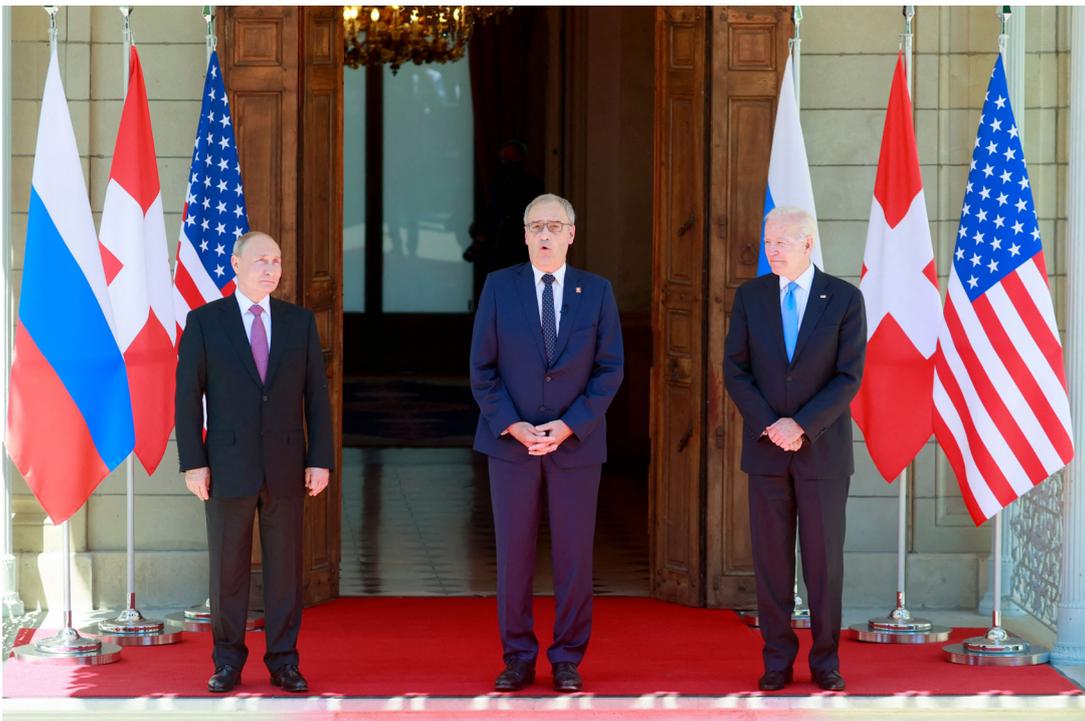


## Switzerland seen from abroad in 2021

16 December 2021

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*The summit between US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin, held in Geneva, put the international media spotlight on Switzerland in June 2021*

## KEY POINTS IN BRIEF

- In 2021, foreign media coverage of Switzerland focused primarily, and more so than in previous years, on political subjects. The summit held in Geneva between US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin, Swiss-EU relations and various popular votes featured prominently. Perceptions of Switzerland varied according to the topic and the origin of the media outlet. Overall, the summit met with a positive global response, whereas Swiss-EU relations sparked headlines that were critical of Switzerland in neighbouring countries.
- On the whole, Switzerland's image abroad in 2021 was multifaceted and generally positive and stable. Switzerland ranked seventh overall in the Nation Brands Index (NBI) – a comparison of how 60 countries are perceived among the general public abroad – retaining its position from the previous year. Switzerland's governance and quality of life in particular enjoy an excellent reputation.
- Furthermore, Switzerland's management of the COVID-19 crisis was viewed very favourably by the general public abroad in 2021. However, this is more likely the result of the positive overall perception of Switzerland rather than a differentiated assessment of Swiss measures. The media paid less attention to the pandemic response than in the previous year.

### Overview

Part of the General Secretariat of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), Presence Switzerland is mandated with monitoring Switzerland's image abroad and reporting on the results, which help shape Switzerland's strategy for communication abroad. The following report provides an overview of how Switzerland was perceived abroad in 2021. The first section of the report analyses **reporting on Switzerland in the foreign press and on social media outside of the country**. In 2021, media coverage focused a great deal on political topics, which were far more prominent than in previous years. Two topics in particular generated media interest: the summit meeting in Geneva between US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin was viewed favourably around the world as a sign of detente in a restless geopolitical climate; Swiss-EU relations, by contrast, repeatedly attracted critical media attention in neighbouring countries. There was a particular focus on the breakdown of negotiations on an institutional agreement, which was seen as a turning point. Overall, Switzerland received somewhat less media attention than in previous years, owing primarily to the absence in 2021 of the World Economic Forum in Davos – an event which usually accounts for a considerable amount of media coverage each year.

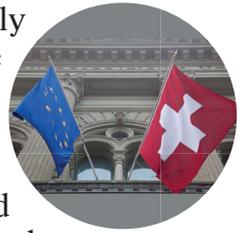
The second section of the report focuses on **perceptions of Switzerland among the general public abroad**. Based on the results of the 2021 Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index (NBI), it reveals where Switzerland's strengths and weaknesses lie in terms of its image abroad and how it fares in international comparison.

To conclude, the report examines the correlation between Switzerland's good overall image and the very positive assessment of the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic expressed by the population abroad in the NBI.

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

## Switzerland as a stage for global politics – political subjects dominate media coverage

**Swiss-EU relations** were an ongoing focus of foreign media coverage, especially within Europe. The volume of reporting reached a peak when negotiations on the institutional agreement broke off on 26 May. From then on, coverage became increasingly critical of Switzerland, particularly in the German-language press, who accused Switzerland of a lack of willingness to compromise. They pointed out that Switzerland's renouncing of the agreement amounted to self-harm and increasing isolation. In other countries, reporting was mostly factual, although responsibility for the failure was clearly placed on Switzerland. There was some sympathy for Switzerland among the Eurosceptic press in the UK. Many European media outlets reporting on events at a later date published more in-depth articles analysing the failure of the agreement. Most concluded that the reason the agreement failed was that Switzerland wanted to benefit from access to the internal market without accepting the necessary conditions. As a result, Switzerland is left to stand on the sidelines, according to media. Later on, Switzerland's decision to procure a fighter jet of US production (the F-35) rather than one from an EU country such as France came under particular criticism from numerous French media outlets, who saw this as a further snub to Brussels and to Paris. Media in neighbouring countries in particular reported on the meeting between Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis and Vice-President of the European Commission Maroš Šefčovič. Reporting was critical at times, suggesting that Switzerland was acting haphazardly in its European policy and playing for time.



The event that made the biggest mark on foreign media coverage this year was the **summit meeting in Geneva between US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin**. Relations between the US and Russia were tense at the time, which is why even the announcement of the meeting generated a wide media response at the end of May. Most reports took a positive stance on Switzerland's role as host state. Switzerland, and more specifically Geneva, was seen as a suitable choice of venue thanks to its tradition of discretion and neutrality. In Russia, too, the venue met with acceptance, as Switzerland is not a NATO member. The media were also interested in the large-scale logistical and organisational aspects of the event. The summit itself, which was held on 16 June and described as historic, unleashed a flood of international media coverage. Although most reports focused primarily on the protagonists, topics and outcomes of the summit, the host state, Switzerland, and summit venue, Geneva, also received the highest amount of media coverage in recent years. A number of media outlets reported extensively on International Geneva, Switzerland's good offices, its neutrality and traditional role as a host state. TV reporting on the event included the tourism appeal of Geneva and Switzerland, while Switzerland's organisational capabilities related to the summit also met with interest. President of the Swiss Confederation Guy Parmelin's welcome of the two presidents also received considerable attention in the media, often using his description of Geneva as a "city of peace" in their reporting. This international media coverage thus had a very positive impact on Switzerland's image, not only in terms of the volume of coverage and increase in visibility but also in relation to Switzerland's role internationally. Over the course of the year, Switzerland's good offices and International Geneva attracted media attention on several other occasions, for example when Switzerland hosted the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum and the Cyprus talks. In connection with the high-level meeting between the US and China in Zurich, the media again highlighted the reasons behind the choice of Switzerland as host, in particular its neutrality and the fact that it had not joined other countries in imposing sanctions against China.

Throughout the year, there were also a number of specific articles on **relations between Switzerland and China**. At the beginning of the year, various European and Asian media outlets expressed criticism over what they dubbed a “secret deal” with reference to an agreement between China and Switzerland on migration cooperation. The publication of Switzerland’s China strategy in March featured primarily in Chinese-language media from Taiwan, Hong Kong and the Chinese diaspora. Media coverage was predominantly factual and focused on the content of the strategy, which was considered moderate outside of China, as well as the critical reaction of the Chinese ambassador in Bern. In September, the reaction of the Swiss embassy in China to reports in the Chinese media about statements by a fictitious Swiss scientist on the origin of COVID-19 went viral. In its statement, the Swiss embassy expressed doubts that the scientist actually existed and warned against the spread of fake news. Numerous media outlets around the world picked up the statement. On social media, the Swiss embassy’s original statement was widely shared both on Twitter and Weibo. In the autumn, well-known Swiss companies such as Credit Suisse and Audemars Piguet came under criticism from media all over Europe, who accused them of currying favour with China. In addition, over the course of the year, various media outlets covered Swiss-China relations without reference to a particular event. The tone of coverage varied according to which country the media outlet was from. While Chinese media considered Switzerland an important partner, media in neighbouring countries in particular accused Switzerland of cosying up to China.



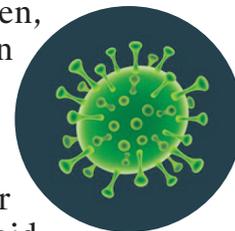
As in previous years, various proposals for **federal popular votes** were widely covered by the media in 2021. This year saw votes on emotive topics that were also the subject of current societal debate in other countries. This contributed to the high levels of media coverage. The adoption of the popular initiatives “Yes to a ban on full facial coverings” in March and “Marriage for all” in September drew considerable interest worldwide. Even in the run-up to the vote, the initiative for a full-face veil ban received regular coverage and its approval generated an extraordinary media response worldwide. The result of the vote was often reported in a concise, factual and balanced manner. In more detailed commentaries, various foreign media outlets criticised the result as islamophobic, especially in neighbouring countries and in the Islamic world.



Some conservative media outlets welcomed the full-face veil ban. Criticism by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights was given coverage. Meanwhile, on social media, commentary surrounding the vote was very polarised. The adoption of the “Marriage for all” initiative also garnered international media attention. The tone ranged from balanced reporting to overt satisfaction at the outcome of the vote. There were positive comments about what was considered a surprisingly high level of support for the cause among the Swiss public, whom some media outlets described as more liberal than was often thought. Meanwhile, as every year, other votes also received a certain amount of attention abroad. The fact that the Swiss population can regularly vote on a number of specific issues is mentioned each year in the media as a characteristic specific to Switzerland. In addition to the vote on the full-face veil ban, the media commented in March on the vote on the free trade agreement with Indonesia as well as the vote on the Federal Act for Electronic Identification Services (e-ID Act). In June, foreign media commented in particular on the pair of agricultural initiatives and the referendum on Police Counterterrorism Measures (PCTA), with the latter coming under some criticism for its broad definition of terrorism. Media interest in the referendum held in June on the COVID-19 Act was largely limited to neighbouring countries, where coverage praised Switzerland’s system of direct democracy for granting legitimacy to its Covid policy. The renewed support for the COVID-19 Act in November’s referendum met with greater interest against the backdrop of the worsening crisis all over Europe. In the run-up to the vote, media widely reported on the heated tensions between supporters and opponents of the measures in Switzerland. Following the endorsement of the law, however, the focus was on the widespread support shown for Switzerland’s pandemic policy. According to media, the simultaneous acceptance of the nursing care initiative also

sent a clear message to the government that measures to combat the pandemic needed to be accompanied by corresponding social measures for employees in the nursing sector. Media in the neighbouring countries also discussed possible impacts of the nursing care initiative on their own labour markets.

Despite the two referendums, Switzerland's handling of the **COVID-19 pandemic** received less foreign media attention than in the previous year. At the beginning of the year, news was dominated by the previous year's decision to keep ski resorts in Switzerland open, in contrast to neighbouring countries. This was viewed critically by most foreign media. In February, the decision to relax measures for the first time, despite the fragile epidemiological situation, was given critical coverage, especially in the German-language media. Subsequently, however, the Swiss approach, viewed as unusual, was also sometimes discussed in the media as a possible model for their respective countries. There were sporadic positive reports of medical aid supplies sent from Switzerland to other countries. In the summer and autumn, in addition to the two referendums on the COVID-19 Act, international media briefly focused on the comparatively low vaccination uptake among the population in German-speaking countries in comparison to other Western European nations. As described in further detail below, the general public abroad viewed the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in Switzerland very positively, despite ambivalent media coverage.



The Swiss **financial centre and tax policy** featured far less in the media than in the previous year. This year, reporting on these subjects focused on various scandals involving Credit Suisse. Firstly, many media outlets were highly critical of the billions in losses resulting from the bank's involvement with both Archegos and Greensill and the way in which this was handled.



Secondly, the bank once again found itself in the foreign media spotlight following the conclusion of two investigations by the Swiss Financial Market Supervisory Authority (FINMA) and the bank's agreement to pay fines to foreign authorities. The first of these investigations concerned the shadowing of former employees while the second involved loans made to Mozambique, sparking the "tuna bonds" corruption scandal. In both cases, FINMA, and subsequently the media, accused the major Swiss bank of serious misconduct. These topics were repeatedly covered by the media over the course of the year. In addition to the Credit Suisse affairs, various cases of money laundering or suspected undeclared accounts drew media interest in the countries involved. The UBS trials as well as the Cum-Ex tax fraud court cases have only attracted limited media interest thus far. Foreign media reported positively on digital currencies in relation to Switzerland on several occasions, and the automatic exchange of information with India received positive coverage in the media there. In reporting on the call for a global minimum corporate tax rate, Switzerland was sometimes cited as an alleged example of a tax haven. In the context of the Pandora Papers, Switzerland was not the focal point of media reports. However, media coverage surrounding prominent personalities did sometimes include mention of their recourse to Swiss lawyers and financial institutes whose services were deemed to be dubious. This kind of criticism in relation to the Pandora Papers was picked up on social media, reigniting existing negative stereotypes linked to the Swiss financial centre.

This year, Swiss **justice** was again the object of media attention, although to a lesser extent than in the previous year. The tone of reporting was also more balanced this year. Coverage included subjects related to the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland (OAG). Its investigations into Lebanon's central bank chief received mainly local, and predominantly positive, coverage. The decision in July to drop the Russian-Swiss money laundering Magnitsky probe after a decade of investigations was covered mainly by Russian media, who used a factual tone for the most part. Western media, on the other hand, were highly critical of the OAG, discussing allegations of corruption and raising doubts over Switzerland's efforts to clarify potentially unscrupulous dealings in its financial centre. Reporting on various rulings of Swiss criminal courts was mainly positive. For example, the trial of Israeli commodities trader Beny Steinmetz for corruption and the verdict against him at the Geneva Criminal Court received a great deal of coverage in the media, much of it paying tribute to the global efforts of Geneva's law enforcement authorities. Steinmetz's five-year prison sentence for corruption and the high compensation payments were seen as a landmark ruling for the entire commodities sector. The conviction of a former Liberian rebel commander by the Federal Criminal Court in Bellinzona for war crimes committed in the first Liberian civil war also received positive feedback. Media reported that it was the first ever conviction worldwide in connection to the civil war in Liberia as well as the first time in Swiss history that a civil court had ruled on war crime charges. The arrest of Russian businessman Vladislav Klyushin by Swiss authorities and the announcement of his US extradition featured primarily in Russian media, who took a rather critical stance. Swiss justice, having featured very prominently in the foreign media last year and almost exclusively in a negative context, was by and large portrayed in a positive light in 2021. The media focused above all on Switzerland's active approach to addressing global injustices. Numerous media outlets worldwide reported objectively and briefly on the opening of criminal proceedings by the OAG against former FIFA President Joseph Blatter and Michel Platini, former UEFA President. On the occasion of the judge initiative, German media criticised the Swiss judicial system. Reporting referred to points which had already been criticised previously, such as the statute of limitations in a case against football officials.



Various **major sporting events that Switzerland participated in** attracted worldwide attention in 2021. The strong performance of Swiss athletes was widely acknowledged in this respect. The most significant attention-grabber was the European Football Championship, in which Switzerland surprisingly made it to the quarter-finals. The underdog victory over France in particular attracted attention worldwide. The team's fighting spirit was praised and the sometimes exuberant celebrations in the streets were noted with surprise, considered unusual for Switzerland. A meme that went viral and socio-political issues surrounding the national team were also discussed. Again in November, there was a swathe of positive headlines. Media outlets worldwide covered the spectacular way in which Switzerland secured automatic qualification for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. The Olympic Games attracted a lot of positive attention, particularly the "Swiss sweep" triple victory in the women's mountain biking competition and the performances of tennis players Belinda Bencic and Viktorija Golubic. This unusually big coverage helped to raise the profile of qualities that have otherwise rarely been associated with Switzerland, such as athletic excellence and emotions. This added some nuances to the classic pattern of how people perceive Switzerland. In addition, as in other years, the media covered Swiss successes in skiing as well as various stories surrounding tennis player Roger Federer, including his role in an advert for Switzerland Tourism in which he appears alongside Robert De Niro.



Swiss **art and culture** was also discussed by foreign media in numerous contexts. The 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Swiss author Friedrich Dürrenmatt attracted a large amount of coverage in the German-speaking world and beyond. Dürrenmatt was celebrated as a renowned figure in German-language literature. The death of Swiss poet Philippe Jaccottet in February drew media interest even beyond Francophone regions. Various exhibitions in Switzerland and abroad dedicated to Swiss artists, such as Alberto Giacometti and Sophie Taeuber-Arp, were very well received by foreign media. The film festival in Locarno also attracted positive reviews. The opening of the extension to the Kunsthaus Zurich and its handling of the art collection of Emil Bührle drew much attention from Western media. While the media reported in positive terms on the artistic and historic value of the collection, some European media outlets criticised the way in which those involved had dealt with cultural property acquired during the Second World War. Media from around the world reported on the death of theologian Hans Küng, highlighting his Swiss origins and paying tribute to him as one of the most influential theologians worldwide.



One occasion which highlighted the issue of **gender equality** was the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of women's suffrage in Switzerland. Media in the German-speaking countries in particular used the anniversary as an opportunity to evaluate the status of Swiss gender equality policies; the general tenor was that there was room for improvement in Switzerland. A headline that appeared in the Aargauer Zeitung regarding the nomination of Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala as the new Director-General of the World Trade Organization was perceived as sexist, sparking negative attention. Over the course of the year, a number of related issues were addressed, such as the family-friendliness of Switzerland, which was sometimes seen as lacking. As previously mentioned, in the context of the "Marriage for all" referendum, foreign media described the Swiss population as adopting a more liberal attitude towards this type of subject than is often assumed.

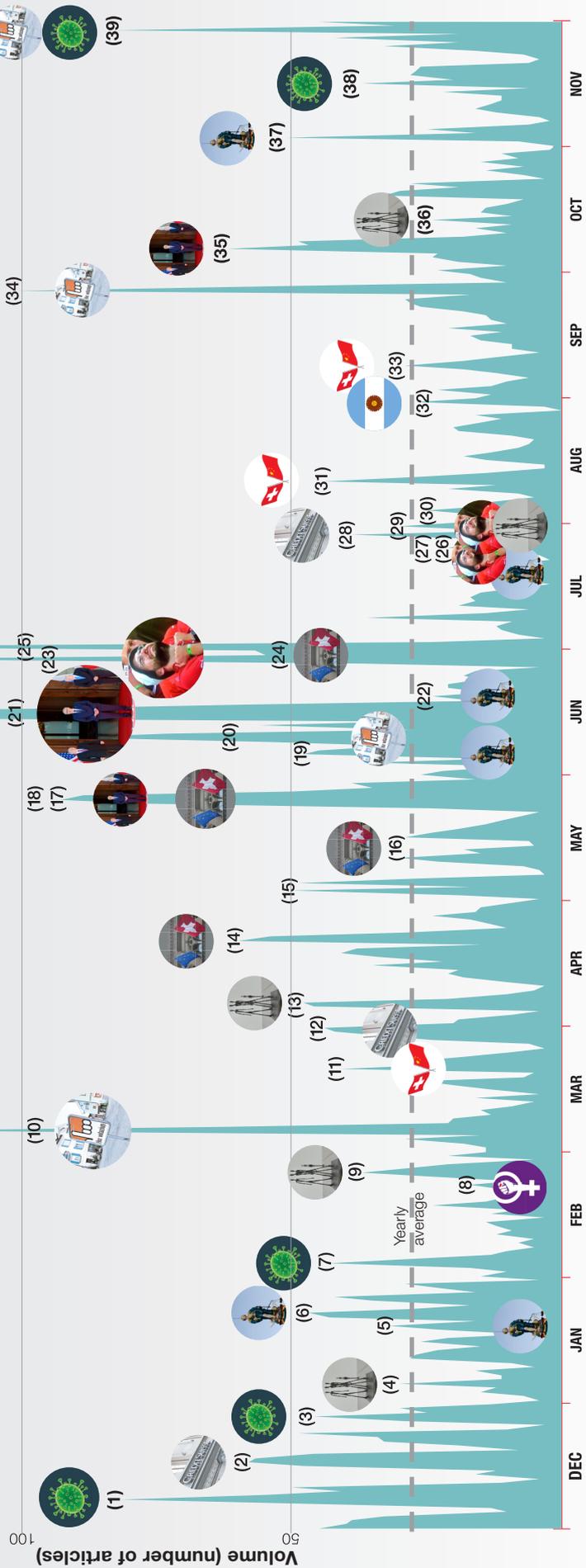


A debate in **Argentina comparing the security situation there with that of Switzerland** received wide coverage in both traditional and social media in Argentina. The debate was sparked by Argentinian security minister Sabina Frederic's comment that whilst there was indeed crime in Argentina, and that Switzerland was safer but also more boring. These remarks met with fierce criticism in Argentina, and the minister left her post several weeks later. The tone of coverage was mostly very positive with regard to Switzerland, which was depicted as a safe country and a very pleasant place to live. The Swiss ambassador's response to the comparison went viral. In his tweet, he added a link to the aforementioned ironically self-deprecating promotional video by Switzerland Tourism in which Robert De Niro complains to Roger Federer about Switzerland's lack of drama. The tweet was very widely shared, and numerous Argentinian media outlets praised it as a successful response to an inappropriate comparison.



# Quantitative evolution of foreign media coverage related to Switzerland (dec. 2020 – nov. 2021)

(1) Covid-19: cancellation WEF Davos, suspension of rail traffic between Switzerland and Italy (2) Classification of Switzerland as a currency manipulator by the USA (3) Covid-19: suspected violations of quarantine regulations by British tourists (4) 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Friedrich Dürrenmatt (5) Investigation by the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland against the Lebanese Central Bank (6) Conviction of mining magnate Beny Steinmetz in Geneva (7) Covid-19: non-approval of the AstraZeneca vaccine in Switzerland (8) Sexism debate surrounding a headline about Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (9) Death of the poet Philippe Jaccottet (10) Votes of 07.03.: adoption of popular initiative "Yes to a ban on full facial coverings" (11) Federal Council adopts China Strategy (12) Credit Suisse: expected losses in the billions (13) Death of the theologian Hans Küng (14) Presidents of the Confederation Parmelin in Bruxelles: Talks on the Swiss-EU institutional agreement (15) Death of Swiss embassy staff member in Iran (16) Swiss-EU institutional agreement (17) Announcement of Biden-Putin summit in Geneva (18) Termination of Swiss-EU institutional agreement negotiations (19) Vladislav Klyushin's arrest becomes known to the public (20) Votes of 13.06.: Covid-19 act, initiatives on agriculture, anti-terror law (21) Biden-Putin summit in Geneva (22) Federal Criminal Court sentences former Liberian rebel leader for war crimes (23) Uefa-Euro 2020: Switzerland's victory in round of 16 against France (24) Federal Council decision on the F-35A fighter jets (25) Uefa-Euro 2020: quarterfinal Switzerland-Spain (26) Russian-Swiss Magnitsky money laundering case closed by the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland (27) Summer Olympics Tokyo: Swiss sweep (mountain biking) (28) Credit Suisse: Report of the investigation of the Archegos case (29) Summer Olympics Tokyo: gold medal for Belinda Bencic (tennis) (30) Opening of Locarno Film Festival (31) Twitter diplomacy: Chinese media reports of a fictitious Swiss scientist, corrective tweet by the Swiss embassy in China (32) Twitter diplomacy: Debate on Argentina-Switzerland comparison (33) Criticism of business relationships of two Swiss companies with China (34) Vote of 26.09.: adoption of "Marriage for all" (35) High-level meeting between the US and China in Zurich (36) Extension Kunsthaus Zürich (37) Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland opens criminal proceedings against Blatter and Platini (38) Covid-19: situation in Switzerland (39) Votes of 29.11.: COVID-19 law, Covid-19 situation in Switzerland



Development of the volume of foreign media coverage of Switzerland (volume = number of articles per day in the leading media analysed, (01.12.2020 - 30.11.2021)). A spike can correspond to multiple events. The numbered events have been selected on the basis of their volume and significance.

Figure 1

## Switzerland's image among populations abroad: top 10 almost across the board

The foreign press and social media are not the only factors that play an important role in how Switzerland is perceived. Other aspects can also influence its image among the general public abroad. One suitable instrument for gauging Switzerland's reputation among populations abroad and comparing it against other nations is the Nation Brands Index (NBI)<sup>1</sup>. Each year, the NBI assesses the strength and attractiveness of countries' images. The perception of Switzerland and 59 other nations is surveyed among the general populations of 20 countries around the world, which are selected based on their economic and geopolitical significance. The NBI reveals where the strengths and weaknesses of Switzerland's image lie, along with how it has changed in recent 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.

As in the previous year, Switzerland ranked seventh out of a total of 60 countries, coming in behind France and ahead of the US (see figure 2). Germany, Canada and Japan took the top three spots. This strong position demonstrates that Switzerland enjoys an outstanding image abroad. It is the highest-ranking medium-sized nation. Switzerland's position varied depending on the country assessing it: it received its best assessments in the perception dimensions from Germany (2<sup>nd</sup> place) and Canada (3<sup>rd</sup> place), while it did not fare quite as well in Italy and Sweden, who both ranked it 11<sup>th</sup>.

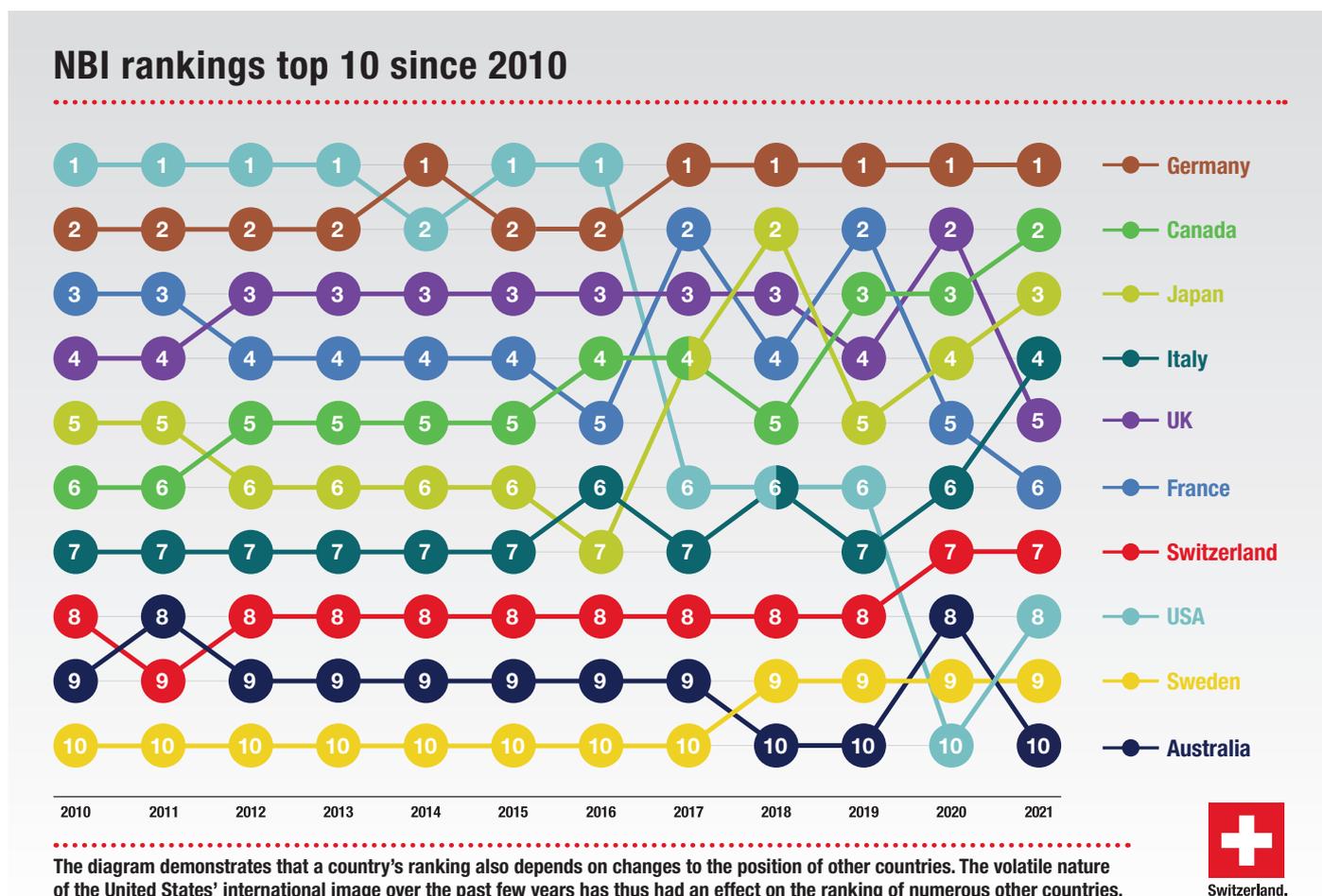
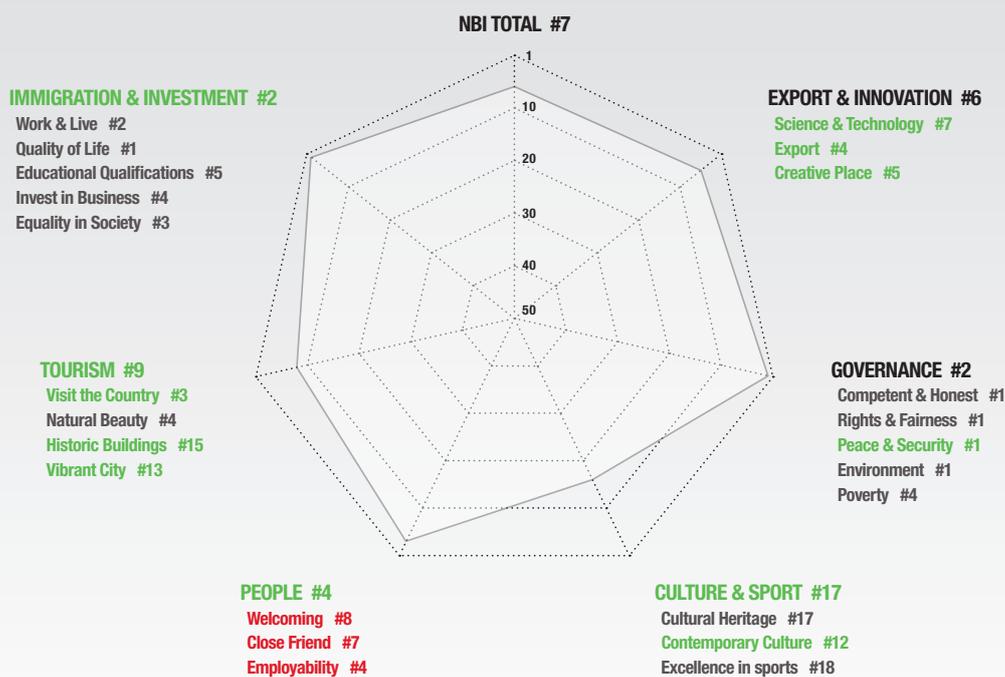


Figure 2

<sup>1</sup> The Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index (NBI) assesses the images of 60 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 60,081 interviews in 2021. Adults over the age of 18 with internet access are surveyed. The NBI conducts surveys in 20 countries: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Poland, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Switzerland made the top 10 in five of the six perception dimensions. As in previous years, the dimensions concerned were export products and innovation, governance, people, and immigration and investment, with tourism also earning a place in the top 10 this year (see figure 3). Switzerland even secured second place in the **governance** and **immigration and investment** dimensions. Switzerland is seen as a country that offers fair and competent governance, and one that is also strongly committed to the environment as well as peace and security; in each of these four indicators, Switzerland achieved first place. Quality of life is another area in which it is considered a world leader.

## Switzerland's image according to the Nation Brands Index 2021



The diagram shows Switzerland's ranking in the NBI's 23 attributes. The six segments present the NBI perception dimensions. For the sake of clarity, the axis in the diagram shows only the first 50 positions. Green indicates an improvement, while red indicates a decline compared with 2020. Black indicates that there was no change from the previous year. The methodology can lead to discrepancies between the dimensions and the indicators. For example, in the "population" dimension, Switzerland ranks fourth out of 60 countries according to the perception of the general public in 20 countries. In the indicators of this dimension, however, it ranks 8<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>.



Figure 3

Switzerland's 9<sup>th</sup> place in the **tourism** rankings – two places up on the previous year – was also positive. Potential for improvement remains in the **culture and sport** dimension, where Switzerland ranked 17<sup>th</sup>. As for **export products and innovation**, Switzerland came in 6<sup>th</sup> place. Switzerland is seen as a country that produces high-quality products while also offering opportunities for creativity as well as innovative science and research. Figure 4 shows how Switzerland was evaluated by the different countries for the export products and innovation dimension. Perceptions of Switzerland varied according to the country rating it: for example, Germany gave Switzerland a far higher score for innovation than Italy did.

## Switzerland's ranking in the panel countries for the “export products and innovation” dimension (2021 NBI)

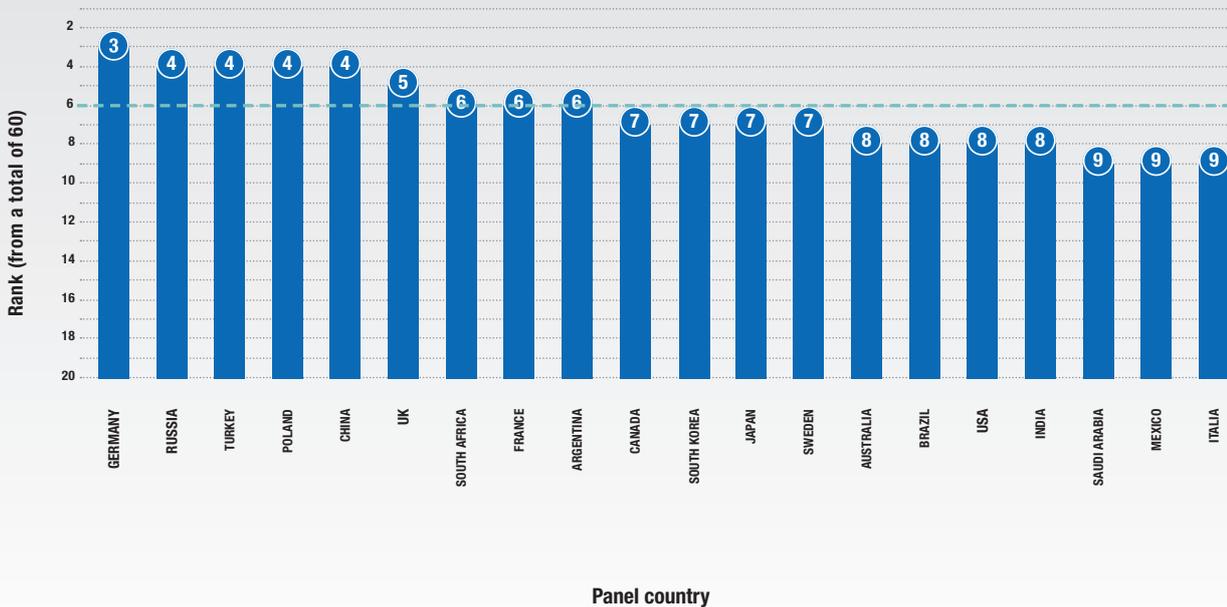


Figure 4

### COVID-19: Positive impact of favourable overall image on the perceived handling of the pandemic

Since 2020, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the NBI has also been measuring the international perception of how the 60 countries it compares handle healthcare crises. Switzerland came in joint first place together with New Zealand, Canada and Germany; according to the subjective perceptions of people surveyed worldwide for the NBI, these countries were the best at handling the COVID-19 crisis. The survey took place in July and August 2021. Other countries that scored well in 2021 were Australia, Norway and Sweden (each in 2<sup>nd</sup> place) as well as Finland, the UK, Iceland, Japan and Austria (each in 3<sup>rd</sup> place).

The results of this survey should, however, be interpreted with caution. The majority of the population are likely at best to have superficial knowledge of specific aspects of crisis management in the different countries, perhaps with the exception of those countries that gained particular international visibility for their handling of the COVID-19 crisis (e.g. New Zealand). It can therefore be assumed that many of the NBI respondents were guided by the general image of a country, which served as the main basis upon which they formed their judgement. To a certain extent, a favourable overall image therefore carries over to how a country is perceived in specific areas – in this case the response to the COVID-19 crisis.

There is some evidence to support this theory. Countries that came off well in terms of perceived management of the COVID-19 crisis also tended to have an excellent national reputation. Germany and Canada, for example, took first and second place respectively in the overall “nation brand” rankings in 2021. In Switzerland’s case, its image is particularly good in the governance dimension (2<sup>nd</sup> place), which is the most relevant of the categories when it comes to how crisis management is perceived. New Zealand is somewhat of an exception. It ranked joint first alongside three countries in the perceived handling of the COVID-19 crisis, yet it ranked

14<sup>th</sup> in the overall “nation brand” rankings. New Zealand differs from the other three countries, though, in that its zero-Covid strategy gained worldwide visibility. In this particular case, the measures taken, which were viewed as effective and broadly discussed internationally at the time of the survey, are likely the main reason behind the very positive assessment. A favourable overall image can therefore act as a sort of buffer in the event of crises, mitigating any negative effects.

## **To summarise: Switzerland’s image abroad in 2021 – media focus on its position in Europe and in the world**

Foreign media coverage of Switzerland was characterised by **political subjects** in 2021. This also reflects the increased significance of geopolitical developments over the past year, and wherever there was a connection to Switzerland, media attention was guaranteed. It has been some time since a single event in connection to Switzerland has attracted such a vast amount of media coverage as the summit in Geneva between US President Joe Biden and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin. Switzerland’s role in the meeting was mostly described in very positive terms. Other political topics, such as relations between Switzerland and the European Union and Swiss–China relations, were discussed in the foreign media throughout the year. Coverage on these issues was usually more critical, depending on where the media outlet was based. In the neighbouring countries in particular, Switzerland was sometimes criticised for aspects that had been portrayed in a positive light with regard to the summit. Its insistence on maintaining freedom of action and its autonomous and relatively independent approach – which according to the media made Switzerland the ideal candidate for its role as bridge builder between superpowers – were a source of annoyance in other contexts, particularly among European media. This was the case whenever foreign media felt that Switzerland stuck to a position that set it apart even from other Western countries, isolated itself or displayed a lack of solidarity.

Meanwhile, various federal popular votes drew considerable media attention in 2021. Coverage painted the picture of a country in which the population has a say in subjects that can be very technical, sometimes pleasantly surprising us, according to the media. Moreover, the areas of sport, the arts and culture received more attention than in most years. Swiss justice received less attention overall in 2021, but coverage was far more positive than the previous year. The predominantly negative reporting from the year before does not appear thus far to have resulted in a lasting negative image of Swiss justice.

There was also less media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Switzerland than the previous year. Here again, the sometimes critical reporting of the previous year has not adversely affected Switzerland’s reputation in the long term. On the contrary, the general public abroad qualified Switzerland’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic as excellent. Switzerland’s generally good image probably had more to do with this positive assessment than the actual measures themselves. Ranked seventh out of a possible 60 positions, **Switzerland is once again the best-ranked medium-sized country in the Nation Brands Index in 2021**. It fared particularly well in the governance dimension – the most relevant to the handling of crises. As it is unlikely that the general public abroad were familiar with the specific details of COVID-19 crisis management, the average person abroad was guided by this well-known image in their assessment. Switzerland’s good and steadfast reputation over the years therefore also has a positive influence on specific areas and newly emerging topics.

Thus, Switzerland’s image abroad was generally positive and multifaceted in 2021. In the context of geopolitical tensions, Switzerland positioned itself as a trusted partner, gaining very high levels of visibility in the foreign media.

## Pictures

Page 1: Swiss President Guy Parmelin (C) poses for a photo with Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) and US President Joe Biden before their meeting at the “Villa la Grange” in Geneva on 16 June 2021 – © KEYSTONE/POOL/Denis Balibouse

Page 3:

Europe – © FDFA / Presence Switzerland

Geneva Summit – © KEYSTONE/POOL/Denis Balibouse

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Statue of Lady Justice in Bern – © Wikimedia Commons user TheBernFiles

Capture © DR

Page 7:

The artwork of Alberto Giacometti titled “Trois hommes qui marchent” (Three Men Walking), pictured in the Fondation Beyeler in Riehen, Switzerland – © KEYSTONE / Georgios Kefalas

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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 major international events. The Federal Council regularly reviews Switzerland’s international communication strategy.

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