

## Switzerland seen from abroad in 2020

22 December 2020



**Narendra Modi** ✓  
@narendramodi

The world is fighting COVID-19 together.

Humanity will surely overcome this pandemic.



**India in Switzerland & Liechtenstein** ✓ @IndiainSwiss · 18 avr.

INDIAN TRICOLOR ON THE MATTERHORN MOUNTAIN: Indian Tricolor of more than 1000 meters in size projected on Matterhorn Mountain, Zermatt, Switzerland to express Solidarity to all Indians in the fight against COVID 19. A big Thank You to @zermatt\_tourism for the gesture. @MEAIndia



12,6 k Retweets 606 Tweets cités 68,9 k J'aime

*During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, symbolic messages of solidarity from Switzerland attracted considerable attention, particularly on social media. Example: Tweet by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (18 April 2020).*

## KEY POINTS IN BRIEF

- In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the media tended to report much more on events in their respective home countries in 2020; consequently, foreign coverage of Switzerland was less frequent. 2020 was characterised by topics that were few in number but long in duration – in addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, discussions about the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland (OAG) were a key subject.
- Switzerland was never the focus of the world’s press as part of foreign coverage of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Nor did specific news reports on Switzerland reach exceptionally high volumes at any point. During the first wave, the tone was largely positive. Reporting focused on measures to support the economy and on the illumination of the Matterhorn. Accordingly, in the summer, people in other countries considered Switzerland to be a safe travel destination. The tone was more critical at times during the second wave, with coverage focusing on high case numbers and the effectiveness and proportionality of the measures. In particular, high death rates and plans to keep ski resorts open over the holidays caused controversy in neighbouring countries.
- Once again in 2020, Switzerland’s image was multifaceted, positive and stable when it came to the general impression among populations abroad. Above all, Switzerland’s governance, its efforts to protect the environment, and its quality of life enjoy an excellent reputation abroad.
- Switzerland is a renowned brand, which evokes certain emotions and associations; film-makers use this effect to their advantage by consciously utilising stereotypes. This year, Asian films and TV series in particular portrayed Switzerland as a dream destination.

## Introduction

The following report from Presence Switzerland illustrates how Switzerland was perceived abroad in 2020. The first section of the report focuses on **reporting on Switzerland in the foreign press and on social media** outside of the country: which topics and events played the greatest role in how Switzerland is perceived abroad? Which Switzerland-related news items that were published in foreign media or on online platforms received the most distribution on social media in 2020?

The second section of the report analyses the **public perception of Switzerland** in 20 countries. Based on the results of the 2020 Nation Brands Index (NBI), it reveals where Switzerland’s strengths and weaknesses lie in terms of its image abroad and how it fares in international comparison. The report ends with a **summary**. In an excursus to the report, there is also a short classification of Switzerland’s image in **foreign films and television series**.

## Switzerland through the eyes of the foreign press and social media

### Ongoing topics as opposed to one-off events: the COVID-19 pandemic and the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland were the predominant subjects covered

Switzerland was featured far less in the foreign press<sup>1</sup> and social media in 2020 – since the COVID-19 pandemic began – than in previous years. There was therefore less foreign coverage relating to Switzerland in 2020 than in years past. At the same time, since the start of the pandemic, reporting was characterised by a small number of ongoing topics (notably the COVID-19 pandemic and the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland). Coverage of one-off events declined (see Figure 1). The following section highlights the most important events that shaped media perceptions of the country; they are presented by subject area.

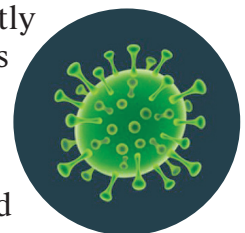
As in previous years, the **World Economic Forum (WEF)** in Davos generated the greatest short-term media response in terms of one-off events. Donald Trump's participation and the appearance of Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg were met with particular interest in foreign media and on Twitter. Although Switzerland itself was not the focus of the reporting, the fact that Davos was frequently mentioned as the meeting location highlighted the country as an important forum for the international exchange of opinions.



The **Crypto leaks** affair also briefly attracted a great deal of attention from foreign media. The CIA and the German Federal Intelligence Service (BND) were reported to have intercepted messages from other states for decades using manipulated encryption devices made by Swiss firm Crypto AG. Foreign media reports tended to focus on the events and possible implications in the respective home country. Several foreign media outlets speculated that the revelations could jeopardise the credibility of Swiss neutrality. According to some reports, this could possibly also have a negative impact on Switzerland's tradition of good offices and on trust in Swiss exports.



As part of the global coverage of the **COVID-19 pandemic**, there has been regular interest over the course of the year in the extent to which Switzerland is affected and how it is handling the associated challenges. However, Switzerland was relatively seldom at the centre of international media attention in this regard. The media focused on the one hand on their respective home countries and on the other hand on the most severely affected countries, with case numbers and mortality rates being focal points of coverage. The tone of coverage towards Switzerland depended on the time period concerned: During the first wave, it was predominantly positive, despite a critical start. During the second wave, media reporting was more critical of Switzerland.



In February, the **ban on large-scale events** received much attention. This can be largely attributed to the fact that, at the time, Switzerland was only the second European country after Italy to introduce such measures. The high case numbers in Switzerland also appeared intermittently in the media in the spring.

<sup>1</sup> The media analysis was based on Presence Switzerland's continuous monitoring of all coverage of Switzerland by the most important leading media outlets of 19 countries (Argentina, Australia, Austria, Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, Portugal, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States), as well as by EU media and the leading media in the Arab world. In addition, other sources may be included in the analysis. Social media content related to Switzerland that was posted by individuals in other countries was also analysed.

Switzerland did, however, come under criticism during the first wave, although only sporadically, with media reporting that measures to contain the virus had been implemented only at a late stage and were not sufficiently stringent. Between the end of March and the beginning of June, key international media regularly reported in very positive terms on the **measures** adopted by the Federal Council to provide **support in the event of loss of earnings and to facilitate the granting of liquidity loans to Swiss SMEs**, with Swiss banks playing an essential role in developing and implementing these measures. The speed and efficiency with which the federal-guaranteed bridging loans were issued was highlighted as exemplary. According to the media, the procedure was unprecedented in its lack of bureaucracy and could serve as a model for other countries. The symbolic messages of solidarity that **illuminated the Matterhorn** and the projections of national flags of the countries hardest hit by the pandemic sparked a significant global response. The images of the Matterhorn lit up were picked up by numerous media outlets for several weeks; they were also shared on social media by high-ranking government representatives in other countries, as well as celebrities from the entertainment industry. In addition, **other topics** featured in the media in phases, including the queues in Geneva when food parcels were distributed to people in need, the border fence between Kreuzlingen and Konstanz, and the Federal Office of Public Health's statement that children played little role in transmitting COVID-19. Positive articles on the innovative role of Swiss research and the Swiss pharmaceutical industry in detecting and combating the virus also appeared regularly.

During the **second wave**, reporting was far more critical at times. Particularly in neighbouring countries and the UK, the media were surprised by Switzerland's **more relaxed measures** by international comparison – despite one of the highest incidences of COVID-19 cases per capita in the world – and reported on overstretched hospitals and **high death rates**. In this respect, certain articles accused Switzerland of putting economic interests over health. The decision to **allow Swiss ski resorts to open during the end-of-year holidays**, while resorts were to remain closed in neighbouring countries, aroused a great deal of controversy among Switzerland's neighbours. Some articles and comments expressed the opinion that this decision reflected a lack of solidarity and undermined the efforts of neighbouring countries to curb the pandemic.

Various events concerning the **Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland** regularly made the headlines of foreign media over the course of the year. There was a focus on cases involving international football: for example the statute of limitations on the 'summer fairy tale' trial over irregularities in the awarding of the 2006 FIFA World Cup or the partial closure of proceedings against former FIFA President Joseph Blatter. The affair concerning undocumented meetings between Attorney General Michael Lauber and FIFA President Gianni Infantino was a focal point of coverage. In connection to this affair, the media widely reported on the appointment of a special public prosecutor, Lauber's resignation and the decision to lift his immunity, and the criminal proceedings opened against Infantino. The media also extensively covered the criminal proceedings against Jérôme Valcke and Nasser al-Khelaifi. The tone towards the OAG was highly critical at times, and reports were occasionally also critical of the way in which the Swiss judicial system functions as a whole.



Once again in 2020, the **Swiss financial centre** drew repeated interest from the media. The most attention was given to the resignation of Credit Suisse CEO Tidjane Thiam and the Swiss bank accounts of Spain's former King Juan Carlos I. The disputes between young climate activists and Credit Suisse attracted much attention, particularly on social media, with a focus on Roger Federer's role as a brand ambassador for the bank. In this respect, the media also looked into the extent to which the Swiss financial centre invests in industries that are harmful to the environment. Furthermore, evaluations regarding Switzerland in two studies by the Tax Justice Network captured media attention abroad. According to these studies, transparency of the Swiss financial centre had improved compared to previous years but remained low by international comparison; this was reported to lead to tax revenue losses, above all in countries in the Global South. The foreign media expressed a highly favourable opinion of the role and efficiency of the financial centre and its actors in managing the COVID-19 pandemic (see above).



Like every year, various **federal popular votes** again garnered international media attention in 2020. In the context of the votes on the ban on discrimination based on sexual orientation (February) and on paternity leave (September), the media painted a picture of a nation that was making progress in gender equality issues but only slowly reaching the standards of neighbouring countries. The vote on the Limitation Initiative in September generated a worldwide media response. The outcome was particularly widely reported in neighbouring countries, where it was seen as an important sign for Europe. With a view to Swiss-EU relations, the coverage conveyed the image of a country willing to cooperate. In coverage of the vote on the responsible business initiative (November), foreign media highlighted that although the vote was rejected, it did achieve a popular majority. This was construed as a sign that political mindsets were beginning to change in Switzerland, as business associations had not previously had any difficulty asserting their position during voting in Switzerland.



**“Chocolate snow covers Swiss town”** – a series of headlines in this vein could be seen across the globe this summer. A technical fault in the ventilation system of the Lindt chocolate factory in Olten was behind the situation, which saw the factory's immediate surroundings covered in cocoa powder. So there was some good news after all in 2020, commented the media and numerous Twitter users. Articles on this subject were very widely shared on social media.



The **Swiss protecting power mandate for the US** in Iran was again discussed on several occasions this year in the context of the frozen conflict between the two countries. For example, media reported that Switzerland had played a mediating role in an exchange of prisoners and during the release of a prisoner on humanitarian grounds.



**next page:** This infographic presents in chronological order the most important events related to Switzerland that were covered in the foreign press and social media. The numbered events have been selected and explained further in the report based on their volume and significance. The size of each circle serves as an estimate of how much the respective topic was covered.

# Image of Switzerland by event

- (1) Swiss protecting power mandate in the conflict between the US and Iran (2) Acquittal for climate protesters (tennis stunt against Credit Suisse) and Roger Federer's statement (3) WEF
- (4) Resignation of Credit Suisse CEO (5) Popular vote on protection against discrimination (6) Crypto leaks (7) Financial Secrecy Index (8) Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland (OAG): charges against al-Khelaifi and Valcke (9) COVID-19: ban on large-scale events (10) Juan Carlos's Swiss accounts / Nazi money from Argentina at Credit Suisse (11) COVID-19: Federal Council declares extraordinary situation, closes borders and orders lockdown (12) COVID-19: easing of restrictions announced (13) OAG: statute of limitations on the "summer fairy tale" trial (14) OAG: Swiss justice and international football / COVID-19: first easing of restrictions (15) OAG: hearing of attorney general and initiation of impeachment proceedings (16) COVID-19: announcement of third easing of restrictions (17) Release of a US national in Iran (18) OAG: appointment of a special federal public prosecutor (19) COVID-19 cases in Swiss football / Swiss bank accounts of Juan Carlos I (20) OAG: announcement of Attorney General Michael Lauber's resignation (21) OAG: criminal proceedings opened against FIFA President Gianni Infantino (22) Juan Carlos I leaves Spain (23) Chocolate snow (24) Juan Carlos's Swiss bank accounts (25) Credit Suisse spying affair: Finma opens enforcement proceedings (26) OAG: FIFA trial against Jérôme Valcke and Nasser al-Khelaifi at the Federal Criminal Court in Bellinzona (27) COVID-19: Swiss quarantine requirements extended (28) Popular votes, in particular the Limitation Initiative (29) COVID-19: sharp rise in case numbers (30) COVID-19: rising case numbers and fewer measures (31) COVID-19: high case numbers and announcement of measures (32) COVID-19: Switzerland badly affected (33) COVID-19: ski resorts (34) Responsible business initiative

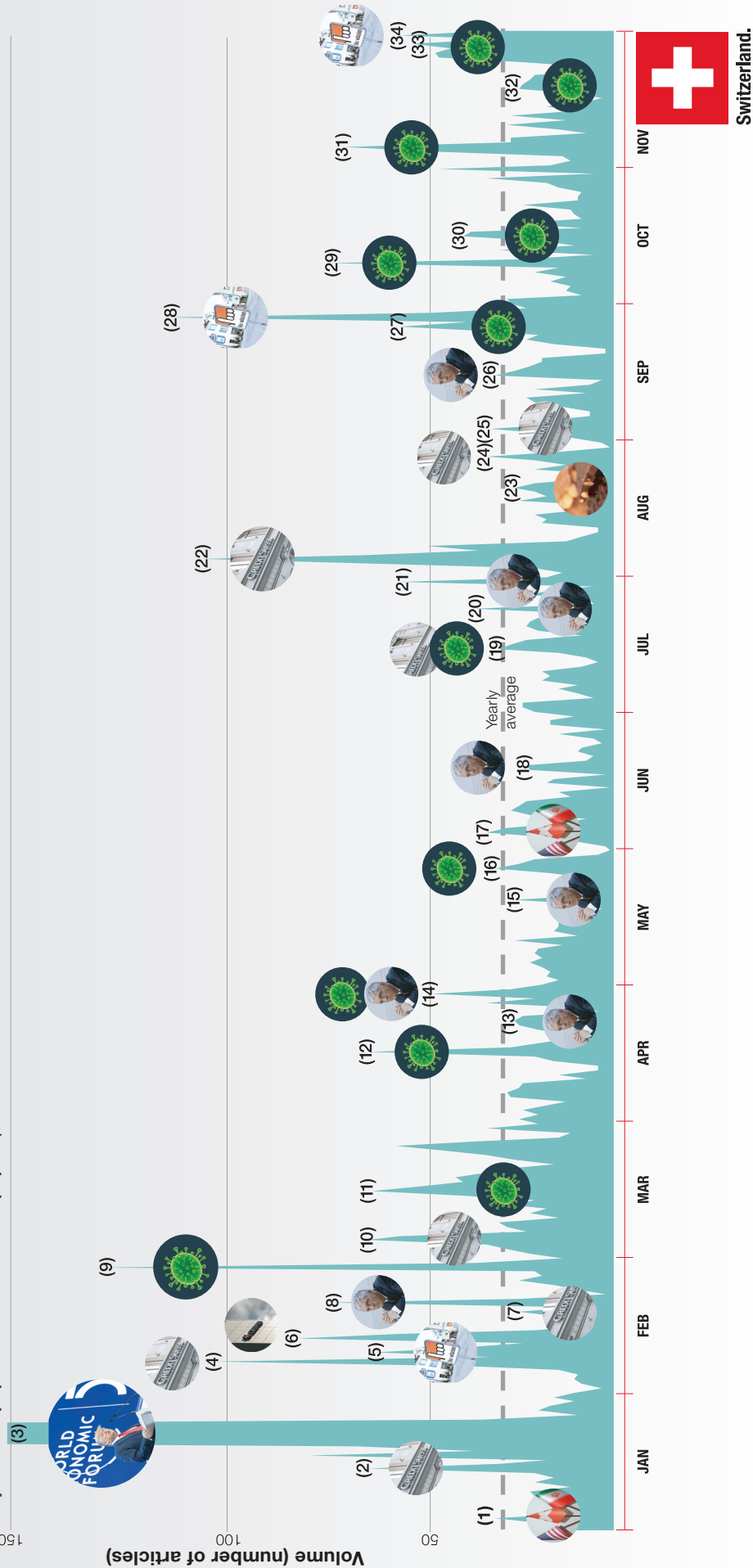


Figure 1: Media coverage of Switzerland from 01.01.2020 to 30.11.2020 (leading foreign media). A spike can correspond to multiple events.

## A look at how Switzerland is portrayed in foreign films and television series

Switzerland is a dream destination: at least this is the impression given by South Korean TV series *Crash Landing on You*, which came out this year, and the lavishly produced Indian film *Switzerland*, which is to be released for the end of the year. In the series *Crash Landing on You*, Swiss landscapes play a key role, and Switzerland is portrayed as a popular destination for education and travel for both the North and South Korean upper classes. In *Switzerland*, an Indian family take a number of risks in order to fulfil their dream of an expensive trip to Switzerland.

Switzerland is a strong brand, which elicits emotions and various associations. Luxury; beautiful scenery and mountains; espionage; and an often-shady financial centre are inextricably linked to Switzerland in the world of film. The Swiss location often simplifies storytelling for film-makers, as associations linked to Switzerland are deliberately evoked, ensuring that the viewer instinctively knows – without the need for further explanation – that the protagonist's money in a Zurich bank comes from dubious sources, or that the hotel in Geneva does not exactly come cheap. At the same time, stereotypes are thus reinforced, even if they do not – or no longer – entirely correspond with reality.



Figure 2: Switzerland as a desirable destination – in 2020, it features particularly in Asian productions (left: *Switzerland*; right: *Crash Landing on You*).

Many films and TV series rely on tried-and-trusted formulas. Swiss landscapes thus appear in seven films about the fictitious half-Swiss James Bond; various Sherlock Holmes films; *Youth* (2015); *Clouds of Sils Maria* (2014); *A Cure for Wellness* (2016); *The Night Manager* (2016); the Bollywood classic *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (*The Big-Hearted Will Take the Bride*, 1995); and numerous other films from India. Over the past few years, Switzerland has also been depicted as a coveted destination in other Asian productions, such as Philippine film *Meet Me in St. Gallen* (2018). Stereotypical representations of the financial centre and the espionage theme are often intertwined. As well as in the current series *Hunter* and the aforementioned James Bond films, Switzerland is used as the setting for equivalent scenes in *The Bourne Identity* (2002), *Snowden* (2016), *Syriana* (2005) and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011). The image of Switzerland as a place with a rather conservative population plays only a secondary role – as well as in scenes from the current Swedish Netflix production *Rita*, this aspect is particularly evident in the classic *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988).

On the other hand, there is usually a time lag before new themes find their way into films and TV series. Switzerland-related films that address newer subjects are therefore rare, although *Angels and Demons* (2009) touches on the theme of Switzerland as a centre for research. Stereotypical representations of countries – not only Switzerland – are often continually reproduced in films for decades and thus largely contribute towards consolidating a nation's image.

## Switzerland's image among populations abroad

### Governance and quality of life in Switzerland are valued worldwide

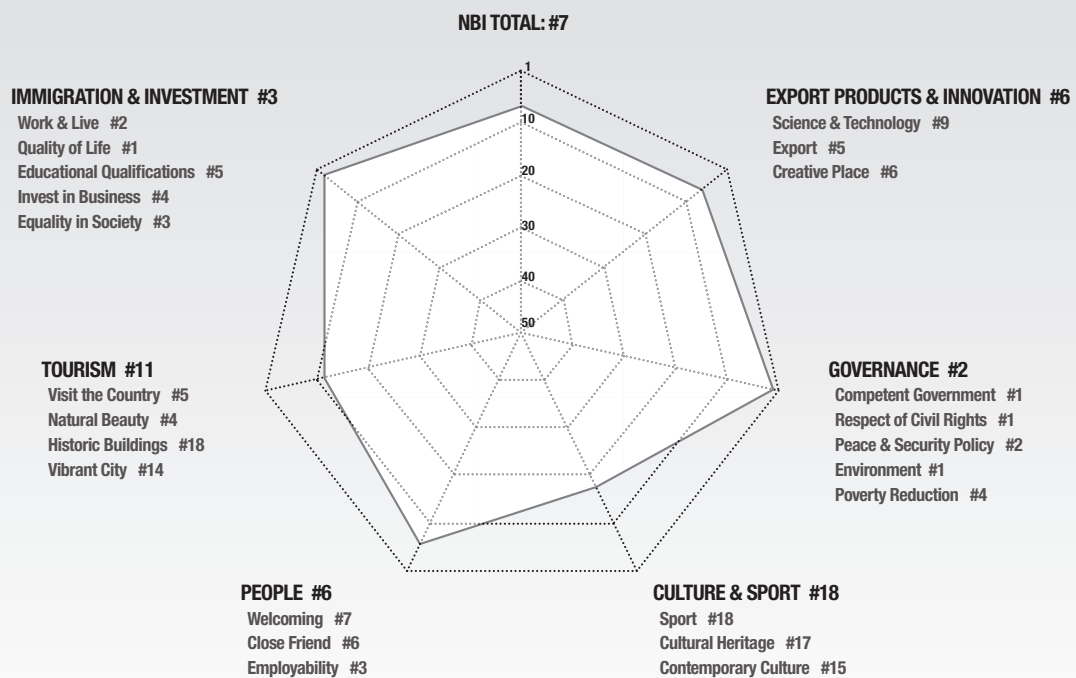
Continually monitoring Switzerland's image in the foreign press and on social media is an important means to evaluate how the country is perceived abroad. However, does the media image correspond with that of the general public abroad? A reliable ranking system for gauging Switzerland's reputation among people abroad and comparing it against perceptions of other nations is the Nation Brands Index (NBI)<sup>2</sup>. Each year, the NBI assesses the strength and attractiveness of countries' images on the basis of representative sampling. The perception of Switzerland and 49 other nations is surveyed among the general populations of 20 countries around the world. The NBI demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses of Switzerland's image, as well as changes in perception over the past years. Six dimensions of perception are evaluated in this reputation index: export products and innovation; governance; culture and sport; people; tourism; and immigration and investment. Each of these dimensions comprises several indicators (see Figure 3). The results of the assessment are produced by means of a ranking corresponding to each indicator, each dimension of perception, and also to the resulting overall image. The rank attributed situates Switzerland's reputation among the other 49 countries assessed.

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<sup>2</sup> The Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index (NBI) assesses the images of 50 countries. It takes six dimensions into account: export products and innovation; governance; culture and sport; people; tourism; and immigration and investment. The NBI includes 20 panel countries and collected a total sample size of 20,019 interviews in 2020. Interviews were conducted between 7 July and 31 August with adults aged 18 and over with internet access in the following countries: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Egypt, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Poland, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States.



# Switzerland's image according to the Nation Brands Index 2020



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 "welcoming", Switzerland ranks seventh.

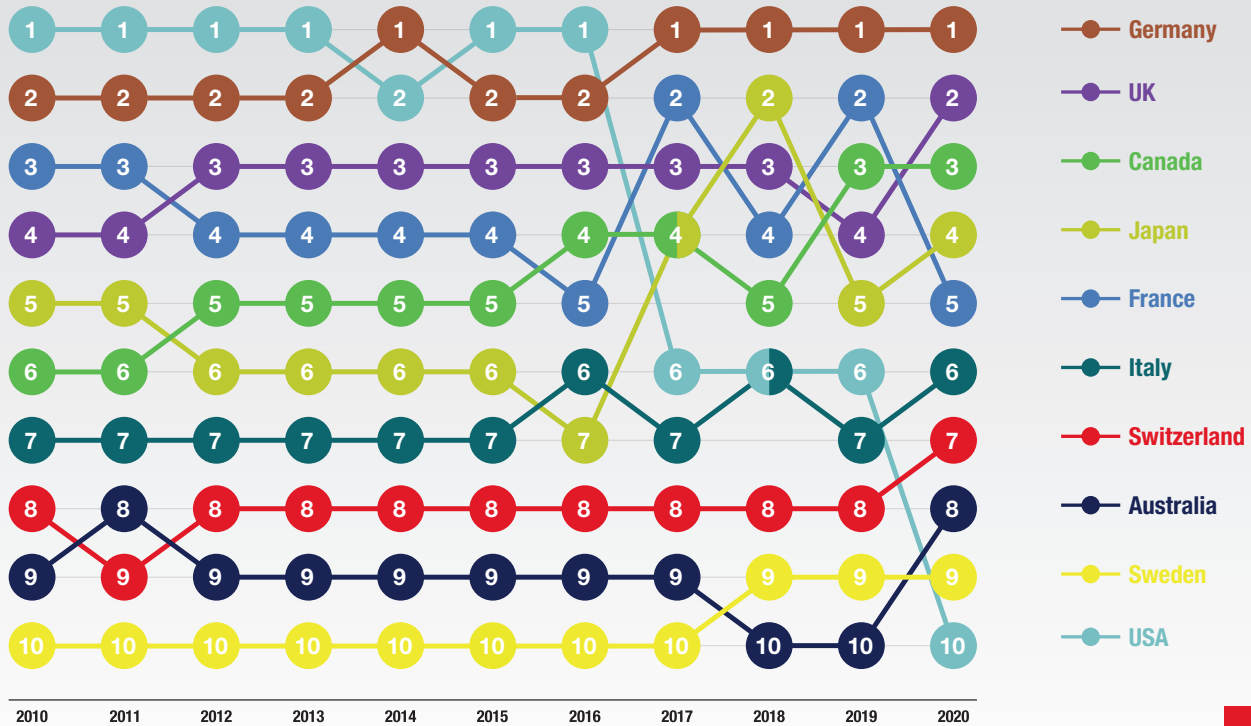


Figure 3: Switzerland's image according to the 2020 Nation Brands Index.

This year, Switzerland came in seventh place in the overall NBI ranking, behind Italy and ahead of Australia. Like last year, Germany topped the rankings. This result demonstrates that, generally, Switzerland continues to enjoy an outstanding image among the public abroad. With its very good position, Switzerland remains the highest-ranking medium-sized nation. Switzerland's ranking was one place up on previous years, although this can largely be attributed to the fact that perceptions of the United States worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic (down from 6<sup>th</sup> place to 10<sup>th</sup> place; see Figure 4). However, Switzerland's placement does vary according to the individual panel countries: Switzerland currently receives its best assessments from Germany, Russia and Canada (ranked third by those countries), while its weakest evaluations come from India. In Italy, Switzerland's reputation improved slightly across all perception dimensions (ranking ninth).

As in previous years, respondents placed Switzerland in the top 10 in four of the six perception dimensions: export products and innovation; governance; people; and immigration and investment. It even achieved second place in the **governance** dimension. Switzerland is perceived as a country that is competently and fairly governed and whose government is also strongly committed to protecting the environment; Switzerland achieved first place for each of these three indicators. It came in third place for **immigration and investment**, thanks, among other things, to having ranked first for the quality of life indicator.

## Top Ten NBI-Rankings since 2010



Overview of the top ten countries in the Nation Brands Index. In each year, the perception of 50 states was studied (among the population of 20 states).



Figure 4: NBI rankings' top ten since 2010.

The perception of Swiss **export products and innovation** climbed from seventh to sixth place in the rankings; this was primarily the result of good ratings in Australia, Canada and China. Switzerland is seen as a country that produces high-quality products while also offering opportunities for both creativity and innovative science and research. Conversely, the external perspective is that there is scope for improvement in the areas of cultural heritage, historical attractions, contemporary culture, and sport.

When data was collected for the NBI in July and August 2020, a number of questions specifically related to the perceived handling of the **COVID-19 pandemic** were also included. At that time, only Germany, New Zealand and Canada were better rated than Switzerland in the overall average in terms of their handling of the crisis. Switzerland ranked joint fourth together with Australia and Japan out of the 50 countries assessed. In line with this evaluation, in the summer, the general public abroad also viewed Switzerland as one of the safest travel destinations: it ranked fourth in terms of perceived safety when visiting the country, coming in behind Canada, New Zealand and Germany. Both in neighbouring countries and in South Korea, Switzerland was deemed the safest country for travel after the respondents' home countries, while in Poland it was even considered the safest country for travel overall. In light of the second wave, which affected Switzerland more severely than most other countries, this perception is likely to have changed somewhat since then.

## **To summarise: Switzerland's image abroad in 2020**

Switzerland received less attention from foreign media than usual in 2020. This was likely linked to the general shift in media dynamics in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This year, the media focused on the pandemic, particularly in their own respective countries and countries that were severely affected. In this regard, Switzerland was not at the centre of international media attention.

Foreign media nevertheless repeatedly reported on the degree to which Switzerland was affected by the pandemic and how the latter was being handled. During the first wave, the tone was predominantly positive, despite a critical start. The measures adopted to support the Swiss economy received a fair amount of positive and prominent attention during the first wave. The media particularly praised the efficiency and speed with which the procedure to grant liquidity loans to Swiss companies was implemented. The Matterhorn light installation also generated considerable media interest, especially on social media. In the summer, the public abroad considered Switzerland to be one of the safest travel destinations. This relatively objective or even favourable tone changed during the second wave, when media reporting on how Switzerland was handling the COVID-19 pandemic became somewhat critical. This trend mainly stemmed from developments in case numbers, mortality rates, and the situation within the healthcare system. Particularly the media from neighbouring countries were critical of the measures taken, which they felt were not sufficiently stringent in light of the high case numbers in Switzerland. This shift in tone during the second wave could be due in part to the fact that Switzerland is generally seen as an exemplary, well-functioning country and the media were surprised and concerned by developments there. In some instances, however, reporting also recalled the image of Switzerland as lacking in solidarity – a portrayal that has appeared on occasion in the past. Some articles claimed that Switzerland gave precedence to economic concerns over health considerations and that opening the ski resorts undermined neighbouring countries' efforts to contain the pandemic. As the pandemic is ongoing, no final conclusions can be drawn yet on the impact on Switzerland's image. Moreover, this conclusion is likely to be influenced not least by external perceptions of how successfully Switzerland manages the crisis in the end in terms of health and on social and economic fronts.

This year, media reporting on Switzerland was strongly characterised by the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, coverage was less varied than in previous years. In addition to articles on the COVID-19 pandemic, the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland featured in the media for a large part of the year. Alongside these subjects, both annually recurring topics, such as the Swiss financial centre and specific popular votes, and one-off events (e.g. the Crypto leaks affair) garnered media interest.

The public abroad generally perceives Switzerland positively. Ranked seventh out of a possible 50 positions, it is the best-ranked medium-sized country in the 2020 Nation Brands Index. Above all, Switzerland's governance, its quality of life and its efforts to protect the environment enjoy an outstanding reputation.

In sum, Switzerland's image abroad remains good and stable at present. The management of the COVID-19 pandemic is not currently expected to have a negative impact beyond the neighbouring countries. Within the neighbouring countries themselves, Switzerland's reputation varies and rests on very diverse aspects. At this point in time, it is too early to predict the extent to which the perceived management of the COVID-19 pandemic will affect other areas of Switzerland's national image.

PICS

Page 1: @ Twitter

Page 3:

US President Donald Trump speaks during a plenary session at

the 50th World Economic Forum(WEF) in Davos – ©KEYSTONE/Gian Ehrenzeller

The headquarters of the encryption device manufacturer Crypto – © KEYSTONE / Alexandra Wey

Coronavirus Emoji – ©Emojipedia

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Voting sign – ©EDA, Presence Switzerland

Chocolate – ©Pixabay / PublicDomainPictures

Prisoner exchange – ©EDA / Keystone

Seite 7:

*Switzerland* – ©IMDB

*Crash Landing on you* – ©IMDB / tvN

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