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LEADERSHIP NAVIGATION

Beyond Reputation: the legitimacy of Swissness



Executive summary

Swissness remains strong, but its resilience can no longer be assumed.

Swissness is one of the most valuable competitive assets any country possesses. Swiss origin adds up to 20% to the price of a product on average, and up to 50% in luxury and watchmaking. Switzerland ranks first globally for reputation, trust, and governance. Its top fifty brands are worth a combined CHF 143.7 billion.

Between 2022 and 2026, that asset has been tested more frequently and from more directions than at any point in recent memory. A banking collapse, a neutrality debate, a trade confrontation, a fatal fire, an unresolved European relationship, and a country questioning its own identity. Each time, Switzerland's reputation has recovered, the rankings remain strong, the perception data is positive.

But reputation tells only part of the story, and the distinction matters more than most leadership teams currently treat it. Reputation is how audiences evaluate you when prompted. Legitimacy is what they assume before the question is even raised. Reputation monitoring tells you where you stand today. Legitimacy analysis tells you how solid the ground is beneath your feet, and how your standing will behave under stress. While reputation can move with the news cycle, legitimacy shifts are slower and can pass unperceived. Both matter, both can be tracked, and both require different yet synergistic work to build and maintain.

There is a measurable gap between the two. The Swissness product signal sits near 98 out of 100. Institutional trust indicators sit between 62 and 81 depending on the measure. That gap is the space in which the system's resilience is determined, and it defines how much the next shock will cost.

Original discourse analysis across 19 countries and 13 languages reveals three findings:

- First, the product-level quality signal remains intact, sentiment around Swiss quality stayed positive even during the January 2026 crisis, confirming that the reputation layer is holding.
- Second, evaluative discourse about Switzerland, the kind that questions rather than describes, has nearly doubled in twelve months.
- Third, Switzerland generates one in ten of all evaluative mentions worldwide despite representing less than 0.1% of the combined population of the 19 markets analysed. The questioning of Swissness is disproportionately domestic, and the legitimacy conversation is more advanced at home than abroad.

At the same time, when a jolt does disrupt international perception, the reaction is sharper and the recovery slower than in Switzerland itself. International audiences hold simpler images of Switzerland, and when those images are challenged, they swing harder and take longer to return to baseline.

The system still works. Reputation damage is absorbed because cognitive legitimacy, the deepest form of acceptance, is still functioning as

a cushion. The question is how long that cushion holds if shocks continue to accumulate across pragmatic, moral, and cognitive dimensions simultaneously.

For Swiss companies and institutions, the implication is clear. Tracking reputation is necessary but no longer sufficient. Organizations that want to protect their Swissness advantage need to monitor legitimacy alongside reputation, build narratives that are aligned with what they actually deliver, and understand which of the eight drivers identified in this paper matters most for their sector and their markets. To translate this into a concrete instrument, this paper introduces the Legitimacy Triangle, a fifteen-question diagnostic that any organization can use to map where its legitimacy is solid, where it is thinning, and where it is exposed. That is the work that separates organizations that are genuinely resilient from those that discover the difference only when it is too late.

Tracking reputation is necessary but no longer sufficient.

Why Swissness requires active stewardship now

Switzerland ranks first in the world for reputation, first for trust, first for governance (Brand Finance, 2026).

Its origin label scores 98 out of 100 (Statista/Dalia, 2017). Its top fifty brands are worth CHF 143.7 billion (Brand Finance, 2025). By every available measure, Swissness is one of the most valuable national assets.

And yet, between 2022 and 2026, that asset has been tested more frequently, and from more directions, than at any point in recent memory: a banking collapse, debates over neutrality, trade confrontation with the United States, a fatal fire that raised questions about Swiss safety standards, an unresolved relationship with Europe, and a country approaching ten million residents while asking itself what it is becoming.

Switzerland's reputation has held up, public perception data confirms it (Presence Suisse, 2024), rankings confirm it, the recovery after each episode has been real.

But reputation is only half the picture. Beneath it sits something deeper, the taken-for-granted acceptance that Swiss origin means quality, reliability, and integrity. In institutional theory, that deeper layer is called legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). While reputation moves with the news cycle, legitimacy moves with decades. This means that when reputation recovers, legitimacy, once questioned, requires a different kind of work to rebuild.

Swissness is a strategic asset. Understanding what it is worth, what sustains it, and where it is vulnerable is a matter of competitive necessity for the companies and institutions whose strategy depends on Swiss origin. The conditions that sustained Swissness for decades are shifting, and the organizations that benefit from it cannot afford to discover that shift after the fact.

This paper addresses two questions:

1. Where does Switzerland's legitimacy stand today, and how is it being tested?
2. What can Swiss companies and institutions do to understand, monitor and strengthen their own position within that system?



Reputation shows the perceptions. Legitimacy determines its foundation

Reputation shows how audiences judge you today



Most organizations track their reputation.

They monitor media coverage, measure brand awareness, survey stakeholder perceptions, and watch where they sit in industry rankings. Reputation tells them how they are being evaluated right now, by whom, and on what terms. It allows them to detect shifts in perception early and to respond before they harden.

Reputation is responsive, it moves quickly when events change the information available to audiences. Switzerland's reputation dipped after the neutrality debate in 2022 and after the Credit Suisse crisis in 2023. In both cases, it recovered within twelve to eighteen months (Presence Suisse, 2024). That responsiveness is a strength.

It means that reputational damage, even serious damage, can be managed through corrective action, communication, and time.

Reputation is also measurable. The Anholt Nation Brands Index, the Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index, the Presence Suisse Image Monitor are all reputation instruments. They capture how audiences evaluate a country or an organization at a given moment.

What they do not tell you is how deep that standing goes. A strong reputation score means that audiences evaluate you positively today. It does not reveal whether that evaluation rests on a foundation that has been examined and found solid, or on assumptions that have simply never been tested.

Legitimacy shows whether that standing will hold

Legitimacy is the generalized acceptance that an entity's actions are desirable, proper, and appropriate within a system of social norms and beliefs (Suchman, 1995).

It is what allows an organization, an institution, or a country to operate without having to constantly justify itself. When legitimacy is strong, audiences accept the entity as a natural part of the landscape. When it weakens, every action becomes subject to scrutiny, every claim requires evidence, and every mistake is interpreted not as an isolated incident but as confirmation of a deeper problem.

For Switzerland, legitimacy is the reason Swissness works as an automatic signal.

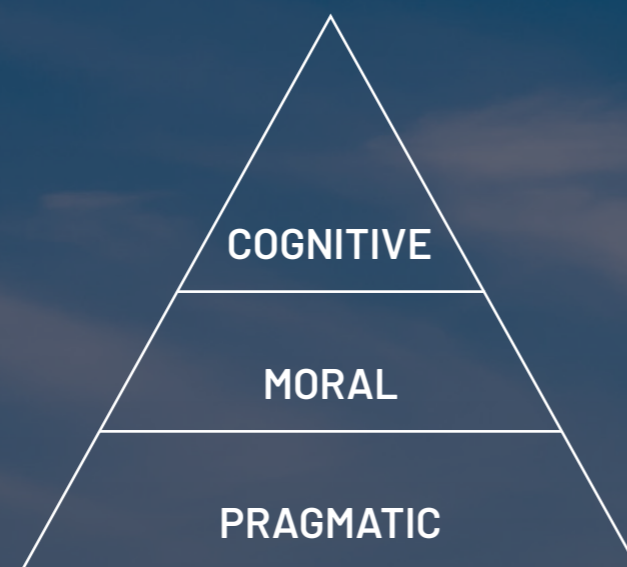
Three levels of legitimacy

Legitimacy has three levels: pragmatic, moral, and cognitive.

Understanding the difference matters because each level answers a different question and requires a different response (Suchman, 1995).

A consumer who picks up a Swiss watch does not conduct a mental audit of Swiss manufacturing standards, he assumes quality. The same goes for an investor in the Gulf who selects a Swiss asset manager, he does not investigate the Swiss regulatory framework, but expects reliability. That taken-for-grantedness, that automatic assumption, is legitimacy at work. It operates before the evaluation even begins, which is why it is worth more than any reputation score.

Reputation and legitimacy are two layers of the same system. If strong reputation reinforces legitimacy, solid legitimacy makes reputation more durable, more resistant to shocks, and faster to recover when tested. Organizations that understand both layers are in a stronger position than those that see only one.



PRAGMATIC LEGITIMACY SITS AT THE BASE

Audiences grant it when they believe the system delivers tangible value. For Swissness, this means the perception that Swiss products actually perform better, that Swiss institutions function more reliably, and that dealing with Swiss counterparts produces better outcomes. This level is well supported by current evidence. Swiss products continue to command price premiums, while the country's financial services keep attracting assets and its universities, talent. As long as delivery matches the promise, pragmatic legitimacy holds.



MORAL LEGITIMACY SITS IN THE MIDDLE

Audiences grant it when they believe the system acts in accordance with broader social expectations of fairness, transparency, accountability, and ethical behavior. For Swissness, this is the perception that Switzerland does not merely perform well but does so in a way consistent with the values it represents. This level is more exposed because each time Switzerland is perceived as acting inconsistently with its stated principles, whether on neutrality, financial transparency, climate commitments, or European solidarity, moral legitimacy is tested. The test does not always produce an immediate verdict, but it generates questions that accumulate.



COGNITIVE LEGITIMACY SITS AT THE TOP

It is the deepest and most valuable form. It refers to taken-for-grantedness, the state in which Swissness is simply accepted as a fact of economic and institutional life, without the need for justification or defense. Cognitive legitimacy cannot be created through communication. No amount of advertising, public relations, or nation branding can produce taken-for-grantedness. It can only be earned through extended periods of consistent pragmatic and moral confirmation. Decades of Swiss products working as expected, Swiss institutions behaving predictably, and Swiss commitments being honored are what built it. It is also the hardest form to repair once damaged, because when audiences stop taking something for granted and begin to question it, the questioning itself changes the relationship. Even if the answers are satisfactory, the fact that the question was asked means that the automatic acceptance has been interrupted.

Repeated pragmatic and moral confirmation accumulates into cognitive legitimacy over time. When a jolt disrupts cognitive legitimacy, audiences fall back to active moral and pragmatic evaluation. The system can recover if those evaluations remain positive. If they don't, the taken-for-grantedness does not fully return.

How legitimacy shifts

Most of the time, audiences evaluate passively.

They rely on existing assumptions and do not revisit their judgments unless something prompts them to. But when a triggering event occurs, a crisis, a scandal, a policy controversy, audiences shift into active evaluation, they reconsider what they had previously taken for granted, and the judgments they form in this active mode may be very different from the ones they held passively (Tost, 2011).

This shift does not happen in isolation. Individual judgments aggregate into collective legitimacy, and collective legitimacy in turn shapes individual perceptions. When enough individual judgments shift, the collective narrative about what Switzerland represents shifts with them. At that point, it becomes harder for individuals to maintain their previous assumptions, even if their own direct experience has not changed (Bitektine & Haack, 2015).

The real risk is strong reputation on thinning legitimacy

Reputation monitoring tells you where you stand in the eyes of your stakeholders today.

Legitimacy analysis tells you how stable that standing is, and how it will behave under stress.

A strong reputation combined with strong legitimacy is the most resilient position. Shocks cause temporary damage, but recovery is rapid, because audiences return to their default assumption that the organization is credible and trustworthy.

By contrast, a strong reputation combined with weakening legitimacy is far more dangerous, because it is invisible. Everything looks healthy in every survey and every ranking, but the foundations are thinning. When a shock arrives, the recovery is slower than expected, or it does not come at all, because the default assumption is no longer there to fall back on.

REPUTATION: how audiences evaluate you now. Moves quickly. Recovers through communication, action, and time. Measured by rankings, surveys, media monitoring. Volatile but manageable.

LEGITIMACY: whether audiences accept your claims without questioning them. Moves slowly. Built through decades of consistent behavior. Lost when taken-for-grantedness is interrupted. Structural and hard to rebuild.

Both matter. Both can be tracked. Both require different actions to maintain.

Swissness today

The value is real and measurable

Swiss origin adds up to 20% to the price of a product on average, and up to 50% in watchmaking and luxury (cited in IPKat, 2026).

Willingness to pay varies significantly by product category but remains positive across a broad range of goods (Fischer & Reinecke, 2015). This is not just a stated preference. Experimental research has confirmed that consumers exposed to a favorable country image actually pay more (Koschate-Fischer, Diamantopoulos, & Oldenkotte, 2012).



The value extends beyond pricing. Swiss origin strengthens satisfaction, trust, commitment, and loyalty in brand-consumer relationships (Bruhn, Schwarz, & Batt, 2012). Communicating Swiss origin enhances perceived performance quality and trust-related associations, and the effect is not limited to the initial purchase decision. It builds deeper ties over time (Bruhn & Batt, 2015).

Swissness operates primarily as a quality signal. It shapes how people judge a product before they decide whether to buy it. The strength of that signal depends on the fit between the country's perceived competencies and the product category (Roth & Romeo, 1992). Switzerland carries particular weight in categories associated with precision, craftsmanship, financial expertise, and technological reliability. Watchmaking, private banking, insurance, pharmaceuticals, medical devices, precision instruments, and premium food products all sit in categories where Switzerland's perceived strengths align naturally with what buyers expect. The top fifty Swiss brands are worth a combined CHF 143.7 billion (Brand Finance, 2025).



What sustains the Swissness signal






Swissness does not float on perception alone, as it rests on several layers of infrastructure, each carrying its own vulnerabilities.

The most visible layer is legal. The Swissness legislation, in force since January 1st, 2017, establishes enforceable criteria for the use of Swiss indications of source, differentiated by product type (IPI, 2026). Designations such as "Designed in Switzerland" or "Swiss Research" are only permissible if the specific activity actually took place

in Switzerland (IPI, 2026b). The watch industry has its own dedicated ordinance.

Enforcement is active, with the IPI intervening in approximately 370 cases of Swissness misuse each year. In January 2026, the Berne Commercial Court ordered BDSwiss AG, a financial services provider registered in Zug but managed from Cyprus, to remove "Swiss" from its name and the Swiss cross from its branding (IPI, 2026c). A federal evaluation in 2020 concluded that the criteria fulfill their purpose domestically, while flagging enforcement gaps abroad (Swiss Federal Council, 2020).

THE VALUE OF SWISSNESS

-  Up to 20% price premium on average, up to 50% in luxury and watchmaking (ETH Zurich / University of St. Gallen).
-  CHF 143.7 billion combined value of the top 50 Swiss brands (Brand Finance, 2025).
-  Positive willingness to pay across virtually every product category tested (Fischer & Reinecke, 2015).
-  Strengthens satisfaction, trust, commitment, and loyalty in brand relationships (Bruhn, Schwarz, & Batt, 2012).
-  1st in the world for talent attractiveness (IMD, 2025).

But Swissness is not only a product-level phenomenon. Switzerland ranked first in the IMD World Talent Ranking in 2025 (IMD, 2025), Geneva-based diplomacy, the Bürgenstock peace conference, and Swiss universities all draw from the same pool of credibility. These dimensions reinforce each other, a country that attracts top researchers strengthens its innovation reputation, which strengthens the credibility of its exports, which feeds back into the broader perception of quality. The Swissness Worldwide studies, conducted by the University of St. Gallen in four waves between 2008 and 2016, confirm that the core associations with Switzerland are remarkably consistent across markets, though audiences in distant countries hold more idealized views while neighboring countries hold more critical ones (Feige et al., 2008, 2010, 2013, 2016).

SWISSNESS LEGISLATION CRITERIA BY PRODUCT TYPE

-  **Industrial goods:** at least 60% of manufacturing costs (including R&D) incurred in Switzerland, with an essential manufacturing step on Swiss territory.
-  **Food products:** at least 80% of raw material weight from Switzerland (calculated on the recipe), with an essential transformation step in Switzerland.
-  **Milk and milk products:** 100%.
-  **Natural products:** origin determined by place of extraction, harvesting, breeding, or fishing Services: registered office and effective management in Switzerland.

Beneath the legal layer sit structures that are harder to codify but equally important. Swiss governance, with its combination of direct democracy, federalism, and consensus-based decision-making, creates a backdrop against which all Swiss claims are evaluated. When international audiences hear that a product is Swiss, they are relying, often unconsciously, on an assumption that Switzerland is a country where rules are enforced and institutions function predictably. Beyond that institutional assumption, Swissness also carries normative expectations that audiences hold without being able to articulate them: precision, reliability, discretion, fairness, a preference for substance over spectacle. These expectations are not contractual. Though a Swiss company delivering a mediocre product has not violated any law, it has violated a normative expectation. In doing so, it has drawn down from the shared pool of credibility that all Swiss actors depend on.

Swissness is also a politically negotiated category, not a neutral standard administered by technocrats. Different actors, from the state to industry associations to SMEs, compete to define who gets to claim Switzerland and on what terms (Del Percio, 2016). In watchmaking, origin rules evolved from quality assurance into boundary-setting and competition regulation (Donzé, 2018). Swissness has always been a strategic tool, not merely a descriptive label.



Reputation remains strong

The current position is strong.

The Presence Suisse Image Monitor 2024, surveying 11,130 people across eighteen countries, placed Switzerland at +61.5 on a scale of minus 100 to plus 100, first among eight reference countries (Presence Suisse, 2024). 70% of respondents said their image had not changed over the previous two

years. The ranking data reinforces the picture, fourth in the Anholt NBI in 2024, fifth in 2025 (Anholt-Ipsos, 2024, 2025), seventh overall in Brand Finance 2026 but first on 17 individual attributes (Brand Finance, 2026), 98 out of 100 in the Made-In-Country Index (Statista/Dalia, 2017), first in U.S. News Best Countries in 2023 for the sixth time (U.S. News, 2023).

SWITZERLAND'S POSITION ACROSS INTERNATIONAL BENCHMARKS, 2023-2026

+61.5/100
general impression, Presence Suisse 2024, 1st among 8 reference countries

98/100
Made-In-Country Index 2017, 2nd (Germany 1st at 100)

81/100
Transparency International CPI 2024

63.2/100
Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index 2026, 7th overall, 1st on medal table

62%
OECD Trust Survey 2023, high or moderately high trust in federal government

CHF 143.7 billion
Brand Finance Top 50 Swiss Brands 2025

1st U.S. News Best Countries 2023 (6th consecutive time)

1st IMD World Talent Ranking 2025

1st Brand Finance 2026 attributes: reputation, trust, governance, best place to work, invest, visit

4th Anholt Nation Brands Index 2024

5th Anholt Nation Brands Index 2025



Strength has held under shock

After the neutrality debate triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, perception of Swiss neutrality dropped sharply in 2022 and recovered to pre-war levels by 2024, most notably in China, the United States, Brazil, and Poland (Presence Suisse, 2024).

After the Credit Suisse crisis, over two thirds of respondents still rated Swiss financial institutions as high quality. This suggests that a fundamentally strong country image helps absorb difficult events and recover quickly (Presence Suisse, 2026).

That recovery capacity is real and documented. It also raises the question of how deep is the reserve, and what happens if multiple shocks arrive in close succession.

Europe is where the Swissness signal is most exposed

On one hand, the closer a country is to Switzerland geographically and culturally, the more nuanced and sometimes more critical its perception.

On the other hand, the further away, the more the perception relies on stereotypes and idealized images (Presence Suisse, 2024). For instance, in Germany and Austria, Switzerland is frequently associated with high prices, while in France, perceptions are moderately skeptical. In Italy, older respondents hold more critical views than younger ones, the opposite of what is observed elsewhere.

This pattern intensifies on the question of Europe. Across all dimensions measured by Presence Suisse, the role of Switzerland in Europe is consistently the most critically evaluated. Majorities in European countries see Switzerland as taking an à la carte approach to the EU, extracting advantages without accepting obligations. Only about a third think Switzerland contributes proactively to positive EU relations (Presence Suisse, 2024). Even the conclusion of bilateral agreements in December 2024 was covered with skepticism about ratification.

For Swiss companies operating in European markets, this creates an environment where Swissness carries less automatic goodwill than it does in more distant markets. A Swiss company negotiating with European regulators or partners operates in a context where its national origin is seen with a degree of ambivalence that does not exist in Asia or Latin America. If Swissness begins to lose its taken-for-granted quality anywhere, it will likely happen here first.



The gap - The business risk

The indicators point to a structural gap

When the indicators are placed next to each other, a pattern emerges.

The product and country signal sits near the ceiling, Made-In-Country Index 98/100 (Statista/Dalia, 2017), Presence Suisse +61.5 (Presence Suisse, 2024), Brand Finance first for reputation and trust (Brand Finance, 2026).

Institutional trust sits lower, with Transparency International CPI ranking

81/100 (Transparency International, 2024), OECD government trust 62% (OECD, 2024), and governance reputation around 80. Brand Finance's overall soft power score, which includes institutional dimensions, sits at 63.2/100, down from 64.9 (Brand Finance, 2026).

These institutional scores are good by international standards. But they are not 98. The product signal operates near the ceiling of what any country achieves. The institutional foundation beneath it sits meaningfully lower.

The gap matters when shocks hit

The gap is not a crisis, it is a structural feature with practical consequences.

When the product signal and institutional trust are closely aligned, the system is coherent and self-reinforcing. Shocks are absorbed quickly because institutional trust acts as a second line of defense.

The underlying assumption is that something went wrong, but the system can be trusted to correct it.

When the two diverge, the system becomes more fragile. Not because the product signal weakens, but because it loses its anchor. A shock that would bounce off a high-coherence system can become amplifying when institutional trust is not strong enough to serve as a backstop. Audiences are then more likely to question whether the system behind the failure is as reliable as they had believed.

Switzerland is currently closer to the first scenario than the second. But it is not as far from the second as the headline numbers suggest.

The gap in numbers

PRODUCT AND COUNTRY SIGNAL

98/100

(Made-In-Country Index)

+61.5%

(Presence Suisse)

1st

for reputation and trust (Brand Finance)

INSTITUTIONAL TRUST

81/100

(CPI)

62%

(OECD government trust)

63.2/100

(Brand Finance overall soft power, down from 64.9)

The product signal is near the ceiling. The institutional foundation is solid but sits 15 to 36 points lower depending on the measure.

Where the gap has been exposed before

Similar configurations have preceded significant trust events in other countries.

Germany's engineering reputation was the strongest national quality signal in the world before 2015. "Made in Germany" topped the Made-In-Country Index at 100 (Statista/Dalia, 2017). At the same time, institutional trust indicators had been under quiet pressure, concerns about regulatory capture in the automotive sector, questions about the independence of testing regimes. The gap was present but not visible. Then, the Volkswagen diesel emissions scandal provided the crystallizing event. What made it structural rather than transient was that it activated questions about the institutions behind the product signal. It was not just that Volkswagen had cheated, but that the German system had allowed it. The gap had been there before the scandal, and the scandal revealed it.



The United Kingdom before Brexit offers a different version. The institutional stability narrative ran ahead of underlying political and social fractures that had been widening for years. The referendum did not create those fractures. It exposed them.

Neither case maps exactly onto Switzerland. The Swiss gap is smaller and the institutional fundamentals are stronger. But the principle holds, countries do not lose credibility when they perform poorly on a single issue. They lose credibility when the gap between their perceived quality and their institutional foundations becomes large enough for a single event to expose it.

The question is not recovery, but reserve

A fundamentally strong country image helps absorb difficult events and recover quickly (Presence Suisse, 2026).

That is a description of cognitive legitimacy acting as a cushion. And the evidence supports it, as Switzerland has absorbed several significant shocks in recent years and recovered each time.

But that cushion is finite. Each shock draws down from the reserve. If the reserve is replenished through consistent positive behavior, the system remains resilient. However, if it is drawn down faster than it is replenished, the cushion thins.

The question is not whether Switzerland can absorb one more shock, but whether it can withstand three or four of them in close succession, across different domains, without the cumulative effect crossing a threshold. The gap between the product signal and institutional trust is the space in which that resilience is tested. The wider the gap, the less margin for error.

The value extends beyond pricing. Swiss origin strengthens satisfaction, trust, commitment, and loyalty in brand-consumer relationships (Bruhn, Schwarz, & Batt, 2012). Communicating Swiss origin enhances perceived performance quality and trust-related associations, and the effect is not limited to the initial purchase decision. It builds deeper ties over time (Bruhn & Batt, 2015).

The gap between the product signal and institutional trust is the space in which that resilience is tested.



A dense shock cycle is testing the Swissness advantage

The longer record

Switzerland has faced jolts before.

The dormant accounts controversy in the 1990s forced the country to account for its wartime conduct before a global audience. It was the first time in recent memory that Switzerland had to defend itself on ethical grounds at an international scale. The Swissair collapse in 2001 demonstrated

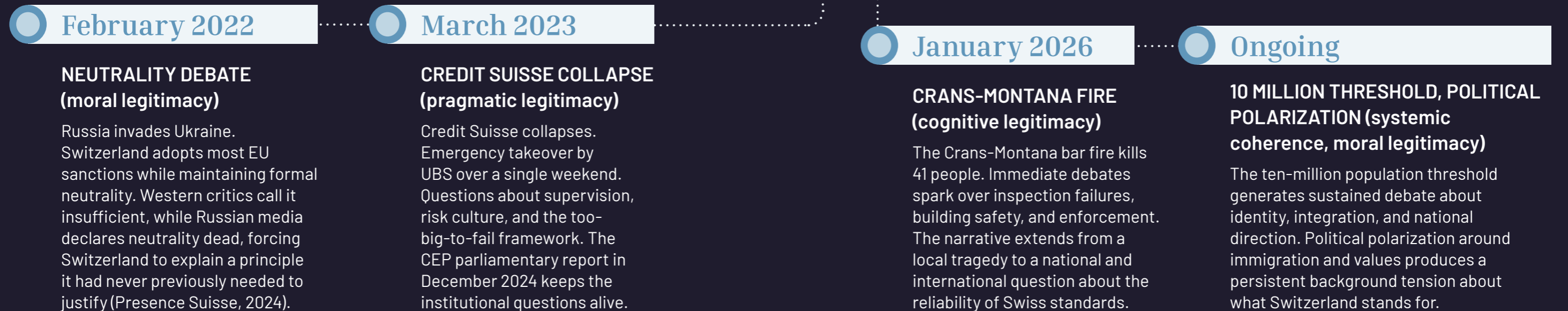
that Swiss corporate governance could fail catastrophically, shattering the assumption that a Swiss national champion was inherently safe. Both episodes established precedents that remain available for reactivation when new crises arise. Someone who remembers Swissair reads Credit Suisse differently, just like someone who remembers the dormant accounts reads the neutrality debate differently.

2022 to 2026 : an unusually intense sequence of tests

The period from 2022 to the present has been unusually dense in events that have tested Swissness.

No comparable concentration of jolts across this many different dimensions has occurred in recent Swiss history.

TIMELINE OF JOLTS, 2022-2026

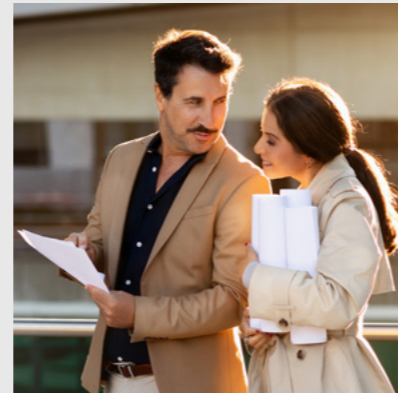


Each event pressures a different layer of legitimacy

Not all of these events test the same thing.

They differ in which dimension of legitimacy they pressure, and that difference determines how deep the potential consequences run.

Some events test pragmatic legitimacy, whether Switzerland delivers on its functional promises. Credit Suisse is the clearest case. The question it raised was not whether Switzerland is ethical or trustworthy, but whether Switzerland still worked, and if its regulatory institutions can manage systemic risk. Swissair had raised a similar question a generation earlier. The tariff negotiations test a related form of competence, but on the external front, being Switzerland's capacity to protect its economic interests as the rules of the international system begin to shift.



Other events test moral legitimacy, whether Switzerland is what it claims to be. The neutrality debate is the primary topic in that case. It put Switzerland in the position of having to justify a principle that audiences had previously accepted as part of the country's identity. The dormant accounts controversy remains the historical reference. The ECHR climate ruling tested whether Swiss institutions meet their own stated standards. Political polarization generates a slower but continuous form of moral testing, as domestic debates produce signals that may conflict with the international perception of Swiss values.

The most consequential events test cognitive legitimacy, the taken-for-granted assumption that Swiss quality and Swiss standards are simply reliable. Crans-Montana is the clearest example. When audiences read about a safety failure in Switzerland and regard it as surprising because Swiss standards are generally expected to be excellent, cognitive legitimacy remains intact. The surprise itself confirms the norm. But when similar failures recur, audiences may begin to question whether Swiss standards are as strong as they had assumed, and the norm itself starts to shift. That shift is what makes cognitive legitimacy the hardest to repair.



Some events test systemic coherence, the overall alignment between what Switzerland promises and what it delivers across all domains. The Swiss-EU bilateral relationship is the primary case. The collapse of the framework agreement in May 2021 opened a three-year gap that will only close when new negotiations reach a substantive conclusion (FDFA, 2026). The persistent European perception that Switzerland wants the benefits of integration without the obligations introduces incoherence into the Swiss narrative.

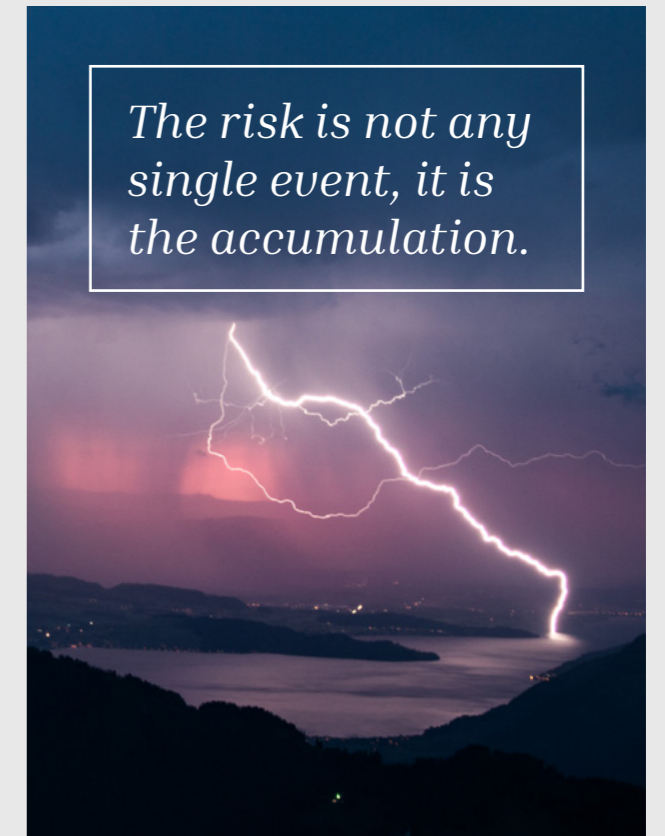
The risk is accumulation of shocks creating a perfect storm

Taken individually, each event is manageable.

The risk is not any single event, it is the accumulation. When pragmatic, moral, and cognitive shocks converge, they generate a qualitatively different kind of pressure than any single shock could produce on its own. Each jolt draws down from the same buffer of cognitive legitimacy, the period from 2022 to 2026 has tested that buffer more frequently and from more directions than at any point in recent memory.

No single one of these events has broken through, but the buffer has been drawn upon repeatedly. Whether it continues to hold depends on what happens next, and on whether Swiss institutions and companies take deliberate steps to reinforce it rather than assuming it will replenish itself.

The risk is not any single event, it is the accumulation.



Where the pressure is forming – from discourse to perception

The previous sections draw on academic research, official surveys, and international benchmarks.

This section tests the argument against original data by examining how Swissness is actually discussed, in what tone, and by whom.

Survey data shows where Switzerland stands. Discourse data shows where pressure is forming. The difference matters for business because legitimacy often weakens in conversation before it appears in rankings.

Methodology

The discourse analysis uses Meltwater over a twelve-month period (May 2025 to May 2026) to track how Swissness is discussed across 19 countries in 13 languages, covering traditional media and digital channels. The 19 countries correspond to the 18 markets covered by the Presence Suisse Image Monitor (Germany, Austria, France, Italy, the United Kingdom, Poland, the United States, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, China, Japan, South Korea, India, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, and South Africa) plus Switzerland as the domestic reference pool. This alignment allows the discourse findings to be read

alongside the survey-based perception data from Presence Suisse (2024).

Six search queries structure the analysis across three dimensions: the global conversation about Switzerland (Swiss 1 and Swiss 2), the quality signal (Swiss 3 and Swiss 4), and the evaluative signal (Swiss 5 and Swiss 6). For each dimension, one query covers the international scope and one covers Swiss domestic sources only, enabling a direct inside/outside comparison. The full query specifications, including keywords in all 13 languages, are available in Appendix A.

GLOBAL CONVERSATION	QUALITY SIGNAL	EVALUATIVE SIGNAL
<p>Swiss 1: all mentions of Switzerland, all languages, worldwide, no country filter.</p> <p><i>48.8 million mentions</i></p>	<p>Swiss 3: mentions associated with Swiss quality, precision, watches, banking, chocolate, innovation, across 19 countries in 13 languages.</p> <p><i>357,000 mentions</i></p>	<p>Swiss 5: mentions combining Switzerland-related terms with language patterns associated with questioning, reassessing, or challenging, across 19 countries in 13 languages.</p> <p><i>1.17 million mentions</i></p>
<p>Swiss 2: all mentions of Switzerland, Swiss sources only.</p> <p><i>1.36 million mentions</i></p>	<p>Swiss 4: same quality terms, Swiss sources only, in French, German, and Italian.</p> <p><i>10,700 mentions</i></p>	<p>Swiss 6: same evaluative terms, Swiss sources only, in French, German, and Italian.</p> <p><i>110,000 mentions</i></p>

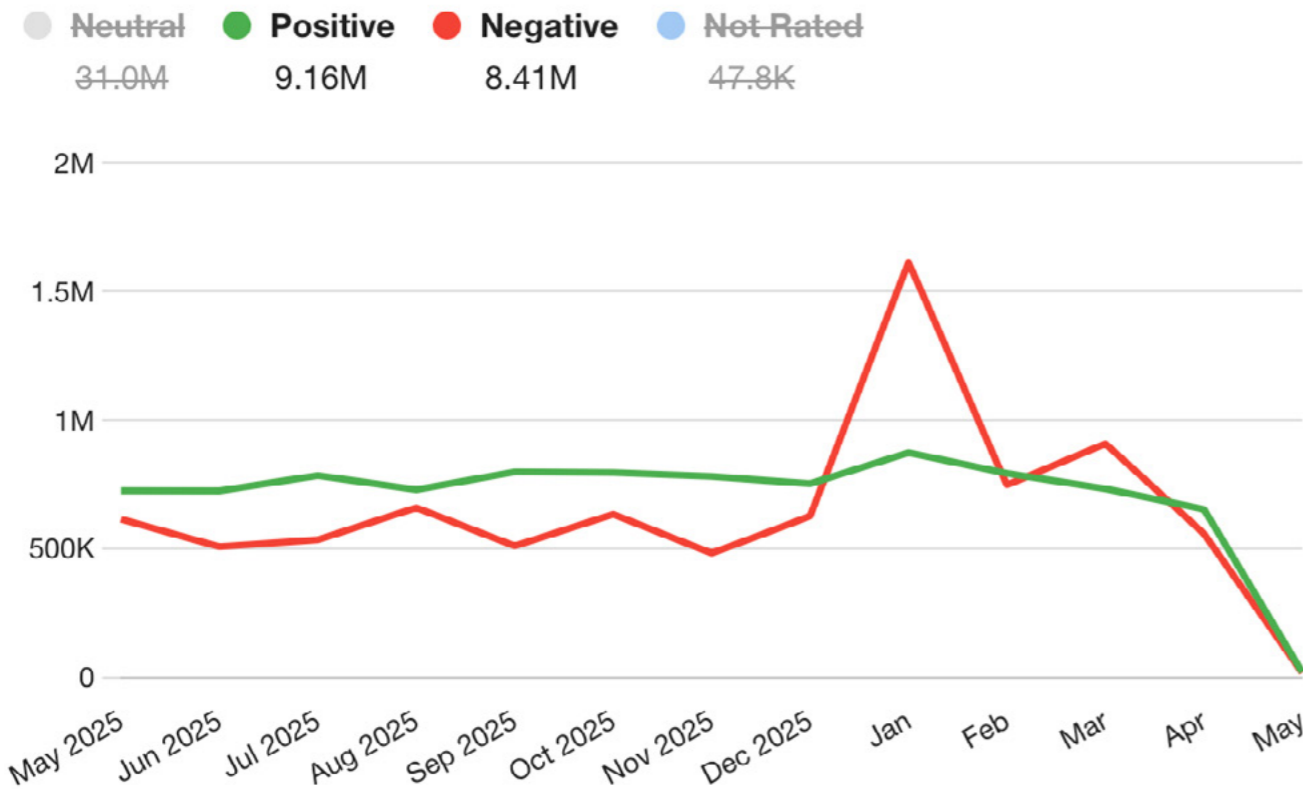
The global picture

Over the twelve-month observation period, the global conversation about Switzerland generated approximately 48.8 million mentions worldwide. Positive mentions (9.18 million) held a slight advantage over negative mentions (8.44 million). The conversation about Switzerland is primarily factual and descriptive.



Sentiment trend

May 5, 2025 - May 1, 2026 | Mentions

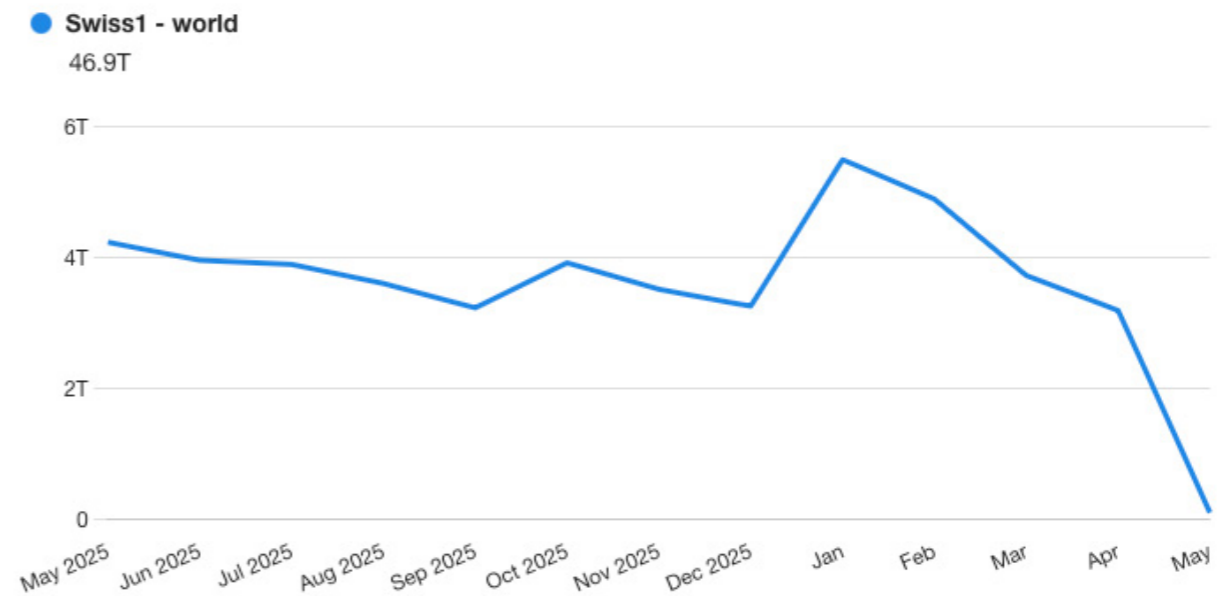


The most significant disruption occurred in January 2026. Negative mentions approximately doubled, rising from a baseline of 500,000 to 700,000 per month to approximately 1.4 million, driven by the Crans-Montana tragedy and the early phase of tariff-related coverage. Positive mentions barely moved during the same

period, remaining around 800,000. The negative spike took approximately three months to return to its previous level, settling back to baseline only in April 2026. That three-month residue suggests the January shock was not a one-cycle event but an episode that shifted the international conversation for a full quarter.

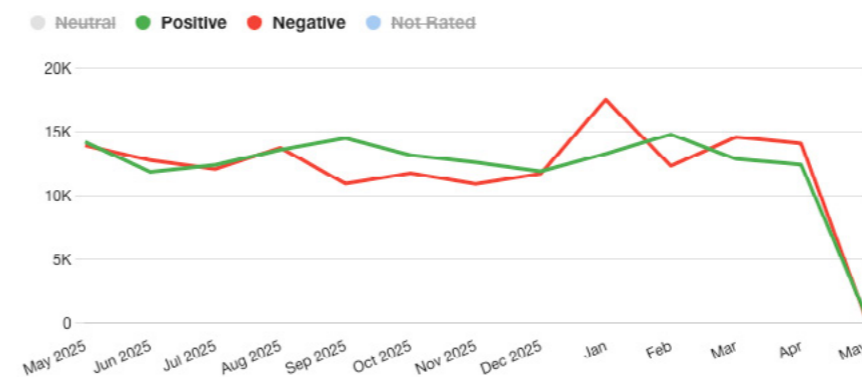
Reach trend

May 5, 2025 - May 1, 2026 | Reach



Sentiment trend

May 5, 2025 - May 1, 2026 | Mentions



From Swiss sources alone, the picture is more tightly contested. Out of 1.36 million total mentions, positive and negative mentions were almost exactly equal: 158,000 positive against 157,000 negative. The domestic conversation about Switzerland is significantly more divided than the international one, where positive still holds a margin.

More domestic resilience

When the net sentiment of the global conversation (Swiss 1) is plotted alongside the net sentiment of the domestic conversation (Swiss 2), three patterns emerge.

First, the two curves move together. The same events drive sentiment in both pools, confirming that the domestic and international conversations are connected.

Second, the global curve is consistently more volatile than the domestic one. When a negative event hits, the drop in net sentiment is larger in the international conversation than in the Swiss domestic one. This is consistent with the Presence Suisse finding that distant audiences hold simpler, more idealized images of Switzerland (Presence Suisse, 2024). When those images are disrupted, the reaction is more abrupt precisely because there is less context to absorb the shock. Swiss audiences, closer to the reality, have the background to contextualize events. International audiences do not.

Third, and most importantly, the January 2026 plunge confirms this pattern at scale. The global curve dropped to approximately -13, while the Swiss curve barely fell below zero. The world reacted far more negatively to Crans-Montana and the tariff coverage than Switzerland itself did. The recovery pattern reinforced the asymmetry. While the Swiss curve returned to neutral within weeks, the international curve stayed negative for approximately three months, not settling back to its pre-January level until April.

This has a direct implication for companies that rely on Swissness internationally. The audiences that matter most for the Swissness premium, the international ones, are also the ones that react most violently when the image is disrupted and take the longest to recover. Swiss companies watching their domestic media environment may conclude that a crisis has passed. Their international stakeholders may still be processing it.

Swiss domestic discourse may be more evaluative in sustained, day-to-day terms. But when a jolt occurs, it is the international conversation that swings harder. The domestic conversation questions Swissness steadily. The international conversation defends it by default, but abandons that default more dramatically when given a reason to.

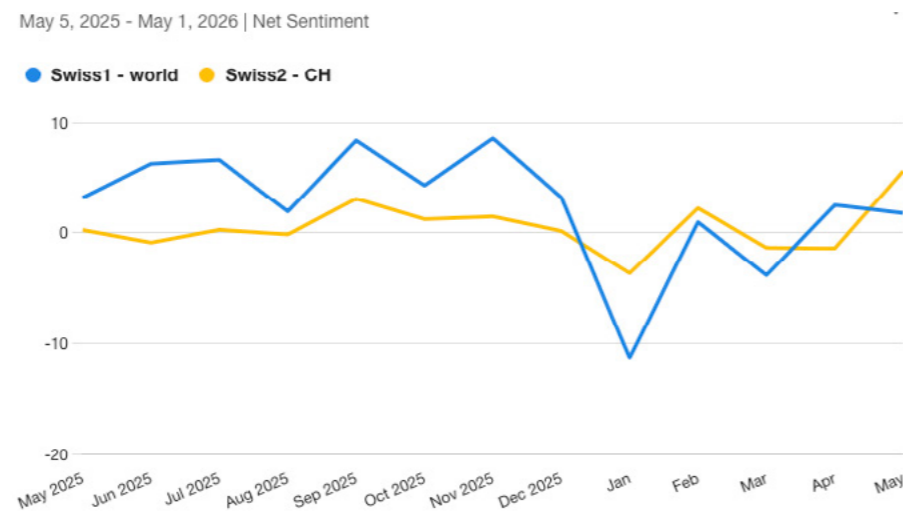
Inside vs. outside: key findings

The international conversation reacts more sharply to shocks than the domestic one. January 2026 saw the global net sentiment drop to approximately -13. While Swiss domestic sentiment barely moved below zero, taking a few weeks to recover, international recovery took three months. Companies tracking only their domestic media environment risk underestimating how long a crisis persists in the minds of their international stakeholders.

Average sentiment trend over time

May 5, 2025 - May 1, 2026

Net sentiment

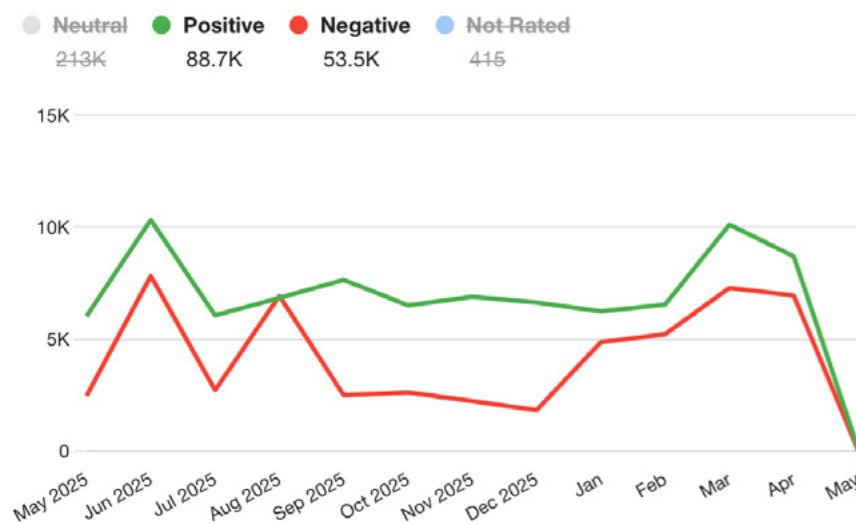


The quality signal holds

Across the 19 markets, 357,000 mentions were specifically associated with Swiss quality, precision, innovation, and related concepts (Swiss 3). The sentiment is clearly positive: 88,700 positive mentions against 53,600 negative. The positive bias holds across the entire observation period, including during the January 2026 crisis. There is no comparable spike in negative quality mentions during the period when the general conversation about Switzerland turned sharply negative.

Sentiment trend

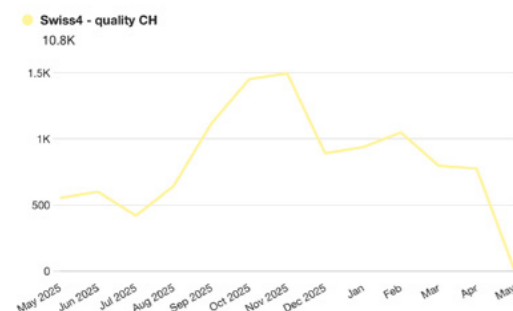
May 5, 2025 - May 1, 2026 | Mentions



From Swiss sources (Swiss 4), the quality conversation is smaller (10'700 mentions) but growing fast, up 64.2% from the previous period. The trend line rises steadily from May 2025 through April 2026. Swiss domestic media and digital channels are talking about Swiss quality more, not less, possibly in response to the very questioning that the evaluative data captures.

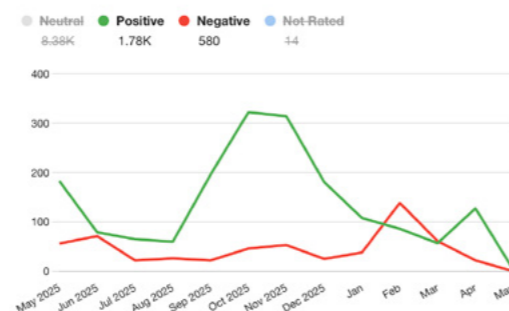
Mentions trend

May 5, 2025 - May 1, 2026 | Mentions



Sentiment trend

May 5, 2025 - May 1, 2026 | Mentions



When the net sentiment of the quality conversation is compared between world (Swiss 3) and Switzerland (Swiss 4), both curves remain predominantly in positive territory for the entire 12 months, fluctuating between 0 and 30. The world curve dips briefly near zero in a few months, but never sustains negative territory. Even during the January-February 2026 trough in the general conversation, quality sentiment stayed close to or above zero in both pools.

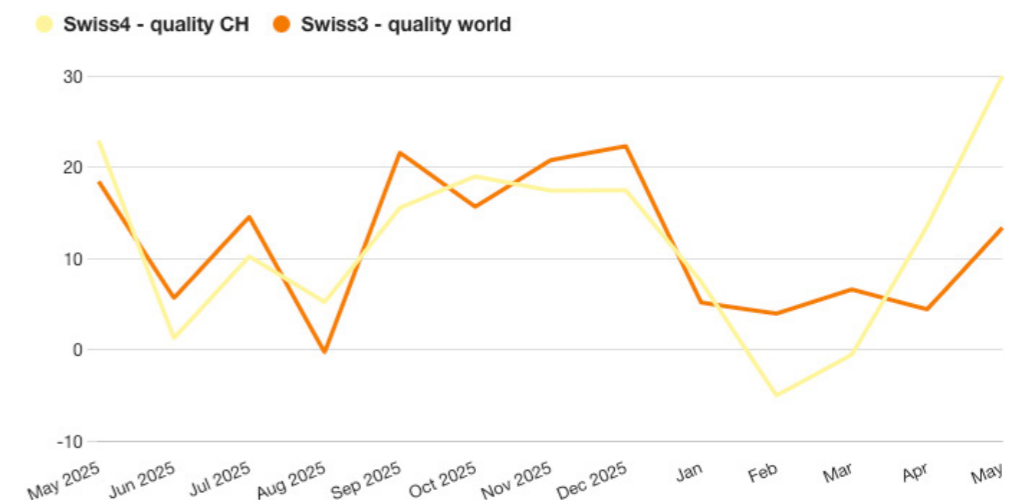
The product-level signal did not collapse when the institutional-level signal came under pressure. The two layers of the Swissness system are behaving differently. The reputation layer, anchored in product quality, precision, and brand associations, remains intact. The legitimacy layer, anchored in institutional trust, standards enforcement, and governance credibility, is under more active discussion.

Average sentiment trend over time

May 5, 2025 - May 1, 2026
Net sentiment

Average Sentiment Trend Over Time

May 5, 2025 - May 1, 2026 | Net Sentiment



Quality signal: key findings

The quality signal remained predominantly positive throughout the observation period, in both domestic and international discourse, even during the January 2026 crisis. Quality-related mentions from Swiss sources grew 64.2% year on year. Product reputation and institutional legitimacy are moving on separate tracks. The Swissness premium, at the product level, is intact.

The evaluative signal is growing

Across the 19 markets, 1.17 million mentions combined Switzerland-related terms with language patterns associated with questioning, reassessing, or challenging (Swiss 5). That volume is up 73.3% from the previous period of 672,000 mentions. The discourse that questions what Switzerland represents has grown by nearly three quarters in twelve months. More people, in more markets, are

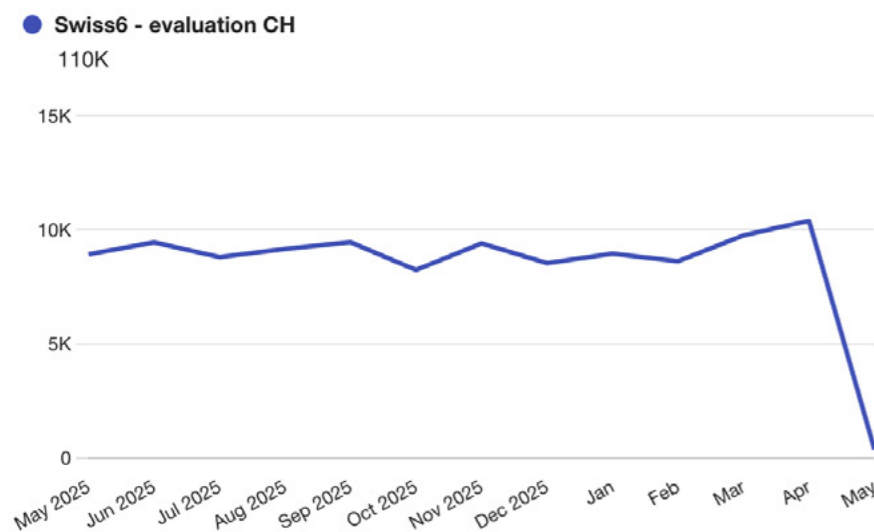
asking questions about Switzerland that they were not asking a year ago.

From Swiss sources alone (Swiss 6), the evaluative conversation generated 110,000 mentions over 12 months, with a stable monthly average of approximately 8,500. The stability is notable, as the domestic evaluative conversation is not spiking and fading, but sustained.

Mentions trend



May 5, 2025 - May 1, 2026 | Mentions



An interesting number is the population ratio. Switzerland represents less than 0.1% of the combined population of the 19 markets yet generates nearly one in ten of all evaluative mentions worldwide. A country that accounts for a negligible share of global population is responsible for 9.4% of all discourse that questions what Switzerland represents.

From Swiss sources alone (Swiss 6), the evaluative conversation generated 110,000 mentions over twelve months, with a stable monthly average of approximately 8,500. That stability is the second signal. The domestic evaluative conversation does not spike and fade. It is persistent, and it does not need a trigger to remain active.



Evaluative signal: key findings

Evaluative discourse about Switzerland has grown 73.3% in 12 months, from 672,000 to 1.17 million mentions. Switzerland, representing less than 0.1% of the population of the 19 markets, generates nearly one in ten of all evaluative mentions worldwide. The domestic evaluative conversation is sustained and persistent, not episodic. Swiss scrutiny of Swissness does not require a triggering event to remain active.

Balancing international premium against domestic pressure

The data reveals a system in which two conversations coexist.

Internationally, Switzerland is discussed primarily in factual and positive terms, with quality associations intact and evaluative questioning still marginal. Domestically, the conversation is more divided, more volatile, and significantly more evaluative.

At the same time, when a jolt disrupts the international conversation, the reaction is sharper and the recovery slower than in Switzerland itself. The domestic audience questions Swissness steadily but absorbs shocks faster. The international audience assumes Swissness by default but reacts more dramatically when that default is challenged.

Not every domestic controversy will become an international one. Actually, most will not. Although the filter between domestic and international discourse screens out most issues, it is selective, not absolute. It lets through events that combine visual impact, narrative simplicity, and relevance to pre-existing international frames. Credit Suisse passed through because it fit the global financial crisis narrative, and the neutrality debate passed through because it fit the geopolitical alignment narrative.

Swiss companies and institutions need to monitor both pools.

If the international pool tells them where their Swissness premium stands today, the domestic pool tells them where the pressure is building and which issues are most likely to cross over. The gap between the two is less a problem to solve than an information advantage to exploit, if you know where to look.

Six findings from the discourse analysis

1 EVENTS IMPACT REPUTATION , BUT LEGITIMACY HOLDS IT TOGETHER

The January 2026 shock produced a sharp negative swing in global sentiment, but the conversation returned to its previous level within three months. The recovery confirms that cognitive legitimacy is still functioning as a cushion, audiences revert to their default assumption that Switzerland is credible and trustworthy. As long as that underlying acceptance holds, reputation damage remains temporary and recoverable.

2 THE QUALITY SIGNAL HOLDS

Product-level sentiment remained positive throughout the period, in both domestic and international discourse, even during the January 2026 crisis.

3 THE GLOBAL CONVERSATION SWINGS HARDER THAN THE DOMESTIC ONE

Product-level sentiment remained positive throughout the period, in both domestic and international discourse, even during the January 2026 crisis.

4 THE EVALUATIVE SIGNAL IS GROWING FAST

Discourse that questions Swissness has grown 73.3% in twelve months.

5 SWITZERLAND GENERATES NEARLY ONE IN TEN OF ALL EVALUATIVE MENTIONS WORLDWIDE

The domestic conversation is persistent, not episodic.

6 THE TWO LAYERS ARE DIVERGING

While product reputation is stable, institutional legitimacy is under increasing discussion. The recovery pattern still works today, but the question is whether it will still work after three or four more shocks draw down from the same reserve.

Eight drivers that determine where Swissness goes next

The preceding sections have established a gap between the strength of the Swissness signal and the solidity of the institutions behind it.

They have catalogued the jolts that test the system and have shown,

through original discourse data, that the product-level reputation is holding while the institutional-level conversation is becoming more evaluative.

For any Swiss organization, **the question is what this means in practice.** The eight drivers below identify where the pressure forms and where each organization's specific exposure lies.

The eight drivers

1 SYSTEMIC COHERENCE – Is the promise consistent across all levels?

The consistency between what Switzerland promises and what it delivers, across all levels simultaneously. When products, institutions, governance, and public behavior tell the same story, Swissness is self-reinforcing, but when they contradict each other, audiences notice. Systemic coherence is not something a company controls, however it needs to be aware when it is weakening, because that is when the narrative around Swissness needs to shift from assumption to active reinforcement.

2 STANDARDS AND ENFORCEMENT CREDIBILITY – Are Swiss standards still taken for granted?

Whether Swiss standards are perceived as robust, consistently applied, and independently supervised. After Crans-Montana, the assumption that Swiss standards speak for themselves has become less automatic. The companies best positioned going forward are those that can articulate what Swiss origin means in their category, with evidence, before they are asked to defend it under pressure.

3 GOVERNANCE AND INSTITUTIONAL TRUST – Does the foundation match the signal?

The perception of transparency, accountability, and integrity in Swiss public institutions and major corporations. When institutional trust proxies sit at 81% or 62% while the product signal sits near 98%, the system is implicitly promising more than the foundation beneath it is delivering. That does not mean the promise is false, it means it is exposed.

4 CRISIS-HANDLING CAPACITY – Does Switzerland respond in a way that reinforces or undermines the narrative?

Speed, accountability, and narrative discipline when things go wrong. Switzerland does not lose credibility when problems occur, but when responses are slow, evasive, or contradictory. How Switzerland handles crises collectively sets the standard against which every Swiss organization is judged individually.

5 INTERNATIONAL ALIGNMENT AND PREDICTABILITY – Is Switzerland perceived as a predictable partner?

Whether Switzerland is perceived as a reliable, predictable partner. The bilateral package is moving through Parliament with a referendum ahead. Tariff negotiations have exposed dependencies and the neutrality debate has raised questions about positioning. For companies whose market access or regulatory environment depends on how Switzerland is perceived by foreign governments, these are not background political issues. They are operating conditions.

6 PROVENANCE INTEGRITY – Are Swiss origin claims honest and enforceable?

The legal and factual core of Swissness. The BDSwiss ruling shows the bar is being set higher (IPI, 2026c). The IPI's clarification on "Designed in Switzerland" shows that grey-zone positioning is becoming riskier (IPI, 2026b). Every company that stretches the boundaries of what qualifies as Swiss origin weakens the signal for everyone else. Provenance integrity is not just a compliance question, but a collective asset management question.

7 TALENT ATTRACTIVENESS – Are people drawn to what Switzerland represents, or just to what it pays?

A forward-looking indicator. Switzerland ranked first in the IMD World Talent Ranking in 2025 (IMD, 2025). But if relocation drivers are shifting from quality of life and openness toward compensation and tax advantages, the nature of the attractiveness is changing. A country that people move to because they admire it is in a stronger legitimacy position than a country people move to because the numbers work.

8 CATEGORY FIT – Does Swissness carry weight in your sector?

Swiss origin is not equally valuable everywhere (Roth & Romeo, 1992). In watches, finance, pharma, precision engineering, and premium food, the fit is established. In technology, digital services, and emerging sectors, it is weaker or undefined. Organizations in newer categories face a choice: invest in building Swissness relevance for their sector or compete on other attributes entirely.



The narrative dimension

Across all eight drivers, one theme recurs. Swissness is sustained not just by performance and institutions but by a story that connects the two, hence Swiss quality, Swiss reliability, Swiss precision, and Swiss fairness. These are narrative frames that audiences use to interpret reality. When this reality confirms the frame, the frame strengthens. However, when contradictions accumulate, the frame weakens, and once it does, every new piece of information is interpreted differently.

The organizations best positioned to protect their Swissness advantage are those that track when the narrative is shifting, understand which driver is moving, and know how to adapt their own positioning before the shift reaches their stakeholders. This is not about spin, it is about alignment, making sure that what you claim matches what you deliver, and that when the story comes under pressure, you have the credibility and the readiness to hold it.

From diagnosis to action: What Swiss organizations should do now

Swissness does not maintain itself.

Everything in this paper describes a system that is strong but increasingly tested, with a gap between what the product signal promises and what the institutions beneath it deliver. For the companies and institutions whose strategy depends on Swiss origin, that gap is not an abstraction drawn on a national scale. It sets the outer limit of their own resilience, because each of them draws on the same pool of credibility and is judged, in part, by how the whole system behaves.

The diagnosis carries a specific implication. An organization that watches only its reputation is monitoring the layer that moves

fastest and recovers fastest and missing the layer that determines whether recovery happens at all. Reputation and legitimacy are not alternatives to be traded off against each other. They are two readings of the same object, and the Swissness case is the clearest demonstration of why both are needed.

What follows is how to act on that, in three steps. Find your North Star, so the organization knows what it is asking others to accept. Assess your legitimacy, so it knows where that acceptance holds and where it is thinning. Then turn the diagnosis into a plan, and act before the next jolt rather than after it.

Reputation and legitimacy are not alternatives to be traded off against each other.



Find your North Star

Performance alone no longer guarantees continuity.

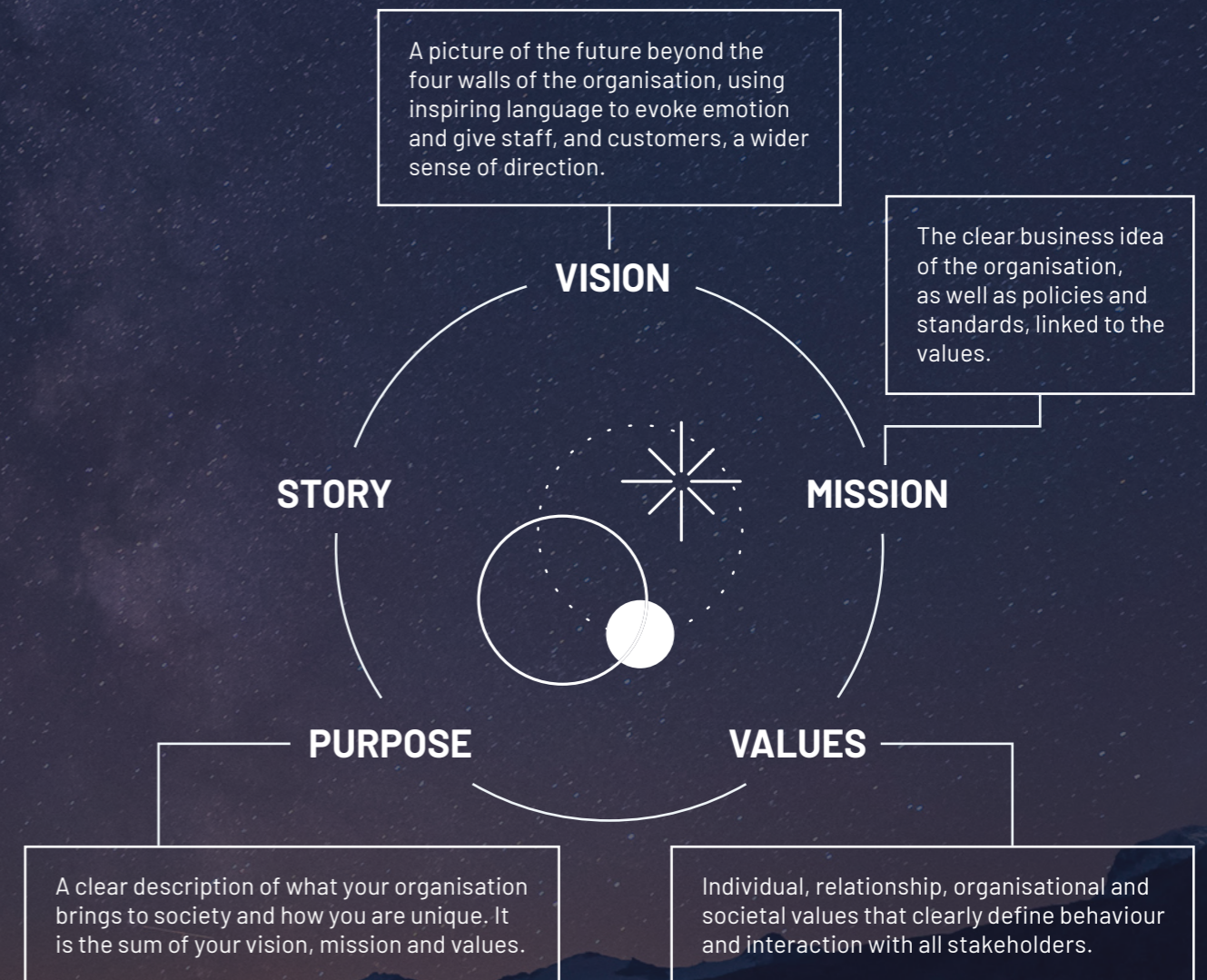
Organizations now operate in sectors that are heavily regulated, highly visible, and exposed to public scrutiny, at a moment when the political climate is unusually sensitive. In that environment, results are necessary but not sufficient. An organization can perform well on every operational measure and still find its freedom of action narrowing, its resilience untested, and its long-term standing in question, because the ground it operates on is no longer granted to it automatically. This is the same lesson the Swissness case teaches at national scale, that a strong record protects you only as long as the deeper acceptance beneath it holds.

Before an organization can defend that acceptance, it has to know what it is defending.

That is the function of the North Star. Before an organization can be judged by others, it has to be legible to itself. This paper has argued that Swiss reputation rests on coherence, on the fit between what is promised and what is delivered. The same logic applies to organizations. Legitimacy is granted to entities whose conduct is recognizable, consistent, and intelligible, and an organization that cannot state plainly what it is for, in terms its own people share, has nothing stable for stakeholders to accept or contest.

Before an organization can defend that acceptance, it has to know what it is defending.

A North Star is a source of direction, motivation, understanding and support. It rests on four elements:



This is why the work has to start here.

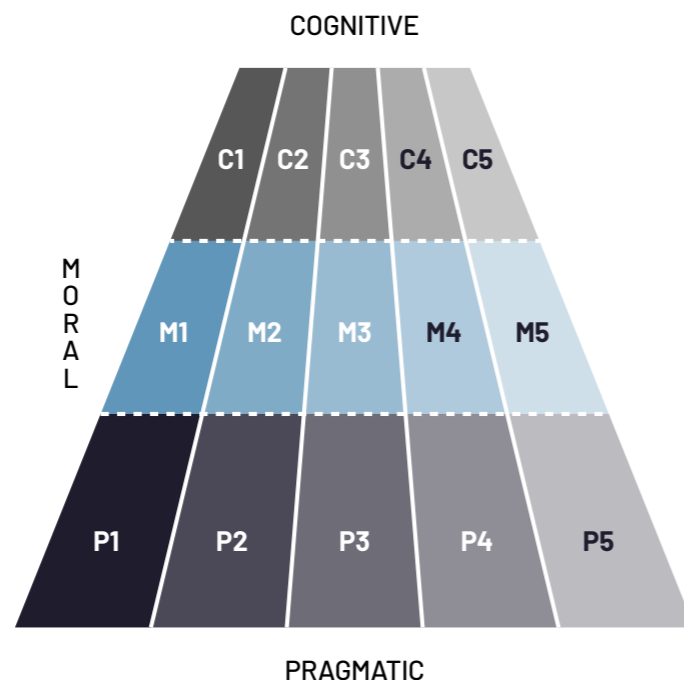
An organization that has not settled what it stands for cannot judge whether others accept it, because it has no fixed point against which to read the answer. It will treat criticism as noise rather than signal, and bend toward whichever pressure is loudest at the time. Defining the North Star is not a preliminary branding step that comes before the real work. It is the reference that makes the rest of the work legible. Before any organization can see where its legitimacy holds and where it is exposed, it has to know what it is asking others to accept.

Assess your legitimacy

A North Star tells an organization where it intends to go.

It doesn't say whether its stakeholders grant it the right to go there. That is what legitimacy measures, and reputation scores cannot stand in alone for it. A high sentiment score is important because it confirms that audiences judge the organization well today. It does not reveal whether that judgment rests on something that has been examined and found solid, or on an assumption that has simply never been tested. The point of a legitimacy diagnostic is to make that point visible before an event makes it for you.

The **Legitimacy Triangle** is the instrument that produces that reading. It takes the three levels of legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) and turns them into fifteen questions, five per level.



Each question is scored on a three-point scale: green where the evidence is strong, orange where it is mixed or rests on assumption, red where it points to weakness or to no evidence at all. The tool works the same way for a company as for a country. Switzerland is used below as the worked example, both because it illustrates the method and because the Swiss case sets the conditions every Swiss organization operates in.

- 3 GREEN:**
Strong evidence supports a positive assessment
- 2 ORANGE:**
Evidence is mixed, incomplete, or based on assumption rather than data
- 1 RED:**
Evidence points to weakness, or no evidence exists

The questions behind the Legitimacy Triangle

Pragmatic legitimacy: does the entity deliver tangible value to those it depends on?

Pragmatic legitimacy rests on self-interested evaluation by direct stakeholders. Suchman (1995) identifies three mechanisms: exchange (the entity provides value), influence (it is responsive to stakeholder interests), and disposition (it is perceived as having stakeholders' interests at heart).

- P1 VALUE DELIVERY**
Do your primary stakeholders receive measurable value that exceeds what they could obtain from the next-best alternative?
- P2 DELIVERY CONSISTENCY**
Has the quality and reliability of what you deliver remained stable or improved over the past three years?
- P3 RESPONSIVENESS**
When stakeholder needs or expectations shift, does the organization adapt in ways that stakeholders recognize?
- P4 PERCEIVED INTENT**
Do stakeholders believe the organization takes their interests into account, or do they perceive it as primarily self-serving?
- P5 DEPENDENCY**
If the organization ceased to exist, would stakeholders face material difficulty replacing what it provides?



Moral legitimacy: is the entity judged as right, proper, and appropriate?

Moral legitimacy rests on normative evaluation. Suchman (1995) identifies four mechanisms: consequential (outcomes are socially valued), procedural (methods are considered fair), structural (governance matches expectations), and personal (leaders are seen as credible).

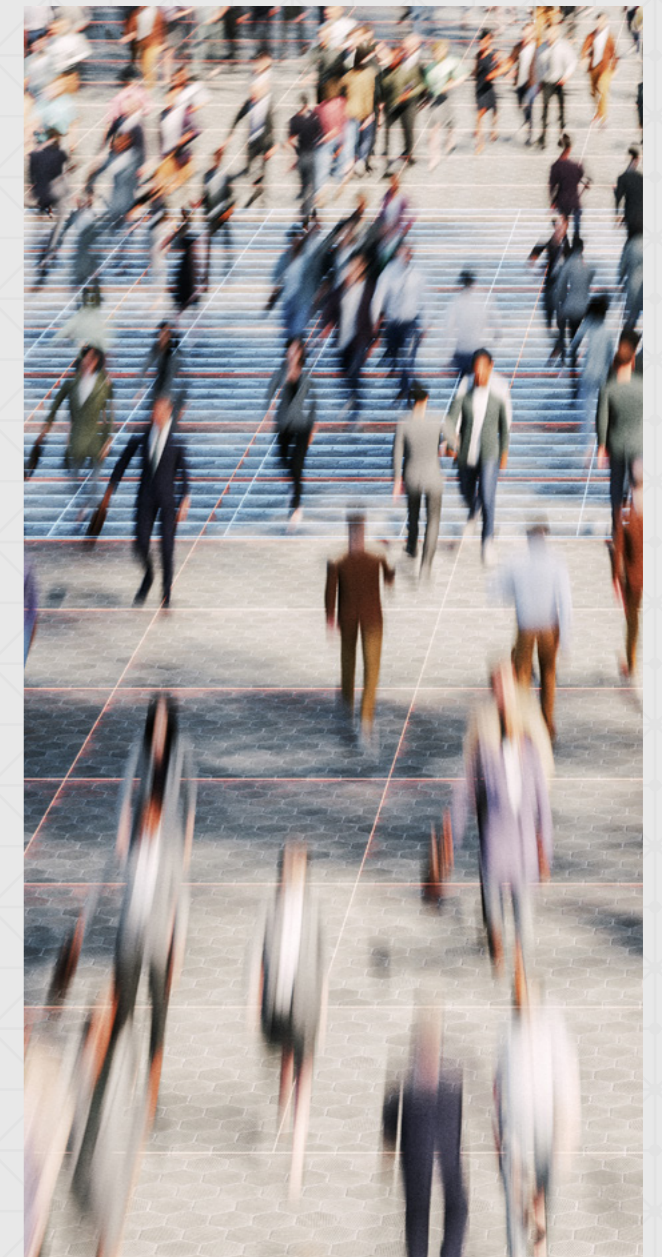
- M1 OUTCOME LEGITIMACY**
Are the organization's outputs and consequences seen as socially desirable by audiences beyond its direct stakeholders?
- M2 PROCESS LEGITIMACY**
Are the organization's methods and decision-making procedures considered appropriate and fair by the standards of its environment?
- M3 STRUCTURAL LEGITIMACY**
Does the organization's governance, composition, and oversight match what is expected of an entity in its position?
- M4 LEADERSHIP CREDIBILITY**
Are the organization's leaders and representatives perceived as competent and acting with integrity?
- M5 VALUES CONSISTENCY**
When the organization has faced a conflict between stated principles and immediate pressure, what does the track record show?



Cognitive legitimacy: is the entity taken for granted?

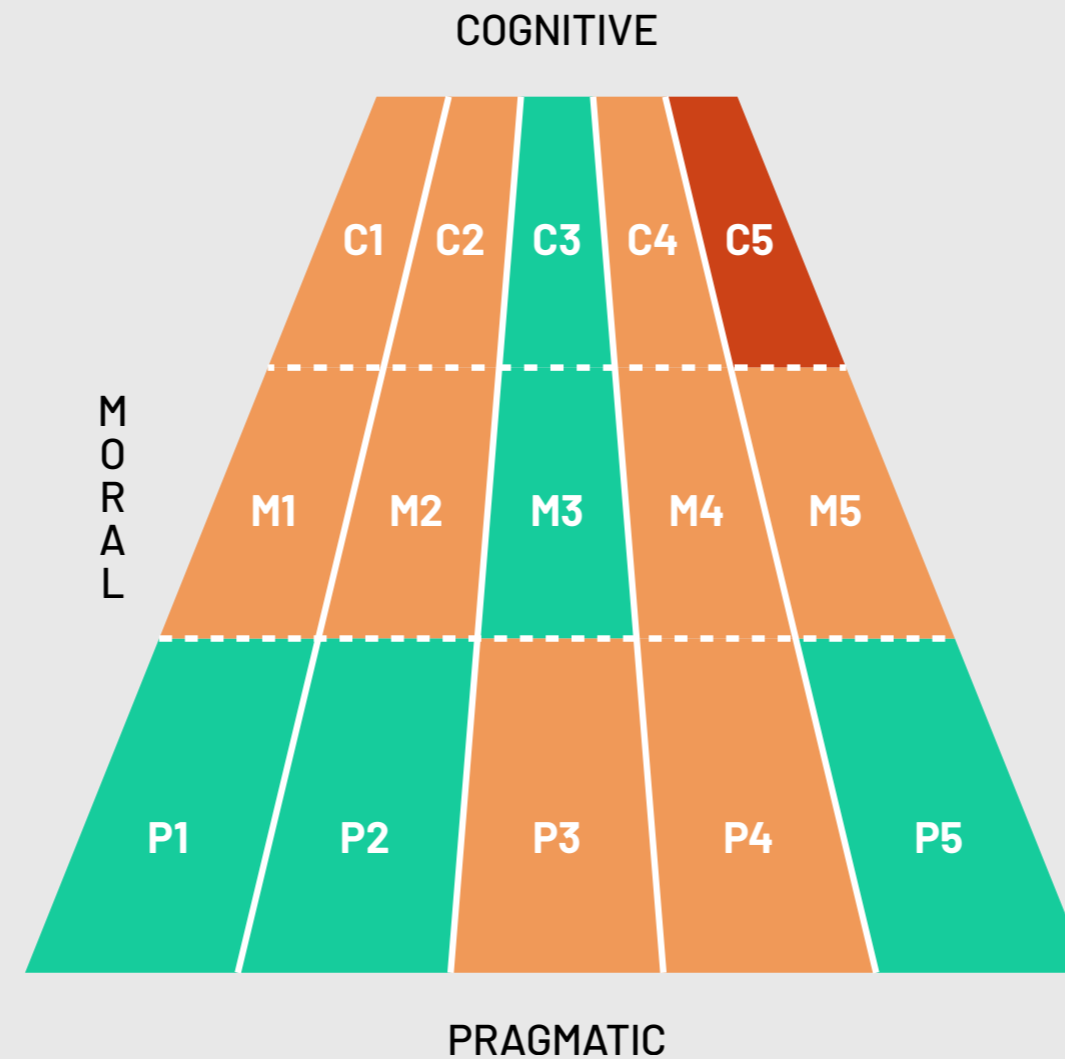
Cognitive legitimacy rests on two mechanisms (Suchman, 1995): comprehensibility (the entity is predictable and culturally legible) and taken-for-grantedness (its existence is treated as natural and necessary, not as a choice that requires justification).

- C1 PREDICTABILITY**
Can stakeholders anticipate how the organization will behave in a situation it has not faced before?
- C2 SHARED NARRATIVE**
Do diverse stakeholder groups hold a consistent understanding of what the organization is and why it exists?
- C3 DEFAULT STATUS**
Do stakeholders engage with the organization as a matter of course, without actively weighing alternatives?
- C4 RESILIENCE OF ASSUMPTIONS**
When the organization has been publicly challenged or criticized, have stakeholders reverted to their prior assumptions or have they begun to reassess?
- C5 DISCOURSE RATIO**
Is public discourse about the organization predominantly descriptive (reporting what it does) or increasingly evaluative (questioning what it is)?



EXAMPLE SWITZERLAND ON THE LEGITIMACY TRIANGLE

- P1** Swiss origin adds 20 to 50 % to the price of a product. Stakeholders pay more and return.
- P2** The quality signal has held at 98 out of 100 across multiple measurement periods.
- P3** Switzerland adapts selectively. The EU relationship and tariff response have raised questions about responsiveness.
- P4** European neighbors see Switzerland as extracting advantages without accepting obligations. The perception of self-interest is documented.
- P5** In watchmaking, finance, and pharma, substitution is difficult. In technology and digital services, it is not.
- M1** The ECHR climate ruling and the Burgenstock conference's limited outcomes sit here. Outcomes are mixed.
- M2** The Credit Suisse emergency takeover bypassed normal market and parliamentary procedures through an extraordinary ordinance. The CEP parliamentary report in December 2024 questioned whether the process was appropriate. The procedure was effective but its legitimacy remains contested.
- M3** Transparency International CPI at 81, strong governance rankings. Structural legitimacy holds.
- M4** The Credit Suisse episode raised questions about supervisory credibility. The CEP report kept them open.
- M5** The dormant accounts precedent remains available. The neutrality pivot created a visible inconsistency.



- C1** Switzerland is predictable in most domains. The framework agreement collapse introduced uncertainty.
- C2** Switzerland is predictable in most domains. The collapse of the institutional framework agreement with the EU in May **2021 introduced uncertainty** about the country's long-term positioning. The approaching ten-million population threshold and the political debates it generates add a second source of unpredictability about what Switzerland is becoming.
- C3** Engagement with Switzerland remains default in its core sectors. Not yet contested internationally.
- C4** Recovery after **shocks still** occurs internationally, but the January 2026 episode took three months to return to baseline, longer than previous episodes. Domestically, the reassessment is sustained rather than episodic: evaluative discourse has not returned to prior levels after any of the recent jolts.
- C5** Evaluative discourse has grown 82.5 percent in twelve months. The ratio is shifting.

KEY: **3** Strong evidence supports a positive assessment **2** Evidence is mixed, incomplete, or based on assumption rather than data **1** Evidence points to weakness, or no evidence exists

A green base with an orange middle and a red signal at the top describes an entity that still delivers but whose taken-for-grantedness is under pressure. The pragmatic promise holds. The moral alignment is being questioned in specific areas. The cognitive layer is intact internationally but eroding domestically.

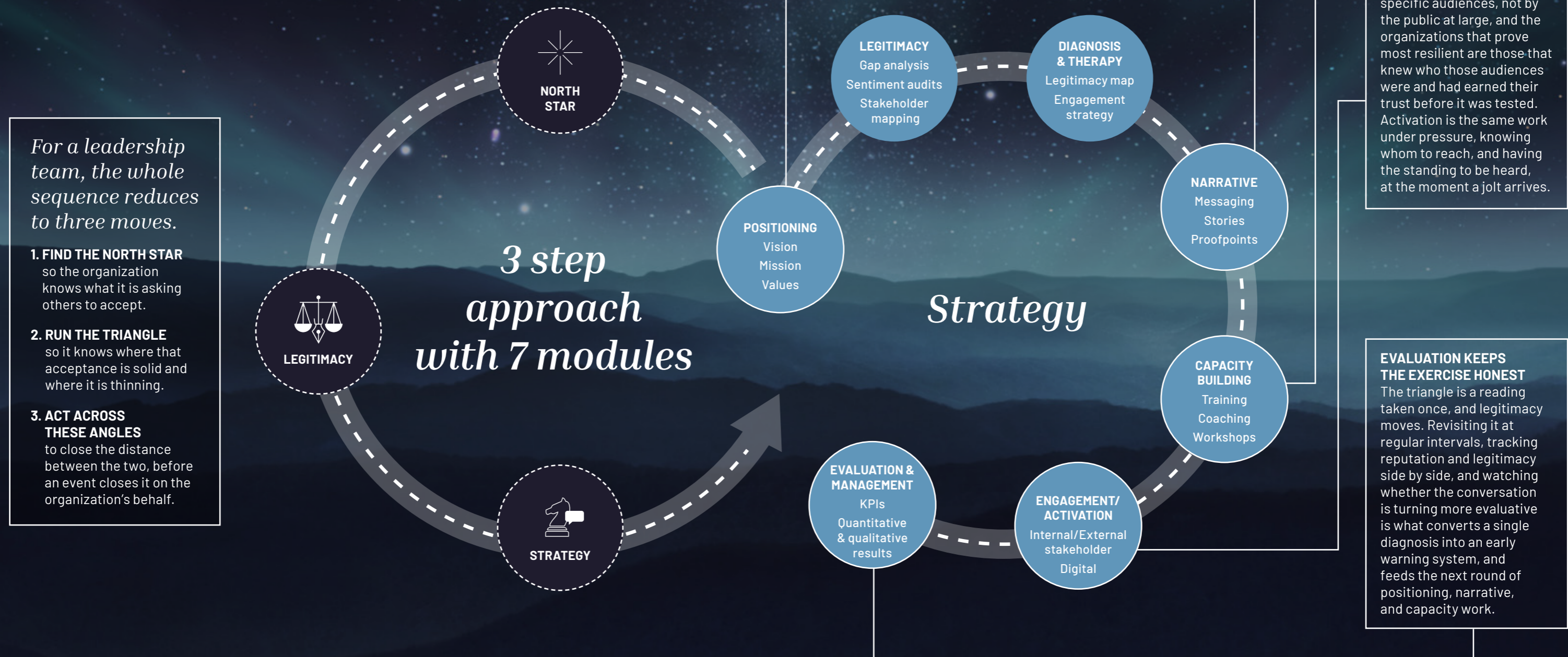
Each red or orange block points to a defined type of work. Pragmatic gaps are closed through evidence. Moral gaps are closed through alignment. Cognitive gaps are closed through narrative and sustained consistency. Working on the wrong level wastes resources. Reading the triangle correctly is the precondition for acting on it.

Turn the diagnosis into a plan

A reading of the triangle is a description of a position, not yet a plan.

It shows where an organization stands and where it is exposed. Acting on it runs in two directions at once: defining what the organization is for and protecting the acceptance that lets it operate without having to justify itself. The North Star sets the first. The triangle locates the second. Everything that follows is about keeping the two pointing the same way, because legitimacy is granted to entities whose conduct is coherent.

That alignment is built and defended across several angles.



For a leadership team, the whole sequence reduces to three moves.

1. FIND THE NORTH STAR

so the organization knows what it is asking others to accept.

2. RUN THE TRIANGLE

so it knows where that acceptance is solid and where it is thinning.

3. ACT ACROSS THESE ANGLES

to close the distance between the two, before an event closes it on the organization's behalf.

Conclusion

Switzerland's reputation has never been stronger. Its legitimacy has never been tested this often, from this many directions, in so short a period.

The reassuring part is that the system still works. The product signal holds, the quality associations are intact, and recovery after each shock has been real and documented. Cognitive legitimacy, the deepest and most valuable form, is still acting as a cushion.

The less comfortable part is that the cushion is being drawn on. Evaluative discourse has nearly doubled in a year, and the gap between the product signal and institutional trust is now measurable. The questioning, for now, is disproportionately domestic, which makes it visible to those who know where to look and invisible to everyone else. That is exactly what makes it easy to underestimate.

Swissness is not a birthright. It is an asset built over decades through consistent delivery, credible institutions, and a narrative that stayed aligned with reality. Keeping it asks for the same discipline that created it. The organizations that will still benefit from Swissness when it matters most are the ones that treat reputation and legitimacy as two readings of the same object, understand which drivers move their own sector, and align what they say with what they deliver before the next jolt rather than after it.

For any Swiss organization, that resolves into a simple sequence. Find the North Star, so it knows what it is asking others to accept. Use the Legitimacy Triangle to see where that acceptance is solid, where it is thinning, and where it is exposed. Then act, across positioning, narrative, capacity, engagement, and evaluation, to close the distance the reading reveals.

The answers will differ by sector, by market, and by stakeholder group. The question will not. It is the same for every organization that trades on Swiss origin, and the cost of leaving it unmasked rises with every shock the system absorbs.



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Appendix A

Meltwater research architecture

SWISS 1 THEME: ALL MENTIONS OF SWITZERLAND WORLDWIDE

- Countries: All (no country filter)
- Keywords: Switzerland OR Swiss OR Suisse OR Schweiz OR Svizzera OR Suiza OR Suíça OR スイス OR 瑞士 OR 스위스 OR İsviçre OR Szwajcaria OR سويسرا OR स्विट्ज़रलैंड OR Швейцария OR Швейцарія OR Švýcarsko OR Švajčiarsko OR Šveits OR Šveice OR Šveicarija OR Svájc OR Elveția OR Швајцарска OR Ελβετία OR Швейцарыя OR สวิตเซอร์แลนด์ OR Thụy Sĩ OR スイス OR Zwitterland OR Schweits OR Sveits OR ස්විට්සර්ලන්තය OR ስዊስላንድ OR سوئیس OR İsveçrə OR Уильс OR Švicarija OR Швајцарија OR سویتزرلینڈ OR Suwisra OR Swistalan OR Ubusuwisi OR Uswisi
- Volume: 48.8 million mentions

SWISS 2 THEME: ALL MENTIONS OF SWITZERLAND, DOMESTIC SOURCES ONLY

- Countries: Germany, Austria, France, Italy, United Kingdom, Poland, United States, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, China, Japan, South Korea, India, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Morocco, South Africa, Switzerland
- Keywords: Swiss OR Suisse OR Schweiz OR Svizzera
- Volume: 1.36 million mentions

SWISS 3 THEME: SWISSNESS QUALITY ASSOCIATIONS, INTERNATIONAL

- Countries: Switzerland
- Keywords: "Swiss made" OR "Swiss quality" OR "Swiss precision" OR "Swiss watch" OR "Swiss bank" OR "Swiss chocolate" OR "Swiss innovation" OR "Swiss excellence" OR "Swiss brand" OR "Swiss engineering" OR Swissness, and translations in French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Polish, Turkish, Arabic, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Hindi
- Volume: 357,000 mentions

SWISS 4 THEME: SWISSNESS QUALITY ASSOCIATIONS, DOMESTIC SOURCES ONLY

- Countries: Switzerland
- Keywords: "qualité suisse" OR "précision suisse" OR "marque Suisse" OR "savoir-faire suisse" OR "montre suisse" OR "banque suisse" OR "chocolat suisse" OR "innovation suisse" OR "Schweizer Qualität" OR "Schweizer Präzision" OR "Marke Schweiz" OR "Schweizer Uhren" OR "Schweizer Bank" OR "Schweizer Schokolade" OR "Schweizer Innovation" OR "Schweizer Exzellenz" OR "qualità svizzera" OR "precisione svizzera" OR "orologio svizzero" OR "banca svizzera" OR "cioccolato svizzero" OR "innovazione svizzera"
- Volume: 10,700 mentions

SWISS 5 THEME: EVALUATIVE DISCOURSE ABOUT SWITZERLAND, INTERNATIONAL

- Countries: Germany, Austria, France, Italy, United Kingdom, Poland, United States, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, China, Japan, South Korea, India, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Morocco, South Africa, Switzerland
- Keywords: (Switzerland OR Swiss OR Suisse OR Schweiz OR Svizzera OR Suiza OR Suíça, and equivalents in Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Turkish, Polish, Arabic, and Hindi) AND (“no longer” OR “losing trust” OR “loss of trust” OR “credibility” OR “at risk” OR “under pressure” OR “questioned” OR “reputation damage” OR “eroding” OR “declining standards” OR “still reliable” OR “once known” OR “used to be” OR “can Switzerland still”), and translations in French, German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Polish, Turkish, Arabic, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Hindi
- Volume: 1.17millions mentions

SWISS 6 THEME: EVALUATIVE DISCOURSE ABOUT SWITZERLAND, DOMESTIC SOURCES ONLY

- Countries: Switzerland
- Keywords: (Suisse OR Schweiz OR Svizzera) AND (“ne plus” OR “perte de confiance” OR “crédibilité” OR “remise en question” OR “sous pression” OR “encore fiable” OR “réputation menacée” OR “réputation en danger” OR “érosion” OR “nicht mehr” OR “Vertrauensverlust” OR “Glaubwürdigkeit” OR “unter Druck” OR “in Frage gestellt” OR “Ruf gefährdet” OR “Ruf beschädigt” OR “Erosion” OR “noch glaubwürdig” OR “non più” OR “perdita di fiducia” OR “credibilità” OR “messa in discussione” OR “sotto pressione” OR “reputazione a rischio” OR “ancora affidabile” OR “erosione”)
- Volume: 110,000 mentions

We hope you have found this report useful.

If you would like further detail about the findings, or more information about navigating, rethinking and rebuilding trust, legitimacy, and impact, please contact:



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About Leidar



Leidar is an international leadership and corporate affairs consultancy, headquartered in Geneva with offices in Brussels, London, Oslo, Washington, New York, Singapore and Dubai. Leidar supports organisations in defining their strategic direction, managing complex issues, and mastering their communications and engagement needs. The firm works across sectors including energy, public health, aviation, shipping, and sustainability.

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About legitima

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legitima is a Swiss strategy consultancy specialising in legitimacy issues. It advises companies and institutions exposed to complex political, social, or regulatory environments marked by conflicting demands. Founded by Gilles Marchand, Director of the Media Philanthropy Initiative at the University of Geneva and former CEO of SRG SSR, the Swiss public service media, legitima draws on a network of experts in Switzerland, France and Canada to help organisations think through, structure and strengthen their institutional position.

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