

Beyond the political framing battles

– Sweden in an international comparison



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“Sweden is still a good country. Not a perfect country – we have substantial future challenges – but definitely not a country in crisis or in collapse.”

Foreword

Public debate requires both facts and opinions. We can have different opinions about the causes of problems and what should be done about them, but for the debate to move forward, it is important that we also base our actions on facts. With this report, Futurion wants to contribute to a more fact-based public debate.

Ever since the so-called refugee crisis in 2015, there is a recurring theme in the public debate that Sweden is a country in decline. At that time, many claimed that Sweden was threatened by a system collapse. Such a thing never happened, but that has not prevented various parties from subsequently portraying Sweden as a country with in enormous trouble.

Of course there are challenges in Sweden. With integration, with skills provision, with the organisation and long-term financing of the welfare system. But these are not unique Swedish problem. To get some perspective, it is reasonable to look at how Sweden compares with other countries. Only in this way can we also form an idea of what we can learn from others, and what we can teach them.

Five years ago, Futurion commissioned Professor Jesper Strömbäck to summarise various indices that compare countries, based on a large number of parameters. The results showed that Sweden was regularly ranked as one of the world's foremost countries. In some cases, Sweden was ranked as the leading country in the world, and in most cases as one of the top ten. Only in four cases was Sweden not among the 15 top-ranked countries.

Since then five eventful years have passed. Therefore, we have asked Jesper Strömbäck to do the same study again, based on new figures and facts.

The new study – which is presented in this report – shows that Sweden retains its position as one of the world's best countries. The study has been expanded and includes eleven more indices. This makes it more difficult to make a direct comparison between Sweden in 2022 with the Sweden of 2017, but to the extent that there have been changes, there are more signals that Sweden has strengthened its position somewhat than that it has deteriorated.

So, Sweden is still a good country. Not a perfect country – we have substantial future challenges – but definitely not a country in crisis or in collapse. Obviously we are doing more things right than we are doing wrong. Let's take that knowledge with us when we address the future challenges!

Ann-Therése Enarsson
CEO of Futurion





About the author

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During the work on this report, Elena Broda, a doctoral student in the Department of Journalism, Media and Communication (JMG) at the University of Gothenburg, assisted with data collection and comments. Many thanks Elena!

Introduction

Over the last ten years, many have claimed that Sweden is a country in decline and a country affected or threatened by a system collapse. When I investigated this issue five years ago by comparing how Sweden was ranked in various international comparisons, it turned out that this was not the case. On the contrary, that comparison showed that Sweden was ranked as one of the world's foremost countries.¹

Despite this, claims that Sweden is a country in crisis or decay continue to be heard in the public debate. In addition to extremists, even some established voices in the debate have gone so far as to claim that Sweden has gone from being a developed country to becoming a developing country² and that we are in the midst of some form of civil war.³ This could easily be dismissed as exaggerated rhetoric, but still raises questions about how Sweden now stands in comparison with other countries. As this report will show, Sweden has maintained its position. Despite everything that has happened domestically and in the world in recent years, Sweden is still ranked as one of the world's foremost countries.

It's about facts

The answer to the question about the situation in Sweden or any other country is not a matter of opinion. They are basically a question of facts. This distinction is reminiscent of a classic quote by the US Ambassador and Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1927–2003): Everyone has the right to their own opinions, but not to their own facts. This familiar quotation is often taken for granted, but at the same time we live in a time where opinions are often presented as facts, where uncomfortable facts are often dismissed as mere opinions, where

there is a greater spread of misinformation, digital propaganda and undue informational influence than ever, and where the political debate is increasingly focused on framing battles related to how to define reality rather than about ideologies or proposals on how to change society. This is not only true of foreign policy, where Russia during its invasion of Ukraine, illustrates the central role played by propaganda and undue informational influence. This also applies to domestic policy. Regardless of level, this risks leading to reduced agreement on what is true and false, increased polarisation of people's perceptions of reality, and a weakened democracy.

The fact is that an important precondition for democracy to work well is that people are at least reasonably informed about politics and society in the broadest sense and that there is a broad consensus on what is true and false.⁴ This in turn presupposes that people have access to true and relevant information



“Despite everything that has happened domestically and in the world in recent years, Sweden is still ranked as one of the world's foremost countries.”

¹ Strömbäck, 2017.

² Among other things, Alice Teodorescu Măwe claimed in a tweet (12-01-2022) that “The journey from developed country to developing country was a quick one”.

³ This has been expressed by many on the more extreme right wing, but also by Krister Thelin, formerly a judge at the UN War Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (tweet dated 14-08-2021).

⁴ See amongst others Rosenfeld, 2019; Wikforss, 2021.

about society and its development, and that people have both the ability and the will to distinguish between true and false or misleading information. At the same time, research shows that there is often a significant gap between ideals and reality.

The battle for the image of reality

A clear example of this, alongside the invasion of Ukraine, is the development in the United States after the 2020 Presidential election. Despite the fact that there is no evidence whatsoever that there was election fraud, and despite the fact that responsible authorities have determined that it was one of the most reliable elections ever, leading Republicans, led by Donald Trump, continue to claim that Trump actually won. Opinion polls also show that a full year after the elections, a majority of Republicans believe that Biden won because of electoral fraud, while the corresponding percentage among Democrats is two percent.⁵ This perception gap has not only paralysed American political debate, increased political polarisation and diminished the legitimacy of the electoral system. In the name of stopping non-existent electoral fraud, Republicans at State level have also taken a number of initiatives aimed at restricting voting opportunities – especially among minorities.⁶

While these examples are extreme in many ways, several studies show that people often have misperceptions of reality and that there are clear perception gaps between groups, depending on their political sympathies among other things.⁷ A central explanation for this is the political battle to define what reality looks like. That is to say that different parties put forward different descriptions of reality. These may be related to history as well as current conditions and developments over time. The reason is not only that different political actors have genuinely different perceptions of reality, but is often – perhaps most often – strategic. The bottom line is that if political actors succeed in defining reality in ways that support and motivate the policies they pursue, the conditions for gaining acceptance and support for the political

proposals they have will improve.⁸ If, for example, some political actors succeed in establishing the perception that immigration is a cost for Sweden, the probability increases that support for a more restrictive immigration policy will increase; if they succeed in establishing the perception that for-profit companies in the welfare sector lead to poorer welfare, this increases the chances of receiving support for a policy that entails restrictions for for-profit companies in the welfare sector; and if they succeed in establishing the perception that high taxes lead to poorer growth, their chances of receiving support for proposals that deal with tax cuts are likely to increase.

A similar logic applies when it comes to describing the societal development in broader terms, i.e. whether things in various respects are moving in the right or the wrong direction. If political actors succeed in establishing the perception that things are going badly for Sweden, the probability increases that people will want to replace those in power, and vice versa: if they succeed in establishing the perception that things are going well for Sweden, the probability increases that people will vote the same party or parties to power. It is therefore logical that opposition parties usually claim that the development is moving in the wrong direction, while parties in government usually conversely claim that it is moving in the right direction. While it is natural for opposition parties to highlight things that are negative while the opposite applies to government parties, there is a risk, not least before an election, that there will be a conflict between putting across a flattering description and putting across a pessimistic description where nuances and truth are lost.

Increased political polarisation

This battle to define what reality looks like can be seen as an expression of how political actors shape or frame reality in order to gain a so-called problem-formulation privilege.⁹ In this context, strategically framing reality, or different aspects of reality, is about choosing facts, words and wordings in a way that highlights certain problem descriptions, causal explanations and possible solutions.¹⁰ Framing reality in a specific way can also be used strategically as a way to hide actual opinions and values. Instead of saying that they want to implement certain proposals, they may justify the proposals by saying that reality looks a certain way and that we therefore “must” pursue a certain policy. Again, the United States is a good example, where few Republicans admit that they want to restrict the ability to vote. Proposals for restrictions are instead motivated by the “fact” that electoral fraud is a major problem that must be addressed. Similarly, many proposals for a more restrictive immigration policy in Sweden in recent years have been justified by the “fact” that Sweden must restrict immigration. In connection with Russia's invasion of

“If one succeeds in establishing the image that things are going badly for Sweden, the probability increases that people will want to replace those in power.”

5 Monmouth University Poll, 2021.

6 Brennan Center for Justice, 2022.

7 See amongst others Douglas, 2021; Flynn, 2016; Ipsos Mori, 2018, 2020; Krosnick & MacInnis, 2020.

8 See amongst others Lakoff, 2014; Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019; Luntz, 2008; Schaffner & Sellers, 2010.

9 Gustafsson, 1999.

10 See amongst others Entman, 1993; Lakoff, 2014; Luntz, 2010; Schaffner & Sellers, 2010; Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2019.

Ukraine, the rhetoric suddenly changed again and the "must" vanished from the established debate.

At the same time, to suggest that the battle to define and frame what reality looks like has become a more important part of the political debate is problematic. One reason is that it creates a strong incentive for politicians and other political actors to ignore research and facts that don't match the perception of reality that they are trying to establish, which leads to the nuances of a reality that is usually neither black nor white being lost. It also contributes to the dissemination of misinformation, that is, the dissemination of false or misleading information in order to influence people's opinions and perceptions of reality.¹¹ Even though there is a lack of research on exactly how common this is, there is no doubt that Swedish politicians are also engaged in disseminating false and misleading information¹², and when it happens on the increasingly important social media, it is rarely noticed by others than dissenters. It's also important to not ignore the undue influence of information from foreign actors who want to influence the Swedish debate and politics. The more the political debate is focused on trying to establish and influence perceptions of reality, the stronger the incentives to use false and misleading information, and the more space for undue propaganda and information warfare. This may be done, for example, by presenting unrepresentative anecdotal evidence as generally valid and of selecting such research that supports a thesis without regard to what other studies show. The incentives to dismiss or attack those that provide information that is contrary to the perception of reality they are trying to establish, for example scholars and the media, will also be stronger.

"There is no doubt that even Swedish politicians are engaged in disseminating false and misleading information."

All in all, this risks leading people to be misled and hold misperceptions of reality. This risk is exacerbated by the fact that people are characterised by a (more or less strong) tendency to prefer and attach greater faith to information that confirms their own opinions and perceptions of reality.¹³ The risk is further exacerbated by a media development that is characterized by an increasing range of political alternative media, which for political reasons spreads false and misleading information, and by the fact that it has become easier for people

to selectively expose themselves to information sources that confirm the perceptions and opinions they already hold.¹⁴ In addition, research shows that those who seek out political alternative media are characterised by a lower trust in the established media, and that the use of such alternatives leads to declining trust in the established media.¹⁵ But even in cases where people want to find correct information and avoid false and misleading information, it can be time consuming and difficult to sift through all the information they are exposed to and know what to trust.

Another problem in this context is that the battle to define and frame the perception of reality risks leading to deadlocks in the public debate and to increased political polarisation.¹⁶ This is not least because the question of what is true or false is characterised by strong notions of right or wrong. For example, if one person claims that violent crime has increased during the last term of office and another that it has decreased, both cannot be right: someone is wrong. But admitting that you are wrong is often difficult and can mean a loss of prestige, not least when the debate takes place in public. This risks leading to counterattacks and the ambition to try even harder to defend something that is not in line with research and facts. When the debate is about concrete political proposals – such as stricter regulation of welfare gains or reduced taxes – it is relatively easy to agree to disagree. It is much more difficult when different perceptions of reality stand opposed to each other.

Sweden ranks high

Against this background, it has become more difficult, but also more important, to present and try to gain acceptance for factual and accurate information about what reality actually looks like – beyond narrow political agendas, beyond a selective use of research and facts, and beyond politically motivated flattering and pessimistic descriptions. For that reason, a review was made five years ago of where Sweden was ranked in a total of 38 different international comparative indices and rankings. The results showed that Sweden was regularly ranked as one of the world's foremost countries. In some cases, Sweden was ranked as the leading country in the world, and in most cases as one of the top ten countries. Only in four cases was Sweden not among the 15 top-ranked countries.

When that report was published, one objection – not least against the background of the so-called refugee crisis – was that the international rankings on which the report was based did not capture the very latest developments. Since then, claims that Sweden in one way or another is a country in decline have also occurred many times. There are therefore strong reasons to follow up on the previous report. ●

¹¹ See amongst others Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018; Kavanagh & Rich, 2018.

¹² Some examples are given in Strömbäck, 2022.

¹³ Kunda, 1990; Nickerson, 1998.

¹⁴ Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018; Garrett et al., 2013; Guess, Nyhan & Reifler, 2020.

¹⁵ See amongst others Andersen, Shehata & Andersson, 2021.

¹⁶ Levendusky, 2013.

Purpose and approach

Against this background, the purpose of this report is to map out how Sweden ranks in different international rankings that are focused on comparing the actual situation in different countries. An important advantage of using international comparative indices and rankings – for example, the UNDP's Human Development Index and Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index – is that they are completely independent of the Swedish public debate. They may have been developed to benefit a certain political issue, but not to benefit or disadvantage either an individual party or a side in the Swedish debate. None of the organisations that compile the international comparative indices and rankings have any interest in portraying Sweden or any other given country in a certain way.

As this report is a follow-up on the previous report, it follows the same principles regarding delimitations and approaches.¹⁷ The identification of relevant international indices and rankings has been made on the basis of which rankings were included in the previous study as well as new searches where search terms such as "international comparison countries", "country rankings" and "international index countries" have been used.¹⁸ It has resulted in a comprehensive list. Based on this, a selection has been made based on the following criteria:

- (a) that the ranking covers at least 20 countries,
- (b) that the ranking has been compiled by an established organisation,
- (c) that it is based on an index that includes a number of different indicators,
- (d) that it is about comparing the actual situation – the outcome of the political policies – in different countries rather than policies per se,
- (e) that the most recent publication has taken place in the last five years,
- (f) and that Sweden is one of the countries included in the rankings.¹⁹

Based on this process, 49 international comparative indices and rankings were identified and included in this study. Of those included in the previous review, six indices have been deleted as they have not published any new rankings. 32 indices were also included in the previous report, while 17 new ones have been added

Sweden in an international comparison

The international comparative indices and rankings that were identified are about everything from democracy and freedom of the press, to innovativeness, competitiveness, social justice and human development. The number of countries included varies, but the core consists of countries within the EU and the OECD. For natural reasons, the indices are based on different data sources, but it is not uncommon for several indices to use partly the same data sources. Examples of this are statistics from the World Bank, the World Economic Forum, the UN and Eurostat. In general, the indices and rankings are primarily based on "hard data" such as facts from various statistical sources, although some are also based more or less on surveys among experts and in some cases among the general public. Below, each of the indices and rankings will be described in an overview, with a focus on (a) the organisation behind them, (b) what they measure, (c) Sweden's position in the latest ranking, and (d) which countries tops them.²⁰ ●

¹⁷ Strömbäck, 2017.

¹⁸ Strömbäck, 2017.

¹⁹ These delimitations mean that some well-known international comparisons are not included. This includes the so-called PISA surveys, which are not based on indices. This also includes the Migration Integration Policy Index, which compares integration policies in different countries but not how integration actually works or the results of the policy measures. This also includes individual research studies. This also includes the Global Cybersecurity Index and Best Countries 2021, because it is essentially based on one data source and not on an index.

²⁰ As for the latest ranking, it states which year it was published. This usually means that the results refer to the previous year, but there are also indices whose results are based on results from previous years. In these cases, it is a matter of not always having current data from all countries, and that the year in which access to data in terms of specific indicators is greatest was chosen.

International indices
and rankings are used
to be able to map out
Sweden's position.



Photo: Johnér/Malin Möner

Democracy and human rights and freedoms

One area where there are several international indices and rankings focus broadly on democracy and human rights and freedoms. In this context, I also include indices that deal with the prevalence of corruption and the degree of legal certainty, as both have a direct and an indirect significance for democracy and human rights and freedoms.

Democracy Index

This index is produced by *The Economist* and its Intelligence Unit, and the latest ranking covers a total of 167 countries and independent territories. The index is based on 60 indicators that relate to five aspects of democracy as a form of government: the electoral system and the degree of pluralism, political freedoms and rights, political participation, political culture and how the political system works. Examples of indicators are whether the national elections are free and fair, whether there is electoral fraud, whether there are mechanisms to ensure that the government can be scrutinised and held accountable, the prevalence of corruption, how much people trust the government, voting turnout, how interested people are in politics and how strong the popular support for democracy is. The most recent index was published in 2021, and it ranked Norway in first place, followed by New Zealand and Finland. Sweden was ranked fourth, followed by Iceland.²¹

Freedom in the World

This index is published annually by Freedom House, and the latest ranking covers 195 countries and 15 territories. The index is based on 10 indicators that deal with political rights and 15 that deal with civil liberties. Examples of indicators are whether national elections are free and fair, whether electoral authorities are free and independent of political pressure, whether different minorities have full political rights and opportunities to

participate politically, whether it is possible to hold the government accountable between elections and whether the exercise of political power is open and transparent, as well as whether there are free and independent media. The latest index was published in 2022, and in it Sweden – together with Finland and Norway – was ranked in shared first place.²²

Human Freedom Index

This index is compiled by the Cato Institute in collaboration with the Fraser Institute. Both are think tanks that work for increased individual freedom, a limited public sector and free markets. The latest index was published in 2021 and covers 165 countries and independent territories. It is based on 82 indicators. The index consists of two parts that together constitute human freedom: personal freedom and economic freedom. In terms of economic freedom, the index measures basically the same aspects as the *Economic Freedom of the World* (see below), so it won't be mentioned here. With regard to personal freedom, the index and ranking are based on the degree of rule of law, personal security and safety (including the prevalence of various types of crime and conflict), freedom of movement, freedom of religion, freedom of association, freedom of assembly and expression and individual rights in close relationships. In the latest index, Switzerland, New Zealand and Denmark were ranked in the first three places, while Sweden was ranked in ninth place.²³

²¹ For more information, see The Economist Intelligence Unit (2021).

²² Freedom House, 2022 and <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores?sort=desc&order=Total%20Score%20and%20Status>.

²³ Vázquez et al., 2021.

World Press Freedom Index

This index is compiled annually by Reporters Without Borders. The latest ranking covers 180 countries and was published in 2021. The index aims to examine the extent of press freedom that prevails in the countries surveyed, and is produced through expert surveys and analyses of abuses against press freedom. The expert surveys cover 87 questions, and among other things, the index includes the degree of pluralism, media's independence from political, economic or religious institutions and those in power, the legal framework, the prevalence of self-censorship and the prevalence of abuse and threats against journalists. In the latest study, Sweden was ranked third. In first and second place were Norway and Finland, followed by Sweden, Denmark and Costa Rica.²⁴

Rule of Law Index

This index is compiled by the World Justice Project, an organisation that works to increase the rule of law in the world. Methodologically, it is based on extensive surveys aimed at citizens as well as lawyers and experts. The latest version of the index consists of eight dimensions, and 44 sub-factors, which have been constructed based on over 500 questionnaires. Among the factors included are constraints on governmental powers, absence of corruption, whether there are guarantees for fundamental human rights and freedoms, access to public information, whether civil rights are protected, the effectiveness and impartiality of the criminal justice system, and the regulatory environment. The latest index was published in 2021 and covers 139 countries. Denmark, Norway and Finland were at the top, while Sweden was ranked fourth.²⁵

Corruption Perceptions Index

This index is compiled by Transparency International and aims to examine the degree of corruption in different countries. The index is based on an aggregation of results from other studies that, via expert interviews and surveys among entrepreneurs, analyse the prevalence of corruption in the public sector. The latest edition of this index is based on data from thirteen different sources. The latest ranking was published in 2021 and covers 180 countries. In shared first place were Denmark, Finland and New Zealand. Sweden was ranked fourth, together with Norway and Singapore.²⁶

Global Corruption Index

This index is compiled by Global Risk Profile, a company that specialises in managing various risks that companies and authorities face. As part of this, it produces the Global Corruption Index, which covers 196 countries and territories and is based on 43 variables. These include whether the countries have ratified

key international conventions, legislation and the rule of law, the perceived extent of corruption (taken from the Corruption Perceptions Index) but also the World Bank's survey of entrepreneurs, and the extent of crime among civil servants. Compared with the Corruption Perceptions Index, it is thus based on more data sources. The latest index was published in 2021, and according to it, Finland, Norway and New Zealand are ranked highest. Sweden is ranked fifth.²⁷

Global Peace Index

This index is compiled by the Institute for Economics and Peace and aims to measure and compare the degree of "negative peace", which refers to the absence of violence or fear of being exposed to violence. The index is based on three pillars, which together comprise 23 indicators. The first pillar deals with involvement in internal or international conflicts, the second with the prevalence and exposure to crime, terrorism and the degree of political stability, and the third with the degree of militarisation. The latest index was published in 2021 and covers 163 countries. Iceland, New Zealand and Denmark were at the top, while Sweden was ranked 15th.²⁸

“The ranking is based, among other things, on the degree of legal certainty, personal security and safety.”

Fragile State Index

This index is compiled by the think tank Fund for Peace. It is based on twelve dimensions and over a hundred indicators. The twelve dimensions are about the monopoly of violence, how fragmented the elites are, conflicts between different groups in the country, economic development, equality in terms of economic development, the economic opportunities for groups and whether there are opportunities for advancement, the legitimacy of the political system, access to public service and public services, human rights and the rule of law, demographic sustainability, the situation of refugees (including internally displaced persons), and interventions in the country by external organisations and countries. The latest index covers 179 countries and was published in 2021. Given the construction of the index, stable democracies generally end up high, with Finland, Norway and Iceland ranked highest. Sweden is ranked eighth.²⁹ ●

²⁴ <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>

²⁵ World Justice Project, 2021.

²⁶ Transparency International, 2021 and <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021>.

²⁷ Global Risk Profile, 2021.

²⁸ Institute for Economics & Peace, 2021.

²⁹ Fund for Peace, 2021.

Various indices compare, among other things, the degree of social justice, equality, the healthcare system, wellbeing and the degree of social and human development.



Photo: Johnér/Juliana Wolf Garçindo

Human development, gender equality and social justice

As in the case of democracy and human rights, there are several international comparative indices and rankings which – in a broad sense – cover the degree of human development, gender equality and social justice. In this context, this also includes indices and rankings that deal with health and the situation for children.

Human Development Index

This index is compiled by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). It aims to examine and compare different countries in terms of three dimensions that are seen as expressions of a high degree of human development: that people have a long and healthy life, that people have opportunities for education, and what standard of living people have. The index is based on four indicators related to these dimensions. The latest ranking was published in 2020 and covers 189 countries. In it, Norway, Ireland and Switzerland are at the top, while Sweden is in seventh place. The same survey also presents a ranking where the results have been adjusted for the degree of inequality, and even then Sweden is in seventh place.³⁰

Gender Inequality Index

This index is also compiled by the United Nations Development Program and is presented as part of the same report that presents the *Human Development Index*. It is based on five indicators and aims to compare the degree of gender equality in reproductive health, political representation in the national parliament, level of education and labour market participation. The latest ranking was published in 2020 and covers 189 countries. In it, Switzerland and Denmark are ranked highest, while Sweden is ranked third.³¹

Gender Gap Index

Another index that deals with equality between women and men is the *Gender Gap Index*, which is compiled by the World Economic Forum. The index covers the degree of equality in terms of (*a*) economic participation and opportunities (*b*) educational attainment, (*c*) health and survival, (*d*) political empowerment. An index is constructed for each of these dimensions, and in addition a summary index is constructed, which is based on fourteen indicators. The latest index was published in 2021 and covers 156 countries. According to this latest index, Sweden was ranked fifth, after Iceland, Finland, Norway and New Zealand.³²

Gender Equality Index

Another index that deals with equality is the Gender Equality Index, which is compiled by the European Institute for Gender Equality. It covers all EU Member States, and measures, among other things, gender equality in working life, access to money, education, housework, female representation in political assemblies and the business community, violence against women and health. An index is constructed for different dimensions, and in addition a summary index is constructed. The latest index was published in 2021, where Sweden is ranked in first place, followed by Denmark and the Netherlands.³³



30 UNDP, 2020, page 343 and page 351.

31 UNDP, 2020, page 361.

32 World Economic Forum, 2021.

33 European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021.

Women Peace and Security Index

A fourth index that deals with equality is the Women Peace and Security Index, produced by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security together with The Peace Research Institute Oslo. The index aims to compare the status and position of women on the basis of three dimensions: economic, social and political inclusion, justice (formal laws and informal discrimination), and security at the individual, local and societal level. It is based on eleven indicators. The latest index was published in 2021 and covers 170 countries. Norway, Finland and Iceland are ranked in the first three places, while Sweden is ranked in seventh place.³⁴

Euro Health Consumer Index

This index is compiled by Health Consumer Powerhouse, the purpose of which is to compare healthcare systems in different countries. The index comprises six dimensions and 46 indicators. The dimensions are patient rights and access to information, the accessibility of care (waiting time for treatment), the outcomes of care, range and reach of various healthcare interventions, preventive work and the use of pharmaceuticals. The indicators include whether you as a patient are entitled to a second opinion, how long the waiting time is for different treatments, whether you can access a family doctor on the same day, the incidence of infant death, whether dental care is included in general health care or health insurance, the proportion of the population with high blood pressure and the degree of subsidisation of medicines. The latest ranking was published in 2018 and covers 35 countries in Europe. In this latest ranking, Sweden was ranked in eighth place, while Switzerland, the Netherlands and Norway top the rankings.³⁵

Social Progress Index

This index is compiled by Social Progress Imperative and aims to go beyond economic indicators to examine the degree of social and human development. It is based on just over 50 indicators, divided into three dimensions: basic human needs (e.g. access to food, running water, electricity, physical security), foundations for human wellbeing (e.g. education, health and freedom of the press, a clean living environment with low emissions) and opportunities (e.g. political freedoms and rights, religious freedom, tolerance and access to higher education). The most recent index was published in 2021 and covers 168 countries. According to this, Norway is ranked in first place, followed by Finland and Denmark, while Sweden was ranked in seventh place.³⁶

Social Justice Index

This index is compiled by the Bertelsmann Stiftung and aims to compare the degree of social justice. The latest version covers 41 countries. The guiding definition of social justice emphasises that all people should have equal opportunities to shape their lives and participate in society. Based on such a definition, the index comprises six dimensions: poverty prevention, equitable education, labour market access, health, social cohesion and non-discrimination, and justice over generations. The latest survey is based on 36 indicators, including the proportion of the population living in relative poverty³⁷, the importance of socio-economic background for school results, the proportion leaving school without complete grades, unemployment in general and among specific groups (e.g. people between the ages of 55 and 64 years), the extent of economic inequality³⁸, support for families with children and retirees, respectively, and the size of the central Government debt. The latest index was published in 2019, and Iceland was ranked in first place, followed by Norway and Denmark. Sweden was ranked fifth.³⁹

Human Capital Index

This index is compiled by the World Economic Forum and aims to investigate what human capital a child born today can be expected to acquire by the time he or she turns eighteen. It consists of four components: survival from birth to school age, expected years of education and school results, and health. The data comes largely from transnational organisations such as the WHO. The latest index was published in 2020 and covers 174 countries and territories. It is topped by Singapore and Hong Kong, while Sweden shares third place with Japan, South Korea, Canada, and Finland.⁴⁰

Better Life Index

This index is produced by the OECD and is about examining and comparing the degree of human wellbeing in different countries. The latest index and ranking is based on eleven dimensions and just over 80 indicators. The dimensions are housing, income and wealth, work and job quality, education, environmental quality, civic engagement, health, subjective well-being, social connections, physical safety and work-life balance.⁴¹ The latest survey was published in 2020 and covers 40 countries. On the *Better Life Index* website one can see how different countries are ranked based on the respective indicators and dimensions and the overall ranking. Based on the overall ranking, Norway ends up at the top, followed by Australia and Iceland. Sweden is ranked in eighth place.⁴²

34 Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2021.

35 Health Consumer Powerhouse, 2019.

36 Social Progress Imperative, 2021.

37 The definition of relative poverty is that you have an income after tax that is less than 60 percent of the median income.

38 The concrete indicator is the countries' Gini coefficient.

39 Hellman, Schmidt & Heller, 2019.

40 World Bank, 2020a. The report does not report any ranking but the index value for all countries, and based on this, Sweden occupies shared third place. See also page 41.

41 OECD, 2020; <https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/>.

42 <https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/>.

Inclusive Development Index

This index has been compiled by the World Economic Forum, and aims to examine and compare different countries in terms of the degree of inclusive and sustainable economic growth. The index is based on the three dimensions of growth and development, inclusion and intergenerational equity and sustainability. The index is based on twelve indicators, which, in simplified terms, are about GDP per capita, labour productivity, average number of years that people can be expected to live in full health, employment rate, inequality in terms of income and wealth,⁴³ the proportion living in poverty,⁴⁴ median income, carbon dioxide emissions in relation to GDP, the use of natural capital in relation to GNI, the extent of central Government debt and the demographic dependency ratio. The latest index was published in 2018 and covers 103 countries. According to this latest index, Sweden was ranked sixth, while Norway, Iceland and Luxembourg were ranked the top three countries.⁴⁵

KidRights Index


This index is compiled by the international NGO KidsRights, the Erasmus School of Economics and the International Institute of Social Studies. The purpose of the index is to examine the extent to which different countries live up to the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child. It covers five pillars – life expectancy and survival, health and healthcare, education, protection and child rights environment – and is based on 20 indicators. Some examples of indicators are whether there is protection against child labour, life expectancy at birth and how many years boys and girls can be expected to go to school. The index is based on both quantitative data from UNICEF and the UNDP and qualitative analyses of statements from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The latest index was published in 2021 and covers 182 countries. It is topped by Iceland, followed by Switzerland and Finland, while Sweden is ranked fourth.⁴⁶ 



Photo: iStock

⁴³ The measures used are the Gini coefficient and a distinction is made between net-income Gini and wealth Gini.

⁴⁴ The definition of poverty varies depending on whether it is a country with a high or low level of development. For countries with a high level of development, a relative measure of poverty is applied. The definition of relative poverty is that you live in a household with an income after tax that is less than 50 percent of the median income.

⁴⁵ World Economic Forum 2018a.

⁴⁶ KidsRights Foundation, 2021.

Economy, competitiveness and entrepreneurship

A third area where there are several international indices and rankings is about economics, competitiveness in various respects and entrepreneurship. This category also includes those that concern issues that have a direct and indirect significance for the economy and entrepreneurship, such as indices that deal with innovativeness and digitalisation.

Global Competitiveness Index

This index is produced by the World Economic Forum and is about the competitiveness of different countries. Competitiveness is defined in this context as the attributes and qualities of an economy that allow for a more efficient use of factors of production. This is measured by 103 different indicators ranging from property rights and debt dynamics to the quality of infrastructure, the level of inflation, life expectancy, the quality of the education system and skills of the workforce to name a few examples. The latest index was published in 2019 and covers 141 countries. In this latest index, Sweden is ranked in eighth place. Singapore is at the top, followed by the USA, Hong Kong and the Netherlands.⁴⁷

World Competitiveness Ranking

This index is compiled by the IMD Business School in Switzerland and covers 64 countries. It is based on 334 criteria which, among other things, refer to how effectively the country is governed, how well the business community functions, the strength and functioning of the economy, and access to different types of infrastructure. It is mainly based on statistics, supplemented by a survey aimed at managers in the business world. The latest ranking was published in 2021. Switzerland is at the top, followed by Sweden and Denmark.⁴⁸

World Digital Competitiveness Ranking

This index is also compiled by the IMD Business School in Switzerland. It aims to measure and compare how advanced different countries are when it comes to adopting and using different types of information technologies in both the public and private sectors and in society at large. The index is based on 52 indicators, of which just over half are based on official statistics, while the others are based on a survey of experts and managers in the business sector. The latest ranking was published in 2021 and covers 64 countries. At the top is the USA, followed by Hong Kong, while Sweden is ranked third.⁴⁹

Ease of Doing Business

This index is compiled by the World Bank and aims to compare the business climate in different countries. The ranking is thus based on various factors that affect the business climate. These include how easy it is to start a business, the availability of credit and what protection there is for creditors and borrowers, how high different corporate taxes are and how complicated the tax system



Photo: Johnér

⁴⁷ World Economic Forum, 2019a.

⁴⁸ <https://www.imd.org/centers/world-competitiveness-center/rankings/world-competitiveness/>

⁴⁹ IMD World Competitiveness Center, 2021a.

is, the protection for minority owners in companies and how easy it is to conduct cross-border business. In total, 41 indicators are measured per country. The latest index was published in 2020 and covers 190 countries and independent territories. In this latest index, Sweden is ranked in tenth place. At the top are New Zealand, Singapore and Hong Kong.⁵⁰

Global Innovation Index

This is one of several indices that deal with the innovativeness and competitiveness of different countries. The Global Innovation Index is compiled by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). It is based on 81 indicators, which include how easy it is to start a business and pay taxes, the degree of legal certainty, how much has been invested in education at different levels, how much is invested in research and development, how advanced information technology is, ecological sustainability and the number of patent applications. The latest index was published in 2021 and covers 132 countries. In this latest index, Sweden is ranked second. Switzerland is ranked first, followed by the United States and the United Kingdom.⁵¹

European Innovation Scoreboard

This index is compiled by the European Commission and aims to compare EU Member States and neighbouring countries in terms of their capacity with respect to research and innovation. The latest version is based on twelve dimensions and 32 indicators, such as how much the public and private sectors invest in research and development, the proportion of highly educated, the proportion employed in knowledge-intensive professions, access to venture capital and how successful countries are in scientific publications, patent applications and doctoral candidates. The latest ranking was published in 2021. According to this index, Sweden is in first place, followed by Finland and Denmark.⁵²

Network Readiness Index

This index is compiled by the Portulans Institute and aims to compare how prepared different countries are to take advantage of different information and communication technologies and the existence of digital gaps. To examine it, 60 indicators are used, which include access to the internet and broadband, the use of digital technology in various spheres of society, investment in emerging technologies and telecommunications, exports of high technology, the presence of robots in the manufacturing industry, number of patent applications and scope of e-commerce. The latest index was published in 2021 and covers 130 countries. The Netherlands ranks first, while Sweden ranks second, followed by Denmark and the United States.⁵³

Digital Economy and Society Index

This index is compiled by the European Commission and aims to monitor the development of Member States in four aspects of the digitalisation of society: access to digital services, the integration of IT services such as AI and big data in small and medium-sized enterprises, access to broadband and 5G and access to IT expertise. The latest edition was published in 2021, where Denmark and Finland are ranked in first and second place, while Sweden is ranked third.⁵⁴

ICT Development Index

This index is compiled by the International Telecommunication Union, which is part of the UN. The purpose of the index is to examine and compare the availability and use of various forms of information and communication technology such as the internet and mobile telephones. It is based on eleven indicators, such as the number of mobile subscriptions, the proportion of the population living in households with a computer, the proportion who have access to the internet and the access to and use of a broadband connection. It also includes the average number of years that people study and the proportion who go onto higher education. The latest index was published in 2017 and covers 176 countries. According to this latest index, Sweden is ranked eleventh. Iceland is at the top, followed by South Korea and Switzerland.⁵⁵

Global Entrepreneurship Index

This index is compiled by The Global Entrepreneurship and Development Institute and aims to examine opportunity-based entrepreneurship in different countries. The latest version was published in 2019 and is based on 28 indicators, which include attitudes to entrepreneurship and the business world, the technology intensity among start-ups, how highly educated those who start companies are, the export potential of start-ups and access to venture capital. The latest index covers 137 countries. The USA, Switzerland and Canada are in the top three places, while Sweden is ranked in tenth place.⁵⁶

International Property Rights Index

This index is compiled by the Property Rights Alliance, a think tank that works to strengthen physical and intellectual property around the world. The index covers, among other things, the protection of physical and intellectual property rights, patent protection, the independence of the judiciary, the degree of legal certainty, political stability and the prevalence of corruption. To a large extent, the index is based on secondary data from other studies. The latest index was published in 2021 and covers 129 countries. Switzerland, Singapore and New Zealand are ranked in the first three places, while Sweden is ranked in thirteenth place.⁵⁷



50 World Bank, 2020b.

51 World Intellectual Property Organization, 2021.

52 European Commission, 2021a.

53 Dutta & Lavin, 2021.

54 European Commission, 2021b.

55 International Telecommunication Union, 2017.

56 Global Entrepreneurship and Development Institute, 2019.

57 Property Rights Alliance, 2021.

Economic Freedom of the World

This index is compiled by the Fraser Institute, which is a think-tank based in Canada, and aims to examine the degree of economic freedom. It is examined by, among other things, measuring public sector consumption as a share of total consumption, government transfers and subsidies as share of GDP, government investments as share of all investments, how high taxes are, property protection, rule of law and judicial integrity, and how costly and easy it is to import and export. The index is based on the notion that economic freedom includes a limited public sector and low taxes. The ranking is based on 42 indicators. The latest index was published in 2021 and covers 165 countries and independent territories. The ranking is topped by Hong Kong, Singapore and New Zealand, while Sweden is ranked 37th.⁵⁸

Index of Economic Freedom

This is another index that deals with financial freedom. It is compiled by the conservative think-tank the Heritage Foundation. The index comprises four dimensions, twelve indicators and a number of sub-indicators. This includes the protection of property rights, rule of law, the absence of corruption, the level of taxes, the extent of public expenditure, the extent of government debt, the ease with which companies can be set up, the rules and costs associated with foreign trade, and regulations of the labour market. Like the *Economic Freedom of the World*, the index is based on the notion that economic freedom includes a limited public sector and low taxes. The latest index was published in 2022 and covers 177 countries. The ranking is topped by Singapore, Switzerland and Ireland, while Sweden is ranked 11th.⁵⁹

International Tax Competitiveness Index

This index is compiled by the American think tank the Tax Foundation and aims to examine the extent to which tax systems in different countries are characterised by competitiveness and neutrality. The index covers 37 OECD countries and is based on 42 indicators, including how high different types of taxes are and how complex the tax system is. The latest index was published in 2021, and Estonia, Latvia and New Zealand are ranked highest, while Sweden is ranked eighth.⁶⁰

Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index

This index is compiled by the World Economic Forum and seeks to measure and compare how competitive the travel and tourism sector is in different countries. The index comprises four sub-indices, fourteen pillars and 90 indicators. The first sub-index is about how good the conditions are for the travel and tourism sector, and includes the business climate, physical security and safety, health and hygiene. The second sub-index

deals with the regulations that surround this sector, and includes price competitiveness, how prioritised the sector is politically and environmental sustainability. The third sub-index deals with infrastructure and includes, among other things, how good the infrastructure is in terms of flights, roads and railways, as well as access to hotel rooms. The fourth sub-index deals with access to natural and cultural resources, and includes, among other things, how attractive the natural environment is and how much area is included in the country's national parks or protected areas. The latest index was published in 2019 and covers 140 countries. It is topped by Spain, France and Germany, while Sweden is ranked 22nd.⁶¹

Global Talent Competitiveness Index

This index is compiled by the INSEAD Business School in collaboration with the Portulans Institute. It aims to examine how attractive countries are when it comes to attracting talent from other countries and retaining their own talent. Talents simply refer to people who can contribute to developing a country's productivity and prosperity. The index is based on five pillars and 68 indicators, with the five pillars being enabling frameworks (e.g. investments in research and political stability), attractiveness (e.g. tolerance for immigrants and the proportion of foreign students), growth (e.g. education systems and lifelong learning), vocational and technical skills (e.g. how easy it is to obtain vocationally trained) and advanced knowledge (e.g. proportion of researchers and access to scientists and technicians). The latest edition was published in 2021 and covers 134 countries. The ranking is topped by Switzerland, Singapore and the USA, while Sweden is ranked fifth.⁶²

World Talent Ranking

Another index that deals with how attractive countries are for talents is the World Talent Ranking, which is compiled by the IMD Business School. In brief, it seeks to assess and compare the development, retention and attraction of a domestic and international highly-skilled workforce. It includes, among other things, how much the countries invest in education, wage levels, cost of living and tax levels, rule of law, access to different types of labour and international work experience. The latest ranking was published in 2021 and covers 64 countries. The ranking is topped by Switzerland, while Sweden comes in second place, followed by Luxembourg, Norway and Denmark.⁶³ ●

58 Gwartney, Lawson, Hall & Murphy, 2021.

59 Miller, Kim & Roberts, 2022.

60 Tax Foundation, 2021.

61 World Economic Forum, 2019b.

62 INSEAD, 2021b.

63 IMD World Competitiveness Center, 2021.



Sweden is ranked high overall in various indices that concern sustainability issues.

Photo: Johnér/Ulf Huet Nilsson

Ecologically and socially sustainable development

Compared with the other areas, there are fewer international comparative indices and rankings that deal with ecologically or socially sustainable development. However, there are some, and these are reported below.

Environmental Performance Index

This index is compiled by the Yale Center for Environmental Law & Policy, the Yale Data-Driven Environmental Solutions Group and the Center for the International Earth Science Information Network at Columbia University. The purpose of the index is measure and compare different countries in terms of the protection of environmental health and ecosystem vitality. It is based on 32 indicators, and each is transformed into a 0–100 scale, from worst to best performance, where a perfect score corresponds to achievement of an internationally recognized sustainability target. The indicators include air quality, protection of biodiversity, emission levels,

sanitation and drinking water, over-fishing, the use of nitrogen in agriculture, and deforestation. The latest index was published in 2020 and covers 180 countries. Sweden is ranked eighth, while the top three positions are occupied by Denmark, Luxembourg and Switzerland.⁶⁴

Sustainable Development Goals Index

This index is compiled by the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, and aims to compare how far different countries have progressed in terms of living up to the sustainability goals set by the UN in 2015. In short, these are about eradi-



⁶⁴ Wendling, Emerson, de Sherbinin & Esty, 2020.

cating poverty; eliminating hunger and malnutrition; promoting health and wellbeing; ensuring inclusive and equitable education; achieve gender equality; ensuring availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all; ensuring access to affordable and sustainable modern energy for all; promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth and full, productive and decent work for all; building resilient and sustainable infrastructure and promoting sustainable industrialisation; reducing inequality within and between countries; making cities inclusive, safe and sustainable; promoting sustainable production and consumption; combating global warming; protecting ecosystems and biodiversity under water as well as on land; building peaceful and inclusive societies; and strengthening partnerships between countries and different parties within countries. The index is based on 91 indicators that are related to these development goals.⁶⁵ The latest index was published in 2021 and covers 165 countries. In this latest index, Finland ranks first, followed by Sweden and Denmark.⁶⁶

Climate Change Performance Index

This index is compiled by GermanWatch, NewClimate Institute and Climate Action Network International, and aims to measure and monitor how different countries are working to reduce emissions and counteract climate change. It is based on the extent of the countries' emissions that affect climate, the availability and use of renewable energy, energy consumption and how progressive the policy for counteracting climate change is. The index covers 60 countries plus the EU as a whole. The most recent ranking was published in 2022, and the country ranked highest was Denmark, followed by Sweden and Norway.⁶⁷

Energy Architecture Performance Index

This index is another one compiled by the World Economic Forum, and aims, simply put, to examine and compare different countries in terms of energy systems and their (a) contribution to economic growth, (b) environmental sustainability, and (c) the extent to which access to energy is secure, widely available and diversified. The index is based on 18 indicators, including energy intensity, energy import costs and revenues from energy exports, carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide emissions from the energy sector, the degree of dependence on energy imports and the share of total energy use coming from alternative energy sources or nuclear power. The latest index was published in 2017 and covers 127 countries. At the top are Switzerland and Norway, while Sweden is ranked third.⁶⁸

Global Food Security Index

This index is compiled by *The Economist* and its Intelligence Unit, and aims to examine how vulnerable different countries are when it comes to food security. The index is based on 58 indicators which include the availability and affordability of food, resources devoted to agricultural research and development, agricultural infrastructure, the existence of guidelines for eating a nutritious diet and how the government follows up and examines the population's status in terms of nutritious diet. The latest index was published in 2021 and covers 113 countries. In this latest index, Sweden is ranked in thirteenth place. The countries that rank highest are Ireland, Austria and the United Kingdom.⁶⁹

Global Health Security Index

This index is compiled by The Economist Impact, Bloomberg School of Public Health at Johns Hopkins University in the USA and The Nuclear Threat Initiative. The purpose of it is to investigate and compare how well equipped different countries are when it comes to preparing for and dealing with epidemics and pandemics. The first index was published in 2019, not long before the corona pandemic broke out. The index comprises six dimensions: prevention, case detection and reporting, speed of response to case detection, capacity of the healthcare system to deal with epidemics commitments to improving national capacity, financing and global norms, and risk environment. In total, the index is based on 37 indicators and 96 sub-indicators. The latest index was published in 2021 and covers 195 countries. The USA, Australia and Finland are ranked at the top, while Sweden is ranked tenth.⁷⁰

Global Sustainable Competitiveness Index

An example of an area-wide index is the Global Sustainable Competitiveness Index, which is produced by the think-tank SolAbility. It consists of five pillars measured using 106 indicators. The five pillars are access to natural capital, intellectual capital and social capital, as well as resource efficiency and government performance. Some examples of indicators are biodiversity and access to fresh water (natural capital), greenhouse gas emissions and energy consumption (resource efficiency), suicide, assault and life satisfaction (social capital), PISA results and patent applications (intellectual capital) as well as government debt and the presence of bribes in business (government performance). The latest index was published in 2021 and covers 180 countries. Sweden is ranked in first place, followed by Finland, Switzerland and Denmark.⁷¹ ●

65 For the OECD countries, another 30 indicators are included. See Sachs, Kroll, LaFortune, Fuller & Woelm, 2021, page 68.

66 Sachs, Kroll, LaFortune, Fuller & Woelm, 2021.

67 The ranking is based on the categories very high, high, medium, low and very low performance. In the latest ranking, no country reached the very high level, so the top three positions are empty. Denmark comes in fourth place, followed by Sweden. Here I start out from the order of the countries that are ranked. See also Burck et al., 2022.

68 World Economic Forum, 2017.

69 <https://impact.economist.com/sustainability/project/food-security-index/>

70 Bell & Nuzzo, 2021; Economist Impact, 2021.

71 SolAbility 2021.

Wellbeing and contribution to the world

A final category of indices is about what can be called prosperity and different countries' contributions to the world and world development.

Legatum Prosperity Index

This index is produced by the Legatum Institute Foundation and is based on twelve pillars that together are judged to be important for a country's success and prosperity. The twelve pillars are about safety and security, personal freedom, social capital, the country's governance, the investment environment, the conditions for entrepreneurship, infrastructure and market access, the strength and functioning of the economy, health, education, environment and people's living conditions. In total, the index is based on 300 variables. The latest index was published in 2021 and covers 167 countries. The ranking is topped by Denmark and Norway, while Sweden comes in third place.⁷²

Good Country Index

This index was originally compiled by Simon Arnholt, consultant, advisor and author, and aims to examine the extent to which different countries are contributing to positive global development. It is based on seven categories and 35 indicators which are based on statistics from sources such as the UNHCR and the World Bank. The seven categories are: global contribution to health and wellbeing (including the extent of humanitarian aid), the planet and the climate (including the size of emissions), culture (including exports of cultural products), world order (including the number of refugees received), prosperity and equality (including development aid), science and technology (including the number of international publications) and international peace and security (including support for peacekeeping troops). The latest version of the index was published in 2020 and covers 169 countries. In this latest version, Sweden is ranked in first place, followed by Denmark, Germany and Canada.⁷³

Commitment to Development Index

This index has similarities with the Good Country Index in the sense that it also measures and compares the extent to which richer countries contribute to the development of other countries and a more just world. It is compiled by the Center for Global Development and covers about 40 countries. The index consists of eight parts: development aid, investment, migration, trade, health, environment, security and technology. These are measured by 40 indicators and a total of 67 measurements. The latest index was published in 2021, and in this latest index Sweden is ranked in first place, followed by France, Norway and Australia.⁷⁴ ●



Photo: iStock

⁷² Legatum Institute Foundation, 2021.

⁷³ <https://www.goodcountry.org/index/about-the-index/>

⁷⁴ Center for Global Development, 2021; Robinson, Cichocka, Ritchie & Mitchell, 2021.

Summary

– Sweden in an international comparison

As has emerged from this review, the international comparative indices and rankings cover a number of different areas and aspects of society. Although there is an emphasis on indices and rankings that deal with economics, entrepreneurship and competitiveness, there are also many that deal with human development, gender equality and social justice as well as democracy and human rights and freedoms. There are also several that cover ecologically and socially sustainable development and wellbeing and contributions to the world. Based on these, we have therefore a very good basis for assessing the situation in Sweden compared to other countries. This is especially true because all indices and rankings in one way or another are about the actual situation in the countries compared.

The results show that Sweden's position in the various rankings varies. Sweden gets its best rankings in *Freedom of the World*, *Gender Equality Index*, *European Innovation Scoreboard*, *Global Sustainable Competitiveness Index*, *Good Country Index* and *Commitment to Development Index*. In these, Sweden is ranked as the foremost country in the world. Sweden gets its worst rankings in *Economic Freedom of the World* and *Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index*, where Sweden is ranked 38th and 22nd respectively. These are the only indices where Sweden does not belong to the 20 leading countries. An important explanation is that high taxes,

a large public sector and a high cost level are counted as negative in these indices, especially in *Economic Freedom of the World*.

In the vast majority of cases, however, Sweden is considered one of the leading countries in the world. This is clear from the table that summarises Sweden's ranking according to the 49 international comparative indices and rankings on which this report is based. In six indices, Sweden is ranked in first place, in 27 indices as one of the five best countries, and in 42 indices as one of the ten best countries. This corresponds to 12, 55 and 86 percent respectively.

This can be compared with the study review five years ago, which included 38 indices and rankings. Sweden then topped three rankings, in 21 indices Sweden was ranked as one of the five best countries, and in 32 indices as one of the ten best countries. This corresponds to 8, 55 and 84 percent respectively. Although the number of international comparative indices and rankings on which the reviews are based has increased, the percentages are strikingly similar.

Little change over time

When it comes to individual indices and comparing Sweden's ranking now with five years ago, Sweden has in some cases gone up, in other cases down, and in other cases still Sweden remains at the same level. However, these are usually small changes. However, the indicators used in different indices have in several cases been slightly adjusted or replaced, or the data sources on which the index is based have changed. This means that we should be careful when comparing Sweden's position in a specific index at different times. More important than minor changes in Sweden's ranking in individual indices is therefore the general picture: Sweden is regularly ranked as one of the world's foremost countries. ●

“In the vast majority of cases, Sweden is considered one of the leading countries in the world.”

Table 1. Sweden's placing in international indices and rankings.

Index	Placing	Year	No. of countries
Democracy Index	4	2021	167
Freedom in the World	1*	2022	210
Human Freedom Index	9	2021	165
World Press Freedom	3	2021	180
Rule of Law Index	4	2021	139
Corruption Perceptions Index	4*	2021	180
Global Corruption Index	5	2021	196
Global Peace Index	15	2021	163
Fragile States Index	8	2021	179
Human Development Index	7	2020	189
Human Development Index – adjusted for inequality	7	2020	189
Gender Inequality Index	3	2020	189
Gender Gap Index	5	2021	156
Gender Equality Index	1	2021	27
Women, Peace, and Security Index	7	2021	170
Euro Health Consumer Index	8	2018	35
Social Progress Index	7	2021	168
Social Justice Index	5	2019	41
Human Capital Index	3*	2020	174
Better Life Index	8	2020	40
Inclusive Development Index	6	2018	103
KidsRights Index	4	2021	182
Global Competitiveness Index	8	2019	141
World Competitiveness Ranking	2	2021	64
World Digital Competitiveness Ranking	3	2021	64
Ease of Doing Business	10	2020	190
Global Innovation Index	2	2021	132
European Innovation Scoreboard	1	2021	27
Network Readiness Index	2	2021	130
Digital Economy and Society Index	3	2021	27
ICT Development Index	11	2017	176
Global Entrepreneurship Index	10	2019	137
International Property Rights Index	13	2021	129
Economic Freedom of the World	37*	2021	165
Index of Economic Freedom	11	2022	177
International Tax Competitiveness Index	8	2021	37
Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index	22	2019	140
Global Talent Competitiveness Index	5	2021	134
World Talent Ranking	2	2021	64
Environmental Performance Index	8	2020	180
Sustainable Development Goals Index	2	2021	165
Climate Change Performance Index	2	2022	60
Energy Architecture Performance Index	3	2017	127
Global Food Security Index	13	2021	113
Global Health Security Index	10	2021	195
Global Sustainable Competitiveness Index	1	2021	180
Legatum Prosperity Index	3	2021	167
Good Country Index	1	2020	169
Commitment to Development Index	1	2021	40

Comments:
The column for "Year" refers to the year in which the respective index was published, and sometimes the empirical data on which the index is based may be from some or a few years earlier.
* Refers to a shared ranking.
Number of countries in some cases includes independent territories.

Conclusions

For those who follow the political debate in traditional and social media, it is easy to get the impression that Sweden is a country with very big problems. This has been the case at least since the so-called refugee crisis, when many claimed that Sweden had been affected by or was facing what was called a system collapse. Such a thing never happened, but that has not stopped many from continuing to argue that Sweden is a country with major and profound problems. At the same time, the national SOM surveys show that a majority of Swedes since 2015 states that the development in Sweden is going in the wrong direction, while at most just over a quarter state that it is going in the right direction. Others have stated that they have no opinion.⁷⁵

Admittedly, there is no doubt that Sweden – like all other countries – faces a number of different problems and challenges. These include climate change and how Sweden should adapt to the changing climate, serious crime, shortcomings in schools, healthcare and psychiatry, the financing of the future welfare system, electricity supply, the integration of immigrants, the ageing population and the supply of skills in the labour market, and an increasingly uncertain security situation.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, pessimism appears to be excessive given that this report has shown that Sweden is regularly ranked as one of the leading countries in the world. This raises the question of how to understand the widespread pessimism. The answer consists of at least three parts.

The focus is on problems

Firstly, the political debate, both in general and on social media, regularly focuses on problems. It is in the nature of things that problems receive more attention than things that work, and regardless of political persuasion, it is in the interest of the political opposition to highlight problems and try to blame the government for them. It can still lead to people overestimating the problems that exist and underestimating what works. This is especially true when some political actors, for strategic reasons, adopt an excessively alarmist rhetoric

and when there is a lot of misinformation in the debate, not least on digital and social media. In this context, the success of (authoritarian) right-wing populism in recent decades is also significant. As research has shown, a central part of populism and populist strategies is to try to identify problems of some kind, exaggerate them and try to present something as a crisis, in order to point out the culprits in the next step, to present the "real people" as innocent victims and themselves and a radical change as the only solution. Because populists strive for radical social change, they need crises to justify their policies. Important in this context, however, is that what matters is not whether there is an actual crisis, but whether people experience a sense of crisis.⁷⁷ Research also shows that political-alternative media contribute to the spread of disinformation and to try to strengthen the sense of crisis.⁷⁸ Because right-wing populism attracts people who are characterised by distrust of the established parties, media and research, this is also a fertile breeding ground for alarmist and exaggerated rhetoric.⁷⁹

Negative news gets attention

Secondly, the traditional media's coverage of politics and society is characterised by focusing more on problems and things that are not working than on things that are working.⁸⁰ This is certainly nothing new, but for the media bad news is good news. This bias in favour of negative news or negativity bias is partly due to the fact that it is in media's mission to provide people with the information they need to be able to take a stand on societal issues, and this undeniably includes information about various problems. By reporting on problems, the media contributes to these problems getting attention which increases the probability that the problems will be fixed. At the same time, negative news captures people's attention more effectively than positive news and is thus attractive from a commercial perspective and in the battle for attention. This is important to note at a time when competition for human attention is fiercer than ever. Negativity is also often considered one of the main news selection criteria.⁸¹

75 Martinsson, 2021.

76 See amongst others Strömbäck, 2013a, 2013b.

77 See amongst others Moffitt, 2016; Taggart, 2000.

78 See amongst others Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018.

79 In Sweden, this is noticeable, among other things, in the fact that the Sweden Democrats' sympathisers have lower confidence in various institutions than other parties' sympathisers. See for example Andersson, 2021; Andersson & Oscarsson, 2020; Jönsson, 2020; Strömbäck & Karlsson, 2017.

80 Lengauer, Esser & Berganza, 2012; Esser, Engesser & Matthes, 2017; Strömbäck, 2019.

81 See also Strömbäck, 2019.

We remember the dangers

Thirdly, people tend to not only pay attention to negative rather than positive information but also to remember negative information better than positive information.⁸² That people have a tendency to pay attention to negative rather than positive information can be explained from an evolutionary perspective, where survival for long periods of human history depended on the ability to detect dangers early. This tendency also explains that the media is characterised by a negativity bias: they know that negative news work. Combined with people remembering negative information better than positive information, the result is easily that people overestimate problems and underestimate what is working. In this context, the focus on problems in the political debate contributes to providing additional fuel for both the media's negativity bias and the fact that many people overestimate the problems that exist.

In other words, there are several linked explanations for why many people express pessimism about development and overestimate the problems that exist. In addition, a number of studies, which were discussed earlier, show that in many areas there is a gap between how people perceive reality and how reality actually is. This can either be due to people lacking knowledge and being uninformed or being misinformed.⁸³

“There is a gap between
how people perceive
reality and what the reality
actually is.”

Given this background, it is all the more important to try to determine what actually characterises the situation in Sweden, beyond the political battle to define and frame what reality looks like. From that perspective, the central conclusion of this report is unequivocal and worth emphasising: Sweden is one of the world's foremost countries. From democracy, freedom of the press and gender equality to social justice and inclusion, to the business climate, innovation and competitiveness, to the environment and sustainable development, Sweden is regularly ranked as one of the top ten countries and in just over half of the cases as one of the five best countries. It is important to note the breadth that characterises the indices where Sweden is ranked as one of the leading countries. It is not only in some individual area that Sweden is considered a leader: in area after area, Sweden belongs to the leading countries. There is also nothing to indicate that Sweden in recent years has

lost ground in the international comparative rankings. This is not to say that the international comparative indices and rankings on which this report is based are infallible. They are not. One can always criticise individual indices and rankings and discuss exactly what they measure, whether they should have been constructed in any other way, whether they should have used other or more indicators, or how they weigh the importance of different indicators. That criticism is legitimate, and no single index shows the whole truth and nothing but the truth. An illustration of this is that Sweden is ranked in first, third and fifth place in the three indices that deal with gender equality.

Because of this, it becomes all the more important not to attach too much importance to any single index, but instead to look at the overall picture: Sweden belongs to the world's foremost countries in a range of different areas. In this context, it is worth recalling that none of the international comparative indices and rankings have been compiled to benefit or disadvantage Sweden. None of them has been compiled to benefit either the government or the opposition or any other side of the political debate. All have been developed and compiled by established organisations, all compare the different countries by applying the same criteria, and all of them are independent of the Swedish domestic policy debate.

Misinformation should be met with facts

From this perspective, it should be seen as misinformation to claim that Sweden is a country in decay or deep crisis, not to mention claims that we have become a developing country or are in some form of civil war. Like all other misinformation, such misinformation needs to be met with facts, and the fact is that Sweden, despite the problems that exist, is one of the world's foremost countries. From a democratic perspective, there is no reason to depict Sweden in idealised terms, but neither should it be depicted in pessimistic terms. Instead, the debate should be based on established evidence.

It is also important from a future perspective and whether Sweden will be able to solve the problems that unequivocally exist. In the end, all successful problem solving is based on a rational and factual analysis of facts and evidence combined with clarity about the goals and means. Both excessive optimism and excessive pessimism are problematic and should be avoided, but in today's Sweden, negativity and excessive pessimism appear to be a much bigger problem than idealism and excessive optimism. ●

82 See amongst others Ito et al., 1998; Soroka & McAdams, 2015; Soroka, Fournier & Nir, 2019.

83 Flynn, 2016; Flynn, Nyhan & Reifler, 2017; Kuklinski et al., 2000; Lindgren et al., 2022.

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