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Red-and-white to the core?

What image do the Swiss have of their country? How pronounced is the Swiss identity? And how proud are the Swiss of their homeland? We look at a representative poll and ask famous personalities about the Helvetian zeitgeist. By Rolf Ribi

When the Swiss national squad faced the team from Ukraine in Cologne on 26 June 2006 during the FIFA World Cup, 50,000 delighted Swiss fans waving red-and-white flags sang their national anthem, "Trittst im Morgenrot daher". The entire country was gripped by unprecedented euphoria and filled with pride. Henceforth, young Swiss men and women not only wore red t-shirts emblazoned with a white cross, but also thought it cool to do so. "Swissness" is also a winning formula in the world of business, and the country's political parties are using such iconic symbols as the Swiss cross and the Matterhorn in their campaigns for the next election. These newfound national sentiments beg the question as to what the Swiss people feel deep down inside.

Berne-based market research company Gfs has attempted to dissect the Swiss identity, or rather the image people have of their country. Its latest survey, conducted in late 2006, asked questions like, "Are the Swiss proud of their country, their politicians and their economy?", "What does 'Switzerland' mean to you?", "What do you think are the country's strengths and weaknesses?", "What is your relation to the state, and what does it do?", "What should be reformed?", and "What – if anything – poses a threat to the Swiss identity?"

"The Swiss have developed an objective, sober stance towards their country," says former public law professor Georg Müller. He believes that "reverence for one's homeland" has little bearing nowadays. "We feel bound to our community, our canton and our country because we are involved in shaping the political will." Former Federal Councillor Adolf Ogi, now a UN special advisor on sports for development and peace, says, "I note that people are generally more at ease with their Swiss identity. Young Swiss people in particular feel very much part of their country." Former law professor Suzette Sandoz is "not sure whether the Swiss have strong ties to their country nowadays".

She says the Swiss identity "hardly exists anymore" in big cities in particular. Former Federal Councillor Rudolf Friedrich is critical of developments. "A significant proportion of our citizens primarily feel bound to their country because they expect it to provide services and personal benefits," he says.

Of Swiss pride

"Are you proud to be Swiss?" the pollsters asked. Twenty-one percent of respondents said they were "very proud", 54 percent "somewhat proud". In other words, three-quarters of the Swiss take pride in their country, but more than a fifth are not proud of it. "Strong national pride is not very widespread in Switzerland," says Gfs Project Manager Lukas Golder. There are also regional differences. For instance, people in the central cantons of Aargau, Thurgau and Zurich identify less with their country than those in the southern cantons of Grisons, Ticino and Valais.

The pollsters wanted to tease out which parts of the political system and economy this pride was associated with. "What aspects of Swiss politics are you particularly proud

of?" they asked. The most frequent responses were self-determination and independence, neutrality, the coexistence of the different language groups, the Swiss Constitution, civic rights such as initiatives and referenda, and cantonal involvement in federal decision-making. In other words, independence and neutrality were seen as the decisive political elements, factors that 92 percent of respondents were either quite or very proud of. The vast majority was also proud of the coexistence of the different language groups. The Constitution, civic rights and federalism were also mentioned, but not by the majority.

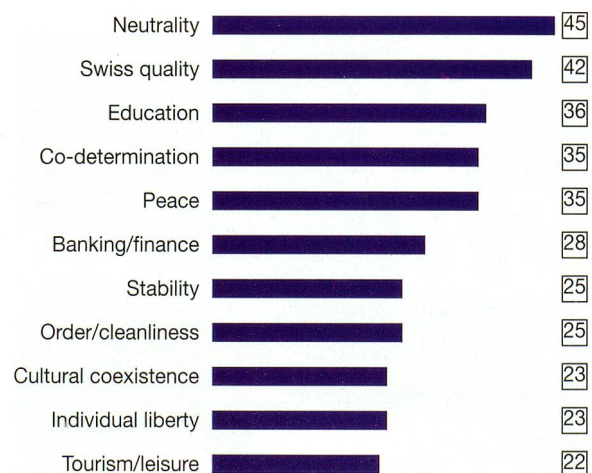
There has been a significant drop in faith in consociationalism, the cooperation between the major political forces in the Swiss Government. Whereas 79 percent of respondents were proud of consociationalism in 2004, this has now fallen to 63 percent. This difference represents almost three-quarters of a million people. "Of all the elements of our political system, consociationalism has lost by far the most ground in terms of national identity," says Lukas Golder. The polarisation at the left and right fringes of the political spectrum obviously has its price, namely decreasing recognition of the merits of consociationalism.

The participants in the survey were asked what aspects of the Swiss economy they were particularly proud of. Most people first mentioned Switzerland's international reputation for quality. This was followed by the watch-making industry, research, strong Swiss brands operating abroad, the country's

Switzerland's strengths (2006)

Which Swiss strengths have been discussed or written about recently?

(Multiple responses possible)



flourishing small and medium-sized companies, and the engineering and pharmaceutical sectors. Swiss banking and finance were also listed as strengths of the Swiss economy, although fully 16 percent of respondents said they weren't proud of them, and 19 percent were not at all proud of Swiss banking secrecy.

The poll also found that the Swiss are proud of the difference between their economy and that of other countries. Seventeen percent of those polled thought the Swiss economy compared very favourably with other economies, while a further 69 percent thought it compared quite well. And increasing numbers of the Swiss are proud of this difference.

"Yes, I'm proud to be Swiss," former Federal Councillor Adolf Ogi enthuses. He says Switzerland is a beautiful country with a high standard of living and well-oiled democratic processes. "The Swiss have always been proud of their country," says Professor Georg Müller, pointing to the small state, the different language regions and cultures, the country's independence and prosperity. And yet, "The sober Swiss don't usually express this national pride." Jakob "Köbi" Kubn, the coach of the Swiss national football squad, professes his allegiance less reservedly. "I love Switzerland," he says. "I am proud to represent my country in my chosen sport," although he adds, "If my home was in another country, I'd love it too."

Writer Adolf Muschg stresses that because Switzerland is a confederation rather than "merely a nation like any other", the Swiss prima-

rily focus on smaller units like their community and their canton. "That doesn't foster national pride, which has never really been a natural phenomenon," he says. What is more, "Switzerland serves as a pleasant reminder that the 'nation' is a recent product of history and certainly not a fortunate creation." Former Federal Councillor Rudolf Friedrich says, "Why should I be proud of something that is not of my doing? I am not proud, but immensely grateful to be able to live and work in a peaceful and liberal country." Indeed, he condemns "damned national pride, with its arrogance and scant regard for others". Professor Suzette Sandoz from Vaud voices similar sentiments. "I am more appreciative than proud because I am genuinely proud of my father, my parents and grandparents, all of whom were true and honest patriots." In any case, she adds, "National pride is a feeling expressed by war generations".

What Switzerland means

The question about what Switzerland means at a personal level provided a clearer picture of subjective Swiss perceptions of their country. The most popular responses were security and freedom (21%), neutrality (20%), a sense of order and precision (19%), the countryside, liberty and freedom of expression, prosperity, money and luxury, and cleanliness. The primary image of a safe and peaceful country has existed and persisted for several years. Second-placed neutrality proved particularly important to the Swiss last year.

When the market researchers asked respondents to name the three factors that best

described Switzerland, they got the following overall results: Security and freedom topped the list, followed by neutrality, liberty and freedom of expression, democracy and co-determination, cleanliness, a sense of order and precision, prosperity, money and luxury, and finally the countryside. Solidarity was rarely mentioned, the terms "home" and "homeland" even less often.

The strengths and weaknesses

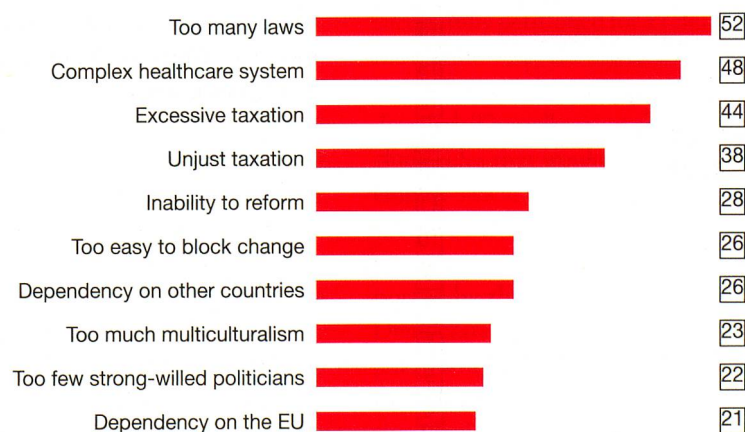
The respondents were also asked what they considered to be the country's strengths. One political factor was named above all others: neutrality. Unfortunately, the survey did not analyse whether this was a passive neutral attitude (of the kind that Federal Councillor Blocher wants) or an active, peace-promoting attitude by a neutral country (of the kind to which Federal President Calmy-Rey prescribes). Quality and education were named as Switzerland's primary strengths, followed by political co-determination and peace. Tellingly, finance and banking were named more often than political concepts such as individual liberty, humanitarian traditions and even collective bargaining. Switzerland's other perceived strengths include its health service and pharmaceutical industry, agriculture and watch-making industry.

So what did the representative sample of Switzerland's citizenry consider the country's greatest weaknesses? Interestingly enough, most of the issues raised point the finger directly at the state itself: too many laws, an over-complicated healthcare system, excessive taxation, inadequate fiscal justice, and an inability to reform. Other named weaknesses included Switzerland's dependency on other countries, specifically the European Union, too much multiculturalism, and a shortage of strong-willed politicians. Switzerland's deliberate political isolation was also mentioned: its lack of openness towards other countries and the decision not to join the European Union. "The participants were keen to blame the politicians for Switzerland's weaknesses, focussing on key elements of the state, like taxation and legislation," says Lukas Golder.

Asked to name Switzerland's strengths, Professor Suzette Sandoz listed direct democracy and consociationalism, freedom of expression and the ability to engage in political dialogue. She said the country's weaknesses were the sale of major Swiss companies to foreign buyers, wor-

Switzerland's weaknesses (2006)

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ries about Switzerland's image abroad, and the loss of a sense of mutual responsibility and obligation. Former Federal Councillor Rudolf Eriedrich said the main strengths were domestic stability and a powerful economy based on the combined efforts of tens of thousands of people. The greatest weakness in his eyes is that the country is "constantly trying to catch up with international developments, for instance with regard to the European Union and the army, even though small states like ours can no longer defend themselves autonomously." Adolf Muschg praises the fact that Switzerland has been a "European country" since as far back as the 18th and 19th Centuries, and that its late medieval structure created the foundation for "a small state with common-sense social policies and great cosmopolitan potential". However, the former literature professor considers its pragmatism a weakness. "Switzerland always acts on a case-by-case basis and therefore appears lacklustre and unimaginative," he bemoans.

Former magistrate Adolf Ogi stresses "the important role our small country plays on the international stage thanks to immense efforts by the Swiss in humanitarian and other fields". He thinks Swiss companies must remain innovative and competitive and place their faith in typically Swiss values like quality, reliability and precision. The much-travelled Swiss film director Marc Forster says apolitically, "When you arrive [in Switzerland], you get the impression that the air is simply much better than anywhere else in the world. Everything is so clean, the people are well-dressed, the buildings look freshly painted. Everywhere else in the world things look so worn out."

No urgent demands for reform

If Switzerland's weaknesses were seen as being primarily political, the politicians would have to sit up and listen. Nonetheless, as Lukas Golder explains, "In spite of the catalogue of weaknesses and potential threats, there were no clear demands for reform." Indeed, fewer than half of those polled were completely or even partly in favour of reforming the political system, and only 15 percent firmly believed that the political system needed a thorough overhaul.

Even so, when the respondents were presented with a list of current political objectives, their political "agenda" was easy to spot, namely securing the old age and survivors' pension scheme (deemed very important by 80% of respondents), increasing economic growth, minimising price rises in the healthcare system, keeping state expenditure in check and combating crime, followed by other aims like promoting education, cutting red tape, securing employment, improving conditions for working parents and stabilising greenhouse gas emissions.

Switzerland's companies fared somewhat better than the country's politicians in terms of perceived weaknesses and the need for reform, but a majority of the representative sample wanted more jobs and more vocational training places and thought major companies paid too little tax. Small and medium-sized companies were judged considerably less harshly. Respondents praised the benefits they brought the country as a whole, and acknowledged their fiscal input more than that of the "big players".

Ambiguity over the role of the state

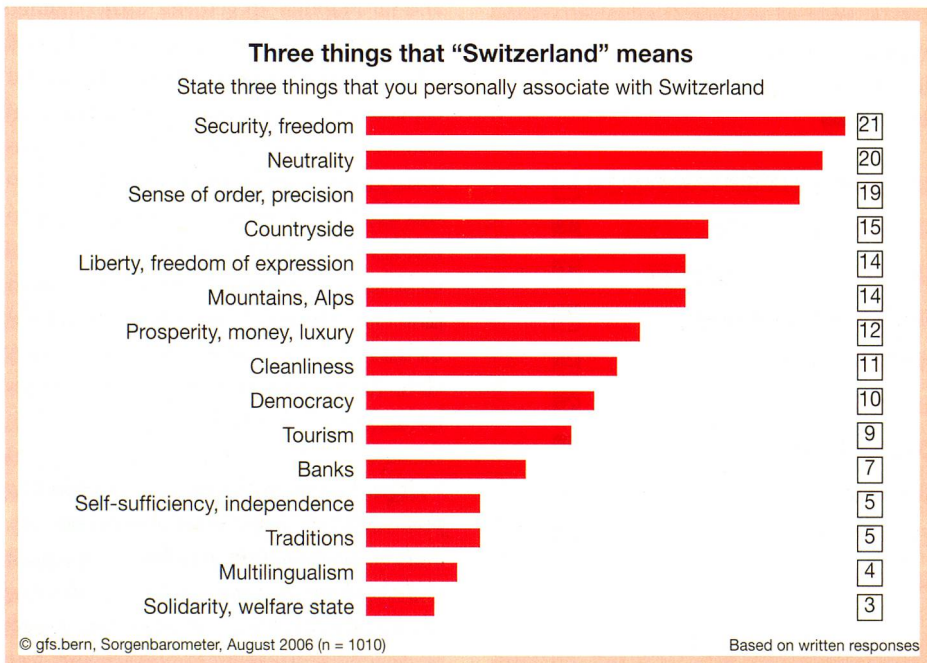
The market researchers from Berne also enquired about what the state did for individual citizens, and conversely, what they contributed to the state. A narrow majority of those polled considered that the state provided too little, and felt let down by it. On the other hand, almost a third said they got the impression that the state did too much for the general public.

The responses to the question about individual contributions towards the state and the country in general make sobering reading. Nearly half of the Swiss men and women in the survey believed that they themselves did far too much; a clearly individualist standpoint. Kennedy's famous remark "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country" obviously has little bearing in Switzerland.

Threats to the identity

According to the findings of the survey, immigration is seen as the greatest threat to the Swiss identity. No fewer than 74 percent of respondents put this issue top of their list of concerns, and the figure is rising. The other issues perceived by the majority of those polled as threatening the Swiss identity were opening Switzerland up to the outside world, increasing egotism among the Swiss, sluggish political reform and political polarisation brought on by right-wing and left-wing parties.

The survey says nothing about what the Swiss abroad think about their country, their homeland. So does the answer lie in the maxim "If you want to understand your homeland better, go abroad"? Or perhaps Peter Haffner, the US correspondent of Tages-Anzeiger magazine, was right when he wrote, "The Swiss abroad are living proof that time travel is possible. They have frozen their homeland in their minds at the point at which they left it."



Source: The survey on the Swiss identity quoted in the above article was carried out by the Gfs market research company of Berne on behalf of Credit Suisse (www.credit-suisse.com/emagazine)