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Challenges for Switzerland's Public Diplomacy: Referendum on Banning Minarets

By Johannes Matyassy and Seraina Flury

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**CHALLENGES FOR SWITZERLAND'S
PUBLIC DIPLOMACY:
REFERENDUM ON BANNING MINARETS**

Ambassador Johannes Matyassy
and
Seraina Flury

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Abstract

In the run-up to the referendum on banning minarets, Switzerland received massive media coverage worldwide and faced open criticism from international organizations, governments and religious leaders, mainly from the Muslim world. Taking into consideration the recent experiences of other countries, Switzerland opted for a very proactive communication strategy abroad. This paid off. Soon after the vote, attention shifted from blaming Switzerland to a broader European perspective, addressing the general issues involved with migration and integration. The experience gained by Switzerland's communication abroad in handling the anti-minaret initiative can be distilled into general points concerning the boundaries and opportunities of international communications, as well as some very practical "Dos" and "Don'ts" which may, hopefully, be of benefit to other countries.

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Switzerland's Communication Abroad

Context

Presence Switzerland, the organization responsible for Switzerland's presentation of itself abroad, was founded in 2000. For many decades prior to that point, the generally excellent image of Switzerland abroad had undergone little real change. Switzerland was primarily viewed in terms of stereotypes (beautiful landscapes, mountains, "Heidi land," chocolate, watches, banks and high prices), although foreigners would also occasionally perceive the country's rather more specific qualities such as neutrality, cultural diversity, quality, precision, political stability or banking confidentiality.

That familiar situation changed in the 1990s as a wave of international criticism grew with respect to the role played by Switzerland's financial center (e.g., in the context of money laundering, the assets of dictators such as Marcos and Mobutu, tax evasion), as well as the tackling of the dormant assets problem and, most notably, the huge media frenzy that accompanied this development in the United States, the United Kingdom and Israel. In the autumn of 1998, three months after the New York Agreement was concluded between the Jewish World Congress and the two large Swiss banks in the United States, Frederick Schneiders Research (FSR) conducted a survey on the image of Switzerland in the United States (Switzerland, Dispatch). Not only the U.S. media but also political, academic and religious circles came out with very strong criticisms in their appraisal of Swiss authorities and banks. By contrast, Switzerland's image with the broader American public was still positive, with just ten percent of responses proving negative.

These events led to a significant rise in interest within Switzerland in the issue of the national reputation, triggering an intensive debate in Swiss political circles over just how the country should officially

present itself abroad. In the Swiss government and parliament, a growing consensus emerged that the existing organs, and most notably the Coordinating Commission for the Swiss Presence Abroad (COCO)¹, were no longer up to the job of effectively presenting Switzerland abroad. Other contributory factors to this conviction included the rapid shift at that time towards a global information society with increased competition between individual countries and their regions, as well as increased efforts by a number of different countries to position themselves favourably in this environment.

Foundation of Presence Switzerland

Feeling the pressure of a serious national reputation and credibility crisis abroad, the Swiss government and parliament resolved to create a new organization with the name Presence Switzerland in 2000 (Switzerland, Dispatch). This organization was created in the form of a decentralized administration unit which was answerable to an extra-parliamentary commission rather than a federal department. The chair of this extra-parliamentary commission was appointed by the Swiss government; as with the earlier COCO, members of the commission included the heads of various federal offices, a high-ranking representative from the cantons, and the heads of semi-government and private organizations in the spheres of culture, business, tourism and sport, as well as the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad. The composition of the commission grew out of the conviction that the image and relationship networks of a country are not shaped by government alone; the standing of a country abroad is also influenced by countless parties from both the public and private sectors as highlighted by Wang, and the key to a sustainable and effective long-term image and network of relationships lies in the coordination of these numerous parties. For administrative purposes, the office of the commission was subsumed into the Federal Department for Foreign Affairs, as Presence Switzerland would be collaborating closely with Swiss representative offices abroad in the implementation of its activities.

The newly-founded organization Presence Switzerland was designed "...to implement a goal-oriented, ongoing cultivation of Switzerland's image sustainably and effectively with modern instruments and through collaboration with relevant partners" (Switzerland, Präsenz Schweiz). The mandate of Presence Switzerland was set out in the Federal Law on the Promotion of Switzerland's Image Abroad: "The Federation promotes the dissemination of general knowledge about Switzerland, the development of friendly feeling towards Switzerland, and the profiling of Switzerland's diversity and appeal" (Switzerland, Federal Law).

In other words, despite its recent experiences in connection with dormant assets, Switzerland did not opt for a short-term "fire-fighting" approach to public relations, but instead chose the path of enduring image cultivation over the longer term. The focus was directed towards the general dissemination of knowledge about Switzerland as well as the establishment and cultivation of relationship networks. Speaking with the American political scientist Joseph S. Nye, a thinker heavily preoccupied with the possibilities and limitations of "soft power," Switzerland chose the path of strategic presentation of itself abroad with a focus on selected topics and countries together with a policy of long-term cultivation of relationships with key foreign figures based on reciprocity and credibility, as opposed to a short-term communication policy based on the events of the moment (Nye). An image cannot be changed in the short term, nor can relationships be built up from one day to the next. Both need to be cultivated over the long-term to ensure they can also be relied upon in times of crisis.

Implementation

From the outset, Presence Switzerland based its approach on rigid scientific research. In the first few years of its existence,

for example, scientific studies on the image of Switzerland in the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Spain, Japan and China were carried out (Pasquier). These studies formed the starting-point for the strategies that Presence Switzerland would go on to develop for the key countries of its foreign communication, in collaboration with the partners represented on the commission. These strategies were implemented with the following instruments: projects abroad, invitations to Switzerland for foreign delegations, dissemination of information about Switzerland and a presence at major international events.

A country's policy for presenting itself abroad can never encompass all countries and all people, but should be limited to the regions and multipliers most relevant to the country in question. Switzerland therefore always focused its policies and activities on key countries. Instead of being geared to the wider populations of these foreign countries, communication abroad was primarily targeted at members of the media, opinion leaders in the sphere of politics, business, science, culture and sport, as well as students and young people.

Particular weight was attached to cooperation with key Swiss government and non-government parties in the sphere of communication abroad, as has also been emphasized by Anholt (Anholt, 25-27). The extra-parliamentary commission ensured harmonization at the strategic level. At the operational level, cooperation took place in various guises, including a presence at major international events as well as theme-specific and country-specific activities (Cull).

Likewise, great efforts were made in the first few years to ensure standardized content and uniform visual presentation of Switzerland in communication abroad. A streamlined message, and image, of this nature strengthens the visibility and the level of awareness of a

country abroad and, according to Anholt (19-21), helps it establish itself against a backdrop of fierce competition between countries and regions to achieve prominent positioning. Fundamental research was therefore carried out to develop “Brand Switzerland,” consisting of core messages and precise corporate design guidelines. “Brand Switzerland” is now used in all activities of Presence Switzerland abroad, and is also gradually being used by its partners in their own activities, which has the effect of generally strengthening the recognition value and impact of Switzerland’s efforts to promote itself abroad.

The Restructuring of Switzerland’s Communication Abroad

The convincing affirmative vote of Parliament for the creation of Presence Switzerland was driven to a significant extent by the reputation and credibility crisis suffered by the country – at least as perceived within Switzerland – towards the end of the 20th century. Only a short time later, however, an increasing number of voices within Swiss political circles, particularly in the national parliament, began to cast doubt on the benefit of a general foreign communication policy and expressed reluctance to keep providing the funds necessary for its support. In contrast to sector-specific organizations in the sphere of tourism, business and culture, which generated clear figures for overnight stays, number of companies settling in Switzerland, export opportunities and artistic exchange programs, the impact of the foreign country communication policy is actually very difficult to quantify; because of the lack of domestic beneficiaries, it is frequently the case that no real lobby exists that might defend the existence and funding of a country’s communication abroad. At the same time, where the promotion of Switzerland’s trade abroad was concerned there were already a number of organizations in existence at the federal level, a state of affairs that likewise drew criticism from within Parliament.

As a result, a discussion on the possible restructuring of Switzerland's international communication abroad kicked off within Switzerland in 2004. Proposals ranged from the abolition of Presence Switzerland right through to the creation of a major institution to advertize the nation, combining the different sectors of business, science, culture, tourism, information and regional studies under a single roof (Switzerland, Draft). The government finally decided in March 2007 to merge the different organizations that were already active in the area of promoting Swiss foreign trade into a so-called 'home of foreign trade promotion' and to fully integrate Presence Switzerland into the Federal Department for Foreign Affairs, while at the same time abolishing the extra-parliamentary Presence Switzerland commission (Switzerland, Answer). Switzerland's communication of itself abroad was therefore geared to supporting the preservation of Switzerland's interests abroad more strongly and in a more political way.

This much is made clear in the very first article of the new Ordinance on Communication Abroad: "The Federal Department for Foreign Affairs (FDFA) supports the preservation of Switzerland's interests abroad through the use of public relations instruments" (Switzerland, Ordinance). Through its integration into the FDFA, Switzerland's communication abroad received an additional mandate in the event of an image crisis or threat to its reputation: "In the event of Switzerland's reputation abroad coming under serious threat or of an actual image crisis coming to pass, the FDFA is required to submit a communication concept to the Federal Council complete with content, responsibilities and budget" (Switzerland, Ordinance).

Presence Switzerland may not originally have been conceived as an instrument for tackling crises, but it has now increasingly been understood that image crises matter in a global information society, and that the cultivation of a national image abroad can play an important role in tackling such crises.

Switzerland's Foreign Policy in Relation to the Muslim World

The world we live in is characterized by a great diversity of religions and worldviews. In this era of increasing globalization, it is widely acknowledged that it is no longer possible to ignore the impact of this diversity on individuals and societies, and especially on politics. To be able to appreciate this situation and to be able to think about religions within a political framework, it is important not to see them as institutions but rather as worldviews or as “lenses” through which to understand the world, and as references for action. Religion and worldviews are decisive factors in many conflicts.

As part of its commitment to world peace, Switzerland has been active since 2004 in promoting peaceful co-existence between peoples with different worldviews, and in resolving conflicts with a religious-political dimension. In the sectors of religion, politics and conflict, the Federal Department for Foreign Affairs' activities, , has worked closely with the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva (IHEID) and other partners, and through this collaboration has acquired a solid body of expertise that is widely recognized at both the multilateral and bilateral levels.

This is why Switzerland took an early interest in the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (AoC). The AoC was founded in 2005 within the framework of the United Nations on the joint initiative of the governments of Spain and Turkey. Its mission is to identify, in collaboration with other countries and regional, international and civil society organizations, the roots of polarizations and tensions between and within different societies, and to recommend concrete actions and solutions which may reduce such tensions. Switzerland had been very active within the Alliance of Civilizations from the time the Alliance was founded.

At the request of AoC High Representative Jorge Sampaio, Switzerland proposed a number of measures to promote cooperation. One of these was to set up “thematic platforms” within the Group of Friends of the Alliance, with the aim of developing recommendations and launching projects to meet specific needs. For example, one such thematic platform aims to promote co-operation between countries and organizations whose activities in the areas of humanitarian aid and development policy are rooted in different cultural and religious traditions. The relevance of this platform can be seen in a number of crisis zones, including Afghanistan, Somalia and Sudan, where there is little or no cooperation between Muslim and non-Muslim organizations. Several European and Middle Eastern countries are active participants in this platform. Switzerland’s approach here is to encourage a practice-oriented dialogue about concrete projects in order to promote mutual understanding and to build a basis for further dialogue and future cooperation.

Another project under the roof of the AoC is the Nyon Process, a dialogue supported by Switzerland, Portugal, Spain and Turkey. The process aims to bring together and mobilize key actors at the interfaces of religion, politics and social activism, including foreign policy advisors from secular governments and religious political activists from Europe, the U.S. (e.g., evangelicals) and Muslim countries. Although religious socio-political movements are frequently the subject of political discussions, their representatives have rarely taken an active part in the discussions. For this reason, the Nyon Process also aims to stimulate discussion about the reasons for the exclusion of major actors and how this affects efforts to improve relations and resolve conflicts involving religious differences. In addition, the process offers European and American political advisors, decision-makers and activists opportunities to get to know members of Islamic socio-political activist movements in discreet but direct ways, and to become aware of the potential for cooperation to diminish conflict, for example in the areas of humanitarian and

development activities. The engagement of Muslim religio-political activists with evangelical activists, and the engagement of these communities with American and European policy communities, are unusual and represent a key distinguishing characteristic of the Nyon Process in the field of rapidly-proliferating “Islamic-Western” dialogue processes.

Through these various networks, dialogue projects and peace initiatives, Switzerland's foreign policy established good and trustworthy relationships with socio-political activists, religious leaders, political advisers and members of governments in the Middle East and Central and South Asia, which proved to be very useful when it came to dealing with the anti-minaret initiative.

Anti-Minaret Initiative

When it came to determining the additional duties of Switzerland's communication abroad in the event of a threat or crisis concerning Switzerland's image, no one predicted how quickly such an event would happen.

In Switzerland, as in all democratic countries, citizens elect representatives to act on their behalf. Switzerland, however, gives its citizens the chance to take a direct part in decision-making as well. Although direct democracy is by no means unique to Switzerland – Italy and many American states are among those who also give voters an important decision-making role – the Swiss system is probably the most extensive in the world. Swiss citizens can both thwart legislation already approved by parliament by means of a referendum, or propose legislation of their own by means of a popular initiative. All Swiss citizens have the right to propose new legislation by launching an initiative – although initiatives normally come from pressure groups rather than individuals. If the sponsors of an initiative manage to gather 100,000 signatures in support of the

proposal, it must be put to a nationwide vote. The only case in which parliament can override this right is if it decides that the motion being proposed is unconstitutional, or if it violates international law.

Members of the Swiss People's Party (SVP) launched their initiative "against the construction of minarets" in 2007. It was submitted on July 8, 2008, with 114,895 supporting signatures. The aim of the initiative was to include a clause in the Swiss constitution banning the construction of minarets. Switzerland has four minarets and around 150 places of Islamic worship. The majority of the 350,000 to 400,000 Muslims living in Switzerland are well integrated. Many are Swiss citizens. The initiative was sparked by a building application for a fifth minaret, in Langenthal – a town in the Berner Mittelland (Central Plateau) region that is seen as typifying the Swiss heartland.

Of Switzerland's political parties, the initiative was supported only by the right-wing SVP and the Federal Democratic Union (EDU). All other parties, as well as the government and all relevant associations, churches and organizations, opposed the minaret ban. The sole exception was the Swiss Farmers' Union, which decided not to adopt a party line. The members of the Federal Council announced their rejection of the initiative in extraordinarily clear terms at a very early stage to both the national and international public. Both the launch and submission of the anti-minaret initiative had attracted early international media coverage, specifically from Australia, Germany, the United Kingdom, Austria, the Netherlands, Norway, the United States and Turkey. As early as 2007, the Federal Council set up a working group to observe developments and facilitate interdepartmental coordination. This working group was chaired by the Federal Department of Justice and Police and comprised representatives of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the Federal Department of Home Affairs and the intelligence service of the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport.

The Swiss government and parliament were well aware at an early stage of the controversial nature of the issue and the possible implications for the image and interests of Switzerland abroad. The launch of the initiative in May 2007 marked an initial peak in media coverage; a second peak followed in July 2008 when the initiative was submitted. It was examined by the Federal Council and parliament with exceptional swiftness. The initiative was declared valid because it did not violate imperative international law. The Federal Council and parliament nonetheless strongly recommended that it be rejected on the grounds that it breached fundamental human rights, especially the freedom of religion (Art. 9, ECHR) and the ban on discrimination (Art. 14, ECHR), and that it contradicted the core values of the Swiss Federal Constitution.

The date of the referendum was set for November 29, 2009, just over sixteen months after the initiative had been submitted. This was extremely fast.

Evaluation of the Anti-Minaret Initiative from the Perspective of Switzerland's Communication Abroad

The late 1990s and early 21st century have seen a general move to the right across Europe as a whole, and the rise of new populist parties with an anti-immigrant and anti-crime message. This is also true in Switzerland, where the Swiss People's Party, once the smallest of the four governing parties in the Swiss coalition, became the largest party in the 2003 and 2007 parliamentary elections.

The SVP campaign, with its "black sheep" posters in the run-up to the 2007 election, had already provoked numerous reactions in the international media. On September 7, 2007, *The Independent*, a UK newspaper, even devoted its front page to the campaign, in an article entitled "Switzerland: Europe's heart of darkness?" (Vallely). The success of the right-wing SVP in the national elections that

October was picked up by media in Europe and the United States. The clichéd image of harmless, neutral Switzerland at the heart of Europe, with Heidi, cows, watches and chocolate, acquired an ugly side, and frequent comparisons were made to the way in which the country had handled the controversial banking and dormant assets affair a decade earlier. From a Muslim perspective, the campaign changed the perception of the issues at stake completely. Although the minaret ban had up until then been perceived mostly as a building permission issue, questions of religious freedom and the right to practice Islam took center stage.



Against this backdrop, the anti-minaret initiative and the related referendum campaign posed a particular challenge for Switzerland's communication abroad. Although the ban on building minarets directly affected only the country's domestic policy, Switzerland's foreign policy was also closely tied to the initiative. On the one hand, the initiative itself had been motivated by a foreign policy factor – the fear of the so-called “spread of radical Islam in Europe.” On the other, it could safely be assumed that domestic policy debate and official communications abroad, especially in Islamic countries, would attract a predictably lively response.

The anti-minaret initiative proved problematic for the following reasons in particular:

- On the home front, it might encourage radicalization of Muslim groups on the periphery of society, and thereby jeopardize religious freedom and the integration of Muslims.

- It ran counter to Switzerland's policy of dialogue and facilitation in general, and toward the Islamic world in particular. Switzerland's credibility as an advocate of international law and its status as the host-state of international organizations might suffer.
- It threatened to cast a cloud over bilateral relations between Switzerland and the countries of the Islamic world overall, and to damage economic relations with these states.
- It could be abused by extremists both at home and abroad for anti-West propaganda and incitement that could be particularly hostile to Switzerland. The experience of Denmark in connection with the publication of the caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed (Larson), and the reaction to Pope Benedict XVI's speech at Regensburg (Radford), showed how unpredictable and swift such moves can be, and that reactions could include violent protests and attacks against institutions, organizations and individual citizens.

The anti-minaret initiative and the referendum campaign together posed an enormous potential risk, and a negative impact on the image and the interests of Switzerland was to be expected.

Therefore, as provided for in Article 2 of the Federal Ordinance on Switzerland's communication abroad, the FDFA submitted a communications strategy to the Federal Council in the summer of 2009. The FDFA recommended that the Federal Council continue to strengthen international communication campaigns, and proposed that an interdepartmental communications working group be set up to coordinate these efforts. The working group would include the President of the Swiss Confederation as well as representatives of the Federal Department of Justice and Police, the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection

and Sport, and the Federal Chancellery. It would be chaired jointly by the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and the Federal Chancellery. The Federal Council approved the communications strategy on July 1, 2009.

Measures During the Referendum Campaign

Although strategic communications were not able to eliminate entirely the risk potential outlined in the section above, they could reduce the probability of its occurrence. Communications during the referendum campaign pursued the following objectives:

1. Increase the information made available about the initiative, and the opposition of the Federal Council and parliament, to foreign embassies in Switzerland and political decision-makers and media opinion-leaders abroad.
2. Enhance the Swiss electorate's knowledge of Islam, the significance of minarets and the situation of the Muslim population in Switzerland.
3. Raise understanding of Switzerland, its political system (direct democracy, the right to submit an initiative) and its political culture (freedom of opinion, co-determination) among foreign embassies in Switzerland, and among opinion-leaders in the international media.
4. Strengthen the positive image of Switzerland in the leading international media as a multicultural, open and humanitarian country.

Achieving these aims necessitated a range of different communications activities depending on how the referendum campaign would progress. The actions taken complemented official communications at home while reflecting them abroad. It was thus

essential that communications were closely coordinated between the authorities involved.

The government was nonetheless walking a tightrope with its communications activities at home. Any active communication during the referendum campaign, especially in pursuit of objective 2 above, would inevitably result in accusations by the initiative's supporters of official propaganda, and thus of interference in the referendum campaign.

The extent of the authorities' involvement and communications in referendum campaigns is a particularly sensitive issue in a political system of direct democracy.

On June 1, 2008, the Swiss electorate voted on the "Sovereignty of the People Instead of Official Propaganda" initiative, known as the "muzzle" initiative. This initiative aimed largely to forbid any information activities on the part of the authorities in the run-up to Confederation-wide votes. Although it was clearly defeated, with 75.2 percent voting against it, many in Switzerland viewed this as a shot across the government's bow. Put briefly, the consensus that emerged was that the Federal Council and administration had a duty to provide information on the content and consequences of referendum proposals, but should always fulfil this duty circumspectly.

Preparatory Measures

Unlike other threats to Switzerland's image, the referendum campaign for the anti-minaret initiative could be foreseen. This enabled Switzerland's communication abroad to prepare its activities carefully and to draw up a variety of scenarios depending on how the referendum campaign would progress. This proved decisive for effective communication both before and after the referendum. Preparations comprised the following specific measures:

- Identifying and prioritizing target countries and leading media in the Islamic world, in close consultation with local Swiss representations.
- Identifying highly credible political, media and religious opinion-leaders abroad with whom contact had already been established, and who might be involved in communications activities.
- Identifying possible official visits, international platforms and organizations that might be incorporated into external communications, producing a calendar of international meetings that might be used as information platforms, and focusing on Geneva as the base of many international and multilateral organizations.
- Producing information materials that could be addressed to target groups abroad, specifically in English, Arabic and Farsi. These materials stated the Federal Council's position and explained Switzerland's political system.
- Intensifying dialogue with socio-political activists, religious leaders, political advisers and government representatives within well-established networks such as the Alliance of Civilizations and the Nyon Process.
- Producing status reports from local representatives and monitoring foreign media coverage of the anti-minaret initiative in 40 languages.

Plans were drawn up at the FDFA head office in Bern. Implementation was then handled primarily by Switzerland's representatives abroad.

Communications during the Referendum Campaign

As anticipated, the close interplay between domestic and foreign policy proved a challenge during the referendum campaign. The right-wing SVP campaigned with provocative posters in support of the anti-minaret initiative. Even before they appeared in public, these posters prompted heated discussion in Switzerland. Two city governments banned the posters from their territories, which ultimately resulted in even more publicity for them.

The heated debate in Switzerland met with a broad response from other countries. Until that point, the anti-minaret initiative had attracted limited attention, but things changed in response to the controversy in Switzerland triggered by the SVP's poster campaign. Coverage mainly took the form of agency reports, with few major editorial articles. The analyses conducted by the FDFA showed that most articles originated in Switzerland's neighbouring countries – Germany, France and Italy – and in the United Kingdom and United States. Media coverage in mainly Muslim countries was limited to a small number of articles, specifically in Turkey, Lebanon, Qatar and Iran. The tone was generally factual and balanced, the authors refraining from comment. Many years of well-founded journalism by Swissinfo Arabic, Switzerland's Arabic-language news and information platform, played a significant part in this largely discerning coverage.



With this in mind, communications by members of the Swiss government, representatives abroad and high-ranking officials were confined to providing information about the initiative and the position of the Federal Council. Existing diplomatic networks were activated, and official meetings and visits, as well as multilateral platforms, were used to this end.

A number of representative opinion polls in Switzerland gave general reason to believe that the anti-minaret initiative would be rejected. Although the coordination working group prepared both scenarios – acceptance and rejection – for Referendum Sunday, senior politicians, the political parties, diplomats and civil servants alike were expecting a “no” vote on the initiative, and that life would return to normal after November 29.

Following the Acceptance of the Anti-Minaret Initiative

Reaction at Home and Abroad

On November 29, 2009, 57.5 percent of the Swiss electorate voted in favour of the anti-minaret initiative. The voting turnout stood at an above-average 53.4 percent.

This clear acceptance of the initiative, which prohibited the construction of further minarets in Switzerland, came as a complete surprise. It undercut the credibility of prominent political commentators and polling firms, who had been unanimous in predicting that the initiative would be rejected. That the forecasts, including those of Switzerland's national television and radio broadcaster SRG SSR, had been so wildly off the mark triggered a storm of controversy about the logic behind, and basis of, referendum predictions and led to an inquiry into the influence of forecasts on opinion-forming during the referendum campaign (Milic).

The acceptance of the initiative generated a huge response from the media, and lively debate among the population at large. There were demonstrations against the acceptance of the initiative. These were generally peaceful, with the exception of two paint-bomb attacks on the Zurich offices of the SVP and on the Goal advertising agency, which had produced the contentious referendum poster. In total, at least seven threatening letters were sent, warning of terrorist attacks on Christian institutions and making threats against the Swiss population.

The result of the referendum attracted enormous attention internationally and was met with incomprehension and disapproval from many nations.

Reactions were critical, but only a few countries, among them Turkey, made any official statement on the referendum. Most of the reaction was conveyed in direct talks with Switzerland's representatives. Official government representatives, as well as the great majority of religious representatives, took actions to avoid political escalation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Palestinian National Authority, for example, issued a very moderate press release on December 9 stating:

“We share the concern expressed by Muslims around the world at the Swiss vote to ban minarets in their country. We urge the Swiss authorities to continue to respect the freedom of religion and to uphold the principle of non-discrimination, taking note that the construction of mosques and the freedom to practice the religion are not touched by the vote... We therefore ask the Swiss authorities and our fellow Muslims to react by actively offering a dialogue in order to overcome prejudice.”

Most nations expected Switzerland to send a clear signal by entering into closer dialogue with the Muslim community and working to prevent discrimination against it. A number of representatives of Muslim governments demanded, via their missions in Geneva, that the Swiss government cancel the new article in the Constitution. These demands indicate that the Swiss system had not, at that point, been sufficiently understood.

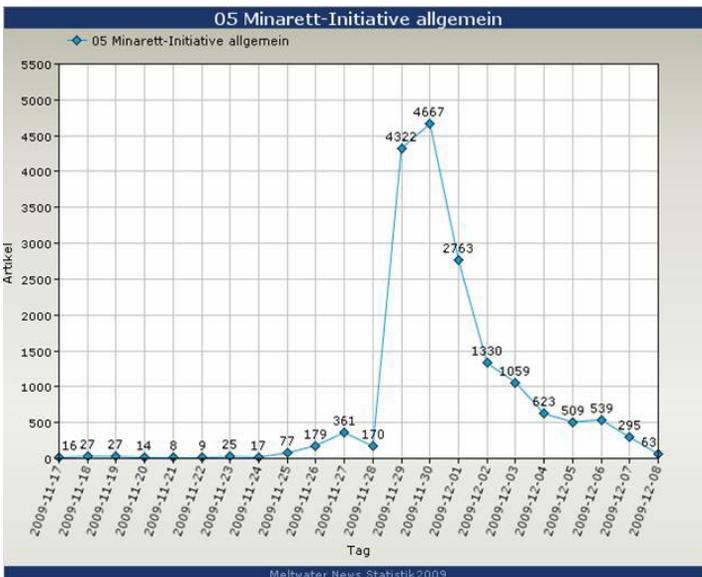
Several organizations, specifically the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Arab League, also made clear demands that the result of the referendum be reversed, at times sharply criticising the outcome. Similar calls were made by members of the Egyptian parliament, representatives of the Turkish government

and senators in Pakistan. There were only isolated calls for boycotts and protests, with the exception of Pakistan, where demonstrations against Switzerland were orchestrated and the Swiss flag was burned some time later, in January 2010.

Foreign media interest in the Swiss minaret ban was enormous (FDFA, Analysis). More than 4,000 media reports were recorded on Referendum Sunday and the following day alone. There was a general consensus among the international media in their surprise at just how clear the result had been. While most of the reaction was factual and balanced, with accurate reporting of the result and the different positions of those concerned, criticism from political figures and international organizations was featured prominently. Most leading international media commented on the Swiss decision, with the vast majority critical and disapproving. The result was interpreted in several quarters as a sign of increasing Islamophobia and discrimination against Muslims in Europe. Not only was the referendum criticized, but Switzerland's direct democracy also came under fire. At the same time, the decision was placed in a broader, pan-European context, and the Swiss minaret ban was portrayed as symbolic of increasing hostility toward Muslims in Western Europe. However, more and more self-critical murmurings were soon heard from the neighboring countries of France, Germany and Austria in recognition that, were referenda on similar issues to be held in those countries, the result would probably be the same.

The media response in the Islamic world was generally restrained and factual. The many newspaper and media reports from these nations were almost entirely critical and uncomprehending of the referendum result. Individual media reports attempted to explain it in terms of immigration. The great majority placed the result in a greater European context, and expressed fears that the minaret ban in Switzerland would be only the start of a process of discrimination against Muslims throughout Europe. The media were

evidently taking pains to keep to the facts, and praised the Swiss government's position. Although much criticism was quoted from prominent Muslims and religious and political leaders, it were always accompanied by calls to remain calm. One example of this interpretation can be found in Al Jazeera's coverage of the Swiss ban on building minarets. Seib has shown how the media and globalized journalism such as that practiced by Al Jazeera can influence how events are perceived and framed by the Muslim world, thereby having unprecedented influence on international politics.



While media coverage in non-Islamic states – with the exception of those with large Muslim communities – eased off after a few days, the issue continued to occupy the media in Islamic states for a longer period. At the same time, despite the harshness of reaction to the referendum result, there were no calls for violence against Switzerland, and few raised the possibility of a boycott.

Measures following Referendum Sunday

Although preparations for the acceptance of the initiative had been made on paper, in their minds Swiss decision-makers and opinion-leaders were prepared only for its rejection. This had to change rapidly.

Before Referendum Sunday was over, information activities with the international community had already been stepped up in personal talks and via the media. In her official statement on Referendum Sunday, a department head of at the Federal Department of Justice and Police, Federal Councillor Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf, said, "Today's popular decision is only directed against the construction of new minarets. It is not a rejection of the Muslim community, religion or culture. Of that the Federal Council gives its assurance."

The government's statement was immediately translated into several languages, spread through the networks established by various political initiatives such as the Nyon Process and distributed to Switzerland's missions abroad. These in turn employed their local contact networks in an effort to ensure that the Swiss decision was correctly reported and interpreted in their host countries.

On the evening of November 29, 2009, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Micheline Calmy-Rey, personally telephoned OIC Secretary-General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu to explain the result of the referendum and emphasize that Switzerland remained an open and receptive partner to the OIC. On the day after the referendum, Foreign Minister Calmy-Rey received all Bern-based ambassadors of OIC states for talks. On December 13, she also met with a number of European foreign ministers in advance of an international conference in Sarajevo organized by the Alliance of Civilizations. In addition, the President of the Swiss Confederation, Hans-Rudolf Merz, and Foreign Minister Calmy-Rey telephoned a number of ministers

and heads of government from the Islamic world. Furthermore, on November 30, Federal Councillor Widmer-Schlumpf personally informed the President of the European Council and EU home affairs ministers of the referendum result.

Drawing on Switzerland's international network, the Federal Council strengthened dialogue with the relevant representatives of foreign governments and religious and civil society institutions. High-level meetings and platforms in multilateral organizations, such as Switzerland's chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, were used to explain the result of the referendum and to underline Switzerland's willingness to enter into dialogue. Media work was intensified. Strategic leading international media were offered interviews, and guest articles were published.

At the same time, dialogue with the Islamic community in Switzerland was broadened and deepened. Shortly after the referendum, the Minister of Justice met once again with representatives of Swiss Muslims, and set up an institutional framework for dialogue between the federal government and representatives of Islamic organizations in Switzerland. This high-level group brought together eighteen women and men representing different Islamic factions and origins, living in different regions of Switzerland, with representatives of three Federal Departments: Justice and Police, Home Affairs and Foreign Affairs. The discussions took place in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect that facilitated discussions of controversial issues. Fairly quickly, the talks moved away from security issues to those of the integration and participation of Muslims in Swiss society. Issues under discussion included the effectiveness of past and current integration programs, the options for strengthening understanding of Swiss state and social policy institutions and traditions among Muslims settled in Switzerland, and how to improve the Swiss population's understanding of Islam and the Islamic communities in Switzerland.

Furthermore, media professionals from countries such as Jordan and Indonesia were invited to Switzerland, and shown through personal meetings that Switzerland is making a serious effort with regard to continued dialogue with, and the integration of, Muslim immigrants. Finally, a number of specific projects were set up, such as a Media & Religion exchange program between Swiss, Egyptian and Jordanian journalists, to look into reporting on religious issues. The general objective of the program is to assist the development of transnational journalistic skills related to discussion and analysis of the role of religions in the contemporary world, combining a common training for Swiss journalists (and those from other Western countries) and journalists from other regions of the world. The program helps journalists extend their knowledge and builds transcultural networks and documentary resources. It aims to improve information about religious realities, their impact on societies and the consequences for international relations, thereby contributing to the prevention of crises and tensions linked to religious factors.

Another example is the support of the international NGO Soliya and its core program, Connect. This program's aim is to educate, support and mobilize a diverse and global community of young adults through the use of new media and communication technologies in order to promote understanding and empathy within and between their societies. Connect, which launched in fall 2010 at multiple Swiss universities, is a semester-long program integrated into courses at more than 80 universities worldwide, increasing knowledge and understanding of diverse cultures and perspectives and facilitating dialogue between students by means of an online video-conferencing platform.

Each of the measures noted above was communicated broadly both at home and abroad, especially to highly critical organizations such as the OIC and the Arab League.

Result

All in all, the focus of international attention soon shifted away from Switzerland to Europe as a whole. Switzerland's minaret ban no longer took center stage but was mentioned as part of an Islam-critical trend in several European countries. For example, after heated debate, France decided to ban the wearing of full veils like the burqa and the niqab in public places beginning in spring 2011. In the June 2010 Dutch parliamentary elections, the Islam-critical Party for Freedom under Geert Wilders became the country's third-strongest political power. In Germany, in late August 2010, Thilo Sarrazin's criticism of Muslim immigrants triggered a bitter controversy about immigration and integration. With this in mind, Switzerland's minaret ban should not be seen as a trigger, but rather classified as part of widespread unease in Europe and a general political move to the right.

The reactions of governments and official religious institutions in the Muslim world in the wake of the minaret ban were critical, yet mostly moderate. This is explained by the following factors:

- The information provided to international partners in advance of the referendum was well-received and praised outside Switzerland. The explanations given helped improve understanding about the referendum and keep the debate matter-of-fact.
- The response to the referendum vote from the Swiss-Muslim population was both constructive for domestic dialogue and encouraged the Muslim communities both domestic and international to remain calm.

- The Swiss government has been in dialogue with Muslims for many years – contact which was stepped up in view of the anti-minaret initiative. The trustworthy and transparent relationships that Switzerland had established with Islamic socio-political activists, religious leaders, political advisers and government representatives through various dialogue projects (such as the Nyon Process presented in the second section, “Switzerland’s Foreign Policy in Relation to the Muslim World”) and by pursuing a very proactive communication strategy in the run-up to the popular vote, now paid off.
- Finally, Switzerland’s positive image abroad proved to be an important buffer. Years of Swiss foreign policy commitment to establishing dialogue and relations with all parties, especially in the Middle East, now paid off.

A certain degree of escalation potential nonetheless remains. In the same way that reaction to the publication of caricatures of Mohammed was delayed in Denmark, the issue might develop a certain late momentum of its own beyond the control of the state once media attention has faded. The OIC is monitoring the situation in Switzerland closely and mentioned the minaret ban on several occasions, e.g., in a resolution passed in May 2010.

One year after, the image and credibility of Switzerland abroad as a defender of human rights and symbol of tolerance and openness have been damaged to a certain extent by the popular decision to ban the erection of new minarets. This has been felt less on a bilateral level, and more in multilateral organizations such as the OIC.

This was also reflected, at least in the short term, by Switzerland’s ranking in the Nation Brands Index for 2010. Switzerland managed to keep its eighth place position, but was marked down considerably on a number of points compared with the previous year, particularly

in matters referring to its population (Nation Brands Index). However, compared to the tremendous losses Denmark suffered in the Nation Brands Index as a result of publication of the caricatures, the relatively modest drop in Switzerland's image, at least in the short term, can be attributed to a large extent to Switzerland's long-standing and consistent foreign policy focusing on dialogue and mutual understanding.

At the same time, the minaret ban has garnered more attention abroad for Swiss domestic policy. Multilateral, Geneva-based organizations in particular have since been observing the Swiss political process much more closely, and are raising questions and comments in political forums.

Whether or not the minaret ban will result in medium- to long-term image loss for Switzerland remains to be seen.

Lessons Learned for Switzerland's Communication Abroad

The lessons learned from Switzerland's handling of the anti-minaret initiative can be distilled into general points concerning the boundaries and opportunities of international communications, along with some very practical "Dos" and "Don'ts" which may, hopefully, be of benefit to other countries.

- Switzerland's communication abroad cannot reverse an event or undo its negative impact. It can, however, present and explain such an event in context, as part of a greater whole, thereby limiting negative implications.
- Keeping quiet about negative events in the hope that they will go away is not an option. On the contrary, in today's global information society, not communicating means letting others frame the meaning and interpretation of those events. Early-stage communication pays off.

- Every country has its good and bad sides. Honesty and transparency are central, especially in state communications abroad. This is the only way in which a country can remain credible in the medium- and long-term.
- A country's positive image acts as a buffer in difficult times. A national image is built up over many years and is relatively stable and robust. As a result, it stands up comparatively well to negative, one-off incidents. In fact, the existing image cushions the impact of negative events. The real damage is done when incidents are repeated. It is therefore well worth taking care of a country's national image.
- Relationships that are built up in good times and can be called upon during bad times are of key importance. Sound and lasting networks that can weather storms do not happen overnight. They take continuous effort and care. These networks encompass not only decision-makers and opinion-leaders abroad, but also individuals at home who enjoy high credibility, leadership status and influence among foreign groups. In contrast to the earlier situation in Denmark, Swiss officials always remained in close contact with Swiss Muslims, who made every effort to de-escalate reaction to the referendum campaign and its result.
- In times of crisis, in particular, the importance of a coordinated and united front cannot be underestimated. Coordination within the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and with other federal departments, between headquarters and Switzerland's representatives abroad, and between bilateral and multilateral levels is almost never straightforward. Instead, it poses a permanent and time-consuming challenge. The additional need to liaise with non-state parties, religious institutions, companies and civil society organizations adds to the complexity of the task.

- Effective and credible official communication is only possible if supported by the government. Government backing is essential, as the heads of the state are a country's most important spokespeople.

Presence Switzerland and Switzerland's communication abroad were prompted by one of the biggest crises in the country's recent history, one which was seen, at least at home, as a dramatic domestic policy issue. Without the massive damage to Switzerland's image abroad caused by the dormant assets affair at the end of the 1990s, the Swiss government and parliament would never have decided to create a framework for systematic, long-term image management.

What happened in connection with the anti-minaret initiative at the end of 2009 and in 2010 also acted as a catalyst, albeit to a lesser extent. Although the Swiss government had entrusted the FDFA several months earlier with additional functions in case of an image threat, it was the anti-minaret initiative that first gave practical meaning to this theoretical problem. All in all, the FDFA's efforts in connection with Switzerland's communication abroad have carved out greater acceptance of this work within the government and the federal administration. The necessity always to factor in the international view and thus also international communications in the event of image-sensitive domestic policy processes had become much less contentious than a year earlier. In line with the theories proposed by American political scientist Joseph S. Nye, Switzerland's communication abroad is no longer limited to strategic communications and relationship-building, but now covers all three levels (Nye, 107-109):

1. Daily communications, which involve explaining the context of domestic and foreign policy decisions and also preparation for dealing with crises.

2. Strategic communication, which develops a set of simple themes, much as a political or advertising campaign does.
3. Development of lasting relationships with key individuals over many years through scholarships, exchanges, training, seminars, conferences and access to media channels.

As such, Switzerland has taken an important step as part of a strong foreign policy that regards communications as an integral element of the country's set of policy instruments.

Endnotes

1. Founded on May 27, 1970 to strengthen cooperation between government and semi-governmental organizations working on behalf of the Swiss presence abroad, the COCO included 20 members from the Federal Administration and from semi-governmental or private organizations in the spheres of culture, business, tourism and sport, as well as the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad. The secretariat of the COCO was integrated into the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) and was relatively modestly funded, with two to four employees and an annual budget of CHF 2.4 million.

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Author Biographies

Ambassador Johannes Matyassy, Ambassador of Switzerland in Argentina graduated in economics from Bern University. He worked as a research assistant at the Bern University Institute of Economics, specializing in economic and social policy. Becoming a diplomat in 1985, he spent two years in the Federal Office of Foreign Trade (BAWI) responsible for the technology initiative EUREKA, for European environmental and transport issues and for the free trade agreement between Switzerland and the European Community. From 1987 until the beginning of 1990, Mr. Matyassy worked for the BAWI as head of the industry and trade section of the Swiss embassy in Argentina. On his return to Switzerland, he became head of section in the World Trade-GATT department in the BAWI, and was promoted in 1991 to deputy head responsible for the dossiers on agriculture and market access for industry products. From 1993 to 1995 he was head of the EUREKA presidency secretariat and of the Cooperation and Coordination section in the FDFA/FDEA, where he was in charge of the preparation and implementation of Switzerland's presidential year in EUREKA and of negotiations with the European Union in the areas of research and transport. In December 1995, Mr. Matyassy was appointed personal adviser to Federal Councillor Jean-Pascal Delamuraz, a position which he held until June 1997. He was then elected Secretary General of the Liberal Democratic Party (FDP) of Switzerland. From 2001 until 2010 he was head of Presence Switzerland in the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). He has also been leader of the FDP in the Canton of Bern from 2004 to May 2010. Since March 1, 2011 he has served as Ambassador of Switzerland in Argentina.

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