



Switzerland as seen by the foreign media: Referendums, the opening of the Gotthard Tunnel and migration issues characterised Switzerland's image in 2016

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Subterranean summit: President of the Swiss Confederation, Johann Schneider-Ammann, French President François Hollande, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi enjoy the inaugural train journey through the Gotthard Base Tunnel

Referendum results, Switzerland's treatment of refugees and the Muslim community, as well as the opening of the Gotthard base tunnel informed the foreign media's perception of Switzerland over the last 12 months. Although international coverage also included news stories from Switzerland's financial centre and the latest developments in the FIFA scandal, foreign media reporting on Switzerland was lower than in the previous year.

Presence Switzerland has a legal mandate to analyse and track how Switzerland is perceived abroad and to report its findings¹. To this end, it continuously monitors reporting in the leading media of 18 countries and two regions². These findings, together with the results of image studies, current communication requirements and opportunities, and feedback from Swiss representations abroad, determine how Presence Switzerland deploys its instruments of communication abroad.

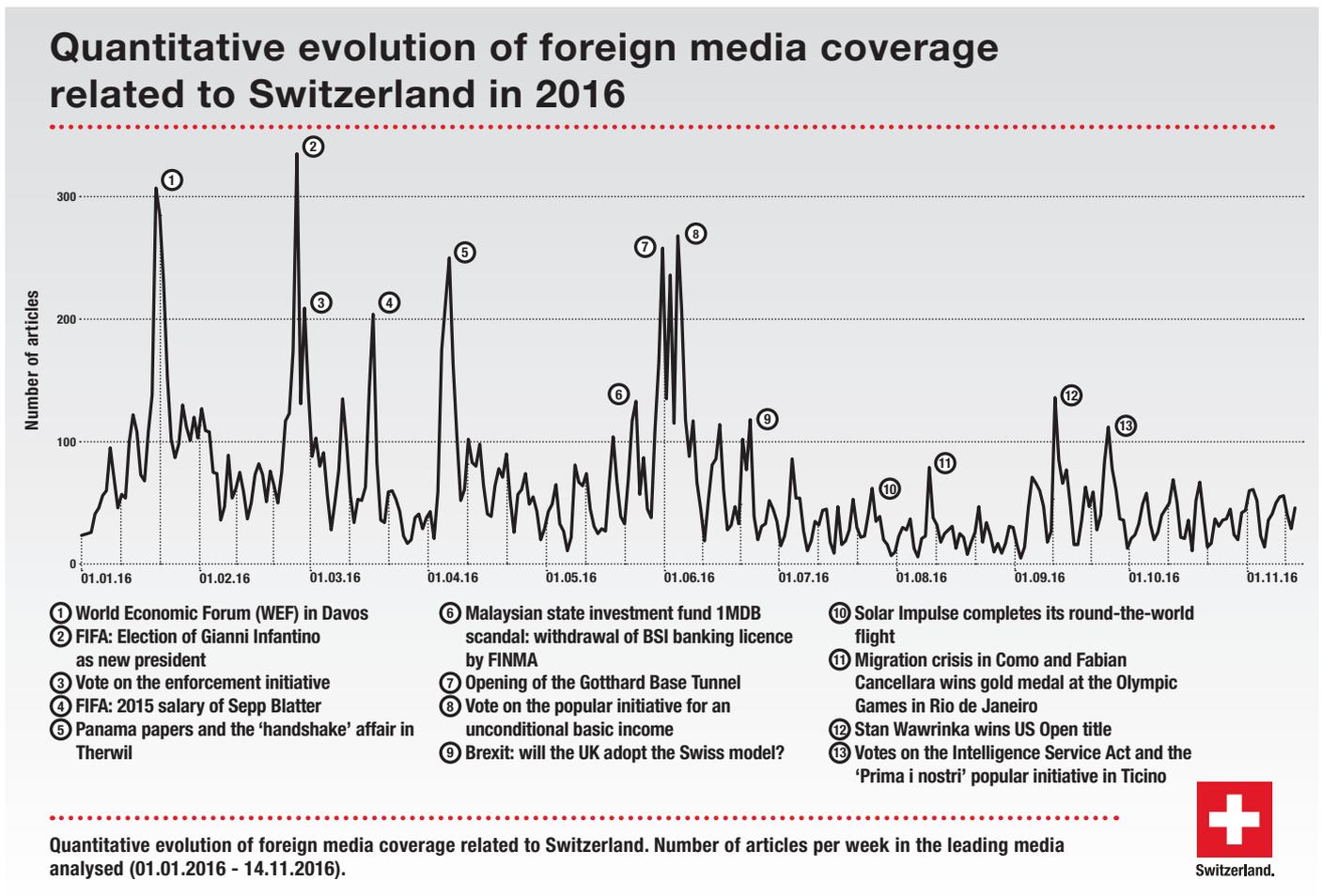


Fig. 1: Quantitative evolution of foreign media coverage related to Switzerland in 2016

The present annual report analyses foreign media coverage related to Switzerland. It identifies the topics that dominated this coverage, as well as other subjects which helped to shape the foreign media's perception of Switzerland over the last 12 months. The report also explains why the volume of foreign media reporting on Switzerland was lower in 2016 than during the previous year.

¹ Federal Act and Ordinance on the Promotion of Switzerland's Image (SR 194.1, SR 194.11)

² The permanent monitoring of foreign media by Presence Switzerland encompasses all media coverage of Switzerland (with the exception of stock market news and sporting results) in the leading media of 18 countries (Argentina, Australia, Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Portugal, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Turkey, the UK and the US), as well as the main pan-Arab and EU media. Analysis covers print and online editions as well as the press reviews produced by Switzerland's representations abroad.

Swiss referendums: a source of great media interest abroad

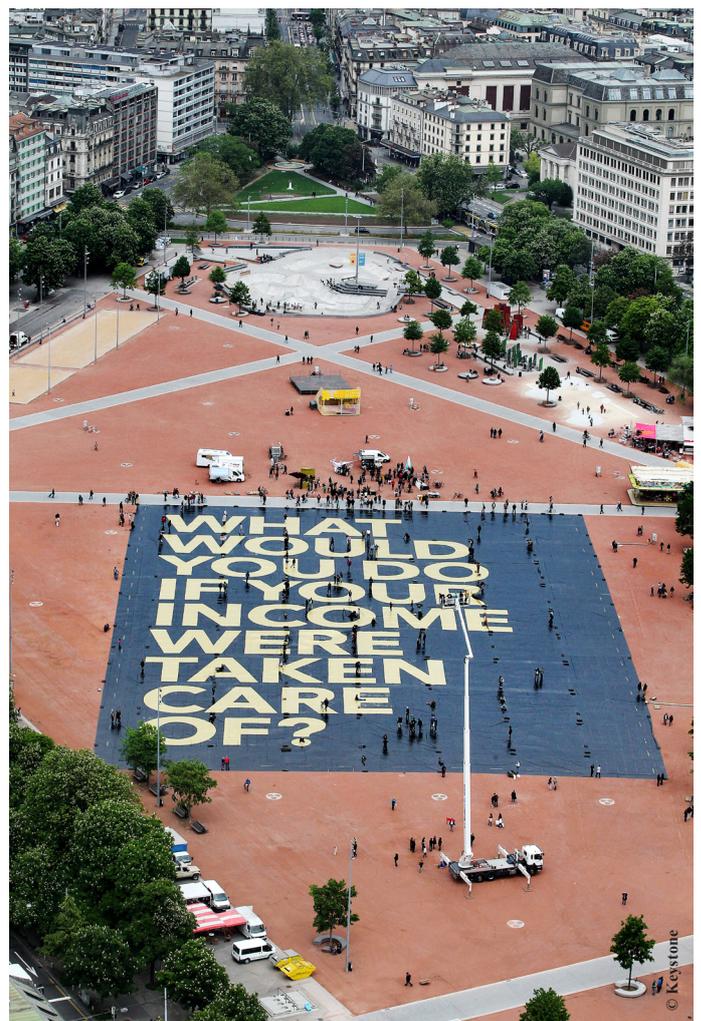
The rejection of the popular initiative “Enforce the expulsion of criminal foreigners” (enforcement initiative) in early 2016 was the subject of considerable coverage in the foreign media. The European media, in particular, reported extensively on the referendum campaign, and analysed the outcome of the vote in detail. Their reports, like those carried by the Swiss media, singled out the high voter turnout and the intensive efforts of civil society organisations. Certain sections of the Western European media saw the result as an end to the longstanding dominance of the Swiss People’s Party (SVP) in migration policy referendums. For example, the British weekly news magazine *The Economist* qualified the outcome as a “rare setback” for the SVP on immigration matters. The overall tone of reporting was mainly positive. Several foreign media outlets also saw the ‘no’ vote as an encouraging sign for continued relations between Switzerland and the EU.

There was also considerable media interest in the failed referendum on “guaranteeing an unconditional basic income for all” in June 2016. Foreign media reports tended to focus on the idea itself; some viewed it as utopian, others as forward-looking. While the European and American media analysed it in terms of similar projects in their respective countries, the idea met with little sympathy in the Asian media. Nonetheless, the tone of the foreign media coverage was largely positive.

Finally, in September, the endorsement of new powers for the Swiss intelligence service as the well as the cantonal referendum “Prima i nostri” (Ours first) in Ticino frequently appeared in media reports, particularly in Italy and the UK. Generally speaking, cantonal initiatives attract little foreign media attention. The considerable coverage of the popular initiative in Ticino was undoubtedly due to its highly charged subject matter, namely giving preference to homegrown workers over foreign job seekers. The last time the foreign media showed a similar level of interest in a cantonal initiative was back in 2013 when the people of Ticino voted on banning full-facial coverings. The foreign media framed their reporting of the “Prima i nostri” result within the context of Swiss-EU negotiations on the free movement of persons. The Italian media in particular saw the ‘yes’ vote as a snub to Italian cross-border workers, and claimed that by implementing this policy, the canton of Ticino, and thus Switzerland too, would possibly be in breach of the rules on the free movement of persons.

It is striking that foreign media coverage of Swiss referendums tends to be very high when the subject of the referendum bears some relation to the domestic policy of the given country. The extensive reporting on the “enforcement initiative” in Europe was due to the fact that many European countries were also grappling with the same issue. Another reason for heightened foreign media interest in Swiss referendums is the newsworthiness of the subject matter. This explains the extensive worldwide reporting on the unconditional basic income initiative, despite the fact that most countries had no intention of adopting such a measure. The unorthodox nature of the concept, therefore, made it a perfect subject for media coverage.

The foreign media coverage of Swiss referendums tends to follow a similar pattern. Isolated reports appear as the last day of voting draws near. The volume of subsequent media reporting varies considerably across countries depending on the level of domestic interest and debate on the given issue, and on how fiercely the referendum campaign was fought in Switzerland. Foreign media interest peaks immediately before and directly after the vote. However, only referendums which are of considerable international relevance like the “Stop Mass Immigration” initiative continue to receive foreign media attention.



All eyes on Switzerland: “unconditional basic income for all” referendum campaign in Geneva.

Switzerland's political system of direct democracy and its many popular votes are of great interest to the foreign media, and help shape the perception of Switzerland abroad. Foreign media reports frequently cite the assorted opportunities Swiss citizens have to influence political decision-making, particularly on issues which also apply to other countries or are international in their reach. Occasionally, though, national and cantonal popular referendums, and their campaigns, can lead to a more critical perception of Switzerland in the foreign media depending on the relevance of the subject matter to the domestic policy of the given country.

Switzerland's handling of migration and the Muslim community: greater foreign coverage against the backdrop of global tensions

Many foreign media reports in 2016 dealt with Switzerland's handling of migration and the Muslim community. A number of events dominated foreign media coverage of the issue. They included the entry into force of the ban on full-facial coverings ("burqa ban") in the canton of Ticino, which was widely reported in the foreign media. The event was also covered by the media in the Arab world, with most reports sticking to the facts of the case. The foreign media also reported on the National Council's approval of the parliamentary initiative for a nationwide roll-out of the ban. The foreign media also reported extensively on the "handshake affair" in the town of Therwil. After two Muslim schoolboys refused to shake hands with their female teacher on the grounds of their religious beliefs, the authorities in Basel-Landschaft suspended the citizenship process of the two brothers and their family. The incident was reported in the Arab media and gave rise to lengthy discussions on online forums. It was clear from the media reports and the readers' comments that most understood why the authorities took the action they did, and condemned the attitude of the two young Muslim schoolboys.

In terms of migration-related stories, a similar situation arose in 2016, which in turn led to a rise in foreign media reporting on Switzerland. Most of these reports focused on the growing number of migrants crossing Switzerland's southern border, the unacceptable refugee situation in the northern Italian town of Como, as well as the surge in refugees taking the Mediterranean route and the resulting increased use of Switzerland as a transit country. By and large, the reporting remained factual and impartial. Most sections of the foreign media expressed an understanding for the actions of the Swiss border guards, although several reports also cited Swiss NGOs, which roundly criticised the country's handling of the refugee situation.

One noticeable aspect of this coverage was the vehement reactions that refugee-related events provoked on social media. When we looked closely at the foreign media articles on Switzerland that were cited most frequently and discussed at great length on social media in 2016, the majority dealt with Switzerland's handling of migration and/or the Muslim community.

The western world's handling of migration and Muslim minorities was addressed in foreign reports on Switzerland, and received extensive media coverage across the world. Consequently, the high volume of reporting should be seen within the wider context of greater interest in the issue generally. The approach of Western societies to Muslim minorities was the subject of increased media reporting both in Switzerland and around the world.

The opening of the Gotthard Base Tunnel and the Solar Impulse round-the-world flight: positive foreign reporting of Swiss innovations

Since it took off for the first time in March 2015, the Solar Impulse and its bid to fly around the world using only solar power has been the subject of regular and detailed reports in the foreign media. Coverage reached its zenith when the plane touched down in Abu Dhabi in July 2016, thus bringing the mission to a successful end. Media reports focused on the two pilots, Bertrand Piccard and André Borschberg, and on the technical features of the solar plane. These reports referenced Switzerland as the birthplace of the pilots and as a country of technical innovation and promoter of renewable energy.

The opening of the Gotthard Base Tunnel on 1 June 2016 was another Switzerland-related subject that attracted the attention of the foreign media. The presence of top-level European politicians including the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the former Prime Minister of Italy, Matteo Renzi, the French President François Hollande, and Christian Kern, the



Innovation ambassadors: pilots Bertrand Piccard and André Borschberg are joined by Federal Councillor Doris Leuthard as they celebrate the successful completion of their Solar Impulse mission

Austrian Chancellor, generated extensive and positive reports worldwide. The foreign media repeatedly cited the importance of the new tunnel for Europe's transport infrastructure. Many sections of the foreign media also held the view that, through the tunnel, Switzerland had made a major contribution to European integration, even though it was not a member of the EU. The German media, in particular, also pointed out that, thanks to cost controls imposed by Switzerland's instruments of direct democracy, the Gotthard tunnel proved that a major infrastructure project can be completed on time and within budget.

Brexit, FIFA, Switzerland's financial centre and Swiss athletes at the Olympic Games: some of the other topics covered by the foreign media

Brexit was another issue which dominated foreign media reporting on Switzerland in 2016. Once again, the media, particularly the British, pondered whether the UK could model its post-Brexit dealings with the EU along Swiss lines. In most instances, the media painted an ambivalent picture of Swiss-EU relations, with the majority of reports concluding that the complexity of the Swiss model and doubts surrounding its future did not make it a viable option for the UK to follow. As well as discussing the Swiss model for the UK post-Brexit, the foreign media also used the British referendum on EU membership to explore future Swiss-EU relations with regard to the free movement of persons. The Brexit vote also generated greater foreign media interest in Switzerland's domestic policy processes, with sections of the foreign media covering the debate in the Swiss parliament on "Inländervorrang light", a watered-down version of the voter-approved initiative to curb mass immigration. Many sections of the foreign media expressed the view that ongoing negotiations between Switzerland and the European Union could set a precedent for the EU's future stance on the issue of the free movement of persons. Foreign media interest in Switzerland's implementation of this policy is unlikely to wane in the near future.

Further developments in the FIFA corruption scandal continued to attract foreign media attention during the early part of 2016. In February there was extensive foreign media coverage of the election of Gianni Infantino as the new president of FIFA. Media reaction was mixed. While certain sections felt that Infantino, a Swiss-Italian national and former secretary general of UEFA, had the stature and influence needed to lift football's world governing body out of the crisis, others believed that his previous ties with UEFA could be the main stumbling block to the root-and-branch reform of the organisation. Reports frequently claimed that the new president was already an insider and therefore not the right person to restore FIFA's reputation. The focus of media reports on FIFA in 2016 was primarily on the organisation itself and those working for it. Although the media were quick to note that the governing body had replaced one Swiss national, Sepp Blatter, with another Swiss national, this point was of incidental importance in terms of the foreign media's perception of Switzerland.

Historically, corruption and tax scandals at Swiss financial institutions have elicited the most extensive and critical foreign media coverage of Switzerland. In 2016, though, the volume of foreign media reporting on financial stories from Switzerland fell. However, there was one exception: further revelations from the Panama Papers. Media research had found that a number of Swiss financial players were frequently involved in setting up offshore companies in order to help customers avoid paying tax. Switzerland also cropped up in foreign media reports on the corruption scandal surrounding the Malaysian state development fund 1MDB, which has been under increased media scrutiny since mid-2016. What is striking about this coverage is the media perception of the legal and communication strategy adopted by the Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland, with most reports praising its head-on approach.

The sporting achievements of Swiss athletes also featured in foreign media reports in 2016. Coverage included wins by top-seeded tennis player Stan Wawrinka and the success of Swiss athletes at the Olympic Games in Rio. The Brazilian media, in particular, also carried extensive and positive reports on the House of Switzerland, the country's official presence at the Games. The gold medal-winning performance of Fabian Cancellara garnered particular attention.

The following illustration shows the relevance of media events in 2016 for the perception of Switzerland abroad, and the tone in which the foreign media reported them.

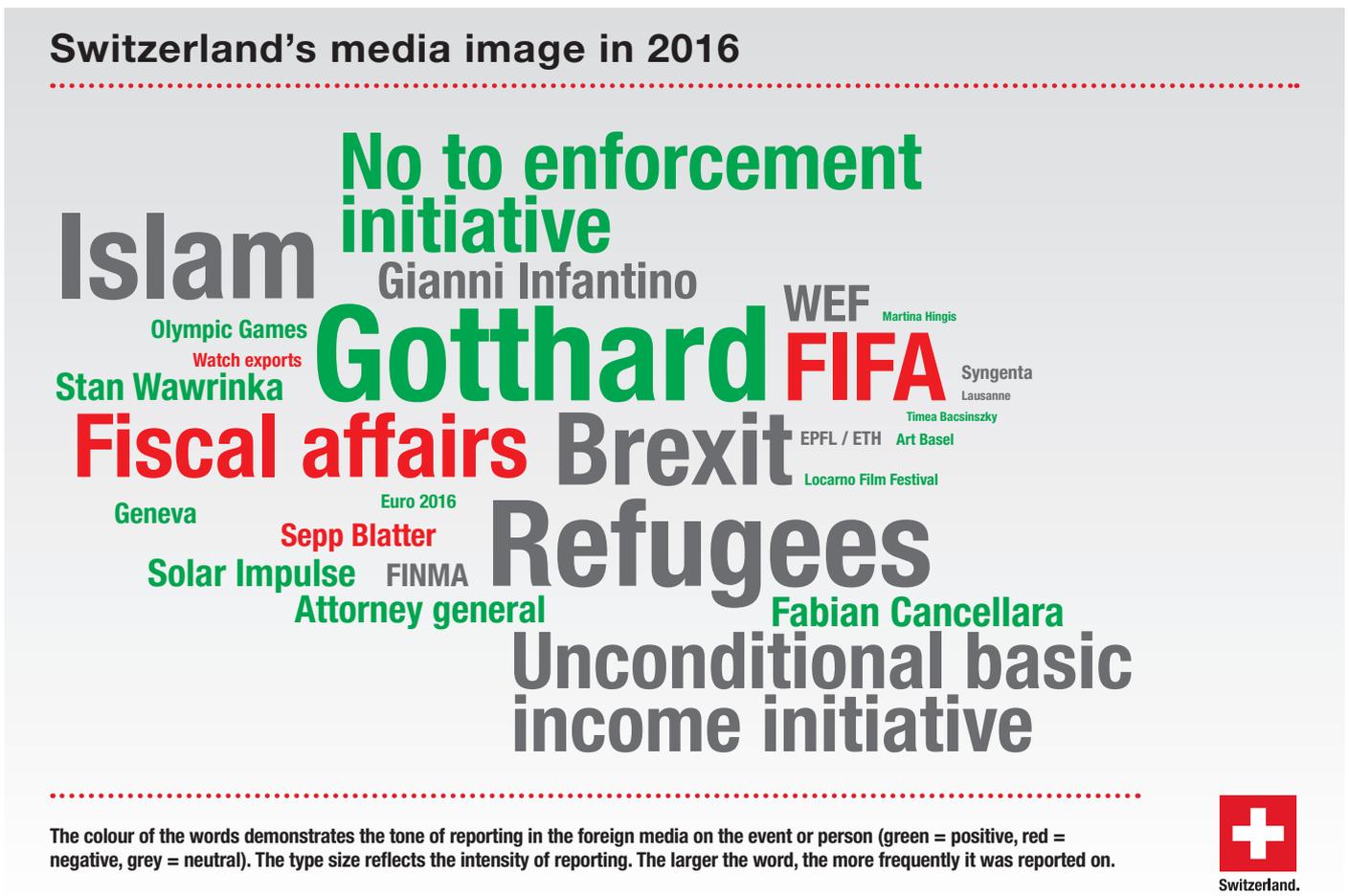


Fig. 2: The colour of the words demonstrates the tone of reporting in the foreign media on the given event (green = positive, red = negative, grey = neutral). The larger the word, the more frequently it was reported on.

Summary: foreign media perception of Switzerland in 2016

Not only was the volume of foreign media reporting on Switzerland lower in 2016 than during the previous year, but there was also a shift in focus. There are several reasons behind these developments.

From a media perspective, 2016 was an extremely eventful year. International media reporting was dominated by the ongoing conflict in Syria, the attempted coup in Turkey, the Islamist terror threat in Europe, the Brexit referendum in the UK, and the US presidential elections. Major sporting events like the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro and the European Football Championship in France also received widespread and extensive coverage. Consequently, Switzerland-specific news stories garnered less attention from the foreign media, which meant fewer reports on Switzerland. Another factor behind this fall in foreign media coverage was the lack of Switzerland-specific media events with a global reach. This was in contrast to 2015, which saw the Swiss National Bank (SNB) abandon its euro exchange rate peg and the FIFA scandal; both of these stories were subject to media scrutiny worldwide. In 2016, Switzerland stood out because of its great economic and political stability. This state of affairs, of course, does not generate many headlines.

Europe's handling of its Muslim minorities, the refugee crisis and the Islamist terror threat received considerable foreign media attention in 2016. These issues were far from being specific to Switzerland; they were a concern for the entire (Western) world. Over the last 12 months, Europe and other Western states have grappled with the challenges that these issues present. While foreign media reports mentioned Switzerland in connection with these issues, it was merely one of several countries cited. As a result, this attenuated the link with Switzerland, thus leading to less foreign media coverage.

There was also a shift in the focus of foreign media reporting on Switzerland in 2016. The issues which garnered the most media interest differed from those of 2015. Behind each of the topics are isolated events which were reported by the foreign media.

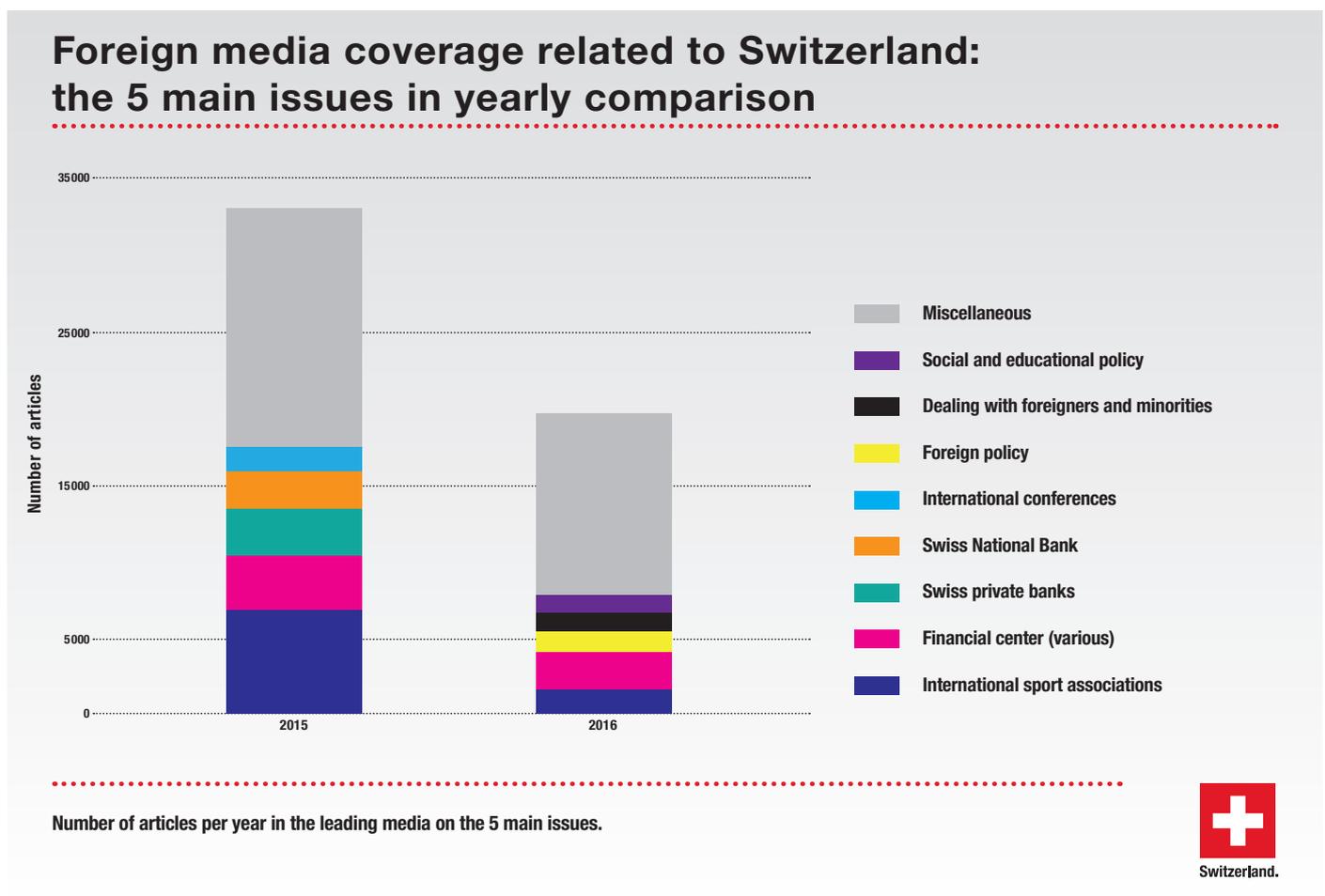


Fig. 3: The main thematic areas in 2016 and 2015.

There were fewer foreign media reports on the Swiss financial centre in 2016 than in 2015. In previous years, the financial and tax affairs of well-known figures generated considerable media interest among Switzerland's European neighbours. Added to this was the "Swissleaks" affair in 2015. In contrast, 2016 was a relatively quiet year for Switzerland's financial centre. The same is true – to an even greater extent – of the thematic area International sports organisations based in Switzerland, which dominated foreign media reporting on Switzerland in 2015 owing to the unfolding FIFA scandal. The fig 3. shows that the level of foreign media reporting on both these thematic areas has fallen sharply over the last 12 months.

In contrast, foreign media coverage of Switzerland's handling of foreigners and minorities and social and education policy rose sharply in 2016. The referendums on the enforcement initiative and the introduction of an unconditional basic income are behind this increase. Another contributory factor was greater media scrutiny of the refugee situation and Switzerland's handling of its Muslim population. The volume of reporting on foreign policy also rose. This was due primarily to media coverage of Brexit and ongoing developments in Switzerland's European policy.

In summary, there are three factors which heavily determine the focus of foreign media coverage on Switzerland. The first is how eventful the media year has been. When Switzerland-specific events come up against major global events, foreign media reporting on Switzerland falls. Second, events which happen in Switzerland but which are global in reach generate greater foreign media coverage. Third, it depends how specific an event is to Switzerland. Events in Switzerland which are part of a wider global trend are of lesser interest for the foreign media than media-relevant events that concern Switzerland alone.

As a unit within the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, FDFA, Presence Switzerland supports the safeguarding of Switzerland's interests abroad by analysing the way in which Switzerland is perceived internationally, and by applying a range of international public relations tools. These include means of information and communication, projects abroad, welcoming delegations to Switzerland, as well as Switzerland's presence at world expos, and the House of Switzerland at the Olympic Games. The Federal Council regularly reviews Switzerland's international communication strategy.

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