

# Cultural and Educational Policy of Sweden as an Element of Nation Branding<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** This article examines the relationship between soft power, nation branding, and educational and cultural cooperation within the framework of the Swedish Institute's policy of international cooperation to promote the country's image abroad and strengthen its reputational capital. The relevance of this topic is due to the significance of the stated agenda, which, as our research has shown, has influenced both the development of cultural cooperation and academic exchanges, and the specific features of the construction of Sweden's foreign policy image. Through an analysis of Swedish Institute materials (primarily data from reports published in 2022–2034), the authors examine the process of how the organization's activities are prioritized based on the distribution of financial support and the focus of its cultural and educational projects. To this end, we analyse the role and parameters of building a national brand; consider changes in the content of educational and cultural events and programmes conducted by Sweden in Eastern Europe and the Baltics; trace the dynamics of the processes of cultural exchange between Sweden and the countries of these regions; note the influence of the current political situation on the volume and measures of financial assistance to them; and describe the perception of Sweden in Russia, Eastern Europe and the Baltics. The study is based on the methods of comparative analysis, discourse analysis, and case study techniques. We conclude that in implementing a diverse range of educational and cultural programmes, the Swedish Institute adheres to the principle of regionalism, which allows such projects to be implemented with due account of the interests and needs of both Sweden and partner countries. We also show that when determining the parameters of national branding, the Swedish Institute relies on the approach of Simon Anholt, refining it in a number of areas. According to the findings of the study, the adaptation of relevant programmes for the development of cooperation with partner countries is aimed at integrating specific Swedish values into the cultural matrix of the host cultures. At the same time, the programmes implemented in this area are greatly influenced by the current political situation, thus excluding such an important international partner as Russia. The study confirms the initial thesis about the

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relatively slow accumulation of Sweden's reputational capital, including in the process of the Swedish Institute's work with "promising" (in the current environment) countries, as well as with the countries of Eastern Europe and the Baltics. We further conclude that the Swedish Institute is not only a key actor in the country's cultural and educational policy, as well as a powerful channel of soft power, but also an instrument for Sweden to position itself as a moral superpower, which can be seen in many areas of its policies that go beyond public diplomacy.

**Keywords:** nation branding, soft power, Sweden, foreign policy, Swedish Institute (SI), international academic mobility, scholarship policy

Over the past seventy years or so, governments around the world have, due to the spread of globalization processes in higher education and science, increasingly started to think about the reputational capital of their countries in this area. There is currently a trend towards the creation of specialized institutes, as well as divisions in various government departments, that are responsible for public diplomacy and the development of national strategies for managing the image of the state on the global stage. This work is often carried out by several structures simultaneously, including NGOs specializing in the popularization of national cultures and languages (for example, the Goethe-Institut, the Instituto Cervantes, and others), foreign policy departments, ministries of culture and education, departments responsible for relations with developing countries, and organizations representing the interests of the business community.

The study of cultural and educational policy as a factor in the national branding of a country has been developing at a rapid pace in recent decades. The spread of marketing categories to countries began in the 1990s. Ideas started to appear in the works of Philip Kotler (*Marketing Places...* 2005), Wally Olins (Olins 2005), Peter van Ham (Ham 2001) and Simon Anholt (Anholt 1998) about the need to effectively promote, in addition to products and services, territories – from small towns and regions to entire countries.

As we know, the concept of "nation brand" was introduced in 1996 by Simon Anholt, the most authoritative specialist in the field of territorial branding. However, he later abandoned this concept in favour of the broader term "competitive identity," which he saw as "the synthesis of brand management with public diplomacy and with trade, investment, tourism and export promotion" (Anholt 2007: 3). At the same time, he emphasized the important role of educational and cultural exchange, and well as tourism, investment policy, and export promotion in forming a favourable reputation of countries (Anholt 2007: 4).

The generally accepted understanding of "nation brand" is based on the idea that it represents a set of certain beliefs and impressions (Kotler, Gertner 2002), as well as on stereotypes and clichés that exist in people's minds in relation to a particular country (Anholt 2013). An alternative definition of "nation brand" was proposed by the British

researcher Keith Dinnie, author of the world's first academic textbook on nation branding, who understands the concept as "the unique, multidimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences" (Dinnie 2022: 15). Dinnie also points out the importance of national identity in the construction of a nation brand. According to him, the essence of any national brand is determined not only by the totality of the country's companies and brands, but also by its culture in the broad sense, which embodies the soul of the nation, from language and literature to sports and architecture (Dinnie 2022: 111).

The Ukrainian cultural scientist Oksana Biletska highlights the strong bond between culture and territorial brand. In her opinion, the target audience perceives territorial brand as the symbolic embodiment of a particular geographical territory, each of which has its own unique culture. As part of a specific culture, the brand simultaneously transmits it (Biletska 2021: 26).

The Russian researcher Alina Koroleva echoes this, defining a brand as a "socio-cultural phenomenon" and stresses the need to identify the identity of a territory when constructing a nation brand (Koroleva 2024: 126). In many ways, this approach makes the concept of country marketing akin to the idea of "soft power," which is acknowledged by the Russian researcher Pavel Parshin. According to him, the marketing appeal of a country is a tool of the "soft power," through which states seek to achieve their political goals (Parshin 2020: 67).

Let us recall that the concept of "soft power" was first introduced in the 1980s and is associated with the name Joseph Nye. "Soft power" was interpreted as the ability to influence the views of the "other" through personal example, which should result in the recipient's voluntary acceptance of the worldview and practices they have been shown without being coerced to do so (Nye 1990; Boldyreva, Boldyrev, Beloshitskaya 2020).

At the same time, American political scientists point to the Scandinavian countries as "possessing a small amount of 'hard power' compared to those who combine it with 'soft power.'"<sup>2</sup>

The modern interpretation of "soft power" in the United States also comes from the suppression of hostile sentiments towards the donor state in certain regions (Rugh 2017). Nye and his followers do not agree with the reading of "soft power" as a "zero-sum" game of power (Tsygankov 2013). However, in a number of Nordic countries, including Sweden, this is exactly how it is interpreted (Govorova, Zhuravel, Samylovskaya 2018; Zhuravlev 2021; Kuznetsov, Mezhevich, Bolotov 2016; International Arctic Science... 2014; Ryzhkova, Sergeev 2019; Larsen 2021; Fan 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Brian M., Hartwell K., Nuryev B. 2014. "Soft Power" – A Double-Edged Sword. *BRICS Business Magazine Russian Edition*. 5. P. 64–75. URL: <https://www.bricsmagazine.com/ru/articles/myagkaya-sila-palka-o-dvuh-kontsah>

Russian researchers have also contributed to the study of soft power. For example, Anatoly Torkunov has analysed the factors of competitiveness of higher education exports by the BRICS countries (Torkunov 2012), A. Smirnov and I. Kokhtyulina have examined soft power from the standpoint of global security (Smirnov, Kokhtyulina 2012); and N. Antonova, A. Sushchenko, and N. Popova have looked at soft power as an instrument of struggle for global leadership, including through education (Antonova, Sushchenko, Popova 2020). Special attention is paid in this context to the United States (Antyukhova 2018). China has also been the subject of much attention, particularly the activities of the Confucius Institute to promote the Chinese language and culture (Andreeva, Kern 2017). This factor is also seen as relevant for studying the experience of Sweden, where the authorities also believe that interest in the Swedish language and culture abroad is an important channel for cultural and educational policy.

The issue of academic cooperation in the Arctic as a factor in the development of the region was studied by a team of scientists from Northern (Arctic) Federal University and the Arkhangelsk Scientific Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences that consisted of P. Zhuravlev, O. Zaretskaya, A. Podoplekin, A. Repnevsky, and A. Tamitsky. The group of researchers paid considerable attention to the scientific infrastructure of cooperation among the “Arctic Eight” countries, one of which is Sweden. However, these studies do not focus on issues of nation branding or “soft power” (The Arctic in the System... 2015). The situation is further complicated by the fact that the cultural and educational policy of Sweden as a factor in nation branding has never been studied in depth outside of Sweden itself.

This state of affairs is unsatisfactory primarily because Sweden stands out for its combination of national branding, development assistance, and “soft power,” coupled with grant, scholarship, and educational policies. These features have been covered comprehensively in papers published by Swedish scholars. Andreas Åkerlund and Nikolas Glover, for example, have each examined the scholarship policy of the Swedish Institute as a combination of public diplomacy and development assistance (Glover 2011; Åkerlund 2018; 2020). Thomas Lundén focused much of his research on Sweden’s attempts to strengthen its position in the Baltic Soviet republics through public diplomacy and the academic track in 1989–1991 (Lundén 2022). However, the specific features and achievements of this policy over time have still not received sufficient consideration.

The methodology used in our research is based on the concepts of nation branding, public diplomacy, and soft power. The concept of nation branding is understood as the targeted activity of governments and interested organizations aimed at forming, correcting, or maintaining the image of a country and its recognizability around the world. At the same time, national marketing sets the framework for a common system of values, which in turn forms the basis for economic, political, cultural and other activities targeted at outside customers (Anholt 2011).

The concept of “soft power” is used to describe the development of Sweden’s image through scholarship, grant, and educational policies, and well as through the dissemination of information about the country. In this context, the image of a country can be

seen both as a means of “soft power” and as a product of it (Leonova 2013: 27–30, 37). It appears possible, with reference to all these developments, to determine the hierarchy of these components through the example of the activities of the Swedish Institute.

The theoretical and methodological perspective is complemented by the concept of “public diplomacy,” which is understood as informational influence on public opinion in other countries. The aim of this approach is to form a favourable image of the recipient country in foreigners. The emphasis is placed here on the advantages of the donor country’s way of life as something that is worth aspiring to, including political practices, culture, economic and social development models (Kovaleva 2014: 33).

“Soft power,” as we have already mentioned, was introduced as a political science concept by Harvard University professor Joseph Nye and was initially interpreted as the ability to influence the views of the “other” through personal example, which should lead to the recipient’s voluntary acceptance of the worldview and practices that have been demonstrated to them (Nye 1990: 155).

The period from 2022 to 2023 was chosen as the optimum timeframe for the present study, as it allows us to track the dynamics of the relevant processes and how they were impacted by Russia’s exclusion from the projects and programmes of the Swedish Institute due to Sweden’s official position on Ukraine.

The sources used consisted of several groups of documents: 1) international rankings; 2) official publications on the website of the Swedish Institute (press releases, reports, announcements); 3) official documents of the Government of Sweden (strategies); 4) official publications on the website of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (reports, press releases); and 5) statistical data (OECD Data). This allowed us to track changes in nation branding, as well as trends in Sweden’s cultural and educational policy.

### **National Brand: Key Points and Design Challenges**

There is no doubt that political reality today continues to be influenced by both globalization (albeit in a fragmented form) and the mediatization of the international space, and this explains why the role of information in international relations continues to grow. Information has become an especially valuable asset, because disseminating the right messages it makes it possible not only to increase awareness of a given subject, but also to mould the desired attitude towards it (Koroleva 2024: 130). States exist in a market economy and an atmosphere of foreign political rivalry and, like companies, they are forced to develop their competitive advantages, work on creating a good reputation – a positive image and national brand – on the international stage, as this can be crucial to the success or failure of a particular political line in the long run. According to the Belgian researcher Peter van Ham, the advent of branding has meant that countries “are no longer merely countries one finds in an atlas,” but “brand states,” whose emotional and symbolic capital often outweighs their political and geographical features (Ham 2001: 2). In these conditions, it is even possible for

competition between brand states and so-called “superbrands” – among which van Ham identifies the EU, the Roman Catholic Church and several TNCs – to develop (Ham 2001).

Let us recall that, according to Anholt, the process of developing a positive foreign policy image for a state must necessarily include three components:

1) *Strategy*. A clear understanding of what a nation is and where it stands on the international stage, and it involves reconciling the needs and desires of a wide range of different national actors (the population, representatives of the business community, NGOs, and the state into a more or less single direction), as well as setting a goal that is ambitious yet achievable.

2) *Substance*. The execution of the strategy in the form of activities in various spheres (legal, economic, social, educational, and cultural).

3) *Symbolic actions*. A special type of specific actions that have intrinsic communicative power and symbolize the strategy: innovations, reforms, actions, policies, etc. (Anholt 2011: 7–8).

As we noted above, the most important component of constructing a nation brand is identifying the country’s identity (Dinnie 2022; Koroleva 2024). At the same time, as Keith Dinnie has aptly noted, it would be nigh on impossible to develop a nation brand that relies on all the components of a country’s national identity (Dinnie 2022: 46). Thus, when developing a communications strategy, it is necessary to take a selective approach to the definition of key messages and niches that line up with the stated goals of the nation brand.

The traditional parameters of the “nation brand” proposed by Simon Anholt in 2005 formed the basis for the Nation Brand Index (Anholt NBI)<sup>3</sup>. The list of indexes that, in one way or another, evaluate the reputation and foreign policy image of various countries has since grown to become rather expansive. The most respected of these are the Good Country Index (GCI)<sup>4</sup>, the FutureBrand Country Brand Index (CBI)<sup>5</sup>, the Soft Power 30<sup>6</sup> (which existed from 2015 to 2019), as well as some others.

The parameters used by the various indexes (see Table 1) allow us to identify the main dimensions of the “nation brand” concept: 1) the level of political culture, norms and values; 2) culture and education; 3) the quality of human potential; 4) the socio-economic situation and quality of life; 5) the quality of exported goods; 6) the investment attractiveness and tourism appeal of the country; and 7) the degree of state involvement in solving global problems. It thus follows that a country’s brand is more than simply images and narratives; it is concrete social facts and measurable results of targeted policies (Marklund 2017: 627).

<sup>3</sup> Ipsos Nation Brands Index. URL: <https://www.ipsos.com/en/nation-brands-index-2023>

<sup>4</sup> The Good Country Index. URL: <https://index.goodcountry.org>

<sup>5</sup> The FutureBrand Country Index. URL: <https://www.futurebrand.com/country-index-2020>

<sup>6</sup> The Soft Power 30. URL: <https://softpower30.com>



**Table 1. Parameters of various indexes.**

Index	Parameters
Anholt Nation Brand Index (Anholt NBI)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>The country's people</i> (their openness, tolerance, and potential hospitality).</li> <li>2. <i>Culture and heritage</i> (the cultural attractiveness of the country, its cultural heritage and its contemporary cultural “vibes,” including art and sport).</li> <li>3. <i>Investment and immigration law</i> (the investment climate, economic and social situation, attractiveness as a place to live, work, and study).</li> <li>4. <i>Domestic and foreign policy</i> (government policy in addressing global issues, including the sustainable development goals, justice, and the level of democracy).</li> <li>5. <i>Exports</i> (not only economic indicators, but an awareness of national goods and enterprises).</li> <li>6. <i>Tourism</i> (tourism appeal, correlated with the level of infrastructure development, the presence of areas of natural beauty and historical heritage).</li> </ol>
The Good Country Index (GCI)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Contribution to science and technology.</i> The following are calculated relative to the size of the economy (GDP): the number of international students studying in the country; the number of science journals published and translated abroad; the number of articles published in international science journals; the number of Nobel Prize winners; and the number of patents registered.</li> <li>2. <i>Contribution to global culture.</i> The following are calculated relative to the size of the economy (GDP): the export of creative products and services; UNESCO dues in arrears; freedom of movement (the number of countries and territories that citizens can visit without a visa); and press freedom.</li> <li>3. <i>Contribution to global peace and security.</i> The following are calculated relative to the size of the economy (GDP): the number of peacekeeping troops sent abroad to carry out UN missions; dues in arrears to UN peace keeping budgets; attributed number of casualties of international organized violence; arms exports; and internet security.</li> <li>4. <i>Contribution to world order.</i> The impact of charity giving from the population; the number of refugees hosted (relative to the size of the economy); the Number of refugees overseas (relative to the size of the population); birth rate; and the number of UN treaties signed (up to 2016).</li> <li>5. <i>Contribution to the planet and climate:</i> the ecological footprint of the country (relative to GDP); environmental agreements compliance; hazardous pesticides exports; renewable energy share; and consumption of ozone-depleting substances (relative to GDP).</li> </ol>
The FutureBrand Country Brand Index (CBI)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Value System</i></li> <li>2. <i>Quality of Life</i></li> <li>3. <i>Business Potential</i></li> <li>4. <i>Heritage and Culture</i></li> <li>5. <i>Tourism</i></li> <li>6. <i>Domestically produced goods</i></li> </ol>
The Soft Power 30	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <i>Digital infrastructure and the country's capabilities in digital diplomacy.</i></li> <li>2. <i>Culture (including popular culture and high culture).</i></li> <li>3. <i>Enterprise (conditions for business and innovation).</i></li> <li>4. <i>Education (the development of scholarship systems, the attractiveness of the country for international students).</i></li> <li>5. <i>Engagement (the country's contribution to international cooperation, the development of diplomatic ties).</i></li> <li>6. <i>Government (the level of democracy in society, notions of justice and equality).</i></li> </ol>

It is important to note that all the indexes listed above were developed by Western organizations and are based on concepts accepted in Western countries. For example, the scoring for parameters related to “political culture” are unevenly weighted towards Western political democracies. It is thus no surprise that developed countries of the

Western world have dominated the ratings for many years. What is more, it is obvious that these ratings are not universal, since they do not account for the uniqueness of various ethnic groups, cultures, and ways of life, and they ignore the specifics of their historical development. Yet these are the features that determine the exclusivity of a particular country and are fundamental to the creation of a nation brand.

The problem of where countries place in these rankings is especially acute in the European region, where, despite their high scores, states are striving under the influence of European integration processes to harmonize their ways of life, which is reflected in the economic, legal, and political domains. The desire for unification is intended to deepen economic integration, but this comes at the price of a serious challenge to the uniqueness of European cultures. What is more, the values of individual EU member states “by definition” should not contradict the values of the EU itself, a fact that significantly narrows the “room for manoeuvre” for many European powers looking to find their niche.

This problem is no less relevant for the Northern European region, where a common market had been created long before the appearance of the European Union, and where the countries had made a unique attempt to promote cultural cooperation and the existence of a “northern identity” that embodied certain value ideals inherent in the worldview of the peoples of the Northern European countries, specifically mutual respect, voluntarism, egalitarianism, tolerance, equality, and the protection of human rights (Butakova, Portnyagina 2020: 321). This means that identity is formed, among other things, not only as a “conceptual reality marking a social integrator of a certain level, but above all as a communicative project that presupposes the growth of group and macro-group solidarity on certain new value bases” (Silantyeva 2019: 22). The countries of Scandinavia find themselves in a difficult position: striving for internal and external reasons to create the image of a united Northern Europe, they are constantly in search of distinctive features that would set them apart from their neighbours and help to consolidate their own positioning strategy at the subregional, regional, and global levels.

### **The Experience of Sweden in Creating a Nation Brand: Key Milestones and Features in the Country’s Positioning**

Sweden’s nation brand started to take shape in the 1960s and 1970s under the influence of the so-called “Swedish model.” The “Swedish model,” which later came to be called the “Scandinavian” or “Northern European” model, according to the definition put forward by the Swedish researcher Carl Marklund, is a specific way of organizing society that is characteristic of the countries of Northern Europe. Its main features are: a mixed economy; a system of collective bargaining; and social policy that reflects a set of progressive social liberal values (Marklund 2009: 264). Marklund argues that the welfare state model that is inherent in all Northern European countries not only embodies these values, but has done so in a generally profitable way, most notably with regard to satisfaction with life and human development (Marklund 2021: 63).



While Sweden has moved some distance from the welfare state ideal of the second half of the 20th century, and while its policy of “neutrality” takes different forms depending on the situation (take, for example, its accession to the EU in 1995, or its application for NATO membership in 2022), the image of Sweden as a peace-loving, modern, and very liveable country continues to prevail in global public opinion. A 2022 report by the Swedish Institute confirms that the country continues to enjoy a positive image abroad, noting that, despite the Quran burning incidents and the difficulties in the NATO accession process, Sweden is still seen in a positive light by the global community, and that its image “as an attractive market and an important player and partner in the international arena” is changing rather slowly<sup>7</sup>.

Sweden again ranked highly in the 2023 edition of the Nation Brands Index – the Swedish brand has been among the top ten nation brands in the world for the past 13 years<sup>8</sup>. In 2022 and 2023, it led all Nordic countries, placing 9th and 10th in the respective years. To compare, Norway ranked 13th in 2023, followed by Finland in 15th place. The areas in which Sweden ranked highest were “Governance” (3rd place), “Immigration and Investment” (4th place) and “People” (6th place). What is more, Sweden emerged as a leader in the area of “Sustainable Development,” ranking first in most attributes related to how a country is perceived for its contribution to environmental protection<sup>9</sup>. The “weakest” elements of the Swedish national brand are “Culture” (14th place) and “Tourism” (13th place).

Targeted work to create a positive image of Sweden in the world began back in 1995 with the establishment of the Council for Promotion of Sweden Abroad (*Swedish: Nämnden för Sverigefrämjande i utlandet*), a platform for dialogue and cooperation between government bodies and quasi-governmental structures advocating for the interests of business and tourism (Business Sweden, Visit Sweden). Its task is to advise the Swedish government on issues related to Sweden’s image abroad. The Council is coordinated by the relevant departments of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, and the Agency for Economic and Regional Growth. The Swedish Institute (*Swedish: Svenska institutet, SI*) – an agency that answers to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs – plays an important role in the activities of the Council, dealing specifically with issues of public diplomacy. The Council publishes strategies for managing Sweden’s image abroad, most recently in 2017, which outlines the main objectives: “to promote trade; attract investment, tourists, and talent; promote cultural exchange; and strengthen the country’s position on the international stage and in multilateral di-

<sup>7</sup> Bilden av Sverige utomlands 2022. Årsrapport från Svenska institutet. Svenska institutet. 2023. URL: <https://si.se/app/uploads/2023/03/bilden-av-sverige-2022-tillganglighetsanpassad.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Omvärldens bild av Sverige. Sveriges position i Nation Brands Index 2023. Svenska institutet. 2023. URL: <https://si.se/app/uploads/2023/11/nbi-2023.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> A new section was introduced into the ranking methodology in 2023 called “Common Interest Questions” on two topics: “Nations as Personalities” and “Sustainability.” The Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index. Press Release – Supplemental Report. November, 2023. URL: <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023-10/NBI-2023-Press-Release-Supplemental-Deck-December-23.pdf>

plomacy<sup>10</sup>. The strategy describes Sweden as a “source of innovation and creativity in a world of great challenges<sup>11</sup>”, naming thoughtfulness, sincerity, openness, and innovation as the country’s core values, and society, innovation, sustainability, and creativity as its priority areas<sup>12</sup>. The “Society” attribute lists the following elements as important for the construction of a narrative about Sweden: the experience of Sweden’s transformation from a poor agricultural country into one of the most developed countries in the world; the commitment to human needs and improving environmental conditions in the implementation of domestic policy; the “Swedish model”; the generous family and social insurance policy; human rights protection; gender equality; and the idea of a public state.

The “Innovation” attribute suggests that Sweden’s brand should be built around innovation and technological development, including through Swedish TNCs, such as Ericsson, Electrolux, Skype, Minecraft, Spotify, etc.

The “Creative” attribute involves creating an image of Sweden as a country with freedom of expression and opinion, an active cultural life, and an independent media by creating a narrative discourse through various media channels, literary works, films, video games, and fashion items.

The “Sustainability” attribute covers three dimensions: social sustainability, economic sustainability, and environmental sustainability. It has to do with Sweden’s active participation in addressing global issues concerning the environment, social well-being and prosperity, and assistance to developing countries.

Sweden’s positioning on the international stage is largely based on the image of it being a “moral superpower” (*Swedish*: *moralisk stormakt*) (Belukhin, Vorotnikov, Dianina 2022: 136). The behaviour of “moral superpowers,” as the Swedish researcher Ann-Sofie Dahl notes, is based on the awareness on the part of the state that its activities are for the benefit of all humankind (Dahl 2006: 343). This gives the “moral superpower” the right to “direct” the activities of other states, “to act beyond its borders<sup>13</sup>”. This is why the cornerstones of Sweden’s foreign policy image and nation brand are developmental aid, followed by cultural and educational policies, the primary objective of which is to disseminate values, ideas, unique knowledge and experience. This largely determines which institutions are responsible for furthering Sweden’s positions in the world.

<sup>10</sup> Strategi 2.0 för arbetet med Sverige bilden i utlandet. Svenska institutet. 2017. URL: <https://sharingsweden.se/app/uploads/2015/06/strategi-foer-arbetet-med-sverige-bilden-i-utlandet-2.0.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Strategi 2.0 för arbetet med Sverige bilden i utlandet. Svenska institutet. 2017. URL: <https://sharingsweden.se/app/uploads/2015/06/strategi-foer-arbetet-med-sverige-bilden-i-utlandet-2.0.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Strategi 2.0 för arbetet med Sverige bilden i utlandet. Svenska institutet. 2017. URL: <https://sharingsweden.se/app/uploads/2015/06/strategi-foer-arbetet-med-sverige-bilden-i-utlandet-2.0.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Edqvist K., Stenberg J. Att förändra med moral Konsten att utnyttja utrikespolitik som medel för den inhemska opinionen. URL: <https://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordId=1325934&fileId=1325935>

Among the institutions that actively implement public diplomacy programmes and shape Sweden's nation brand as a democratic, technological, and ecological power, the Swedish Institute and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (known as Sida in Swedish) deserve special mention.

The tasks of the Swedish Institute include working directly on creating a favourable image of Sweden in the world; promoting Swedish education, research, and technology, and the Swedish language; furthering international cultural cooperation and scientific and student exchange; humanitarian aid, including through the exchange of experience and knowledge; and disseminating the values of democracy and sustainable development.<sup>14</sup>

According to the Swedish Institute's website, it allocates approximately 505 million Swedish krona (49.5 million USD) in budgetary funds annually for activities in the following areas: international cooperation; international aid; education; academic research; and business. An additional 300 million krona (29.5 million USD) are allocated for grants and scholarships.<sup>15</sup>

The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency is a government agency that works under the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. The main objective is to provide assistance to developing countries, and its priorities include combating poverty in developing countries; protecting human rights and the development of democracy; supporting peaceful development and preventing conflicts; gender equality; and environmental protection<sup>16</sup>.

There are two types of assistance to developing countries that Sweden provides as part of the work of the Agency: 1) long-term programmes and projects aimed at helping the development of individual countries and regions; and 2) urgent humanitarian aid in the event of a crisis. Some 40% of the first type of aid is provided within the framework of multilateral diplomacy through international organizations, mostly those that are part of the UN family (UNICEF, FAO, UNFPA, WHO, etc.), although the majority of aid is provided directly by Sweden. At present, the country provides assistance to 36 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe through bilateral diplomacy<sup>17</sup>.

Statistics show that Sweden spends more on development projects than any other Nordic country. For instance, as of 2022, Swedish development aid amounted to 0.891% of GNP (6053.4 million USD), while Norwegian development aid amounted to 0.863% of GNP (4784 million USD), and Danish development aid equalled 0.698% of GNP

<sup>14</sup> Förordning (2015:152) med instruktion för Svenska Institutet. URL: [https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/forordning-2015152-med-instruktion-for-svenska\\_sfs-2015-152](https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/forordning-2015152-med-instruktion-for-svenska_sfs-2015-152)

<sup>15</sup> Vårt uppdrag. Official website of the Swedish Institute. URL: <https://si.se/om-si/uppdrag-finansiering/#:~:text=sarskilda%20forutsattningar%20specificeras.-,Finansiering,utbildnings%2D%20och%20universitetsforskning%20samt%20naringsliv>

<sup>16</sup> Prioriteringar i biståndet. Official site of Sida. URL: <https://www.sida.se/sa-fungerar-bistandet/prioriteringar-i-bistandet>

<sup>17</sup> Två sorters bistånd. Sida. URL: <https://www.sida.se/sa-fungerar-bistandet/tva-sorters-bistand>

(2966.8 million USD). Meanwhile, the average for the countries of the OECD Development Assistance Committee of 0.36% of GNP. By comparison, the United States, a traditional great power, allocated just 0.217% of its GNP to development aid in 2022<sup>18</sup>.

### **Changes in Sweden's Educational and Cultural Activities in Eastern Europe and the Baltics**

Sweden's decline in the 2023 Nation Brand Index is largely due to its worsening image in the Arab world, primarily Saudi Arabia and Turkey.<sup>19</sup> This speaks to the importance of public diplomacy and bilateral cooperation in building a strong nation brand in a multipolar world<sup>20</sup>. The most important tools for this type of interaction are academic exchange and cultural diplomacy, which help people from different countries understand each other, learn about national characteristics, and pave the way for interaction in other areas.

The diverse range of educational and cultural programmes that are being implemented, including under the auspices of the Swedish Institute, is based on the principle of regionality, which thus allows Sweden to exert meaningful influence on its neighbours while keeping its own needs and interests in mind (Ragozin 2023: 71).

A priority goal of the Swedish Institute is to promote prosperity and stability in neighbouring countries (and beyond). Sweden cooperates in this area with Armenia, Azerbaijan, the Baltic States, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Poland, Russia (until 2022), and Ukraine, and is implemented as part of the strategies of the Swedish government: the Strategy for the Swedish Institute's Activities Concerning Cooperation in the Baltic Sea region for the Period 2016–2020 (extended indefinitely)<sup>21</sup>; the Strategy for Sweden's Support for Democracy, Human Rights and the Environment in Russia 2020–2024;<sup>22</sup> and the Strategy for Sweden's Reform Cooperation with Eastern Europe for 2021–2027.<sup>23</sup> Together, these strategies highlight the complementarity of the activities of the Swedish Institute and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.<sup>24, 25, 26</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Net ODA. OECD Data. URL: <https://data.oecd.org/oda/net-oda.htm>

<sup>19</sup> Omvärldens bild av Sverige. Sveriges position i Nation Brands Index 2023. Svenska institutet. 2023. URL: <https://si.se/app/uploads/2023/11/nbi-2023.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Sweden and the 2023 Nation Brands Index: Time for a rethink? Svenska institutet. URL: <https://si.se/en/sweden-and-the-2023-nation-brands-index-time-for-a-rethink/>

<sup>21</sup> Strategi för Svenska institutets verksamhet gällande samarbetet inom Östersjöregionen för perioden 2016–2020. Regeringskansliet. 2016. URL: <https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/725fa55efcad4bbabc92989f7eee4179/strategi-for-svenska-institutets-verksamhet-gallande-samarbetet-inom-ostersjoregionen-for-perioden-2016-2020.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Strategi för Sveriges stöd till mänskliga rättigheter och miljö i Ryssland 2020–2024. Regeringskansliet. 2020. URL: <https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/89ff32f3a5f8469d8be87ee1a946f361/strategi-for-sveriges-stod-till-demokrati-manskliga-rattigheter-och-miljo-i-ryssland-2020-2024.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Strategi för Sveriges reformsamarbete med Östeuropa 2021–2027. Regeringskansliet. 2021. URL: <https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/bd9ca35b1bb548a999bc67aab348acb5/strategi-for-sveriges-reformsamarbete-med-osteur-opa-20212027.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Strategi för Svenska institutets verksamhet gällande samarbetet inom Österjösregionen för perioden 2016–2020. Regeringskansliet. 2016. URL: <https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/725fa55efcad4bbabc92989f7eee4179/strategi-for-svenska-institutets-verksamhet-gallande-samarbetet-inom-ostersjoregionen-for-perioden-2016-2020.pdf>

Even before the Baltic countries joined the European Union in 2004, Sweden was deeply involved in various cooperation formats in the region that promoted large-scale reforms to further the processes of democratization and transition to a market economy in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. In addition to providing financial support for the reform of numerous agencies, the Swedish Institute also organized and held cultural events aimed at boosting the competencies of Baltic specialists, improving interaction between Swedish scientists and scientists from these countries, and promoting the Swedish language.<sup>27</sup>

The Swedish Institute is currently running three programmes in Eastern Europe and the Baltics through which it provides, among other things, financial support to various initiatives that promote cultural and academic exchanges, freedom of the media, and democracy. These programmes are the SI Baltic Sea Neighbourhood Programme, Akademiskt Samarbete, and Creative Partnership.

The latter programme includes CinéDOC School, a project that involves educational activities for teachers of over 60 schools in Georgia. Under the initiative, teachers are encouraged to use documentary films in their classrooms to help develop critical thinking in students and to instil in them a respect for human rights and democratic values.<sup>28</sup>

The Culture Makes Democracy project includes an educational programme for Belarusian activists, politicians, and art managers, which includes a trip to Gothenburg (Sweden) to discuss the interrelation between democratic values and creativity, as well as the latest trends in contemporary art, and cultural support systems. The idea is to develop art projects for the Belarusian audience, as well as to form a professional community of figures in the arts in Belarus.<sup>29</sup>

In 2022–2023, projects were launched to support independent media in Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (“Strong Partnerships Boost Resilience”), combat gender inequality in the academic environment in Armenia, Georgia, and Poland (“EquaStream”), support the participation of children and young people in various media activities in Georgia and Moldova (“Echolocation 2.0”), etc,

A significant part of the Swedish Institute’s programmes in Eastern Europe focuses on expanding cooperation in the Baltic region on protecting the environment and biodiversity, combating climate change, and promoting sustainable development in

<sup>25</sup> Strategi för Sveriges reformsamarbete med Östeuropa 2021–2027. Regeringskansliet. 2021. URL: <https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/bd9ca35b1bb548a999bc67aab348acb5/strategi-for-sveriges-reformsamarbete-med-osteur-20212027.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Strategi för Sveriges stöd till mänskliga rättigheter och miljö i Ryssland 2020–2024. Regeringskansliet. 2020. URL: <https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/89ff32f3a5f8469d8be87ee1a946f361/strategi-for-sveriges-stod-till-demokrati-man-skliga-rattigheter-och-miljo-i-ryssland-2020-2024.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> Eduards K. Sveriges stöd till de baltiska ländernas omvandling 1990–2003. Sida. 2004. URL: <https://cdn.sida.se/publications/files/sida3740sv-sveriges-stod-till-de-baltiska-landernas-omvandling-1990-2003.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> CinéDOC School: Civic education in schools through documentary film screenings. Svenska institutet. URL: <https://si.se/en/projects-granted-funding/cinedoc-school-civic-education-in-schools-through-documentary-film-screenings/>

<sup>29</sup> Culture Makes Democracy. Svenska institutet. URL: <https://si.se/en/projects-granted-funding/culture-makes-democracy/>



the Baltic countries. Typically, such projects are carried out in cooperation with other countries of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), including Germany, Finland, Denmark, and Norway. One of the most notable among these projects is the Baltic Sea Region H2 (BaSeH2) Network which involves, in addition to Sweden, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine, and promotes the decarbonization of the economic sector and the development of a secure low-carbon energy system. The project involved holding educational seminars to improve the competencies of respective specialists and developing a professional community that could influence the policy formation process in the energy sector<sup>30</sup>.

An examination of even a limited list of projects financed by the Swedish Institute shows that they are successors to the historical and cultural ties that Sweden developed in the region and the influence it once had there, and suggests the lack of equivalence of cultural exchange between Sweden and the countries of Eastern Europe and the Baltics. Cultural exchange is perceived in Sweden not as a dialogue between equal cultures that recognize each other's uniqueness and are capable of mutual enrichment, but rather as a one-way deal that is aimed at engendering cultural uniformity based on Swedish (or Western) standards and norms. Evidently, this paradigm leaves no room for recognizing the right of the countries of the region and their partners to make their own choices with regard to their cultural and civilizational development.

The current political situation driven by Russia's special military operation in Ukraine and the subsequent sanctions and restrictions against Russia by most Western countries has certainly impacted the nature and focus of events held as part of Sweden's public diplomacy efforts. The Swedish Institute has temporarily suspended cooperation with pro-government organizations in Russia and Belarus and "redirected" its activities to providing support to Ukraine<sup>31</sup>.

Two projects have been launched as part of the Creative Partnership initiative: an educational programme for training Ukrainian military personnel in the areas of human rights protection and democracy ("Digital Technology for Advancing Awareness and Knowledge of Human Rights in Ukrainian Military"); and a joint Swedish, Kosovan, Albanian, and Bosnia and Herzegovinian project to finance the restoration of Ukraine's cultural heritage ("Restoring Ukraine's Cultural Heritage in Partnership"). Almost 4 million Swedish krona (0.391 million USD) were allocated for these projects.

In spring 2022, the Swedish Institute launched a crisis support programme for Ukraine to provide assistance to Ukrainian organizations in the fields of culture, media, and civil society. Thanks to these efforts, eleven projects in literature, cinema, photography, urban development, and architecture received funding<sup>32</sup>. What is more,

<sup>30</sup> BaSeH2. Svenska institutet. URL: <https://si.se/en/projects-granted-funding/baseh2/>

<sup>31</sup> Svenska institutets stöd till Ukraina 2022–2023. Svenska institutet. URL: <https://si.se/svenska-institutets-stod-till-ukraina-2022-2023>

<sup>32</sup> Svenska institutets stöd till Ukraina 2022–2023. Svenska institutet. URL: <https://si.se/svenska-institutets-stod-till-ukraina-2022-2023>



16 of the 74 scholarships awarded under the SI Scholarships for Global Professionals programme in 2022 were intended for Ukrainians (21.6%), six more than the previous year.

As we mentioned above, an integral part of building the Swedish nation brand is the promotion of the Swedish language. Some 12,829,000 krona (1.25 million USD) were allocated by the Swedish Institute in 2022 for these purposes (accounting for 9% of its total expenses). However, the current situation has had a significant impact on support for teaching Swedish in the region, as cooperation with 18 Russian universities has been suspended indefinitely. A total of nine grants were awarded to educational institutions in Kyiv, Lviv, Gdansk, Poznan, Warsaw, Krakow, Tartu, Riga, and Vilnius<sup>33</sup>.

### **The Perception of the Swedish Nation Brand according to NBI**

According to the 2023 Nation Brand Index, the perception of Sweden in Russia did not worsen, despite the exacerbation of Russia–Sweden relations, including in the field of cultural and academic exchange. In fact, Sweden moved up one position from the previous year to 9th place. What is more, Sweden improved significantly in areas such as “Governance” (26th in 2022 to 10th in 2023) and “Peace and Security” (46th to 21st)<sup>34</sup>. This can be explained by the fact that Russians are for the most part positively disposed towards Sweden and the role it plays in the international agenda. In this regard, it would be a fair conclusion that a country’s reputational capital “accumulated” over a relatively long period of time and shows little variation. Perhaps the only thing that could significantly worsen the image of one country in the eyes of another is an out-of-the-ordinary event (note how Sweden’s image in the Arab world took a hit in 2023 following incidents of the burning of the Quran). What is more, the process of Sweden’s accession to NATO has been delayed, meaning that the image of the country’s “neutrality” has not yet been completely destroyed. Another explanation may be the lack of interest in political news from Sweden because other news items dominate the media agenda.

As for the other countries in the region, Sweden is also traditionally perceived in a positive light. In Eastern Europe and the Baltic countries, it is associated with such attributes as “high standard of living,” “modern,” “stable,” “beautiful,” and “open<sup>35</sup>”. It is noteworthy that the people of Ukraine are more favourably disposed to Sweden than the population of any other Eastern European country: 86% of Ukrainian respondents said that they would like to live and work in Sweden; and 93% noted the high standard

<sup>33</sup> Svenska institutets årsredovisning 2022. Svenska institutet. 2022. URL: [https://si.se/app/uploads/2023/02/svenska-institutets-arsredovisning-2022\\_20230222-ua.pdf](https://si.se/app/uploads/2023/02/svenska-institutets-arsredovisning-2022_20230222-ua.pdf)

<sup>34</sup> Omvärldens bild av Sverige. Sveriges position i Nation Brands Index 2023. Svenska institutet. 2023. URL: <https://si.se/app/uploads/2023/11/nbi-2023.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> Omvärldens bild av Sverige. Sveriges position i Nation Brands Index 2023. Svenska institutet. 2023. URL: <https://si.se/app/uploads/2023/11/nbi-2023.pdf>

of living in the country.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, knowledge about Sweden in the other countries of the region, including Poland, Armenia, Georgia, and Belarus, is rather low. This can be put down to geographical distance, the fact that news about Sweden is rarely covered in the national media, or the drop-off in cultural contacts (in the case of Belarus)<sup>37</sup>.

People in the Baltic countries, however, know quite a lot about Sweden. This is because the Baltics, primarily the people of Estonia and Latvia, have their own experience of interacting with the country, be it through travel, education, work, or personal contacts. The general feeling towards Sweden in the Baltic countries is positive, especially in Lithuania. At the same time, the Russian-speaking population of Estonia and Latvia are more positively disposed towards Sweden than those who speak Estonian and Latvian, respectively. It is also worth noting that the people of these countries welcome the prospects for expanding cooperation with Sweden: almost 80% of respondents in Latvia and slightly more than 70% of those in Estonia and Lithuania spoke positively about it<sup>38</sup>. And these figures are significantly higher among the younger generation in all countries, approaching 90%. The areas of highest priority are healthcare, social wellbeing, human rights protection, and the environment<sup>39</sup>.

## Conclusion

As a relatively small country, Sweden does not have huge human, economic, technical or military resources at its disposal and is thus forced to rely on “soft power” in its policies. Sweden is an export-oriented economy and, as such, it pays special attention to issues of foreign policy positioning and nation branding, while the cultural and educational activities of the Swedish Institute are a powerful means of “soft power” and align with the tasks of building the country’s narrative, introducing people to its unique features, values and culture through projects and programmes, and creating an image of the country that sets it apart from other powers. In terms of its effectiveness, Sweden’s nation branding strategy has proven successful, as its positions in international rankings, and its performance opinion polls conducted in other countries on the country’s image, demonstrate. Public diplomacy activities aimed at developing cultural and academic exchange play an important role here: bilateral contacts are crucial for maintaining interest in the country, creating positive associations, while at the same time allowing Sweden to preserve its positive image in the world, despite the various

<sup>36</sup> Bilden av Sverige i Central- och Östeuropa. Svenska institutet. 2022. URL: <https://si.se/app/uploads/2021/04/bilden-av-sverige-i-central-och-osteuropa-1.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> Bilden av Sverige i Central- och Östeuropa. Svenska institutet. 2022. URL: <https://si.se/app/uploads/2021/04/bilden-av-sverige-i-central-och-osteuropa-1.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> Bilden av Sverige i Baltikum. Svenska institutet. 2022. URL: <https://si.se/app/uploads/2022/10/bilden-av-sverige-i-baltikum.pdf>

<sup>39</sup> Bilden av Sverige i Baltikum. Svenska institutet. 2022. URL: <https://si.se/app/uploads/2022/10/bilden-av-sverige-i-baltikum.pdf>

fluctuations that occur in connection with international events. In the past, priority was given to programmes that had a clear bias towards Western social theory and aspects dedicated to maintaining democratic values, human rights, environmental protection, and social wellbeing. The Swedish Institute redirected the focus of its activities in 2022, allocating aid to Ukraine and suspending cooperation with pro-government organizations in Russia and Belarus. Even so, the image of Sweden as a country that is eager to provide assistance for social, economic, cultural, and education policies continues to take shape. At the same time, the results of the 2023 Nation Brand Index demonstrate that Sweden has not suffered any reputational damage in the eyes of the Russian people, despite the fact that certain channels of cooperation between Russia and Sweden, including in the field of cultural and academic exchange, have been suspended or “frozen.” The Swedish Institute continues to actively develop cooperation in Eastern Europe and the Baltics through support for cultural and educational projects, work with opinion leaders, digital diplomacy, scholarship programmes, and support for teaching Swedish in educational institutions in the region.

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