



The strengths of Switzerland and its people

1. Switzerland's security for the future

Switzerland is a byword for stability. This reputation is founded on a political and economic system that has its origins in the distant past, and which gives supreme importance to political equilibrium and the decentralisation of power, as well as to strong institutions and carefully balanced political mechanisms that ensure the cohesion of a nation formed by the collective will of the people.

The Swiss do not take decision-making lightly, compromises are common occurrences. The Latin saying *festina lente*, make haste slowly, is second nature to the Swiss. Rather than rushing headlong into the future, Switzerland advances slowly but steadily, seeking consensus and solutions that will be lasting and sustainable.

Stability, reliability and sustainability are aspects which create a high level of predictability and trustworthiness both within Switzerland and in the Confederation's relations with other nations. Switzerland's traditional neutrality is another constant factor. These aspects together with an ingenious system of rules and conventions produce a high level of security for the future of both the individual Swiss and for society as a whole.

It is for this reason that so many international organisations, sports associations, and other institutions such as the World Economic Forum and Art Basel have for many decades made Switzerland their home, promoting it to the level of an international centre *par excellence*.

The Swiss tradition of providing a home for international organisations can be traced back to the 19th century. In 1863 the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was founded in Geneva, eventually giving birth to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. This helped to put Geneva on the map as the humanitarian capital of the world. In the first half of the 20th century Geneva was chosen to be the headquarters of the League of Nations, and at the end of World War II the European Office of the United Nations replaced it in Geneva. Today, there are about 200 international organisations based in the city, together with more than 150 missions.

“Geneva stands for tolerance, peace and democracy. The languages, religions and cultures of the world meet here at the river Rhone. Here too civil society, the public and private sectors, work hand in hand. In a word: here you will find humankind in all its diversity.”

Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary-General

Another Swiss characteristic which has been fundamental to the functioning of “International Geneva” is the reconciliation of opposing viewpoints, i.e. forging consensus between civil society, governmental organisations and the private sector. There are few countries in the world that have managed so successfully to peacefully reconcile “North and South” -- four different languages and cultures -- to the extent Switzerland has achieved.



Brushing the sawdust off an opponent's back is a tradition that has more meaning than a mere handshake. It is symbolic of a belief that is as old as Switzerland, which holds that opponents should learn to live together, as sportsmen rather than as enemies.

Switzerland's Federal Councillor Moritz Leuenberger, speaking at a festival of alpine wrestling and folklore in 2001

The desire to maintain a balance between different groups is a constant of Swiss policy. A good example is the policy of ensuring the social and economic integration of remote mountainous areas. Economic decentralisation has been promoted since at least 1920. Public transport, roads, waste disposal and telecommunications infrastructure is well developed throughout the country: the level of service in Switzerland's alpine valleys is the same as in the big cities. This has resulted in a relatively well balanced economy nationwide. The economic dominance of Zurich in Switzerland is much less pronounced than that of Stockholm in Sweden or Vienna in Austria.¹ And the more remote regions of Switzerland, notably those in the Alps, are less prone to structural weakness than is the case in comparable regions of France or Italy.² Another benefit is the greater diversity of the flora and fauna in the Swiss Alps compared to the situation in neighbouring countries.

A land in which so many cultures have been able to live in peace for so long is by definition a success story.

Bruno Kaufmann, President of the European Initiative and Referendum Institute

"Wanderlust" and migration have been a constant theme throughout Swiss history, as indeed a scarcity of basic resources made survival difficult for a period of centuries. The Swiss communities in Europe, Latin America and the USA bear witness to this structural migration. But even in the prosperous Confederation of today the Swiss have not lost their love of travel, although it may simply mean living abroad for a limited period. In 2007, the so-called "Swiss abroad" numbered 668,107, equal to one tenth of nation's present day resident population.³ It is also worth noting in this context that the Protestant refugees who fled to Switzerland in the 16th and 17th centuries played a major role in the nation's subsequent economic development.

One undoubted advantage has been our geographical location. Switzerland found itself at the centre of three of Europe's most important trade routes as early as in the Middle Ages, and we had the good sense to take advantage of the fact. Today we might say that the early Swiss were good at "networking."⁴

François Bergier, economic historian

Switzerland came to be seen as a land of opportunity even before World War I. Today the percentage of foreign residents among the population is one of the highest in Europe. In 2007 the annual increment in the number of resident foreigners was 29,900 (+1.8%) bringing the total to 1,703,800 or 22.1% of a total population of over 7.5 million.⁵

¹ Blöchliger, Hansjörg (2005): Baustelle Föderalismus. Zürich, 38.

² Glauser, Peter / Siegrist Dominik (1997): Schauplatz Alpen. Zürich: Rotpunktverlag, 21.

³ This includes both the "Helvetic diaspora" of Swiss who migrated at the end of the 18th century and in the 19th century, mainly to the USA, Brazil and Russia, as well as the "fifth nation" of Swiss residing abroad (From the Political Affairs Division IV (PA IV, DFA) 2007 statistical report on the Swiss abroad).

⁴ Jean-Francois Bergier (2005). Im Land der Ingenieure, NZZ Folio 11, 47.

⁵ Federal Statistical Office (2008):. Foreigners in Switzerland
<http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/de/index/themen/01/22/publ/ausl/presentation.html>

The Greater Zurich Area is home to a varied population that includes the citizens of over 170 nations.⁶ More than two fifths of all those born in wedlock today in Switzerland had either a father or a mother, or both, who were citizens of a foreign land.⁷

The multilingual abilities of people who live in Switzerland is a byword: in addition to at least one of the national languages knowledge of English can be taken for granted in the metropolitan areas, and knowledge of a second national language is widespread. Anyone who lives in Switzerland is daily confronted from childhood upward with product packaging, instruction manuals and a variety of signs in several languages. Familiarity with other languages is second nature to the Swiss.

Although the traditional “peaceful reconciliation of opposing viewpoints” can be a costly business, thanks to the prosperity of Switzerland since the founding of the Confederation this has never been a problem (see: “Switzerland’s economic strengths”).

Economic prosperity, the tradition of rule by consensus and a landscape which many find breathtaking have combined to produce a high standard of living. The Economist Intelligence Unit Quality-of-Life Index rates Switzerland second.⁸ In the Mercer Consulting worldwide ranking of cities that offer the best quality of life Zurich and Geneva have long ranked first and second respectively.⁹ Among the contributing factors are the fact that Switzerland is one of the safest countries in the world, with a crime rate that is reliably low.¹⁰ The seven members of the Swiss Federal Council (government) arrive safely at their offices in Bern each day with no need of special escorts, nor are their homes kept under surveillance or cordoned off from the citizenry. The building that houses the parliament looks over a lively open-air market, and in the warmer weather children play in the fountains in the square in front of the building. When parliament is in session MPs can be seen in the cafés around the Federal Palace or walking to the nearby railway station.

The high quality of life in Switzerland’s the more densely populated areas of the alpine region is possible only thanks to highly innovative environmental protection technology. The climatic, geological and topographical conditions of the alpine region make for a very fragile ecosystem that is particularly vulnerable to climate change. Environmental problems that will affect the whole of Europe often have their first clear manifestations in the Alps, which thus serve as a barometer for the entire ecosystem. The priority the Swiss give to environmental questions is viewed as a matter of absolute necessity, and has allowed Switzerland to play a leading role in international efforts to protect the environment and the countryside. Switzerland was rated number one in the Environmental Performance Index 2008.¹¹ And in the IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook the Confederation placed second for both “waste water treatment plans in percentage of population served” and for “energy intensity”.¹²

⁶ Zurich. Magazine of the Greater Zurich Area, 2006.

⁷ Federal Statistical Office (2005)

⁸ The Economic Intelligence Unit Quality-of-Life Index, 2006.

www.internationalliving.com/content/download/9347/83523/version/1/file/January_2006_sml.pdf

http://www.economist.com/media/pdf/QUALITY_OF_LIFE.pdf

⁹ Mercer Consulting (2008): Ranking of Cities worldwide: http://www.citymayors.com/features/quality_survey.html

¹⁰ IMD (2008): World Competitiveness Yearbook.

¹¹ Environmental Performance Index 2008. produced by a team of environmental experts at Yale University and Columbia University: <http://epi.yale.edu/Home>

¹² IMD (2008): World Competitiveness Yearbook.



Swiss transport policy is another area in which the objective of sustainable development today has the support of most of the population. In 2007, a total of 39.5 million net tonnes of goods were transported over the Swiss Alps, 3.5% more than the previous year. The lion's share (64%) was transported by rail, a ratio unmatched by any other country in Europe, although it was 2% less than the previous year.¹³ By comparison the amount transported by rail in neighbouring France and Austria was well below a third of the total, a proportion which continues to fall. Worth noting in this context is the fact that Switzerland's success was achieved without any discriminatory measures or secondary effects due to the rerouting of traffic.¹⁴

Switzerland has had a major influence on the shaping of international conventions on the environment, due to its recognised expertise and the leading role Switzerland has played in global climate research. The high quality of the fundamental research undertaken by the Swiss in this area is generally recognised, and once again reflects Switzerland's traditional strengths (see the chapter on [science](#)). It is no coincidence that the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the Secretariat of the International Conference on Hazardous Wastes (Secretariat of the Basel Convention) are both based in Switzerland.

2. Self-determination, Swiss style

Self-determination is fundamental to the Swiss way of life. This is manifested in Switzerland's federal political system based on direct democracy.

The instruments of Swiss direct democracy, referenda and people's initiatives, ensure that the citizens have a major influence on the running of the State. Through the election of representatives at the local, cantonal and national levels of government (with the exception of the Federal Council), the citizens can decide who will govern them. Popular initiatives and referenda make it possible to approve or reject the legislation proposed by representatives in the various assemblies. They also enable citizens to propose their own legislative measures, insofar as these do not violate the Swiss constitution or international law.

This direct participation in the affairs of the state inevitably leads to a strong sense of individual responsibility, which in turn results in a relatively low ratio of government expenditure to GNP. Moreover it is the citizens who at the local and cantonal levels decide the rate of taxation. In Switzerland the people are also responsible for a part of their retirement arrangements as well as for (obligatory) health insurance.

It is no accident that the ideal of freedom was one of the driving forces behind the creation of Switzerland. The nation of Switzerland grew out of a defensive alliance to protect the freedom of the inhabitants of its mountains against attacks by the feudal lords of neighbouring states. Today, Switzerland is one of the most liberal nations in the world.

The ideal of freedom in Switzerland is inextricably linked to the love of the Alps. No other European landscape evokes such spell-binding imagery, notions and beliefs as the Alps. Just hearing the Alps mentioned or viewing a characteristic photograph has positive associations for many people of

¹³ Federal Department of Transport, Energy and Communications (2008): Monitoring Flanking Measures, 2nd Semester Report 2007.

¹⁴ Federal Office of Transport (2006): Faktenblatt Alpenquerender Güterverkehr 2005, published 24.02.06.

overpowering and enchanting natural landscapes that suggest freedom from the humdrum of urban life.

Since at least the 18th century the beauty of Switzerland's alpine regions, its mountains and lakes, farms and pastures, flourishing local traditions (see: "Switzerland's cultural strengths") and picturesque historic towns have enchanted visitors of all kinds, including writers, who romanticised the mountains, and the British who first discovered alpine tourism and invented the sport of mountain climbing.¹⁵ Today more than a hundred million visitors each year are attracted to the magic of the Alps as to a magnet, making this region one of the world's foremost tourism destinations.¹⁶

The tradition of self-determination has also made Switzerland reluctant to join supranational organisations. Thus the Confederation has remained aloof from the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

The same tradition is also at the root of Switzerland's federal system of government. The principle of subsidiarity is central to the Swiss concept of federalism. Authority and rule of law must have their source in the people rather than in any ruling class, and the justification of higher state bodies must be derived from the lower-level entities. Only then can the institutions be expected to act with due respect for subsidiarity and balance. Decisions must be taken at the most appropriate level. What this means in practical terms is that the cantons and municipalities participate extensively in the debates and decisions on such matters as schools, social welfare, the road system and the rate of taxation (see: "Switzerland's economic strengths").

The Swiss cantons and municipal authorities thus have more genuine power in relation to central government than any of their counterparts anywhere in the world. No other country devolves political decision-making authority to the extent that the Swiss Confederation does. While there has undeniably been a trend towards the delegation of powers to sub-national levels of government in other countries in recent decades, they still have a long way to go to catch up with Switzerland.¹⁷

Decentralised decision-making and different forms of self-determination have returned to favour among international governmental and non-governmental organisations. Governments around the world are conceding greater rights and responsibilities to local and regional bodies, bringing the decision-making process closer to those directly concerned in an effort to reduce the feeling of alienation that has grown up between peoples and governments, as exemplified in Europe by the rejection of a common Constitution by the citizens of the European Union.¹⁸

Switzerland's European policy is a good example of this process of participatory government. Since the signing of the Free Trade Agreement in 1972 the Swiss have endorsed the government's bilateral approach to cooperation with the European Union in a series of referenda. It is precisely this approval at each new step towards integration via referenda on bilateral agreements that makes Switzerland a reliable partner in Europe.

¹⁵ The popular notion of the Alps underwent a complete change in the 18th century: from 'mysterious-frightening' the mountains came to be seen as 'mysterious-enchanting', and instead of avoiding them people sought to visit them, hoping to be impressed, overpowered. Bätzig, Werner (2003). Die Alpen. Geschichte und Zukunft einer europäischen Kulturlandschaft. München: C.H. Beck.

¹⁶ Peter Glauser / Dominik Siegrist (1997). Schauplatz Alpen, Zürich: Rotpunktverlag, 66.

¹⁷ Blöchliger, Hansjörg (2005): Baustelle Föderalismus. Zürich, 38-41.

¹⁸ World Bank (2000): World Development Report, 105-217.

The importance of the principles of self-determination and self-reliance is also reflected in the high value which the Swiss attach to respect for the private sphere and personal discretion. The Swiss state and society are careful to avoid undue interference in the affairs of the individual.

Each Swiss citizen is responsible for declaring the true state of his or her taxable income and assets on their tax return. This fact has made it possible for Switzerland to keep taxation relatively low in comparison with other nations.¹⁹ Swiss banking secrecy means that the State can gain access to information concerning the financial situations of individuals only in clearly specified cases. The Swiss Penal Code only considers tax fraud, not tax evasion, as a matter for criminal proceedings, with punishment by imprisonment or a fine. Tax evasion is viewed as a violation of administrative law rather than of the Penal Code, and is punishable by a fine.

In social questions too self-determination and self-reliance are important. Thus for example Switzerland has a relatively liberal policy towards the problem of drug abuse, as expressed in legislation on narcotics which has been approved by the electorate on several occasions, including at the end of November 2008. Furthermore passive and indirect active assisted suicide is permitted in Switzerland thanks to a liberal form of legislation designed to protect human life while at the same time respecting the wishes of individuals who have decided to confront death on their own terms.

¹⁹ Federal Department of Finance (2008): fact sheet of International comparisons with regard to taxation .