/or were particularly significant.

¹ Federal Act on the Cultivation of Switzerland's Image Abroad (SR 194.1) and Federal Ordinance on the Cultivation of Switzerland's Image Abroad (SR 194.11).

² Presence Switzerland continuously monitors the coverage of Switzerland by leading media outlets in 18 countries (Argentina, Australia, Austria, Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Portugal, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Turkey, the UK and the US), and in the Arab world and the EU. It examines paper and online versions of news stories as well as press reviews provided by Swiss representations abroad.

Quantitative evolution of foreign media coverage related to Switzerland in 2017



Evolution of the volume of foreign media coverage of Switzerland (volume = number of articles per day) in the leading media analysed (01.01.2017 - 30.11.2017). A spike can correspond to multiple events.



Figure 1: Quantitative evolution of foreign media coverage of Switzerland in 2017

Continued coverage of finance and tax-related stories despite a steady decline in volume since 2015

Although no major events involving Swiss banks or banks based in Switzerland occurred in 2017, the volume of foreign media coverage of the Swiss financial centre remained relatively constant. This can be attributed to recurrent stories about Swiss companies or Swiss banks (or companies and banks based in Switzerland) and reports about foreign individuals or networks involved in corruption or money laundering cases with repercussions for Switzerland. In both cases, there is only partial overlap between how Switzerland is covered by the foreign media and the implications for Switzerland's image: in the first instance, the protagonists are Swiss, tending to reinforce links between tax evasion/tax fraud and Swiss banks; in the second instance, Swiss banks play a secondary role and are mentioned, if at all, because of their cooperation with the authorities of the countries concerned.

The story that received the most coverage in the international press, particularly the German press, was the arrest and subsequent trial of Daniel M., who was accused of having been paid by the Swiss Federal Intelligence Service to spy on the tax authorities of the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia. While the German press noted that relations between Switzerland and Germany would not be affected by this affair, it did give prominent coverage to critical remarks about Switzerland, including statements by politicians concerning its credibility in the fight against tax evasion.

Various other cases involving alleged tax fraud or evasion, such as the UBS trial in France, investigations against Credit Suisse in various European countries and the US, and criminal proceedings against ABB in South Korea and Swiss Life in the US, also drew media attention. There were also investigative press reports on the ramifications for Switzerland of bribery and money laundering cases abroad, the most serious being the “Gürtel” and “Lezo” cases in Spain, the “K Money Route” case in Argentina and the “Lava Jato” case in Brazil. These cases drew regular media coverage of Switzerland in the countries concerned, generating significant volumes over the whole year. Switzerland was mentioned in foreign media reports both as a country to which assets had allegedly been funnelled and because of the cooperation by Swiss banks and the Swiss authorities with foreign authorities.

Finally, Switzerland was also mentioned in various ways in connection with the “Paradise Papers” leak but was not the main focus of the media coverage. Various Swiss individuals and companies such as Glencore were criticised for having been involved in offshore financial schemes, and Switzerland continued to be described as a tax haven. A more positive trend was also discernible, however: foreign media reports also commended Switzerland's efforts to adhere to international tax and financial standards. Numerous articles specifically mentioned Switzerland's multilateral and bilateral collaboration in this area as well as its introduction of the automatic exchange of information in tax matters.

Occasional tensions and its digital impact

Various isolated events involving Switzerland and other foreign countries and communities drew international press coverage and also had an impact on social media. Some of these events exemplify how news stories tend to go viral on social media platforms and the use of such platforms by government agencies.

The Turkish constitutional referendum in April 2017 was a case in point: the Turkish media was critical, in some cases virulently so, of an article published by Blick under the headline “Vote no to Erdogan's dictatorship”, which was translated into Turkish, and also of caricatures of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the Basel Carnival and an anti-Erdoğan demonstration in Bern. Media coverage in other countries was more neutral, especially because similar and in some instances more controversial incidents occurred in other European countries.

A hotel in Arosa that was accused of anti-Semitism after a caretaker posted a sign telling Jewish guests to shower before using the hotel swimming pool made headlines. The incident received relatively neutral coverage from the international press but elicited indignant criticism from the Israeli media and Jewish media outlets. The “Free Balochistan” poster campaign in Geneva made big headlines in the Pakistani media. It is worth noting that both incidents also went viral on social media and elicited responses from politicians in the countries concerned and from the Swiss authorities.

The Swiss mountains in the headlines

Natural phenomena in the Swiss Alps also drew foreign media coverage. Natural phenomena tend to get more coverage during periods of relative media calm. Foreign media reports frequently emphasised the outstanding efforts of rescue crews and the effectiveness of alarm systems in Switzerland. A landslide in the village of Bondo (Graubünden), which caused considerable damage, and three events related to glacier retreat also drew the attention of the foreign media: the partial collapse of the Trift Glacier (like the Bondo landslide a consequence of melting ice), the discovery of a couple that had been preserved for decades in the Tsanfleuron Glacier (Valais), and the discovery of the remains of a German backpacker in the Hohlaub Glacier (Valais). The discoveries of human remains in Swiss glaciers in particular made international headlines and also went viral on social media.



Swiss rescue workers in action: Through the air in the horizontal net.
©REGA.CH

These events had a twofold impact on Switzerland's image abroad. First, despite Switzerland's iconic image as a country of unspoiled landscapes and mountains, critical media reports highlighted the fact that Switzerland is not immune to natural phenomena caused by climate change. Second, foreign media reports stressed the effectiveness of Swiss infrastructures, safety measures and alarm systems, and portrayed Switzerland as a country that is technically highly capable of coping with such events.

Another mountain-related story that attracted international media attention was the village of Albinen (Valais), which advertised the benefits of its natural setting and offered non-residents a substantial sum to move to the village. This project, like others aimed at reversing the rural depopulation trend, was much commented on in social media in particular.

Finally, the death of Swiss mountaineer Ueli Steck in the Himalayas also attracted considerable international attention. The foreign media praised the courage and perseverance of the "Swiss Machine" in rugged mountain conditions – qualities that are also indirectly associated with Switzerland.

Sport and popular votes continued to attract media attention

As every year, various subjects continued to attract foreign media attention, in particular Swiss popular votes and Roger Federer's achievements on the tennis court. The simplified naturalisation of third-generation foreigners, the Corporate Tax Reform Act III, the Energy Strategy 2050 and to a lesser extent the Federal Act on the 2020 Pension Reforms received some foreign media coverage. Because analogous projects are also frequently debated abroad, a number of foreign media articles portrayed Switzerland as a political forerunner. Swiss political culture and direct democracy were often mentioned, both during the periods leading up to popular votes and after the results were announced.

The continued string of victories won by Roger Federer – a genuine Swiss icon – also attracted significant media attention, especially during the Wimbledon finals. Roger Federer was also the most frequently mentioned Swiss name in the foreign media (see word cloud below). Besides his outstanding performance, many media reports also praised the two records he broke at Wimbledon: Federer is the first man to have won Wimbledon eight times and the oldest to reach a Grand Slam final.

Recurring themes: the Swiss economy and Swiss innovation

As every year, the World Economic Forum in Davos attracted intense international media coverage, underscoring Switzerland's status as a host of international forums for debate. Press coverage focused primarily on the agenda at Davos, major figures who attended the event and the countries represented. The fact that a Chinese head of state attended the WEF was also noted in media reports. Xi Jinping's state visit to Switzerland attracted commentary from the foreign media and glowing coverage from the Chinese press, but a number of foreign media outlets were also critical of Switzerland's attitude towards Tibetan activists who demonstrated against the visit.

The foreign press also ran scattered stories related to education, research and innovation in Switzerland. Although the overall number of news stories on these topics has remained relatively constant from one year to the next, they featured more prominently in 2017 because Switzerland was not a focus of foreign media attention this year. Jacques Dubochet's Nobel Prize in Chemistry attracted the most media attention, as did discoveries, experiments and inventions made by research institutes like the Blue Brain Institute and CERN and by education institutions and companies.

Foreign media perception of Switzerland in 2017



Each term or topic is colour coded to indicate whether foreign media reports about the particular topic was positive (green), negative (red) or neutral (grey). The size of the letters represents the number of reports published on a certain topic. The bigger the size of the letters, the more reports were published about that topic.



Figure 2: foreign media perception of Switzerland in 2017

Finally, the commodity trading business was examined in numerous articles about the “Paradise Papers”. As noted above, Glencore was criticised for having benefited from offshore financial schemes and having collaborated with various actors involved in corruption cases.

The word cloud above visualises the tenor of media coverage of various events in 2017 and their relevance to Switzerland's image abroad.

Steady decrease in foreign media coverage of Switzerland

The volume of foreign media coverage of Switzerland has fallen steadily since 2015. The biggest international news story in 2017 was President Donald Trump's first year in office and the geopolitical repercussions of his presidency. Other topics that attracted a great deal of media attention were the elections in France and Germany, the Catalan independence referendum and a number of terrorist attacks in Europe. In 2017, Switzerland attracted less media attention than in previous years when various events, incidents and scandals in the country made international headlines. The biggest news stories in previous years were about sports organisations like FIFA (see “International sports organisations” category in Figure 3) and Swiss banks or banks with offices in Switzerland, most notably the Swissleaks scandal (category: “Private Swiss banks”) and judicial proceedings against UBS and Credit Suisse. Some of these topics continued to draw sporadic media attention in 2017 but did not generate the spikes seen in previous years.

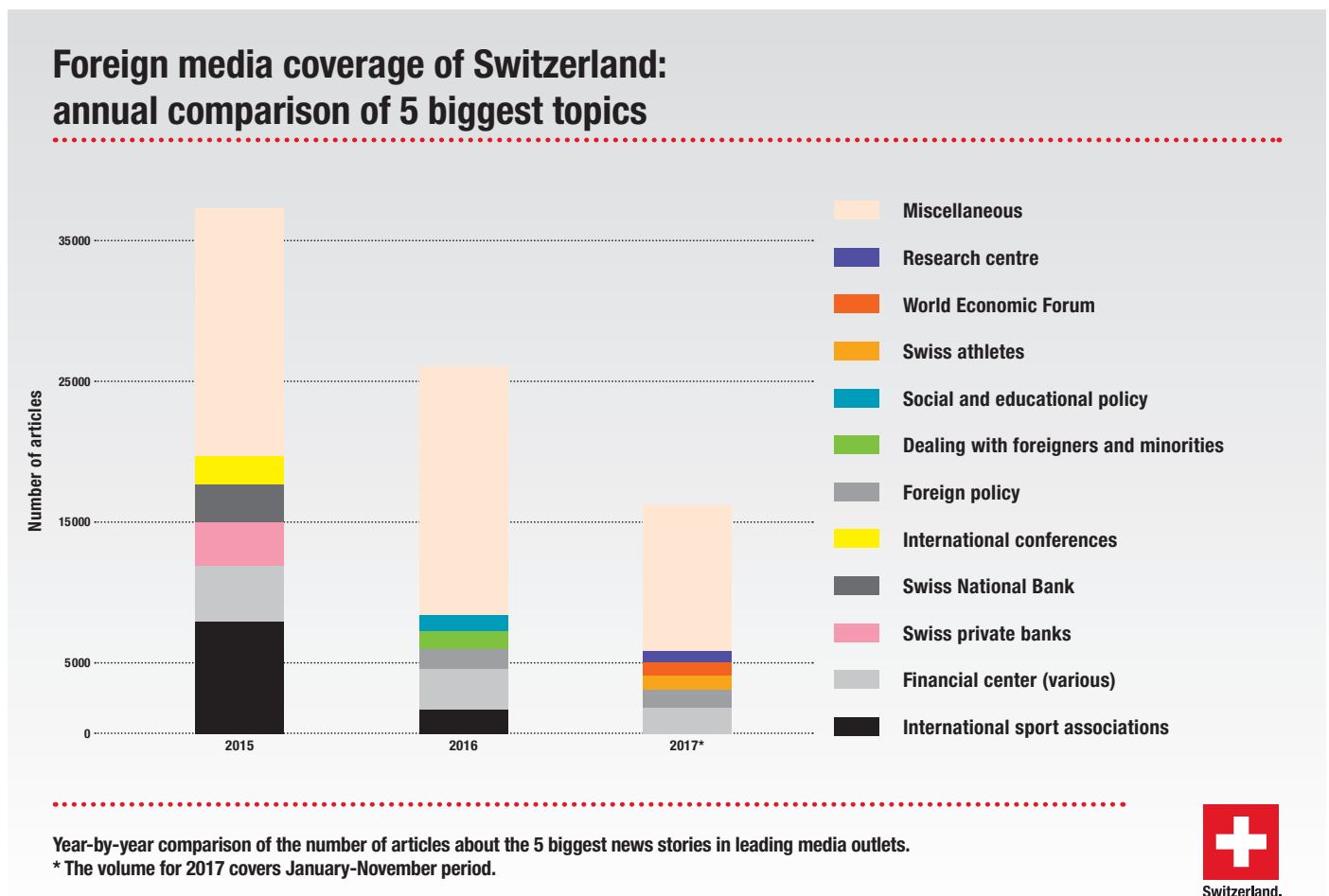


Figure 3: Foreign media coverage of Switzerland: annual comparison of 5 biggest topics

Switzerland's image on Instagram

The international perception of all countries is increasingly influenced by their social media coverage and especially by images posted on social media platforms. This is particularly the case of Instagram, currently the most popular image-sharing platform, which allows users to tag each photo with the name of the place where it was taken. In order to find out how Switzerland is presented on Instagram and obtain an accurate idea of what kinds of photos are associated with the country, Presence Switzerland analysed, with the aid of the latest visual recognition technologies developed by Google, some 5 million photos and videos shared on the platform in 2017 with hashtags associated with Switzerland (#Switzerland, #Swiss, etc.).

Image of Switzerland on Instagram in 2017



The size of the letters represents the number of "shares" regarding the topic.
The bigger the letters, the more posts on that topic were shared.



Graph 4 : Image of Switzerland on Instagram in 2017

Some of Switzerland's strengths and attributes lend themselves particularly well to the Instagram aesthetic. Switzerland's landscapes, sweeping valleys, lakes and mountains draw the photographer's gaze and make it a singularly "instagrammable" country. The platform's social dimension, which encourages visitors to immortalise snapshots of family members and selfies taken in front of mesmerising landscapes, reinforces Switzerland's appeal. Instagram also allows users to indulge in nostalgia with various filters that give their images a retro or vintage look in keeping with Switzerland's traditional and bucolic side. But the majestic power of Switzerland's natural environment also tends to eclipse the country's more modern and futuristic aspects, like its urban architecture.

The most popular images of Switzerland show natural settings against a backdrop of mountains, green valleys, lakes and rivers. As one might expect, animals, and people engaging in sport and outdoor activities are also among the most popular images shared on Instagram. Photos of fashion models and luxury products, especially watches, also proliferate.

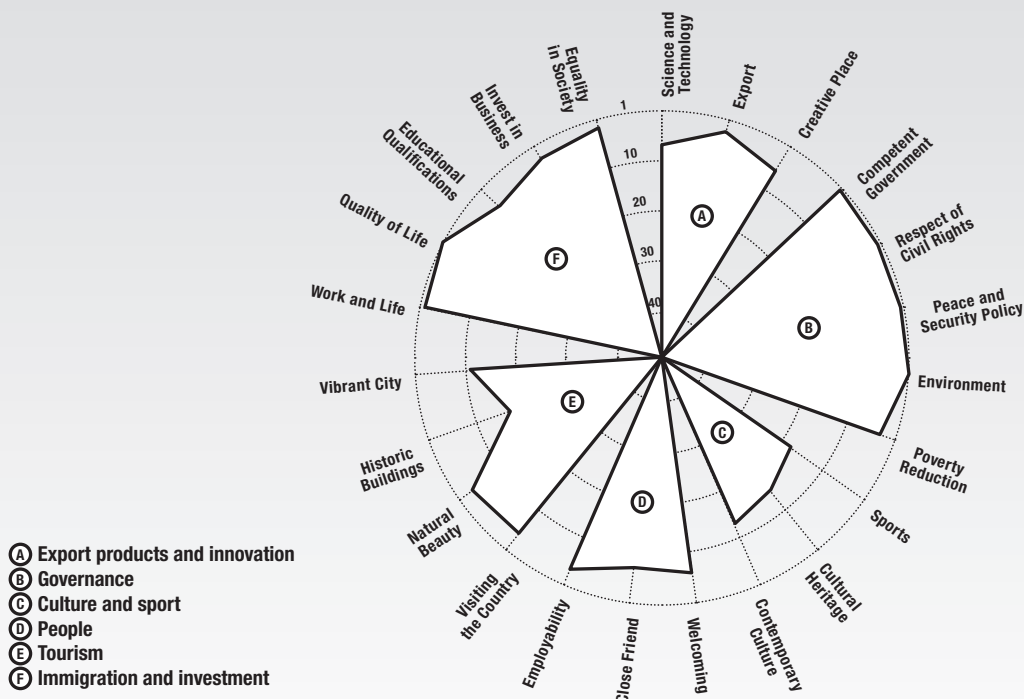
Although there are plenty of images of buildings located in Switzerland on Instagram, the overwhelming majority are chalets and other traditional buildings. Because few images of modern Swiss buildings are shared on the platform, Switzerland's cultural heritage is seen through the prism of its traditions, not its forward-looking architecture. This clichéd image of a traditional Switzerland is reinforced by countless images of Swiss cheese and especially Swiss chocolate – all of which are highly Instagram-compatible because they appeal to people's emotions.

Finally, the number of images of influential Swiss personalities on Instagram is too small to enhance the country's position on this social media platform. While Swiss football players are well represented on Instagram, they do little to enhance Switzerland's image because most of them play for international clubs. In terms of Switzerland's image, the influencers with the biggest reach on Instagram are travel bloggers.

Public image abroad: Switzerland consistently gets high marks for its governance, quality of life, work and business environment

Along with the image presented by the foreign media, the perception of Switzerland among the general public abroad is another key indicator of Switzerland's international image. The Nation Brands Index (NBI)³ can be used to evaluate the public perception of Switzerland in 20 economically and geopolitically significant countries. The NBI general ranking is based on six dimensions: export products and innovation; governance; culture and sport; people; tourism; the country's attractiveness. There are sub-dimensions for each of these six dimensions (see Graph 5). According to the NBI, Switzerland's overall image has been consistently positive over the years: it has ranked 8th out of 50 countries every year since 2008 except in 2011 (9th rank), outperforming countries of similar size and wealth like Austria, the Netherlands and Sweden. Switzerland's ranking varies from country to country: it ranks 2nd in Germany, 12th in Sweden and 15th in Italy.

Switzerland's image according to the Nation Brands Index 2017



Switzerland's image in the 2017 Nation Brands Index: The diagram shows Switzerland's ranking in the NBI's 23 attributes. The six segments present the main NBI indices: export products and innovation, governance, culture and sport, people, tourism and immigration/investment. Example: In the 'environment' attribute, Switzerland is ranked first in a study of 20'185 persons from 20 countries. In 'welcoming', Switzerland ranks seventh.



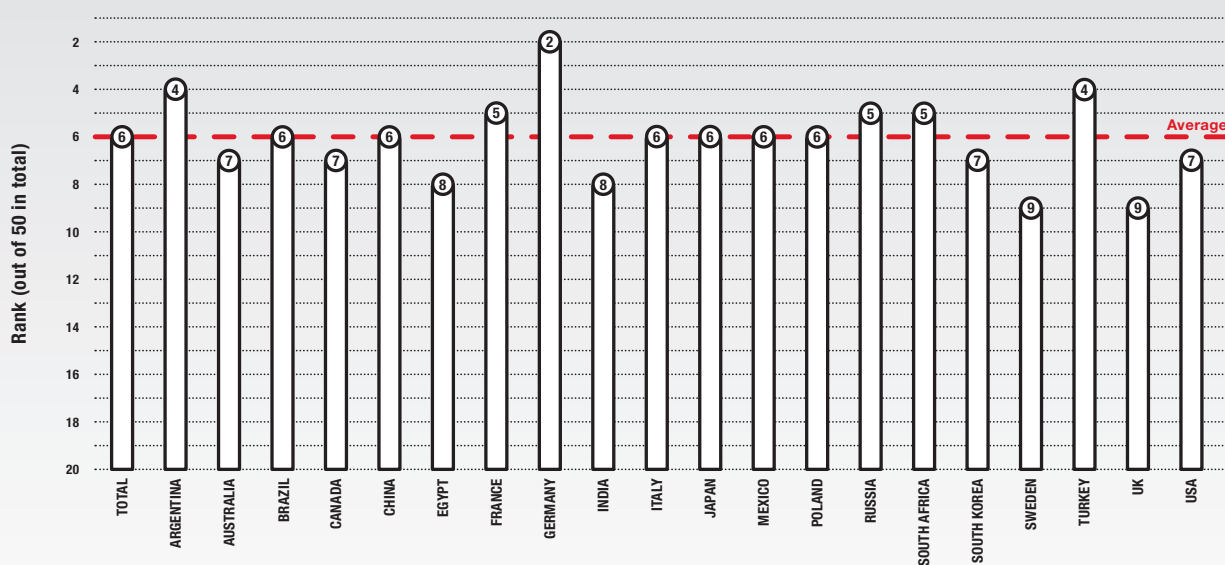
Figure 5: Switzerland's image according to the Nation Brands Index 2017

Although Switzerland ranks behind Canada this year, it has a particularly good image in terms of governance (2nd rank), for each of the sub-dimensions: it ranks 1st in terms of environmental policy and also scores very high for the competence and honesty of its government, its respect for civil rights and its peace and security policy. Switzerland is also considered to be a very attractive country to live and invest in (tied with Germany and right behind Canada), having moved from rank 4 to rank 2 since 2016. It also enjoys an excellent reputation for its economy and institutions (rank 1 for its quality of life).

³ The Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index assesses the international public image of 50 nations. It takes account of six criteria: export products and innovation, governance, culture and sport, people, tourism and the country's attractiveness. The NBI index surveys respondents in 20 countries based on an overall sample of 20,185 adults aged over 18 who have access to the internet

Switzerland also ranks high in terms of its export products and innovation. Swiss products have a particularly good reputation. Switzerland is also considered to be among the ten most innovative countries and one whose scientific and technological performance is highly valued. How Switzerland is perceived varies from country to country for its export products and innovation and for the other dimensions (see Figure 6). In its neighbouring countries, Switzerland falls above or in the average range for the “export products and innovation” category and ranks 6th among the 20 countries surveyed. It ranks 2nd in Germany, 5th in France, 6th in Italy and slightly lower in Sweden and the UK (rank 9). Switzerland also ranks well in geographically further removed countries such as Argentina, Turkey, Russia and South Africa, and somewhat less well in Egypt and India.

Switzerland's ranking for the 'Exports and innovation' dimension in the 20 countries surveyed for the Nation Brands Index 2017



Switzerland's ranking in export products and innovation by the 20 countries surveyed in the Nation Brands Index 2017. The dotted line shows the average ranking across countries in the export products and innovation dimension (rank 6).



Figure 6: Switzerland's ranking for the 'Exports and innovation' dimension in the 20 countries surveyed for the Nation Brands Index 2017

Another factor that benefits Switzerland's image is the relatively favourable perception of its citizens among the general public abroad (rank 5). The foreign general public has a particularly good perception of the professionalism of the Swiss, less so of their hospitality and friendliness.

The general public in other countries has a less flattering image of Switzerland in the field of culture. Despite slight progress since 2016, Switzerland is not generally thought to have an exceptional cultural heritage, either historic or contemporary. In the field of sport, there is also potential for improvement. Finally, Switzerland ranks relatively less well in terms of tourism, although the results are not unsatisfactory and vary depending on the sub-dimensions: its natural beauty is highly appreciated and it is also considered a premier tourist destination, but its cities and especially its historic buildings do not inspire much praise.

Conclusions

In 2017 – a year when the volume of foreign media coverage of Switzerland declined compared with previous years – the country's role as a financial centre, occasional tension with certain countries and various natural phenomena drew the most media attention. As every year, Swiss popular votes and sporting achievements drew some media attention. Other topics related in particular to the economy and education, research and innovation were also covered by the foreign press.

Switzerland's image among the general public abroad has consistently been rather positive. Switzerland has a particularly good reputation regarding governance and as a country to live and invest in. Switzerland's export products, innovation potential and people have a rather good image, but there is room for improvement with respect to sport, culture and tourism.

There is some overlap between news coverage and public perception. This is particularly the case with regard to governance: Switzerland's popular votes and political system are regularly mentioned and praised in the foreign media and also enjoy a favourable image among the general public. The same applies to Switzerland's natural beauty and mountains, which are objects of fascination abroad. This positive image of Switzerland's natural assets was in some respect contrasted this year by media reports about landslides and the melting of glaciers caused by climate change, a phenomenon to which the country is not immune.

In other areas, however, public opinion and media coverage seem to be at odds. In the field of sport in particular, Switzerland's NBI ranking does not match the accolades heaped by the international press on athletes like Roger Federer, a genuine global icon. This discrepancy should be put into perspective and may be explained by other countries' reputations as sporting nations. Furthermore, since Switzerland's performance in the field of innovation has been borne out by various other indices, the country's innovative strengths could be leveraged in various ways to enhance its reputation in this area.

Finally, because the international image of all countries is increasingly influenced by their social media coverage, Presence Switzerland carried out an analysis of Switzerland's presence on Instagram which revealed that this platform does showcase a number of Swiss strengths. However, while Switzerland's photogenic natural landscapes are ideally suited to the Instagram aesthetic, they tend to reinforce an image of a traditional Switzerland. Along with traditional media, social media will from now on form an integral part of efforts to analyse how Switzerland is perceived internationally and showcase the country's strengths.

As a unit within the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, FDFA, Presence Switzerland supports the safeguarding of Switzerland's interests abroad by analysing the way in which Switzerland is perceived internationally, and by applying a range of international public relations tools. These include means of information and communication, projects abroad, welcoming delegations to Switzerland, as well as Switzerland's presence at world expos, and the *House of Switzerland* at the Olympic Games. The Federal Council regularly reviews Switzerland's international communication strategy.

Contact: FDFA, Presence Switzerland, Bundesgasse 32, 3003 Bern, prs@eda.admin.ch