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Is the grass greener on the other side of the Channel?
How Swiss news media presented Brexit as a 'benchmark' for Switzerland

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Zemp holds a Master's degree in Political Science, specialising in European politics, from the University of Munich (LMU). He was affiliated with the EU3D project and ARENA through the EU3D student grant.

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Preface

The EU has expanded in depth and breadth across a range of member states with greatly different makeups, making the European integration process more differentiated. EU Differentiation, Dominance and Democracy (EU3D) is a research project that specifies the conditions under which differentiation is politically acceptable, institutionally sustainable, and democratically legitimate; and singles out those forms of differentiation that engender dominance.

EU3D brings together around 50 researchers in 10 European countries and is coordinated by ARENA Centre for European Studies at the University of Oslo. The project is funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme, Societal Challenges 6: Europe in a changing world – Inclusive, innovative and reflective societies (2019-2023).

The present report focuses on the manner in which Swiss newspapers refer to Brexit as a benchmark in the context of ongoing Swiss – EU bilateral relations and negotiations. The report is thus part of the project's work on EU external differentiation and external differentiated integration, which is the main focus of Workpackage Three. Further, the report's explicit focus on the role of newspapers and journalists in framing debates on differentiation and possible paths for Europe's future development dovetails with research within Workpackage Four (on public opinion, debates and reforms). The report discusses themes that are of great relevance for contemporary Europe and does so in a very interesting and incisive manner.

John Erik Fossum
EU3D Scientific Coordinator

Abstract

This report analyses how Swiss newspapers have referred to Brexit as a benchmark when evaluating recent attempts of the Swiss government to (re-)negotiate its bilateral relations with the EU. The results show that Brexit references were important in the public debate about the Swiss EU relationship and were often referred to as a 'role model', what contrasts with evidence indicating 'deterrent effects' of Brexit. Especially during Brexit episodes, which were characterised by a high issue salience and a good comparability with the Swiss situation, journalists and political entrepreneurs frequently *benchmarked* the Swiss situation against the Brexit process. Overall, the evidence from Switzerland suggests that the Brexit experience matters for public discussion and opinion formation on European (dis-)integration beyond the UK and emphasizes a hitherto neglected influence of news media in *framing* Brexit as a benchmark for Europeans.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

With their vote on 23 June 2016, the British people launched an unprecedented disintegration step in the history of European integration and once more Europe faces the question: quo vadis? Since the Brexit vote, both the public and scholars alike have debated intensively the consequences of the UK leaving the Union for the future of Europe. For good reasons, one question has sparked off ample scholarly interest: What is the impact of Brexit on public support for European integration?

Immediately after the British vote, *The Telegraph* headlined that the *'EU faces Brexit "contagion" as populist parties across Europe call for referendums'* (Foster et al., 2016). Scholars too have noticed that Brexit comes with a serious risk for *'political contagion'* (Walter, 2021a; Wind, 2017), and convincing empirical evidence has been put forward tackling the question of Brexit's impact on public support for European integration (e.g., de Vries, 2017; Hobolt et al., 2021; Walter, 2021a). The state-of-the-art shows thereby clear effects of Brexit, but contrary to the initial fear of 'contagion' hints the evidence more towards 'deterrence effects' of Brexit. Scholars rightly recognised that the relevance of Brexit for public opinion is not limited to the remaining 27 EU member states. Also the support for European integration in externally integrated countries like Norway or Switzerland, which moreover share a long tradition of Euroscepticism with the UK, may be exposed to serious changes triggered by Brexit

(Fossum and Vigrestad, 2021; Malet and Walter, 2021a). Especially Switzerland proved to be a fruitful study ground for the topic, which has put forward remarkable evidence. While for the EU-27 primarily positive effects on EU support were documented, for the Swiss context, Brexit also revealed its potential as an 'encouraging' role model for people's willingness to take disintegration steps (Malet and Walter, 2021a; Walter, 2021a).

Rather than measuring the introduced causal effects, this report is about the theoretical mechanism behind such a causal impact of Brexit on European public opinion. For theorizing their findings, the published studies on the topic refer explicitly or implicitly to the concept of 'benchmarking', as it is prominently put forward by a theory of Catherine de Vries' (2018). Simplified, de Vries' benchmark theory argues that the people's support for European integration is based on an evaluation of the own situation against reference points, which inform about alternative states of integration. Arguably, Brexit provides ample information about such alternative states by setting a precedent for the consequential disintegration step of leaving the Union and the prospects of negotiating a new model of external EU integration. In consideration of de Vries' (2018), it is evident that the integration project 'Europe' faces existential threats if people start to benchmark their situation against positively assessed Brexit experiences.

Despite the apparent significance of benchmarking activities in the aftermath of the Brexit vote on the future of Europe, empirical evidence speaking directly to this phenomenon remains thin. Theoretically, the state-of-the-art emphasizes the key role of the benchmarking mechanism for Brexit's impact on public opinion. Yet, the empirical studies focus on measuring the observable effects, which comes with the price of reduced attention to the mechanism driving these effects. Drawing on the findings provided by the existing literature, this report shifts its full attention to the concept of benchmarking as the causal mechanism behind the observed effects of Brexit on European public opinion. Convinced that not only the final effects but also the theoretical mechanisms behind it need to be subjected to empirical investigation, the report contributes to the literature with a descriptive investigation putting the following research question at its centre:

How did Swiss news media *benchmark* the Swiss EU integration process against the Brexit process?

The theoretical framework elaborates stepwise the arguments why on the one hand the news media, and on the other hand Switzerland, represent each a relevant and fruitful context for studying the benchmarking dynamics around Brexit. In a nutshell, bringing in the news media—with a special focus on concepts of media framing—allows for a straightforward observation of public benchmarking dynamics and underlines the hitherto neglected influence of news media in framing Brexit as a benchmark for Europeans.

The Swiss context suggests itself for investigation, as Switzerland's EU affiliation was high on the political agenda throughout the entire Brexit process. Foremost, the negotiation on an institutional framework agreement with the EU between 2014-2021 triggered intense public debates about the Swiss-EU relationship (Gafafer and Schäfer, 2021). Switzerland's challenges in this decisive phase for the countries' future integration path reveal striking similarities to the UK situation after Brexit (Hunt, 2018; Tobler, 2016). With Brexit, Switzerland's 'Sonderweg' in seeking external differentiated EU integration got somehow a 'partner in crime' (Eisl, 2020). Moreover, it was already introduced that the state-of-the-art found in particular in the Swiss context remarkable variation in the effects of Brexit on public support for EU integration. In brief, Switzerland allows studying a concrete setting, where various forms of benchmarking against Brexit may have played (and may continue to play) a decisive role. It is thus expected that the country provides unique insights about the benchmarking phenomenon, which are highly relevant not only for externally integrated countries, but also for the remaining 27 EU member states.

For tackling the stated research question, the report conducts a content analysis of articles from Swiss newspapers. Drawing on an own conceptualisation of 'explicit benchmark framing' in news media, the report describes and discusses benchmarking activities in Switzerland with a focus on the lengthy process of the Swiss government's attempt to strike a framework deal with the EU. The results of the content analysis confirm that Swiss news media have extensively benchmarked the Swiss integration process against Brexit and did thereby present Brexit as both

a 'deterrent' and an 'encouraging' role model. In line with the report's main expectation, both the evolvement of the Brexit process as well as the framing power of news media and political entrepreneurs can explain the observed variation in the benchmarking activity over time and over different newspapers.

The theoretical framework, together with a separate chapter developing the expectations, sets the groundwork for the empirical analysis. Chapter four prepares and outlines the content analysis process before a two-part discussion of the results tackles the research question. Via a quantitative presentation of the results, the report gives an overview of how Swiss media referred to Brexit as a benchmark and foremost tackles the elaborated expectations regarding variations over time and different newspapers. With a more qualitative approach, the report strengthens its contribution by providing an in-depth description of benchmarking activities in Swiss news media. Thereby, an extended typology summarizes the various ways of how the news has benchmarked the Swiss context against Brexit. A final section completes the descriptive picture provided in this report by tracing the benchmarking activity over five key episodes within the Brexit process.

Chapter 2

Theoretical framework

As mentioned in the introduction, the theoretical framework presents not only the basic concepts used in this report, but it also elaborates stepwise a line of arguments why tackling the stated research question matters. It does so by introducing the benchmark theory by Catherine de Vries (2018) and highlighting how benchmarking matters in times of Brexit for Europe, and particularly for Switzerland. After reviewing the empirical literature on benchmarking effects of Brexit, the Swiss context and its relevance for the topic moves to the centre. The final part of the theory chapter argues why studying news media with a framing approach allows a so far neglected access to the benchmarking dynamics and it introduces first broad concepts for grasping benchmarking in news media coverage.

2.1 Introducing the concept of benchmarking

Before deepening into de Vries' benchmark theory, it is helpful to introduce the general understanding of the benchmarking concept and give some examples of how it is used in social science. Anyone who explores the scientific use of the 'benchmarking concept' will quickly find a large arsenal of uses of the term. For an initial definition, it is therefore worth looking at the most clear and unambiguous, albeit broad, dictionary definitions. The act of benchmarking is defined in the online Cambridge dictionary (2021) as '*to measure the quality of something by comparing it with*

something else of an accepted standard'. The online dictionary Merriam-Webster (2021) summarizes the essence of a 'benchmark' as *'something that can be used as a way to judge the quality or level of other, similar things'*. In other words, the verb benchmarking means to evaluate a situation by comparing it with a certain reference point. The point of reference against which a situation is 'benchmarked' is called a benchmark.

The basic idea of the benchmarking concept mirrors a very human behaviour: evaluating objects based on a comparison with similar things. Accordingly, the application area for the benchmarking concept is wide, also in science. Maybe most prominently today, the benchmarking approach is associated with various evaluation tools in the business sector (Zairi, 1998). Here, models of 'best practices' typically serve as benchmarks for business evaluations. But benchmarks do not solely serve as an orientation towards a desirable state. Benchmarking a performance against a 'worst practice' can also be a fruitful adaption of the concept in the business and management sector (see Agarwal et al., 2016).

Scholars investigating economic voting provide an important harnessing of the idea for political science, and research on public opinion in particular (see Arel-Bundock et al., 2021; Kayser and Peress, 2012; Powell and Whitten, 1993). Here, the benchmarking idea is used to hypothesise that for a rational voter not the performance of the domestic economy per se matters, but rather how the economic situation is evaluated based on a comparison with other countries' situation or with historical reference points (ibid.). The idea that the international or historical context matters for how people evaluate a domestic situation will also become apparent when looking at de Vries' (2018) use of the benchmarking idea in her research about public opinion on European integration.

Benchmarking against a 'best practice' in the business context is often paraphrased as 'learning from the best' (Rau, 1996; Ulrich, 1998). The close relation between the benchmarking concept and the idea of learning from specific reference points speaks to other areas of application within political science. Benchmarking is discussed for example from the background of organisational learning (Askim et al., 2008). The literature on cross-national and transnational policy learning refers to benchmarks as reference points for 'best practices' (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2013; Porte et al., 2001; Schäfer, 2006). The concept finds concrete application in

understanding global diffusion of common policy models and normative standards (Broome and Quirk, 2015), or it helps to understand the spread of national law reforms across the globe based on the voter's look at international benchmarks (Linos, 2013). Again, when discussing benchmarking in the context of the policy diffusion literature, the relevance of the international sphere as an important source of information against which actors evaluate their situation becomes evident.

Moreover, when looking at its application in social sciences, it becomes apparent that the concept of benchmarking rests on the influential insights from human psychology and behavioural economics about the importance of the *relative*. It is argued that human perception and their evaluation of the world has a strong relative component (Kahneman, 1992). Instead of evaluating in absolute terms, people tend to evaluate their situation in relative terms (Festinger, 1954; Kahneman, 1992). Kahneman and Tversky's (1979) prospect theory is the ground-breaking work that has established the importance of evaluations in relative terms in social sciences. Their prospect theory implies that people evaluate alternative courses of action in terms of losses or gains compared to a certain reference point. This means that an actor is for example not evaluating the absolute utility of a certain alternative but rather its relative utility. The assumption of such reference-dependent judgement corresponds precisely with the basic characteristics that the concept of benchmarking formalizes.

2.2 Benchmark theory by Catherine de Vries

In her book *'Euroscepticism and the Future of European Integration'*, Catherine de Vries (2018) presents a benchmark theory for explaining public support and scepticism in EU member states. The basic assumption of her argument is that people's attitudes towards EU membership are rooted in a comparison between the benefits of the status quo (the EU membership) with the benefits associated with an alternative state outside the Union. Depending on how the status quo is evaluated relative to the evaluation of the alternative state, an EU-sceptical or EU-friendly attitude results. Suppose people evaluate the net-benefits of the status quo as smaller as the net-benefits associated with the alternative state. In that

case, they want to change their situation and should form a sceptical attitude towards the EU. A positive stance towards the EU results accordingly if people's evaluation of the net-benefits associated with the status quo exceeds the net-benefits expected in an alternative state.

As the evaluation of the benefits associated with the alternative state is usually characterised by a lack of information, people rely on 'benchmarks' to compensate for this shortage. The national context, for example the domestic economic performance, but also the international context, for instance the performance of a European non-EU country, can serve as such benchmarks that help to evaluate how well the own country would perform if it were outside the Union (de Vries, 2018, p. 37). In other words, due to information shortfall about the alternative state, people rely on benchmarks to assess if they may be better off in an alternative state or not.

In sum, two assumptions form the core of the benchmark theory presented by de Vries (2018). First, the people's opinion towards EU membership builds on a comparison between two sets of evaluations: weighing up the costs and benefits of EU membership and the corresponding cost-benefit evaluation for alternative states. Second, the evaluation of the alternative state depends on information provided by benchmarks. As a result, the people's opinion on EU membership can change independently from the cost-benefit evaluation for the status quo of EU membership. A shift in the perception of a relevant benchmark can be enough for a change in EU support. Taken together, the benchmarking mechanism argues that people evaluate their own status quo of EU membership by comparing it to 'benchmarks', which represent approximations of alternative states.

With the benchmarking approach, de Vries (2018) considerably expands explanatory approaches for the preference formation regarding European integration. Foremost, her approach makes clear that EU support or scepticism relies not only on the people's assessment of EU performance and the benefits and costs associated with EU membership. It is also the people's evaluation of alternative states—and thus the concept of benchmarking—that plays a major role in how satisfied or dissatisfied people are with their status quo.

To make these rather abstract arguments clearer, it is worth looking at concrete examples of such 'benchmarks' that are relevant for the people's opinion on EU membership. De Vries (2018) focuses on domestic, national factors as benchmarks, which influence people's weighing up between EU membership and non-membership. How well do people assess the performance of their national political system? Do people trust their national politicians or are the perceived as corrupt? Is the performance of the national economy evaluated as strong or rather weak? These are just illustrative questions that all point to aspects in the national context which may provide people with information about how well their own country would do outside the EU according to de Vries (2018). As discussed above, this evaluation of how well the country would perform in an alternative state may be as relevant as the actual evaluation of the costs and benefits of EU membership itself for people's attitudes towards European integration. With this focus on the national context, de Vries can for example explain why there is more EU opposition in economically strong countries, while weaker states tend to be reluctant to leave (de Vries, 2018, p. 39). A bad performance of the national economy has a negative impact on how people think their country could do outside the Union, while on the other hand, people in strong economies may evaluate the alternative state much more optimistic by relying on the good performance of their nation state as a benchmark.

As this report centres around Brexit as a momentous benchmark for the European public, the discussion must shift the focus away from the domestic performance towards the international context as a key provider of information for benchmarking dynamics. Before we ultimately turn our full attention to the Brexit context, it is worth looking at the relevance of such 'external' benchmarks more generally. When discussing how the performance of a foreign country can serve as a benchmark for the public in EU member states, De Vries (2018) refers to non-EU countries like Norway or Switzerland. At least *'in principle'* (de Vries, p. 37), these countries inform EU citizens about an alternative state outside the Union. However, for de Vries, their relevance as benchmarks for EU citizens is limited because non-members cannot inform about the transaction costs associated with leaving the Union. Consequently, de Vries' (2018) does not deepen the potential of such 'external' benchmarks with the exception of the concrete application of her theory to the Brexit context.

Nevertheless, it appears that the explanatory power of external benchmarks for research on public opinion about European integration is not limited to Brexit. Similar to the argument discussed before in the context of benchmarking in economic voting, people's look abroad may be relevant for how they evaluate their status quo of EU membership, even if the information provided by such benchmarks is imperfect. Reinl and Evans (2021, p. 4) point to such international benchmarks when they write: '*benchmarks might for instance refer to the economic situation of a country outside the EU*'.

The generally very well evaluated economic and political performances of countries outside the EU like Norway or Switzerland may accordingly have certain influence on EU citizens despite the missing information about the transaction costs of leaving the Union. Based on de Vries' (2018) benchmarking mechanism, one could expect a stimulating effect for Euroscepticism if people benchmark their situation within the EU against the performance of a non-EU country that is supposedly doing better. Hints in this direction can be found by looking at how Eurosceptic forces tend to reproduce an idealised picture of countries outside the Union. If Geert Wilders is, for example, twittering: '*Switzerland is not a member of the EU, it has its own money and its own borders, and it has beautiful, prosperous places*' (Wilders, 2013; author's translation), he presumably tries to make political capital by influencing the Dutch people's perception of Switzerland in the hope that they will use this information as a benchmark and accordingly get more optimistic in their evaluation of the 'exit option'. Moreover, not only countries outside the EU may provide information against which people benchmark their situation. From the background of a differentiated Europe (Leuffen et al., 2013; Schimmelfennig, 2018), it is thinkable that the people in one EU country benchmark their own '*scope and depth*' of integration against, for example, the performance of an EU country which has secured so-called 'opt-outs' (see Schimmelfennig, 2018).

These remarks just touched on not only sharpen our understanding of how benchmarking against an external context works, but they also illustrate the wide field of application of this theoretical concept for future research on public opinion about European integration. De Vries' (2018) benchmark theory makes apparent that scholars interested in dynamics

about public opinion on 'Europe' must take into account the *relative* dimension of human evaluations, as it was already prominently put forward by Kahneman (1992). People's look beyond borders may provide crucial information for such a relative evaluation of the own national status quo of EU integration. However, for people to consider an external context as a benchmark, this context must be characterised by a certain similarity to their own situation. Only if this is the case, the external context can serve as a benchmark that hints to a realistic alternative state for people's own country.

Regarding public opinion within EU countries, de Vries (2018) has correctly concluded that the impact of non-EU countries like Norway or Switzerland as benchmarks is limited. Leaving the Union is a vastly different thing from not joining. Against this background, domestic benchmarks like the national economic performance appear to be indeed better reference points that help explain EU scepticism. Yet, with the historic vote of the British people on 23 June 2016, Europe has changed dramatically, and so did the relevance of external benchmarks for public opinion on European integration (de Vries, 2017). Recapitulating the insights gained from discussing de Vries' benchmark theory, and inspired by Fossum and Vigrestad's (2021) article, a simple question may unfold enormous consequences for the future of the European project in a post-Brexit era: *Is the grass greener on the other side of the Channel?*

2.3 Brexit as a momentous benchmark for Europe

With the British decision to leave the European Union, in one fell swoop, a whole new dimension and relevance for the application of de Vries' benchmark theory arose. For the first time in EU history, a country is breaking away from the Union. And suddenly, the before only in abstract terms discussed exit option is becoming a reality. Brexit provides Europeans with exactly this information about the costs and benefits of leaving the EU, which countries that have never joined the EU cannot deliver. In this sense, Brexit overcomes the discussed major limitation of non-EU countries as external benchmarks for EU citizens. Based on the insights from de Vries' benchmark theory, it gets apparent that information provided by Brexit may be highly consequential for the future of the European Union. If people start to newly evaluate their own

country's exit option based on such information, Brexit could on the one hand trigger 'encouragement effects' (Walter, 2021a), what could even lead to a 'domino effect' of exits (Wind, 2017). Such effects require, however, that people perceive Brexit as a success and anticipate that also their own country would be better off by taking a similar step. On the other hand, if Brexit sets a negative precedent for leaving, benchmarking against it could 'deter' people from disintegration steps.

Immediately after the historical referendum, scholars started to think about the impact of Brexit on the future of the European Union (Hobolt, 2016; Oliver, 2016). The effect on public support for the EU was thereby one of the main issues discussed. De Vries (2017) and Wind (2017) were among the first to present empirical evidence hinting to Brexit effects on public opinion. With the evolvement of the Brexit process, more and more empirical studies devoted themselves to the topic. Unsurprisingly, the benchmark theory by de Vries (2018) became a key theoretical reference for the intense scholarly debate about the Brexit effect on public support for European integration. The following chapter briefly presents the core insights from these empirical studies, and it strengthens the relevance of the benchmark theory for the research topic.

The notes about de Vries' (2018) benchmark theory centred around effects on public opinion within EU member states. Many of the empirical studies investigating a respective impact of Brexit focus on EU members too. After the brief presentation of the empirical literature speaking to the effects within the EU, the report transfers the relevance of benchmark dynamics around Brexit to the context of externally integrated countries, foremost Switzerland. Thereby, empirical data and theoretical reflections will strengthen the report's argument that benchmarking against Brexit matters also for Switzerland and that the Swiss context offers a unique ground for studying this particular phenomenon.

2.3.1 Brexit and benchmarking dynamics for EU member states

De Vries (2017) has applied her benchmark theory to the Brexit context shortly after the consequential referendum. Her survey data show an increase in EU support within EU member states immediately after the Brexit vote. Viewed through her benchmark theory, these findings suggest that *'Brexit largely set a negative precedent for leaving'* (ibid, p. 48). De Vries

puts forward the political and economic uncertainty following the British vote as factors that made people in EU countries prefer their status quo of membership over an alternative state outside the Union. The finding that this increase was especially pronounced among people who think that Brexit will have bad consequences for the UK further strengthens the theoretical reflections regarding benchmarking effects. Moreover, de Vries' data is in line with other early studies revealing increased public support for the EU right after the referendum (see, e.g., Wind, 2017).

With the evolvement of Brexit, the amount of available information about the exit option increased and so did the number of studies which investigate the effects on public opinion in EU countries. The overall picture provided by these studies follows the insights by de Vries (2017). A series of studies confirm that Brexit has overall strengthened EU support in the remaining member states and thus has primarily set a negative precedent for leaving the Union (Chopin and Lequesne, 2021; Glencross, 2019; Malet and Walter, 2021a; Reinl and Evans, 2021; van Kessel et al., 2020; Walter, 2021a, 2021b; Walter and Martini, 2020). However, already de Vries (2017) argues that one cannot draw hasty conclusions about the effect of Brexit on public opinion based on such first data. Next to the fact that future dynamics around Brexit are unknown, the state-of-the-art hints to important specifications of the found overall trend regarding benchmarking effects. The key specification of the observed deterrence trend is that studies have repeatedly shown that under certain circumstances also so-called 'encouragement effects' emerged (Malet and Walter, 2021b; Walter, 2021a; Walter and Martini, 2020). Here, Brexit seemingly set a positive 'benchmark' for leaving the Union at times, which has manifested itself in a hardening of Eurosceptic attitudes (ibid.). The literature highlights that particularly the ups and downs in the Brexit process over time allowed such variation in how the benchmarking dynamics rubbed off on public opinion (Malet and Walter 2021a). The section elaborating the report's expectations will pick up and deepen this variation over time regarding different Brexit moments that tended to either come with 'encouragement' or 'deterrence' effects.

Further, studies suggest that factors such as people's basic attitudes towards the EU moderate the 'benchmarking effects' of Brexit (Walter, 2021a, 2021b). A frequently investigated specification is the effect of Brexit

on Eurosceptic parties (Baloge, 2021; van Kessel et al., 2020; Walter and Martini, 2020). Notably, Walter and Martini (2020) documented an encouragement effect for such parties right after the referendum had succeeded. In line with the findings of other studies focusing on European parties (see van Kessel et al., 2020), these encouragement moments fade with the evolvement of the Brexit process and even Eurosceptics started to moderate their demands regarding the exit option. Accordingly, the overall trend of a deterrence effect seems to hold also for Eurosceptic forces within EU-27 (ibid.).

The evidence discussed so far indicates that European citizens are benchmarking their own situation against the unfolding Brexit events and eventually adapt their preferences regarding their own country's exit. However, the presented data confirm foremost a correlation and not a causal relation between Brexit events and changes in public opinion. To strengthen the argument that actually the benchmarking dynamics around Brexit led to the observed changes, many studies have complemented their findings with different sorts of experimental evidence (see de Vries, 2017; Hobolt et al., 2021; Malet and Walter, 2021a, 2021b). Of special note is Hobolt et al. (2021), who demonstrate with a series of vignette experiments that Brexit benchmarks do impact people's evaluation of EU membership. In their conclusion, the authors further summarize well a key takeaway from the so far reviewed empirical literature:

> Our findings suggest that Brexit acts as a benchmark for citizens' evaluations of EU membership across EU-27, and that it may not continue to act as a deterrent in the future.
>
> (Hobolt et al., 2021, p. 2)

2.3.2 Brexit and benchmarking dynamics for externally integrated Switzerland

Brexit informs as a benchmark not only about the consequences of the exit option, but more generally sets a precedent for a substantial disintegration step, which is also highly relevant for countries with an external EU integration approach (Fossum and Vigrestad, 2021; Malet and Walter, 2021a). Further, the UK's disintegration efforts result in a search for an 'own' form of 'external differentiated integration' (Frommelt, 2020; Leruth

et al., 2019). Brexit provides hereby direct information about prospects and risks of respective negotiations with the EU and extends the 'models' of external differentiated integration available. The UK's process of leaving the EU is thus expected to resonate also in the public opinion of externally integrated countries. Though the empirical database is still thin, several studies have addressed respective effects for countries like Switzerland or Norway and thereby confirm the relevance of Brexit benchmarks for these countries.

Fossum and Vigrestad (2021) investigate whether the Brexit experiences have influenced Norwegians' assessment of their own integration 'model'. Their findings reveal that important stakeholders in Norwegian politics have not altered their views on Norway's EU affiliation and remained supportive of the status quo under the Agreement on the European Economic Area. Theoretically, the paper underlines the relevance of benchmarking dynamics against Brexit for Norway, and the authors indicate that their findings could reflect the overall trend of Brexit as a deterrent precedent for changing the status quo of EU affiliation. However, Fossum and Vigrestad (2021) correctly state that further research is needed to show if the observed adherence to the Norwegian status quo in the aftermath of Brexit is indeed related to deterrent Brexit benchmarks or is due to other factors.

Strong evidence for the effects of Brexit benchmarks comes from studies dedicated to the Swiss context. Malet and Walter (2021b) and Walter (2021a) document both convincingly how benchmarking against Brexit matters for Swiss public opinion about Switzerland's external EU integration. The two studies thereby present evidence not only for deterrence but also for the less frequently observed encouragement effects associated with benchmarking dynamics. Walter (2021a) investigates how public opinion regarding the Swiss governments' plans to finalise an institutional framework agreement with the EU has changed during the chaotic Brexit events in spring 2019. Her data show that within only two weeks, the Swiss public became significantly more supportive of the agreed framework deal and people expressed increased concern about setbacks in the status quo of bilateral agreements with the EU. The abrupt changes in spring 2019 indicate that the salient Brexit events had a deterrence effect on public opinion. Interestingly, however, supporters of

the Eurosceptic *Swiss People's Party* remained largely unaffected, according to Walter (2021a). If anything, their non-cooperative stance towards the EU hardened, which shows that benchmarking against the same Brexit episode can generate different dynamics within a society.

With panel surveys fielded between November 2019 and February 2021, Malet and Walter (2021b) substantially strengthen the empirical evidence for the Swiss context. Their study shows how public opinion regarding two salient issues during the Brexit process (the framework agreement and the so-called 'limitation initiative') correlate with the ups and downs of the Brexit process. In line with Walter (2021a), Malet and Walter (2021b) confirm the overall trend of deterring Brexit effects for the Swiss context. Also visible in the data are slight encouragement effects for episodes in which Brexit had a more positive public image. Moreover, the study validates a causal impact of Brexit 'benchmarks' on people's policy preferences regarding the Swiss integration process with experimental evidence. Analogous to Hobolt et al. (2021) for the EU-27 context, Malet and Walter (2021b) show that priming Brexit makes Swiss voters more willing to maintain the status quo and more reluctant to take disintegration steps.

2.3.3 Deepening the study focus: the Swiss integration process and Brexit benchmarks

With their focus on Switzerland, both Malet and Walter (2021b) and Walter (2021a) extend the literature on the effect of Brexit on European public opinion substantially. The two studies indicate that benchmarking against Brexit matters for Switzerland and that, moreover, the Swiss context allows rare insights about the 'encouraging' potential of Brexit benchmarks for Eurosceptic attitudes, which is relevant beyond Switzerland. Taken together, the so far presented state-of-the-art supports this report's approach to use Switzerland as a subject for an in-depth study of benchmarking dynamics surrounding Brexit. Malet and Walter (2021b) and Walter (2021a) confirm further that such investigations should centre around the framework agreement negotiations as the core policy issue in the recent Swiss integration process. In addition, the two studies suggest the 'limitation initiative' as an alternative policy proposal that provides a further avenue for studying Brexit benchmarks in Switzerland. The following section introduces the Swiss negotiation with the EU about the

framework agreement, gives first insights about the relevance of Brexit benchmarks for this context, and presents the 'limitation initiative' as an additional relevant issue in recent Swiss politics.

The framework agreement dominated the Swiss integration process for the last decade and was, throughout the Brexit process, a politically highly salient issue in Swiss politics (Gafafer and Schäfer, 2021). In 2014, Switzerland and the EU began negotiating a new agreement to put their relations on a more institutionalised basis. For the EU, such an institutionalised footing is necessary to consolidate and further develop the status quo of Swiss integration with the 120 bilateral agreements at its heart (Tobler, 2016). The EU—in the spirit of its current *'rebordering'* attempts (see Schimmelfennig, 2021)—demands above all to dynamically link the bilateral agreements to future legal developments in the EU (Malet and Walter, 2021b). Further seeks the EU to place relations with Switzerland under a dispute settlement mechanism with the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in the leading role. After four years of tough negotiations, an agreement was reached in December 2018 (ibid.). Yet, due to domestic opposition, the Swiss government refrained from signing the agreement and asked the EU to renegotiate some contested points.

However, renegotiations with the EU proved difficult and the domestic resistance from both left and right did not diminish. Moreover, the threat of the looming referendum hung like the sword of Damocles over the entire negotiation process. In May 2021, the Federal Council drew the consequences from the unfortunate situation and unilaterally declared the negotiations with the EU on the framework agreement to have failed (Gafafer and Schäfer, 2021). Though with this consequential step, the first attempt to put the EU-Swiss relationship on a more institutionalised footing has failed, the pressure on Switzerland remains high to find an agreement with the EU. The EU threatens to let the status quo of bilateralism slowly erode by not updating existing agreements if Switzerland is not moving in the direction of a more institutionalised affiliation (ibid.).

The struggle of the Swiss in finding an agreement with the EU reveals fundamental parallels to the UK's European integration path. Foremost, the trade-off between national sovereignty and the gains of close cooperation with the EU characterize both countries' recent struggle with

European integration (Emmenegger et al., 2018). The Brexit process and the Swiss negotiations on the framework agreement represent both ample examples of attempts to reconcile these two demands by requesting external differentiation. The respective outcomes of these negotiations (respectively the non-achievements) provide straightforward evidence about the willingness of the EU to 'accommodate' (Jurado et al., 2021) the special interests of the two countries. Despite very different starting points—with the UK disintegrating and Switzerland trying to put its EU affiliation on an institutionalised footing (Tobler, 2016)—, the evident similarities between the two contexts are fruitful ground for the discussed benchmarking dynamics at the core of this report. The section about the expectations will take a closer look at the significance of Brexit as a benchmark for the Swiss negotiations about the framework agreement. Noteworthy here is that the report follows Malet and Walter's (2021a, p. 4) observation that people may compare not only the policy outcomes but also *'the politics through which these policies emerge'* (ibid.). This comes with the important implication that Brexit can inform Swiss citizens not only about alternative models of external integration but may deliver also straightforward information about the strengths and weaknesses of alternative negotiation strategies in the 'tug-of-war' with the EU.

Not to forget is the so-called 'limitation initiative', launched by the *Swiss People's Party* (*SVP*), which interrupted the Swiss process of finding a framework deal with the EU (Gafafer and Schäfer, 2021). The initiative demanded the negotiation of a new model of EU integration without the Free Movement of Persons (AFMP). Due to a 'guillotine clause' attached to the bilateral agreements with the EU, Switzerland risked losing access to the single market if it had accepted the *SVP's* proposal (Malet and Walter, 2021a, p. 7). Thus, fighting the limitation initiative formed together with the negotiation on a framework agreement an overall strategy of the Swiss government to preserve the status quo of bilateralism (Renz, 2019). On 27 September 2020, the Swiss electorate rejected the limitation initiative with over 60% votes against it (Malet and Walter, 2021a, p. 12). The section on expectations also delves into the possible relevance of Brexit benchmarks for the public debate preceding this vote.

Of course, the until now discussed parallels between the UK and Swiss situation and the therefore expected benchmarking dynamics did not go

unnoticed on the EU side (Gruyter, 2021). From the very beginning, the EU was aware that Brexit may serve not only for its remaining members but also for externally integrated countries like Switzerland as a potentially consequential benchmark. Accordingly, the EU had obvious '*incentives to actively push for a deterrent rather than an encouragement precedent to fend off further threats to its structural integrity*' (Walter and Martini, 2020, p. 23). However, the EU-27 has also strong interests in keeping close ties with the UK. The '*accommodation dilemma*' presented in Jurado et al. (2021) conceptualizes precisely this trade-off for the EU in negotiations about external differentiated integration, be it with the UK or Switzerland. To bear in mind is that the Swiss negotiations also could function as a benchmark and, for example, influence the British demands regarding external integration (Dardanelli and Mazzoleni, 2021). It is from this background not surprising that the EU took a hard line towards both countries, was cautious about making concessions, and openly communicated its red line on access to the Single Market throughout the two negotiation processes (Baczynska, 2020; Eisl, 2020).

2.4 Why bringing in news media and framing literature matters

In sum, the presented state-of-the-art indicates convincingly that the Brexit process influences public opinion about EU integration in EU countries and beyond. For theorizing their findings, all the mentioned studies refer explicitly or implicitly to the 'benchmarking logic', as it is prominently put forward by de Vries' (2018) benchmark theory. Figure 1 recapitulates with the help of Coleman's boat (2000) these benchmarking dynamics that explain how an event like Brexit can impact public opinion in another country, which may in the end even shape future developments in European integration.

Figure 1: Formalisation of the 'benchmarking dynamics' in a macro-micro scheme
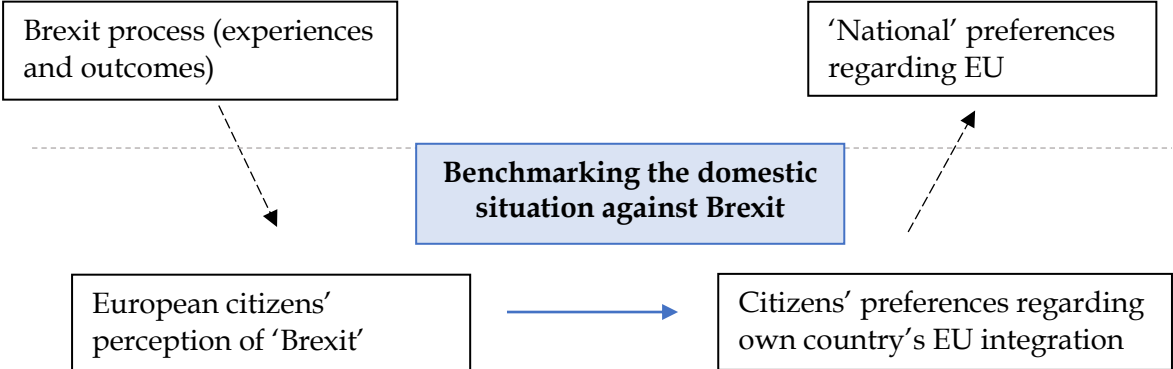
The literature review indicated that the evidence for the impact of Brexit benchmarks builds foremost on detected correlations between Brexit events and shifts in public preferences in European countries. We have seen that some studies added experimental approaches to strengthen the theorised causal mechanism and thus provided straightforward evidence for the relevance of 'benchmarking Brexit'. Convinced of the validity of the evidence acquired by the presented studies, this report claims that it can enrich the state-of-the-art about this timely and relevant topic by focusing on a so-far insufficiently examined actor, the news media. The following section develops this argument and sketches how such a focus allows a straightforward observation of benchmarking dynamics in the public, and at the same time, embraces the influential role of the media and their 'framing power' (Entman, 2010) for the formalised benchmarking process.

We have seen in the theoretical discussion that the benchmarking dynamic relies on information about a certain reference point, the benchmark. It is evident that the media play an important role in providing this information. This dependency on news media appears especially pronounced if the benchmark relates to a foreign context, as is the case with benchmarking against Brexit. Many of the reviewed studies about the effect of Brexit benchmarks hint at this function of news media in providing necessary information (e.g., de Vries, 2017; Hobolt et al., 2021; Malet and Walter, 2021b; Walter, 2021a). A few studies even include the media coverage about Brexit as an intermediary variable in their statistical analyses. Walter (2021a), as well as Hobolt et al. (2021), consider the exposure of individuals to media coverage about Brexit as a variable

that moderates the measured benchmarking effect. Exceptional regarding the inclusion of news media coverage is the work by Malet and Walter (2021b). The authors look at prevalent 'sentiments' in news coverage during different Brexit episodes and develop important expectations thereof regarding varying effects of Brexit over time. Despite these contributions, the literature's engagement with the news media's role for benchmarking tendencies against Brexit is in its infancy, and significant gaps remain. Foremost, a crucial characteristic of the news media as an intermediary actor remains fully untouched: the *framing* power of news media.

Elaborating a line of argument about the relevance of news media for benchmarking dynamics demands the inclusion of the literature on news media framing (D'Angelo, 2018; Schuck and de Vreese, 2006). The media's framing power is arguably a key reason why news coverage should not be overlooked when discussing 'Brexit benchmarking effects'. News media are not only the major source for information about Brexit; they can also, via framing, shape how people perceive and evaluate this reference point (ibid.). Drawing on the insights from Kahneman and Tversky (1979), Olson (2017, p. 564) pointed to the relevance of framing when stating that *'the same piece of absolute performance information can be evaluated differently depending on the framing of the reference point'*. De Vries (2017) also explicitly refers to the importance of framing for 'benchmarking Brexit'. Her elaborations focus thereby on the framing power of political entrepreneurs, and she highlights the Eurosceptics' interests in framing Brexit as a success. Drawing from these strong interests and the framing power of political entrepreneurs, de Vries (2017) convincingly concludes that her findings of a 'deterrent' benchmarking effect of Brexit are not set in stone. Re-framing Brexit as a success story may change the direction of the impact on public opinion in EU-27 (ibid., p. 48) with potentially tremendous consequences for the future of the European project. It is precisely this obvious and momentous influence of the power to *frame* Brexit in one way or another that makes it all the more astonishing that the existing literature on Brexit's benchmarking effects pays little attention to news media coverage. News media do not only inform Europeans about the Brexit process and its consequences, but they are also a vital player in *framing* these political events (see Entman, 2009). A *Euronews* poll (Tidey, 2021) exemplifies the significance of media framing when finding

that many Europeans are closely following how the UK is doing outside the Union via the news; and that they would re-evaluate their preference regarding their own country's exit if Brexit turns out to be a success for the British.

At its heart, the rich literature on news framing (see D'Angelo, 2018; de Vreese, 2003; Entman, 2009) tells us that news coverage knows alternative ways of defining and constructing key political events like Brexit. Frame concepts and framing analyses are here to do justice to this heterogeneity and highlight corresponding patterns in news coverage. Thereby, the literature distinguishes two basic perspectives on how we can look at news frames (Scheufele, 1999, p. 107). On the one hand, one can study news frames by treating them mainly as a dependent variable. Here, research is interested in frames as an outcome of, for example, public discourses. Thinking in frames from this standpoint can help to bring hidden structures and patterns to light, which are otherwise difficult to access. On the other hand, studies may be more interested in frames as an independent factor, which for example not only reflect public discourses but are also directly influencing them (ibid.). These different perspectives on the framing concept are, of course, closely connected in reality. Their theoretical distinction is, however, a good basis for examining two key contributions, which this report makes by looking at media coverage with a framing perspective:

First, the understanding of news media frames as a dependent factor makes it evident that studying media coverage with a framing perspective allows unique access to the benchmarking phenomenon. Looking at media coverage, thought as a reflector of public discourses, can make the usually latent benchmarking activities tangible, and addresses the fact that the literature so far has not provided direct evidence about the phenomenon of benchmarking against Brexit itself but rather documented its effects. The assumption that news media present in their coverage frames which reflect the people's benchmarking activities opens a so far neglected gateway for empirical investigations on the phenomenon.

Second, by looking at benchmarking activities in the context of news coverage, this report emphasises that news media may not only reflect but also influence the benchmarking dynamics directly via their framing power. The concept of 'framing effects' stresses the influential role of

media as a political actor and is for Entman (2009) even the 'raison d'être' for framing analyses in social science. Entman (2003, p. 417) summarizes the influence of media framing with the words: '*Framing entails selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution.*' When recalling what is at stake politically regarding how people benchmark their own situation against Brexit, it seems essential that research also pays attention to news media as a powerful political actor and *framer*. Combined, the reflective and influencing character of media frames provide strong arguments for why looking at benchmarking dynamics in news media with a framing perspective matter.

2.5 A first conceptualization of relevant 'benchmark' framings in news media

How can newspapers *frame* information about Brexit in a way that is relevant to people's benchmarking tendencies? Based on a compound of the different theoretical insights elaborated so far, this section outlines a first concept of 'explicit benchmark framing' in news media, which forms a vital starting point for the empirical analysis. Additionally, it sketches a second concept of how news media framing can influence the benchmarking effects by engaging more implicitly with the benchmarking dynamics.

Explicit benchmark framing

First and foremost, we can conceptualize frames within the media content which construct and convey a complete benchmarking argument. These news frames explicitly carry out benchmarking in the sense that they evaluate a domestic issue by benchmarking it against Brexit. Accordingly, the 'character' of such frames derives directly from the in-depth examined benchmarking concept. The major difference to the benchmarking process, as it was discussed so far, is that now not the people are the actors who practice the act of benchmarking but rather news frames overtake this task. Such news frames provide thus not only certain information about Brexit, but they present this information already as a 'benchmark' with a respective evaluation of a domestic situation that *gets benchmarked*. One could say that the news delivers 'pre-benchmarked' information, which links Brexit directly to the domestic context. Speaking to scholarly

debates about economic voting, Kayser and Peress (2012) present evidence for exactly such a role of news media as explicit 'benchmarkers' of information about national economic performances. Thereby, the media's active role helps to argue why foreign economic performances matter as 'benchmarks' despite the objection that the cognitive limitations of ordinary voters make it unlikely that they benchmark their domestic economic situation against a foreign reference point (see Arel-Bundock et al., 2021, p. 2).

Simply put, 'explicit benchmark frames' represent the directly visible benchmarking activities in the news media coverage. Transferred to the focus of the report on Switzerland, we can define an explicit benchmark frame as an argument in news media coverage that evaluates an aspect of the Swiss integration process based on a direct reference to a Brexit 'benchmark'. In this definition, the two key elements of a benchmark frame are apparent. An explicit benchmark frame demands, on the one hand, an evaluative element targeting an aspect of the Swiss integration process. The literature's understanding of *evaluative* media frames suggests that such an evaluation can come in three 'sentiments': positive, negative and neutral evaluations (see Matthes, 2012, p. 253). On the other hand, according to the logic of benchmarking, such an evaluation must derive directly from a Brexit reference. Only if the Brexit reference links to such an evaluation, the reference point qualifies as a benchmark. This highlights the *relative* component of a 'Brexit benchmark' and reveals that benchmarking demands more than a 'sober' comparison of the two situations. The 'Brexit benchmark', as a relative concept linked to the Swiss situation, knows again three basic types (positive, negative, and neutral). This report refers to them frequently as 'natures' of a Brexit benchmark. The basic 'nature' of such a Brexit reference can be determined by asking if the frame presents the British situation as a role model for Switzerland (→ positive benchmark) or rather as an anti-role model (→ negative benchmark). A positive Brexit benchmark implies that Brexit trumps the Swiss situation in a specific aspect, what usually comes with a negative evaluation of the Swiss context. Vice versa, a negative benchmark hints at an aspect where Brexit performs relatively badly. Such a benchmark frequently comes with a positive evaluation for Switzerland, but not necessarily, as the content analysis will show. If neither of the two

fits the actual 'role' of the Brexit benchmark for Switzerland, also a 'neutral' characterisation is possible.

The empirical part will stepwise deepen the understanding for explicit benchmark frames and provides examples for the various forms of such frames. To make this brief conceptualisation of news media's 'benchmarking activity' more concrete, two examples from the empirical analysis give a first idea how such benchmark frames look like. The used underscore signals the two necessary elements for an explicit benchmark frame (*the Brexit benchmark* that links to *an evaluative element* targeting the Swiss situation).

Example for 'role model' benchmark framing:

> Switzerland' negotiations with the EU comes off badly in a comparison with Brexit. Boris Johnson negotiated better, both in substance and in style.
>
> (Widmer, 2021; author's translation)

Example for 'anti-role model' benchmark framing:

> 'We have achieved a good negotiation result', said Association President Valentin Vogt, referring to the Brexit turmoil. 'On a scale of ten, it stands at seven in favour of Switzerland. The British have only achieved a three'.
>
> (Fellmann, 2019; author's translation)

Moreover, when discussing different options for framing Brexit as a benchmark for Switzerland, one must also consider the option that a media frame explicitly denies a benchmarking link between the two contexts. A frame may, for example, present the Swiss and British situation as very different and thereby argues explicitly against benchmarking the Swiss integration process against Brexit. Such a framing adds a fourth category 'sui generis' to the three basic 'natures' of positive, negative, and neutral Brexit benchmarks expected in news coverage. When this report seeks to answer how the Swiss media have benchmarked the Swiss situation against Brexit, it will also closely screen this type of framing and refers to it as 'benchmark denial framing'.

Evaluative media framing of Brexit (≈ implicit benchmark framing)

Explicit benchmark frames represent the most straightforward way of transferring the concept of benchmarking into the context of a news media analysis. Yet, the previously presented arguments about the framing power of media indicate clearly that the relevance of news coverage is not limited to such an explicit form of framing Brexit as a benchmark for the Swiss context. Media also influence the benchmarking dynamics by solely framing the information about Brexit in certain ways. For example, suppose a Swiss newspaper frames the Brexit experiences constantly as a success. In that case, it may foster negative evaluations of the Swiss situation—under the assumption that people benchmark the Swiss integration process against such Brexit information.

The framing literature provides strong arguments about the impact of so-called 'evaluative frames' in the news coverage of political events (Entman, 1993; Matthes, 2012). Brexit as a highly salient and controversial process is prone to be framed in such an evaluative way. It is plausible that especially news frames conveying a strikingly positive or negative 'evaluative tone' regarding Brexit may work as mediating or even moderating factors for the discussed benchmarking effects of Brexit. One can thus argue that a 'tendentious' framing of the political events around Brexit constitutes an 'implicit form' of benchmark framing by news media.

Though convinced by the relevance of such an implicit news framing impact, the report, with its descriptive approach, focuses on the concept of explicit benchmark frames in Swiss media. Therefore, I leave it at this brief sketch and encourage future studies to take account of the evaluative framing in Brexit coverage when investigating the impacts of Brexit on public opinion. Yet, it is important to note that the evaluative framing tendencies are also key for the explicit benchmark framing concept. When news coverage explicitly frames Brexit as a benchmark for Switzerland, it conveys inherently also an evaluative framing for the Brexit experiences as the reference point. Thus, the different ways how Swiss media frame and evaluate the Brexit experiences are echoed throughout the presented content analysis, which aims to make the explicit benchmarking tendencies—as they are reflected and constructed by Swiss news media—visible.

Chapter 3

Elaborating some expectations

On the one hand, one can understand the theoretical framework as a sketch of arguments why benchmarking dynamics around Brexit matter and why we should include media coverage in this debate. On the other hand, the framework has provided us with a first concept of how benchmarking in media may look. The discussion has further highlighted the relevance of benchmarking against Brexit for externally integrated Switzerland. The construction of this report builds thus on the latent expectation that we should find frames in Swiss newspapers that present Brexit as an explicit benchmark for recent issues in the Swiss integration process, foremost the negotiations with the EU about a framework deal. The assumption that a look at Swiss news media will reveal interesting benchmarking dynamics forms a basic expectation for the empirical analysis, what the following chapter further elaborates.

To grasp the phenomenon of benchmarking in the media descriptively and to strengthen the general understanding of its empirical occurrence, the planned content analysis must detect relevant patterns in the data (Patton, 2015). Thereby, the elaborated different types of Brexit benchmarks—also called the 'nature' of a Brexit benchmark—form the key basis for such descriptions. Interesting patterns are expected when looking at the occurrence of these different benchmark types over time and over various newspapers. Along these lines, the following section

broadly elaborates some exceptions about the variation of the investigated explicit benchmark framings in the Swiss media coverage.

Variation over time in general benchmarking activity

When can we expect media to benchmark the Swiss context against Brexit? The question about the temporal occurrences of Brexit benchmarks is likely to depend on the issue salience of Brexit events on the one hand and on the salience of happening regarding the Swiss-EU relation in the media coverage on the other hand. As benchmarking is a relative act, the media's framing in this direction needs both the Brexit context as *the benchmark*, as well as the Swiss context that *gets benchmarked*. One could thus assume that Brexit benchmarks in the Swiss media occur when both Brexit and the Swiss integration process are in the spotlight. Figure 2 illustrates the salience of Brexit and the Swiss framework agreement in headlines of selected Swiss media per year. 2019 stands out as a year with high salience for both topics. In this period, the UK and EU's negotiations about a withdrawal agreement made headlines all over Europe, particularly in the first six months of the year. At the same time, Switzerland was discussing intensively the negotiation outcome about the framework deal with the EU, which was presented in December 2018 (Gafafer and Schäfer, 2021). Accordingly, one could expect a relatively high number of benchmark

Figure 2: Issue salience compared
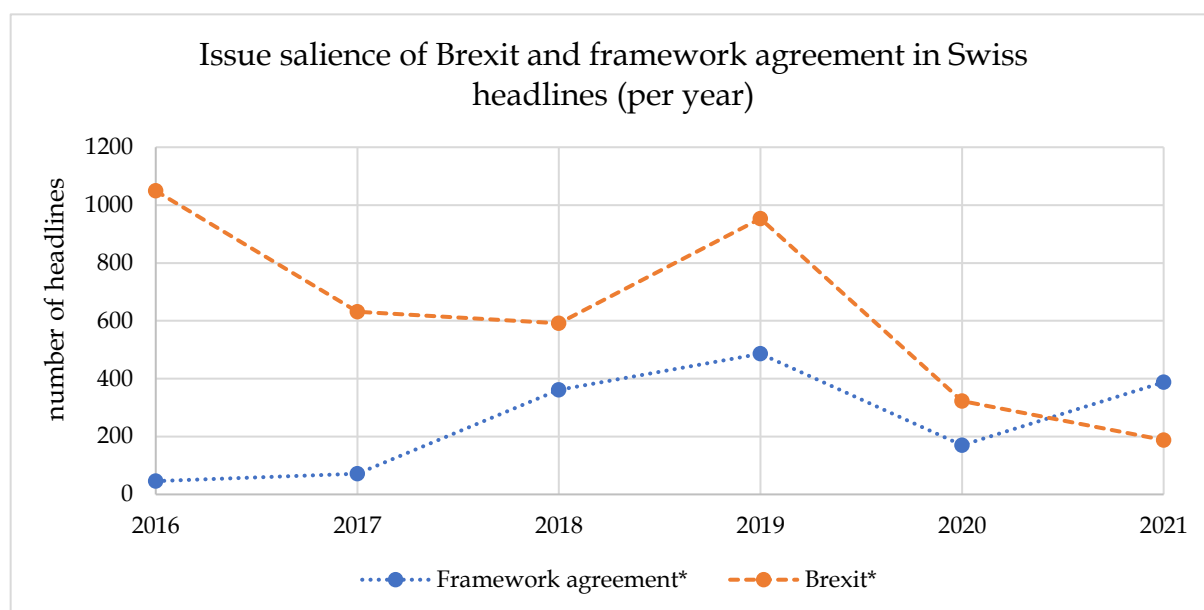
Source: own search on Factiva in selected Swiss newspapers with search terms representing the two issues

frames in the first half of 2019 based on the salience of the two topics at this time.

However, there is an important objection against such a one-sided focus on the issue salience. It has been argued in the theory section that the benchmarking mechanism demands certain comparability of the two contexts involved. More essential for the occurrence of benchmarks in the media than the pure issue salience might thus be how well the two contexts are comparable at a given point in time. And regarding this comparability aspect, the Brexit process as a potential benchmark varies over time.

A crucial question is thus: which episodes in the Brexit process are particularly prone to serve as benchmarks for the Swiss context under the comparability criterion. Theoretically, one can separate the Brexit negotiations into two phases. A first phase relates to the terms of exit and a second phase concerns the future of UK-EU relations (Bulmer and Quaglia, 2018; Schuette, 2021). In the words of Schimmelfennig (2018), first, it needs to be clear how the UK moves *'from internal to external differentiation'* before negotiation about the future EU-UK relation as a form of *'external differentiation'* can get concretised. Apparently, for Switzerland as an externally integrated country, the conditions under which the EU is *'accommodating'* the UK as an external country in such a second phase are of great interest (Walter, 2021a).

The 2019 concluded Withdrawal Agreement and the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TAC) negotiated in 2020 are the two obvious pillars for identifying the two phases in the actual negotiation process. However, it must be noted that while the distinction in these two phases is straightforward in theory, in reality, a more interwoven picture has emerged. The Withdrawal Agreement did not only set out the terms of the UK's exit, but included also a Political Declaration about the framework for the future relation between the UK and the EU (Fabbrini, 2020; Frennhoff Larsén and Khorana, 2020). Considering this specification, one can still expect that particularly the second phase after the UK's formal exit on the first of February 2020 (Fabbrini, 2020) has triggered an intensified benchmarking activity in Switzerland, as here the UK and the Swiss situation show various similarities.

Combined with the reflections regarding the required issue salience, a more general expectation arises: In times of Brexit events, which have triggered a decent media coverage, and which are foremost suitable as objects of comparison for Switzerland, benchmarks are expected. For benchmarking the Swiss negotiation about the framework agreement, the period of the negotiations about the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement seems to best fulfil these conditions. We expect thus a peak of benchmarks when the outcome of the successful EU-UK negotiation got published and received extensive media attention in December 2020 and January 2021.

Variation in the 'nature' of Brexit benchmark framings over time

More of interest for the descriptive aim of this report than the mere appearance of benchmark frames over time is the question about which type of Brexit benchmark framing occurs. The conceptualisation has put forward the 'natures' of positive, neutral and negative Brexit benchmarks, as well as the special case of an explicit benchmark denial. The following discussions will sketch some expectations by focusing on the two main framing categories of positive (role model) and negative (anti-role model) references to Brexit as a 'benchmark'. Expectations regarding the explicit benchmark denial type are briefly covered at the end of the chapter.

To sketch some expectations about the variation of positive and negative types of benchmark frames over time, the potential of different Brexit episodes to be framed as a certain benchmark needs to be elaborated. For this, a look back at the discussed literature covering benchmarking effects of Brexit is helpful, as it delivers us hints about which episodes of Brexit could have triggered which kind of benchmark framing.

From reviewing the publications regarding the effects of Brexit on public opinion, we know that scholars have discussed encouraging and deterrent moments during the Brexit process. The overall picture provided by the literature is that Brexit has mainly set a negative precedent for leaving the European Union (de Vries, 2017; Reinl and Evans, 2021; van Kessel et al., 2020; Walter, 2021a). These findings indicate that the Brexit process generally seems prone to be framed as a negative benchmark. The state of the art hints, however, also to the potential of Brexit for encouragement effects (Walter, 2021a; Walter and Martini, 2020). For example, Walter and Martini (2020) have documented an initial encouragement effect of Brexit

for European populist parties right after the referendum has succeeded. Important evidence regarding varying effects of Brexit is presented by Malet and Walter (2021a). They find that a publicly negatively evaluated episode like Theresa May's unsuccessful attempts to get the Brexit deal through the parliament has increased public support for European integration in EU member states. Positively perceived events within the Brexit process, like Johnson's electoral success, had reversed effects and let EU support decrease (Malet and Walter, 2021b, p. 23). Such findings are important for the report's expectation. They indicate that the Brexit process has triggered benchmarking effects on public opinion in both directions and that there were episodes in the Brexit process which seemed particularly prone to be framed as a positive benchmark despite a general trend of 'deterrence'.

But how do these insights about Brexit's effects on European public opinion translate to the Swiss context and into concrete expectations regarding the variation of the analysed benchmark frames? Worth recapitulating is that varying effects of Brexit events are particularly well documented for Switzerland (Malet and Walter, 2021a; Walter, 2021a). These empirical findings for Switzerland about 'deterrence' and 'encouragement' effects form a key foundation for the report's expectation that the Swiss context reveals interesting variation in the 'nature' of Brexit benchmarks, which may not appear in EU countries to that same extent. The discussed empirical evidence suggests a three-part division of the Brexit process to organize the expectations regarding the variation of different types of benchmark framings over time.

In a first phase right after the referendum, many things were unknown, and Brexit seemed to allow both a positive and negative 'evaluative' framing, which is mirrored in the documented encouragement and deterrence effects. Accordingly, Brexit benchmarks in the Swiss context are expected to be rather speculative at this stage, but positive and negative Brexit benchmark framings should have been possible. As time went on, a steadily sobering picture took hold, and the problems surrounding Brexit dominated public debates. This deterrence phase, which had its heyday in spring 2019, was also visible in Swiss public debates (Walter, 2021a). Especially in 2018 and 2019, the negative public perception of Brexit events should limit the use of positive benchmarks

frames in the Swiss media, while framing Brexit as a negative benchmark is more likely.

According to the reviewed literature, with Johnson as prime minister, the negative spiral was broken to some extent. Despite ongoing problems, there have been some successes in the Brexit process under Johnson, which should open the door for positive benchmarks. In that vein, Malet and Walter (2021b, p. 16) have summarised their expectations regarding Brexit effects for the time after Johnson took office as: *'We thus expect that the deterrence effect of Brexit may be attenuated in wave 1* [referring to the time right after Boris Johnson had reached an agreement with the EU], *if not even reversed into an encouragement effect.'*. The Brexit events under Johnson constitute thus a third phase for which an interesting heterogeneity of different benchmark types is expected with a high potential for positive benchmarks.

Walter and Martini (2020) present a detailed picture regarding the ups and downs of Brexit. Their paper assesses how well Brexit is going based on a human coding of key events, and they support thereby the trend line presented here based on the three phases (ibid, p. 36). An own analysis of 'negative' Brexit associations in selected Swiss media further strengthens the assumption that negative 'sentiments' regarding Brexit have evolved in the years after the referendum and have reached a clear peak in 2019

Figure 3: Number of articles that associate Brexit with a selection of 'negatively' connotated words
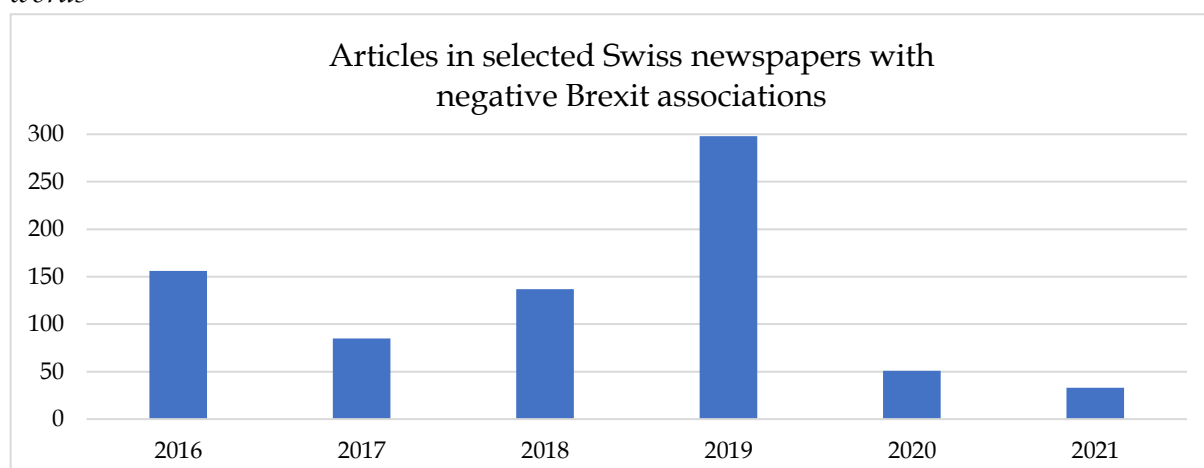
Source: own calculation with search string on Factiva (not translated): Brexit* near3 (chaos OR chaotisch* OR drama* OR problem* OR fehler* OR turbulenz* OR theater OR krise OR negativ* OR angst OR sorge* OR irrsinn* OR albtraum OR gefahr* OR katastrophe OR risiko* OR debakel)

(see Figure 3). The diagram's sharp drop in negative Brexit associations in 2020 indicates, at least indirectly, a more positive perception of the developments after Boris Johnson took the helm. However, one must bear in mind that in 2020, media attention on Brexit was generally lower than in 2019. Yet, given the immense wave of negative reporting in the first half of 2019, it seems reasonable to assume that in 2020 'no news was good news' for people's evaluation of how Brexit is going.

The expectations regarding the occurrence of positive and negative benchmarks in the three, not sharply separable, phases can be combined with the assumption regarding the general occurrence of benchmarking based on the comparability and issue salience arguments. The negotiation phase after the official exit of the UK has been put forward as a most-likely context for benchmarking activity in Swiss newspapers. This phase falls fully into the era when Johnson was in the lead, and the 'sentiments' regarding the Brexit experiences became somewhat 'warmer' or at least less negative (see Walter and Martini, 2020, p. 36). Accordingly, we cannot only expect a high number of benchmark frames for the period when the negotiation between the UK and the EU about their future relationship was on the table, but also relatively high shares of positive benchmarks. Nevertheless, due to what Walter and Martini (2020, p. 15) call a *'memory effect'* regarding people's perception of Brexit, the *'history of events'* cannot be ignored when stating that the developments under Johnson may allow an increase in positive benchmarking. The accumulation of a series of negative experiences throughout the Brexit process, including the episodes under Johnson, is expected to set a fruitful ground for negative benchmarks, even in times of supposed stage victories for Brexiteers. One can thus also assume a decent amount of negative Brexit benchmarks for the expectedly intense benchmarking phase when Johnsons was negotiating the future UK-EU relationship.

The assumed co-existence of negative and positive benchmarks hints at a basic assumption of this report, which the expectations so far did not reflect on: Though the actual Brexit events may set clear conditions for the presentation of Brexit as a benchmark, the discussed framing power opens tremendous flexibility in the way how news media can frame the same Brexit experience as a benchmark. Accordingly, it is of utmost importance

to formulate expectations regarding how different media outlets may present different framings of Brexit as a benchmark for Switzerland.

Variation in the 'nature' of Brexit benchmark framings over newspapers

The expectations regarding benchmarking over various news media are embedded in the assumption that newspapers, inter alia due to their role as a framer, are crucial political actors (Entman, 2010, 2009; Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Framing power is often connected to certain degrees of media bias (Entman, 2010) and according to Edelman (1993, p. 232) is the choice of frames often *'driven by ideology and prejudice'*. The political leaning of media outlets, as well as the individual journalist's ideological or political orientation, are thus key explaining factors for the observed variation in the media's framing of news (Groseclose and Milyo, 2005; Scheufele, 1999; Tuchman, 1978).

Accordingly, the political leaning of different media outlets might be quite decisive for how the media frame Brexit as a benchmark for the Swiss integration process. More specific, the binary categorisation of media outlets in Europhile and Eurosceptic ones, as it is for example done for the British media landscape (see Anderson and Weymouth, 1999; Daddow, 2006; Gavin, 2001; Price, 2009), grasps the relevant dimension of the political leaning for this report best. The here presented expectations are thus mainly based on a separation of newspapers with a tendentious Europhile leaning on the one hand and newspapers with a Eurosceptic leaning on the other. Such a general leaning should translate quite directly into a certain attitude regarding the Swiss integration process and the specific issue of the framework agreement. Eurosceptic newspapers should oppose the framework agreement as they fear a substantial integration step. At the same time, news outlets with a general Europhile leaning tend to support the framework agreement as a necessary step to secure the status quo of Swiss EU affiliation.

The core expectation regarding the occurrence of either positive or negative benchmark frames based on the newspapers' leaning towards European integration is straightforward: Newspapers with a Eurosceptic leaning—as well as with a connected critical attitude towards the status quo of Swiss EU integration—will use positive Brexit benchmarks to *frame* a negative evaluation of the status quo or to promote an alternative state of less integration. Reversely, newspapers with a more Europhile

leaning—and expected positive attitude towards a framework deal—are using negative Brexit benchmarks. Here, the negative benchmarks are expected to serve well for a positive evaluation of the status quo, respectively for negative evaluations of alternative states with less integration. These two basic expectations underline the assumed link between the framing of Brexit as a positive benchmark and a negative evaluation of the Swiss integration process, and the respective opposite combination of a negative Brexit benchmark and a positive evaluation of the *benchmarked* Swiss integration approach. It is, however, a task for the empirical analysis to check if these combinations are indeed prevalent or if the data also reveal other combinations.

Important to note is that the expectations here are deliberately kept broad. Other factors and conditions may be relevant for how different Swiss newspapers frame Brexit as a certain benchmark. A likely relevant conditional factor is the basic ideological attitude behind a Eurosceptic stance. Drawing on the insights from Fossum and Vigrestad (2021), who argue that Brexit does not trigger benchmarking dynamics for left Eurosceptics in Norway due to a diametral different political ideology, positive benchmark frames are not expected for Swiss newspapers with a clear left-leaning, though they may oppose the Swiss status quo or the EU in general. In reverse, a newspaper with a clear political stance against Europe and the status quo of integration, and additionally shares a similar ideology as Brexiteers, is a very likely candidate for *framing* positive Brexit benchmarks.

An additional factor of relevance, connected to the political leaning, is the type of content a newspaper produces and how clearly a Europhile/Eurosceptic editorial agenda is expressed via different types of articles (see Price, 2009). Neutral news coverage appears less likely to include benchmark frames than journalist commentaries and political editorials. Here, the journalists' independence may also play a role, and how often articles give a platform to political entrepreneurs as 'speakers' (Marquis et al., 2011). Of course, these aspects may not only vary over different newspapers but also within the coverage of a certain newspaper. It will be part of the empirical analysis to gather relevant information regarding such context factors, which will help to explain the found patterns.

Concluding remark on the formulated expectations

The discussed expectations regarding the variation over time and newspapers provided a broad picture of what kind of patterns we can expect. The main contribution of this discussion lies not in developing hypotheses but rather in offering a guideline for the empirical investigation, which will help reduce complexity, organize the data in a useful way and detect relevant patterns in it.

Tables 1 & 2 summarize and combine the core expectations discussed so far. Table 1 records the most important insights regarding the variation over time, based on the distinction of the Brexit process into three phases. Table 2 combines these insights with the expected variation across newspapers with different political leaning and thus serves as a final summary of the core expectations for the empirical analysis.

Table 1: Expected variation over three distinctive phases

Initial phase: pre-negotiation (June 2016 - April 2017)	Negotiation phase I: under PM May (April 2017- June 2019)	Negotiation phase II: under PM Johnson (July 2019- January 2021)
➢ Open for **negative** as well as **positive** framing ➢ **Low intensity**: due to limited issue salience and comparability of the UK and CH context	➢ **negative** benchmarks dominant (→ deterrence potential high) ➢ **medium intensity**: High issue salience of the relevant contexts, but limited comparability due to focus on withdrawal	➢ Co-occurrence of **positive** and **negative** benchmarks (→ deterrence + encouragement potential) ➢ **high intensity**: due to good comparability, especially in negotiation phase about future relation after official exit

Table 2: Expectation over time for newspapers with Eurosceptic/Europhile leaning

	Initial phase: pre-negotiation (June 2016-April 2017)	Negotiation phase I: under PM May (April 2017-June 2019)	Negotiation phase II: under PM Johnson (July 2019-January 2021)
Eurosceptic leaning	Positive benchmarks (low intensity)	No, or only a few benchmarks (as positive framing is difficult)	Positive benchmarks (very high intensity)
Europhile leaning	Negative benchmarks (low intensity)	Negative benchmarks (medium intensity)	Negative benchmarks (high intensity)

To reduce complexity, the here elaborated expectations have ignored some important specifications of the investigated benchmark frames. Most notably, the theoretically discussed benchmark denial framing was left out. The report expects that this frame type is used as a 'counter framing' strategy to other actors' benchmarking activity. This means that denial framings of Brexit as a benchmark should occur in times of generally high benchmark framing activity. One can assume that benchmarking activity in newspapers is often influenced by the principle of 'actio et reactio'. If, for example, a Eurosceptic newspaper heavily frames a Brexit experience as a positive role model to highlight the shortcomings of the Swiss situation, it is plausible that a newspaper with a more Europhile leaning reacts to this. One obvious way of such a reaction is to reframe the Brexit event and present it as a negative benchmark. However, there may be times when the Brexit events hardly allow such a change in framing cause the episode is clearly associated with either positive or negative 'sentiments'. The denial framing is then the more feasible reaction strategy. The above-discussed negotiation phase under May could be such a context. It should be hard for a Eurosceptic newspaper to refer to Brexit with a positive framing in this negatively perceived episode. The denial frame may be the only reaction strategy if Europhile newspapers start to positively evaluate the Swiss integration path based on references to May's problems with Brexit.

A final but important note needs to address the limitation initiative. It has been argued that the limitation initiative represents a second, specific aspect in the Swiss integration process that may get benchmarked against the UK's experiences with Brexit. While the UK was negotiating with the EU about their future relationship outside the Union, the Swiss people had to decide on the limitation initiative at the end of September 2020. In contrast to the framework agreement process, which was salient throughout the Brexit process, is the limitation initiative's issue salience presumably concentrated. Usually, public debates about a referendum are the most intense in the eight weeks before the vote (Kriesi, 2011), and thus we expect that Brexit benchmarks speaking to this aspect are occurring mainly in summer 2020. This expected restriction also has implication for the projected 'nature' of benchmark frames in the context of the limitation initiative. It would stand to reason that supporters of the initiative use positive Brexit benchmarks for a positive evaluation of their demand to

reduce EU integration drastically. However, in Summer 2020, Brexit was in a rather difficult phase and the spectre of a hard Brexit became a realistic and widely discussed scenario (Jackson and Shepotylo, 2021). The confirmation that there will be no extension of the transition period in June 2020 has, for example, intensified the fear of a hard Brexit in the UK and in Europe. The uncertainty and negative sentiments associated with this episode of Brexit (see also the assessment by Walter and Martini, 2020) suggest that positive Brexit benchmarks during the public debates of the limitation initiative are rather unlikely. It is rather expected that the Brexit situation allowed opponents of the limitation initiative to refer to Brexit as a negative benchmark for illustrating which negative consequences and uncertainties Switzerland would face if it were to accept the initiative. Supporters of the initiative could then, however, rely on the above-argued denial strategy.

Chapter 4

Preparation of the empirical analysis

As already indicated with the research questions, the empirical design of the report aims to describe how Swiss media have benchmarked the Swiss integration process against the Brexit process. The theoretical reflections have shown that next to the explicit framing of Brexit as a benchmark for the Swiss context, also an implicit form of benchmarking may be of relevance. However, in the interest of a comprehensive and targeted empirical analysis, the empirical design focuses on documenting the explicit form of benchmarking in the news media.

Following Gerring's (2012) convincing call for *'mere description'*, the empirical design seeks for *'descriptive arguments'* about the empirical phenomenon of benchmark frames in Swiss media. Thereby the report does not ignore the causation behind the investigated benchmark framings. By organizing and comparing the descriptive data across different media outlets and points in time, based on the elaborated expectations, the evidence helps to explain variation in benchmark frames as a dependent phenomenon. The empirical design is thus also committed to basic features of a *'descriptive-comparative analysis'* (see Blatter et al., 2018). But on the shoulders of luminaries in the field of political science methodologies like Gerring (2012) and King et al. (1994, p. 34), this report can convincingly argue that a mainly descriptive approach well addresses the topic. Moreover, by approaching benchmarking in the media

descriptively, the report gives expression to the relevance of this phenomenon and contrast the mentioned tendencies in the literature to treat the benchmarking activity itself, in the words of Gerring (2012, p. 735), as a *'preface to causal analysis'*.

The obvious way of providing such descriptive arguments is by conducting a content analysis of newspaper articles. Based on the structuring approach of a content analysis (see Mayring, 2014), the idea is to gather and organize data from the media content in a way that allows an in-depth description of the benchmarking phenomenon in the media coverage. The analysis seeks to reveal relevant patterns in respect to the formulated expectations and to generally strengthen the understanding of how Swiss news media have *framed* Brexit as a benchmark. The following chapter deepens the report's methodological approach by first informing about the data gathering before elaborating the processing of these data.

4.1 Building of the sample

Newspaper selection

The content analysis builds on a sample of articles from Swiss newspapers covering the German-speaking part of the country. Selected are on the one hand the two daily newspapers Tages-Anzeiger and NZZ (Neue Zürcher Zeitung). These two supra-regional daily print papers are vital representatives of the quality press in Switzerland (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). While Tages-Anzeiger is associated with a left-liberal stance, NZZ traditionally covers a more right-liberal position (Longchamp, 2013; Vontobel, 2009). To extend this tandem, the analysis includes two weekly newspapers: WOZ Die Wochenzeitung and Die Weltwoche. The two represent two diametrically opposed positions on a traditional left-right scale (see Figure 4) and thus extend the range of the selected newspaper's political leaning decisively. Together, the four selected newspapers cover a wide spectrum of political leanings in the Swiss printed media.

Figure 4: Own classification of the four selected newspapers in terms of political leaning (left-right), based on evidence from Longchamp (2013) and Vontobel (2009)

WOZ	Tages-Anzeiger	NZZ	Weltwoche
left ←——————————————————————→ right			
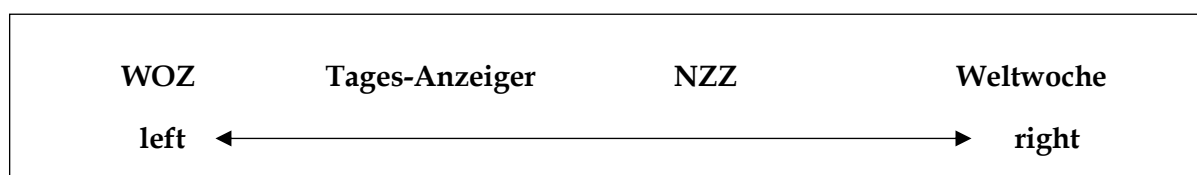
However, the left-right position of the newspapers translates not directly towards a certain political leaning regarding European integration. Research on party positions has shown that non-economic scales like the one ranging from green/alternative/libertarian (GAL) to traditionalist/authoritarian/nationalist (TAN) are better suited to estimate parties' stance towards European integration than the traditional left-right scale (Hooghe and Marks, 2009). On that note, the phenomenon of Euroscepticism from the very left also needs to be taken into account (see Meijers, 2017). For example, the left *WOZ (Die Wochenzeitung)* has traditionally close ties to trade unions, which are one of the key opponents of the Swiss government's plan to institutionalize relations with Europe via a framework agreement (Gafafer and Schäfer, 2021).

De Vries (2017), among others, argues that benchmarking and framing Brexit becomes in particular relevant from the background of Eurosceptic forces. Accordingly, selecting a clearly Eurosceptic newspaper is essential for the study. With *Weltwoche*, this demand can be met (see von Matt, 2016). The positioning of *Weltwoche* features many traits of a *TAN* leaning (traditionalism, authority, nationalism), and its editorial agenda is openly Eurosceptic (ibid.). The paper's editor-in-chief, Roger Köppel, is a prominent member of the Swiss parliament for the Eurosceptic *Swiss People's Party (SVP)*. The journalistic impact of the member of parliament Köppel, one of the loudest anti-European voices in Swiss politics, frequently gives rise to criticism (ibid.). An own inspection of anecdotal evidence from leading articles of the *Weltwoche* about the Swiss framework agreement confirms its Eurosceptic editorial agenda. Moreover, a view into leading articles of the newspaper supports the assumption that *NZZ* and *Tages-Anzeiger* tend towards a Europhile positioning and advocate the framework agreement with the EU. *Weltwoche* presents itself as a clear counterweight to the *NZZ* position if it postulates, for example:

> Along with the Green Liberal Party, the Neue Zürcher Zeitung is one of the big supporters of the EU Framework Agreement. Week after week, the editor-in-chief lobbies for the institutional treaty that wants to subject Switzerland to foreign law, foreign legislators and EU sanctions.
>
> (Köppel, 2019; author's translation)

Also, the *Tages-Anzeiger* was frequently criticised by *Weltwoche* for their Europhile positioning. In an article from 12 May 2021, a *Weltwoche* journalists accuses *Tages-Anzeiger* of echoing a *'choir of cheers for the EU and the EU agreement'* (Zimmermann, 2021). It seems thus accurate to conclude that the (economically) right-liberal *NZZ* and the left-liberal *Tages-Anzeiger* represent voices in the Swiss media landscape characterised by a supportive stance towards European integration, while *Weltwoche* is the clear Eurosceptic counterpart in the sample. A positioning of *WOZ* as a clearly left print media in respect to a general European stance is difficult. Regarding the framework agreement, the newspapers' close ties with trade unions may evoke a rather sceptical coverage.

Based on these reflections, the four newspapers form a representative sample for the analysis, which foremost includes the necessary variation in the positioning towards European integration and the framework agreement. Again, to emphasize is the significance of the selection of *Weltwoche* as an unambiguously Eurosceptic newspaper. Insights gained from this newspaper speaks to the concern in the literature that Eurosceptic forces could try to frame and benchmark Brexit in the spirit of their propaganda against the EU (see de Vries, 2018, p. 48).

Selection of relevant articles

To detect benchmark frames in the coverage of these newspapers, the report relies on articles that, in one way or the other, touch upon Brexit and the Swiss integration process. The presence of the two contexts within one article is a minimum condition for the conceptualised 'explicit benchmark framing'. To build the sample of articles based on this necessary condition, a keyword search was conducted. *Factiva* provided the relevant articles for *Tages-Anzeiger*, *NZZ* and *Weltwoche*. The database *Swissdox* allowed full access to the articles from *WOZ*. An identical Boolean search term determined the sample of articles for each newspaper.

To find the appropriate search string, I have tested a variety of search term combinations. A first step combined the term *Brexit** with various key words covering the framework agreement. Thereby the following search string 1 (not translated) turned out to be exhaustive and purposeful: *Brexit* AND (Rahmenvertr* OR Rahmenabkomm* OR institutionell* Rahmen OR Insta OR institutionell* Abkommen OR 'Schweiz-EU' OR 'EU-Schweiz').*

To include also the second, though minor issue discussed in the theory section, the limitations initiative, the search was extended towards articles that included *Brexit** and a synonym for the 'limitation initiative' but were not already selected via the first search term. The respective search string 2 reads as follows: *Brexit* AND (Kündigungsinitiat* OR Begrenzungsinitiat* OR 'Für eine massvolle Zuwanderung') NOT (Rahmenvertr* OR Rahmenabkomm* OR institutionell* Rahmen OR Insta OR institutionell* Abkommen OR 'Schweiz-EU' OR 'EU-Schweiz').* This extension did not increase the number of hits considerably, what strengthens the report's main focus on the framework agreement as the core issue in Swiss politics which is likely to get benchmarked against Brexit.

The time frame for the article search started with the Brexit referendum on 23 June 2016 and ended on 26 September 2021, the day the author finalised the search. A total of 667 articles found their way into the sample with the keyword search. Table 3 gives an overview of the number of gathered articles for each newspaper via the two search strings.

Table 3: Collection of articles via two search strings

	NZZ	Tages-Anzeiger	Weltwoche	WOZ
Search string 1: focus framework agreement	319	183	117	15
Search string 2: Extension limitation initiative	13	12	7	1
Total	332	195	124	16

4.2 Proceeding the data

The research goal of the report demands an analysis strategy that on the one hand refers to the general methodological tools and standards assigned to traditional content analyses (see Krippendorff, 2004; Mayring, 2014; Rössler, 2017), and on the other hand also considers the specifications and peculiarities developed for framing analyses (D'Angelo and Kuypers, 2010). One can understand the latter as a subtype of traditional content analyses, which has shifted the focus from categories to frames (ibid.). Thinking in frames is, according to advocates like Reese

(2018), a *'more discerning approach'* for analysing media content than the usage of the *'more static categories'*.

For developing the research strategy, understood as a content analysis of frames in the news, a reflection upon two basic coding approaches is necessary: inductive and deductive. Referring to the distinction between framing analysis and traditional content analysis, there seems that scholars of the latter lean towards a deductive approach (Mayring, 2014), while a framing analysis usually leaves a lot of room for the inductive style (D'Angelo and Kuypers, 2010; Matthes and Kohring, 2008). For this report, a hybrid approach, which makes use of deductive and inductive forms of analysis, is suggested. By the explicit use of deductive and inductive coding approaches, the empirical part does justice to the theoretical conceptualisation presented for explicit benchmark framing, while not losing the openness and flexibility provided by an inductive framing analysis, necessary for the descriptive and explorative aim of the study. In practical terms, this means that a first coding step aims for a deductive 'extraction' of all the frames, which either qualify as an explicit benchmark frame or a benchmark denial frame. The term 'extraction', borrowed from Gläser and Laudel (2010), is used deliberately to stress the purpose of this step to identify the relevant frames in the data. Subsequently, inductive approaches gain importance for an enhanced description and organisation of the found frames. The coming sections inform how the report analyses the gathered articles based on such a two-track coding approach. To keep in mind is that the two presented coding 'steps' are interwoven in practice and their separation is mainly for illustration.

Step 1: deductive extraction of the relevant frames

The first coding step aims for 'extracting' deductively all the explicit benchmark frames in the data as they were conceptualised in the theory chapter. Based on the keyword search, all the collected articles contain information about Brexit and the Swiss context. The initial unit of analysis for this coding step can be understood as an article segment in the sense of a 'unit of meaning', which includes information about Brexit and the Swiss integration process. The crucial question for the 'extraction' phase is if this information has been *framed* in a way that qualifies as an 'explicit benchmark frame'. To remember, the term 'frame' refers to a certain way of how an article has presented Brexit as a benchmark for the Swiss

context. Frames are in this sense understood as *'conceptual tools which media rely on to convey, interpret and evaluate information'* (Neuman et al., 1992). In Matthes' words, frames are *'selective views on issues—views that construct reality in a certain way leading to different evaluations and recommendations'* (Matthes, 2012, p. 249). Due to the open understanding of a frame unit in this report, a frame can be formed solely by a clause or one or more sentences, but it can also range over several paragraphs within an article (ibid.).

Drawing on the presented conceptualisation, the coder can detect explicit benchmark frames in the data by looking for its two key elements and the required connection between them in the sense of the benchmarking concept. The extraction procedure becomes comprehensible when discussed with reference to code system 1:

Table 5: Code system 1: scheme for 'extraction' of explicit benchmark frames with four code categories

Two 'core' elements	Code categories	Main codes
Brexit as a 'benchmark' for Swiss context	Code cat. 1: the 'nature' of the Brexit benchmark	[1.1] Positive benchmark
		[1.2] Negative benchmark
		[1.3] Neutral benchmark
	Code cat. 2: Brexit experience/outcome as the benchmark (benchmark object)	*Coded deductively and inductively → see code system 2 in attachment A for details*
Evaluation of Swiss context	Code cat. 3: 'sentiment' of evaluation	[3.1] Positive evaluation
		[3.2] Negative evaluation
		[3.3] Neutral evaluation
	Code cat. 4: object evaluated (*benchmarked* object)	*Coded deductively and inductively -> see code system 2 in attachment A for details*

Code system 1 rests on the two core elements of a benchmark framing. We know from the conceptualisation that an evaluative element targeting the Swiss context is a necessary condition for an explicit benchmark frame. This evaluative element is grasped with the code categories 3 & 4. Category 3 grasps the 'sentiment' of this evaluation, while category 4 specifies which concrete 'object' is under evaluation. The key coding decision for the researcher is related to code category 1, which grasps the framing of Brexit as a 'benchmark'. Due to the elaborated *relative*

understanding of the concept, coding this aspect requires that Brexit as the benchmark refers directly to an evaluative statement targeting the Swiss integration context. Only when the presentation of Brexit as a benchmark links to such an evaluative statement can we say that the frame engages in the activity of *benchmarking*. In consequence, the deductive assignment of a code from this category is a sufficient condition for the frame unit's extraction as an 'explicit benchmark frame', while a code for categories 3 & 4 is necessary. Additionally, codes from category 2 specify the object that is framed as the benchmark. For the practical application, one can summarize that if the researcher can assign to a 'frame unit' a code from each of the four code categories in code system 1, the respective segment qualifies as an 'explicit benchmark frame'.

To keep in mind is that an extracted benchmark frame, as a construction of the four codes, must form a consistent 'unit of meaning'. This demands that the 'object evaluated' and the 'benchmark object' do not vary within one frame unit. If Brexit is, for example, used as a benchmark to evaluate two different objects of the Swiss context, two benchmark frames are extracted to guarantee a consistent 'unity of meaning'.

Not to forget is the theoretically elaborated strategy of a benchmark denial framing, which is not included in code system 1. Frames in articles revealing such a denial framing are extracted with the separate code category 5 (see the extended code system 2 in attachment <u>A</u>).

Step 2: characterisation and organisation of the frames with deductive and inductive coding

It is apparent in the so far discussed procedure that the 'extraction' of the benchmark frames with the help of code system 1 incorporates already the basic information about the 'nature' of the Brexit benchmark and the linked evaluation for the Swiss situation. In awareness of the simultaneity in the actual process, the coming section shifts the focus away from the deductive extraction towards the enhanced characterisation and organisation of the extracted benchmark frames.

Code system 2 (see attachment <u>A</u>) lists all the code categories, as well as the main codes within each category, which are used in this report to describe the different frames in a meaningful way. The conceptualisation has revealed that we can distinguish four basic types of relevant framings

of Brexit for the benchmarking dynamics. Accordingly, are the respective codes for a positive, negative, neutral benchmark framing (code 1.1-1.3) and the code for the denial framing (code 5) essential for the organisation of the extracted frames throughout the report.

Moreover, to address the explorative and descriptive spirit of the report, the process also opens for an inductive style of coding and organising of the frames. For example, a combination of deductive and inductive coding gathers the information about the concrete object that serves as the benchmark (code cat. 2), as well as about the object from the Swiss context that gets evaluated (code cat. 4). Additionally, the theory section has put forward interesting context factors for benchmark frames. Foremost the questions about who is framing Brexit as a benchmark and in which thematic context such frames occur are addressed with some predefined categories (code cat. 6 & 7) but profit also from a more fine-grained coding via inductively gathered information.

Altogether, the information gained from a combination of deductive and inductive coding allows to descriptively grasp the investigated phenomenon, to organise it in a meaningful way and to provide answers regarding the elaborated expectations. A codebook, which guided the coding process, is accessible via the digital attachment <u>D</u>. The codebook delivers some broad coding rules by listing 'key questions', definitions, and anchor examples. The digital attachment further contains the list of all the extracted frames with detailed information about the source of each frame and the assigned codes. In addition, code system 2 in attachment <u>A</u> gives an overview of the number of frames assigned to the various codes.

The discussion of the empirical results in the following chapters divides into two parts. Part one aims for a quantitative overview of the key patterns in the data with a special focus on the elaborated expectations. Part two opens the discussion towards a qualitative description of the found frames, which includes various coding aspects deliberately left out in part one. The ensuing introduction to part one deepens this two-pronged approach.

Chapter 5

Results part 1: focus on quantitative description

This first part presents and discusses the empirical results with a mainly quantitative focus on the coded data. The goal is to provide an overview of the benchmarking activity in the investigated Swiss newspapers. Temporal developments and the variation over the different newspapers form—according to the elaborated expectations—the main patterns of interest. For this purpose, the focus lies on the key information collected with the codes for the 'nature' of the Brexit benchmark (code cat. 1), as well as the code for denial frames (code cat. 5).

The coming discussion reveals that focusing on these four 'types' of *framing* Brexit as a benchmark allows capturing the core character of the observed frames. However, the data also expose interesting variations within these broad categories. Especially the evaluation of the Swiss situation, which links to either positive, negative, or neutral Brexit benchmarks, contributes to such variations. The theory section expected that a positive Brexit benchmark, meaning the UK serves as a role model, comes with a negative evaluation of the Swiss situation, while Brexit as a negative benchmark triggers a positive evaluation. Neutral Brexit benchmarks are accordingly associated with a neutral evaluation. A detailed look at the extracted benchmark frames reveals that there are also

combinations of a certain Brexit benchmark with an evaluative statement beyond these expected patterns. In the more qualitative discussion (chapter 6), the 'sentiments' of the evaluated object are used, among other factors, to organise the extracted frames inductively and to provide an extended typology of the phenomenon which specifies the basic tripartition in positive, negative, and neutral benchmark framings. Moreover, concrete empirical examples will back up this qualitative part of the analysis and contribute to an enhanced understanding of how newspapers have benchmarked the Swiss context against Brexit.

Yet, for providing a quantitative overview that speaks to the main expectations, it is appropriate to focus on the essential 'natures' of Brexit as a reference point for Switzerland. The initial part of the quantitative discussion presents the general occurrence of benchmark frames over time, including the denial frames as a 'sui generis' form of a benchmark frame. Two basic questions are thereby at the centre: First, when and to what extent did benchmark frames occur in the Swiss newspapers? And second, did these frames present Brexit as a role model or rather as an anti-role model for Switzerland? After this overview, the distribution over the four analysed newspapers moves into the centre. The quantitative presentation of the results concludes with a summary of the gained insights against the background of the formulated expectations.

5.1 Variation of benchmark frames over time

By analysing 667 articles from the four selected newspapers, 229 benchmark frames and 36 benchmark denial frames were extracted. Figure 5 illustrates the distribution of the total 265 frames over the months within the period studied. With 60 frames found, January 2021 was the most intense month for benchmarking in the four newspapers, followed by December 2020 with 23 extracted frames. The high density of benchmark frames (incl. benchmark denials) in these two months coincides with the intense negotiations on the future relationship between the UK and the EU, which ended with the signing of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement on 30 December 2020 (European Commission, 2021). The above-average values for this period are in line with the expectation that Switzerland is highly interested in the phase after the UK officially left the Union and started negotiating with the EU about their

future relationship. The finalisation of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement has revealed valuable information about the form of external EU integration the UK was able to negotiate with the EU. It is thus not surprising that this event has triggered a wave of benchmark frames, as well as benchmark denial frames.

Figure 5: Distribution of extracted frames over time
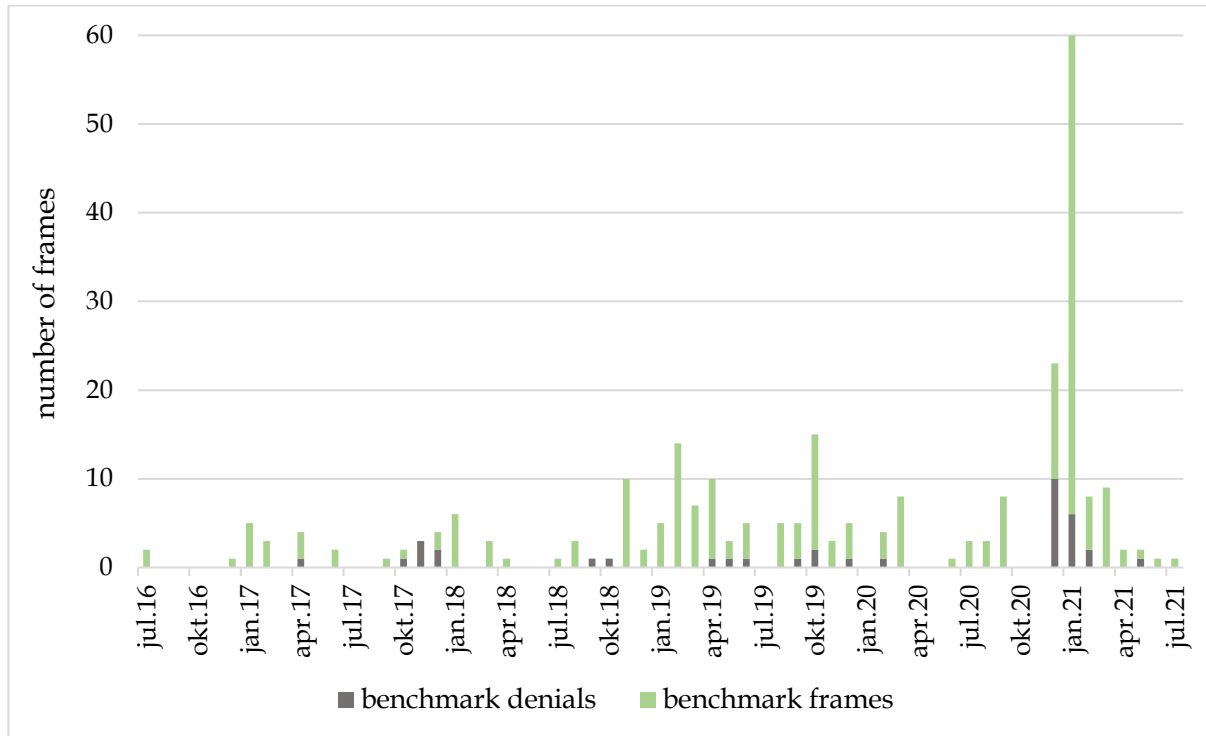
Noteworthy is that benchmarking rarely occurred in the months and weeks before the UK and EU have finalised their Trade and Cooperation Agreement. This is surprising, as the British negotiation here was relatively well comparable to the Swiss negotiation. A reason for this could be the general lower issue salience of the two negotiations at this time (see Figure 2, p. 28). Analogous to an argument by Malet and Walter (2021a) about the impact of major sports events on Brexit coverage, events like the Covid pandemic or the US presidential election could have reduced the media's interest in the EU-UK negotiations. With the negotiation showdown and the signing of the agreement, the media attention was presumably back. The number of extracted frames peaked dramatically in the last days of December 2020 and was at a constantly high level in January 2021. This indicates that the Swiss media reacted

with benchmarking mainly to the publication of the agreed deal. In February and March 2021, the EU-UK agreement still reverberated before the benchmarks occurred only sporadically until the end of the study period in late September 2021.

Although the high numbers around the finalisation of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement dominate the distribution in Figure 5, almost two-thirds of the found benchmark framing have occurred before. A relatively dense benchmarking activity shows the time between November 2018 and March 2020. This period coincides with the decisive phase of the Brexit negotiations regulating the exit of the UK. Launched with the presentation of a first draft withdrawal agreement on 14 November 2018, this period of intensified benchmarking ended with the official exit date on 31 January 2020 (Walter and Martini, 2020).

The highest number of benchmarks within this withdrawal phase report the data for October 2019, the month when a revised withdrawal agreement was settled under the new Prime Minister Johnson. Intensified benchmarking activity is also observable for spring 2019 when Theresa May was unsuccessfully trying to get her 'deal' through the British parliament, and Brexit was very salient in newspapers all over Europe (Henley, 2019). The quite persistent occurrence of benchmark frames during the lengthy negotiations, which have focused primarily on the terms of withdrawal, indicates that Brexit allowed benchmarking the Swiss context even in episodes without straightforward comparability between the two contexts. Nevertheless, the shorter second negotiation phase after the official withdrawal remains exceptional in its density of benchmarks. We can thus confirm the expectation regarding the higher intensity of benchmarks in the negotiation period after the UK has left the Union. To note is, however, that the benchmarks in this phase are very concentrated around the presentation of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, while the benchmarks in the negotiation period before the UK's official withdrawal are more spread.

The data show further the expected trend line of an increased benchmarking activity over the course of the Brexit events, as information about Brexit and its consequences accumulated. However, after the exceptional peak in early 2021, this trend was clearly broken, and almost

no benchmarks appeared in the last six months of the period under study. This is remarkable, as it was in these months when it came to a showdown over the framework agreement, which ended with the big bang of the Swiss unilaterally terminating the negotiations with the EU on 26 May 2021 (Gafafer and Schäfer, 2021). Correspondingly, the framework agreement and Swiss European policy occupied the headlines in Swiss media during this period (Gruyter, 2021; von der Burchard, 2021). That despite this high issue salience of Swiss-EU relations, rarely any benchmarking against Brexit has occurred since April 2021, strengthens the assumption that such frames mainly appear as a reaction to key Brexit events, namely the Brexit negotiations and the respective outcomes.

Occurrence of different benchmark framings and benchmark denials over time

As this report focuses on providing answers on *how* Swiss media benchmark the Swiss integration process against Brexit, it is of utmost importance to present patterns regarding the four elaborated types of how Brexit can be framed as a 'benchmark'. From the total 265 extracted frames, referred 104 to Brexit as a negative benchmark, meaning Brexit served in almost 40% of all the frames as an anti-role model for evaluating the Swiss context. Nearly equally frequent were positive benchmarks. A total of 97 frames presented Brexit in such a role model framing. 28 frames were attributed to the category of neutral Brexit benchmarks, while 36 media frames explicitly denied that Brexit can serve as a benchmark for the Swiss context. Figure 6 visualizes the respective shares over all analysed frames in a pie chart.

Figure 6: Shares of the four core 'benchmark types'
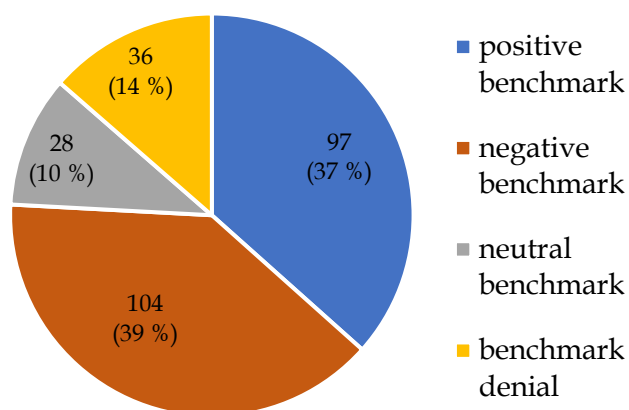
Figure 7: Distribution of the three 'types' of benchmark framing over time
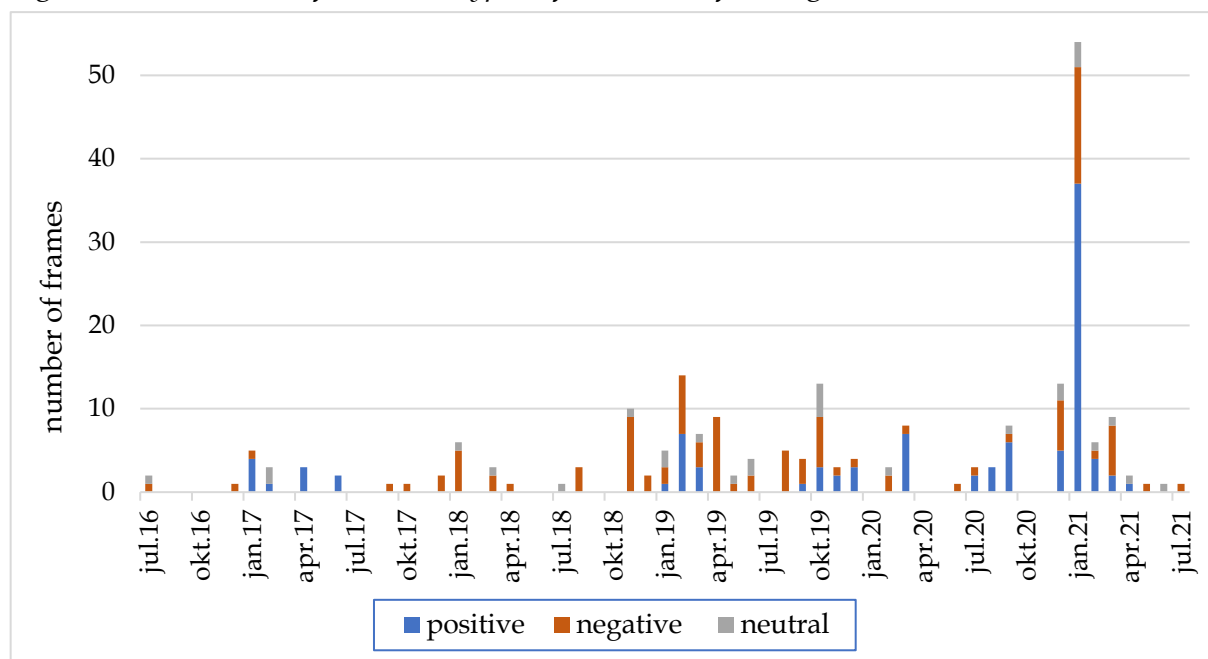
Figure 7 illustrates the distribution of negative, positive, and neutral benchmark frames over the entire study period. Even if the data basis is partly thin, especially for the first third of the period studied, a basic trend can be identified that supports the expected patterns for the initial phase and the two negotiation phases under May and Johnson. In 2017, benchmarking activity was generally low, but the few extracted frames referred mostly to positive Brexit benchmarks (62.5%), while negative benchmarks had a share of only 19%. As mentioned in the expectation section, the public sentiments regarding Brexit became increasingly negative during the negotiations, which is also reflected in the found frames. Negative Brexit benchmarks start to dominate from the end of the year 2017. From 2019 onwards, positive benchmarks mingled with negative benchmarks, while positive ones seem to have gained the upper hand since March 2020. No remarkable variation is reported for the neutral benchmark type. Neutral frames occur consistently, but at a low level over the studied period.

Figure 8 on the next page splits the share of the different benchmark types over the distinctive phases of the Brexit process discussed in the expectation section. The corresponding patterns in the bar chart further strengthen the main expectations regarding the distribution of positive and negative benchmarks over time. Foremost, the negotiation phase

under May was dominated by negative benchmarks, while in the negotiation phase under Johnson, positive benchmarks were in a strong majority. Before and after the key Brexit negotiations and their respective outcomes were highly salient in the media, the frequency of benchmarks was low, and the picture regarding the types of benchmarks is mixed.

Figure 8: Variation in benchmarking over four Brexit phases
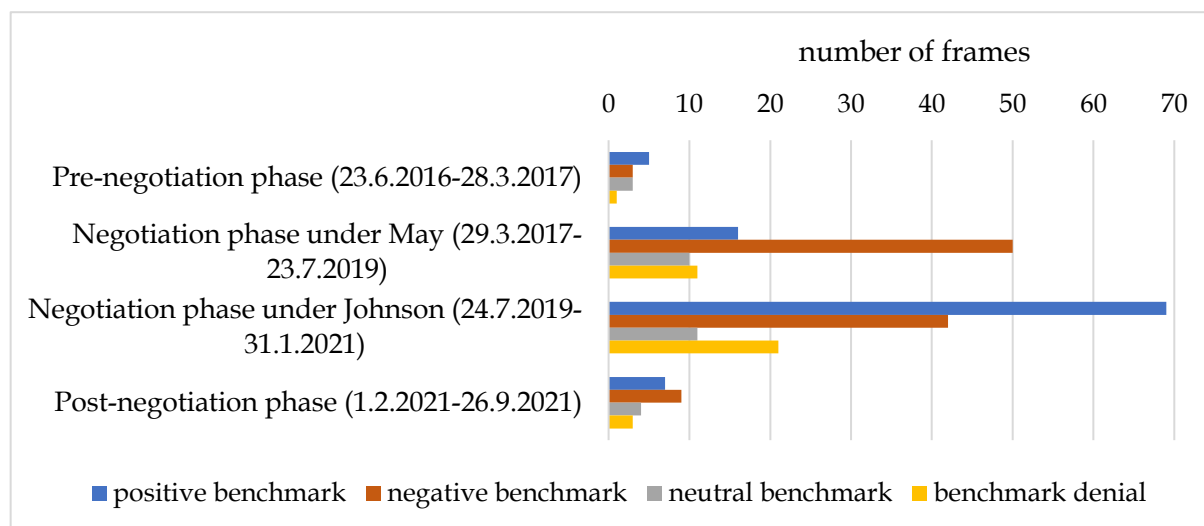
Noteworthy patterns occur further when splitting up the negotiation episode under Johnson into a phase before and one after the official withdrawal (see Figure 11 in attachment <u>B</u>). The distribution here reveals that the negotiations and the outcome linked to the withdrawal phase did not only trigger relatively fewer benchmark frames but also that most of the frames in this phase referred to a negative Brexit benchmark. This suggests that positive benchmarks had its heyday in the phase after Johnson settled the exit and could focus on negotiating the future EU affiliation.

We have already discussed that newspapers used benchmark frames extensively as a reaction to the agreed trade deal at the end of December 2020. For the intense benchmarking time between 16 December 2020 and 8 February 2021, a total of 46 positive Brexit benchmarks have been extracted, compared to only 21 frames with a negative framing. These numbers make clear what was already visible in Figure 7: The Trade and Cooperation Agreement is not only the key object against which the media have benchmarked the Swiss context, it also allowed an extensive framing of Brexit as a role model.

As expected, based on the idea of a reaction strategy, the intense benchmarking in the episode of the Trade and Cooperation agreement came with an exceptional high number of denial frames. Exactly 50% of all the denial frames found in the entire study period occurred between 16 December 2020 and 2 February 2021.

5.2 Variation of benchmark frames over newspapers

A core pattern to analyse for this report is the variation over the four analysed newspapers. To address the expectation regarding the editorial leaning of a certain newspaper towards Europe, comparing *Weltwoche*, as the clear Eurosceptical representative, with the other newspapers, which tend to be more Europhile, is key. However, this report is aware that it cannot rely on a well-founded and distinct classification of the selected newspapers in either a Europhile or Eurosceptic category. Therefore, the presentation of relevant patterns builds primarily on the comparison of the four newspapers with each other and not on the separation in Europhile and Eurosceptic newspapers. Such an approach reflects further the focus on providing descriptive evidence. However, the allocation of the analysed newspapers to either the Eurosceptic or Europhile side is constantly kept in mind.

Comparing benchmarking activity in the newspapers analysed

Before highlighting the variation in the 'natures' of Brexit benchmarks used in the different newspapers, the general benchmarking activity over the four news outlets is compared. Table 4 contains the basic information for such an assessment:

Table 4: Benchmarking activity over newspapers

	NZZ	*Tages-Anzeiger*	*Weltwoche*	*WOZ*	*Total*
Benchmark frames extracted (incl. denial frames)	139	50	73	3	265
Analysed articles (sample size)	332	195	124	16	667
words totally analysed	≈ 305'000	≈ 134'000	≈ 135'000	≈ 23'000	≈ 597'000
Benchmarks per one article analysed	0.42	0.26	0.6	0.19	0.4
Benchmarks per 10'000 words analysed	4.6	3.7	5.4	1.3	4.4

The first row in Table 4 includes the absolute number of extracted frames for each newspaper. With 139 extracted frames, *NZZ* is responsible for the lion's share of frames, followed by *Weltwoche*. The high number for *NZZ* is, however, also connected to the largest share of articles analysed. It gets evident that for a more comparable measure of the benchmarking activity in each newspaper, one must set the absolute number of frames in proportion to the articles examined per newspaper. The last two rows in Table 4 calculate respective density values, based on the number of articles and words analysed for each newspaper. Remarkable is with 0.6 the exceptionally high amount of benchmark frames per article found for *Weltwoche*. Also calculated down to the share per 10'000 words, *Weltwoche* stands out from the other news outlets. *Weltwoche* seems thus the clear front-runner in benchmarking Brexit against the Swiss context.

WOZ (Die Wochenzeitung) clearly falls behind in the analysis. Only three benchmark frames were extracted for this newspaper. *WOZ* appears thus practically irrelevant for the benchmarking activity, both in absolute and relative terms. This kind of zero-finding is relevant and by no means a setback for the empirical analysis. It coincides with the expectation that a left-leaning newspaper is less likely to include Brexit benchmarks due to a diametral different political ideology than Brexiteers, even though the newspaper may also take a sceptical stance towards the framework agreement or the EU in general. Due to the missing data, it is reasonable that the *WOZ* is mostly left out in the following discussion of the empirical results.

Regarding the numbers listed in Table 4, it is vital to note that the analysed sample for each newspaper does not proportionally reflect the general volume of a newspaper. The search strings constituting the sample have selected only articles which have mentioned both the Brexit and the Swiss contexts in one article. For example, the relatively small general 'output' of *WOZ* (see Table 5, row 2) only partly explains the small sample for this newspaper. A generally lower issue salience of Brexit within the *WOZ* coverage, and the missing tendency to seek for links between Brexit and the Swiss context, are other factors determining the sample size. Table 5 relativizes in this sense the selected sample of articles for each newspaper by referring to the article output of the newspapers with a focus on their Brexit coverage.

Table 5: Relativisation based on general 'news output' of a newspaper

	NZZ	Tages-Anz.	Weltwoche	WOZ
Analysed articles (sample size)	332	195	124	16
Articles total within the time frame of the study	134'678	117'374	16'302	9'570
Thereof: hits for 'Brexit*'(≈ articles covering Brexit)	4084	2565	675	193
Share of 'Brexit coverage' from total coverage	3%	2.2%	4.1%	2%
Share of articles in the sample from the total Brexit coverage	8.1%	7.6%	18.3%	8.2%

(Source: own search on Swissdox; time frame: 23.6.16-26.9.21)

Row 2 in Table 5 presents the total number of published articles for each newspaper, as archived in *Swissdox*, for the whole period under investigation. Not surprisingly, the two daily newspapers exceed the two weekly papers in the number of total articles published. Relating to the number of articles mentioning 'Brexit' (row 3), the share of Brexit coverage from the overall coverage is calculated (row 4). Finally, the last row records the share of articles mentioning both the Swiss and Brexit context from the total coverage speaking to Brexit. Again, with a share of 18%, *Weltwoche* stands out distinctly from the other newspapers. Relative to the total coverage about Brexit, *Weltwoche* did more than twice as often cover both the Swiss and Brexit context within one article compared to the other newspapers. Moreover, with a share of 4.1%, the newspaper reports more frequently than average on Brexit. This discussion makes it apparent that the selected sample of articles for the analysis is, for good reasons, not representative of the newspaper's overall coverage. *Weltwoche* comparatively often covered one of the investigated Swiss integration issues together with the term 'Brexit' and is thus over-proportionally represented in the sample. This explains why the sample of articles for the weekly paper *Weltwoche* is close to the sample for the daily published *Tages-Anzeiger*.

Considering the values from Table 5 has implications for the assessment on how active a medium was in 'benchmarking' against Brexit. From the background of the total coverage, the dominant role of *NZZ* in absolute numbers of extracted frames is further relativised. *Weltwoche* as a weekly

newspaper, in contrast, has a limited total volume, and we can strengthen the notion that the *Weltwoche* coverage contains an exceptionally high density of benchmark frames. While *Weltwoche* paid much attention to Brexit, the other weekly newspaper *WOZ* showed less interest in Brexit. Only 2% of all the *WOZ* articles in the investigated time have mentioned Brexit, which is also part of the explanation why only few articles from this newspaper found their way into the sample.

Variation in the 'nature' of Brexit benchmarks over newspapers

After the opening discussions on the general benchmarking activity in the four newspapers, the dominant patterns concerning the 'nature' of the used Brexit benchmarks move into the centre. By following the core distinction in the four types of benchmark frames, Table 6 gives a first quantitative overview about how the four newspapers have framed Brexit as a benchmark for the Swiss context. The row percentages (*in italics*) inform about the distribution within a newspaper, while the column percentages (in brackets) reveal the distribution of a certain benchmark type over the four newspapers.

Table 6: Overview distribution benchmark types over newspapers

	positive benchmark [1.1]	negative benchmark [1.2]	neutral benchmark [1.3]	benchmark denial [5]	*total*
NZZ	32 *(33%)* *23%*	63 *(60.5%)* *45.3%*	20 *(71.4%)* *14.4%*	24 *(66.7%)* *17.3%*	139 *100%*
Weltwoche	60 *(61.9%)* *82.2%*	8 *(7.5%)* *11%*	2 *(7.1%)* *2.7%*	3 *(8.3%)* *4.1%*	73 *100%*
Tages-Anzeiger	5 *(5.1%)* *10%*	31 *(30%)* *62%*	5 *(17.9%)* *10%*	9 *(25%)* *18%*	50 *100%*
WOZ	0	2 *(2%)* *66.7%*	1 *(3.6%)* *33.3%*	0	3 *100%*
total	97 *(100%)*	104 *(100%)*	28 *(100%)*	36 *(100%)*	265

A first glimpse on the table reveals that for all newspapers, except *WOZ*, each of the four benchmark types was found at least twice. A key pattern emerges when looking at which type predominates within a newspaper. The most overwhelming dominance of a certain benchmark type appears

in the data for *Weltwoche*. Of 72 frames, 60 (82.2%) refer to Brexit as a positive benchmark. This confirms the expectation that *Weltwoche*, with its Eurosceptic leaning and the open critical position towards the framework agreement, frames Brexit mainly as a positive benchmark. Correspondingly, the proportion of negative and neutral benchmarks in *Weltwoche* coverage is small. Noteworthy is that also the share of denial frames is significantly lower than in *NZZ* and *Tages-Anzeiger*. The column percentages for positive benchmarks further confirm the exceptional position of *Weltwoche* for this type of benchmark. The weekly newspaper is responsible for more than 60% of all positive benchmarks found.

As a corresponding counterpart to *Weltwoche* qualifies *Tages-Anzeiger* with a clear dominance of negative benchmarks. 62% of all the found frames in *Tages-Anzeiger* have presented Brexit as a negative benchmark. Remarkable is further the highest share of benchmark denials within any newspaper analysed. Despite the clear leaning of *Tages-Anzeiger* for negative benchmarks, the biggest contributor for negative benchmark frames is *NZZ*. In addition, *NZZ* makes up for the clear majority of neutral benchmarks and benchmark denials (see the column percentages). Only for the category of positive benchmarks, *NZZ* is left in the second position behind *Weltwoche*. The generally high number of extracted frames for *NZZ* also comes with a relatively balanced distribution of the different types compared to *Weltwoche* and *Tages-Anzeiger*. Nevertheless, also the investigated *NZZ* coverage has a clear leaning. 45.3% of all the frames in *NZZ* referred to a negative benchmark, while positive benchmarks occurred almost two times fewer, resulting in a share of 23% within *NZZ*.

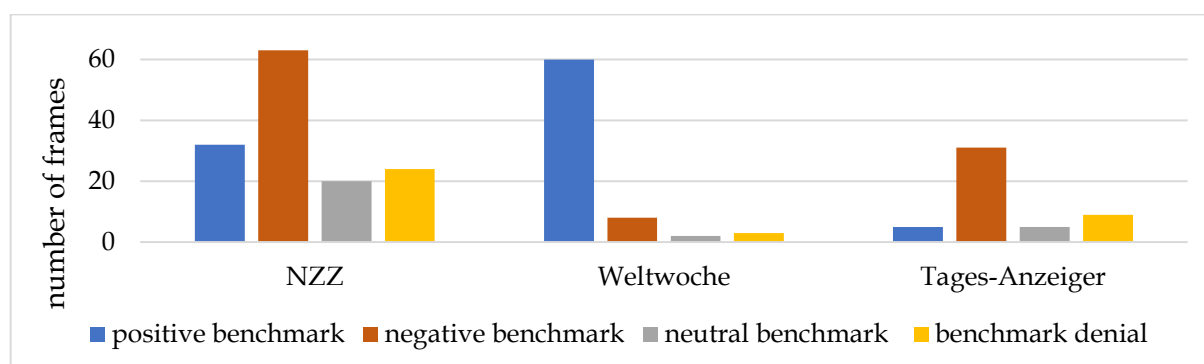*Figure 9: Distribution of benchmark types over newspapers*

Figure 9 summarizes the core insights from the brief quantitative discussion of the variation over the newspapers in three bar charts. It

becomes again apparent that *NZZ* and *Weltwoche* contributed extensively to benchmarking in Swiss media. *NZZ* did thereby lean towards negative Brexit benchmarks, though the other categories are also represented to a remarkable extent. In contrast are the extracted frames for *Weltwoche* almost entirely devoted to a positive framing of Brexit as a benchmark for Switzerland. The duo is accompanied by *Tages-Anzeiger*, which stands out for a pronounced tendency towards negative benchmarks despite its relatively smaller numbers.

Variation over time within newspapers compared

After comparing the distribution over the analysed newspapers, it is also important to look at how this distribution has changed over time within the different newspapers. Three figures in attachment C illustrate the distribution of neutral, positive, and negative benchmarks over time for *NZZ*, *Weltwoche*, and *Tages-Anzeiger*. The figures indicate that the general trend regarding an increased frequency over time also holds true for the individual newspapers. In particular, the Trade and Cooperation Agreement triggered an enhanced benchmarking activity in all the newspapers. Also, regarding the key distribution between positive and negative benchmarks, the general patterns attributed to the different episodes of Brexit seem to hold true, even if we look at the newspapers separately. The turbulent negotiations in spring 2019 did in all the three newspapers trigger a relatively high share of negative benchmarks, though for *Weltwoche* the numbers are compared to its activity in positive benchmarking marginal. The Johnson era, and especially the finalisation of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, apparently allowed room for positive benchmarks in all the three newspapers. However, the extent to which this space was exploited differs significantly between the newspapers. For *Weltwoche*, except for two negative frames in October 2019, the Brexit experience under Johnson was exclusively and very extensively framed as a positive benchmark. In *Tages-Anzeiger* and *NZZ*, an increase in positive benchmarks for this episode is apparent, but negative benchmarks remain in the majority. For the *NZZ*, this majority is narrow, and there is even a slight surplus for positive framings in the four weeks surrounding the Trade and Cooperation Agreement. These just discussed trends in the variation of the benchmark types over time within the newspapers are best visible by breaking down the Brexit process again into the negotiation phases under May (29.3.17-23.7.19) and under

Johnson (24.7.19-31.1.21). This is done with the help of another three-part bar chart:

Figure 10: Distribution of number of frames in two negotiation phases compared
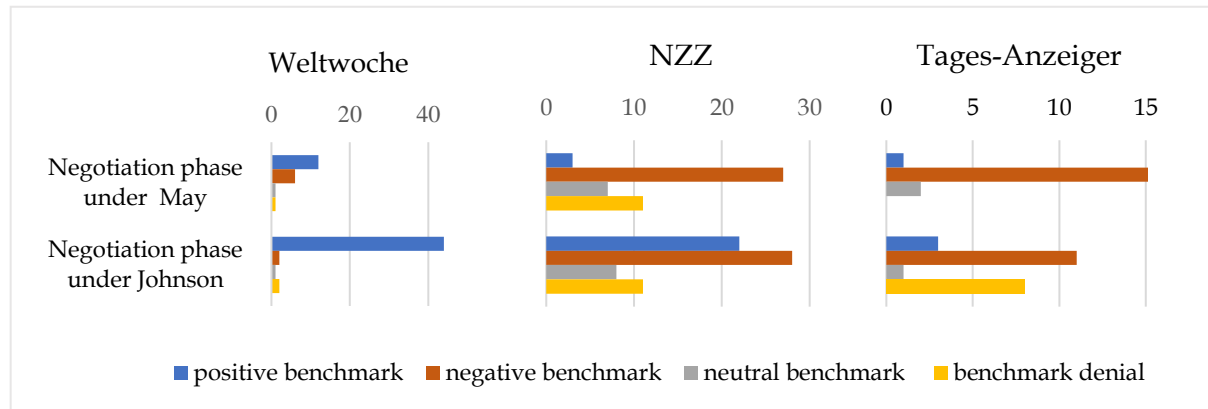
The three bar charts reveal the distribution of the four main benchmark types in each newspaper for the two negotiation phases. The frames in these two phases represent together 87% of all the extracted frames. By comparing the composition between the two phases, one observes interesting shifts within each of the three newspapers.

The bar chart speaking to *Weltwoche* reflects the discussed dominance of positive benchmarks, which is highly pronounced in the negotiation phase under Johnson. In the era under May, this dominance was noticeably weaker. The share of positive benchmarks was in the latter phase with 60% considerably lower than in the Johnson era when striking 90% of the Brexit benchmarks had a clear positive character. To consider is further the significantly smaller number of frames during the negotiations under May.

Also, a clear increase in positive benchmarks report the bars for *NZZ* during the negotiations under Johnson. In contrast to the other two newspapers, this increase does not correlate with a decrease in the absolute number of negative benchmarks. Yet, due to the increase in positive benchmarks, the share of negative benchmarks within *NZZ* dropped from 56% to 40.5%. Constant over the two phases, and on a high level compared to the other newspapers, are neutral benchmarks and benchmark denials.

For the negotiation under Johnson, even *Tages-Anzeiger* reveals a slight increase in positive benchmarks. Still, the newspaper's framing is

characterised by a strong leaning towards negative Brexit benchmarks. With 84% was the share of negative frames in the phase under May extraordinary. The most remarkable change links to the occurrence of denial frames. In the period under Johnson, benchmark denials gained an astonishing amount of weight in the coverage of *Tages-Anzeiger*. This increase fits with the expectation that such frames can serve as a counterstrategy against trending benchmarking activities.

The discussed patterns, summarised by the three-parted chart, allow some interim conclusions regarding the variation over newspapers: First, in all the newspapers did positive benchmarking increase in the negotiations under Johnson, what supports our expectation that Brexit events under Johnson have 'encouraging' potential. Second, the high number of negative benchmarks in the phase under May is in line with the expectation that this phase mainly generated 'deterrence' effects. And third, particularly Weltwoche demonstrates that there remained ample room throughout the Brexit process to frame Brexit as a positive benchmark, even when the public sentiment towards the Brexit experience was negative. NZZ and Tages-Anzeiger showed similar flexibility in framing Brexit as benchmark, for example, by maintaining the level of negative benchmarks high even in times with a clear trend towards positive benchmarks.

5.3 Summary regarding main expected pattern

The final step of this quantitative presentation tries to speak to the 'over-all' expectation regarding the variation in the two basic frame types as presented in Table 2 on page 36. The table has merged the key expectations by combining a three-split Brexit process with the distinction in Eurosceptic and Europhile newspapers (see also Table 7 as a reminder*).*

Table 7: Replica of summarised expectation based on 3x2 table

	Initial phase	Negotiation phase I	Negotiation phase II:
Eurosceptic leaning	Positive benchmarks (low intensity)	No, or only few benchmarks	Positive benchmarks (very high intensity)
Europhile leaning	Negative benchmarks (low intensity)	Neg. benchmarks (medium intensity)	Negative benchmarks (high intensity)

Table 8 is the attempt to fill the respective 3x2 table with the empirical results discussed so far. Weltwoche constitutes the group of Eurosceptic newspapers, while NZZ and Tages-Anzeiger represent the 'Europhile' leaning news media. The left half of each cell lists the number of positive benchmarks and, accordingly, the right ones the number of negative benchmarks. The size and colouring of the respective cell elements indicate roughly the proportions and intensity of each of the two basic benchmark types within one of the three phases. By directly comparing the patterns visualised in Table 8 with the ones in Table 7, one can evaluate the validity of the formulated expectations and highlight unexpected patterns in the data. A comparative look at the two tables recapitulates on top the key patterns elaborated so far in this chapter.

Table 8: Findings visualised in respective 3x2 table
(positive benchmarks → blue colouring; negative benchmarks → red colouring)

	Initial phase: pre-negotiation (June 16-April 17)		Negotiation phase I: under PM May (April 17-June 19)		Negotiation phase II: under PM Johnson (July 19-January 21)	
Eurosceptic leaning (Weltwoche)	4	0	12	6	44	2
Europhile leaning (NZZ and Tages-Anzeiger)	1	3	4	43	25	39

First and foremost, the dominance of the blue coloured positive benchmarks across the first row and the red coloured negative benchmarks over the second row mirrors the expected main pattern regarding the distinction between Eurosceptic and Europhile newspapers. Table 8 further supports the expected increase in the total number of benchmarks over the course of the Brexit process, what is expressed in the intensifying colouring.

The patterns within the columns, which link to the three phases, reveal further matches with the expectations. The initial phase includes both benchmark types, with the expected split between the two newspaper categories and general low intensity. In the negotiation phase under May, the negative benchmarks dominated and were found mainly in the coverage of Europhile newspapers. And finally, the last column reflects

the very high intensity of positive benchmarks in the period under Johnson, with *Weltwoche* in the leading role.

What became already clear in the previous discussion is endorsed with the consideration of Table 8 again in a nutshell: the content analysis confirms the expected basic pattern in terms of variation across the three phases and the different political orientation of newspapers to a large extent. Yet, there are also some discrepancies, and it is particularly rewarding to look more closely at where the analysis has produced rather surprising results. Three 'anomalies' are particularly noticeable when comparing the two tables. First, the Eurosceptic *Weltwoche* framed Brexit quite extensively as a positive benchmark even in the episode under May, when Brexit mainly made negative headlines. Second, the absolute number of negatively framed benchmarks in the negotiation phase under May is surprisingly high from the background that the experiences at this period appeared limited in its comparability to the Swiss context. Lastly, the patterns in Table 8 reveal deviants in terms of the expected attribution of positive benchmarking to Eurosceptic newspapers and negative benchmarking to newspapers with a Europhile leaning. Most notable in this respect is the considerable number of positive Brexit benchmarks in the as Europhile assessed newspapers, mainly in *NZZ*, during the negotiation phase under Johnson.

Chapter 6

Results part 2: focus on qualitative description

This second part of the analysis takes an in-depth, descriptive look at the benchmarking activities in Swiss media. Bringing in concrete excerpts from the analysed frames is thereby key for an enhanced understanding of the phenomenon that complements the presented quantitative evidence. For grasping the basic patterns in the data, the discussion so far focused on the 'nature' of the Brexit reference with the role model framing (positive benchmark) and the anti-role model framing (negative benchmark) at the centre. It is the task for this second part to present information about the extracted frames that have been put aside so far. This includes reflections about the coded objects, subjects, and article context behind the analysed frames. Foremost, the evaluative element connected to a certain Brexit benchmark gains importance and allows the presentation of an extended typology of the analysed media frames. Based on such an inductively elaborated typology, the report presents the various forms of benchmark framings found in Swiss media. To complete the 'descriptive picture', a final part contextualizes these framings against the background of a selection of five Brexit episodes—formative for the observed benchmarking dynamics in Switzerland.

6.1 Benchmark object and benchmarked object

A view on the used code systems (see attachment A) reveals that the analysis has broadly labelled which specific aspect from the Brexit context served as the benchmark (the 'benchmark object'), as well as which object from the Swiss context *got benchmarked* ('object evaluated'). Before describing the different benchmark framings in more detail with a qualitative approach, it is helpful to give a brief numeric overview of this coding aspect.

From the 229 extracted frames, 35 showed an explicit link to May's Brexit negotiation process or the respective outcome, while 101 referred to the negotiations or outcomes under Johnson. If no clear link to one of the two contexts was apparent, the Brexit benchmark object was codes as generic. 93 benchmarks were assigned to this category. The clear predominance of benchmark objects referring to Brexit events under Johnson is consistent with the finding that there was significantly more benchmarking during the time with Johnson as prime minister. The benchmarks with such a 'Johnson link' split further in 21 frames associated with the Withdrawal Agreement and the remaining 80 referring explicitly to the context of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement.

Regarding the object that got benchmarked, the analysis' focus was clearly on the Swiss framework agreement and the limitation initiative. Though these two issues have determined the selection of articles, the analysis also found a few frames that did not directly target one of the two issues but rather evaluated the Swiss integration process generically. Decisive for a systematic organisation and interpretation of the benchmark frames is whether an evaluative element speaks to the Swiss status quo or an alternative state. Of the 229 benchmark frames extracted, 198 related to the status quo. Not surprisingly does thereby a clear majority (179) evaluate the framework agreement process, including its outcome in the form of the presented draft agreement, which this report understands as a 'quasi-status quo' for Switzerland's EU integration. 19 frames did evaluate the status quo of Swiss integration generically. Within the minor group of frames referring to an alternative state, the limitation initiative was in 26 frames the benchmarked object. The few remaining frames evaluated a more generic alternative state, for example, the option of integrating merely with a free trade agreement.

For a better organisation of the frames evaluating the framework agreement, the code system tried to specify if a frame either evaluated the negotiation process itself, for example the negotiation style, or its outcome. In reality, one cannot draw a sharp dividing line between these interrelated aspects. Nevertheless, for some rudimentary insights, an evaluation that unequivocally focused on either the process or the outcome of the negotiation was coded respectively. Interestingly, coding this aspect did reveal that the frames evaluating the negotiation process trump numerically the ones refereeing to a specific outcome. 75 frames had a clear focus on the process, while 47 referred to the outcome of the negotiations (the remaining 57 frames had no clear focus on either of the two aspects). The important implication of these numbers is that not only the specific Brexit outcomes matter for benchmarking but also the 'art' of British bargaining was an important reference point against which the news has evaluated the Swiss performance. This strengthens our expectation that—against the dominant focus in the literature—not only policies matter for benchmarking, but also the *'politics through which these policies emerge'* (Malet and Walter, 2021b, p. 4).

6.2 Description based on a typology of benchmark framing in Swiss news media

After these first insights about the objects in the extracted benchmark frames, the detailed presentation of different types of benchmark framings moves to the centre. As discussed, such a presentation demands the inclusion of the evaluative element of the Swiss context connected to a certain Brexit benchmark. The sentiment of this evaluation was either coded as negative, positive, or neutral (see code category 3). By looking at which 'nature' of the Brexit benchmark came with which evaluative statement, an extended typology of the extracted benchmarks unfolds.

For interpreting and comparing the evaluative element correctly, one has to consider that some of the frames evaluated not the status quo but an alternative state for Swiss EU integration (see discussion about '*benchmarked* object'). As indicated in the theoretical elaborations, evaluations of the status quo and the alternative state are closely linked and constitute a sort of inverse relationship. This relationship gets apparent if we look at what kind of 'call for action' lurks behind a certain

evaluation. Both a positive evaluation of an alternative state and a negative evaluation of the status quo can be interpreted as a 'call for change' of the status quo. In contrast, positive evaluations of the status quo or negative evaluations of an alternative state imply a denial of such a call and emphasize the strengths of a current 'status'. Based on such a relationship, the upcoming discussion groups the observed evaluative statements regarding an alternative state together with their respective equivalent of evaluations speaking directly to the status quo.

Table 9 gives a quantitative overview of the observed frequency of all possible combinations of one of the three basic Brexit benchmark 'natures' with a respective evaluation of the Swiss status quo. Moreover, it highlights the six most frequent combinations as distinct 'types' of benchmarking the Swiss status quo against Brexit. The numbers in brackets indicate how many of the total frames within each category evaluated an alternative state and were thus categorised regarding their implicit evaluation of the status quo, based on the just presented inverse relationship.

Table 9: Organizing the frames in an own typology (the numbers denote the frequency of each combination)

Evaluation status quo / Brexit benchmark 'nature'	negative evaluation ('call for change')	positive evaluation ('no call for change')	neutral evaluation ('advising character')
Positive Brexit benchmark (role model)	Type 1.0: *Classic role model benchmarking* 84 (3)	0	Type 1.1: *Brexit sparks advice* 13 (1)
Negative Brexit benchmark (anti-role model)	Type 2.1: *Flaws on both sides* 19	Type 2.0: *Classic anti-role model benchmarking* 68 (25)	Type 2.2: *Brexit sparks warning* 17
Neutral Brexit benchmark	5	2 (2)	Type 3.0: *Classic neutral benchmarking* 21

Each cell in Table 9 represents a theoretically conceivable benchmarking type based on a combination of the evaluative element with a certain Brexit benchmark 'nature'. The numbers confirm that positive Brexit benchmarks evaluated the Swiss status quo negatively, while negative Brexit benchmarks included a positive evaluation dominantly. Neutral Brexit benchmarks were in the majority connected to a neutral evaluation. These three combinations follow the theoretically elaborated 'logic' of the benchmarking mechanism and cover three quarters of all the extracted frames. That is why the corresponding types are labelled each with the attribute *'classic'*.

However, Table 9 reveals that we can find combinations that do not match this 'classic' pattern. Most apparently, it was possible to combine a negative Brexit benchmark with a negative evaluation. Such frames expose *'flaws on both sides'* and occurred 19 times. In contrast, the 'anomaly' of a positive Brexit benchmark and a positive evaluation did not occur. Noteworthy is further that the neutral evaluation allowed combinations with all three 'natures' of Brexit benchmarks, while negative and positive evaluations have each a clear leaning towards one type of framing Brexit as a benchmark.

With Table 9 as a key reference, the following section describes the different benchmarking types as combinations of a certain Brexit benchmark and a respective evaluative element. The focus is on exposing the dominant, 'classic' types, but also presenting the frames with a rather rare combination. Again, the tripartition in positive, negative and neutral 'natures' of Brexit benchmarks structures the discussion as we look at what kind of evaluations of the Swiss situation was linked to each of these three sorts of Brexit references. Concrete excerpts of the found media frames—translated by the author with the help of *DeepL*—form an essential part in this section. For the citation of the quotes, the author refers directly, via a sequence number, to document *D.1*, which lists all the found frames with their sources. The digital attachment provides access to the respective document (see attachment <u>D</u> for further information). Chapter 6.4, which traces benchmarking activities across key Brexit episodes, will also cite examples with reference to document *D.1*.

Brexit as a role model that puts Switzerland in a bad light?

Type 1: **Classic role model benchmarking**
(Brexit as role model + negative evaluation of the Swiss situation)

Evaluating an object based on a comparison with a benchmark that serves as a role model—a 'best practice'—is a common application of the benchmarking concept, particularly in the business context. The content analysis shows that also Swiss newspapers have in this sense intensively benchmarked the Swiss integration process against Brexit. As Table 9 reveals, a positive framing of Brexit as a benchmark usually comes with a negative evaluation of the Swiss status quo. This means that a positively framed Brexit experience links to a critique of the own situation. By pointing at the supposedly 'green grass on the other side of the Channel', one can highlight the shortcomings of one's own situation:

> With the Brexit solution, so to speak, a veil had been pulled away, and now the shortcomings of the Federal Council's proposal are suddenly clearly visible to everyone.
>
> (Weltwoche, frame no. 190)

This combination of a positive Brexit benchmark with a negative evaluation is with 84 frames the most frequent of the types Table 9 puts forward. In almost all the frames within this type, the framework agreement was evaluated. To present concrete examples how this 'classic role model benchmarking' looks like, the introduced separation in the negotiation process and the concrete outcome is helpful. On the one hand, such framings frequently criticised the negotiation process and evaluated, for example, the Swiss style of negotiating with the EU negatively. Here, Brexit benchmarks allowed referring to a different, allegedly better, negotiation style. By for example presenting the UK as a purposeful, combative negotiator, the Swiss government's negotiation style was in contrast portrayed as disoriented and wimpy:

> We too can take inspiration from the British, to whom we have close ties. The English bulldog is finally—so it seems at present—turning its back on the EU. In the meantime, with its framework agreement, Switzerland continues to behave like a timid little lapdog.
>
> (Weltwoche, frame no. 172)

That Boris Johnson's negotiation style caused admiration in *Weltwoche* mirrors our expectations. Maybe more surprising is that the newspaper even took May's negotiation style as a benchmark for a negative evaluation of the Swiss government's negotiation performance:

> The list of Brexit demands that the British head of government Theresa May has deposited in Brussels contains clear language. One can classify her free trade plans as promising or not. In any case, the new leadership in London has clear visions of what it wants. What does Switzerland want in Brussels? That is less clear.
>
> (Weltwoche, frame no. 157)

Likewise, *NZZ* was not above criticising Switzerland's negotiation style with reference to a positive Brexit benchmark:

> Johnson was willing to take risks. He went all out, accepted failure, even though he was in a more difficult position than Switzerland. (…) Consequently, those who are more willing to take risks in negotiations are in a stronger position. The Federal Council was too quick to settle for relatively minor concessions.
>
> (NZZ, frame no. 12)

Noteworthy is that in the understanding of international negotiations as 'two-level games' (Putnam, 1988), also the negotiations with the domestic stakeholders were benchmarked against Brexit:

> The Brexit agreement does have loopholes. (…) But Prime Minister Boris Johnson cleverly sold it as a victory. The contrast with the Federal Council is striking. The latter went from one consultation to the next. Of course, a propaganda machine à la Johnson is unrealistic in the Swiss system. But those who leave the field to their opponents need not be surprised if the debate derails.
>
> (NZZ, frame no. 16)

When the British negotiations with the EU made progress and the first results were presented, 'benchmarking Brexit' became more concrete. Journalists and political entrepreneurs were now able to benchmark Switzerland's draft framework agreement against tangible outcomes of the British negotiations. It is plausible that the Swiss public looked at what concrete concessions the EU made to the British and benchmarked the

own government's achievements against this information. The following two excerpts exemplify such a benchmark framing:

> If you compare the UK's and Switzerland's negotiation outcome, you are almost a little shocked by how badly Switzerland negotiated with the EU.
>
> (Weltwoche, frame no. 189)

> If we had to choose between the framework agreement and the Brexit agreement, we would take the second option without hesitation (…).
>
> (NZZ, frame no. 18)

Due to their comparable 'evaluative' statement regarding the status quo, also three positive Brexit benchmarks, which evaluated an alternative state positively, belong within this group of 'classic role model' benchmarking. These frames rely all on positively presented economic experiences of the UK and argue implicitly that Switzerland would do just as well if it is brave enough to take a disintegration step. Such a positive framing is quite astonishing as the economic consequences of Brexit usually trigger negative sentiments (see Hobolt et al., 2021). And accordingly, the analysis usually finds references to the British economic situation in the context of 'anti-role model benchmarking' (see discussion of type 2). Especially opponents of the 'limitation initiative' refer frequently to the economic difficulties related to Brexit. An excerpt from *Weltwoche* illustrates how a 'classic role model' frame tried to counter this 'fear campaign' of the opponents of the 'limitation initiative':

> And in the UK? Here, employment reached historic highs two years after the Brexit yes. GDP grew by 1.9 percent in 2017 and by 1.4 percent in 2018. According to the EU Commission's latest forecast, the UK economy will grow by 6 percent next year—even slightly faster than the EU average. So, what to make of the fear campaign of the opponents of the limitation initiative?'
>
> (Weltwoche, frame no. 212)

Type 1.1: **Brexit sparks advice for Switzerland**
(Brexit as role model + neutral evaluation of the Swiss situation)

Not all the positive Brexit benchmark came with a negative evaluation statement about the Swiss situation. 13 frames pointed to Brexit as a role

model and formulated a rather neutral evaluation of the Swiss context, by for example frame it as advice. Such benchmarks usually focus on how Switzerland should act in the future based on 'learnings' from Brexit:

> Switzerland should take the courageous approach of British Prime Minister Theresa May as a model and also act self-confidently vis-à-vis the EU. Switzerland too holds good cards.
>
> (Weltwoche, frame no. 213)

But of course, framing an evaluation as advice with reference to Brexit as a role model may—more or less apparent—imply a certain dissatisfaction with the status quo. In this sense blur here the boundaries between neutral and negative evaluations. With 9 out of the 13 frames, *NZZ* was particularly active in this kind of benchmarking. The advice frame seemed a suitable way for the generally Europhile *NZZ* to voice criticism towards the negotiations about the framework agreement subtly.

Brexit as an anti-role model that puts Switzerland in a better light?

Type 2: **Classic anti-role model benchmarking**
(Brexit as anti-role model + positive evaluation of the Swiss situation)

The counterpart to the described role model framing is frames that present Brexit as a negative benchmark. As expected, these frames tend to evaluate the Swiss situation positively. With 68 frames is this combination the second most frequent. A look at this framing type reveals that the positive evaluation usually targeted the Swiss negotiation outcome or, in principle, the idea of a framework agreement. A textbook example for such a benchmark framing evaluating the Swiss negotiation outcome positively provides *Tages-Anzeiger*:

> 'We have achieved a good negotiation result', said Association President Valentin Vogt, referring to the Brexit turmoil. 'On a scale of ten, it stands at seven in favour of Switzerland. The British have only achieved a three'.
>
> (Tages-Anzeiger, frame no. 123)

The negotiation process itself, in contrast, was rarely positively evaluated based on negative Brexit benchmarks. This aligns with a remarkable general pattern in the data: When a frame evaluated explicitly how

Switzerland was negotiating with the EU, negative evaluations dominated with 45 frames against only 3 frames with a positive judgement. *Tages-Anzeiger* provides one of the rare frames where the Swiss negotiation strategy came off better when benchmarked against the British one:

> The race of the cherry-pickers is now in its decisive phase. (…) If everything does not go wrong, the Swiss are currently in the lead. Also, because they are currently more pragmatic than the British, who are paralysed in their ideological trench warfare.
>
> (Tages-Anzeiger, frame no. 121)

Benchmarking against negative Brexit references frequently led to a positive evaluation of the general Swiss status quo of EU affiliation. Frames have thereby often emphasised that a framework agreement is needed to maintain this status quo, even if an article expressed a critical opinion on the negotiations' concrete progress. In this direction goes a frame from *Weltwoche*, one of the few negative Brexit benchmarks discovered in the coverage of this newspaper:

> Brexit is the blueprint for the termination of the bilateral agreements without a framework agreement. The Swiss would never psychologically endure such permanent theatre. It goes against our grain genetically and culturally. The majority of us are programmed and conditioned to balance things out.
>
> (Weltwoche, frame no. 218)

In a similar spirit, such anti-role model benchmarking did allow to attack critics of the Swiss framework agreement directly:

> What a 'Treppenwitz': just when the British adventure is demonstrating the superiority of Switzerland's gradualist approach, the SP follows the SVP in denouncing the foreign policy consensus.
>
> (NZZ, frame no. 34)

Turbulent Brexit experiences—be they political or economic—served in these frames as clear signs that Switzerland must preserve the status quo of EU integration if it wants to avoid similar problems. The Swiss government's basic intention to find an institutional agreement with the EU was accordingly evaluated positively. In this sense, the close

resemblance with frames that negatively evaluated an alternative state of less integration based on a negative Brexit benchmark is evident. With the 'limitation initiative', Switzerland discussed intensively such an alternative state, which intended a clear dismantling of EU integration. As suggested above, we can understand a negative evaluation of the 'limitation initiative' as an implicit positive evaluation of the Swiss status quo.

In total 25 frames, a negative Brexit reference came with a negative evaluation of an alternative, less integrated state. All these frames are decidedly close to de Vries' (2018) theoretical elaborations, as she focuses on the role of benchmarks for providing information about an uncertain alternative state. As expected, benchmarking the limitation initiative was dominated by 'anti-role model benchmarking'. With the help of negative Brexit benchmarks, it was possible to provide the Swiss people with concrete information about how badly Switzerland could do if it follows the initiative and breaks away from the current state of EU integration. The analysis has put forward a whole list of fine examples for benchmarking frames in this context, many pointing to the uncertainties and economic risks associated with Brexit:

> Acceptance of the 'limitation initiative' would lead to the termination of the bilateral agreements with the EU, meaning the severance of regulated relations with the most important partner. It would be tantamount to a Swiss Brexit.
>
> (WOZ, frame no. 228)

> If this initiative were adopted, the bilateral agreements would be off the table after 18 months, and the existing relationship with the EU would be destroyed. (…) And when one sees how the UK has been going round in circles since Brexit, you can't wish for that.
>
> (Tages-Anzeiger, frame no. 143)

It is remarkable how these frames do not need concrete reasoning to establish Brexit as a negative example. Statements like *a 'Swiss Brexit'* are apparently able to draw on a generally negative public opinion about Brexit. Negative Brexit benchmarks were thus a straightforward and popular stylistic device for political entrepreneurs to warn against a 'Yes' vote on the limitation initiative.

Type 2.1: **Benchmarking reveals 'flaws on both sides'** (Brexit anti-role model + negative evaluation of the Swiss situation)

Rather unexpected did 19 frames combine a negative Brexit benchmark with a negative evaluation of the Swiss status quo. These frames referenced Brexit as a 'bad practice' to argue for the weaknesses of the own situation. For example, the omnipresent Brexit chaos in spring 2019 triggered a series of such framing:

> The Brexit drama equals the tragedy surrounding a framework agreement between Switzerland and the EU.
>
> (Weltwoche, frame no. 220)

The Swiss handling of the negotiations with the EU was the preferred target of this framing type. Noteworthy is that such an emphasis on 'flaws on both sides' occurred mainly in the Europhile newspapers like *NZZ* and *Tages-Anzeiger*. Especially from the background of the slow progress in the negotiations between Switzerland and the EU, it is reasonable that also more Europhile newspapers expressed criticism. The respective combination allowed such newspapers to evaluate the Swiss negotiations negatively and yet to refer to Brexit with an anti-role model frame:

> Only those who know where they want to go can negotiate from a strong position and with vision. Both the British and the Swiss have lacked this determination.
>
> (NZZ, frame no. 66)

For Eurosceptics, in contrast, this type of framing allowed to uphold a rejectionist stance towards the framework agreement, even in times when Brexit almost inevitably served as an anti-role model, like in spring 2019. The basic argument thereby was that the Brexit 'chaos' did only occur because the UK made the mistake of integrating in the first place. Brexit as a negative benchmark illustrated accordingly what Switzerland could face if it becomes institutionally bound to the EU via the framework deal. Expectedly, *Weltwoche* has published several such frames which undermine the framework agreement in principle:

> If Switzerland accepts the Framework Agreement, it will experience a constitutional crisis like the UK with Brexit.
>
> (Weltwoche, frame no. 222)

> The Brexit case shows just how dangerous it is to be more closely linked to the EU institutionally. In fact, one can hardly get out, is treated from above, paraded and put under pressure. Brexit-like scenarios are only imminent if Switzerland ties itself institutionally to the EU with the framework agreement.
>
> (Weltwoche, frame no. 221)

Type 2.2: Brexit sparks warning for Switzerland
(Brexit as anti-role model + neutral evaluation of the Swiss situation)

As in the case of positive Brexit benchmarks, also negative Brexit references allow the combination with a rather neutral evaluation. Since Brexit serves here as an anti-role model, such neutral evaluations are best understood as 'warnings':

> The federal councillors should not act like seven little Johnsons. Populists rarely develop an integrating force; their policies can break up an entire kingdom.
>
> (Tages-Anzeiger, frame no. 150)

This framing type tries to state some lessons from the negatively perceived Brexit experiences and does not explicitly evaluate the Swiss context itself. Yet, implicitly, such 'warnings' tend to evaluate the Swiss situation at least as not as bad as the Brexit situation. In this sense, also these frames align with the tendency that negative Brexit benchmarks come with a positive evaluation of the Swiss status quo.

Brexit as a neutral reference point for Switzerland

Type 3: Classic neutral benchmarking
(Neutral Brexit benchmark + neutral evaluation of the Swiss situation)

We have already seen how negative and positive Brexit benchmarks were combined with a neutral evaluation of the Swiss situation. In 28 extracted frames, the Brexit benchmark itself was coded as neutral. Brexit was here not presented as either a role model or an anti-role model for Switzerland but as a neutral reference point. As Table 9 shows, such neutral Brexit benchmarks normally come with a neutral evaluation of the Swiss status quo. Such 'classic neutral frames' emphasize the relevance of Brexit as a benchmark or reference point for Swiss EU policy but do usually not actively *benchmark* one situation against the other. This means they do not

contain clear evaluative statements. For example, *NZZ* presents in this sense Brexit with a neutral benchmark frame when writing:

> Foreign judges concern not only Switzerland; the British 'White Paper' and the EU negotiations with the small states are points of reference for the controversial framework agreement.
>
> (NZZ, frame no. 96)

Typical for neutral benchmarking is a focus on the behaviour of the EU during the Brexit process. Obviously, the Brexit experience revealed important information about the EU and how it handles the demands for external EU integration. Such information is likely to be used to evaluate the Swiss negotiations neutrally in the form of advice, as an excerpt from an *NZZ* frame illustrates:

> The deal with London shows that Brussels is ready to make concessions——if the other side moves.
>
> (NZZ, frame no. 104)

Counteracting Brexit benchmarking with 'benchmark denial frames'

Benchmark denials constitute a very own type of frames extracted in the analysis that is not listed in Table 9. Yet, with a count of 36 frames, one cannot ignore this framing type when talking about benchmarking in Swiss news media. As expected, benchmark denials respond directly to benchmarking tendencies in public debates by denouncing such activities in principle. All the found denial frames emphasize in one way or the other that the Brexit situation is different, and one cannot compare it with the Swiss context:

> Since this year, the EU is negotiating with the UK on Brexit. However, we should not look at these events in principle (and not only because of the faltering progress of the Brexit negotiations). The purpose of the two negotiations is fundamentally different.
>
> (NZZ, frame no. 245)

The above example expresses nicely that basic differences between the two contexts are decisive in the view of benchmark denials and not a generally negative assessment of Brexit. If a frame puts forward the latter point to argue that Brexit should not serve as a role model, it aligns with

the discussed 'anti-role model benchmarking' type. This indicates, however, that both negative Brexit benchmarks and benchmark denials serve as a framing strategy to counter role model framing of Brexit. But as benchmark denials deny the comparability of the two contexts categorically, they can also oppose anti-role model benchmarking. For example, the following denial frame from a *Weltwoche* article is a direct reaction to the described attempt to mobilise against the limitation initiative by warning from a 'Swiss Brexit':

> (…) This was doubly inappropriate. Firstly, unlike the UK, Switzerland is not a full member of the EU. An exit is therefore not open to discussion from a purely logical point of view. Secondly, even in the unlikely event of the five Swiss EU treaties falling through would be nothing like an EU exit, such as the British are facing.
>
> (Weltwoche, frame no. 239)

The majority of the extracted benchmark denials reacted explicitly to 'role model benchmarking' activity. Especially newspapers with a more Europhile agenda presented an increased number of such frames when Brexit as a positive benchmark flourished. 19 of the 36 denial frames rejected explicitly that the more positively perceived Brexit developments under Johnson work as a benchmark for the Swiss situation. The central argument was thereby that the Swiss model is characterised by a deeper integration into the European markets than the model the UK has agreed with the EU. *NZZ* counters the wave of role model benchmarks in the aftermath of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, for example, with the statement:

> One should not compare apples and oranges. The UK does not have partial integration into the EU Single Market like we do.
>
> (NZZ, frame no. 259)

6.3 Subject and article context of the benchmark frames found

The remarks so far usually presented the different newspapers as the originators of the benchmark frames. However, it is necessary, especially from the background of the discussed reflective and influencing character of news frames, to look more closely at who is the subject behind the

extracted frames that actually practices '*benchmarking*'. Are indeed the newspapers, respectively their journalistic collaborators, the originators of the benchmark frames, or do they rather reflect benchmarking tendencies in public debates, put forward by political entrepreneurs? Insights regarding these questions may sharpen our understanding of the role of news media for the benchmarking dynamics, though in reality, one can hardly distinguish between the theoretically elaborated reflective and influencing perspective on media frames (Scheufele, 1999).

The report applied a straightforward coding rule to grasp the subject of the analysed benchmarking activity (see code category 6). Basically, the coder tried to grasp if the journalist or an 'external' actor emerged as the benchmark frame's originator. The latter is the case if an article presents a benchmark frame as a statement attributed to an external actor, for example, a politician. If no such connection to a specific actor exists, the journalist was coded as the '*benchmark framing subject*'.

From the 229 benchmark frames and 36 denial frames, 88 frames denoted a specific actor as the originator that is not the journalist themself. These explicit references to public actors emphasise the 'reflective' character of media frames. Well represented were thereby members of the Swiss parliament with 30 allocated frames. Further, the government had its say with 16 frames linked to one of the seven Federal Councillors. The remaining references pertain to various political entrepreneurs from Switzerland and abroad, representatives of the business community, and some readers' opinions.

The clear majority of 177 frames had no such explicit reference. For these frames, one can assume the journalist to be the initiator and thus the main 'subject' that is benchmarking. The high share of frames in this category suggests that journalists do not only reproduce and reflect the benchmarking activity of public entrepreneurs, but they themselves use their framing power to benchmark the Swiss context explicitly against Brexit in one way or the other. However, to bear in mind is that reflecting public discourses still plays a key role in such framing activity of journalists.

As expected, the journalist's framing power takes in particular effect in formats that openly allow the expression of political opinions and

comments. It is in such journalistic formats, like leading articles or columns (Firmstone, 2019), where the analysis finds the bulk of benchmark frames. Interesting patterns emerge when comparing the different opinion-based formats within a newspaper. Expectedly, the benchmarking tendency in leading articles usually follows the newspaper's political leaning and editorial agenda. Columns or guest commentaries, in contrast, extend the spectre of opinions deliberately within a newspaper, which is also mirrored in the frames found in such journalistic formats. For example, *Weltwoche* overwhelmingly published the classic form of positively framed Brexit benchmarks and respective negative evaluations of the Swiss status quo. Only two frames evaluated the Swiss situation positively based on negative Brexit benchmarks (see frames no. 217 & 218). Both striking outliers were published in a regular column by Peter Bodenmann, a former president of the *Social Democratic Party* in Switzerland.

It is further interesting to look at the thematic context in which articles have embedded benchmark framings (see code category 7). A broad categorisation of the frames according to this aspect reveals that 128 frames appeared in articles with a clear focus on the Swiss integration process, while only 9 relate to articles that cover predominantly a Brexit event. 120 frames were assigned to the category 'hybrid', which grasps the articles that dealt with the two contexts in a balanced way. The fact that most frames were embedded in hybrid or Swiss-centred articles does not diminish the key role of happenings in the Brexit process for triggering the benchmarking activity in Swiss newspapers: 141 of the 265 frames refer evidently to a specific Brexit event or experience which was highly salient at the time of the framing, even if the thematic focus of the articles was on the Swiss context. It was thus mostly a high issue salience of Brexit events, which inspired newspapers to frame Brexit as a benchmark in articles, which naturally had a Swiss focus. A final and important descriptive step of the analysis puts exactly these key Brexit episodes into the spotlight.

6.4 Tracing newspapers' benchmarking over five key Brexit episodes

Throughout this report, we have seen how the Brexit process has triggered different intensities and different types of benchmarking activity. The concluding step of the analysis traces the various types of benchmark framing in the Swiss newspapers over five Brexit episodes. By looking at these formative episodes for the observed framings, the report contextualizes and summarizes core insights from the content analysis and strengthens the descriptive evidence about the newspapers' benchmarking activities.

Episode 1: May's Brexit strategy and first negotiation outcomes as benchmarks

In the months after the referendum, Swiss newspapers did hardly evaluate the Swiss negotiation process against Brexit. This is not surprising. Despite a decent issue salience of both contexts, Brexit did in this early phase not provide concrete information against which one could easily benchmark the Swiss situation. In January 2017, this changed as the British demands about their future relation towards Europe took concrete shape. Prime Minister May presented a white paper based on 12 principles that '*guide the government in fulfilling the democratic will of the people of the United Kingdom*' (gov.uk, 2017). Swiss newspapers took these developments as an inducement for some first concrete benchmark framings. These frames benchmarked the Swiss negotiation process directly against May's 12-point list of demands and guidelines for her negotiations with the EU. In such comparisons, the Swiss negotiating strategy came off badly. Most of the frames praised May's straightforward and combative approach and criticised the Swiss approach for a lack in exactly these negotiation skills where the UK excels:

> What Obelix says to Dogmatix about the British cannot be applied to their crystal-clear Brexit approach. But it can be applied to the mindless jostling of the Federal Council.
>
> (Weltwoche, frame no. 160)

As in the above example, it was foremost *Weltwoche* that has bluntly criticised the Swiss negotiators. *NZZ* tended during this Brexit episode more towards a neutral framing by mainly emphasizing that the

presented British approach serves as a new reference point for the Swiss negotiations (see frames no. 96 & 97).

By tracing the benchmarking activity after this initial phase, it gets evident that with the evolvement of the Brexit negotiations, the enthusiasm for May's negotiation style got dampened. Towards the end of 2017 and throughout 2018, newspapers started to present the UK's negotiation approach more and more as a negative benchmark. However, this critical view on Brexit did not transfer into a more positive evaluation of the Swiss negotiations. In consequence, the described benchmark type focusing on 'flaws of both sides' were common at this stage of the UK negotiations.

The Brexit negotiations reached a first milestone with the presentation of the draft withdrawal agreement in November 2018. For the first time, Brexit provided information in the form of a concrete outcome, and not surprisingly, Swiss newspapers tried to benchmark the Swiss negotiations against this new information. As in May's homeland, the outcome of the UK's negotiations met harsh criticism also in the Swiss media. Similarly, the ongoing negotiations of the Swiss government with the EU were in a difficult phase during this time and caused domestic criticism from several sides (Gafafer and Schäfer, 2021). This situation explains why the clear dominance of negative Brexit benchmarks in this phase was mostly combined with negative evaluations of the stalled Swiss negotiation. Particularly *NZZ* and *Tages-Anzeiger* saw in May's Brexit agreement the proof that the time of 'special treatments' is over. Respective frames stated that both the UK and Switzerland must break away from the illusion that the EU will eventually give in to its basic principles for access to the single market. *NZZ* even devoted an entire article to an in-depth comparison of the two contexts, whereby the title makes the negative evaluation for both negotiation approaches evident: '*Cherry picking is not on offer; How (not) to negotiate with the EU: lessons from recent negotiating marathons*' (Höltschi, 2018).

Weltwoche remained relatively silent in this period. The only benchmark frame found in the newspaper's coverage of November 2018 pointed into a similar direction as *NZZ*. Yet, the linked conclusion regarding the Swiss negotiation was very different. *Tages-Anzeiger* and *NZZ* used Brexit references to frame their claim for a more 'pragmatic' Swiss negotiation approach to realise a framework agreement very soon. *Weltwoche*, in

contrast, saw in May's unsatisfactory Brexit achievements a sign that Switzerland will not be able to get a good deal with the EU either and thus should bury its desire for a framework agreement entirely:

> If even Britain's negotiators have not managed to reach flexible and relatively open rules for cooperation with the EU, Swiss diplomacy will certainly not be sophisticated enough to extract a special arrangement for itself [...] This also means that hoping for a framework agreement with the EU that accommodates Switzerland on important points is mistaken.
>
> (Weltwoche, frame no. 219)

After years of negotiations, Switzerland presented on 7 December 2018 a draft framework agreement (Gafafer and Schäfer, 2021). For the EU, the negotiation phase with Switzerland ended with this agreement, and Brussels pushed for quick finalisation (ibid.). This milestone in the Swiss integration process did, except for one frame by *NZZ* (frame no. 35), not lead to immediate benchmarking activity against Brexit. However, it set an important basis for future benchmarks, as now also Switzerland had a concrete negotiation outcome on the Table. While Switzerland's behaviour during the negotiations had hitherto been the focus of criticism in the analysed benchmark frames, commentators and journalists were now able to evaluate the concrete outcome of the Swiss negotiations by benchmarking it against Brexit.

Episode 2: Benchmarking against the chaotic Brexit negotiations in spring 2019

A key phase in the entire Brexit process unfolded in spring 2019, when Prime Minister May had to negotiate not only with the EU but also with her own parliament on the proposed withdrawal agreement. Unlike any other episode in the long Brexit process, these events have triggered negative coverage across Europe (Henley, 2019; Walter, 2021a). The unprecedented wave of negative coverage about May's unsuccessful attempts to get Brexit done also manifested in an accumulation of negative Brexit benchmarks in Swiss newspapers.

In contrast to previous periods, the newspapers tended here towards a more positive evaluation of the Swiss situation from the background of the chaotic situation in the UK. The description of the classic 'anti-role

model benchmarking' made already clear that a turbulent period in the Brexit process fosters positive evaluations of the Swiss status quo and the attempt to preserve it with a framework agreement. In this sense, benchmarking against Brexit did relativise the flaws of the before regularly criticised Swiss negotiation style. Also, the deficiencies in the presented framework agreement appeared acceptable for many observers considering where the British stood at the time:

> We can see how difficult it is already for the UK. Either you agree on a European framework and its rules or you don't. Without an agreement, you are a third country. We Swiss have been successfully using the superior possibilities of a partnership for years. We negotiated the framework agreement in this spirit—and I think we negotiated well.
>
> (NZZ, frame no. 38)

However, there were still a decent number of frames referring to the Brexit problems by simultaneously highlighting similar flaws in the Swiss negotiations (e.g., frames no. 132 & 220). While *NZZ* and *Tages-Anzeiger* framed this Brexit phase almost entirely as a negative benchmark, *Weltwoche* tried to uphold the role-model character of Brexit even in this difficult time for Brexiteers. One respective strategy observed was to shift the focus away from the difficult negotiations with the EU towards successful bilateral negotiations with European trading partners. Among others was the completion of a UK-Swiss trade deal presented as a positive Brexit benchmark. Commentators argued that these Brexit experiences show that free trade in Europe is possible without the 'restrictive' institutional ties demanded by the EU (frame no. 166-177). And accordingly, the conclusion was that Switzerland does not need a framework deal with the EU to successfully uphold its close economic ties with European countries.

Episode 3: Johnson negotiates the Withdrawal Agreement

While the stalled finalisation of the framework agreement caused increasing dissatisfaction on all sides in Swiss politics, in Summer 2019, Johnson took the helm in the UK to get Brexit done. Johnson's presentation of the revised withdrawal agreement in October 2019 triggered a new wave of benchmark frames in the analysed newspapers. A mixture of various types of benchmark frames characterises the weeks after this

breakthrough in the Brexit negotiations. In addition to continuing negative benchmark framings, Johnson's successful negotiation led to an increased number of framings with Brexit as a positive benchmark. Especially when not the Brexit developments in general, but specific aspects, like Johnson's negotiation style were the reference point, even newspapers like *NZZ* drew on role-model benchmarking. And once more, the Swiss negotiators came off rather badly in such comparisons (see frames no. 4, 27, 171). The dissatisfaction with Switzerland's handling of the negotiations led even the generally Brexit-critical *Tages-Anzeiger* to *role model framing* of Johnson's achievements:

> With his simple slogan 'Get Brexit Done!', the British prime minister managed to rally the masses behind him. And such determination and strength would also do well for the Swiss government.
>
> <div align="right">(Tages-Anzeiger, frame no. 117)</div>

Noteworthy is a series of role model frames during this episode, resulting in a neutral evaluation of the Swiss negotiations. Thereby, Johnson's negotiating success was framed as proof that renegotiations in the deadlocked Swiss talks with the EU are still possible:

> The example of the Brexit agreement by Prime Minister Boris Johnson shows that if you have clear visions, you have a good chance of getting changes made in Brussels, even in a supposedly untouchable agreement.
>
> <div align="right">(NZZ, frame no. 29)</div>

Episode 4: Launching the second phase of Brexit negotiations and an increased issue salience for the Swiss limitation initiative

With the UK officially leaving the Union, a new negotiation phase has started for the UK. The challenge was now, similar to the Swiss situation, to find an agreement with the EU regulating their future relationship based on an external integration approach. The first ten months after the UK formally left the Union were quite calm concerning benchmarking in Swiss media. Occasionally, *Weltwoche* has published articles prominently comparing the Swiss negotiations with Johnson's approach. Here, the classic type of role model benchmarking dominated, exemplified in an article by *Weltwoche* with the title: *'Role model Boris Johnson—What*

Switzerland can learn from the British Prime Minister for the negotiations with the European Union' (Heumann, 2020).

In September 2020, *Weltwoche's* editor-in-chief published another article with a high density of positive Brexit benchmark frames, which set the Swiss situation in a bad light. Thereby an interesting framing strategy of the newspaper got apparent. To overcome the accumulated negative public perception of Brexit, *Weltwoche* frequently distinguished between the Brexit era under May and under Johnson. Thereby, the newspaper associated the negative experiences with May, while Johnson stood for Brexit as the actual success story. Such a narrative allowed the flexibility of framing May's Brexit experience as an anti-role model while Brexit under Johnson could shine as a role model for Switzerland:

> Boris Johnson's predecessor Theresa May failed because she acted exactly like Switzerland towards the EU. There was something masochistic about her willingness to compromise. The result were bad deals, all of which were scuttled by parliament. Johnson got in very differently. He put the EU under pressure.
>
> (Weltwoche, frame no. 186)

Moreover, in the beginning of 2020, the limitation initiative started to accompany the framework agreement as a key discussion point regarding Swiss EU integration. Thus, an increased number of benchmark frames evaluated the proposed alternative state of an EU affiliation without the free movement of people. Remarkable is that 25 of these frames referred to Brexit as an anti-role model and evaluated the 'limitation initiative' negatively, while only three frames supported the initiative based on a role model framing of Brexit. The description of the classic 'anti-role model benchmarking' has already presented examples of how Brexit benchmarks—with a frequent focus on economic uncertainties related to Brexit—helped in campaigning against the 'limitation initiative'. Thereby, it became further clear how supporters of the initiative reacted to these tendencies by presenting benchmark denial frames.

Episode 5: The Trade and Cooperation Agreement——the heyday for benchmarking in Swiss news media

It became apparent throughout this analysis that the finalisation of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) at the end of December 2020 led

to an incomparably high number of benchmark frames in Swiss newspapers. From that moment on, not only the Swiss had a concrete agreement with the EU in form of the draft framework agreement, but also the future UK-EU relations took concrete shape. It is no surprise that the two sketched 'paths' of external EU integration provided a fruitful ground for intense benchmarking activity in Swiss news media.

Foremost *Weltwoche*—but also *NZZ* and *Tages-Anzeiger*—accompanied their coverage about the British last-minute agreement with extensive 'role model' framing. The examples presented in the section about 'classic positive benchmarking' already gave an insight into the general tenor of these frames. For many commentators, the TCA pulled away a veil revealing the concrete shortcomings of the Swiss government's deal (see, e.g., frames no. 18, 189, 190). Thereby, the articles reflected relatively often the thoughts of politicians, which indicates that the TCA did also within the Swiss political elite trigger exceptional high benchmarking activity.

Two points summarise well the concrete aspects of the TCA at which the Swiss commentators looked upon with envy in the found frames. First and foremost, benchmarking the Swiss framework deal against the TCA led to negative evaluations of the foreseen role of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in the Swiss draft agreement. Throughout the negotiations, the role of the ECJ was one of the most controversial points in the Swiss-EU agreement, even in otherwise pro-European camps (Tobler, 2016). To see that Johnson could negotiate the ECJ out of the deal triggered a series of benchmark frames in Swiss newspapers. These frames left no doubt that the British agreement trumps the Swiss deal in this respect. Remarkable is that not only the fundamentally critical *Weltwoche* but also *NZZ* and *Tages-Anzeiger* published such frames. A statement by a Swiss trade unionist illustrates how benchmarking in this direction suited quite well also the critique from the left regarding the framework agreement:

> With the British, too, Brussels had first insisted that the ECJ must have the last word. We continue to expect that our negotiators will manage at a minimum to remove wage protection and state aid from the influence of the ECJ.
>
> (NZZ, frame no. 6)

A second major issue debated in the aftermath of the TCA was brought up mainly from the right side of the political spectrum and pointed at the controversial topic of immigration. Thereby, benchmark frames focused on the fact that the EU-UK deal comes without a free movement of persons. In such a framing, Johnson's deal is seen as a precedent that it is possible to negotiate a decent trade agreement with the EU without giving up national control over immigration. With reference to a successful Swiss referendum in 2014, which had the goal to stop an alleged 'mass immigration' (Tobler, 2014), critics stated, for example:

> In contrast to the often eccentric politician with the wispy hairdo, the Swiss political caste did not deliver. To this day, they refuse to implement the verdict of the sovereign of 2014.
>
> (Weltwoche, frame no. 197)

Noteworthy is that the numerous positive Brexit benchmarks in the *NZZ* were mostly linked to statements of political entrepreneurs, while *Weltwoche* presented its harsh critique for the Swiss government openly as an editorial opinion. *NZZ* published several positive Brexit benchmarks via interviews with politicians from the Eurosceptical *Swiss People's Party*. One of these frames sums up the trends in role-model benchmarking after the publication of the UK-EU deal:

> It is impressive what Boris Johnson has achieved for his country. But we Swiss are supposed to be satisfied with the Guillotine clause, the threat of the EU Citizenship Directive and the European Court of Justice?
>
> (NZZ, frame no. 7)

Yet, as already seen in the quantitative distribution over time, the finalisation of the TCA did not only stimulate role model framing. As a counteract, a decent number of frames referred to this Brexit episode with anti-role model framing or benchmark denials. Many of these frames made their reactive character very explicit, for example, when denouncing that *'for some people, the grass is currently greener and juicier on the other side of the English Channel than in Switzerland.'* (NZZ, frame no. 51).

'Anti-role model benchmarking' in *NZZ* and *Tages-Anzeiger* has highlighted aspects in which Johnson's deal does not score particularly

well compared to Switzerland. A closer look at where Switzerland outperforms the UK according to these frames reveals an interesting regularity. All frames which ended with a positive evaluation of the Swiss situation after benchmarking it against Johnson's deal have emphasised the superiority of the Swiss deal when it comes to access to the European Single Market:

> Matthias Michel speaks of 'emergency drops' for Great Britain so that trade does not completely collapse. Switzerland is much more integrated into the European market. He pleads for the institutional agreement.
>
> (Tages-Anzeiger, frame no. 128)

The general tone of these framings was that—due to the much better access to the European market—Switzerland must accept the minor disadvantages that may pop up when benchmarked against the British deal. And again, it becomes clear that such negative Brexit frames may unfold a similar effect as benchmark denials by rejecting that Johnson's Brexit experience serves as a role model. Interestingly, the 'actio et reactio' game about the interpretative sovereignty over Brexit as a reference point does not end with such denials of a role-model framing. The analysis puts forward several statements by advocates of Brexit as a role model, which in turn reacted directly to a benchmark denial strategy. For example, the Swiss government's recurring argumentation that the two agreements are not comparable, let *Weltwoche* publish an article that reads as one consistent claim why the two contexts are indeed comparable and why Johnsons' Brexit must serve as a role model for Switzerland:

> The Federal Council has so far pretended that its plans for a framework agreement have nothing to do with Brexit. This attitude was always wrong, and now it has become fully untenable.
>
> (Weltwoche, frame no. 209)

Casting a final glance back at the just discussed five episodes, it becomes evident how political entrepreneurs and particularly journalists have co-determined the benchmarking dynamics in Swiss news coverage. Although the ups and downs of the Brexit process set the stage for benchmarking, the news media showed the 'power' to benchmark the Swiss situation against the same Brexit episode with very different

framings. This was most evident in the intense benchmarking phase in the aftermath of the TCA deal. To rely on role model benchmarking, especially the Eurosceptic *Weltwoche* presented Johnson's deal as a victory over the EU. In contrast, actors aiming for a negative Brexit benchmark presented Johnson's deal as a stopgap solution where the UK got the short end of the stick.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

By conducting a content analysis of Swiss newspapers, this report aimed to provide descriptive evidence about benchmarking dynamics in the context of Brexit. The thereby observed and documented 'explicit benchmark frames' strengthen the state-of-the-art's claim that 'Brexit benchmarks' matter for Europe (see, e.g., Hobolt et al., 2021). The report adds to the existing literature with a concrete insight into benchmarking tendencies and emphasises significant variations in how newspapers benchmarked the Swiss integration process against Brexit. Worth highlighting are the varying patterns in the framing of Brexit as a 'role model' on the one hand and as an 'anti-role model' on the other. The discussion has put forward different episodes in the Brexit process and the framing power of newspapers as explanatory factors for the observed variations. With an exceptional intense benchmarking activity, the weeks after the finalisation of the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement stood out in the data. In this episode, the Swiss and British context's decent issue salience and straightforward comparability seemingly led to intense benchmark framings in Swiss newspapers. Moreover, it was here that Brexit best unfolded its potential as a role model for Switzerland, largely pushed by framings in *Weltwoche*.

The report elaborated its descriptive arguments via a two-part analysis of collected data. The quantitative discussion focused on meaningful

reduction of the information and delivered an overview of key patterns in the benchmarking activity, which spoke directly to the elaborated expectations. Thereby, the two basic expected patterns regarding variance over time and newspapers were confirmed: First, the benchmarking activity has intensified over the course of the Brexit negotiations; and while in the trouble-ridden phase under May anti-role model benchmarking was dominant, the events under Johnson did trigger an increase in role-model framing of Brexit. Second, when split by the political leaning of the newspapers, the data revealed that a newspaper with an openly Eurosceptic agenda framed Brexit almost exclusively as a role model, while Europhile papers leaned towards anti-role model framing.

The quantitative description found its continuation in a second analysis part, where the focus shifted towards a qualitative look at the found news media frames. Here, the reductionist quality criterion for a content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) had to be broken down to a certain extent. Through the organisation via the presented typology and the discussion along five key episodes, the report described the benchmarking activity in Swiss media concretely and with an openness towards important specifications, and yet kept an eye on the 'bigger picture'.

Throughout the research process, the Swiss context proved useful in approaching benchmarking activities in news media. The analysis indicates that benchmarking against Brexit was a prominent element in Swiss public debates on the country's EU affiliation. The documented patterns and variations have important implications for the literature interested in 'benchmarking effects' of Brexit in Europe. The frequently observed framing of Brexit as an 'anti-role model benchmark' is in line with the discussed evidence pointing at 'deterrence effects' of the UK experiences since the Brexit vote. Particularly for evaluating profound disintegration steps, like the 'limitation initiative', looking at Brexit as a reference came dominantly with 'deterrent' sentiments in Swiss newspapers. Yet, and this is a notable insight from the background of the state-of-the-art, especially when the newspapers' benchmarking targeted the Swiss negotiations on the framework agreement, also a role model framing of Brexit was very common. The style and outcome of the UK's negotiations with the EU triggered a remarkable amount of benchmarking

activity in which Switzerland was 'encouraged' to follow the British 'role model'. In sum, the report acknowledges Switzerland as a context where—despite a very different initial situation—benchmarking against Brexit matters; and in which the perception of Brexit as a positive precedent played a prominent role. Though Brexit seems to *deter* also the Swiss from radical disintegration steps—similar to the observed 'deterrence effects' regarding the exit option in EU-27—, when it comes to concrete discussions of how one wants to continue with the proven path of external integration, Swiss benchmark framings revealed the potential of Brexit as a role model.

One can assume that the British experiences also set a crucial reference point for Switzerland in the coming years, as the UK will continue its negotiations about access to 'Europe' and its markets. The report has revealed that not only the outcomes of such negotiations but also the process itself represents a highly relevant object for benchmarking activities. Important to keep in mind is that the relevance of benchmarking dynamics for negotiations on (external) differentiated integration is not limited to Brexit as the point of reference. Theoretically, any country negotiating a form of differentiated integration with the EU can take over the role as a benchmark. In this sense, the Swiss experiences and achievements may also serve as benchmarks for the British in finding access to 'Europe' in a post-Brexit era (see, e.g., Dardanelli and Mazzoleni, 2021; Jenni, 2016).

The benchmark theory by de Vries (2018) delivered the crucial starting point for this report. The report's theoretical examinations and empirical evidence echo the relevance and explanatory power of de Vries' benchmark approach for studies investigating Brexit effects on the European public. Building upon the existing evidence, the report derives its key contributions from bringing in the news media and the framing literature into the scholarly debate. The approach of looking at the benchmarking mechanism from a news framing perspective came with two main assets:

First, looking at media frames, understood as important reflectors of public discourses, opened a gateway to the—in the literature foremost theoretically discussed—benchmarking mechanism. The descriptive evidence, for example, in the form of concrete excerpts from news articles,

provided straightforward evidence about how actors evaluate a situation based on a benchmarking 'logic'. Screening these benchmarking tendencies in an actual public debate is a contribution of the report, which complements well the state-of-the-art's focus on measuring respective effects. Moreover, to identify this mechanism in the news coverage, an intense theoretical engagement with the benchmarking concept was necessary. Thereby, the report has strengthened the understanding of the benchmarking phenomenon and brought forth a conceptualisation attempt to capture it empirically.

Second, by including the framing literature, the report has put forward arguments why the news media may play an active and influencing role in the benchmarking dynamics around Brexit. Derived from the idea of strategic use of 'framing power', the report elaborated its key expectation that the benchmarking activity in Swiss newspapers varies across different newspapers. By quantitatively and qualitatively comparing the benchmark framings found, the report showed how Eurosceptic and Europhile newspapers actively *framed* Brexit as a benchmark in distinctive ways. The Eurosceptic *Weltwoche* was exceptionally active in benchmarking and almost exclusively referred to Brexit with a 'role model framing'. The more qualitative description of the frames vividly displayed how *Weltwoche* used its 'framing power' to present the various Brexit references in a way that served its apparent Eurosceptic editorial agenda, with the planned institutional framework agreement at the centre of the criticism.

The documented variation in the way how the different newspapers have framed Brexit as a benchmark has implications for future research. It foremost shows that studies on benchmarking effects of Brexit can profit by paying attention to the news media as a key political actor. Not only do news media provide the information about Brexit that is crucial for benchmarking activities in European countries, but they are also able to *frame* this information in distinctive ways. This report has set the focus on 'explicit benchmark frames' and thus provided evidence about how the news conveys 'pre-benchmarked' information about Brexit to Swiss citizens. An avenue for future research would be to elaborate the introduced argument that media and political entrepreneurs exert also influence by solely *framing* Brexit experiences without explicitly

presenting them as a benchmark. In the end, it is the people's perception of Brexit that matters for the benchmarking effects (see Hobolt et al., 2021), and with this, the way news media present and evaluate the UK's performance outside the EU.

The report findings reinforce the concerns in the literature that particularly Eurosceptic forces may try to make political capital out of benchmarking dynamics around Brexit (see de Vries, 2017). With their role model framing, *Weltwoche* and Eurosceptic political entrepreneurs often stood at the beginning of benchmarking dynamics in Swiss newspapers. The found anti-role model or denial framings functioned then regularly as a reaction to these Eurosceptic benchmarking attempts. One can assume that using positive Brexit benchmarks as a rhetorical tool for proclaiming Eurosceptic positions in a 'take back control' manner is not a phenomenon limited to the Swiss context. This assumption underlines the need for further research on the benchmarking tendencies against the post-Brexit UK with a focus on Eurosceptic discourses. The descriptive approach in this report opens an avenue for research with such a focus. It appears—in the descriptive spirit of the report—not only relevant to 'measure' the changes on support for Euroscepticism linked to Brexit impacts but also to shed light on how Eurosceptic actors actually use Brexit benchmarks to frame and convey their political 'message'. The elaborated concept of 'explicit benchmark framing' may provide a tool for grasping benchmarking tendencies within discourses of Eurosceptic political entrepreneurs in Europe.

Moreover, it is important to note at the end of this report that the process, which the UK has launched with voting on Brexit, is still at its beginning—just as the research investigating the consequences of this historic step for Europe. The report is a first attempt to complement the growing literature examining Brexit effects on public opinion with an analysis of 'benchmark framings' in Swiss newspapers. The presented concepts and their application in a content analysis are in their infancy but include potential for improvement and inspire further research on the topic.

The report started with introducing the 'fear of Brexit contagion', which arose immediately after the Brexit vote across Europe. Following the reviewed state-of-the-art, it became apparent that many of these fears did

not come true, at least in the short run. On the contrary, Brexit seemed to have exerted mainly 'deterrence' effects on European's sympathy for similar disintegration steps. However,—and the here presented evidence from studying benchmarking activity in Swiss newspapers firmly strengthens this assessment—Europe is far from having 'outlived' the danger of Brexit's *'encouragement effects'* (Walter, 2021a, p. 26). After a tumultuous withdrawal process, the most fruitful years for framing 'Brexit' as a role model for disintegration attempts may yet to come. The medium and long-term performance of the UK outside the Union could represent key reference points for European citizens' evaluation of their own country's EU integration 'path', be it as a member of the Union or as an externally integrated country. The question—*Is the grass greener on the other side of the Channel?*—is thus likely to retain its relevance, and we are well-advised to keep an eye on the news media, as they have a say in how Europeans will answer this explosive question.

Chapter 8

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Chapter 9

Attachment

A: Code system 2: main codes used in the report

Code cat. 1: the 'nature' of the benchmark	No. coded frames
1.1 positive benchmark*	97
1.2 negative benchmark*	104
1.3 neutral benchmark*	28
Code cat. 2: Brexit 'experience' as the benchmark (benchmark object)	
2.1 negotiation/outcome under Johnson	101
2.2 negotiation/outcome under May	35
2.3 Brexit experience generic	93
Code cat. 3: 'sentiment' Swiss evaluation	
3.1 positive	46
3.2 negative	132
3.3 neutral	51
Code cat. 4: Object evaluated (benchmarked object)	
4.1 SQ specific: framework agreement process and outcome	179

* the four key codes representing the basic benchmark framing types extracted

4.2 SQ generic: bilateral way as it exists today without reference to framework agreement	19
4.3 AS specific: limitation initiative (no AFMP)	26
4.4 AS generic I (less integration)	5
4.5 AS generic II (more integration)	0

Code cat. 5: special code for extracting explicit denial of benchmark	
5 Explicit benchmark denial frame*	36

Additional codes (coded for all 265 extracted frames)	
Code cat. 6: benchmark-framing subject	
6.1 Journalist	177
6.2 Political entrepreneur (CH)	56
6.3 Other	32
Code cat. 7: article context (thematic focus)	
7.1 Focus Swiss integration process	128
7.2 Hybrid	120
7.3 Focus Brexit coverage	9
7.4 Other	8

B: Distribution compared over different periods

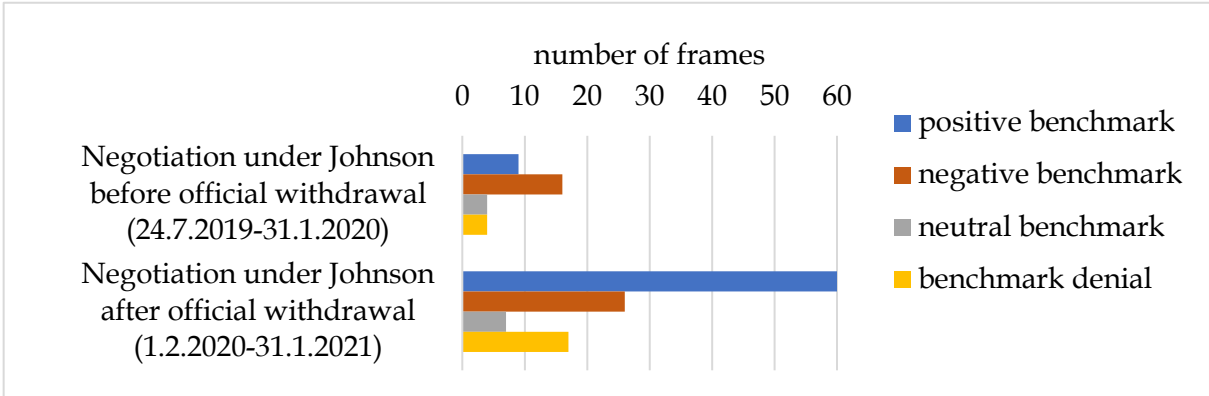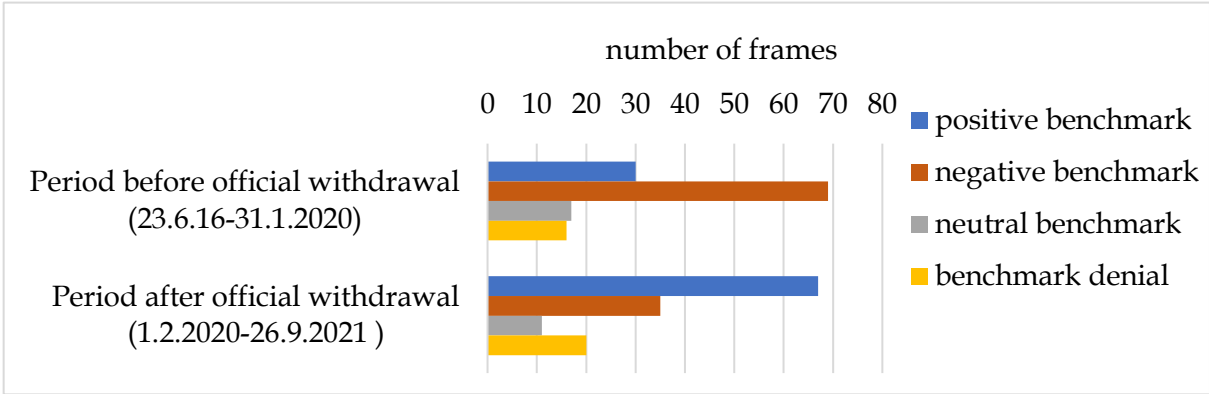*Figure 11: Distribution within two negotiation phases under Johnson*

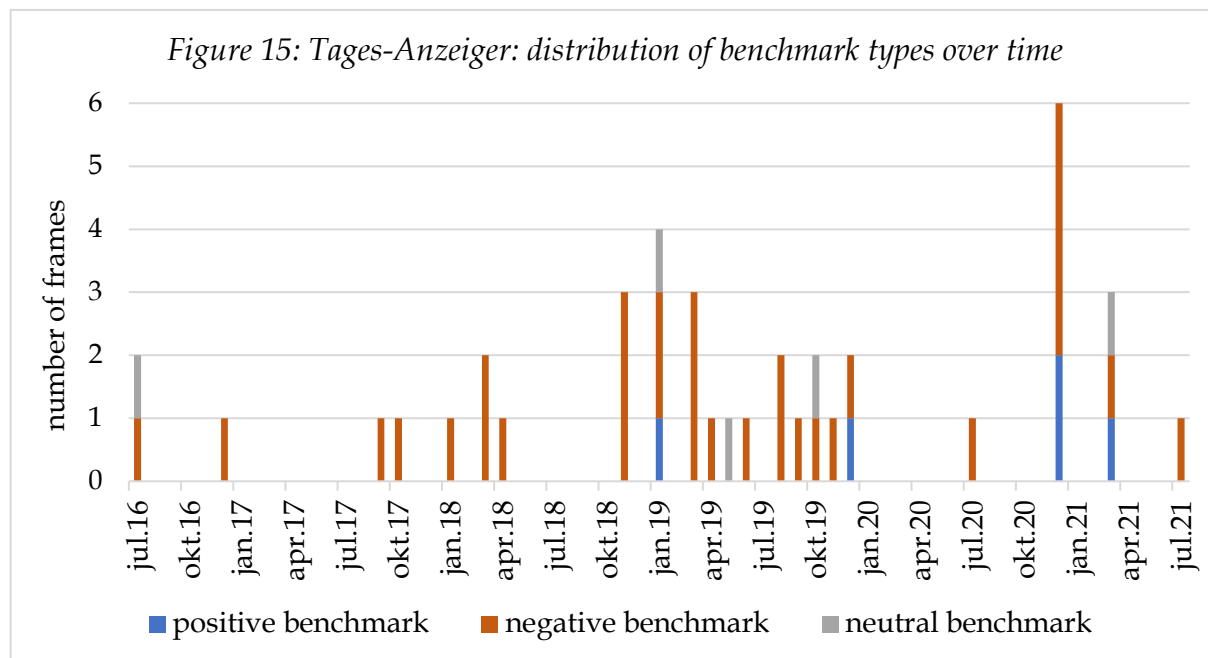*Figure 12: Distribution within periods before and after official withdrawal*

C: Distribution of benchmark types over time in three newspapers

Figure 13: NZZ: distribution of benchmark types over time

Figure 14: Weltwoche: distribution of benchmark types over time

Figure 15: Tages-Anzeiger: distribution of benchmark types over time
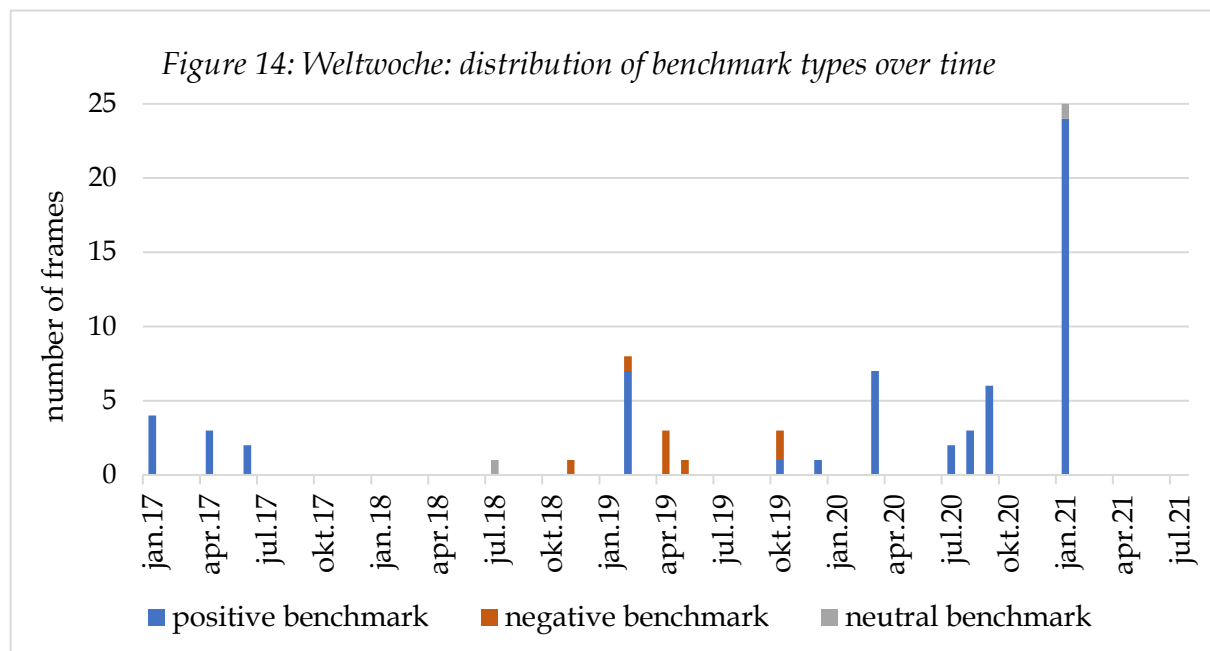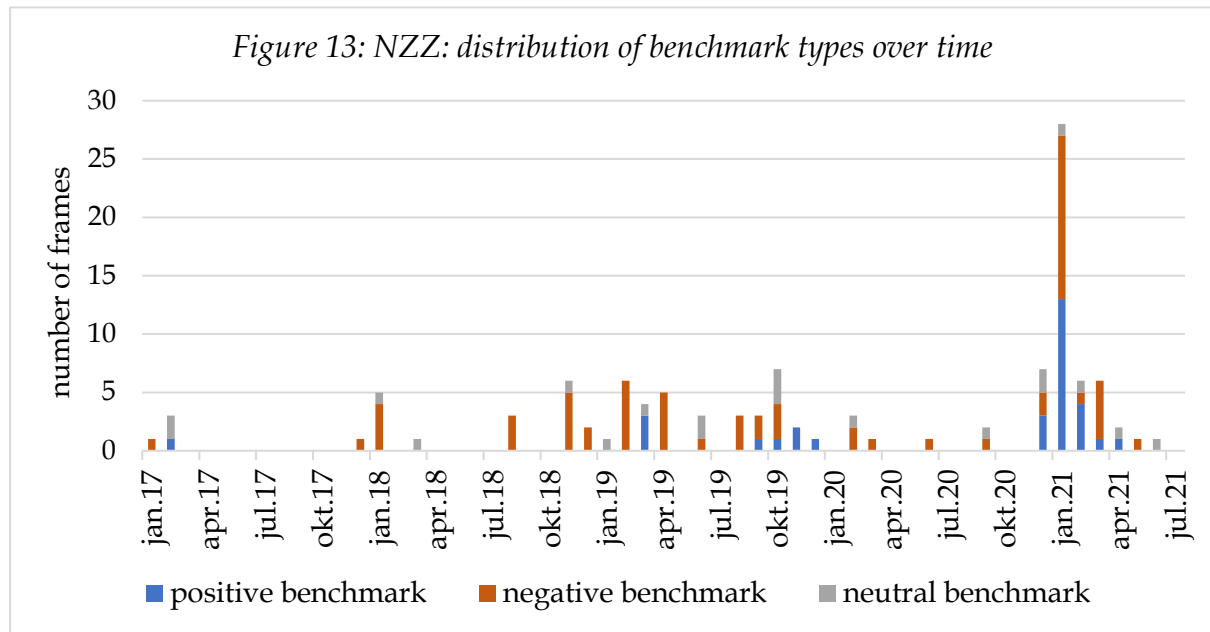
D: Digital attachment

Access:

Overview of documents in the digital attachment

D.1 List with all the coded 'frames' and the respective sources

D.2 Codebook

UiO : **ARENA** Centre for European Studies
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IN KRAKÓW

LUISS
School of Government

Universität
Konstanz

UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD | DPIR
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICS &
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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SCIENCES PO
Grenoble
cnrs

bruegel

Contact

EU3D scientific coordinator: Prof. John Erik Fossum
EU3D project manager: Geir Kværk

ARENA Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo

www.eu3d.uio.no   info@eu3d.uio.no   @EU3Dh2020