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The Swiss Minaret Ban Referendum and Switzerland's International Reputation: A Vote with an Impact

DINA WYLER

Abstract

In 2009, Switzerland prohibited the constructions of minarets on a nationwide basis due to a popular referendum. Immediately, the status of Switzerland as an ambassador for diplomacy and neutrality was questioned by the international community. This paper discusses the short-term impact of the vote on Switzerland's international reputation by analyzing Switzerland's ranking in the National Brand Index (NBI) between 2005 and 2015. The analysis shows that the general international reputation of Switzerland as well as its people's and government's reputation experienced a decline after the vote. The Swiss, in particular, suffered a loss in reputation abroad, while the reputation of Switzerland's government maintained a high ranking. An explanation for these differences is the way the Swiss Federal Council acted before and after the vote. The Council opposed the initiative from the very beginning and started a campaign to assure that the good relations with other countries, especially Muslim countries remain intact. These efforts paid off, as the analysis of the NBI shows. By actively reaching out to important parties such as the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Swiss government could maintain its position in the top three of the NBI ranking. This was possible due to Switzerland's long-term strategy in "image-cultivation" abroad. Meanwhile, the Swiss people who voted for the ban with 57 yes-votes experienced a downward trend in their international reputation.

Introduction

As a neutral country with a well-functioning democratic system, Switzerland has always maintained high appreciation within the international community as a reliable partner.¹ However, when in 2009 the Swiss electorates voted in favor of a nationwide ban of the construction of minarets, the status of Switzerland as an ambassador for diplomacy and neutrality was questioned.² Not only the 350,000 Muslims living in Switzerland saw this vote as an affront, but so did the Muslims and non-Muslims around the world; they expressed their disappointment in the Swiss people, and accused them of being intolerant and against peaceful coexistence.³

To understand this vote, one has to understand Switzerland's unique democratic system. Switzerland is a direct democracy. Each individual has the possibility to collect 100,000 signatures within 18 months to obtain a nationwide vote on a certain issue.

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This tool is called popular initiative. If the initiative is accepted, the Federal Constitution is rewritten by including the initiative's text. In order to be adopted, the majority of the Swiss people as well as the majority of the cantons have to accept the proposal. Before the vote, the Swiss government reviews the initiative in order to make sure that it does not violate any international treaty or human rights law.⁴ Despite its regular usage, popular initiatives hardly ever pass. From 160 submitted initiatives between 1891 and 2015, only 15 were adopted. In many cases, the initiative serves as an instrument to indicate current fears and concerns within the Swiss society and helps put pressure on the government to act even though the initiative does not have an actual chance to pass.⁵

In the case of the minaret initiative, the initiators were able to collect 115,000 signatures within the given time period.⁶ Previous surveys indicated that the initiative would have no chance at the ballot.⁷ The fact that the initiative passed with 57 yes-votes came therefore as a shock. The idea to launch an initiative to ban the construction of minarets emerged in 2005 when the members of a Turkish mosque in a small town in Switzerland intended to build a minaret. This decision provoked strong opposition within the local community. Within a short period of time, they collected 400 signatures in order to prevent the project. However, the local authorities repealed the initiative's claim and allowed the construction of the minaret on the condition that it will not be used to call to prayers. In 2009, the minaret was finally built.⁸ At the same time, three other Muslim communities planned to build minarets. These developments provoked a vivid political discussion in Switzerland and marked the beginning of a growing opposition against future constructions of minarets within the Swiss society.

Savannah Dodd summarizes:

The [...] minaret controversy and the surge of minaret building plans across Switzerland, along with the 2004 French headscarf debate, the 2005 London bomb attacks, and the fury over a Danish cartoonist's portrayal of Muhammad in 2006, were the kindling needed to garner public support.⁹

Back in 2006, when the minaret of the Turkish mosque was in planning, members of the right-wing Swiss People's Party (SVP) founded the *Egerkingen Committee*. After an unsuccessful attempt to pass a legislation through the Swiss parliament, they decided to launch an initiative to change the third paragraph of Article 72 of the Federal Constitution. The construction of minarets should be prohibited on a nationwide basis.¹⁰ The initiative committee argued that minarets would symbolize a religious and political claim for power that threatens Switzerland and its Christian values. According to the committee, a ban of minarets would be a symbolic gesture against the subtle Islamization that would take place not only in Switzerland but in whole of Europe.¹¹

Minarets have functioned as a religious symbol, pointing to heaven and as a reminder to Allah's presence on earth from the eighth century onwards. Next to its religious symbolism, the minaret also served as a watchtower during battles.¹² In comparison to the European average, Switzerland has the second lowest number of mosques per Muslim resident with one mosque per 4000 Muslim.¹³ Even lower is the number of minarets. Only three of them existed by the time the initiative was launched. In terms of religious freedom, the minaret referendum evoked a vivid discussion whether or not it violated international human rights law. The Federal Assembly saw no violation of freedom of religion by the initiative's text. In a public statement they argued that:

... the majority of international law is not mandatory and cannot be an absolute limit on the revision of the constitution. A popular initiative cannot be declared

invalid because it violated the non-mandatory standards of international law. If it is accepted by the people and the cantons, the federal government must consider terminating the international agreement in question.¹⁴

While the Swiss Federal Assembly verified that no international treaty was violated by the initiative's claim, several human rights organizations argued that the ban would directly restrict the religious freedom of Muslims living in Switzerland.¹⁵ Human Rights Watch announced that the referendum "violates the rights of observant Muslims to manifest their religion in public".¹⁶ Antoine Boesch, a Swiss lawyer, contested the ban by reaching out to the European Convention on Human Rights court in Strasbourg. But the court refused the lawsuit due to the fact that the complainant could not sufficiently prove to be a victim of the violation of the European Human Rights convention.¹⁷

Whether or not the religious freedom of Swiss Muslims was endangered by the initiative, as a country which is regularly involved in peace talks and tries to promote equality and religious freedom around the globe, banning a religious symbol had a high symbolic meaning for Switzerland. All around the world politicians condemned the decision the Swiss electorates had made and characterized it as a direct attack on the freedom of religion. The United Nations' human rights chief called the referendum a "discriminatory and deeply divisive step which risks putting the county on a collision course with its international rights obligations".¹⁸ These statements were the beginning of a publicly held debate whether or not Switzerland's credibility as "an advocate of international law and its status as the host-state of international organizations"¹⁹ would be seriously threatened. The aim of this paper is to contribute to this discussion, by analyzing the short-term impact the vote had on Switzerland's international reputation. In the first chapter, the concept of international reputation and why it matters will be discussed, followed by the summary of the international reactions of the ban and how the Swiss government dealt with the situation. Finally, the actual international reputation of Switzerland from 2005 to 2015 will be analyzed with the help of the National Brand Index (NBI).

International Reputation as a Tool of Power

One of the most important tools in the field of international relations in order to explain a specific outcome is the contribution of power between nation states. The classic theories of international relations define power as military strength. However, not every state's actions can or should be traced back to their military strength or weakness. Significant aspects of how states interact with each other are not based on military capacities but on other, more subtle forms of power. These aspects are called *Soft Power*, a term strongly promoted by American political scientist, J. S. Jr. Nye. For Nye, *Soft Power* is "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies".²⁰

International reputation is one aspect of *Soft Power*. The international reputation of a country is usually defined as the "collective judgments of a foreign country's image".²¹ Robert Jervis, a well-respected professor for international affairs at Columbia University, once stated that international reputation is crucial in order to understand how the international system functions and can sometimes even be "of greater use than a significant increment of military or economic power".²² The way a country is seen from other countries makes a huge difference to its diplomatic relations with

other nations.²³ It can directly determine a country's ability to influence international politics. In nowadays globalized world where information is available all the time, the foreign public's opinion becomes even more crucial and can strongly influence a decision-making processes of a country. Due to the importance of a country's international reputation, a good management of the own reputation abroad is a paramount task of every state's public diplomacy.²⁴

Switzerland is by nature strongly dependent on international reputation as a tool of power. It does not have any noteworthy natural resources. Its population and its territory as well as its army are rather small. Therefore, Switzerland does not fulfill the classic criteria to be a leading power in the world. Nevertheless, Switzerland has always enjoyed a remarkable international reputation and is undoubtedly considered to be a key partner in diplomatic relations. Compared to its size, Switzerland has a rather big influence in international world politics and is regularly involved in critical international crisis such as the war in Ukraine when Switzerland was in charge of the presidency of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2014. Switzerland's global reputation is also based on its frequent role as a protecting power for a number of states without formal diplomatic relations. The small European state represents for example American interests in Iran.²⁵ Furthermore, Switzerland is the host country for the most important international institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization and the International Red Cross. In addition, Switzerland has a leading function in different diplomatic fora such as the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (AoC) or the Nyon Process which aims to establish an "Islamic-Western" dialogue. Through all these collaborations Switzerland has established a "solid body of expertise" that is internationally recognized and appreciated.²⁶

As discussed in this paper, international reputation is a crucial aspect when it comes to international relations and makes a country more influential than it would otherwise be considering its size or its military strength. Especially for Switzerland, whose main advantage is its good image in the world as a mediator between countries and its political stability, losing this positive public opinion would be a great disadvantage. The decision of the Swiss electorate to establish a nationwide ban of the construction of minarets therefore became a great challenge for Switzerland's international reputation and therefore for Switzerland's political position on the international scene in general.²⁷

International Reaction and the Role of the Swiss Government

Already in 2007 when the minaret referendum was launched, the campaign of the SVP received high international attention in the media. This was mainly due to the controversial posters that were published by the SVP to promote their cause. The posters showed the Swiss flag covered by minarets and a woman in a burka. The fact that the minarets resembled missiles provoked national and international reactions. After the adoption of the initiative by the Swiss electorates in 2009, the international media coverage grew even bigger. More than 4000 articles all around the world reported on the vote.²⁸ The topic was also intensively discussed in the Arab media. Two of the most popular Arab satellite television stations, Al-Arabia.net and Al-Jazeera.net published over 50 articles between September and October 2010.²⁹

The international reactions were diverse. Conservative parties across Europe praised the Swiss people's decision and their courage to stand up for their values and called for a similar vote in their countries. At the same time, the vote provoked numerous negative reactions throughout the world. The French foreign minister saw the ban as "an

expression of intolerance”³⁰ and the Vatican stated that the ban would be an “infringement of religious freedom”.³¹ In Islamabad people demonstrated against the result and burned Swiss flags.³² Furthermore, a Turkish minister called upon all Muslims to withdraw their money from Swiss bank accounts.³³ Some representatives of Muslim governments as well as the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC)³⁴ and the Arab League demanded that the Swiss government cancels the new article in the Constitution due to its collision with basic human rights.³⁵ Nevertheless, albeit reacting very emotionally in some cases, the public reactions from all around the world were generally less harsh.³⁶ Critical voices mostly remained moderate and were accompanied by calls to remain calm.³⁷ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Palestinian National Authority issued a press release, calling Muslims to react by actively offering a dialogue in order to overcome prejudice.³⁸ The Grand Mufti of Egypt encouraged “all Swiss Muslims to use dialogue and legal means to ban the contest”.³⁹

Not only official state leaders were involved in this huge public outcry, the public, too, participated in this debate. Aziz Douai and his team conducted a study to analyze the over 1500 online comments on Al-Arabia.net and Al-Jazeera.net concerning the issue. Surprisingly, not all comments were negatively connoted. On the contrary, the public Arabian opinion seemed to be highly ambivalent. Forty-three percent of the Al-Arabia commenters opposed the ban while 33% were clearly in support of the vote. Even more surprising are the results for Al-Jazeera, where a majority of the readers (56%) had a clearly positive opinion about the minaret ban. Only 20% opposed the referendum while 24% remained neutral. In some comments, the vote was framed as an attack on Muslims, and their religious freedom and many commenters called upon their governments to submit an official response to Switzerland’s decision. However, many commentators reminded others of the lack of religious freedom in many Muslim countries and called for an end of these double standards.⁴⁰

The Swiss government was well aware of the possible damage of its image abroad and put great effort into promoting Switzerland as an open-minded country during the whole campaign of the SVP. The Federal Council spread information about the initiative and about the Swiss political system, thereby trying to “strengthen the positive image of Switzerland in the leading international media as a multicultural, open and humanitarian country”.⁴¹ In order to do so, the council reverted to channels that trace back to the 1970s.⁴² Back then, the Swiss parliament expressed its wish to establish a better network to promote Switzerland’s image abroad. As a result, the parliament finalized the “Global Concept for Switzerland’s presence abroad” in December 1974, followed by a Federal Act of Parliament which institutionalized a commission of 20 people which should elaborate a global concept for Switzerland’s presence abroad. The financial budget grew over the years up to 2.4 million Swiss Francs.

The work of this body became increasingly important in the 1990s when Switzerland faced harsh international criticism due to its numerous unclaimed bank assets from the Second World War. This topic triggered a massive echo in the media, especially in the US, the UK and Israel where Switzerland was accused of taking advantage of these dormant bank accounts from possible Jewish victims of the Holocaust. In order to prevent a loss of its good image, the government took action and founded *Presence Switzerland*. The task of *Presence Switzerland* was to establish “image-cultivation” abroad in order to guarantee stable and long-term relationships with other countries on which Switzerland could rely in possible crisis in the future.⁴³ This goal should be achieved by “promoting Switzerland’s visibility, explaining Switzerland’s political concerns and positions to a foreign public and developing and fostering Switzerland’s network of contacts with

foreign decision-makers and opinion leaders abroad”.⁴⁴ In 2007, when the popular initiative was launched, the Swiss Federal Council used the resources which *Presence Switzerland* had built over years in order to assure that Switzerland’s international reputation will not suffer. Immediately, the government set up a working group to observe the developments related to this specific issue.⁴⁵ Months before the actual vote, the Swiss Federal Council advised *Presence Switzerland* to deepen its efforts in reinforcing the collaboration with Swiss embassies and a more detailed monitoring of the media coverage of Switzerland abroad.⁴⁶ The general idea was to “identify countries and credible political, media and religious opinion-leaders abroad with whom contact had already been established, and who might be involved in communications activities”.⁴⁷ In summer 2009, shortly before the popular vote, the work was again intensified.⁴⁸

Despite these efforts, the acceptance of the ban came as a shock for the Federal Council. The main arguments why people voted in favor of the ban were that minarets would not be a part of the Swiss culture, and that Islam would be an intolerant and expansionist religion.⁴⁹ Federal Councilor Evelyne Widmer-Schlumpf immediately took the floor and reiterated her personal and the council’s discontent with the Swiss people’s decision and clearly stated that the Federal Council does not believe that the ban of minarets would be a useful approach to deal with Islamism. Instead, she called for an extensive dialogue between the different religious groups in Switzerland.⁵⁰ In addition, the Federal Council immediately released a press statement in Arabic to clarify the implications of the vote. In order to spread its message, the Swiss Federal Council used their well-established networks, most importantly the network of the AoC and the Nyon Process. The Minister of Foreign Affairs personally called the Secretary-General of the OIC in order to emphasize Switzerland’s will to remain an important partner to the OIC.⁵¹ According to Swiss ambassador Johannes Matyassy, these trustworthy networks and relationships with politicians and religious leaders abroad were a useful tool in order to assure a proactive dialogue with international partners.⁵² Instead of public outrage, many representatives of other countries met with Swiss officials and discussed what impact the ban will have for their relationship.⁵³

Empirical Analysis

After discussing how the global public and officials reacted to the ban, and what the Swiss Federal Council’s strategy was in order to prevent Switzerland from losing its good international reputation, the next chapter will empirically analyze the actual development of Switzerland’s image between 2005 and 2015.

Data and Method: NBI

Measuring something as abstract as reputation is not an easy undertaking. One of the few who developed a strategy to measure this highly complex concept is Simon Anholt. Anholt is a British political consultant and “the world’s leading expert on nation-branding”⁵⁴ who advised politicians in over 50 countries on how to change the national image of their country. In 2005 he developed the NBI, which has become a well-known pool of enormous quantity of data. The NBI measures how positively each country is perceived by a representative sample of 20,000 people from 20 developed and developing panel countries that “play important and diverse roles in international relations”.⁵⁵ In each country, approximately 1050 interviews are conducted every year. Next to an overall rating of the nation’s reputation, six sep-

arate dimensions of national competence are measured (export, governance, culture, people, immigration and investment). Every respondent has to rate a country by answering three to five questions to each dimension on a scale. The final NBI score of a country is the average from the six mentioned dimensions.⁵⁶

For this analysis, the NBI of Switzerland from 2005 to 2015 will be compared in order to examine whether the image of Switzerland has changed after the ban in 2009.⁵⁷ First, the general NBI scores from each year will be compared. To get a more precise picture, the dimensions of *Governance* and *People* will be analyzed, too. Additionally to those two dimensions, the only two Muslim countries in the sample, Egypt and Turkey will be analyzed separately. Although those two examples cannot speak for the entire Muslim world, it serves as an interesting indicator to see whether and how the image of Switzerland changed there in comparison to non-Muslim states. In the next chapters, the general development and the most striking differences are described and in the end of this paper the results and their implication are evaluated.

Ranking

As Figure 1 illustrates, Switzerland was positioned on the 5th rank out of a total of 50 countries between 2005 and 2007. From 2008 to 2010, Switzerland lost some of its reputation and was now only ranked 8th in the overall NBI ranking. In Germany, China and Poland Switzerland could keep its 5th rank while Sweden put Switzerland on rank 16th, the lowest rank of all countries. The downward trend continued in 2011 as Switzerland’s reputation decreased again. The country was now positioned 9th in the ranking. In 2013 Switzerland could regain its 8th rank. Up until 2015, its rating remained unchanged.

Remarkable here is how Switzerland’s reputation strongly fluctuates in Egypt and Turkey. Up until 2009 the two Muslim countries in the sample rated Switzerland’s reputation as well as the other countries’, or even better in Turkey’s case. However, in 2010, one year after the ban, both countries had a worse perception of Switzerland than the average country in the sample. The strongest differences occurred in Turkey where Switzerland lost 6 ranks within one year and was now positioned on the 12th rank. Similarly, Switzerland experienced a loss in reputation in Egypt in the same year. There, the reputation of Switzerland continued to decrease until 2011. Interestingly, the rankings of

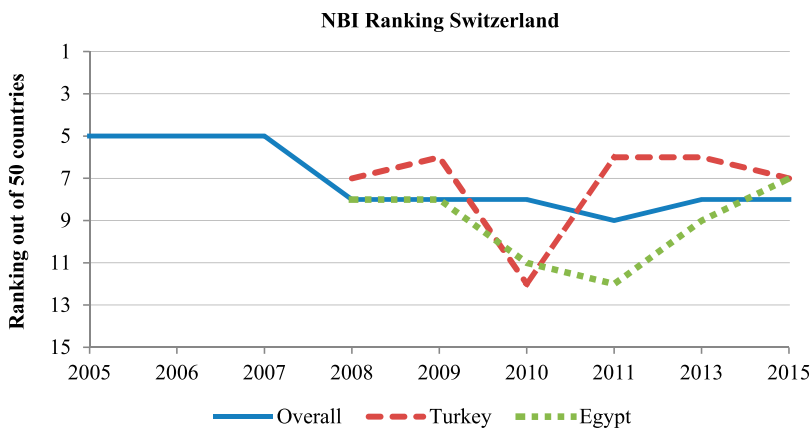


Figure 1. NBI Ranking for Switzerland.

Egypt and Turkey align again with the general voting, and in 2015 the strong downwards trend in Egypt's and Turkey's perception of Switzerland turned again into a disproportionately positive image of Switzerland. In 2015, both Muslim countries had an even better opinion of Switzerland than the other 18 nationalities in the sample.

Governance

The dimension Governance measures how competent and honest a foreign public believes a government is, whether the people believe the foreign government respects the rights of its citizens, how fair it treats them, as well as the country's global behavior in the areas of international peace and security, environmental protection, and world poverty reduction. Respondents also select one adjective that best describes the government in each country.⁵⁸ For this analysis only the general rating for *Governance* as well as whether the Swiss government is believed to respect the right of its citizens will be analyzed.

The overall rating of Switzerland's government remained more or less stable over all the years. However, similarly to the general NBI ranking, the sub-category *Governance* too, experienced a slight downward trend in the years 2009 to 2013 when Switzerland lost its first placement to Canada due to the questions of being competently and honestly governed and for behaving responsibly in international peace and security.⁵⁹ As in the overall ranking, the two Muslim countries in the sample generally give Switzerland worse grades than the average respondent of the 20 sample countries that were interviewed (See Figure 2). While Turkey's rating follows more or less the general trend, Egypt's rankings for Switzerland constantly fluctuate. Egypt's low ranking of the Swiss government in the year 2011 is remarkable.

The fact that the two Muslim countries usually rate Switzerland harsher than the average can also be observed in the sub-category questions. In 2011, Switzerland was generally ranked as the best country when it comes to the competence and honesty of a government. Egyptian respondents, however, only believed that the Swiss government was the 6th most honest and most competent government out of 50 countries. The same is true for the question about how fair a government treats its citizens and how much it protects their rights (See Table 1).

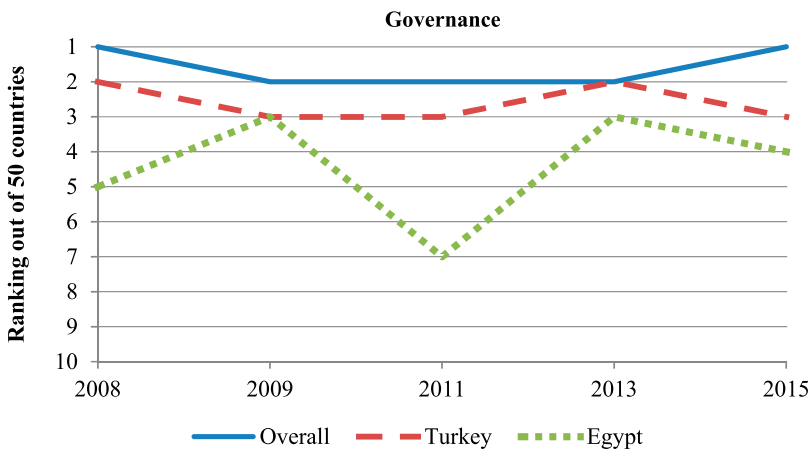


Figure 2. NBI in the dimension *Governance* (Switzerland).

Table 1. Switzerland’s ranking in the sub-questions for the dimension Governance.

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2013	2015
Competent and honest (overall)	1	2	2	1	1	1
Competent and honest (Turkey)	–	–	–	2	3	4
Competent and honest (Egypt)	–	–	–	6	3	2
Rights and fairness (overall)	1	1	2	2	2	1
Rights and fairness (Turkey)	–	–	–	2	1	3
Rights and fairness (Egypt)	–	–	–	6	4	3

People

The dimension *People* analyzes whether respondents would feel welcome when visiting the country, whether respondents want to have a close friend from that country as well as how willing respondents would be to hire a well-qualified person from that country. Respondents are also asked to select adjectives to describe the predominant images they have of the people in each country.⁶⁰ For this paper, only the overall ranking for the dimension *People* as well as the question of how welcome someone would feel in Switzerland will be analyzed.

In comparison to the Swiss government which remained within the top three throughout the years, the Swiss people receive comparable low grades. Surprisingly, the reputation of Swiss people increased in 2009, the year the ban was implemented. Only one year later however, the reputation of the Swiss population experienced a decrease (See Figure 3). Between 2010 and 2015, Switzerland remained on a rather low rate. As the average countries (including Turkey and Egypt) have a better perception of Swiss people in 2009 than in 2008, this positive perception changed after 2009.

As shown in Table 2, most notable are the bad rankings for Swiss people in Egypt in the year 2008 and 2011. More striking than the overall grading however, are the responses for the sub-questions. In the years after the ban, namely in 2010 and 2011, Switzerland lost two ranks in the category on how welcome one would feel in the country. In 2011 and 2013, respondents of both Muslim countries agreed that they would not feel welcome

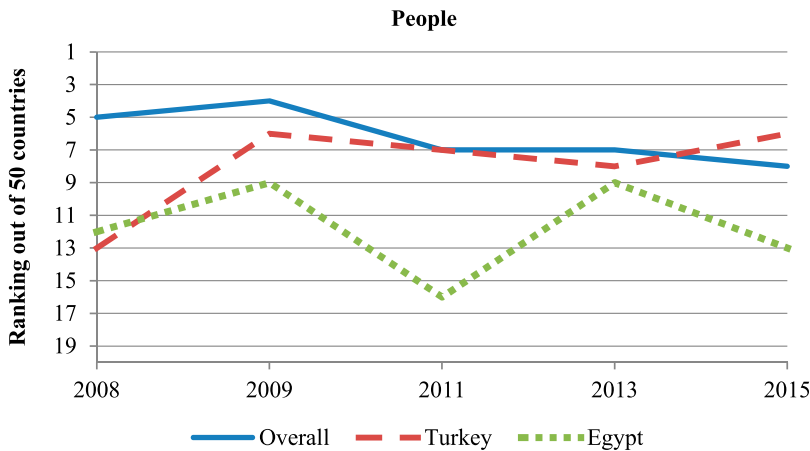


Figure 3. NBI in the dimension *People* (Switzerland).

Table 2. Switzerland's ranking in the dimension people.

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2013	2015
Welcoming	8	8	10	10	8	8
Welcoming (Turkey)	–	–	–	23	19	17
Welcoming (Egypt)	–	–	–	20	21	19

in Switzerland as they both gave Swiss people extremely low grades compared to the average ratings Switzerland received.

Discussion of Results

The Swiss Minaret Referendum was launched in 2007 and the Swiss people accepted the initiative in 2009. Simultaneously, the international reputation of Switzerland experienced a slight downwards trend in all three analyzed dimensions. The dimension *Governance* remained highly ranked over all the analyzed years while the dimension *People* as well as the general NBI clearly experienced a harsher decline. This difference can be explained by the efforts of the Swiss government to explain the Swiss political system of direct democracy to the foreign countries.

The results indicate that the respondents in the 20 panel countries do not have a problem with the way the minaret referendum was conducted. On the contrary, the system of direct democracy enjoys high reputation abroad. The fact that the Swiss Federal Council clearly and officially opposed the ban is probably another reason why the dimension *Governance* remained highly ranked. Although Switzerland lost one rank to Canada in 2009, its way of governance enjoyed a positive image abroad. Meanwhile, the general NBI ranking decreased significantly in 2008. The dimension *People* experienced a striking decline in 2010.

These findings as presented in Figure 4, lead to the conclusion that a foreign public is able to distinguish between the political system of a country and the voting pattern and political worldviews of its citizens. These findings also underline the importance of how a government acts and reacts to crisis. The findings in this paper have shown that the way a government acts is notified by the foreign public and that those actions have a direct impact on how the country is regarded abroad. While the foreign public appreciated the efforts of the Swiss government and kept their appreciation of the political system of Switzerland, they did not accept the way the Swiss people voted in the minaret referendum.

In this analysis the perception of Muslim countries in the sample, namely Turkey and Egypt, were discussed separately. Although the data for this analysis was more limited, several trends could be detected. First of all, in the sample, Turkey and Egypt, like the remaining 18 countries in the sample, rank the Swiss way of governance better than the general NBI and the dimension *People*. The greatest differences to the other countries are the comparably worse grades. In all dimensions in almost every year, Turkey and Egypt rated Switzerland worse than the other 18 countries. This again strongly supports the assumption that the minaret ban and the way Switzerland's image is perceived abroad are directly linked to each other since Muslim countries are more sensitive to this issue. Although correlation cannot guarantee causality, the observation of this analysis strongly supports the thesis that the minaret ban had an impact on Switzerland's international reputation. Nevertheless, other factors have to

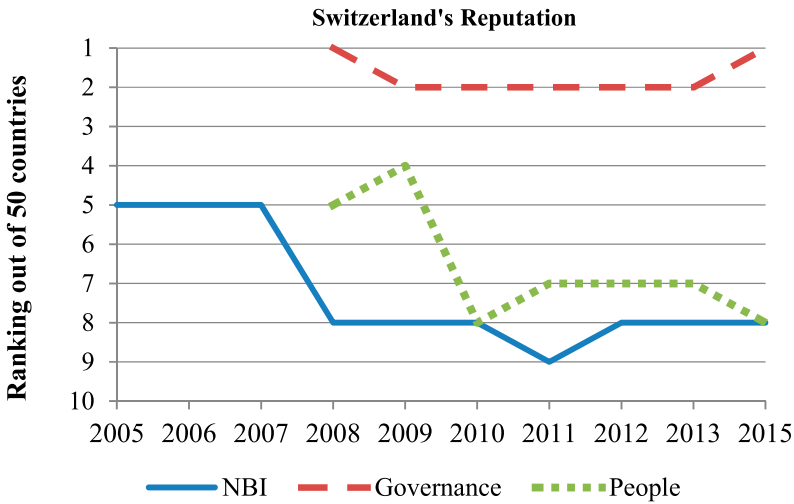


Figure 4. NBI ranking of Switzerland and the two subcategories.

be taken into account too, such as the international financial crisis which could worsen Switzerland’s reputation as a rich country.

Conclusion

International reputation matters. It is an important tool in politics, especially for countries without a leading military force or great natural resources such as Switzerland. The fact that Switzerland experienced a slight downward trend in its overall international reputation should therefore be taken seriously. The Swiss government was well aware of that fact and therefore acted consciously in order to promote a better image of Switzerland throughout the campaign of the popular initiative of the SVP. This behavior was paramount. This analysis has shown that the way a representative of a state acts will be notified by a foreign public and can directly influence the way this administration or government is regarded abroad. Switzerland’s way of governance received good grades in the NBI rankings, which proves that the actions of a government do matter and are paramount in order to keep good relationships with other nations.

A second learning from this paper is that good long-term relationships with other countries that are built in a peaceful time can be crucial in times when things do not work as well. Reputation is something that cannot be built from one day to another but has to be a long-term strategy of every country’s public policy. If a government only reaches out to other countries in a time of crisis without having good relationship to those nations, the harm of a new implemented policy such as the ban of the construction of minarets could have severe impacts for a country’s international reputation and therefore also on its foreign policies. At the same time, reputation cannot be destroyed from one single decision or policy. Switzerland remains a highly attractive and reputable country in all analyzed dimensions even after the minaret referendum. This analysis has proven that Switzerland’s international reputation is solid and remains high albeit unpopular decision its people might have taken. As shown in this paper, the reputation of a country is something fragile and the more questionable or controversial policies a country adopts, the greater the loss of reputation.

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57. Unfortunately, the Swiss government only provides detailed reports of their NBI ranking for the years 2008, 2009 and 2015. For the other years only short reports with the most important details are available. Nevertheless, the reports provide enough material to receive a comprehensive and reliable overview about the development of the international reputation of Switzerland between 2005 and 2015. For 2014 no report is online and for 2012 only a general report of Switzerland's reputation is provided. This is also why sometimes, not every year is illustrated in the graphs.
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