

# Switzerland seen from abroad



# Key points in brief

- This analysis of Switzerland's image abroad provides an overview of how it was perceived by the foreign media and the general public abroad in 2023. In an international environment still dominated by geopolitical crises and tensions, the foreign media frequently focused on political and economic issues. The sometimes critical tone of the coverage has had only a limited impact so far on Switzerland's image among the general public abroad, which remains positive overall.
- Media attention on the war in Ukraine remained strong in 2023, and foreign media – particularly in Europe, the US and Russia – continued to report on Switzerland's position and actions in this context. They focused on issues such as the refusal of arms transfers, neutrality, sanctions against Russia, and Switzerland's solidarity and reliability as a partner. In Western media in particular, the tone of reporting was at best objective, and at times highly critical. In Russia, the media frequently propagated the narrative that Switzerland had abandoned its neutrality.
- The collapse and takeover of Credit Suisse, as well as the interventions in this context by the Swiss authorities, led to a volume of foreign media reporting that was briefly unprecedented. Most of this reporting was very critical, focusing on the banking giant itself and the possible reputational damage to the Swiss financial centre as a whole. There was a somewhat more nuanced assessment of the actions of the Swiss authorities.

- Depending on current events, foreign media also reported on other developments in the fields of foreign policy, the economy and justice in 2023. However, its interest in these stories was significantly lower than in the two main topics mentioned above. The relationship between Switzerland and the EU, for example, was discussed regularly by Swiss media but was rarely covered by leading foreign media. Even then, it was mainly discussed in relation to other topics, such as the Swiss federal elections.
- As before, overall perceptions of Switzerland among the general public abroad range from positive to excellent and are generally stable. According to the Nation Brands Index 2023, which compares the national images of 60 countries, Switzerland is even perceived as a global leader in the field of governance. However, perceptions of Switzerland in specific countries and with regard to individual aspects, such as sympathy, have worsened since 2021. Going forward, these developments will be monitored and analysed.

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# Overview

How was Switzerland perceived abroad in 2023? Which issues and events attracted attention beyond the country's borders? How were they reported and did this have an impact on the perception of the country as a whole? The 2023 Analysis by Presence Switzerland explores these questions. National images are created and developed in complex ways, and do not necessarily correspond to reality or the country's own self-image. However, it is still important to have the most precise understanding possible of Switzerland's image, as it provides a key basis for shaping the country's communication abroad.

This report examines two different aspects of Switzerland's image abroad. The first part focuses on the presentation of Switzerland in leading foreign media outlets and on social media. The central question here is how Switzerland was covered and presented to the general public in media reporting, which tends to be strongly influenced by recent events. The second part focuses on Switzerland's image among populations abroad. Here, Presence Switzerland assesses the results of the renowned Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index (NBI) 2023. The NBI is a representative population survey which is carried out regularly in 20 countries, and compares perceptions of 60 nations across a range of topics. Examining the perspective of the foreign media and that of the general public abroad makes it possible to identify the similarities, differences and interactions between the two.

The topics that most affect a country's image abroad during a given timeframe are determined by various factors, and context plays a key role in this regard. The international environment in 2023 was marked by geopolitical crises and

growing tensions, and the media and general public abroad were understandably interested in globally relevant issues and in Switzerland's positioning on key topics – including in relation to other nations. This harsher setting led to an increased interest in values such as solidarity, and to a relatively critical tone in communications. Specific events and developments that attract attention abroad can also influence how a country is perceived, especially when they have a broad impact and the topics are already strongly associated with a country.

In this context it is hardly surprising that the main focus of Swiss-related foreign media coverage in 2023, in terms of the volume and frequency, clearly lay in two areas. As in 2022, one of these areas was Switzerland's attitude towards and handling of the war in Ukraine. There was some highly critical reporting on decisions and events connected to the war, in particular in the US and a number of European countries. Media reports repeatedly presented critical analysis of Switzerland's neutrality policy.

The collapse of Credit Suisse (CS), its takeover by UBS, and the role the Swiss authorities played in this led to a volume of reporting abroad that was briefly unprecedented. The tone of some of the reporting was highly critical not only of CS, but in some cases of the Swiss financial centre as a whole. The latter had repeatedly faced criticism abroad in the past and was quick to do so again here. However, the volume and intensity of the criticism abated relatively quickly and are now only slightly higher than normal.

Given this highly critical presentation of Switzerland from some foreign media, it is particularly notable that perceptions of the country among the general population abroad remain strikingly positive and stable for the most part. On average across all countries and indicators, Switzerland continues to enjoy a very positive image. It has maintained seventh place in the overall NBI rankings for 2023, making it the best-ranked small-to-medium-sized country. Although the overall results are positive, there are occasional negative developments in Switzerland's image connected to specific countries or indicators that must be noted and analysed.

# Switzerland through the eyes of the foreign media

**“The role Switzerland has played for centuries: a black hole that is at the heart of Europe while also standing apart from it; not so much nobly neutral, as spectacularly selfish.”**

The Sunday Times, UK, 03/09/2023

**“Switzerland becomes stumbling block for Western military aid to Ukraine”**

Wall Street Journal, USA, 28/02/2023

**“Mit dem Rückverkauf von Leopard-2-Panzern an Deutschland betreibt die Schweiz politische Schadensbegrenzung.”**

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Germany, 26/09/2023

## Switzerland and the war in Ukraine: a critical response

Since the beginning of the conflict, Switzerland's **position on and handling of the war in Ukraine** have attracted interest in the foreign press. The topic continued to generate media attention abroad in 2023, particularly in the first half of the year. Even in the second half of the year, there were sporadic spikes in coverage, particularly in response to specific decisions (c.f. infographic 1). Throughout the year, foreign media also made repeated references to Switzerland's behaviour in the context of the war in Ukraine when discussing other topics.

Media scrutiny of the topic varied strongly by geographical region. Interest in Switzerland's stance was particularly high in Europe (mainly in France, Germany and the UK), the US and Russia. The tone of reporting in Western countries was at best objective, and at times highly critical. The topic attracted considerable attention on social media too, sometimes on accounts with a wide audience. Here too, the tone towards Switzerland was highly critical and sometimes controversial. Outside of Europe, the Anglosphere, and Russia and Ukraine, there was limited interest in and coverage of Switzerland's actions with regard to the war in Ukraine. The topic did not, therefore, have the same impact on the media's perception and presentation of Switzerland everywhere, and had no impact at all in some countries.

In terms of content, the reports focused on questions around the re-export, sale and potential transfer of armaments. Widely reported events included the refusal to allow war materiel originally produced in Switzerland to be re-exported to Ukraine via third countries, as well as domestic political debates on this topic in Switzerland. One focus of media attention in this area was Parliament's approval during the summer of the decommissioning of Leopard 2 tanks as a precondition for selling them back to Germany. Some media interpreted this decision as political damage control by Switzerland vis à vis its European partner countries. European media in particular made reference to the war in Ukraine in reports on Switzerland's decision to destroy its Rapier air defence systems.



Continued foreign media interest in Swiss neutrality was in part connected to these issues, with media outlets repeatedly covering Switzerland's internal political discussions on the interpretation and shaping of its neutrality policy. The tone of this reporting was often critical. A common narrative in the foreign media was that Switzerland was behaving immorally, refusing to support the victim of a clear act of aggression by referring to its neutrality. A common conclusion was that Switzerland's neutrality primarily served to protect its own economic interests. Switzerland's actions with regard to arms re-exports were criticised by some media outlets, who said it showed the country was no longer a reliable partner of the West. By contrast, there were almost no articles in the foreign media in 2023 covering positive aspects associated with neutrality, such as Switzerland's good offices.

References to the war in Ukraine were also repeatedly made in media reports on Switzerland as a commodities trading centre and, in some cases, as a financial centre. The coverage, mostly critical, was driven by the belief in some parts of the media that Switzerland had fallen short in implementing sanctions against Russia. Some foreign media outlets emphasised that this behaviour also served to protect Switzerland's own economic interests. This was not a momentary preference, they argued, but a part of Switzerland's identity. In this context, the media repeatedly made critical references to Switzerland's behaviour during the Second World War.

Some topics were discussed in terms of the war in Ukraine even if they were not inherently linked to it. One example of this related to the 'Magnitsky Affair'. In 2011, the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland initiated criminal proceedings against Russian nationals for suspected money laundering, following a complaint by British investor Bill Browder. During those proceedings, assets belonging to the Russian suspects were frozen. The Office of the Attorney General's announcement that these assets would now be released was criticised in the media by Russian human rights activists and lawmakers in the UK and US as an immoral decision that provided a boost to Russia in the context of the war in Ukraine.

In the middle of 2023, two other events related to Switzerland attracted the attention of various media outlets to the country. Reporting on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's video address to the Swiss parliament was

mostly objective, while Switzerland's announcement of its intention to participate in the European Sky Shield Initiative was criticised as security-policy free-riding in the German media in particular.

Russian reporting on Switzerland's handling of the war in Ukraine constitutes a special case. As it has since the beginning of the war, the media in Russia continued to propagate the narrative that Switzerland had abandoned its neutrality by accepting EU sanctions. The Russian media argued that this would lead to various negative repercussions for Switzerland, including the withdrawal of foreign assets from the country. They also repeatedly picked up on statements by Swiss public figures, provided these suited their narrative. Beyond this, Swiss actions were often reported in a succinct and factual manner.

#### **Media monitoring by Presence Switzerland**

This media analysis is based on continuous monitoring of all coverage of Switzerland by the 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 the leading media in the Arab world and the EU. In addition, other sources may be included in the analysis. Social media content related to Switzerland that was posted by individuals abroad was also analysed.

**“La place financière suisse est tombée de son piédestal.”**

Le Figaro, France, 26/03/2023

**“The Federal Reserve and Treasury Department welcomed the deal, as did the European Central Bank.”**

Bloomberg, USA, 19/03/2023

**“Now the banking sector’s reputation has been tainted, fears are that “Swissness” as a whole could lose its value-enhancing shine.”**

The Guardian, UK, 22/03/2023

## **Financial centre: global responses to the demise of Credit Suisse**

The **collapse of Credit Suisse** in the spring of 2023 had an extremely strong impact on the foreign media’s perception of Switzerland. The bank’s takeover by UBS and the related interventions by the Swiss authorities (the Confederation, Swiss National Bank and FINMA) generated an exceptionally high volume of global media reporting, some of it extremely critical. Many foreign media outlets predicted reputational damage for the Swiss financial centre. However, international media interest in the demise of Credit Suisse declined notably after a few weeks and the tone became more objective. (c.f. infographic 1).

Media criticism focused mainly on Credit Suisse and its management, as well as the feared repercussions for the financial centre. The foreign media were more nuanced in assessing the actions of the Swiss authorities, but only occasionally favourable. Various media outlets concluded that the development would damage Switzerland’s overall standing as a business location, and had undermined the very qualities that distinguished the Swiss financial centre – namely its quality, stability, trustworthiness and adherence to the rule of law.

Specific aspects of the takeover were discussed throughout the year. The media were, for example, critical of the newly formed megabank’s size and influence on Swiss politics. The National Council’s refusal to approve the emergency guarantee credits at the extraordinary session in April was seen by most foreign observers as a vote of no confidence in the Federal Council. The creation of a Parliamentary Investigation Committee (PIC) was also briefly reported on. Financial and business portals in particular reported objectively on announced investor legal actions against FINMA due to AT1 bond write-downs. UBS’s quarterly figures and reported record profit also attracted a great deal of global media attention. Some media reports noted that UBS had been allowed to buy Credit Suisse at a knockdown price, reaping a windfall profit, and were critical of the Swiss authorities’ role in the emergency rescue deal. Plans for extensive job cuts were reported on regularly throughout the year, with the coverage being mostly objective.



**“Banking is not the only area where long-established Swiss values are suddenly in question. Switzerland’s doctrine of neutrality has been the cornerstone of its foreign policy for centuries. But that position has become harder to maintain in an era of European unification and economic interdependency.”**

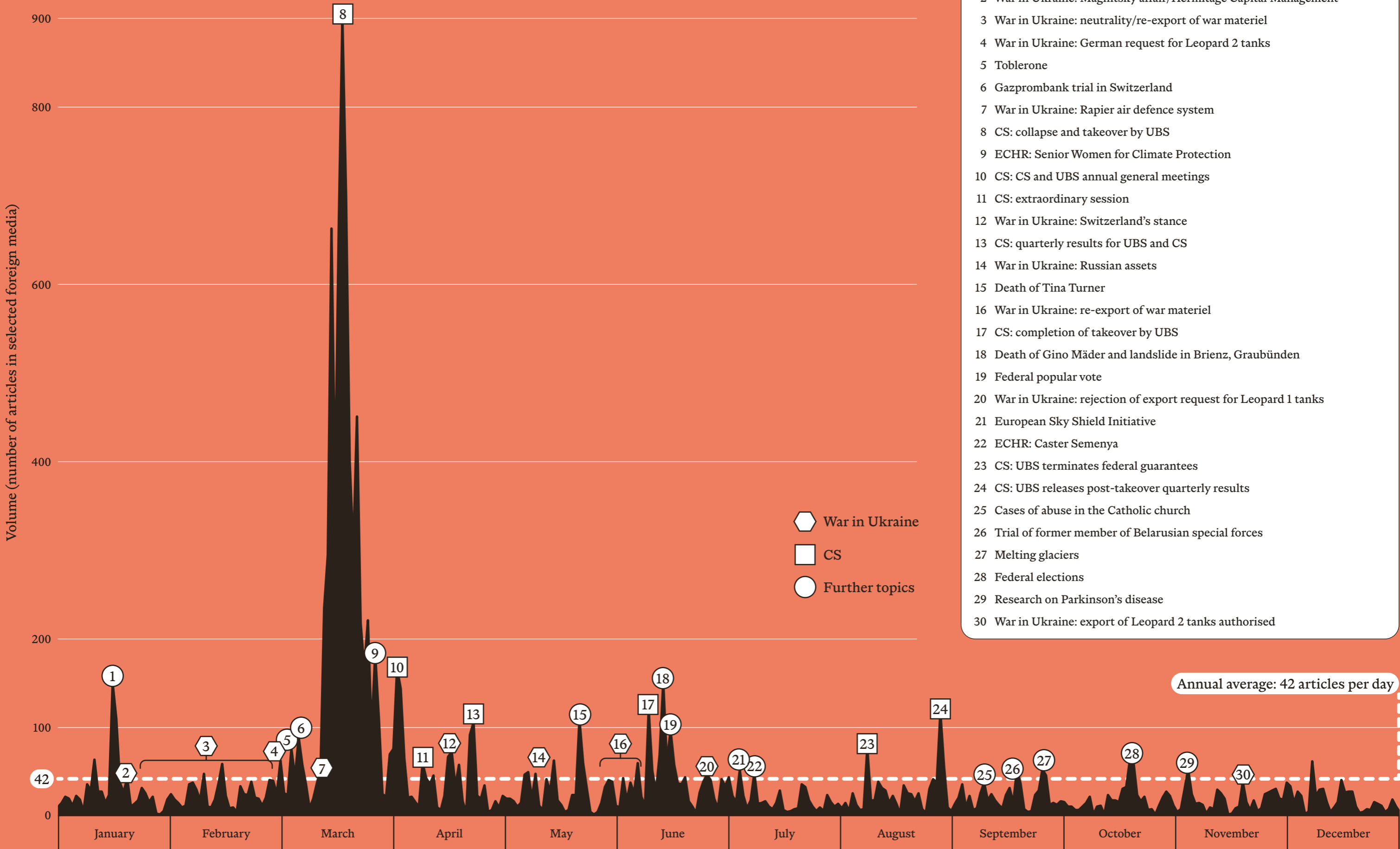
Financial Times, UK, 25/03/2023

It is notable that in spring 2023, the media drew correlations between criticisms of Switzerland that had previously been addressed separately. Some leading global media outlets linked the criticism expressed in the wake of Credit Suisse’s collapse with disapproval of Switzerland’s handling of the war in Ukraine and the perceived difficulties in its relations with the EU. On this basis they diagnosed an identity crisis in Switzerland, as well as an erosion of its trustworthiness, and believed Switzerland’s ‘model of success’ had been fundamentally called into question. However, such fundamental media criticism proved to be the exception rather than the rule, and appeared mainly in the immediate aftermath of Credit Suisse’s collapse.

Of course, foreign media reporting on the **Swiss financial centre** in 2023 covered other stories than just the Credit Suisse takeover. The most widely reported of these was the publication in late summer of draft legislation to strengthen Switzerland’s anti-money laundering apparatus. Coverage of this story was mostly factual in tone. Numerous reports interpreted the proposal as a reaction to increased pressure on Switzerland to tighten its financial controls, particularly since the war in Ukraine. Other stories attracting significant attention included the judgment by the French Court of Cassation against UBS for aiding and abetting the laundering of proceeds from tax fraud, and the settlement between the Geneva-based private bank Pictet and the US tax authorities.

# Infographic 1

## Trends in foreign media coverage of Switzerland in 2023



“Die Schweiz unter-  
nimmt einen neuen  
Anlauf, das zerrüttete  
Verhältnis zur  
Europäischen Union zu  
kitten und auf eine  
solide Grundlage zu  
stellen.”

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Germany, 17/12/2023

“Pour devenir riche en  
France, le plus simple encore  
est d’être frontalier.”

Le Figaro, France, 10/11/2023

## Foreign policy: media coverage in specific contexts

Alongside its systematic coverage of Switzerland’s decisions with regard to the war in Ukraine, the foreign media also took an interest in other foreign policy issues on a number of occasions. It is notable that **relations between Switzerland and the EU**, which are discussed frequently in Switzerland itself, were rarely the subject of standalone reports in the foreign media. When they did appear, it was mostly in the context of topics such as the collapse of Credit Suisse, the federal elections or the war in Ukraine. Such reporting generally emphasised the problematic aspects of Switzerland’s relationship with the EU. One exception was the Federal Council’s adoption of a draft negotiating mandate with the EU at the end of 2023, which occasioned more detailed coverage from some outlets.

Unsurprisingly, the issue of **cross-border commuters** received regular media attention in Switzerland’s neighbouring countries in particular. Reporting often revolved around concrete issues such as taxation or regulations on working from home. The media cited the stable Swiss labour market and high wages as the main reasons for cross-border commuters to work in Switzerland. The articles sometimes also pointed out negative aspects, for example claiming that Switzerland’s attractiveness to workers was exacerbating shortages of skilled labour in neighbouring regions. In Italy in particular, a number of media outlets emphasised that Italian healthcare workers often chose jobs in Switzerland because of the better working conditions, even though they were urgently needed in Lombardy. The impact of this reporting on Switzerland’s image was therefore mixed: it illustrated the country’s economic attractiveness, but may also have generated resentment towards it.

Switzerland’s **relations with Iran** were also repeatedly discussed in the foreign press. Criticism of Switzerland’s ambassador to Iran for wearing a chador on a visit to a holy site drew attention on social media in particular. Foreign reporting on the Iranian government’s summoning of the ambassador over her public criticism of executions was objective in tone, as was reporting on the cancellation of a visit to Geneva by the Iranian president, Ebrahim Raisi, after a legal

complaint was filed against him under universal jurisdiction. In some cases – for example in the context of a prisoner exchange – reports mentioned Switzerland’s role as a protecting power of the US in Iran.

A **protest against the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan**, on the margins of a ‘feminist strike’ led to widespread media criticism in Turkey. The Turkish media, as well as Turkish government members on social media, described the incident as an intervention by terrorists and criticised Switzerland for allowing it.

In contrast to its stance on the war in Ukraine, Switzerland’s position on the **conflict in the Middle East** was rarely explicitly addressed in leading foreign media. One exception was the decision by the National Council to cease funding for the UNRWA relief agency because of its stance on Hamas. This was a subject of controversy in the MENA region, both in the traditional media and on social media. It was not always clear from the reporting abroad that the parliamentary debate, which ultimately ended in a compromise, had not yet concluded and that the decision was therefore not final.

In Spain, the media discussed **Switzerland’s role in the context of Catalan separatism** on a number of occasions. Some newspapers reported that members of the Catalan independence movement had secretly maintained contact with an FDFA representative and a Geneva-based foundation. Negotiations in Geneva between the PSOE, who are the ruling party in Spain, and the Catalan separatist leader, Carles Puigdemont, were also widely covered. Some reports also alleged that Switzerland wanted to support the separatists. As a knock-on effect, the importance of International Geneva as a venue for dialogue processes received media attention.

## Votes and elections: limited media coverage

The foreign media often discuss proposals that are put to a popular vote in Switzerland. There were only a few examples of this in 2023, however, as only one **federal popular vote** took place. Of the three proposals included in the vote, the adoption of the Climate and Innovation Act received the most attention, with foreign media mostly presenting it in a positive light. The adoption of the proposal to implement the OECD minimum tax rate was mostly reported objectively, while the approval of the amendment to the COVID-19 Act was generally only mentioned in passing. Some foreign media outlets also covered the federal popular initiative ‘Cash is Freedom’. Coverage of an upcoming vote on night-time cowbell noise in the commune of Aarwangen was mostly amused and critical.

The **federal elections**, on the other hand, drew in-depth coverage from foreign media on the major campaign topics, the election results and Swiss politics in general. The SVP’s strong performance prompted discussion of the different ways in which the party is perceived and categorised both domestically and abroad. A number of commentators in Switzerland’s neighbouring countries in particular described it as a far-right party, but also noted that it was perceived differently in Switzerland itself. Some media outlets also predicted the election results would have a negative impact on Switzerland’s European policy. Reporting on the Federal Council election was mainly restricted to Switzerland’s German-speaking neighbours, and was generally brief and objective.



“La Suisse a longtemps eu la réputation d’un havre de tranquillité, offrant opacité et impunité. Le vent est peut-être en train de tourner.”

Le Monde, France, 08/09/2023

## Justice: Switzerland as prosecutor – and defendant

The foreign media regularly pick up on indictments and court proceedings that take place in Switzerland or involve Switzerland, usually as a result of widespread public interest in a particular case. In 2023 the foreign media reported with particular interest on a number of cases handled by the **Swiss judiciary** under the principle of universal jurisdiction. This allows suspected perpetrators of certain crimes to be tried in a court outside the country in which the offences were committed. Cases that attracted media attention included the indictment of the former Algerian defence minister Khaled Nezzar and the international arrest warrant issued by Switzerland against an uncle of the Syrian ruler, Bashar al-Assad. Significant attention was paid to the trial of a former member of the Belarusian special forces, in which the principle of universal jurisdiction was applied for the first time to the crime of enforced disappearance. Foreign media outlets were in part critical of the acquittal of the accused.

The foreign media also reported on several **cases brought against Switzerland** at the European Court of Human Rights. This included the judgment that the athlete Caster Semenya was denied an effective legal remedy by the Swiss judiciary. The Swiss Federal Supreme Court had in 2020 rejected the South African runner’s appeal against a judgment by the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in Lausanne. There were also a number of reports covering the complaint brought by the Swiss Senior Women for Climate Protection.



“Es ist, als würden die Berge wanken und die Alphörner quietschen [...]. Die Alpenrepublik verliert eine nationale Trademark – und Toblerone seine ikonografische Silhouette.”

Die Presse, Austria, 07/03/2023

## Swissness: what makes a product Swiss?

A number of products, including chocolate and cheese, are inextricably linked with Switzerland by people in other countries. Decisions relating to iconic products as well as to regulations on **Swissness and trademark protection** therefore attracted considerable media interest in 2023. There was, for example, widespread coverage of the news that Toblerone had to remove the Matterhorn and the words ‘Made in Switzerland’ from its packaging as it no longer complied with ‘Swissness’ legislation. According to the legislation, a product’s essential manufacturing steps must take place in Switzerland to earn the Swiss designation of origin.

Swiss cheese also made the headlines on a number of occasions. There was considerable interest in the judgment by a US court that cheese could be sold in the US as ‘Gruyère’ regardless of its origin, as well as the judgment by the General Court of the European Union (EuG) that ‘Emmentaler’ cheese did not necessarily have to come from Switzerland. The EuG ruled that ‘Emmentaler’ was not a protected designation of origin in the EU, but only described a type of cheese. The judgment was seen in some quarters as a major defeat for Swiss producers.

“Paralizzato da 11 anni torna a camminare grazie a un ‘ponte’ digitale tra cervello-midollo spinale. [...]. È tornato a muoversi grazie alla nuova tecnica applicata dal Politecnico di Losanna.”

La Repubblica, Italy, 25/05/2023

“In der Schweiz gilt ein Zug ab drei Minuten Verspätung bereits als unpünktlich. [...]. Warum ist Zugfahren im Nachbarland so viel besser?”

Süddeutsche Zeitung, Germany, 21/12/2023

## Miscellaneous: headlines on individual topics

In addition to reporting in the areas mentioned above, there were also individual events and news items relating to Switzerland in 2023 that were considered newsworthy and attracted coverage in the foreign media. For example, international media reported on the continuing popularity of the village of **Iseltwald** on Lake Brienz among South Korean tourists, prompted by the television series ‘Crash Landing on You’.

The impact of **climate change** on Switzerland was also discussed in a range of contexts. At the beginning of 2023, the foreign media reported widely on the record temperature highs at the turn of the year, as well as the resultant lack of snow in Swiss ski areas. Later in the year, media outlets around the world published the results of a study by the Swiss Academy of Sciences indicating that Swiss glaciers had shrunk by 10% in just two years. This is equivalent to the glacial retreat measured between 1960 and 1990. Posts on this topic were shared frequently on social media.

Following an investigation by the University of Zurich on behalf of the Swiss Bishop’s Conference, numerous foreign media outlets reported that the **Catholic Church** in Switzerland had for decades covered up instances of sexual abuse, and that the roughly 1,000 identified cases were only the tip of the iceberg. The coverage was critical in tone, but mostly brief and factual.

Once again in 2023, the issue of **euthanasia** in Switzerland was a regular topic of media reporting abroad. This was mainly in response to specific cases where people from abroad had made use of euthanasia, which in turn prompted discussion in their home countries.

Various stories relating to **innovation and research** in Switzerland were also picked up by foreign media. This included research findings that might enable paraplegics to walk again, as well as the successful trialling of a robotic arm for use in rescue operations. Reporting in this area drew attention to Switzerland’s high-quality science and research work.

In summer, the Israeli media in particular and some German media outlets reported on **tensions between the residents of Davos and orthodox Jewish tourists**. Reporting was especially critical of the Davos tourism association, which was accused of inciting resentment against orthodox Jews.

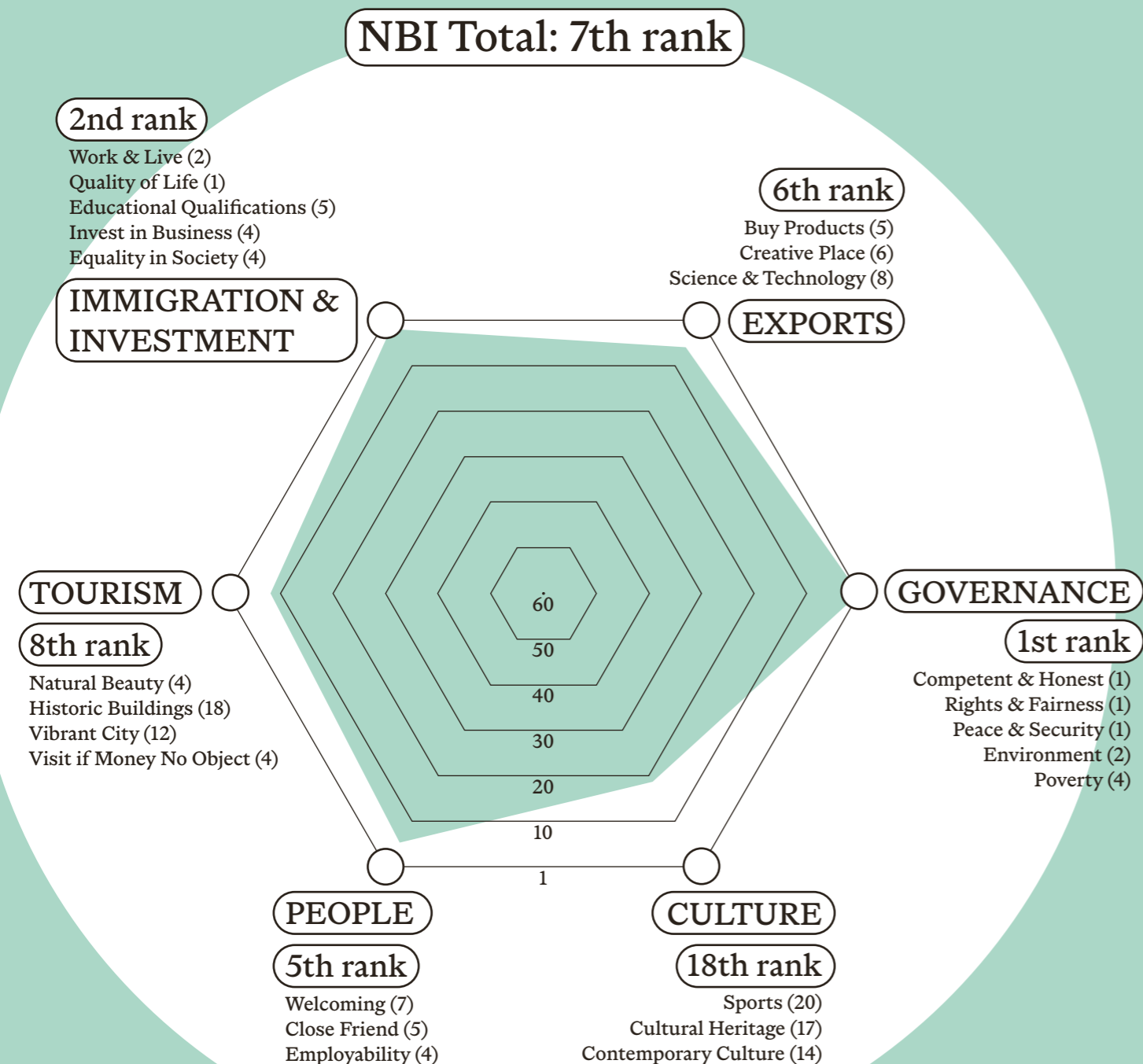
There were mixed responses from foreign media to the topic of **transport** in Switzerland. The partial closure of the Gotthard Tunnel due to construction work tended to draw criticism, while the punctuality of the SBB – particularly in comparison with the Deutsche Bahn – drew a number of favourable comparisons in both German and British media.

A **video campaign by the Swedish Tourist Association** on the frequent confusion of Switzerland with Sweden led to a favourable reception of Switzerland in foreign media and on social media for several weeks.

Topics in the field of **art and culture** were also regularly covered by foreign media in 2023. Only a few one-off stories attracted widespread coverage, with discussion instead centring around various cultural events. As it does every year, the Locarno Film Festival received much attention, as did the widely praised film 'Unrueh'. The death of singer Tina Turner, who lived in Küsnacht (canton of Zurich), also attracted considerable attention from around the world. With regard to Swiss cultural institutions, the Kunsthaus Zürich's approach to the Emil Bührle collection again drew criticism. The return of Chinese cultural objects prompted a number of favourable reports in the Chinese media.

# Switzerland's image among populations abroad

## Infographic 2 Switzerland's image according to the Nation Brands Index 2023



The chart shows Switzerland's ranking in the NBI's six dimensions of perception, as well as in each of their respective indicators. Example: under 'governance', Switzerland ranks first based on the public opinion of 20 countries because it is perceived as a nation with a competent government (1st); a respect for civil rights (1st); and a global commitment to peace and security (1st), environmental protection (2nd), and poverty reduction (4th).

Source: Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index 2023

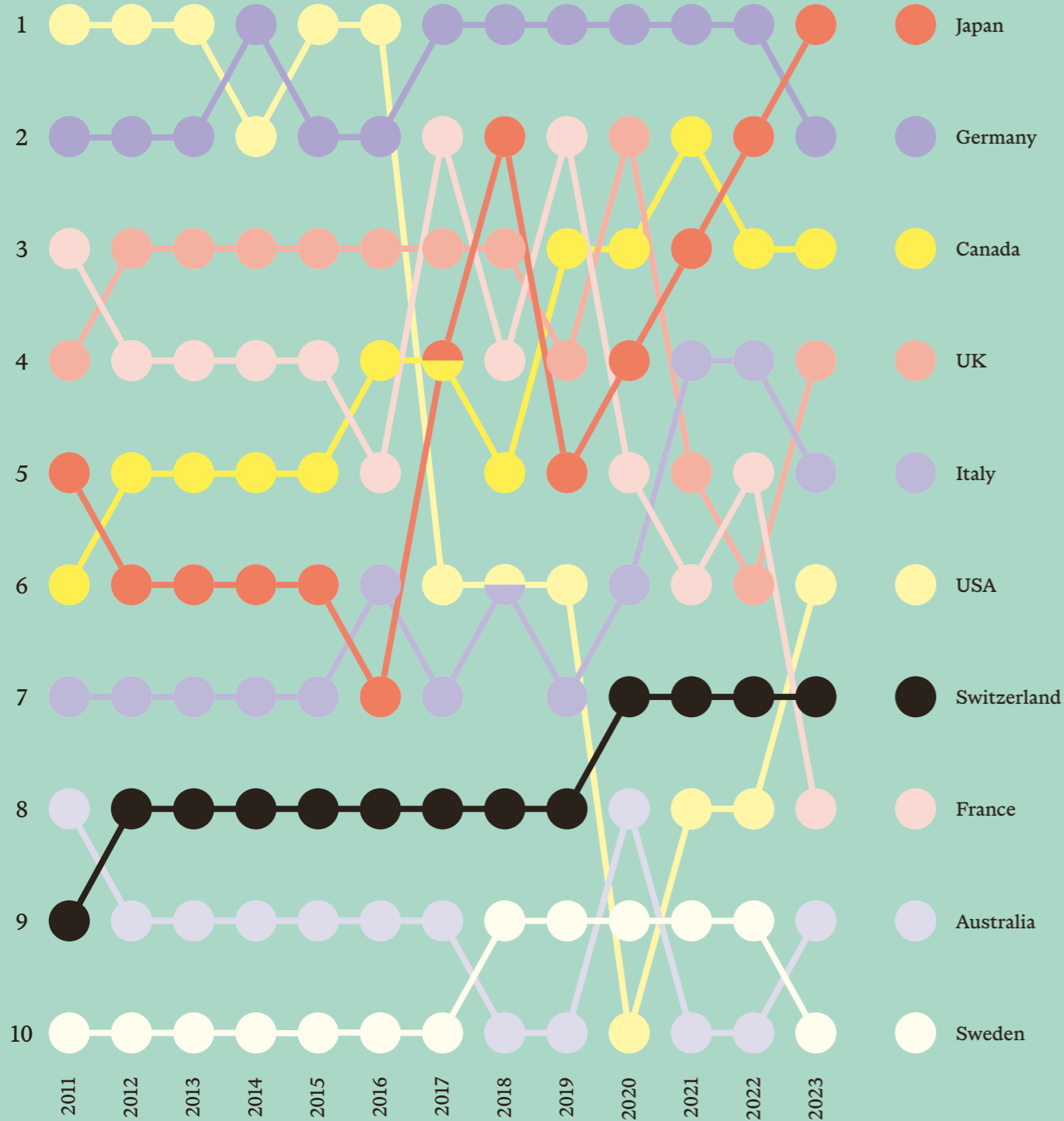
Continuously monitoring how Switzerland is perceived in foreign media and on social media provides a vital means of determining how the country is perceived abroad. However, does this media image correspond with perceptions among the general public abroad? The Nation Brands Index (NBI) is a tried-and-tested ranking system for gauging Switzerland's reputation among the public abroad and comparing its image with that of other countries. Each year, the NBI assesses the strength and attractiveness of countries' images on the basis of representative sampling.

The perception of Switzerland and 59 other nations is surveyed among the general populations of 20 countries around the world. The NBI reveals the public's view of the strengths and weaknesses of Switzerland's image, along with how the perception of Switzerland has changed in recent years. Six dimensions of perception are evaluated in this reputation index: export and innovation; governance; culture and sport; people; tourism; and immigration and investment. Each of these dimensions is assigned several indicators, which are then surveyed. The answers are used to produce a ranking of the assessed countries for each indicator and dimension, as well as for the countries' overall image. Switzerland's respective rankings therefore show how it compares with the 59 other countries in terms of a particular indicator, dimension or its overall image.



### Infographic 3 NBI top ten rankings since 2011

Rank (out of a total of 60)



Overview of the development in overall rankings of the ten most favourably viewed countries in the Nation Brands Index since 2011. Japan is currently the best-ranked nation. Switzerland has occupied a very respectable seventh place since 2020. The survey assesses the image of 60 countries (up from 50 in 2022).

Source: Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index 2023

#### Der Nation Brands Index

Every year, the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index (NBI) gauges the reputation of 60 countries among the general public. Six different aspects are taken into account when determining a country's image: export and innovation; governance; culture and sport; people; tourism; and immigration and investment. The NBI conducts surveys in 20 countries. In each of these countries, around 3,000 people above the age of 18 are surveyed. The NBI 2023 drew on a total sample of 60,072 interviews. The surveys were conducted between 27 June and 3 August 2023 in the following 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.

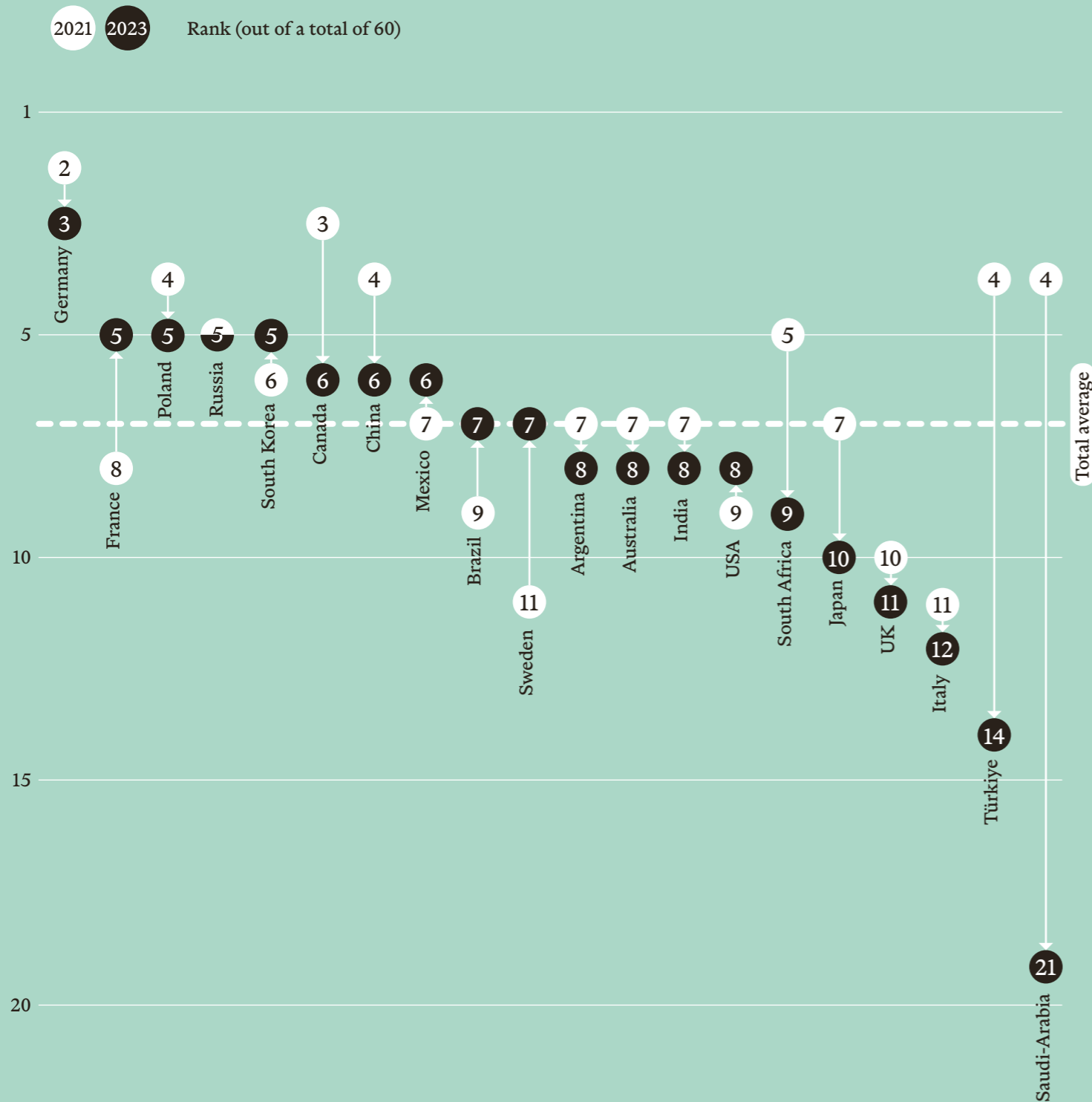
Switzerland placed seventh overall in the NBI's global ranking for 2023, a position it has occupied four years in a row since 2020. It also enjoys a very positive and balanced image in most of the survey's sub-categories: in five of the six dimensions it was in the top ten of the 60 nations compared. The general public abroad

even ranked it first under 'governance', ahead of Canada and Sweden. Switzerland is seen as a country with a competent government that respects civil rights and is committed to peace and security. Switzerland also performed well under 'immigration and investment', where it ranked second, partly because it attained first place in the 'quality of life' indicator. It also received a favourable assessment from the public in the other dimensions: it ranked sixth under, export and innovation', fifth under 'people', and eighth under 'tourism'. Only under 'culture' does it drop to an upper-middle ranking at 18th place, with around a quarter of countries viewed more favourably than Switzerland (c.f. infographic 2).

Overall, this demonstrates that Switzerland continues to enjoy an outstanding and stable image among the public abroad. At seventh place overall, it is among the most favourably viewed countries in the world and is the best-ranked small-to-medium-sized country. The overall best-ranked country in the NBI 2023 rankings is Japan, which has climbed steadily through the ranks in recent years. It is followed by Germany, Canada, the UK, Italy, and the US (c.f. infographic 3).



## Infographic 4 Switzerland's overall ranking among countries surveyed for the NBI in 2021 and 2023



The chart compares Switzerland's overall ranking in 2021 and 2023 among the 20 countries surveyed for the NBI. Example: In 2023 Switzerland had the third-best image among the German public. In 2021 it ranked second there.

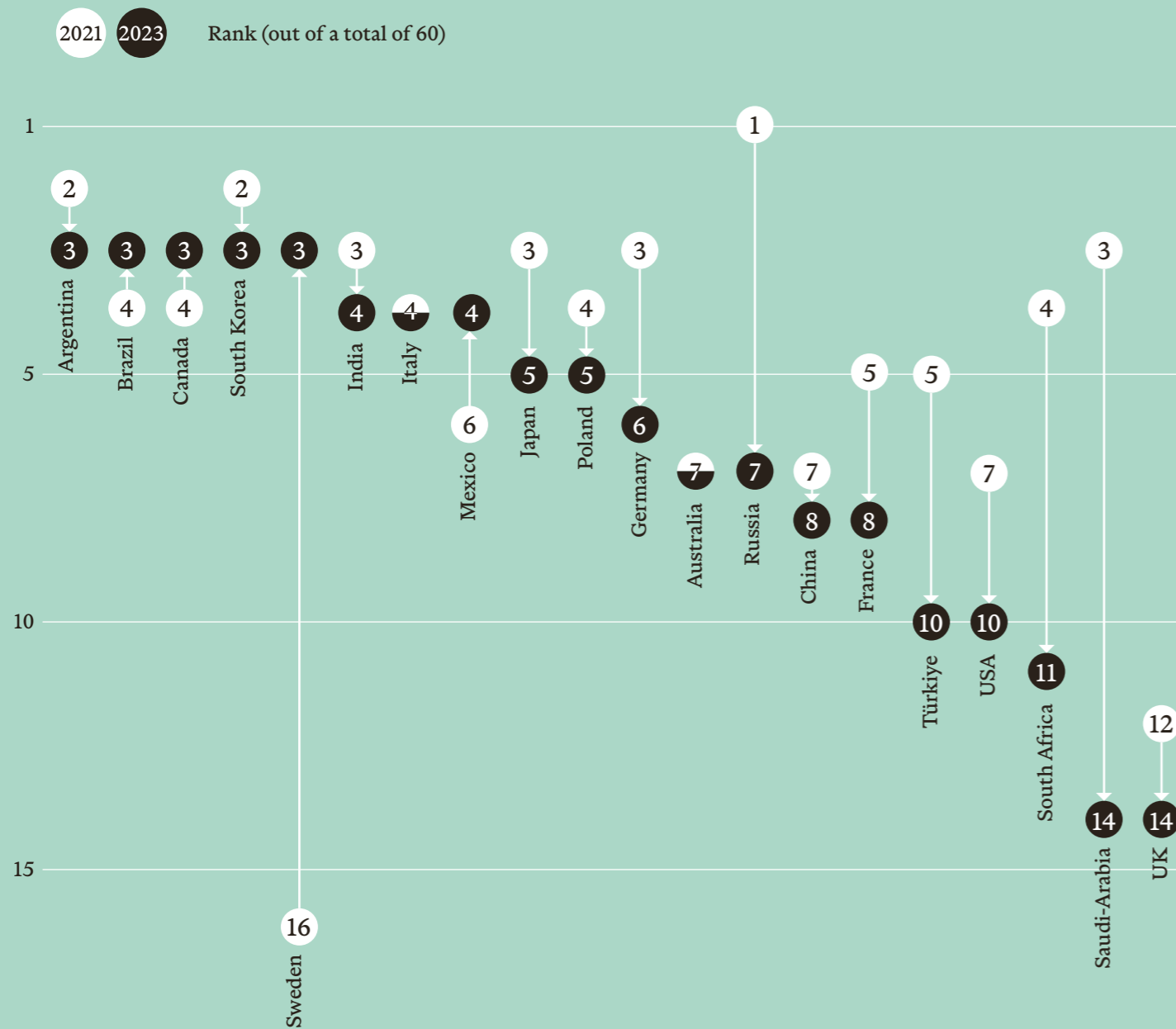
Source: Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index 2023 and 2021

Switzerland's strong performance in the NBI 2023 in terms of overall perception and, above all, the stability of its ranking can nevertheless be contextualised by examining assessments from **individual countries** rather than the global average. Switzerland's ranking varies considerably among the different countries surveyed, and there are sometimes striking differences in how it is perceived over time in individual nations. The following section will therefore briefly analyse Switzerland's overall NBI image in selected countries. It will compare Switzerland's various overall rankings in different countries for 2023, as well as the change in ranking since the NBI 2021 (c.f. infographic 4).

These comparisons make it possible to discern changes in the perception of Switzerland in the individual countries surveyed. As the surveys for the NBI 2021 took place before Russia's attack on Ukraine, the comparisons can also provide an indication of whether Switzerland's attitude and actions in the context of the war have affected the perception of Switzerland among the general public abroad. However, it should be noted that although the NBI's results illustrate developments in how a country is perceived, they cannot reveal the reasons for such changes. These must be ascertained from the current context or by using other methods and instruments.

As its strong overall ranking of seventh suggests, Switzerland has a very positive image in most countries. This applies to the majority of European nations: as before, Switzerland received its highest ranking in 2023 from Germany (3rd) and received above-average rankings from France and Poland (5th). Its rankings from Italy (12th) and the UK (11th) were somewhat lower by comparison. Switzerland's overall image is generally very good in non-European countries too. In most countries, assessments of Switzerland in 2023 were also relatively consistent with those in 2021. Because even small shifts in perception can lead to a change of ranking, only changes of several places are significant.

## Infographic 5 Switzerland's ranking in terms of sympathy among countries surveyed for the NBI in 2021 and 2023



The chart compares how sympathetically Switzerland was perceived in 2021 and 2023 among the 20 countries surveyed for the NBI. Example: Switzerland placed eighth with regard to sympathy among the French public in 2023, after placing fifth in 2021.

Source: Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index 2023 and 2021

Switzerland received its lowest rankings in 2023 from Saudi Arabia (21st) and Turkey (14th), despite receiving a particularly favourable fourth-place ranking from both countries in 2021. These two assessments from predominantly Muslim countries reveal a highly significant and unusual decline in Switzerland's image. The reasons behind these much more critical assessments of Switzerland are not immediately clear. There were no incidents in Switzerland during the period in question that made negative headlines or met with widespread disapproval in the Muslim world. The most likely hypothesis is that the decline in Switzerland's image is a result of it being confused with Sweden. There were several anti-Islamic protests in Sweden in the early summer of 2023, just before the NBI survey began, with copies of the Koran being burnt in some instances. There was strong indignation in a number of Islamic countries as well as large-scale protests against Sweden. The situation was exacerbated by a widespread anti-Swedish disinformation campaign on social media, in which the Swedish authorities were accused of discriminatory behaviour towards Muslims. As a result, Sweden's rating in the NBI 2023 plummeted in the Muslim countries surveyed. It is a well-known phenomenon that people from non-European countries often struggle to distinguish between Switzerland and Sweden.

It is worth noting that Switzerland's handling of the war in Ukraine has had no clear impact on its overall NBI image among the general public in individual countries, despite frequent media criticism. Switzerland's overall image among the general public does not appear to have suffered significantly since 2021, either in Russia or in any of the countries with a particular commitment to supporting Ukraine.

However, the assessments of **general sympathy** towards a country are more informative in this regard. Although this metric is surveyed as part of the NBI, it is not taken into account when determining the overall image. It is generally a more volatile value and is more strongly rooted in emotional reactions to current events. The analysis shows good overall results with regard to sympathy towards Switzerland, but also suggests there has been a moderate decline in Switzerland's popularity among the general public in some Western countries that supported Ukraine (c.f. infographic 5). This is particularly evident in Germany, France and the United States, where sympathy for Switzerland has in some cases declined notably since 2021. The significant decline in sympathy for Switzerland in Russia is also likely to be linked with this issue. The previously mentioned reputational damage in Turkey and Saudi Arabia is clearly expressed here too.

To summarise, Switzerland's overall reputation among the general public abroad remains largely stable and ranges from positive to excellent. It is mostly still perceived as a very sympathetic country. However, there have been individual deteriorations since 2021, particularly in ratings awarded for sympathy. And even if they are likely the result of a misunderstanding, the image slumps in Muslim countries should not be ignored. The detailed analysis of the NBI 2023 shows that despite overall stability, there are certainly critical developments in the perception of Switzerland in some countries that need to be monitored.

# Switzerland's image abroad in 2023

In 2023, Switzerland's image abroad was strongly influenced by political and economic issues. As in 2022, Switzerland's actions in the context of the war in Ukraine attracted considerable attention. The issue was a defining and recurring element of the media's perception and portrayal of Switzerland abroad – evidence that the global relevance of the conflict remains high. The topic did not influence reporting everywhere, though, and had no impact at all in some countries. European countries, the US and Russia in particular reported regularly on Switzerland's positioning in this context.

As in the previous year, the fundamental tone of such reporting was predominantly critical of Switzerland. Western media often referred to the stereotype of Switzerland lacking solidarity, putting its (economic) interests ahead of morality and using neutrality primarily as an excuse. Russian media used every opportunity to spread the narrative that Switzerland's adoption of EU sanctions meant it was no longer neutral.

The collapse of Credit Suisse represented a major turning point in foreign media coverage in 2023. The development attracted unprecedented levels of global media coverage, and temporarily drove most other Swiss-related stories out of the headlines. The majority of this reporting was highly critical, focusing on the banking giant itself and the possible reputational damage to the Swiss financial centre. From the perspective of some foreign media, the demise of Credit Suisse and the way it was handled called into question a number of attributes seen as typically Swiss. They expressed surprise that even the Swiss financial centre was no longer reliable, that its former hallmarks of quality and dependability had been tarnished, and that the behaviour of the Swiss authorities was no longer predictable.

In spring 2023, a narrative briefly emerged in some media that connected various strands of critical reporting. Some leading international media outlets believed Switzerland's model of success had been fundamentally undermined by the downfall of an icon of the Swiss financial centre, controversies around Switzerland's position with regard to the war in Ukraine, its handling of neutrality, and the perceived breakdown in its relations with the EU.

However, fundamental media criticism such as this was the exception rather than the rule. The volume of reporting on the collapse of Credit Suisse abated relatively quickly and the intensity of media criticism relating to the financial centre and the war in Ukraine also relented, particularly in the second half of the year. The topics and points of criticism nevertheless remained present in the background, and foreign media coverage of other events such as the federal elections often made reference to them.

Media reporting is not the only thing that influences how a country is perceived abroad, though. The present analysis also shows that the media's portrayal of a country and the way the general public view it do not always align. The results of the NBI 2023 show that Switzerland still has a positive to excellent image overall, particularly in comparison with other countries, and was able to maintain its overall 7th place ranking among the 60 countries assessed. Respondents ranked Switzerland among the top ten countries in five out of six perception dimensions; it even took the top spot in the area of governance and ranked second for immigration and investment.

However, there was a decline in sympathy towards Switzerland in some countries, including Germany, the US, France and Russia. It is plausible to assume that this is also linked to Switzerland's positioning with regard to the war in Ukraine, as well as the related media reporting. However, this cannot be directly inferred from the results of the NBI. It seems relatively clear, though, that the sometimes significant reputational damage Switzerland suffered in Saudi Arabia and Turkey was the result of it being confused with Sweden. When evaluating such indices, therefore, it is vital to monitor and analyse how Switzerland is perceived in individual countries and dimensions as well as how it places in the overall ranking. This makes it possible to determine whether, and to what extent, critical media reporting is reflected in longer-term public opinion. Overall, as in previous years, Switzerland's political positioning in Europe and

in the world during 2023 was a key influence on its presence in foreign media and its image abroad. In view of the ongoing tensions and crises dominating the world's attention, as well as the upcoming negotiations on relations between Switzerland and the EU, the political dimension is likely to remain a vital factor in how Switzerland is perceived abroad in 2024.

#### **Presence Switzerland**

As a unit within the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), Presence Switzerland is responsible for Switzerland's communication abroad. To help safeguard Switzerland's interests around the world, Presence Switzerland systematically analyses Switzerland's image abroad and implements communication measures tailored to specific target audiences. The communication tools used by Presence Switzerland encompass a range of activities. These include the execution of thematic campaigns, digital initiatives, and representing Switzerland at world expos. Presence Switzerland also manages the House of Switzerland at major international events, and oversees the implementation of communication projects, welcoming delegations to Switzerland, and media relations. The Federal Council regularly sets out the strategy for Switzerland's communication abroad.

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