

Switzerland seen from abroad in 2018: Switzerland's image on Twitter and in foreign media

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Swiss midfielder Xherdan Shaqiri making double-headed eagle gesture at the World Cup match Switzerland vs Serbia

KEY POINTS IN BRIEF

- **Foreign media reports and Twitter activity concerning Switzerland covered a wide variety of topics in 2018, many of which were conducive to Switzerland's image. The analysis shows that Switzerland consistently enjoys a positive image abroad.**
- **The perception of Switzerland was strongly influenced by annually recurring topics such as the World Economic Forum in Davos, Swiss athletes and direct democracy.**
- **In particular, Switzerland's European policy, immigrant integration in Switzerland, and occasional tensions with Russia (suspected espionage activities) and Spain (Catalan separatists residing in Switzerland) received prominent coverage in 2018.**
- **Meanwhile, Switzerland's role as a financial centre drew less media attention this year. At the same time, the focus shifted away from controversial financial and tax-related scandals and more towards positive reports beneficial to Switzerland's image, such as the automatic exchange of information in tax matters and blockchain technology.**
- **Switzerland's research achievements and social affairs were other areas that sporadically influenced its image abroad, for the most part positively.**

Introduction

This report by Presence Switzerland sets out the topics that shaped Switzerland's image in 2018 in the foreign media and on social media – represented in this analysis by the microblogging social networking service Twitter.

The first part of the report focuses on the perception of Switzerland on Twitter: when all tweets with the hashtag #Switzerland are analysed, which topics are revealed to have been the most important in 2018? And which were the ten tweets that most influenced the perception of Switzerland, measured by the number of retweets, likes, and comments?

The second part of the report analyses coverage of Switzerland in the foreign media. Which topics played the greatest role in how Switzerland is perceived abroad? Four topics featuring prominently in the coverage in 2018 were examined in detail: Switzerland's European policy, how the country deals with integration issues, tensions with Russia (allegations of spying) and with Spain (Catalonia conflict).

The conclusion summarizes and classifies the findings that shed most light on Switzerland's image abroad across the two media.

Switzerland's image on Twitter

The perception of a country is increasingly influenced by its social media coverage and the content shared on these platforms. In its annual analysis 2017, Presence Switzerland examined how the country is presented on Instagram. This year it focused on Twitter, the microblogging social networking service. Twitter is highly relevant in any analysis of Switzerland as seen by social media. The platform is used by 326 million users worldwide to share news and is often the quickest way to disseminate information when something happens in the world. In order to identify the topics with which Switzerland was associated on Twitter in 2018, Presence Switzerland first carried out an analysis of all 650,000 messages that were shared on Twitter this year with the hashtag #Switzerland¹. Secondly, irrespective of hashtags, it also determined which tweets related to Switzerland achieved the biggest reach (measured in terms of retweets, likes, and comments) during the course of the year.

Hashtag #Switzerland: focus on events, tourism and emotional occasions

The analysis of all messages with the hashtag #Switzerland² revealed that many different aspects of Switzerland are discussed on Twitter and generally these comments are positive (see Figure 1). It is particularly common for foreign tourists to use the hashtag #Switzerland to share photos and videos of picturesque mountain scenery and landscapes, but travel agencies also often use the hashtag to promote Switzerland.

Moreover, it seems to be very popular to post all kinds of rankings on Twitter, which is why various facets of Switzerland are often compared with many other countries. For example, according to one ranking that attracted many positive comments, Switzerland is the most blockchain-friendly country in Europe. On Twitter, Switzerland also draws a great deal of attention in relation to sporting events. This year the FIFA World Cup dominated: before and after each game involving the Swiss team, a huge number of tweets appeared, and that number was many times higher as a result of the “double eagle” gesture in the match against Serbia. Thanks to the World Cup, approximately five times as many tweets with the hashtag #Switzerland were posted between mid-June and early July than during most of the rest of the year.

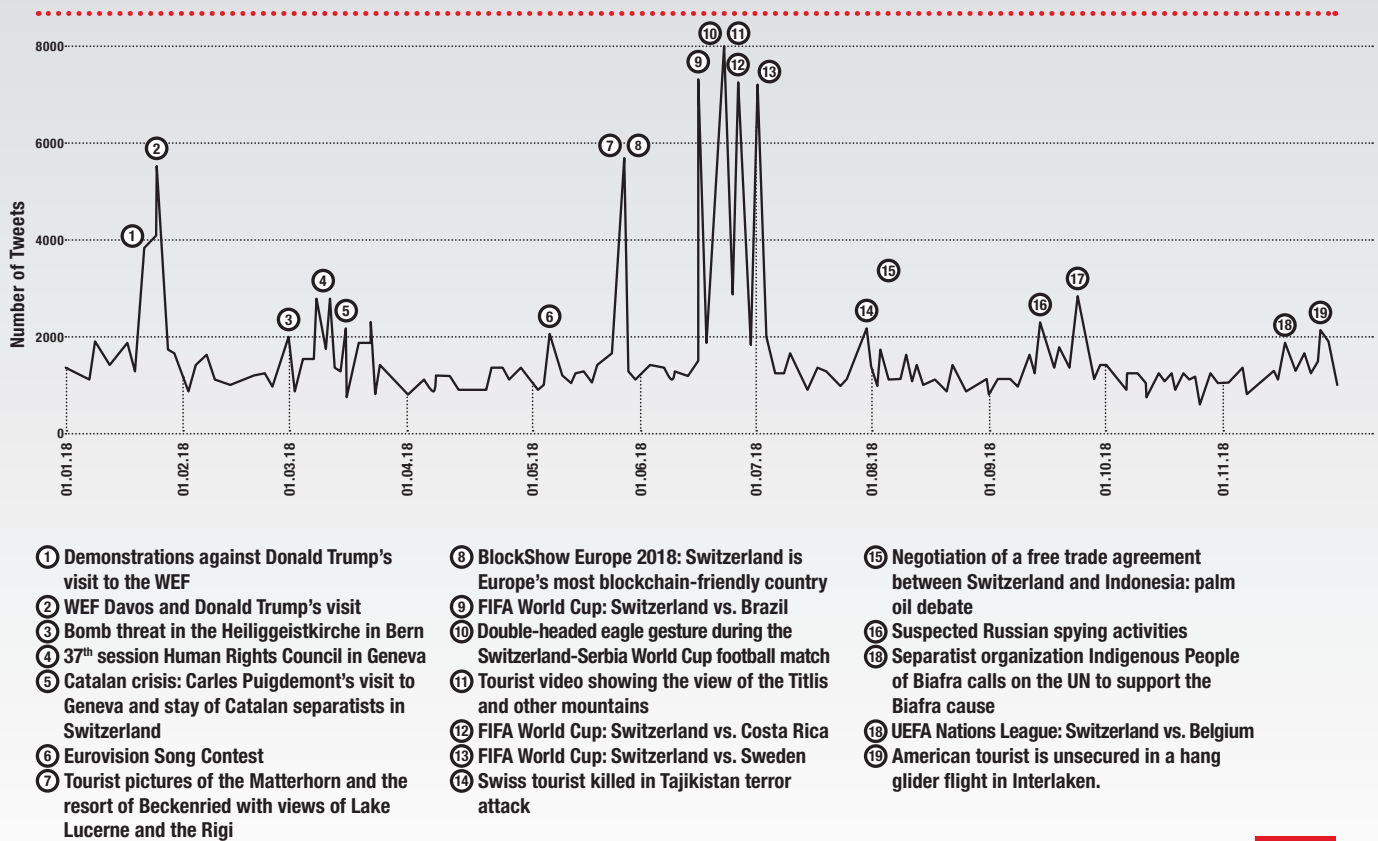
Besides addressing the world of sport, users often mentioned Switzerland in the context of economic, scientific and cultural events. The World Economic Forum and Donald Trump's attendance in particular held great fascination for many. Its venue, Davos, mentioned frequently, showcased Switzerland as an important country for the international exchange of views. At the same time, opposition to Donald Trump by part of the Swiss population achieved a great deal of visibility, with the demonstrations in Switzerland drawing considerable attention on Twitter. The Eurovision Song Contest was a further event that lent Switzerland a relatively high level of visibility, despite the country's only moderate past performance.

Switzerland also enjoyed a high profile on Twitter throughout the year with topics related to International Geneva. A variety of interest groups were particularly active on Twitter, addressing topics discussed at the 37th session of the UN Human Rights Council. Furthermore, demands made by the *Indigenous People of Biafra organisation* for United Nations support in the resurgent Biafra conflict in Nigeria were echoed widely on Twitter.

¹ The tweets mainly originate from people abroad. However, as many users have deactivated geolocation on Twitter, it was not possible to completely exclude messages sent by Swiss citizens from the analysis.

² The hashtag #Switzerland in English was analysed because hashtags in other languages (e.g. #Schweiz, #Suisse, #Svizzera, #Suiza) are used far less.

Quantitative evolution of tweets related to Switzerland in 2018



Quantitative evolution of tweets related to Switzerland (number of tweets per day, 01.01.2018 – 30.11.2018). A spike can correspond to multiple events



Figure 1: Quantitative evolution of tweets about Switzerland on Twitter in 2018

In connection with political events, 2018 saw Switzerland mentioned most often in the context of the Catalonia conflict and in relation to alleged Russian espionage activities. Furthermore, negotiations for a free trade agreement between Switzerland and Indonesia prompted environmentalists to raise concerns on Twitter about the issue of palm oil and the related clear-cutting of the rain forests.

Switzerland also drew the attention of Twitter users not least due to events of high news value such as the bomb threat in Bern's Heiliggeistkirche church, the attack in Tajikistan which left a Swiss citizen dead, or a US tourist's harrowing hang glider flight over the Bernese Oberland after his instructor forgot to strap him in.

On an upbeat note, a photo of Alain Berset, President of the Swiss Confederation, sitting on a pavement outside the UN HQ in New York, received plenty of positive feedback. In Kenya in particular, this image provided an opportunity to praise Berset's humility and criticise the country's own leaders.

Tweets with the biggest reach: Switzerland most visible in tweets by prominent figures

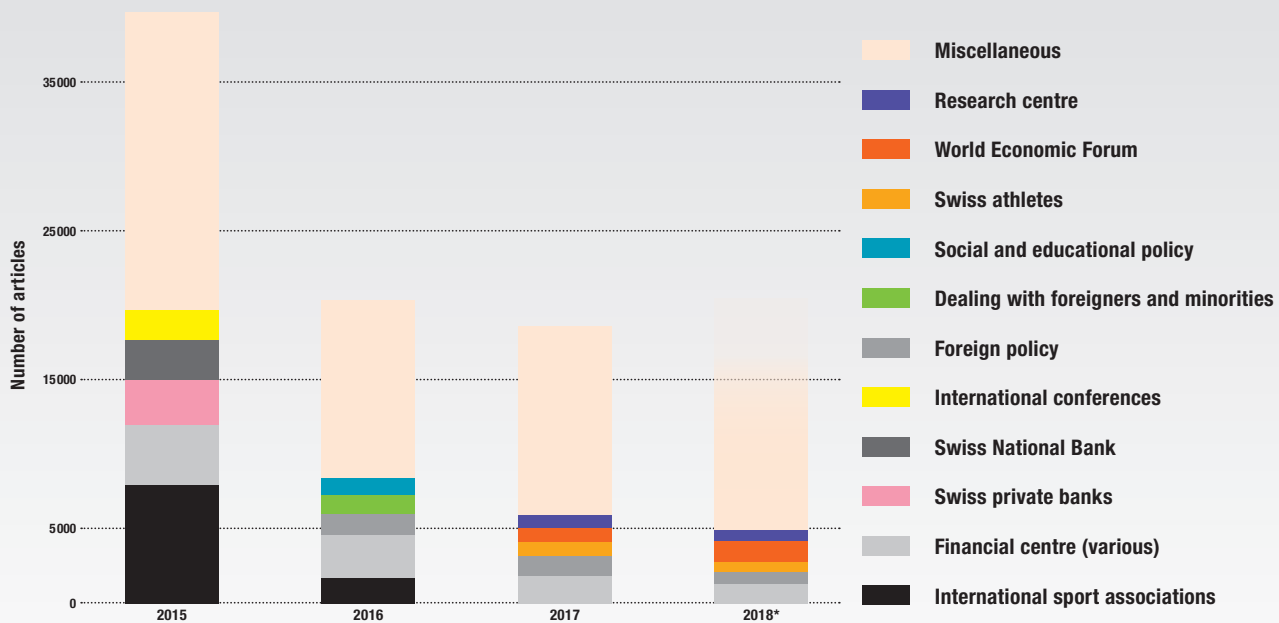
In order to go beyond the hashtag analysis and gain an impression of which tweets related to Switzerland in 2018 were most read, additional analysis was carried out to determine which messages were most often retweeted, liked, and commented on³. It emerged that Switzerland gained a high level of visibility especially in tweets sent by prominent figures with many followers.

The tweet with the greatest reach, i.e. the one related to Switzerland that generated the most retweets, likes, and comments on Twitter in 2018, was a comment made by the British pop singer Harry Styles, which was posted ahead of a concert in Basel (1th rank). As the concert in Switzerland marked the beginning of a four-month tour, the singer's tweet was retweeted about 100,000 and liked over 300,000 times. Besides Harry Styles, there were also other prominent people who put the spotlight on Switzerland: on the occasion of the Grand Slam tournament in Wimbledon, a tweet posted by tennis player Serena Williams about her joint career with Roger Federer provoked extensive and positive responses from around the world (9th rank). Furthermore, a euphoric tweet sent by Indian Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan, who attended the WEF in Davos, was viewed widely in India in particular (9th rank). However, at the same time in India, considerably harsher criticism by Rahul Gandhi, President of the Indian National Congress, was widely read. He used the visit made by Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, to the WEF in Switzerland as an opportunity to remind the prime minister of his election pledge to punish tax evaders and bring illicit funds back from Switzerland (10th rank). It's no surprise that the most retweeted tweets include a number of comments made by Donald Trump on the WEF. The biggest reach was achieved by a tweet whose theme was "Make America Great Again" (4th rank). As was the case with other top tweets on the WEF, Switzerland was also not the focus of this but gained visibility as the venue.

Alongside Davos, other popular tourist destinations drew attention through three videos that went viral on social media. One of these showed picturesque shots of the snow-covered village of Grindelwald and its Christmas decorations (2nd rank). The second video showed the view from the Titlis mountain station (5th rank), while the third showed a spectacular ride down the Gelmerbahn funicular, depicted as a roller coaster on Twitter (7th rank). Last but not least, two social topics related to Switzerland also made it into the top ten tweets: Firstly, the founder of *Millennial Politics*, a digital media company targeting young, progressive Americans, took Switzerland's social policy as a model for the USA (3rd rank). Secondly, there was widespread approval of a draft law accepted by the National Council seeking to criminalise discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (6th rank).

³ All tweets related to Switzerland, with or without a hashtag, were analysed. Languages covered: English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Russian. All the top tweets presented here were written by people living outside Switzerland.

Foreign media coverage of Switzerland: annual comparison of most important topics



Number of articles in the leading media analysed regarding each of the five most important topics per year.
* The volume for 2018 covers the period from January to November. In previous years, the period from January to December was reflected.



Figure 2: Annual comparison of the most important topics

The perception of Switzerland in leading foreign media

The media analysis⁴ conducted by Presence Switzerland shows that the volume of coverage of Switzerland by leading foreign media outlets has fallen steadily since 2015. The decline in press coverage can probably be attributed at least in part to the general downturn in the media sector, with international reporting particularly affected by cutbacks in journalism. Simultaneously, the media focus has also shifted to other topics: controversial topics such as the FIFA affair, scandals involving Swiss banks or banks with offices in Switzerland, or the country's treatment of foreigners often featured heavily in international coverage of Switzerland during 2015 and 2016. Since 2017, however, there was a stronger emphasis on positive events connected with Swiss sportsmen and sportswomen, Switzerland as a research centre or the WEF that promote the country's image (see Figures 2 and 3).

Thus, in 2018 not only Roger Federer's victories but also the achievements of Switzerland's athletes in the PyeongChang Olympic Games and the successes of the Swiss national team in the FIFA World Cup in Russia received wide coverage in the media (see topic: Swiss athletes in Figure 2).

⁴ The media analysis was based on continuous monitoring by Presence Switzerland of all coverage of Switzerland (except for stock exchange information and sports results) by the most important leading media outlets of 18 countries (Argentina, Australia, Austria, Brazil, China, France, Germany, Great Britain, India, Italy, Japan, Portugal, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Turkey and the US) as well as the leading media in the Arab world and EU media. It examines paper and online versions of news stories as well as press reviews provided by Swiss representations abroad.

In relation to Switzerland as a research centre, it was chiefly research in the natural sciences and medicine carried out by Swiss universities that attracted the attention of foreign media. Switzerland was also frequently discussed as an innovative research centre in the field of drone technology (see topic: Research centre in Figure 2). There can be no question that the WEF, held in Davos, made the biggest headlines this year. As a result of the visit by Donald Trump, it generated a vast amount of interest in foreign media outlets, as it did on Twitter. The demonstrations and protests against the US President were also widely covered in the foreign press (see topic: World Economic Forum in Figure 2). Other events with a very high volume of coverage were the assisted suicide of the famous Australian scientist David Goodall and the vintage Junkers Ju-52 aircraft crashing on the Piz Segnas mountain.

As every year, Swiss popular votes again generated interest abroad. There was great interest in the “Say yes to abolishing radio and television fees (Abolition of Billag fees)” initiative to scrap the TV and radio licence fee and the “For crisis-safe money: Money creation by the National Bank only! (Sovereign Money Initiative)” initiative to give the Swiss National Bank the sole authority to create money. Especially in those European countries in which analogous debates were under way (e.g. Germany, Austria and Great Britain), the media showed interest in both proposals. The “For the dignity of farm animals’ (Horned Cow Initiative)” initiative was another vote that attracted media attention. This is once more indicative of the keen media and social interest in emotive stories that easily resonate with the general public, such as animal rights. The “Swiss law, not foreign judges’ (Self-determination Initiative)” initiative also generated media interest. Reports following the clear rejection of this proposal have helped to promote Switzerland’s image as an open-minded country and to counter the ongoing criticism, particularly within Europe, of Switzerland shutting itself off. In some cases, Switzerland, with its political culture and direct democracy, was also presented as a political laboratory facilitating the discussion of sensitive and pressing issues.

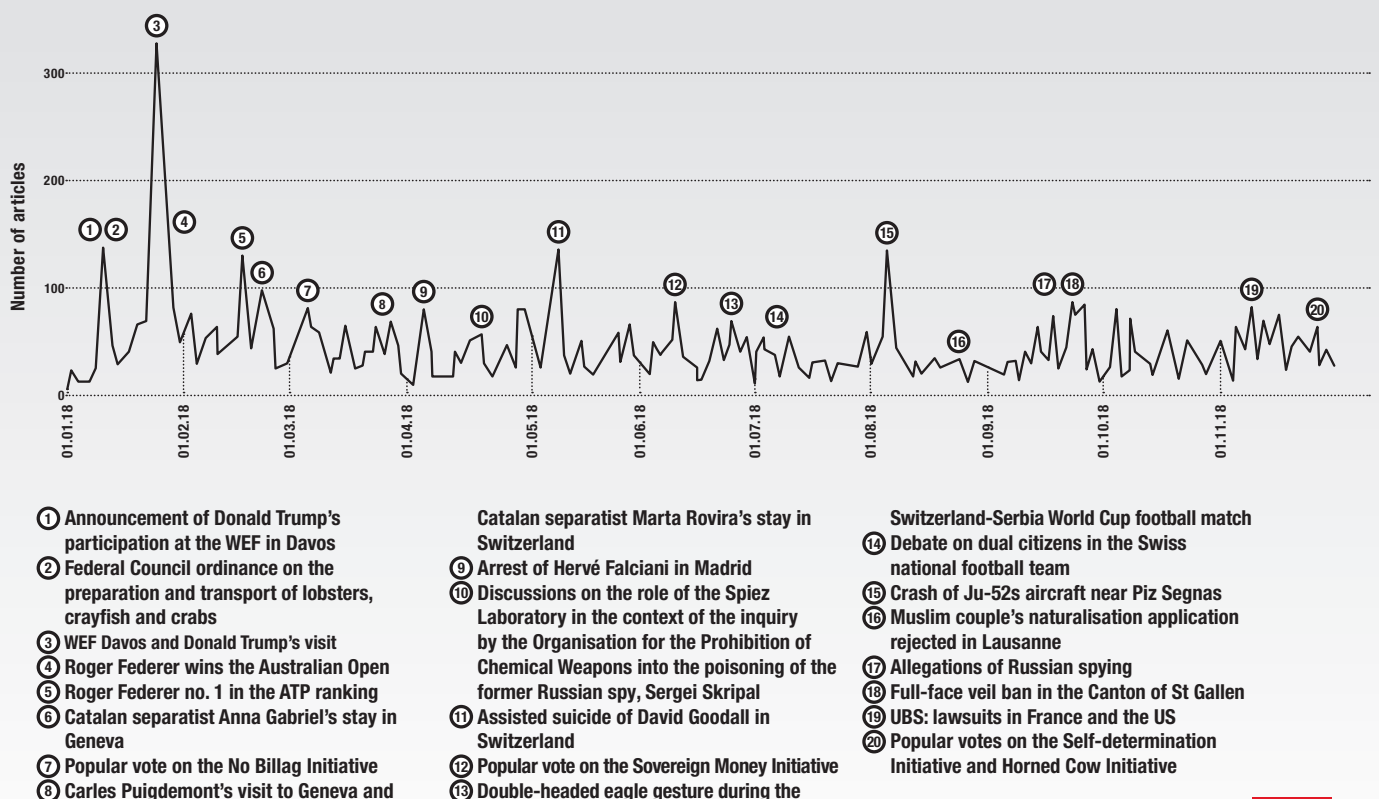
The Swiss financial centre, on the other hand, was less represented in foreign media this year (see topic: Financial centre in Figure 2). The steady decline in volume on this topic since 2016 was accompanied by a shift in focus: whereas coverage of Switzerland as a financial centre has been characterised by financial improprieties and taxation scandals for many years, far more positive aspects of it were highlighted this year. This can be attributed mainly to the introduction of the automatic exchange of information on tax matters and frequent coverage of Switzerland as a centre for cryptocurrencies and blockchain technology. Regular reporting on the “clean money” strategy and the new financial technologies had a positive impact on how Switzerland was perceived as a financial centre. The coverage also conveyed an image of Switzerland as an innovative country, taking on a pioneering role in the use of digital technologies.

European policy: reports on the framework agreement, stock exchange equivalence and Brexit

In 2018, Switzerland’s European policy was a topic that regularly attracted commentary in foreign media (see topic: Foreign policy in Figure 2). In particular, the negotiations for an institutional framework agreement were repeatedly covered. While the coverage was, in general, nuanced until the end of the summer, the tenor became more critical afterwards owing to the continued absence of any progress. From then on, the media focused more sharply on the obstacles to be overcome in the negotiations and expressed little optimism about the prospects of a framework agreement being concluded soon. The Federal Council’s decision not to initial the negotiated draft institutional agreement for the time being and to launch consultations on the agreement was met with sporadic and largely neutral reactions in Europe.

The EU's refusal to recognise Swiss stock exchange rules beyond a certain deadline was another European policy topic that the foreign media reported on throughout 2018. They addressed not only the consequences for the Swiss stock exchange if no framework agreement were concluded, but also often discussed the issue in the context of Brexit. The European media, and the British media in particular, frequently argued that the EU, by deciding on limiting such recognition beyond a certain date, intended to set an example for the UK. As was the case in the previous two years, many articles were also published which, taking the example of Switzerland, expanded on the implications for the UK following Brexit. Overall, the coverage was mainly objective, but some articles also pointed out that from the perspective of Brussels, Switzerland should not be used as the model for the UK.

Quantitative evolution of foreign media coverage related to Switzerland in 2018



Development of the volume of foreign media coverage of Switzerland (volume = number of articles per day in the leading media analysed, 01.01.2018 – 30.11.2018). A spike can correspond to multiple events. The numbered events have been selected on the basis of their volume and significance. Media reports on stock exchange reports and sports results are not included.



Figure 3: Quantitative evolution of foreign media reporting on Switzerland 2018

Switzerland's approach to immigrant integration: debates about the "double eagle" gesture, denied citizenship and bans on face-covering clothing

In the context of intense interest globally in how western societies manage the integration of people with a migrant background, related events connected with Switzerland also featured in foreign media coverage: Firstly, the "double eagle" gesture made by the Swiss footballers Granit Xhaka, Xherdan Shaqiri and Stephan Lichtsteiner in the Serbia vs. Switzerland World Cup match made major headlines around the world. The coverage focused on the conflict between the Serbian spectators and the Swiss players of Kosovan-Albanian descent. However, there was also discussion of the inflow of migrants into Switzerland from war-torn Kosovo and the cultural diversity of the Swiss national team. Whereas the foreign media predominantly expressed understanding for the "double eagle" gesture, placing it in the context of the strong emotions aroused during the game or the provocative behaviour of some fans in the stadium, the gesture, laden with symbolism, was strongly condemned in the Serbian media. After the "double eagle" gesture, the foreign media also gave extensive coverage to the subsequent debate on dual citizenship in the Swiss national football team. The coverage stuck largely to the facts and this discussion too provided an opportunity to explore national identity and cultural diversity in Swiss society.

Later in the summer, there were a number of media reports on a Muslim couple in Lausanne who were denied Swiss citizenship. One of the reasons they were refused citizenship was that, for religious reasons, the couple would not shake hands with people of the opposite sex. The tone adopted by the traditional media was in most cases objective but the case polarised social media. Whereas the decision taken by the city of Lausanne was condemned on Twitter by, for example, Kenneth Roth, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, it was welcomed by Austria's Vice-Chancellor, Heinz-Christian Strache. The foreign press repeatedly runs scattered stories about events connected with Swiss citizenship. The coverage does not always cast a positive light on Switzerland's treatment of migrants.

Finally, the ban on face covering clothing accepted in a vote held in St Gallen also featured prominently in September. The decision made by St Gallen's voters on how to deal with face-covering clothing, which is currently under discussion in many countries, met with a neutral response, even in the Arab press. The foreign media also noted the forthcoming people's vote on prohibiting face-covering clothing at national level.

Isolated tensions with Russia and Spain: Spying allegations and the Catalonia conflict

In the area of Switzerland's bilateral relations with other countries, two stood out: Russia due to suspected espionage activities and Spain due to Catalan separatists residing in Switzerland.

In the case of Russia, Switzerland became the focus of media attention for the first time in the spring in the context of investigations into the nerve gas attack on Sergei and Yulia Skripal. At that time, there were many headlines prompted mostly by a claim made by Sergey Lavrov, Foreign Minister of Russia, that the Spiez laboratory had identified traces of BZ, a nerve agent used by the west. In autumn, the suspected Russian espionage activities in Switzerland were widely reported abroad. The media initially focused on the two suspects in the Skripal case who were reported to have travelled to Geneva several times in the run-up to the attempted assassination. Not long after, the Swiss media published news items about two other Russian agents who allegedly attempted to reconnoitre the Spiez laboratory and the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) in Lausanne. Western media coverage of the allegations of Russian spying and the resulting tensions between Switzerland and Russia mainly focused on facts, but there was also some editorial commentary that was critical of Russia. Meanwhile, the tone of Russian

media towards Switzerland was often negative. Quoting the Russian ambassador to Switzerland, who described the accusations of Russian spying as “fairy tales”, the Russian press dismissed the investigative reports published by Swiss newspapers as anti-Russian propaganda.

In relation to the Catalonia conflict, separatist Anna Gabriel’s stay in Switzerland gave rise to coverage, some of it negative, in the Spanish press in February and March. The statement of the Federal Office of Justice also received mention: as a rule, Switzerland does not grant extradition requests for political offences. The media was less critical in its reporting on the former Catalan leader Carles Puigdemont’s visit to Geneva and the stay of another Catalan separatist, Marta Rovira, in Switzerland. The media used the debate surrounding possible extradition proceedings as an opportunity to analyse Swiss criminal law. Outside Spain some media also described the way Switzerland and other European countries deal with potential extradition and legal assistance requests.

Conclusion: Switzerland as seen by Twitter and foreign media in 2018

Foreign media reports and Twitter activity concerning Switzerland covered a wide variety of topics in 2018, many of which were conducive to Switzerland’s image. While coverage included certain controversial topics, the analysis shows that Switzerland’s overall image abroad has been consistently positive.

Most events concerning Switzerland were reflected in both traditional and social media. In terms of volume, the event that most influenced the perception of Switzerland was the World Economic Forum in Davos, with the visit by Donald Trump attracting much media interest. In second place were Swiss athletes, such as Roger Federer and the Swiss national football team, whose sporting achievements in international championships received a great deal of attention. Foreign media reports also gave prominent coverage to various aspects of immigrant integration, such as the full-face veil ban in the canton of St Gallen and the rejection of a Muslim couple’s application for citizenship in Lausanne. Media interest in certain events was further intensified where there was an overlap between different subject areas. For example, the “double eagle gesture” during the FIFA World Cup affected Switzerland’s image in regard to both sports and immigrant integration, and the combination of these two particular subjects drew an extraordinarily high degree of media attention. As in previous years, the perception of Switzerland was also largely shaped by reports concerning its political system, particularly its popular referendums. Among these, foreign media outlets gave particular attention to proposals that are also being debated abroad (such as the Abolition of Billag fees initiative or the Sovereign Money Initiative) and to emotive issues that tend to resonate with the general public (such as the Horned Cow Initiative). Furthermore, occasional tensions with Spain, after some Catalan separatists fled to Switzerland, and also with Russia, following allegations of espionage, brought Switzerland under the spotlight in foreign media and on Twitter.

Switzerland received less media attention this year for its role as a financial centre. Compared with previous years, reports on Swiss banking and finance tended to cover less controversial issues (i.e. financial or tax-related scandals) and focused instead on some of the more positive aspects of the sector, such as the introduction of the automatic exchange of information in tax matters and blockchain technology. Other areas that made a positive contribution to Switzerland’s image were its competitiveness and innovative capacity as well as its strengths and reputation in education and research. Switzerland’s European policy also influenced the country’s perception, and this issue received regular media attention throughout the year. Compared with other topics, however, European policy was given rather little column space in the foreign press. Finally, various social and human interest stories were also run in the international media during the year. For example, the assisted suicide of Australian scientist David Goodall and the parliamentary

initiative against homophobia and transphobia had a degree of influence on how people see Switzerland abroad. Social issues like these regularly attract media attention, on the one hand because Switzerland tends to stand out with its different rules, but also because similar issues are being debated abroad.

Overall, the analysis shows that both the foreign press as well as social media – as represented by Twitter in this year’s analysis – play a decisive role in forming Switzerland’s image abroad. This symbiosis between social and traditional media is beneficial to the general perception of Switzerland as it contributes to a diverse and well-rounded image of the country abroad.

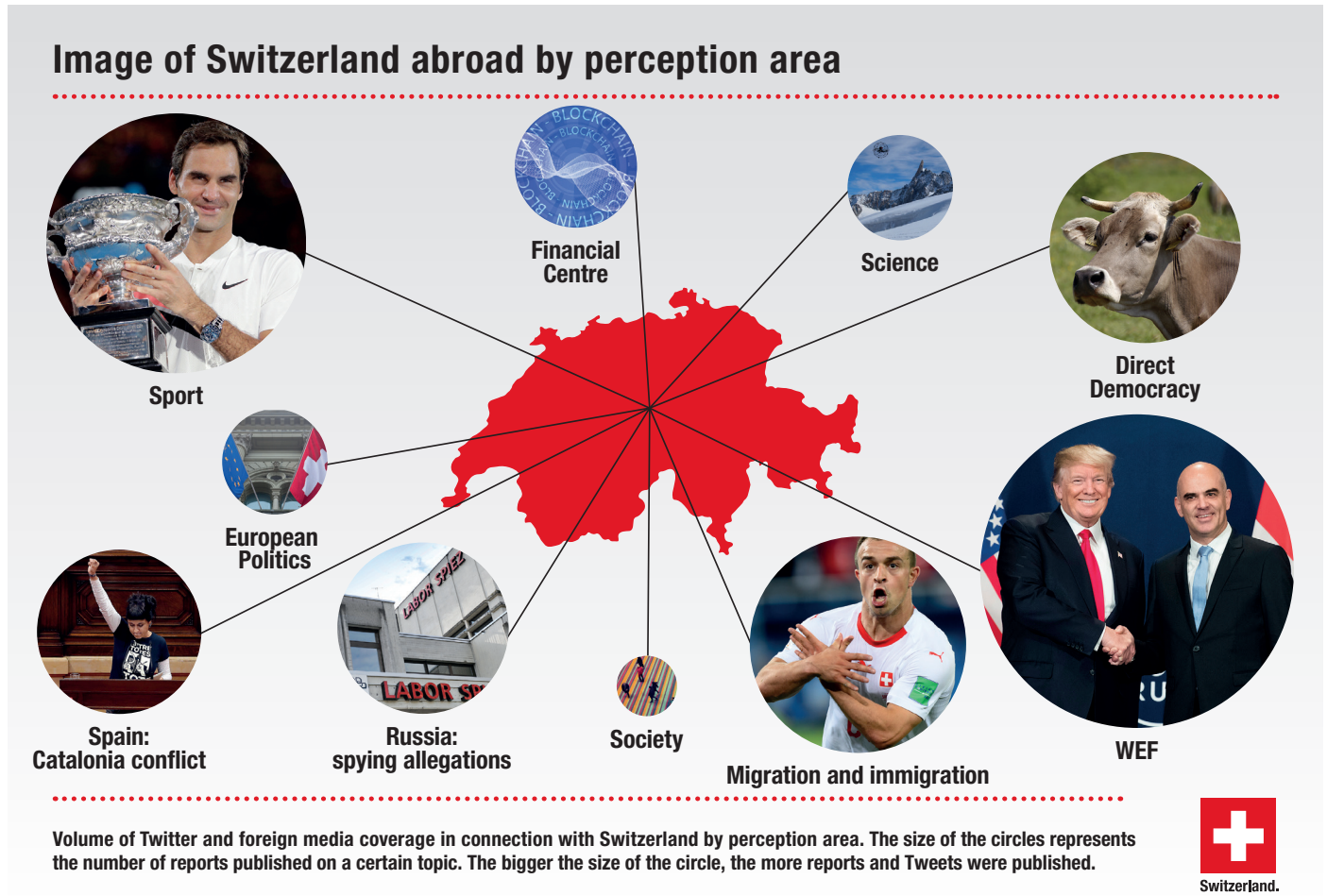


Figure 4: Image of Switzerland abroad by perception area

Picture page 11

Sport: © Keystone/AP/ Dita Alangkara

Science: courtesy of Flyability

Spain: © Keystone/EPA/ Alberto Estevez

Russia: © DDPS - ZEM/Thomas Buchwalder

Social integration: ©Keystone / Laurent Gillieron

WEF: © Keystone/AP/ Peter Klaunzer

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