

Managing Cultural Diversity in Switzerland

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1 Introduction

“Unus pro omnibus, omnes pro uno” (One for all, all for one) is written around the Swiss cross in the dome of the parliament building and hovers above the heads of federal politicians. It represents the Swiss political motto and is engraved in the Swiss cultural identity (see Fig. 1). It became part of the national identity after the founding of the modern federal state in 1848. In the nineteenth century, the fledgling Swiss state used this maxim to appeal to the sense of national unity. Each individual canton, each state, had to ensure that it was in everyone’s interest to surrender sovereignty to the federal state (Hebeisen, 2021). This motto is still invoked today, especially in times of crisis. For example, as the coronavirus crisis escalated, the phrase was repeatedly used by the Federal Council to call on the Swiss people to show solidarity: Stay at home! Protect the

weakest among us and save our community from disaster (Hebeisen, 2021).

Understanding the cultural diversity of a country requires looking at different contexts, such as the geographic, historical, and political framework. These influences are an expression of the mentality of the people who live in that society. Cultural diversity is defined as the presence of multiple cultural or ethnic groups within a society, community, or organization. It includes differences in customs, beliefs, values, behaviors, and artifacts that distinguish one group of people from another.

In the following, it will be shown how cultural diversity is shaped in Switzerland. First, the geographical, historical, and political aspects will be discussed. Then, it will be explained how Switzerland became a country of migration. Third, it will be shown what kind of cultural aspects are relevant for cooperation with the Swiss and how they are anchored in the socio-historical context. Finally, some practical implications for working with the Swiss will be presented.

To give a comprehensive view of cultural diversity in Switzerland, a holistic, interdisciplinary approach was chosen regarding the literature used. Sources from the disciplines of intercultural communication and intercultural psychology were considered. As in these fields a cultural-historical approach is inherent which is essential for intercultural understanding, sources

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Fig. 1 Dome of the parliament building
Source: Ben Hueter, Bern



from Swiss history and Swiss literature were added to make cultural differences plausible.

Of course, there is no such thing as the Swiss. Switzerland is a very diverse, small country that encompasses different linguistic and cultural regions and, like other countries, is regionally very diverse. In the canton of Graubünden, for example, the mentality differs from valley to valley, or the cities are culturally different from the countryside. Regional differences are emphasized. They are part of the Swiss identity. This complexity is simplified by focusing on the German-, French-, and Italian-speaking parts of Switzerland.

2 Switzerland: Beyond Chocolate and Cheese

“Direct democracy and foreign policy neutrality, the cohesion of different language groups, economic modernity, prosperity, cosmopolitanism, cleanliness: these are just some of the virtues for which Switzerland is admired worldwide” (Reinhardt, 2019, p. 2). So what makes a Swiss Swiss?

Surrounded by its neighbors Germany to the north, Austria and the Principality of Liechtenstein to the east, France to the west, and Italy to the south, Switzerland is located in central Europe, bordered by high mountains. Its capital is Bern. Switzerland’s area of only 41,285 km² includes three major natural areas: the Jura in the northwest, the Central Plateau, and the Alps. The Central Plateau accounts for about 30% of the total area. It is home to most of Switzerland’s major cities and two-thirds of the country’s population. However, residential areas and infrastructure cover only 16% of the Central Plateau (Hurter et al., 2021). Population density is high. Switzerland has significantly more inhabitants per km² than the EU average (Glatthard, 2020).

Switzerland’s population is growing steadily, reaching 8.7 million in 2022, a quarter of whom hold foreign passports. More than half of these foreigners were either born in Switzerland or have lived here for at least 10 years (Federal Chancellery, 2023). The largest groups of foreign nationals come from Italy, Germany, and Portugal (Rausa, 2022). This diversity is also reflected in the religious landscape. Religious freedom is a constitutional right. While Roman Catholicism

and the Evangelical-Reformed Church were clearly the main religions in the past, their share has declined over the years. Today, Switzerland’s religious landscape is diverse (see Fig. 2).

Switzerland is a country strongly influenced by Christianity, which is reflected in the preamble of the Federal Constitution. It begins with the words: “In the name of Almighty God!” (Fedlex, 1999). The dominance of Christianity has a long history. Under the rule of the Romans, the Christian faith spread throughout the territory of present-day Switzerland from the fourth century onward. The Christian culture of the country is evident in the many churches that have been

built, the Sunday rest, and the public holidays, most of which are based on Christian tradition (Hurter et al., 2021).

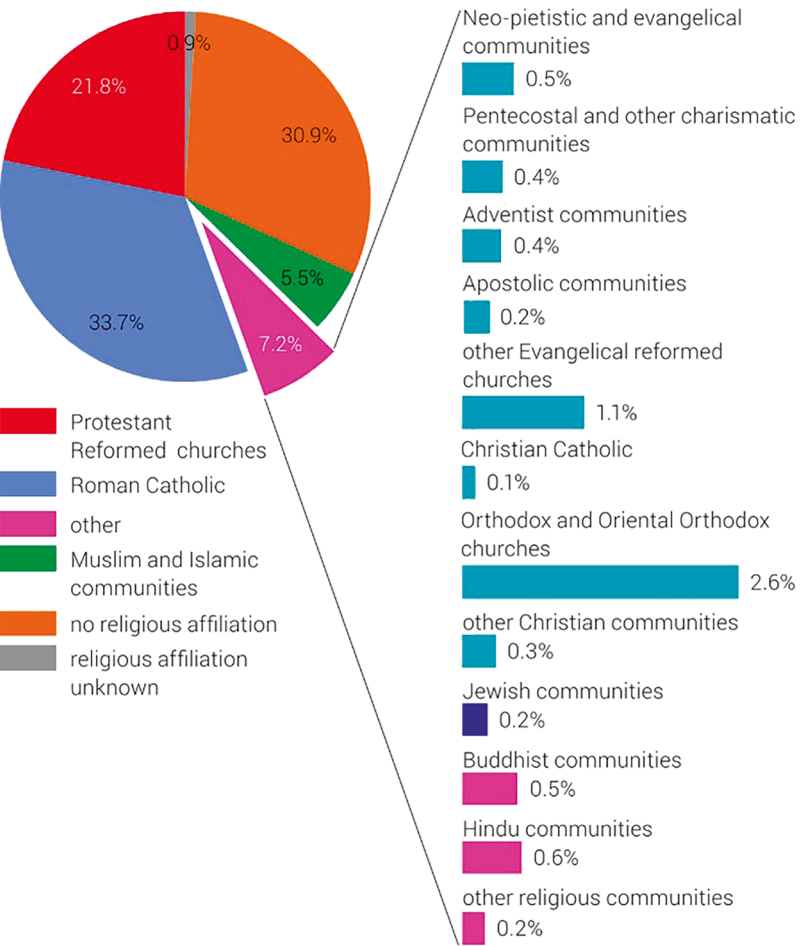
2.1 Multilingual Switzerland

The linguistic landscape of Switzerland is diverse and complex. The coexistence of the four national languages, German, French, Italian, and Romansh, enshrined in the Federal Constitution, is increasingly complemented by numerous other languages that have been added as a result of migration and globalization. About 62% of the

Fig. 2 Religions in Switzerland Source: Federal Statistic Office, 2023

Religion 2019 – 2021

Permanent resident population 15 years or over



population speaks German, 23% French, 8% Italian, and 0.2% Romansh. Romansh is a Romance language spoken only in parts of the canton of Graubünden. Twenty-three percent of the population speaks a language other than the four national languages. English is the most commonly used non-national language (Müller & Roth, 2022).

But the four national languages alone do not provide a full picture. There are many different dialects, depending on the canton or region. Swiss German in all its facets is the colloquial language of the German-speaking Swiss. Writing is mainly done in written German, a standard language. In Ticino, some people still speak Lombard dialects. In French-speaking Switzerland, each region still has its own peculiarities and accents, but oral Swiss French differs only slightly from standard French (Hurter et al., 2021). Dialects are a mark of identity, especially in German-speaking Switzerland. The dialect tells you where someone comes from. There are considerable regional differences. Sometimes you can even tell which village or district someone comes from. The Swiss have always been interested in knowing exactly where someone comes from, because there are so many different identities.

In general, Switzerland has three official languages: German, Italian, and French. This means, for example, that parliamentarians debate in these languages. All federal publications are also published in these languages. However, Rumantsch is also considered an official language when communicating with Rhaeto-Romanic speakers.

Multilingualism is an important part of Swiss culture. It is promoted by the federal government in order to strengthen internal cohesion.

2.2 Some Historical Milestones and National Myths that Shape Switzerland

Switzerland is neither ethnically nor religiously homogeneous. The Swiss national spirit is not based on a particular ethnicity, language, or culture, but on a common history and shared politi-

cal values. Thus, Switzerland is often referred to as a nation of will (Hurter et al., 2021). The preamble of the Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation reflects this attitude:

In the name of Almighty God! The Swiss People and the Cantons, mindful of their responsibility towards creation, resolved to renew their alliance so as to strengthen liberty, democracy, independence and peace in a spirit of solidarity and openness towards the world, determined to live together with mutual consideration and respect for their diversity, conscious of their common achievements and their responsibility towards future generations, and in the knowledge that only those who use their freedom remain free, and that the strength of a people is measured by the well-being of its weakest members, adopt the following Constitution. (Fedlex, 1999).

The myth of the birth of Switzerland and of a hero.

1291 is widely regarded as the year Switzerland was born. At that time, the original forest cantons of Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden are said to have formed an alliance to assure each other of mutual support in the event of violence from within or without, and to pledge obedience to lawful rulers and judges. This created self-government and autonomy. This pact, dated at the beginning of the month of August, became the actual founding act of Switzerland in the nineteenth century. August 1 became the Swiss national holiday (Reinhardt, 2019).

The myth of William Tell, the Swiss national hero, and the story of the apple shot also falls from this period. According to the legend, William Tell was forced by the Habsburg bailiff to shoot an apple from his son's head with a crossbow. He had refused to wear a hat as a sign of Habsburg rule. The shot was successful, but Tell was arrested because he had a second bolt. If he had missed, he would have killed the bailiff. On his way to the dungeon, he escapes. He lay in wait for the bailiff and shot him. This was the signal for an uprising. The Confederates revolted against the Habsburgs and freed themselves from the aristocratic power.

The fact that this story isn't true does not diminish its fascination. On the contrary, it gradually became a core element of the national consciousness (Reinhardt, 2019). Switzerland, whose position between the great European pow-

ers was always precarious, whose necessity for existence could never be proven, and whose cohesion was always endangered by confessional, linguistic, and economic differences, needed an enormous output of mythical narratives to secure its identity, the deep certainty of belonging together despite particular identities (Von Matt, 2021).

The legend of William Tell is still alive today as a symbol of freedom and non-oppression. To this day, all Swiss people carry William Tell within and with them: His image is embossed on the 5 Swiss Franc coin.

2.2.1 The Reformation

In 1523, the Reformation began in Zurich under Huldrych Zwingli with the goal of transforming the Roman Catholic Church. Under Jean Calvin, Geneva became a reformed center with international influence from 1536 (Hurter et al., 2021).

However, not all parts of the Confederation supported this movement. Some remained loyal to the Catholic faith. This led to a deep division between Catholic and Protestant places, which led to many conflicts and armed confrontations until the nineteenth century (Reinhardt, 2019; Hurter et al., 2021; Zanolli & Walter, 2022).

2.2.2 From Alliances to the Federal State

Over the centuries, Switzerland evolved from a collection of different alliances to a confederation of states and finally to the federal state of today. Its national borders and strict neutrality were established and internationally recognized at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. The federal state of Switzerland was created in 1848 with the official name Swiss Confederation (in Latin: *Confoederatio Helvetica* (CH)). The 26 cantons were given a large degree of autonomy. They are sovereign except to the extent that their sovereignty is limited by the Federal Constitution. Freedom of religion and freedom of the press were established. All Swiss men were granted political rights (Hurter et al., 2021). Switzerland developed into a unified legal and economic area (Federal Chancellery of Switzerland, 2023).

2.2.3 Neutrality

Swiss neutrality has existed for centuries and is widely recognized internationally. Historically, neutrality played an important role in the creation of the Swiss nation. It was mentioned as early as the sixteenth century. On the one hand, neutrality means that Switzerland does not get involved in international conflicts; on the other hand, it is an important element of Swiss security and foreign policy. Thanks to it, Switzerland has considerable credibility in promoting peace. Neutrality is a fundamental part of Swiss identity and enjoys strong support among the Swiss population (Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, 2022).

2.2.4 Women's Right to Vote

It took more than a century for Swiss women to be granted political rights. On February 7, 1971, they were granted the right to vote and stand for election at the federal level. Women's organizations in Switzerland had to put pressure on the Federal Council and work tirelessly to obtain a majority vote of the people and the cantons (The Swiss Parliament, 2023). In November 1990, the Swiss Federal Supreme Court unanimously ruled in a public hearing that women in the canton of Appenzell Innerrhoden were entitled to political rights. Women's suffrage was thus introduced in the last canton by the highest court and against the majority decision of the men in this canton.

2.3 Swiss Citizen: Much of a Say

Switzerland is a direct democracy. The supreme power lies with the people. Therefore, the people are largely involved in the decision-making process at all political levels. All Swiss citizens over the age of 18 have the right to vote in elections and on referendums. Swiss voters are called to vote on an average of fifteen issues about four times a year. In addition, Swiss citizens have the right to propose referendums on specific issues. This can be done through an initiative, an optional referendum, or a mandatory referendum. In addition, all people in Switzerland have the right to petition, regardless of nationality or age (Fedlex, 1999). This diversity of politi-

cal rights is unique in the world. However, this wide range of opportunities for democratic participation plays an important role. In two cantons, one of the oldest and simplest forms of direct democracy, the *Landsgemeinde*, is still practiced today. Citizens gather in the open air to elect the government and the court, and to vote on matters by show of hands. The *Landsgemeinde* dates back to the Middle Ages and is unique in the world (Hurter et al., 2021). The separation of powers ensures that power is not concentrated in the hands of a single person or political party. This is a fundamental principle of Swiss democracy (Federal Chancellery, 2023).

2.4 Federalism

Switzerland is a federal state. Power is shared between the federal government, the 26 cantons, and the 2136 communes. Federalism makes it possible for Switzerland to exist as a single entity—despite four language cultures and different regional characteristics (Federal Chancellery, 2023). The cultivation of diversity in unity, of unity despite diversity, is the national glue of Switzerland (Küng, 2023).

The Federal Council governs Switzerland. It is the only country in the world that has a collegial government. The seven members of the Federal Council are all members of the college and have equal rights. Decisions are made by consensus (Federal Chancellery, 2023). The Federal Council represents the major political parties in Switzerland. To ensure stability, Federal Councillors are elected by Parliament for a four-year term and cannot be dismissed (Federal Chancellery, 2023).

The Swiss system of government has no head of government or president. A member of the Federal Council is elected President of the Confederation as *primus inter pares* for 1 year at a time (Hurter et al., 2021).

The parliament consists of two chambers: the National Council, which represents the people, and the Council of States, which represents the cantons.

In conclusion, Switzerland has historically developed much like much of Western Europe

but has been able to maintain its unique character and independence. Multilingualism and federalism have their roots in the past but still characterize Switzerland today. Its neutrality is recognized by all states in the world (Federal Chancellery, 2023).

3 Switzerland: Country of Migration

The history of Switzerland is a history of migration (Holenstein et al., 2018; Lüthi & Skenderovic, 2019). In early times, various Germanic tribes settled in the area that later became Switzerland. Surrounded by powerful nations with no natural resources of their own, the small country in the middle of Europe had to absorb impulses through constant exchange with other countries, thus promoting development and innovation. It is even more interesting that the term “migration” became a socially significant and political concept only late, in the 1990s (Espahangizi, 2022). In 2023, 47% of the members of the board of directors of the 100 most important companies in Switzerland do not have a Swiss passport. In the case of new appointments, this figure rises to 56%. They come from 39 countries. Female top executives in particular are finding their way to Switzerland from abroad. They make up 54% of the female members of executive management. Among the companies listed on the Swiss Market Index (SMI), 75% of the board members are foreigners and 91% of female board members are foreigners. On the boards of directors of SMI companies, 54% of vacancies were filled by women (Schilling, 2023).

Early emigrants were the many Swiss mercenaries who served in the armies of the great powers, some of whom settled in countries such as Italy and France. In addition, many merchants, craftsmen, and confectioners emigrated to neighboring countries in order to pass on their highly specialized knowledge. The Protestant Huguenots, long persecuted by the French Catholics, were the first refugees to come to Switzerland, and as watchmakers and weavers, they would have an enormous influence on the

country's industrial history. In essence, however, immigration has always been closely linked to the economic situation. In the nineteenth century, famines led to an exodus of around 12% of the population to the USA, Latin America, or Asia in search of better living conditions (Holenstein et al., 2018, p. 191 ff.).

This changed with industrialization. Thanks to technological innovations gained through international exchange and trade relations, Switzerland became a center of mechanical engineering, textile industry, watchmaking, and food industry, which required more and more workers. Famous entrepreneurs such as Nestlé, Maggi, Brown and Boveri, Hayek, all came from other countries and contributed their innovative strength, and at the newly founded universities, mostly international scholars provided their expertise to the next generation.

With the two world wars, the economic consequences of which were also strongly felt in Switzerland, the attitude toward foreign workers changed. As early as 1915, there was talk of “foreign infiltration” (“Ueberfremdung”) that needed to be resisted. But after the end of the Second World War, there was an enormous demand for

workers to meet the needs of a rapidly growing economy. Countless Italians, and later Spaniards, Portuguese, and people from Turkey and ex-Yugoslavia came as “guest workers,” who toiled under meager conditions at first and had to leave the country after 9 months.

Although Switzerland was closely linked to other European countries because of its need for workers, it never became a member of the European Union and maintained a restrictive immigration policy. As a result of the economic development, the rapprochement with political Europe, the conditions of immigration were relaxed, so that in the 2000s many French and Germans came to Switzerland. As a result of crises and wars in the world, groups of refugees from Hungary and the Czech Republic also arrived in Switzerland in the 1950s and 1960s. Later, Tamils from Sri Lanka arrived. In more recent history, (civil) wars in Afghanistan, Somalia, Eritrea, Syria, or Ukraine have led to the immigration of other groups (Holenstein et al., 2018).

According to Fig. 3, the distribution of the permanent foreign resident population by end of 2021 looks a follows:

Permanent foreign resident population, on 31.12.2021

By citizenship

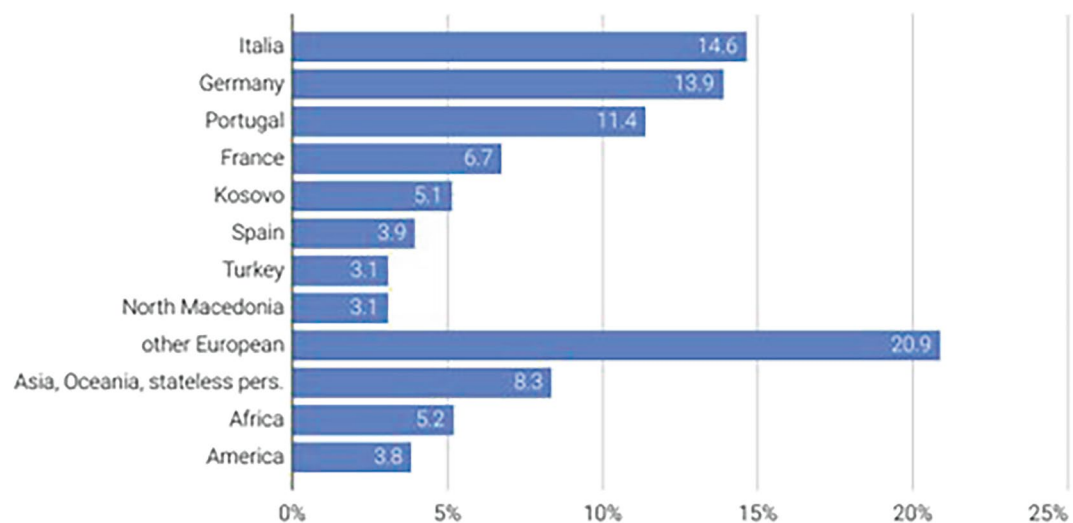


Fig. 3 Permanent foreign resident population in Switzerland. Source: Federal Statistic Office, 2022

Switzerland's approach to migration is complicated. On the one hand, it is recognized that the development of the Swiss economy is inconceivable without foreign skilled workers; on the other hand, for more than 100 years, parts of society have been engaged in a discourse of overforeignization, which is repeatedly expressed in partly xenophobic popular initiatives (Espahangizi, 2022). In addition to realistic fears (such as pressure on the housing market, bottlenecks in infrastructure), symbolic fears of loss of cultural identity are evoked, which can later be expressed in prejudices against other groups and corresponding actions (Stephan et al., 2016).

These effects are in addition to the already existing attempts to secure the cultural identity of a small country against its larger neighbors from the same language families. In a very interesting study on Switzerland and Belgium, van Oudenhoven et al. (2010) was able to show that the different linguistic regions of Switzerland feel less affection toward their larger neighbors than vice versa, and that German-Swiss feel significantly less similar to Germans than vice versa. Interestingly, this was not the case for the French-speaking part of Switzerland. The authors explain this by saying that the French-speaking Swiss are already a minority in their own country and therefore emphasize cultural similarities with France more strongly in order to assert their identity vis-à-vis German-speaking Switzerland.

4 Main Cultural Themes and their Socio-Historical Anchoring

Sections 2 and 3 outlined the framework for understanding the main cultural issues in Switzerland. In the following, the most relevant cultural aspects, how they manifest themselves in daily and working life, and their practical implications are outlined.

4.1 Individualism–Autonomy–Independence

Switzerland is an individualistic culture. This means that there is a strong preference for a loose social framework in which individuals are

expected to care only for themselves and their immediate families. The individual takes precedence over the interests of the group (Hofstede et al., 2017). Swiss people tend to be self-reliant, independent, and take personal responsibility for their own lives. Switzerland scores relatively high on Hofstede's Individualism dimension. However, compared to the German-speaking part, the French-speaking part scores lower, suggesting that social ties are stronger (Hofstede et al., 2017). For example, business meals in French-speaking Switzerland last longer and are celebrated more than in German-speaking Switzerland. They also serve to build relationships and get to know each other on a personal level before doing business. The same is true in Ticino, the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland.

Individualism is also reflected in the Federal Constitution, which states that each individual must take responsibility for himself and contribute to the accomplishment of the tasks of society (Fedlex, 1999). This shows that individualism in Switzerland is linked to the good of the community and is an interplay with the slogan "Unus pro omnibus, omnes pro uno" (see Sect. 1).

Autonomy and independence are highly valued in Switzerland. It could be said that the Swiss still have William Tell in them (see Sect. 2.2). Independence is deeply ingrained in the Swiss soul. People do not like having things imposed on them. They value their privacy. One of the goals of the Swiss Confederation is to protect the country's independence. This attitude also explains why Switzerland is not part of the EU. Many Swiss feel the same way about the EU as the historian Rudolf von Salis described the internal attitude of the Swiss before Switzerland joined the UN: "The Swiss do not see themselves as part of the world. We are good, we are doing well, we are neutral and democratic, we are a free people" (Küng, 2023). On the other hand, this leads to a somewhat insular mentality, even though Switzerland has bilateral agreements with the EU.

In the personal environment, autonomy is taught from an early age. In kindergarten, for example, children are encouraged to find their own way to school. Parents are asked to give their children this freedom and, if possible, not to pick them up by car.

The Swiss value their privacy and the privacy of others. They tend to keep their personal and professional lives separate and do not usually share personal details or opinions with acquaintances or strangers. Celebrities such as Roger Federer, for example, are recognized on the street but not harassed. They are given their freedom and space. The Swiss are known for their aloofness, and it takes a while to get in touch with them.

4.2 Egalitarianism–Participation–Modesty

“Down to earth Swiss President sitting on pavement excites netizens,” the Kenyan news outlet STAR headlines over a photo that went viral of then-sitting Swiss President Alain Berset taking notes during a break at the 2018 UN General Assembly in New York, sitting relaxed on a curb without security (Fig. 4).

This image of powerful people who should not display their status to the outside world, but on the contrary should be as modest and “grounded” as possible, is deeply rooted in Switzerland. This is reflected in the Hofstede data, in which Switzerland has a very low score on the Power Distance dimension, not only compared to Kenya, but also to its European

neighbors (Hofstede et al., 2017). The data can be further differentiated by language region. The French-speaking part of Switzerland has slightly higher scores because it is more influenced by the more centralistic French understanding of the state and hierarchy, which also leads to critical incidents in cooperation within Switzerland. Managers in Switzerland who simply give orders because of their position, who visibly communicate their status, starting with their academic title, and who do not involve employees in decision-making processes are generally not taken seriously.

It is important that decisions are made by consensus whenever possible. Voting in meetings with obvious winners and losers is rare in Switzerland. Instead, long discussions are held in order to find corridors in which conflicting opinions can be reconciled.

This is the historical legacy of the medieval desire to control one’s own affairs rather than be ruled by “foreign lords,” and the resultant federal and direct-democratic political system, which does not have a real head of state but rather an all-party Federal Council that is supposed to speak with one voice (see Sect. 2.2). To win people over, it is not enough to give orders but to work out solutions through participatory interaction and informal dealings. In short, the Swiss are used to being asked and involved, and they want

Fig. 4 Down-to-earth Swiss President
(Credits: Keystone-SDA/Peter Klaunzer)



to be asked and involved. This is a fact that often surprises their German neighbors.

The strong influence of Christian Protestantism in Switzerland has also influenced the importance of virtues such as diligence and modesty. A place in the kingdom of heaven was reserved only for those who worked in this world “by the sweat of their brow” (Genesis 3: 19) and did not waste their wages but put them to good use and reinvested them. Zeal for work and humility were divine obligations. Boasting of wealth or trappings of power, on the other hand, was of the devil (Furnham, 1990).

Thus, even the professor cannot rely on the students at the beginning of a lecture to grant him the appropriate expertise based on his title alone but must first earn the recognition through appropriate performance. In Switzerland, a self-confident demeanor and presentation of one’s own status is quickly judged as arrogant. Conversely, Swiss people sometimes suffer from not being recognized for their expertise in international meetings because of their modest appearance.

4.3 Rationality–Task Orientation

“Rire c’est bon pour la santé,” which translates as “Laughing is good for your health.” With this phrase for the “Day of the Sick,” delivered with a deadpan expression, no modulation in his voice, and no discernible joy, then-Swiss President Johann Schneider-Ammann caused viral amusement in 2016, even reaching US talk shows. It confirmed all too well the stereotype of the serious Swiss who constantly strive to control their own emotions and passions.

When intercultural training participants from other countries, as well as the Swiss themselves, are asked about their perceptions of the Swiss, terms such as task-orientation, rationality, reserve, and neutral emotional expression frequently come up. This is accompanied by evaluations such as “friendly,” “polite,” but also “reserved” or “sober.”

In this effort for rationality and emotional control, the intellectual-historical roots of the Enlightenment and Protestantism are recogniz-

able, in which reason and the understanding of this world and the hereafter became the principle. Calvinist thought, which was particularly widespread in Switzerland, strongly influenced behavior. Only asceticism, modesty, and renunciation of worldly passions were considered pleasing to God. On the other hand, in the so-called doctrine of predestination, economic success was a sign that one belonged to the chosen ones who were predestined to receive God’s grace. This led to a life of hard work and control of the passions. Profits were not squandered but reinvested, which fostered a rapidly developing economy, including improved educational opportunities (Furnham, 1990). It is hard to imagine another region in the world where a referendum rejected two additional weeks of vacation with 67% of the vote, as happened in Switzerland in 2012. The population agreed with the rationalizing arguments of the employers’ associations that “something that sounds pleasant at first sight brings with it various disadvantages,” in this case possible economic damage and job losses (ARD Tagesschau, 2012).

In everyday interpersonal life, the strict separation of reason and emotion also leads to other strong differentiations of life domains, such as between work and private life, between role and person, formal and informal situations. In the professional environment and in the professional role, it is important to put the matter in the foreground and to work through it in a time-efficient manner. Here there are many similarities with German cultural standards (Schroll-Machl, 2007).

An exchange of personal sensitivities is not part of it. To this end, situations are deliberately created, such as the so-called “Apéro” (aperitif), which often follows larger meetings and where participants can get to know each other better over finger food and drinks. The open handling of emotions and access to the person beyond the professional role is usually reserved for the immediate family and close friends. Here, too, there is a greater distinction between strangers and acquaintances or friends. In order to address an unknown person directly, as is often the case in the USA, many Swiss first need a factual reason to make a social situation pleasant.

In presentations, less emphasis is placed on stirring, emotional conviction than on structure and conviction in the matter at hand. Pathos is suspect here.

4.4 Monochronic Time Orientation and Punctuality

Edward T. Hall said: “Time speaks. It speaks more plainly than words” (Hall, 1990). In Switzerland, especially in the German-speaking part, time speaks loudly. In a global comparison, Switzerland belongs to the monochronic cultures. They tend to have tighter schedules, with only one thing (mono) planned for one time (chronic). In polychronic cultures, on the other hand, people tend to have flexible schedules, move in rhythm with nature, and do several things (poly) at the same time (chronic) (Berglund, 2015). In monochronic cultures, time is segmented and treated like a material. It is owned, used, saved, and wasted (Hall, 1990). Purposeful actions are performed along an axis, one at a time. Time runs out. Time runs out and doesn’t come back; therefore, time is precious - time is money. Punctuality is important and expected.

Punctuality is an important aspect of Swiss culture, especially the German-Swiss value punctuality highly. The country is said to run like a clock. Time is everything. Everything has its time and place, which contributes to efficiency. Punctuality is seen as a sign of respect for others’ time and a demonstration of reliability and professionalism. The German-Swiss even tend to be overly punctual, as punctuality also conveys a sense of security. Any change is considered disruptive and inappropriate. In meetings, participants are expected to arrive within 5 min of the agreed time. Being late is considered unprofessional and rude and can be seen as a sign of disrespect. Project plans are detailed, and deadlines are met, barring an earthquake. If a train is late, the people waiting get nervous just before the train arrives and start bouncing on their heels. Then they pull out their cell phones and tell their business partners, friends, or family members that the train is 2 or 3 min late. Even the Swiss Federal Railways apologizes to its customers

when a train is about 3 min late. Shop closing times are strictly adhered to. About 20 min beforehand, customers are clearly informed that the store is closing, and they are asked to leave, and everyone leaves.

The importance of time in Switzerland and how it manifests itself in everyday life is also underscored by a study conducted by Robert Levine a few years ago. He examined the pace of life in different cultures based on walking speed, working speed, and the accuracy of public clocks. (Levine, 2008). Switzerland achieved the distinction of first place based on high rankings across the board: its walking speed ranked third, its working speed ranked second, and the accuracy of public clocks ranked first. Clocks were off by an average of 19 seconds (Levine, 2008).

When it comes to time, flexibility is rarely an option (Bewes, 2018). The downside is that a linear approach to time can be blind to the effectiveness of shared activities and connections. Moreover, people from a more polychronic culture may be perceived as inefficient and unreliable.

Although time is also valued in French-speaking Switzerland and Ticino (Italian-speaking part), it is handled more flexibly. In the French-speaking part, meetings and appointments can start a few minutes later than scheduled. There is a saying “le quart d’heure vaudois”—the Vaud quarter hour. It means that you should be at least a quarter of an hour late. Anything more than a quarter of an hour after the appointed time is considered rude.

In Ticino, people might take time to catch up and socialize before getting down to business, which is also part of doing business. Also, someone important might be a few minutes late for an appointment to demonstrate his or her importance.

4.5 Rule Orientation: Need for Security

For groups to live together peacefully in the long term, they need social norms on which they agree and which regulate their expectations of each other and of themselves. These include rituals of

greeting, rules of conversation, and rules of behavior, which are either explicitly formulated in rules or are implicit.

In Switzerland, for example, children in kindergarten learn to shake the teacher's hand, look her or him in the eye, and say "Guete Morge Ms/Mr. XY" every morning when they enter the kindergarten. This learned behavior becomes routinized, automated, and finally internalized, i.e., it remains effective as an expectation of "polite behavior" toward respectful persons, but it is no longer on the surface of consciousness and is then considered "natural," "self-evident," and "universal." Thus, those who do not shake hands or make eye contact are perceived as "breaking the rules" and are sanctioned accordingly. The same applies, for example, to the disposal of old newspapers, which are only removed from the paper collection if they are properly bundled, the rules for using the common laundry room in apartment buildings, and much more.

However, cultures differ in how important these norms are and how strictly they should be followed. In a global study, Gelfand (2018) was able to distinguish national cultures into "tight cultures" (strict rule orientation) or "loose cultures" (loose rule orientation). Although Switzerland was not specifically examined in this study, Gelfand, with some plausibility, assigns Switzerland to the Tight Cultures, i.e., cultures associated with conscientiousness, social order, and self-control on the one hand, and with closed-mindedness, conventionality, and cultural inertia, on the other (Gelfand, 2018, p. 55). She attributes the development of narrow cultures to perceived threats, which in the case of Switzerland can result from population density, leading to the need for more regulation of life. Following Gelfand's logic, one could also argue that over the past 700 years, the small country of Switzerland has repeatedly felt threatened militarily or economically by powerful and power-hungry neighbors and has secured its own identity and internal cohesion against the external threat by forming common strict social norms.

Protestantism is another plausible explanation. In this interpretation of Christian life, the individual must answer directly to his or her God

in the conduct of life, i.e., form an inner voice (conscience) that guides him or her in everyday actions. This inner voice, expressed in a sense of duty, then leads the person to follow these rules even when no one is watching. For God, in case of doubt, sees everything. This cultural norm can be described as "internalized, rule-oriented control" (Schroll-Machl, 2007) and is so strongly linked to the socio-historical context of Switzerland that it is self-evident even for people who are not baptized or belong to another religion but have been socialized in this context.

Rules, procedures, and regulations are also important elements of protection against the uncertainties of the future. In Switzerland, there is a strong need to eliminate uncertainties in the course of life and to always have a sense of control over one's own destiny. This is confirmed by the high scores on the "Uncertainty Avoidance" dimension in both Hofstede (Hofstede et al., 2017) and the GLOBE study (2023). This may also be related to time orientation. Punctuality as a social norm has a very strong meaning in Switzerland and is strictly expected (see Sect. 4.4).

Gelfand postulates that tight cultures must also offer opportunities for looser behavior, just as loose cultures can also have spaces with stricter social rules. In Switzerland, during the six-day carnival season at the end of winter, the Swiss are allowed to create a kind of orchestrated chaos, put aside their self-control, and let their hair down.

4.6 Swissness: Patriotism–Quality Expectations

Switzerland evolved from a collection of different alliances to a confederation of states and finally to the federal state of today (see Sect. 2.2). Even today, each canton has its own peculiarities, and the people take each other for granted. For example, people talk about the "Röstigraben," which separates German and French-speaking Switzerland in terms of mentality. Even if one sees Swiss flags in everyday life in Switzerland, one can hardly speak of a unified national pride

but must look at patriotism in a more differentiated way. The artist Ben Vautier expressed this in a painting at the World Fair in Seville: “La Suisse n’existe pas.” What he meant was that there is no such thing as a unified Switzerland, but that Switzerland is diverse, and everyone carries a different Switzerland with them (Tribelhorn, 2017). This artistic provocation led to deep political discussions.

Historically, Switzerland has lived in peace for decades and has never experienced a real external threat since the founding of the federal state, except for World War II when it was threatened with invasion. Moreover, Switzerland’s neutrality has been internationally recognized and practiced since the nineteenth century. This encourages the living of internal diversity. As a result, the strongest sense of home and belonging in Switzerland is initially toward the canton to which one belongs, although this is beginning to change (Credit Suisse Worry Barometer, 2022). Nevertheless, a unified Swiss national pride also comes to the fore, for example on Swiss National Day or at the World Cup. On such occasions, people can show that they are proud to be Swiss. Swiss flags fly everywhere. This cultivation of diversity within unity, of unity despite diversity, is the national glue of Switzerland (Küng, 2023). So, one could say that the Swiss are proud of their country deep inside but live a subtle patriotism that manifests itself clearly on certain occasions. This patriotism also comes into play when something comes from outside. Then people stand together, and internal differences hardly play a role. For example, there is great sensitivity to external criticism of Switzerland. It is seen as an attack on Switzerland.

What do the Swiss take pride in and what binds them to their country? A national survey in 2022 (Credit Suisse Worry Barometer, 2022) showed that the Swiss believe that Switzerland stands first and foremost for security and stability, followed by democracy and human rights, and neutrality. Beyond the political system, the Swiss associate Switzerland with home and tradition, beautiful scenery and spectacular nature. In general, Switzerland stands for quality of life and

prosperity, as well as a number of typical characteristics such as diligence, down-to-earthness, righteousness, or order and precision (Credit Suisse Worry Barometer, 2022).

The fact that Switzerland is a “special case” within Europe, i.e., that it has retained its independence, is politically and economically stable, feels special, plays an important role in the way the country sees itself, and is linked to the myth of William Tell (see Sect. 2.2). Living grassroots democracy and the supreme power of the people in the state are deeply rooted in the hearts of the Swiss. In addition, high quality is an important Swiss value. The Swiss focus on quality rather than quantity (Bewes, 2018). Whatever you do, it has to be of high quality. For example, houses are built with the best materials and last for centuries. Swiss quality is also expected in cooperation. If this is not the case, it can quickly be seen as unprofessional.

The Swiss reputation for quality has a long tradition and enjoys an excellent reputation worldwide. Made in Switzerland stands for reliability, tradition, exclusivity, and premium quality. Swissness sells. Several studies have shown that the added value of the Swiss brand can be as much as 20% of the selling price of certain products—and as much as 50% for luxury goods—compared to comparable goods from other countries. No wonder Swissness is protected. In 2017, a law was enacted for this purpose, with the basic principle that if a product or service says Swissness, then Swissness must be in it. This underscores the importance of quality, which was also felt by the famous Toblerone chocolate. For more than 50 years, the Matterhorn has adorned the packaging of Toblerone, but the Matterhorn will have to disappear. The reason is the outsourcing of parts of the production to Slovakia. As a result, the traditional Swiss chocolate no longer meets the “Swissness” criteria.

4.7 Communication and Conflict Management

In a global comparison, Switzerland is considered a low-context culture. This means that mes-

sages are communicated explicitly and directly. Verbal and written words are the primary way to convey a message. What is said is in the foreground (Nam, 2015). However, this statement has to be seen in a more differentiated way. Switzerland consists of four linguistic regions: German, French, Italian, and Romansch. The latter is the least homogeneous. German, French, and Italian are linguistically influenced by their respective neighbors, France, Germany, and Italy. In terms of low context and compared to Germany, France and Italy are among the countries that are already higher in context. Higher in context means that there is less information in the verbal message. Meaning is conveyed through implicit context, including gestures, social customs, silence, nuance, or tone of voice (Nam, 2015). This means that in French- and Italian-speaking Switzerland, context must also be taken into account when communicating. For example, Italian-speaking Swiss tend to be more expressive and emotional in their communication, using more gestures and body language.

Context also plays a role in German-speaking Switzerland, especially when it comes to conflict avoidance. This is often overlooked because the German-speaking Swiss generally express what they mean directly. But when it comes to criticism or disagreement, it is usually expressed indirectly. So, you might say yes when you mean no. Or someone in a store who doesn't want to buy anything might say, "Thanks, I'll think about it." This way of communicating has to do with Switzerland's deep-rooted consensus orientation, which is anchored in federalism and its basic democracy (see Sects. 2.3 and 2.4). The Swiss tend to value consensus building and finding common ground. They often use a collaborative approach to solving problems, bringing together all stakeholders to find solutions that work for everyone. Because of their basic democracy, everyone is involved and has a say. This is also evident in work situations. Everyone is asked to give their opinion. In addition, Switzerland is a small country where people know each other around the corner and do not want to jeopardize

these relationships. In such an environment, you can only get ahead if you talk to each other and give each other feedback.

5 Conclusion

Whether one settles down and lives happily after migrating to Switzerland depends on a variety of influencing factors (Berry, 2006). As discussed, there is no single Swiss culture. It is important to consider the subtleties of Swiss cultural diversity.

In a survey of over 50,000 migrants, 91% said they liked it very much or well in Switzerland. They appreciate the countryside, the high level of security, the good health care system, and the direct democracy, and are annoyed by high health insurance premiums, high rents, and the cost of living, but also by immigration and expensive childcare. They tend to perceive the Swiss as aloof, polite, materialistic, somewhat boring, rather pedantic and stressed, and rather xenophobic. They find it difficult to make friends or flirt with Swiss people in Switzerland (LeeWas, 2023).

A crucial factor for successful acculturation is the fit between individual acculturation goals and the opportunities offered by the new environment. In his well-known model of acculturation, Berry distinguishes between four acculturation strategies that result from attitudes toward the culture of origin and the target culture, and the strategies preferred in the host society: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization (Berry, 2017).

If a person pursues a separation strategy, i.e., prefers to adhere to the values and norms of the culture of origin, there is usually also a group in the diverse Swiss population that the person can join. In addition to ethnic groups, there are also professional groups, such as expatriates, who have access to a variety of international schools in urban centers and join together in international expat groups.

If, on the other hand, a person pursues an assimilation strategy, i.e., wants to leave behind his or her own culture of origin and adopt the new one as well as possible, the question arises as to how this can succeed in Switzerland and whether this is also desired by the host society. The question of when someone is accepted as “one of us” is posed, for example, by Social Marker Research, which provides a list of possible requirements against which migrant acceptance can be assessed (Leong, 2014). The longer the list of required achievements and the more difficult they are to achieve, the more exclusive a society is. Initial studies with student focus groups have shown that Switzerland tends to follow an exclusive strategy. It takes a lot to be accepted as “Swiss.” Naturalization alone is not enough. In the German-speaking part of Switzerland, visible aspects come into play, such as physical features that might indicate a history of migration, names that might refer to certain ethnic groups, or even non-Christian religious characteristics. The most important criterion for full acceptance as Swiss, but one that is difficult to achieve, is to speak a Swiss dialect without an accent, especially in the German-speaking part of Switzerland (Kammhuber et al., 2014).

Those who pursue an integration strategy need resilience and patience, as well as an environment that is willing to overcome the reservations described above and open up its own values and norms to social negotiation. While this takes a little longer in private life, in Switzerland associations and clubs are a good place for people to organize themselves in order to do sports together, make music, shape the neighborhood, or pursue other hobbies and interests.

It can be concluded that, despite the extremely diverse composition of Swiss society, immigrants need to manage their expectations of actual acceptance in Swiss society carefully and develop proactive strategies to create pathways for their own integration. However, intercultural training and culture-reflective organizational development can help to manage diversity in a productive way (Kammhuber, 2017).

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