

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 27 (2000)
Heft: 4

Artikel: Swiss image promotion : in need of a polish
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907654>

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Illustration: Eugen Bachmann-Geiser

Switzerland's ubiquitous presence around the world is striking: every eleventh holder of a Swiss passport lives abroad.

In need of a polish

BY LUKAS M. SCHNEIDER

Switzerland's positive image abroad has suffered in recent times, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world. With its "Swiss Presence" proposal the Federal Council is endeavouring to polish up the country's tarnished image.

RECENTLY A NUMBER of studies have shown that Switzerland continues to enjoy a good reputation abroad. Yet it has suffered a few dents to its image, particularly in the wake of the debate on looted gold and dormant accounts.

According to the findings of a study conducted in the USA on behalf of the "Vorort" umbrella association for Swiss trade, Switzerland's good reputation has come under fire from opinion-formers (intellectuals, politicians and members of the media), while in the eyes of the broad American public it has remained intact. Swiss banks came off worst.

Their dealings in the international world of finance were also negatively viewed by two thirds of respondents in another survey. This recently published report commissioned by the national research programme

for Swiss foreign policy restricted its survey to 15 EU member states and additionally highlighted Europe's low interest in Switzerland.

From CoCo to "Swiss Presence"

Swiss officialdom is aware of the need for action, as witnessed by the reorganisation of the Co-ordinating Committee for the Presence of Switzerland Abroad (CoCo). Since 1976 the task of this commission has been to co-ordinate the promotion of Switzerland abroad. But the CoCo has been unable to perform its intended role, not least due to the modest funds at its disposal and the lack of decisive impetus.

New face for «Swiss Presence»

Paul Reutlinger has been appointed President of "Swiss Presence". The Federal Council has selected the 57-year-old to this prestigious office, which he will perform in addition to his function as head of the Sabena airline. With his wide-ranging international experience Reutlinger, who was in charge of the Swiss Tourist Board between 1994 and 1996, is ideally qualified for the post according to a statement by the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. LS

Based on the existing infrastructure and past experience, the government is aiming for a new start. As of October, new life is to be breathed into Swiss image campaigns under the title "Swiss Presence". Funds are gradually being amassed: whereas the last annual budget of the CoCo amounted to CHF 2.4 million, the sum of CHF 13.8 million will be available to "Swiss Presence" as of 2003. This will enable the existing 5-strong secretariat to be expanded to a staff of 10. Ambassador Rudolf Bärffuss, Vice President of the CoCo, promises a professional and dynamic communication effort.

Guinea pig USA

"Swiss Presence" activities will focus primarily on campaigns in selected target countries, with the USA at the top of the list. The main aim is to communicate positive Swiss characteristics (diversity, humanitarian tradition, close involvement of citizens i. e. direct democracy, quality consciousness, innovativeness) in skilfully packaged forms. Bärffuss is not letting the cat out of the bag at this stage: "All I want to say at present is this: New York will be an important campaign centre, and we promise maximum media impact."

Will it work in the long run? The federal administration is well aware that a national image cannot be improved overnight, but evolves slowly over time. The situation will need to be reviewed at the end of the three-year national programme.

