



Global Soft Power Index 2026

*The world's most comprehensive research study
on perceptions of nation brands*



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About Brand Finance

Brand Finance is the world’s leading brand evaluation and strategy consultancy.

Bridging the gap between Marketing and Finance

Brand Finance was set up in 1996 with the aim of 'bridging the gap between marketing and finance'. Since this time, we have helped companies and organisations of all types to connect their brands to the bottom line.

Quantifying the financial value of brands

We put thousands of the world’s biggest brands to the test every year. Ranking brands across all sectors and countries, we publish over 100 reports annually.

Unique combination of expertise

Our teams have experience across a wide range of disciplines from marketing and market research, to brand strategy and visual identity, to tax and accounting.

Priding ourselves on technical credibility

Brand Finance, a chartered accountancy firm regulated by the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, is the first brand valuation consultancy to join the International Valuation Standards Council.

Our experts crafted standards (ISO 10668 and ISO 20671) and our methodology, certified by Austrian Standards, is officially approved by the Marketing Accountability Standards Board.

We advise governments on how to boost their nation brands

Brand Finance has been conducting an annual Nation Brands study on the world’s most valuable and strongest nation brands for 22 years. It has provided key benchmarks for diplomats, tourism boards, trade agencies, nation brand consultants and managers.

The Global Soft Power Index expands on that methodology to provide an all-round view of perceptions of nation brands. Understanding those perceptions is key for national, regional, city, and corporate brands to achieve success internationally, allowing to identify strengths and weaknesses and to improve growth strategies going forward.

The stronger the nation’s Soft Power, the greater its ability to attract investments, market its products and services, promote tourism, and invite talent.



Get in Touch

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For more information, please visit our website:
brandfinance.com/softpower

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Order your custom-prepared Soft Power Report where Brand Finance's place branding experts interpret your nation brand perceptions and performance over time, in comparison to peers, and across different markets of research.

Designed for the visionary — policymakers, strategists, marketing professionals, and diplomacy leaders — this report serves as your roadmap to navigate the worldwide nation branding landscape.

By integrating perception research with financial data, you gain the insight to get ahead of others in the global arena — grow Soft Power and devise successful strategies to attract investment, trade, talent, and tourism.

softpower@brandfinance.com

Insight

Identify strengths and weaknesses of your brand in specific markets

Benchmarking

Compare your brand to competitors and track year-on-year changes

Strategy

Adjust brand positioning and set long-term goals to maximise economic impact

Accountability

Measure ROI and modify marketing budgets to support your brand's strategic goals

Communication

Publicise strong results to reassure key stakeholders of your brand's strength

Education

Educate key stakeholders about the benefits of brand management

Introduction



David Haigh
Chairman & CEO,
Brand Finance

Brand Finance was founded with a clear mission: to bridge the gap between marketing and finance. In 2026, we celebrate 30 years of focusing solely on this mission. Over these three decades, we have grown into the world’s leading independent brand evaluation firm. While our work is widely recognised for assessing the world’s most valuable commercial brands, we have also extended our measurement to other branded entities, most notably nations.

We began assessing the economic value of nation brands in 2004 through desk research. Since 2019, we have complemented this with quantitative research into global perceptions of nations, and this report presents the results of the seventh wave of that research. We measure all 193 United Nations member states against 55 metrics, including Familiarity, Reputation, and Influence, alongside performance across 35 attributes grouped into eight pillars.

Understanding and influencing these perceptions is critical. They drive behaviour, which in turn affects a nation’s economic performance and global standing. Improvements in how a nation is perceived can increase its attractiveness for investment, trade, talent, education, and tourism, ultimately strengthening economic outcomes. These improvements also underpin what we call Soft Power.

We define Soft Power as ‘a nation’s ability to influence preferences and behaviours through attraction or persuasion rather than coercion’. Soft Power delivers both diplomatic and economic benefits. The term was coined in 1990 by Professor

Joseph Nye. He argued that Soft Power is as important as Hard Power and Economic Power to advancing national interests. He later developed the concept of Smart Power, the strategic and balanced use of Hard, Economic, and Soft Power.

Hard and Economic Power can support Soft Power, but their use is not always benign. Military strength can reinforce alliances and multilateral institutions or be used coercively. Economic strength can provide aid and support development or exert pressure for compliance. Professor Nye’s work emphasised that leaders must determine their own balance of the three levers of Smart Power to exercise influence effectively.

The current geopolitical moment illustrates these dynamics. While the US continues to exercise Hard, Economic, and Soft Power, its overall Soft Power performance has declined, and some allies perceive aspects of its actions as unfair or self-defeating. This has created space for other nations to expand their influence, most notably China, whose Soft Power continues to grow rapidly.

This decline is mirrored in perceptions of global institutions. Confidence in multilateral organisations, remains positive but is under pressure. History reminds us why this matters: the League of Nations, founded after the First World War, failed in part because the United States did not join. The UN, established in 1945 and strongly backed by the US, has played a critical role in maintaining peace, supporting development, and coordinating humanitarian efforts. Today, it employs 100,000 staff, keeps peace in over a dozen regions, and remains a vital instrument for global stability.

Soft Power has never been more important to restoring equilibrium to the international system. This report provides a comprehensive, data-driven view of the current landscape, highlighting where nations are succeeding, where they face challenges, and how shifts in perception affect global influence.

We hope the insights presented here guide leaders and policymakers in shaping strategies that strengthen both national reputation and Soft Power, ensuring that countries are positioned to thrive in an increasingly interconnected and competitive world.




























Global Soft Power Index 2026

The ranking of all 193 member states of the United Nations, scored out of 100, according to the results of a survey of 150,000+ respondents in 100+ markets


























<div>1 = 1</div> <div></div> <div>UNITED STATES</div> <div>Score 74.9 -4.6</div>	<div>2 = 2</div> <div></div> <div>CHINA</div> <div>Score 73.5 +0.7</div>	<div>3 ▲ 4</div> <div></div> <div>JAPAN</div> <div>Score 70.6 -0.9</div>	<div>4 ▼ 3</div> <div></div> <div>UNITED KINGDOM</div> <div>Score 69.2 -3.2</div>	<div>5 = 5</div> <div></div> <div>GERMANY</div> <div>Score 67.7 -2.4</div>
<div>6 = 6</div> <div></div> <div>FRANCE</div> <div>Score 65.8 -2.7</div>	<div>7 ▲ 8</div> <div></div> <div>SWITZERLAND</div> <div>Score 63.2 -1.7</div>	<div>8 ▼ 7</div> <div></div> <div>CANADA</div> <div>Score 63.2 -2.0</div>	<div>9 = 9</div> <div></div> <div>ITALY</div> <div>Score 61.6 -0.8</div>	<div>10 = 10</div> <div></div> <div>UNITED ARAB EMIRATES</div> <div>Score 59.4 -1.0</div>
<div>11 ▲ 12</div> <div></div> <div>SOUTH KOREA</div> <div>Score 59.2 -1.0</div>	<div>12 ▲ 13</div> <div></div> <div>SPAIN</div> <div>Score 58.9 -0.8</div>	<div>13 ▼ 11</div> <div></div> <div>SWEDEN</div> <div>Score 58.8 -1.5</div>	<div>14 ▲ 16</div> <div></div> <div>RUSSIA</div> <div>Score 58.7 +0.6</div>	<div>15 = 15</div> <div></div> <div>NETHERLANDS</div> <div>Score 57.8 -0.9</div>
<div>16 ▼ 14</div> <div></div> <div>AUSTRALIA</div> <div>Score 57.5 -2.1</div>	<div>17 ▲ 20</div> <div></div> <div>SAUDI ARABIA</div> <div>Score 55.9 +0.3</div>	<div>18 = 18</div> <div></div> <div>DENMARK</div> <div>Score 55.6 -0.9</div>	<div>19 ▼ 17</div> <div></div> <div>NORWAY</div> <div>Score 55.4 -1.4</div>	<div>20 ▲ 22</div> <div></div> <div>QATAR</div> <div>Score 54.9 +0.4</div>
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* All data points have been rounded to the first decimal place.

<div>26 ▼ 25</div> <div></div> <div>NEW ZEALAND</div> <div>Score 51.6 -1.5</div>	<div>27 = 27</div> <div></div> <div>PORTUGAL</div> <div>Score 50.4 -0.7</div>	<div>28 = 28</div> <div></div> <div>IRELAND</div> <div>Score 49.6 -0.9</div>	<div>29 ▲ 31</div> <div></div> <div>BRAZIL</div> <div>Score 49.2 +0.4</div>	<div>30 ▼ 29</div> <div></div> <div>LUXEMBOURG</div> <div>Score 49.1 -0.9</div>
<div>31 ▲ 32</div> <div></div> <div>POLAND</div> <div>Score 48.9 +0.2</div>	<div>32 ▼ 30</div> <div></div> <div>INDIA</div> <div>Score 48.0 -1.8</div>	<div>33 ▲ 34</div> <div></div> <div>GREECE</div> <div>Score 46.7 -0.1</div>	<div>34 ▲ 35</div> <div></div> <div>ICELAND</div> <div>Score 45.9 -0.3</div>	<div>35 ▲ 36</div> <div></div> <div>MALAYSIA</div> <div>Score 45.8 -0.3</div>
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<div>46 ▲ 48</div> <div></div> <div>CROATIA</div> <div>Score 41.6 +0.4</div>	<div>47 ▼ 46</div> <div></div> <div>UKRAINE</div> <div>Score 41.4 -0.6</div>	<div>48 ▼ 47</div> <div></div> <div>HUNGARY</div> <div>Score 41.3 -0.6</div>	<div>49 ▲ 51</div> <div></div> <div>BAHRAIN</div> <div>Score 40.8 +0.4</div>	<div>50 = 50</div> <div></div> <div>MOROCCO</div> <div>Score 40.6 0.0</div>

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<div>56▼ 54</div> <div></div> <div>CHILE</div> <div>Score 39.4 -0.1</div>	<div>57▼ 56</div> <div></div> <div>SLOVENIA</div> <div>Score 39.4 -0.1</div>	<div>58▲ 62</div> <div></div> <div>IRAN</div> <div>Score 39.3 +0.4</div>	<div>59▼ 57</div> <div></div> <div>MALDIVES</div> <div>Score 39.2 -0.1</div>	<div>60▲ 63</div> <div></div> <div>CYPRUS</div> <div>Score 39.0 +0.1</div>
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<div>76▲ 82</div> <div></div> <div>EL SALVADOR</div> <div>Score 36.6 +0.8</div>	<div>77▼ 72</div> <div></div> <div>PERU</div> <div>Score 36.6 -0.1</div>	<div>78▲ 84</div> <div></div> <div>PARAGUAY</div> <div>Score 36.4 +0.9</div>	<div>79▼ 70</div> <div></div> <div>LITHUANIA</div> <div>Score 36.4 -1.0</div>	<div>80▲ 83</div> <div></div> <div>DOMINICAN REPUBLIC</div> <div>Score 36.3 +0.5</div>
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<div>101▲</div> <div>104</div> <div>BANGLADESH</div> <div>Score 33.7 +0.3</div>	<div>102▼</div> <div>100</div> <div>ALBANIA</div> <div>Score 33.7 +0.1</div>	<div>103=</div> <div>103</div> <div>BOLIVIA</div> <div>Score 33.6 +0.2</div>	<div>104▼</div> <div>94</div> <div>COTE D'IVOIRE</div> <div>Score 33.3 -0.8</div>	<div>105▲</div> <div>108</div> <div>MONGOLIA</div> <div>Score 33.2 +0.8</div>
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<div>126▼</div> <div>120</div> <div>GUATEMALA</div> <div>Score 31.1 -0.1</div>	<div>127▲</div> <div>133</div> <div>LIBYA</div> <div>Score 31.1 +1.0</div>	<div>128▼</div> <div>126</div> <div>MOLDOVA</div> <div>Score 31.0 +0.4</div>	<div>129▲</div> <div>141</div> <div>TAJIKISTAN</div> <div>Score 31.0 +1.3</div>	<div>130▼</div> <div>119</div> <div>NORTH MACEDONIA</div> <div>Score 30.9 -0.4</div>
<div>131=</div> <div>131</div> <div>HONDURAS</div> <div>Score 30.8 +0.5</div>	<div>132▼</div> <div>129</div> <div>SAN MARINO</div> <div>Score 30.8 +0.4</div>	<div>133▼</div> <div>132</div> <div>FIJI</div> <div>Score 30.7 +0.5</div>	<div>134▲</div> <div>136</div> <div>LIBERIA</div> <div>Score 30.4 +0.4</div>	<div>135▼</div> <div>114</div> <div>ANDORRA</div> <div>Score 30.4 -1.4</div>
<div>136▲</div> <div>140</div> <div>DOMINICA</div> <div>Score 30.3 +0.6</div>	<div>137▲</div> <div>142</div> <div>SUDAN</div> <div>Score 30.2 +0.6</div>	<div>138▼</div> <div>134</div> <div>TURKMENISTAN</div> <div>Score 30.2 +0.1</div>	<div>139▼</div> <div>138</div> <div>CONGO</div> <div>Score 30.1 +0.1</div>	<div>140▼</div> <div>137</div> <div>MOZAMBIQUE</div> <div>Score 29.9 -0.1</div>
<div>141▲</div> <div>144</div> <div>NIGER</div> <div>Score 29.9 +0.6</div>	<div>142▲</div> <div>146</div> <div>KYRGYZSTAN</div> <div>Score 29.8 +1.0</div>	<div>143▲</div> <div>166</div> <div>BURKINA FASO</div> <div>Score 29.7 +4.3</div>	<div>144▲</div> <div>145</div> <div>GUINEA</div> <div>Score 29.7 +0.7</div>	<div>145▼</div> <div>135</div> <div>BARBADOS</div> <div>Score 29.7 -0.3</div>
<div>146▲</div> <div>149</div> <div>SOUTH SUDAN</div> <div>Score 28.8 +0.9</div>	<div>147▼</div> <div>139</div> <div>BOTSWANA</div> <div>Score 28.8 -1.0</div>	<div>148▼</div> <div>143</div> <div>LAOS</div> <div>Score 28.8 -0.6</div>	<div>149▲</div> <div>161</div> <div>EQUATORIAL GUINEA</div> <div>Score 28.8 +2.6</div>	<div>150▼</div> <div>147</div> <div>SEYCHELLES</div> <div>Score 28.7 +0.4</div>

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<div>151▲ 153</div> <div></div> <div>AFGHANISTAN</div> <div>Score 28.3 +0.8</div>	<div>152▲ 156</div> <div></div> <div>GAMBIA</div> <div>Score 28.3 +1.3</div>	<div>153▼ 148</div> <div></div> <div>NICARAGUA</div> <div>Score 27.8 -0.2</div>	<div>154▼ 152</div> <div></div> <div>MYANMAR</div> <div>Score 27.8 +0.2</div>	<div>155▲ 158</div> <div></div> <div>MALAWI</div> <div>Score 27.7 +1.2</div>
<div>156▲ 159</div> <div></div> <div>PAPUA NEW GUINEA</div> <div>Score 27.7 +1.4</div>	<div>157▼ 155</div> <div></div> <div>CAPE VERDE</div> <div>Score 27.6 +0.6</div>	<div>158▼ 150</div> <div></div> <div>MAURITANIA</div> <div>Score 27.3 -0.4</div>	<div>159▼ 154</div> <div></div> <div>ESWATINI</div> <div>Score 27.2 -0.2</div>	<div>160▼ 157</div> <div></div> <div>GUYANA</div> <div>Score 27.1 +0.2</div>
<div>161▼ 151</div> <div></div> <div>TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO</div> <div>Score 27.0 -0.6</div>	<div>162▲ 163</div> <div></div> <div>BENIN</div> <div>Score 26.7 +0.9</div>	<div>163▲ 173</div> <div></div> <div>BURUNDI</div> <div>Score 26.7 +2.1</div>	<div>164▲ 165</div> <div></div> <div>TOGO</div> <div>Score 26.7 +1.1</div>	<div>165▲ 176</div> <div></div> <div>CHAD</div> <div>Score 26.3 +2.0</div>
<div>166▲ 179</div> <div></div> <div>SOLOMON ISLANDS</div> <div>Score 26.2 +2.3</div>	<div>167▼ 162</div> <div></div> <div>GUINEA-BISSAU</div> <div>Score 26.1 +0.2</div>	<div>168= 168</div> <div></div> <div>BELIZE</div> <div>Score 26.1 +0.8</div>	<div>169▼ 164</div> <div></div> <div>GABON</div> <div>Score 25.9 +0.1</div>	<div>170= 170</div> <div></div> <div>HAITI</div> <div>Score 25.9 +0.9</div>
<div>171▼ 160</div> <div></div> <div>GRENADA</div> <div>Score 25.6 -0.6</div>	<div>172▼ 169</div> <div></div> <div>SIERRA LEONE</div> <div>Score 25.3 +0.1</div>	<div>173▼ 167</div> <div></div> <div>COMOROS</div> <div>Score 25.2 -0.1</div>	<div>174▼ 171</div> <div></div> <div>SAMOA</div> <div>Score 25.1 +0.1</div>	<div>175▼ 172</div> <div></div> <div>SÃO TOMÉ AND PRÍNCIPE</div> <div>Score 25.0 +0.3</div>

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<div>176▼ 174</div> <div></div> <div>ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA</div> <div>Score 24.8 +0.3</div>	<div>177▲ 181</div> <div></div> <div>SOMALIA</div> <div>Score 24.6 +1.1</div>	<div>178= 178</div> <div></div> <div>SAINT LUCIA</div> <div>Score 24.5 +0.6</div>	<div>179▲ 185</div> <div></div> <div>ERITREA</div> <div>Score 24.1 +1.3</div>	<div>180▼ 177</div> <div></div> <div>DJIBOUTI</div> <div>Score 24.1 -0.1</div>
<div>181▲ 187</div> <div></div> <div>MARSHALL ISLANDS</div> <div>Score 24.0 +3.2</div>	<div>182= 182</div> <div></div> <div>SURINAME</div> <div>Score 23.8 +0.5</div>	<div>183▼ 180</div> <div></div> <div>TIMOR-LESTE</div> <div>Score 23.6 +0.1</div>	<div>184▲ 189</div> <div></div> <div>PALAU</div> <div>Score 23.6 +3.5</div>	<div>185▼ 184</div> <div></div> <div>LESOTHO</div> <div>Score 23.4 +0.3</div>
<div>186▼ 175</div> <div></div> <div>SAINT VINCENT AND THE GRENADINES</div> <div>Score 22.9 -1.6</div>	<div>187▼ 183</div> <div></div> <div>TONGA</div> <div>Score 22.7 -0.6</div>	<div>188▲ 190</div> <div></div> <div>MICRONESIA</div> <div>Score 22.3 +2.2</div>	<div>189▼ 186</div> <div></div> <div>SAINT KITTS AND NEVIS</div> <div>Score 21.5 +0.3</div>	<div>190▲ 191</div> <div></div> <div>TUVALU</div> <div>Score 21.5 +1.5</div>
<div>191▲ 192</div> <div></div> <div>VANUATU</div> <div>Score 21.4 +2.1</div>	<div>192▼ 188</div> <div></div> <div>NAURU</div> <div>Score 20.7 +0.5</div>	<div>193= 193</div> <div></div> <div>KIRIBATI</div> <div>Score 19.7 +0.9</div>		

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01

Methodology

Understanding the Global Soft Power Index



Kevin Woods
Head of Research,
Brand Finance

What is Soft Power?

Soft Power is a nation’s ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. This includes the means of culture, business, or diplomacy, rather than military force or economic sanctions. In practical terms, Soft Power is the power of perceptions which can be leveraged by nations to strengthen security as well as attract investment, trade, talent, and tourism, and in effect improve economic growth.

How is Soft Power measured?

The Global Soft Power Index evaluates Soft Power through:

1. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

- + **Familiarity** how well a nation is known.
- + **Reputation** how positively a nation is regarded.
- + **Influence** how much a nation is perceived to influence other nations.

2. Eight Soft Power pillars & 35 Nation Brand attributes

Equally important are perceptions of the nation brand across key areas where Soft Power is developed and exercised.

We use a comprehensive list of 35 Nation Brand attributes divided between 8 Soft Power pillars. A respondent-level statistical drivers analysis allows us to identify which Nation Brand attributes are most important in shaping *Reputation*

8 Soft Power Pillars & 35 Nation Brand Attributes

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Business & Trade	International Relations	Education & Science	Culture & Heritage	Governance	Media & Communication	Sustainable Future	People & Values
Strong and stable economy	Influential in Diplomatic circles	Advanced technology and innovation	Influential in arts and entertainment	Internationally admired government leaders	Affairs I follow closely	Invests in green energy and technologies	Trustworthy
Products and brands the world loves	Helpful to countries in need	Advanced in science	Food the world loves	Politically stable and well-governed	Easy to communicate with	Sustainable cities and transport	Generous
Easy to do business in and with	Good relations with other countries	Strong educational system	Great place to visit	High ethical standards and low corruption	Influential media	Acts to protect the environment	Friendly
Future growth potential	-	Invests in space exploration	Leader in sports	Safe and secure	Trustworthy media	Supports global efforts to counter climate change	Fun
-	-	-	Appealing lifestyle	Respects law and human rights	-	-	Tolerant and inclusive
-	-	-	Rich heritage	-	-	-	-

and *Influence* of nations and how perspectives differ between societies worldwide.

3. Recommendation measurement

The Global Soft Power Index survey also assesses a nation’s ability to attract investment, trade, talent, and tourism. Understanding to what extent a country would be recommended as a place to invest, trade, work, study, or visit complements the Global Soft Power Index metrics by providing a direct link between Soft Power and Nation Brand performance in key sectors.

Evolution of the Global Soft Power Index

Now in its seventh year, the Global Soft Power Index has been appraised annually through expert consultation and data-driven analysis to ensure a robust and relevant measurement, while maintaining year-on-year comparability of results.

The Index framework was initially established with academic input from nation branding expert Dr Paul Temporal, University of Oxford, and through extensive consultation, involving qualitative interviews with over 50 practitioners and researchers of Soft Power worldwide and across several categories: academics, think-tank analysts, journalists, diplomats, nation brand managers, consultants, business leaders, artists, and sportspeople.

In the first two years, the survey covered the views of both the General Public and Specialist Audiences, such as market analysts, policymakers, and thought leaders. Given similar results across the two groups, since 2022, we have focused exclusively on the General Public, allowing for greater sample sizes and increased comparability across markets.

Survey design

The Global Soft Power Index is the world’s most comprehensive research study on perceptions of nation brands. Based on a global sample of 150,000+ respondents across 100+ markets, the Index ranks all 193 member states of the United Nations.

The Index measures international perceptions of nation brands. Participants’ home nation perceptions are also captured and available but are not included in the Soft Power score calculation.

Data collection

- + **Total respondents: 159,459**
The sample collection was conducted online between 17th September and 27th October.
- + **Markets surveyed: 102**
Our sample is representative of the population of each of the 102 markets surveyed.



Key markets with the largest populations and whose perspectives are of greatest interest to Index users (e.g. China, United States, India etc.) were prioritised, with sample sizes in excess of 4,000 respondents in these markets. Overall, a base size of at least 1,000 respondents was achieved in 73 of the 102 markets surveyed, with the remaining 29 markets having smaller sample sizes.

+ **Nation brands assessed: 193**
Similarly, in order to manage respondent workload, key nation brands were prioritised to ensure a greater number of ratings from participants for a robust understanding of perceptions.

In practice, this means that global powerhouses such as China, would have more exposure in the survey than a smaller nation such as Andorra (i.e. nearly twice the number of ratings at the Nation Brand attribute level within a market).

Fieldwork approach

- + **Developed markets** - data collected via established online research panels (managed by Clariti, formerly Savanta).
- + **Emerging and hard-to-reach markets** - data collected using digital advertising-based sampling (managed by Bolt Insight).
- + **Quota controls** - age, gender, and geographical region within each market to ensure representative samples.

Survey questionnaire

Surveys were conducted in 54 languages to ensure accessibility across markets.

Each respondent was asked about a random subset of the 193 nation brands in the Index:

+ **Familiarity:**
Is the respondent unaware of, aware of, or familiar with this nation? *KPI rated on a scale (from ‘I’ve never heard of it’ to ‘I know it well’).*

Only those respondents familiar with a given nation brand (‘I know this country well’ / ‘I know this country a little’) answer further perception questions in the survey:

+ **Reputation:** Overall, does the respondent rate the nation as having a positive or negative reputation? *KPI rated on a scale (0-10: ‘Extremely negative’ to ‘Extremely positive’).*

+ **Influence:** How influential does the respondent believe the nation to be in their country? *KPI rated on a scale (0-5: ‘No influence at all’ to ‘Extremely influential’)*

+ **35 Nation Brand Attributes across the 8 Soft Power Pillars:**
Which attributes does the respondent associate with this nation? *Score dependent on the number of attribute selections by respondents in a given market (respondents can select all that in their opinion apply).*

Included in the survey, but not part of the calculated Soft Power score:

+ **Recommendation:**
How likely is a respondent to recommend the nation as a place to invest, work, study, visit, or purchase from? *KPI rated on a scale (0-5: ‘Would not recommend at all’ to ‘Would definitely recommend’).*

Understanding the scores

Each nation receives a Soft Power score, reflecting its perceptions across:

- + **Familiarity**
- + **Reputation**
- + **Influence**
- + **35 Nation Brand Attributes across the 8 Soft Power Pillars**

Introduced in 2024, the Recommendation measures provide additional context when analysing nation brand results but are not included in calculating the Soft Power score.

Higher scores = More international impact and stronger perceptions.

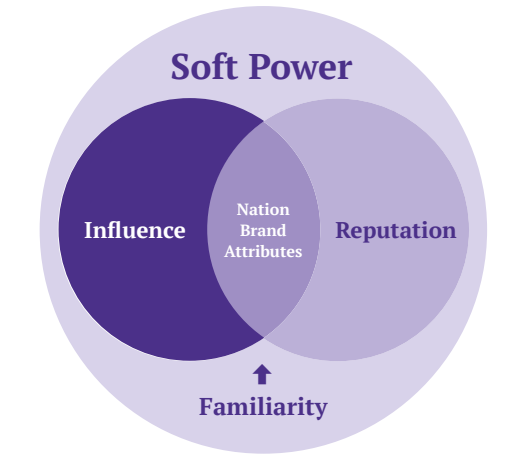
Lower scores = Less international impact and weaker perceptions.

Weighting the scores

Each nation brand’s Soft Power score is determined by a balanced weighting system across both market and metric inputs.

The market inputs are weighted in a way that ensures global representation while accounting for real-world influence:

- + **50% – “one country, one vote” rule** (ensuring sovereign equality between all markets)



- + **50% – overall country population** (larger markets contribute proportionally more to global scores)
- + **Familiarity modifier** (markets with greater Familiarity with the nation brand account for a greater weight than others)

The metric weights are split equally between KPIs and Nation Brand attributes, with each accounting for 50%:

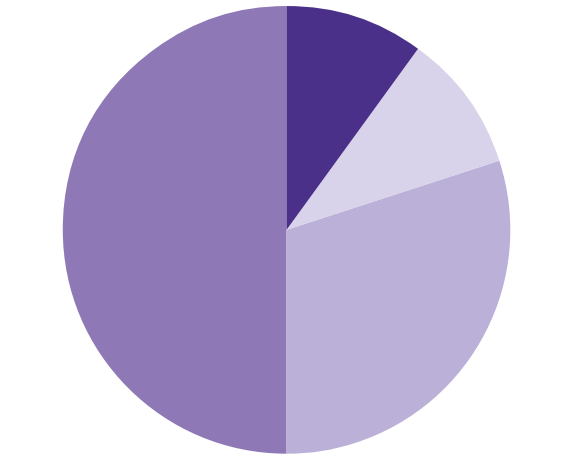
- + Among KPIs, *Influence* (30%) carries greater weight than Familiarity or Reputation (10% each), reflecting the action-oriented definition of Soft Power that we adopted, focused on its role in strengthening security and improving economic growth.

- + Weightings given to each attribute within the Index are based on statistical drivers analysis assessing the degree to which attribute perceptions impact *Influence* and *Reputation*. This is determined annually through regression analysis on respondent-level data across key global regions.

Global Soft Power Index weightings

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●	<i>Familiarity</i>
●	<i>Reputation</i>
●	<i>Influence</i>
●	<i>8 Soft Power Pillars</i>



Survey Coverage

- Nation Brand and Market of Research
- Nation Brand Only - No Fieldwork

Latin America & Caribbean

Antigua and Barbuda
Argentina
Bahamas
Barbados
Belize
Bolivia
Brazil
Chile
Colombia
Costa Rica
Cuba
Dominica
Dominican Republic
Ecuador
El Salvador
Grenada
Guatemala
Guyana
Haiti
Honduras
Jamaica
Mexico
Nicaragua
Panama
Paraguay
Peru
Saint Kitts and Nevis
Saint Lucia
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
Suriname
Trinidad and Tobago
Uruguay
Venezuela

North America

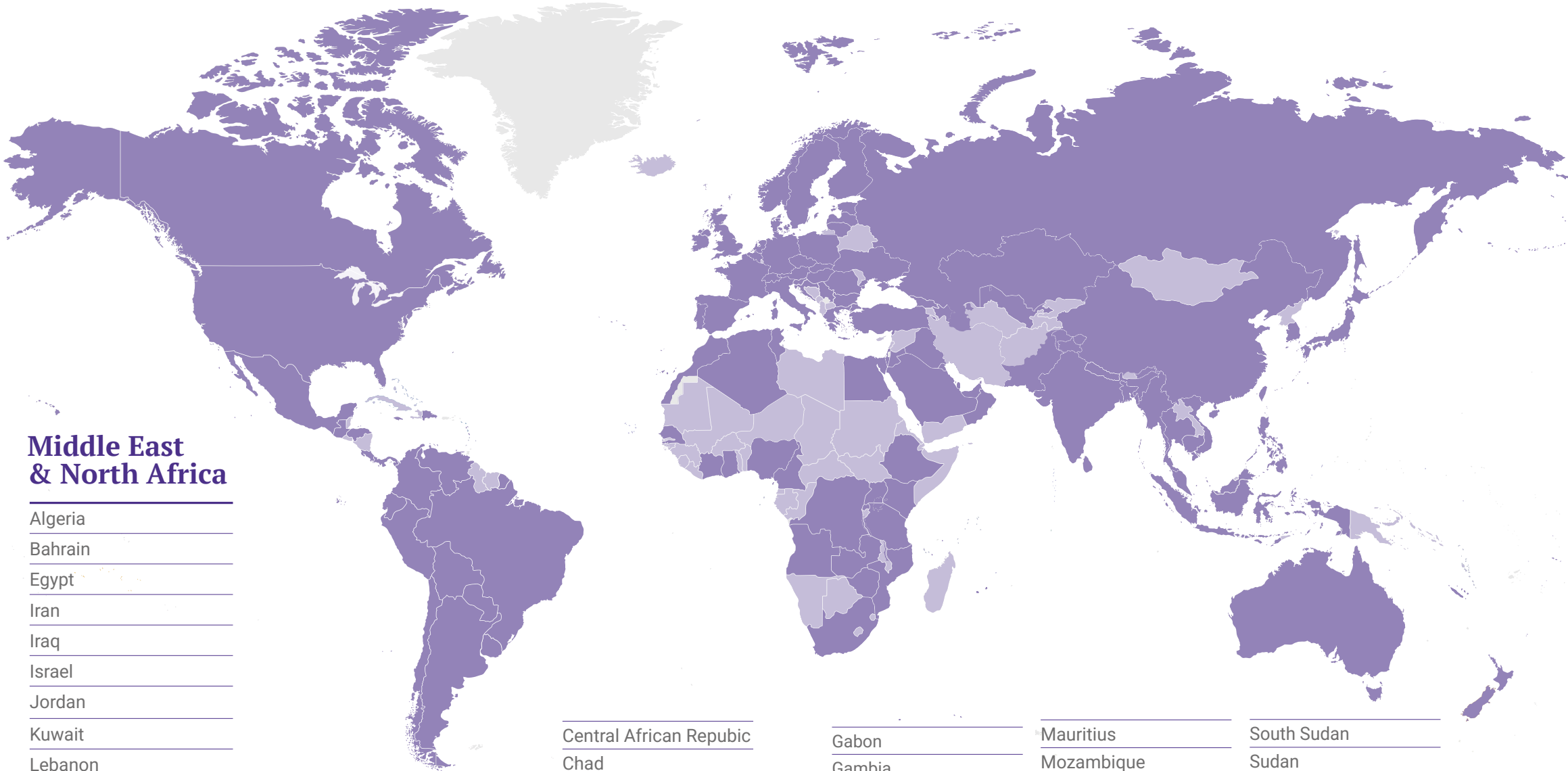
Canada
United States

Europe

Albania	Croatia	Hungary	Monaco	Serbia
Andorra	Cyprus	Iceland	Montenegro	Slovakia
Armenia	Czech Republic	Ireland	Netherlands	Slovenia
Austria	Denmark	Italy	North Macedonia	Spain
Azerbaijan	Estonia	Latvia	Norway	Sweden
Belarus	Finland	Liechtenstein	Poland	Switzerland
Belgium	France	Lithuania	Portugal	Türkiye
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Georgia	Luxembourg	Romania	Ukraine
Bulgaria	Germany	Malta	Russia	United Kingdom
	Greece	Moldova	San Marino	

Asia

Afghanistan
Bangladesh
Bhutan
Brunei Darussalam
Cambodia
China
India
Indonesia
Japan
Kazakhstan
Kyrgyzstan
Laos
Malaysia
Maldives
Mongolia
Myanmar
Nepal
North Korea
Pakistan
Philippines
Singapore
South Korea
Sri Lanka
Tajikistan
Thailand
Timor-Leste
Turkmenistan
Uzbekistan
Vietnam



Middle East & North Africa

Algeria
Bahrain
Egypt
Iran
Iraq
Israel
Jordan
Kuwait
Lebanon
Libya
Morocco
Oman
Qatar
Saudi Arabia
Syria
Tunisia
United Arab Emirates
Yemen

Sub-Saharan Africa

Angola	Central African Repubic	Gabon	Mauritius	South Sudan
Benin	Chad	Gambia	Mozambique	Sudan
Botswana	Comoros	Ghana	Namibia	Tanzania
Burkina Faso	Congo	Guinea	Niger	Togo
Burundi	Côte d'Ivoire	Guinea-Bissau	Nigeria	Uganda
Cape Verde	Democratic Republic of the Congo	Kenya	Rwanda	Zambia
Cameroon	Djibouti	Lesotho	São Tomé and Príncipe	Zimbabwe
	Equatorial Guinea	Liberia	Senegal	
	Eritrea	Madagascar	Seychelles	
	Eswatini	Malawi	Sierra Leone	
	Ethiopia	Mali	Somalia	
		Mauritania	South Africa	

Oceania

Australia
Fiji
Kiribati
Marshall Islands
Micronesia
Nauru
New Zealand
Palau
Papua New Guinea
Samoa
Solomon Islands
Tonga
Tuvalu
Vanuatu



02

Executive Summary

45 %

27 %

65 %

35 %

01/07

02/07

03/07

Executive Summary



Konrad Jagodzinski
Place Branding Director,
Brand Finance

The Trump Effect

The United States keeps 1st position in the Global Soft Power Index, with a score of 74.9 out of 100. However, it is experiencing a significant erosion of its soft power across all metrics except *Familiarity*, as President Donald Trump redefines the paradigms of America's engagement with the world.

The US records the sharpest decline out of all 193 nation brands in the entire ranking this year, down 4.6 points compared to last year. Perceptions of America's *Reputation* fall -11 ranks to 26th, and the nation records declines across multiple key drivers of *Reputation*, with the steepest ones in the *People & Values* pillar (-48 ranks), demonstrating how a misalignment between traditional expectations of America's nation brand and the new priorities of President Trump's second term are impacting the mood among global audiences.

It is difficult not to make a connection between some

of the 'America First' policies and the negative turn of the US perceptions internationally: on immigration and travel as the US drops -32 ranks in friendliness to 156th – its lowest rank on any metric ever; transactionalism and unilateralism in international affairs and a drop of -50 ranks in *good relations with other countries* to 99th; reductions in foreign aid and a drop of -68 ranks in generosity to 98th; imposition of trade tariffs and a drop of -21 ranks from 5th to 26th in ease of doing business; withdrawal from the Paris agreement and a drop of -16 ranks from 2nd to 18th in support for climate action.

The radicalism of these shifts and the process of implementing new policies are likely to have contributed to a steep decline in perceptions of trust (-24 ranks to 57th) and an erosion across the *Governance* indicators, such as *respect for law and human rights* (-10 ranks), *safety and security* (-9 ranks), *political stability* and *good governance* (-8 ranks), and *ethical standards* and *low corruption* (-4 ranks). What is more, the results point to a negative knock-on effect even on objectively unrelated areas as US scores soften across all metrics in the survey except *Familiarity*.

Nevertheless, the US retains competitive dominance across multiple soft power domains. Hollywood, sporting excellence, top brands from Apple to Coca-Cola, elite universities, Silicon Valley, and space missions all contribute to a global perception of the





















US as a hub of creativity, opportunity, and modernity. It maintains top positions in *arts and entertainment* (1st), *sports* (3rd), *global brands* (2nd), *science* (3rd), *technology* (3rd), and *space exploration* (1st).

Undoubtedly, some of its perceptual strengths are also reinforced by President Trump's ability to set the international agenda and consequently dominate the news cycle. The US continues to rank 1st for both *Familiarity* and *Influence*, and leads the rankings for the *International Relations* and *Media & Communications* pillars. It remains number #1 for influence in diplomacy, government leaders, *influential media*, and *affairs I follow closely*.

Global audiences increasingly perceive a disconnect between the image of America they are used to and the change in both direction and process from the new administration, causing reputational spillover even across domains seemingly unrelated to President Trump's policies. At the same time, the US is able to maintain its premier spot in the Global Soft Power Index thanks to unmatched Familiarity and Influence, underpinned by traditional strengths in popular culture, sporting achievement, consumer exports, scientific advancement, technological innovation, space exploration, and newly reinforced by President Trump's undeniable ability to set the global agenda and capture the global imagination.

Global Soft Power Index Top 20

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	1 =	United States		11 ▲	South Korea
	74.9	79.5 -4.6		59.2	60.2 -1.0
	2 =	China		12 ▲	Spain
	73.5	72.8 +0.7		58.9	59.7 -0.8
	3 ▲	Japan		13 ▼	Sweden
	70.6	71.5 -0.9		58.8	60.3 -1.5
	4 ▼	United Kingdom		14 ▲	Russia
	69.2	72.4 -3.2		58.7	58.1 +0.6
	5 =	Germany		15 =	Netherlands
	67.7	70.1 -2.4		57.8	58.7 -0.9
	6 =	France		16 ▼	Australia
	65.8	68.5 -2.7		57.5	59.6 -2.1
	7 ▲	Switzerland		17 ▲	Saudi Arabia
	63.2	64.9 -1.7		55.9	55.6 +0.3
	8 ▼	Canada		18 =	Denmark
	63.2	65.2 -2.0		55.6	56.5 -0.9
	9 =	Italy		19 ▼	Norway
	61.6	62.4 -0.8		55.4	56.8 -1.4
	10 =	United Arab Emirates		20 ▲	Qatar
	59.4	60.4 -1.0		54.9	54.5 +0.4



China – a credible alternative

With America’s soft power eroding, China consolidates its 2nd position in the Index. As the only nation brand in the top 10 to increase its soft power score this year (+0.7 points up to 73.5), it has narrowed the gap to the US to less than 1.5 points.

Over the last few years, China has worked effectively to not only reinforce core strengths but also address historical weaknesses. Its soft power gains are underpinned by a long-term, policy-led programme, from the Belt and Road investments, scientific and technological advancement, sustainability reforms, to building global product brands and facilitating cultural engagement.

Starting with relative weaknesses, China’s *Reputation* has risen +9 ranks to 18th, overtaking that of the United States for the first time. This is supported by gains across key drivers of *Reputation*, such as *People & Values* (+22 ranks), *Governance* (+10 ranks), and *Sustainable Future* (+7 ranks), also in direct contrast to the trend of US results.

While still ranking relatively low in many of the underlying nation brand attributes, China has made visible improvements on perceptions of *friendliness* (+27 ranks), *fun* (+18 ranks), *ease of communication* (+14 ranks), *generosity* (+14 ranks), and *lifestyle appeal* (+8 ranks).

In total, China now ranks higher than the US on 19 out of the 35 nation brand attributes.

These improvements illustrate that audiences now engage with China not only as a strategic actor but also as a country offering approachable experiences and cultural resonance. China’s tourism perceptions have strengthened too, increasing +5 positions this year to 36th, reflecting a growing attraction of Chinese cities, heritage, and leisure opportunities, aided by visa facilitation programmes and people-to-people exchanges.

Cultural phenomena such as Labubu, which gained global popularity in 2025, alongside strong recognition for brands like Huawei and Tik Tok, and the growing exports of electric vehicles, enhance China’s reach further.

At the same time, China continues to consolidate its core strengths, systematically reinforcing perceptions in *Business & Trade* (+2 to 2nd) and *Education & Science* (+2 to 1st) where it projects credibility and reliability. It now ranks 1st globally for not only ease of doing business and *future growth potential*, but also technology and innovation, and advanced science.

It has also risen to 3rd globally for perceptions of *strong and stable economy* (+5 ranks) – the single most influential driver of soft power among all the 35 nation brand attributes within the Global Soft Power Index.

By combining domestic development with structured international engagement, China is increasingly perceived as predictable, reliable, and capable of delivering tangible benefits, helping to sustain its high standing in *Influence* (2nd) and *Familiarity* (+1 to 4th).

By addressing key weaknesses and honing core strengths, China has built a credible alternative to US domination on the global stage. Its progress reflects a deliberate, multi-faceted strategy combining policy coherence, economic expansion, technological advancement, and cultural engagement. Its sustained improvements across nearly all pillars demonstrate that soft power gains can be achieved through patient, structured, and consistent efforts.

A global mood shift

The Global Soft Power Index 2026 reveals a broader structural trend affecting nations worldwide: a widespread decline in international sentiment, reflecting a global mood shift driven by economic uncertainty, geopolitical tensions, and social pressures. This phenomenon is systemic rather than limited to individual countries. Across the survey, audiences are more cautious, less willing to express admiration, and more likely to scrutinise nations’ behaviour, reflecting concerns about disruptive security crises, cost-of-living pressures, and speculation about an AI bubble on the stock markets.

The mood shift is reminiscent of perception declines during the COVID-19 pandemic, when global audiences reassessed trust, governance, and alignment between values and action across the majority of nation brands. The negative effect is compounded as the US, alongside the United Kingdom, Germany, and France, record sharper-than-average declines to their soft power scores. Ranked at the top of the Index, these nation brands have historically served as reference points to the survey respondents: their governance models, economic stability, and global engagement establish the benchmarks against which others are assessed. When audiences perceive these ranking leaders as underperforming, the reference point for soft power globally shifts downwards, creating a cascading deflation across all nation brands.

Looking beyond the ranking leaders, Western nations more generally account for a disproportionate share of the declines. Many are struggling to cope with the ripple effects of President Trump's new approach to European allies; many have to deal with issues of their own, as their governments are increasingly seen to underdeliver on long-standing brand promises of stability, prosperity, and moral leadership.

The United Kingdom exemplifies this dynamic, recording this year the entire ranking's second-steepest

drop in soft power after the US (-3.2 points down to 69.2). Having already declined to 3rd place in 2025, the UK falls further to 4th in 2026 – its lowest position in the Index's history. *Reputation* crucially declines to 6th. While beyond substantial rank declines in the *People & Values* pillar, the UK largely retains its place on other metrics, its scores soften in all 35 nation brand attributes.

Although *Familiarity* (2nd) remains high, relevance is weakening. After six years of ranking 2nd, the UK now ranks 6th on the attribute *affairs I follow closely*, signalling a loss of its agenda-setting power. Against a backdrop of sustained underinvestment in the nation brand and soft power strategy, control over the UK's image is increasingly slipping away. Social media are dominated by persistent negative narratives fuelled by both genuine discontent as well as disinformation around post-Brexit trade frictions, migration pressures and backlash, alleged high crime rates, and supposed freedom of speech limitations, crowding out positive stories and reinforcing largely undeserved perceptions of Britain's twilight.

Similarly, the example of Germany (5th, -2.4 points down to 67.7) illustrates how economic and diplomatic credibility can erode simultaneously. It records its largest score declines on perceptions of a *strong and stable economy* (-0.7 points) as well as leadership in

science (-0.8 points) and technology (-0.6 points), indicating that news of Germany's economic slowdown coupled with a less prominent role in the AI race are undermining its global standing. Steeper declines are also evident in perceptions of diplomatic influence (-0.7 points) and government leaders (-0.6 points), reflecting a transitional period as Chancellor Friedrich Merz, having taken office mid-year, has yet to establish the authority and stature once associated with Angela Merkel's international leadership.

A similar pattern is visible across several other Western nation brands, including: France (6th, = rank, -2.7 points), Canada (8th, -1 rank, -2.0 points), Sweden (13th, -2 ranks, -1.5 points), and Australia (16th, -2 ranks, -2.1 points).

Against this background, Switzerland (7th, +1 rank, -1.7 points) declines more slowly, enabling it to rise relative to peers despite overall softening. While it also records declines in line with the broader trend, its nation brand remains among the most resilient in the Index. This resilience is underpinned by exceptionally high *Reputation*, where it ranks 1st in the world, alongside top rankings for key drivers of *Reputation*, including trust, governance, and economic stability. Switzerland ranks number #1 on more metrics than any other nation brand in the Index, scoring 17 golds and topping the soft power medal table yet





again this year. Together, these strengths allow Switzerland to hold its ground, illustrating how deeply embedded brand credibility can cushion against periods of global scepticism. This translates into tangible economic impact of soft power as Switzerland ranks either 1st or 2nd on all five dimensions of Recommendation which capture destination appeal across the key sectors of investment, trade, talent, education, and tourism.

The negative shift in the global mood highlights a critical lesson about soft power in 2026. Publics are increasingly sensitive to the alignment of values, actions, and outcomes. Countries that fail to demonstrate reliability, credibility, and impact face erosion not only in specific domains but also in broader international reputation and relevance.

Soft Power is not solely about visibility or size; it is about perception that a nation is delivering on promises implicit in its brand. Nations failing to uphold these promises are penalised by global audiences.

Strategies for nation brand success

In the current soft power landscape, characterised by widespread sentiment deflation and increasing scrutiny of nation brands, the capacity to maintain soft power is closely linked to adaptability and the strategic alignment of policy, impact, and narrative.

Countries that hold ground amid declines do so by consciously consolidating strengths, maintaining credibility, and leveraging economic, diplomatic, and cultural assets to reinforce perceptions.

Japan is a good example of a nation brand focusing on building soft power through a direct experience of the nation brand. Although absolute score has softened slightly (-0.9 points to 70.6), Japan rises to 3rd place, overtaking the UK.

Alongside established strengths in *Business & Trade* (1st), *Sustainable Future* (1st), *Education & Science* (2nd), and *Governance* (2nd), over the past year Japan has solidified perceptions across *People & Values* (1st, +2 ranks) and *Culture & Heritage* (3rd, +2 ranks) thanks to its growing popularity as a travel destination.

The tourism boom has seen Japan gain in *Familiarity* (6th, +1 rank) as well as related attributes such as *great place to visit* (8th, +3 ranks), *appealing lifestyle* (4th, +9 ranks), *friendly* (7th, +12 ranks), and *fun* (21st, +15 ranks). Understanding experiential drivers of soft power is as key as perceptual drivers for any nation brand strategy (see article in the Insights section).

Italy offers a complementary example of narrative alignment in a polarised media environment to sustain soft power. Among the top 10 nation brands in the

Index, it records the smallest decline (9th, -0.8 points down to 61.6), reflecting an ability to shield its popularity from the storm by positioning itself in line with dominant global discourses.

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's right-wing government has proved adept at maintaining traditional alliances and partnerships, while engaging populist narratives that currently command disproportionate attention in international media, resonating with key audiences and influential figures, including aligning with the new US administration.

This has helped Italy sustain relevance and limit reputational erosion despite broader declines among Western peers. Similarly, Argentina achieves its highest-ever ranking at 37th, a climb of +5 positions, the biggest gain among all the top 50 nations this year, reflecting the appeal of President Javier Milei's politics among key global audiences.

The United Arab Emirates, in turn, exemplifies a balanced strategy of persuasion through demonstrating impact and promoting engagement. The UAE retains 10th place overall with a score of 59.4, holding steady despite a minor adjustment of -1.0 point, while major Western nations in the top 10 average declines of -2.5 points.

The nation brand defends or improves its ranks across all KPIs and pillars.

It solidifies its *Influence* (8th) by connecting Europe, Asia, and Africa in both diplomatic and business terms, as illustrated by its strengths in *International Relations* (9th) and *Business & Trade* (10th). Communicating about progress towards energy transition and promoting immigration-friendly policies have helped achieve notable +4 rank improvements for both the *Sustainable Future* and *Governance* pillars – key drivers of *Reputation* which in itself also saw an improvement (+1 rank). With that base, it comes as no surprise that the UAE now ranks as the world's 7th most preferred destination for investment.

However, the UAE has also been inviting global audiences to engage more with its authentic core, resulting in improved *Familiarity* (+3 ranks). The nation brand has recorded notable increases across perceptions of *friendliness* (+17), *fun* (+7 places), and *arts and entertainment* (+5 ranks). The UAE now ranks 2nd in the world for generosity too.

The UAE continues to follow a balanced, forward-looking approach, illustrating how success in business, diplomacy, governance, innovation, and sustainability, coupled with authentic engagement across global audiences, can solidify soft power and protect a nation brand in an uncertain world.

Saudi Arabia (17th, + 3 ranks) and Qatar (20th, +2 ranks) also perform strongly, growing soft power through proactive diplomacy, economic diversification, and new efforts across culture, tourism, and sports. Gulf nations illustrate that practical impact and proactive engagement are a recipe for success, particularly in volatile regions.

Last but not least, South Korea provides a case study of effective investment in cultural salience in order to boost soft power. Rising to 11th place, the country offsets declines in *Governance* (25th, -5 ranks), linked to the recent constitutional crisis, with gains in *Familiarity* (15th, +2 ranks) and *Influence* (15th, +2 ranks), driven largely by globally successful content industries, including K-pop, K-dramas, and K-beauty.

Cultural salience has become a defensive asset, enabling nations to maintain visibility and affinity even when reputational indicators experience a temporary decline. In the case of South Korea, this is supported by significant government investments: KOCCA's annual budget exceeds \$400 million, complemented by the 2023 \$620 million support package for content, tourism, and language education, and the 2024 K-Content Fund of \$420 million. This level of commitment leaves no room for surprise at South Korea's leading positions in the *arts and entertainment* (7th) and *influential media* (7th) metrics.

Soft Power vs Hard Power

In contrast to these strategic approaches to soft power, in some cases, countries can achieve gains in international perception not because of broader governance, cultural, or economic strengths, but because respondents may perceive them as effective.

This phenomenon is amplified especially given the backdrop of a credibility crisis for Western nation brands observed in this year's Index. Sometimes – and particularly for authoritarian states – visibility, assertiveness, and tightly controlled narratives can create an impression of influence, authority, or salience. While these gains are often underpinned by mass propaganda rather than substantive soft power assets, they can temporarily boost recognition.

Russia exemplifies these dynamics very well. Rising to 14th place this year (+2 ranks), the country leverages military visibility, assertive foreign policy, and intensive propaganda to increase global attention. These actions amplify perceptions of influence and political weight, even as Russia's regard for international law, human rights, or economic development is simply not there.

We must also be aware of regional differences in perspective and how the resonance of certain narratives might be stronger in some parts of the world than in





others. Russia's increase is influenced in particular by high perceptions in China and rising perceptions in key markets across Asia and Latin America, including in India, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Brazil.

Similarly benefitting from global visibility of its hard power, after joining Russian's invasion of Ukraine, North Korea (63rd) records the fastest growth in the top 100 ranking this year, in both score (+2.4 points) and rank (+12 ranks). Strong shifts in perception are driven by respondents in Russia, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Egypt. Even in markets that consider North Korea an adversary, such as the United States, perceptions of its Influence have increased.

Burkina Faso (143rd) provides another striking example. Its score increased by +4.3 points, driving a +23-rank jump, making it the Index's fastest-growing nation brand this year. This rise is closely linked to the increased prominence of Ibrahim Traoré, whose leadership style, public visibility, and decisive messaging can be associated with sharp gains in Burkina Faso's perceptions in *Governance* (+95 ranks to 67th) and *Media & Communication* (+64 ranks to 106th).

However, the durability of these gains remains uncertain. Perceptions of cultural appeal (165th), business attractiveness (162nd), and education and science (156th) continue to lag, highlighting the limits of hard power and visibility alone as

drivers of sustained long-term soft power.

Unlike among authoritarian regimes, deployment of hard power by countries claiming to adhere to liberal democratic values is likely to create a discord which damages rather than boosts perceptions.

Israel is a prime example, recording the steepest rank decline among the top 50 nation brands this year, -6 positions down to 39th, and third-strongest score decline in the entire Index (-3.0 points), behind only the US (-4.6 points) and the UK (-3.2 points). Following two years of its military campaign in Gaza and settler expansion in the West Bank, global sympathies are shifting towards Palestine, and Israel now ranks among the bottom five nations for having a perceived net negative impact on the world.

Similarly, universally believed to be stoking civil war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda drops -13 positions to 122nd this year, recording the sharpest rank decline in the Index aside from microstates, whose perceptions can be more volatile year on year due to low *Familiarity*.

The Global Soft Power Index Medal Table



Richard Haigh
Managing Director,
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The Global Soft Power Index Medal Table

As we enter 2026, global perceptions of power are shifting at an accelerating pace. Heightened geopolitical tensions, more assertive national politics, and intensifying competition for influence have reshaped how nations are viewed globally. In this environment, Soft Power is an increasingly contested asset, shaped by leadership, governance, culture, and values, and a nation’s ability to respond effectively to global challenges.

Brand Finance’s Global Soft Power Index tracks these changes, measuring how nations adapt to evolving global paradigms to reinforce their global reputations.

The Global Soft Power Index ranks all 193 United Nations member states across a range of pillars and attributes to determine which nations wield the greatest Soft Power. The 2026 Medal Table highlights performance at a more granular level by tallying each instance in which a country ranks first, second, or third for a given pillar or attribute, awarding metaphorical “medals” in 55 categories.

This analysis provides a more nuanced view of a nation’s performance, particularly where large nations dominate the overall rankings by revealing where other nations excel.

In 2026, Switzerland leads with 17 gold medals, followed by the U.S. with 12, and Japan with 9, though Japan’s total medal count exceeds that of any other nation at 26. China, Canada, and the United Kingdom earn more than 10 medals each too, but fewer golds. 21 nation brands overall earn at least one medal across the 55 categories, showing how concentrated Soft Power tends to be.

Soft Power medal winners of 2026

Switzerland – A trusted brand






















With 17 gold medals, including a world-leading *Reputation*, Switzerland is a global benchmark for stability, ethical governance, and trust, also leading in areas such as international relations and economic strength.

Switzerland secures gold medals in three of the five Recommendation categories, complemented by silver medals in the remaining two. Respondents worldwide rank Switzerland as the number one nation in which to work, invest, and visit, and the runner up for the destination to study and buy products and services from, reinforcing its position as a world-leading destination for opportunity and confirming the incredible strength of its nation brand.

Switzerland also earns gold medals for trust, underscoring the power of credibility in an era increasingly defined by misinformation and fake news.

Recommendation

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			Metrics
			Recommendation
			Recommendation to invest in
			Recommendation to buy products and services from
			Recommendation to work in
			Recommendation to study in
			Recommendation to visit

Soft Power Medal Winners 2026

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Pillars				Metrics
				Global Soft Power Index
				Awareness
				Familiarity
				Reputation
				Influence
				Net Positive/Negative Impact
				Business & Trade
				Strong and stable economy
				Products and brands the world loves
				Easy to do business in and with
				Future growth potential
				International Relations
				Influential in diplomatic circles
				Helpful to countries in need
				Good relations with other countries
				Education & Science
				Advanced in technology and innovation
				Advanced in science
				Strong educational system
				Invests in space exploration
				Culture & Heritage
				Influential in arts and entertainment
				Food the world loves
				Great place to visit
				Leader in sports
				Appealing lifestyle
				Rich heritage
				Governance
				Internationally admired government leaders
				Politically stable and well-governed
				High ethical standards and low corruption
				Safe and secure
				Respects law and human rights
				Media & Communication
				Affairs I follow closely
				Easy to communicate with
				Influential media
				Trustworthy media
				Sustainable Future
				Invests in green energy and technologies
				Sustainable cities and transport
				Acts to protect the environment
				Supports global efforts to counter climate change
				People & Values
				Trustworthy
				Generous
				Friendly
				Fun
				Tolerant and inclusive



United States –
Unparalleled influence

The U.S., with 12 gold medals, excels in diplomatic, cultural, and media influence. While trailing other nations like Switzerland or Japan in *Governance* and *People & Values*, the U.S. maintains its position as the world’s most influential Soft Power nation with the utmost global awareness, driven by its dominance in entertainment, space exploration, and diplomatic influence.


Japan –
Business & Trade powerhouse

Japan tops the table with a total of 26 medals in 2026 and secures nine gold medals across key areas including sustainability, education, and *products and brands the world loves*. Within the *Business & Trade* pillar, Japan earns three medals across the four attributes. Alongside its strong performance for global product appeal, Japan also earns silver medals for economic stability and future growth potential. Strength in this pillar is one of the key contributors to its third-place ranking for overall Soft Power in 2026.

China –
Economic power coupled
with cultural appeal

China’s diverse medal tally (five gold, eight silver, and four bronze), reflects its multifaceted appeal. The nation performs strongly in business, science and technology, but also sustainability, while strong perceptions of its rich heritage show potential to reach global audiences through culture and tourism.

The Soft Power Medal Table 2026

Rank	Country				Total
1.		17	5	–	22
2.		12	1	5	18
3.		9	15	2	26
4.		5	8	4	17
5.		3	5	9	17
6.		3	3	2	8
7.		2	7	4	13
8.		2	–	–	2
9.		1	2	6	9
10.		1	–	–	1
11.		–	3	3	6
12.		–	2	2	4
13.		–	1	7	8
14.		–	1	2	3
15.		–	1	–	1
16.		–	1	–	1
17.		–	–	3	3
18.		–	–	2	2
19.		–	–	2	2
20.		–	–	1	1
21.		–	–	1	1

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03

Insights

01/07

02/07

03/07

04/07

Soft Power is built in the everyday: The experiences that shape *Familiarity*, *Reputation*, and *Influence*



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The data and analysis in this article are based on a pilot GSPI study conducted in 2025 which included a new question on how respondents got to know about the nation brands they said they were aware of. The pilot study was conducted in 5 markets – Brazil, China, France, India and USA.

Soft Power is often discussed as an abstract asset, but in practice it is built and lost through tangible experiences and touchpoints that shape how people come to see a country. The Global Soft Power Index captures this through perceptions: how familiar people feel with a nation, the reputation they hold of it, and the influence they believe it has. We also measure the associations behind those outcomes, such as whether a country is seen to be stable, innovative, or trustworthy.

But these perceptions do not form in a vacuum. They are shaped by experiences: what people watch and read, where they travel, the culture they consume. That is why, alongside our established analysis of perceptual drivers, we tested an experiential layer this year. We asked respondents who said they know a nation what actually made it familiar to them and modelled how those experiences connect not only to deeper *Familiarity*, but also to stronger *Reputation* and *Influence*.

Awareness travels fast. Familiarity does not.

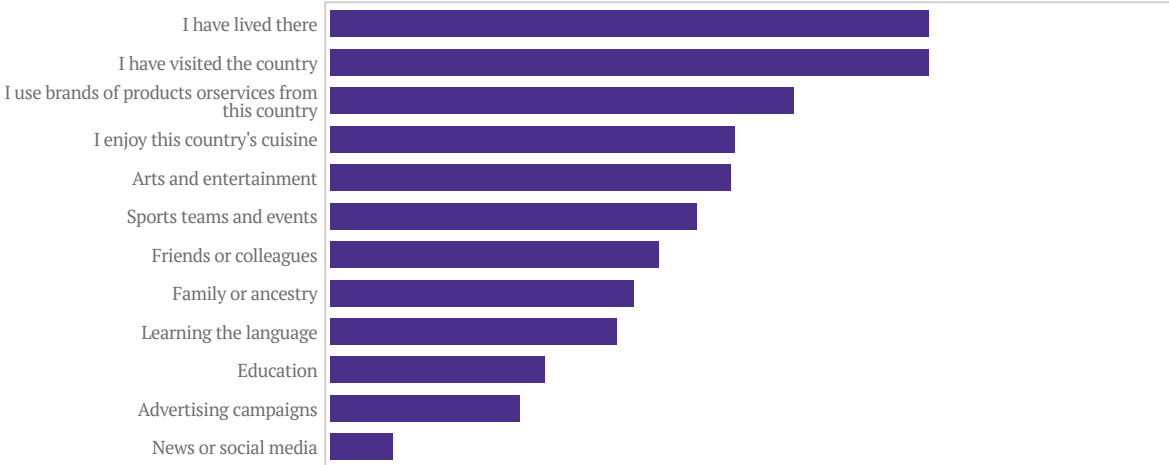
News and social media is the most common cited sources of awareness. But awareness is not the same as a deeper knowledge and understanding that in turn underpins trust and sustained influence. Deeper knowledge is built through direct, lived experience. Visiting and living in a country are the two strongest drivers of nation brand *Familiarity*. (Figure 1)

Beyond that, *Familiarity* is strengthened by repeated, everyday exposure: using that country's products and services, engaging with its culture through cuisine, arts and entertainment, and following sports teams and events. By contrast, news or social media is the weakest driver of *Familiarity*.

This is not an argument against media visibility. It is a reminder of what visibility can and cannot do.

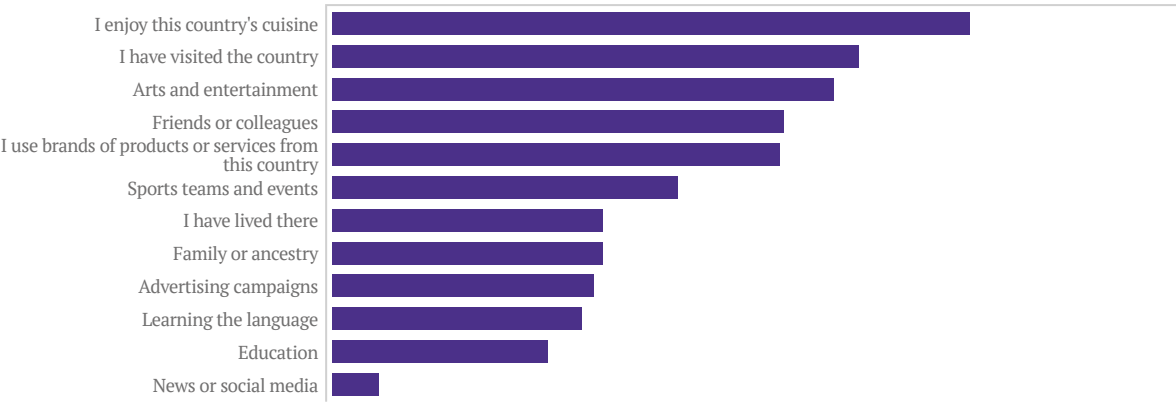
Experiential Drivers of Familiarity (Figure 1)

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Experiential Drivers of Reputation (Figure 2)

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Media can put a country in front of an audience quickly, but deeper *Familiarity* is much more closely linked to first-hand contact and then reinforced through everyday exposure of cultural and commercial consumption.

Reputation: the strongest lever is the life people want

Reputation is most strongly associated with experiences people enjoy and talk about. Cuisine is the strongest experiential driver of *Reputation*, followed by visitation, arts and entertainment, and friends or colleagues. (Figure 2)

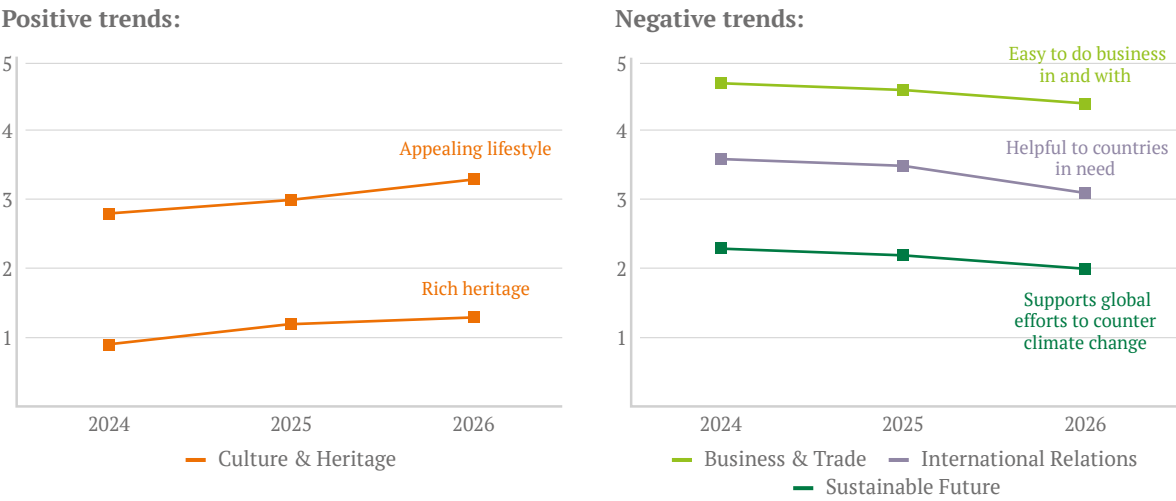
The results are intuitive but strategically important. These are touchpoints which create positive emotions, spark conversation and are reinforced socially.

They shape whether a country feels attractive, interesting, and distinctive, well beyond what audiences learn from headlines or official messaging.

Longer-term trends in the perceptual drivers point in the same direction. Across all pillars, *appealing lifestyle* and *rich heritage* show the strongest positive movement, increasing most significantly in the past three years (Figure 3). This sits alongside the growing role of travel experience in shaping reputation with tourism-linked associations such as *great place to visit* and *Friendly* people recording the largest jumps last year. Taken together, the trends suggest that *Reputation* is built when a country is associated with experiences people enjoy, aspire to, and talk about – and when those experiences feel authentic rather than engineered.

Perceptual Reputation Drivers (Figure 3)

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Influence: The strongest lever is the life people need

Influence looks different. It is less about affection and more about utility, reliance, and repeat use. The strongest experiential driver of *Influence* by far is using a country's products or services (Figure 4).

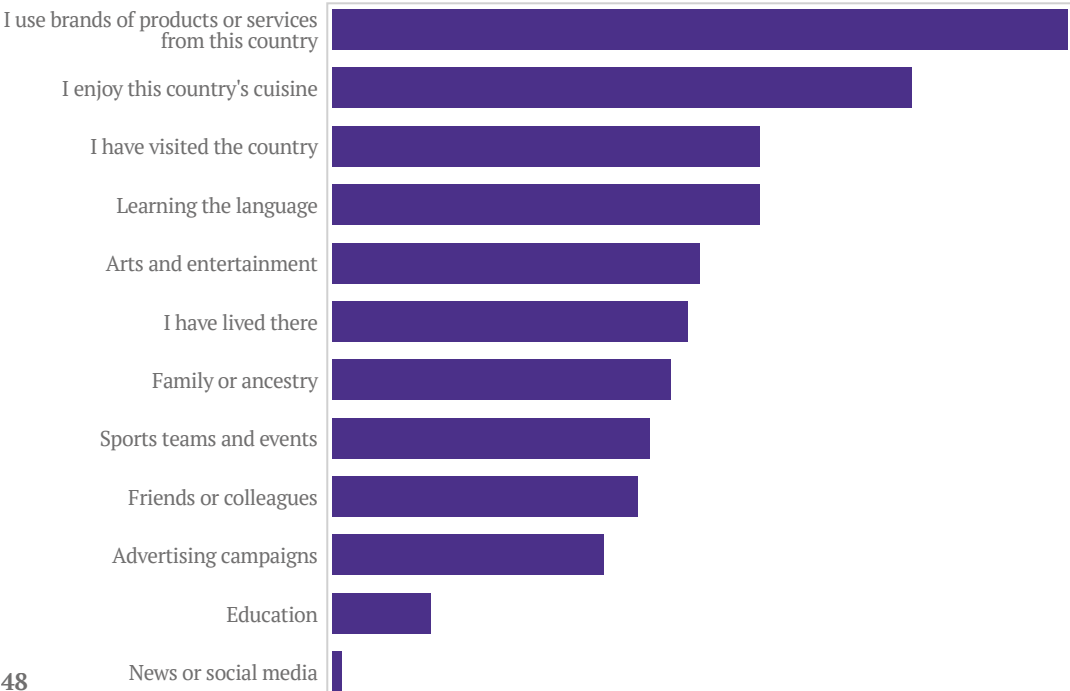
In other words, *Influence* is built when a country shows up in how people work, connect, purchase, and solve problems. It is then further reinforced through cultural contact such as enjoying a country's cuisine, visiting or learning the language, all of which play a meaningful role in shaping perceived influence.

This distinction matters because it highlights that while both *Reputation* and *Influence* are about embeddedness into day-to-day life, they are driven by two different mechanisms:

- + **Reputation** is strengthened by cultural pull, leisure experiences, and social reinforcement.
- + **Influence** is primarily strengthened by everyday utility, adoption, and integration into routines with culture and language acting as strong amplifiers.

Experiential Drivers of Influence (Figure 4)

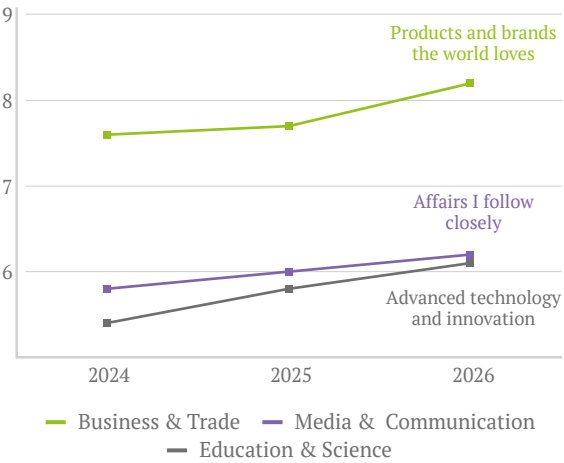
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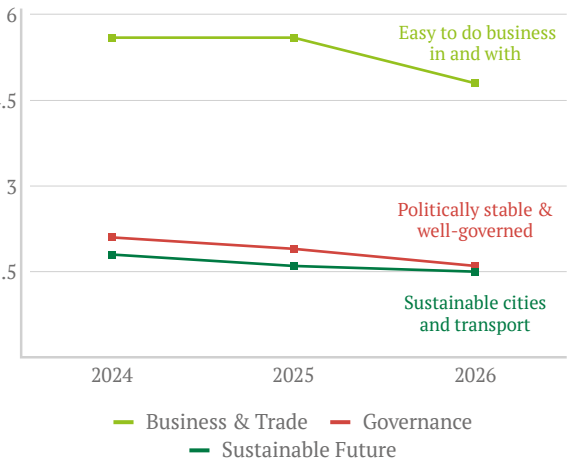
Perceptual Influence Drivers (Figure 5)

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Positive trends:



Negative trends:



Three-year trends in the perceptual drivers of *Influence* reinforce this picture. The attributes gaining weight i.e., *products and brands the world loves*, advanced technology and innovation, and the affairs people follow closely are all tied to being visible in what people use, hear about, and pay attention to (Figure 5).

In a year dominated by fast-moving international events and the race for leadership in frontier AI-driven technologies, that kind of presence has become a bigger part of how *Influence* is judged.

At the same time, with tariffs and trade restrictions in play, openness and smooth market access stop feeling like the default. Friction, both internationally and domestically in some cases has become part of the backdrop so *Influence* is less driven by ease of doing business and or general political stability.

Linking experiences to the perceptions that matter

Looking at experiential drivers alongside perceptual drivers strengthens soft power strategy. Perceptual drivers show which associations are most closely linked to *Reputation* and *Influence*. Experiential drivers show the routes by which those perceptions are formed and reinforced.

The conclusion is that the levers are not interchangeable. Closer Familiarity is most effectively built through travel and other routes to first-hand contact, complemented by sustained exposure through culture and consumption.

Reputation is strengthened by leisure-led touchpoints and cultural experiences that people socialise around such as food and entertainment. *Influence* is built through everyday relevance, where products, services, platforms, and technology ecosystems embed a country in decisions and behaviours far beyond its borders.

The broader opportunity and the reason we run this kind of modelling is that it turns the Global Soft Power Index from a scoreboard into a strategy tool: not just who is strong, but why, and what would move the dial next.

Does sustainability drive Soft Power?



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Soft power describes a nation’s influence on others, underpinned by its policies, values, and positions. With this in mind, it is clear that sustainability perceptions help define soft power: the actions a nation chooses to take on topics like climate change, AI governance, and gender empowerment have a clear effect on reputation.

What does the data show?

Analysis of the results of the Global Soft Power Index demonstrates this relationship clearly. The *Sustainable Future* pillar

evaluates nation brands on four key aspects of environmental sustainability: cities and transport, support for global action on climate change, green energy and technologies, and environmental protection. We observe strong correlations between national performance on this pillar and other aspects of the Index.

Perceived national influence in Business in Trade has a correlation of r=0.97 with *Sustainable Future*, and there is a correlation of r=0.93 between sustainability and influence in *International Relations*. *Sustainable Future* is also linked with national Reputation Scores, with a correlation of 0.89.

Sustainability-related Soft Power attributes (Table 1)

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Environmental	Acts to protect the environment
	Invests in green energy and technologies
	Supports global efforts to counter climate change
	Sustainable cities and transport
Social	Strong and stable economy
	Helpful to countries in need
	Strong educational system
	Tolerant and inclusive
Governance	Respects law and human rights
	High ethical standards and low corruption
	Politically stable and well-governed
	Trustworthy media

Leaders in sustainability attributes (Table 2)

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			Metrics
			Acts to protect the environment
			Invests in green energy and technologies
			Supports global efforts to counter climate change
			Sustainable cities and transport
			Strong and stable economy
			Helpful to countries in need
			Strong educational system
			Tolerant and inclusive
			Respects law and human rights
			High ethical standards and low corruption
			Politically stable and well-governed
			Trustworthy media

Sustainability goes beyond these environmental concerns to encompass social and governance factors too. In total, 12 attributes from across the index contribute to sustainability (Table 1), collectively responsible for driving as much as 34% of a nation’s soft power.

Which countries lead the way?

We see consistently strong sustainability perceptions for eight nations: Switzerland, Japan, Sweden, Germany, the UK, Canada, China, and the Netherlands. (Table 2)

The United States, which makes the podium on most metrics notably did not receive any top

3 scores on sustainability attributes. This may not be surprising given President Trump’s pivot away from the green policies, initiatives, and investments built up by prior administrations.

Does perception match reality?

There is not necessarily a close alignment between sustainability perceptions and the reality of countries’ progress against the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Our analysis continues to demonstrate that many nations, particularly smaller ones, that have made strong progress against the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), are missing out on deserved recognition and soft power benefits.



We find that European nations, especially Central and Eastern Europe, largely comprise the set of nations who have an opportunity to grow their sustainability perceptions to match their levels of performance and generate soft power. Among the top 10 are Finland, Ukraine, Croatia, France, Slovenia, Latvia, Czechia, Serbia, Poland, and Denmark.

Finland holds the top score of sustainability performance in the latest UN SDG Index. It is seen to be relatively committed to sustainability, but not to the extent that its standout performance merits.

Denmark and France make the top 5 on performance, with Croatia, Poland, and Czechia making the top 10. For all of these nations, their efforts are not fully translating into public perception. Collectively, their SDG progress is comprehensively strong, especially on KPIs related to Affordable and Clean Energy (SDG #7), Gender Equality (SDG #5), and Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure (SDG #9). These nations should seek to more effectively communicate their strong sustainability position to enhance their soft power and leadership on this theme.

On the other hand, there are many cases where sustainability perception exceeds relative performance levels, which may pose a reputational risk. The most economically developed nations may be taking some of the largest-scaled measures to address sustainability, thanks to greater finances and means to promote investment and tourism.

However, the large footprint that their consumption and lifestyles have means a greater environmental footprint, and therefore sustainability perceptions that tend to exceed performance.

Will sustainability continue to be key to Soft Power?

COP30 was hosted in Belem, Brazil in November 2025, and its negotiations package saw new targets for tripling climate adaptation finance by 2035 and recognizing the just

transition imperative. Despite these wins, no binding roadmap to phase out fossil fuels or reverse deforestation was developed. International cooperation and motivation appear quite uneven. Environmental degradation, damage from climate change, and carbon emissions continue to cost nations in terms of money, productivity, and human health.

With the United States no longer backing many environmental treaties and associations, including the Paris Agreement, and the EU continuing to revise and dilute its corporate sustainability reporting requirements, the outlook for sustainability may seem challenging.

Yet the results of the Global Soft Power indicate that for many countries, if they are prepared to step up, make progress, and most importantly, confidently communicate about that progress, there are significant benefits to secure from trade, to talent, to tourism.

There remains a platform for nations to step up when the steering forces of the climate discourse change position or stand down. In a fragmented sustainability landscape, consistency and ambition will distinguish leaders from followers. Our research supports the soft power benefits of a commitment to sustainability, as well as the public association and recognition that come with it.

Domestic & global perception gaps: Aligning internal confidence and external credibility in Nation Branding



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Domestic perceptions play a critical yet often underexplored role in shaping national reputation and soft power.

While nation branding strategies traditionally prioritise international audiences, the perceptions held by a country's own citizens provide an essential lens through which reputation formation, credibility, and long-term influence can be understood.

Empirical analysis of Brand Finance's domestic and global perception data highlights systematic differences between how nations are viewed internally and how they are perceived internationally, revealing distinct patterns

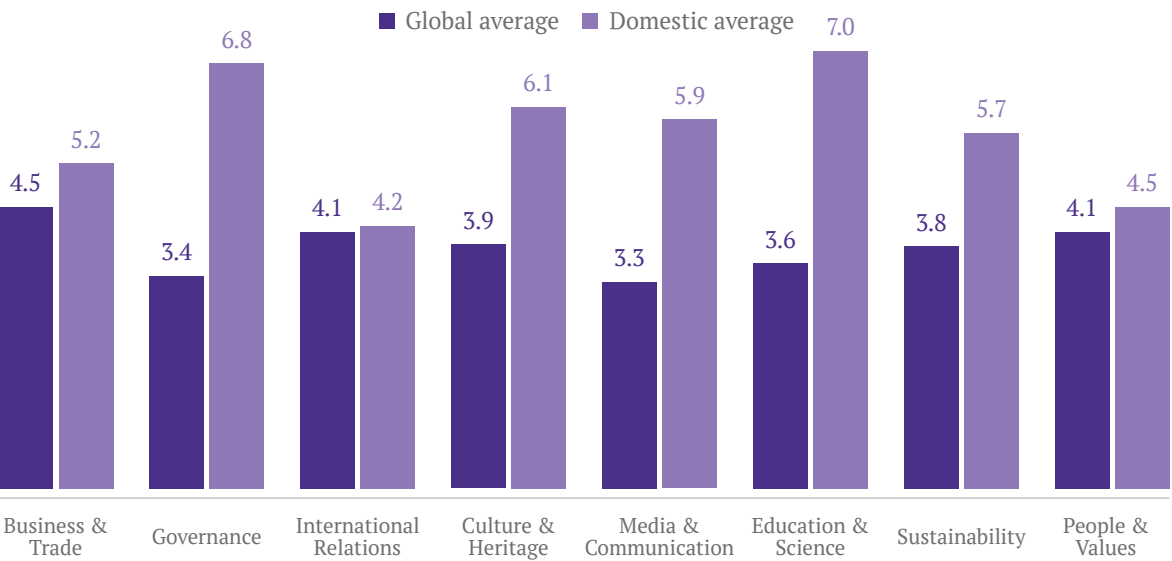
across pillars of soft power and significant regional variation.

These domestic–global perception gaps are not merely statistical anomalies. They reflect structural differences in lived experience, information exposure, and expectations, and they carry important implications for nation brand strategy.

In an increasingly competitive global environment, where trust, credibility, and legitimacy are central to influence, understanding where domestic confidence aligns with or diverges from global recognition is essential for effective nation brand management.

Where domestic and global perceptions diverge (Figure 1)

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Institutional confidence at home, limited recognition abroad

Across the dataset, domestic audiences consistently rate their countries more positively than global respondents on institution-led pillars of soft power, most notably *Governance* and *Education & Science*. On average, domestic perceptions exceed global perceptions by more than three points on both pillars, making these the most pronounced positive domestic–global gaps observed.

This pattern suggests that citizens possess a higher degree of confidence in their country's institutional performance than is recognised externally. Governance quality, public service delivery, and education systems are experienced directly and continuously by domestic audiences. Reforms, investments, and incremental improvements are therefore more visible and more tangible at home than they are abroad. International audiences, by contrast, rely on indirect indicators such as media coverage, rankings, and legacy reputation, which often lag behind recent developments.

A similar, though slightly less pronounced, domestic uplift is observed in *Media &*

Communication and *Culture & Heritage* (Figure 1). These pillars are embedded in everyday life and national identity, reinforcing domestic familiarity and pride. Global audiences may engage with a country's culture selectively, but they are less exposed to the full breadth and evolution of cultural expression that citizens experience routinely.

By contrast, pillars such as *Business & Trade*, *People & Values*, and *International Relations* show considerably smaller domestic–global gaps. In these areas, domestic and global perceptions are more closely aligned, showcasing what our news cycle mostly consist of, economics and global affairs.

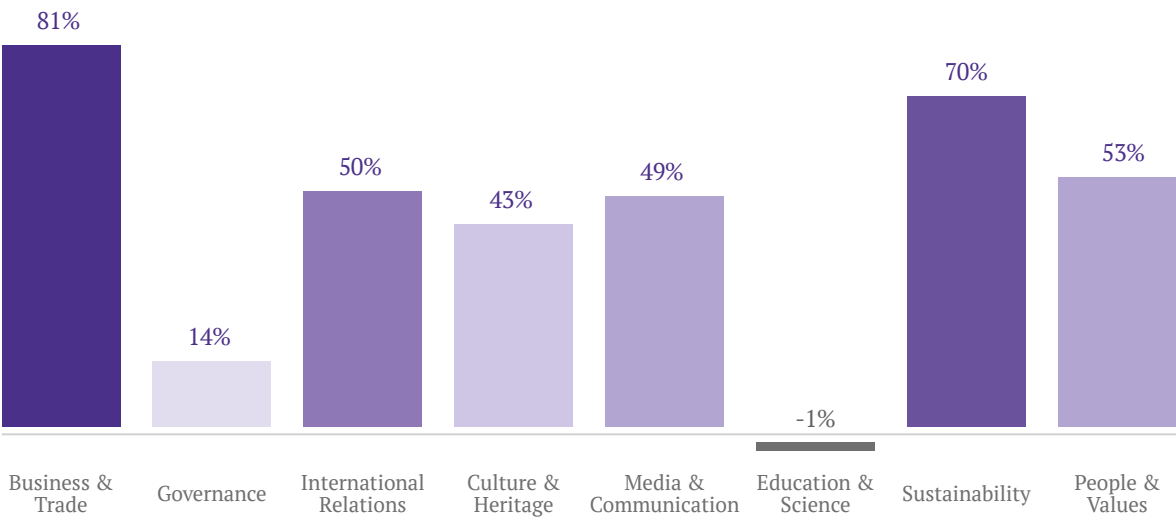
What translates globally, and what does not

Correlation analysis between domestic and global scores reveals a clear distinction between pillars that translate efficiently across borders and those that do not.

Business & Trade exhibits one of the strongest alignments between domestic and global perception, indicating that economic attractiveness and commercial capability are widely observable and comparatively easy for international audiences to assess.

Correlation between domestic and global perceptions by pillar (Figure 2)

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Specifically, perceptions of a *strong and stable economy* show a 79% correlation (Figure 2) between domestic and global audiences, reflecting the visibility of macroeconomic indicators, trade flows, and investment activity. However, it is notable that ‘a *strong and stable economy*’ is one of the few metrics where global perceptions exceed domestic ones, reflecting a broader context of recent economic uncertainty in the past year, where citizens may perceive neighbouring economies as performing better than their own.

In contrast, *Governance* and *Education & Science* display very weak correlations between domestic and global perception. This divergence indicates that improvements in these areas, while recognised domestically, do not automatically convert into international reputational gains. Institutional strength and educational capacity often require external validation, through international benchmarks, partnerships, accreditation, or measurable global impact, before they are fully recognised beyond national borders.

This distinction has important strategic implications. It suggests that reputation formation is not solely a function of performance, but of proof architecture. Certain pillars require deliberate mechanisms to translate domestic reality into internationally credible signals.

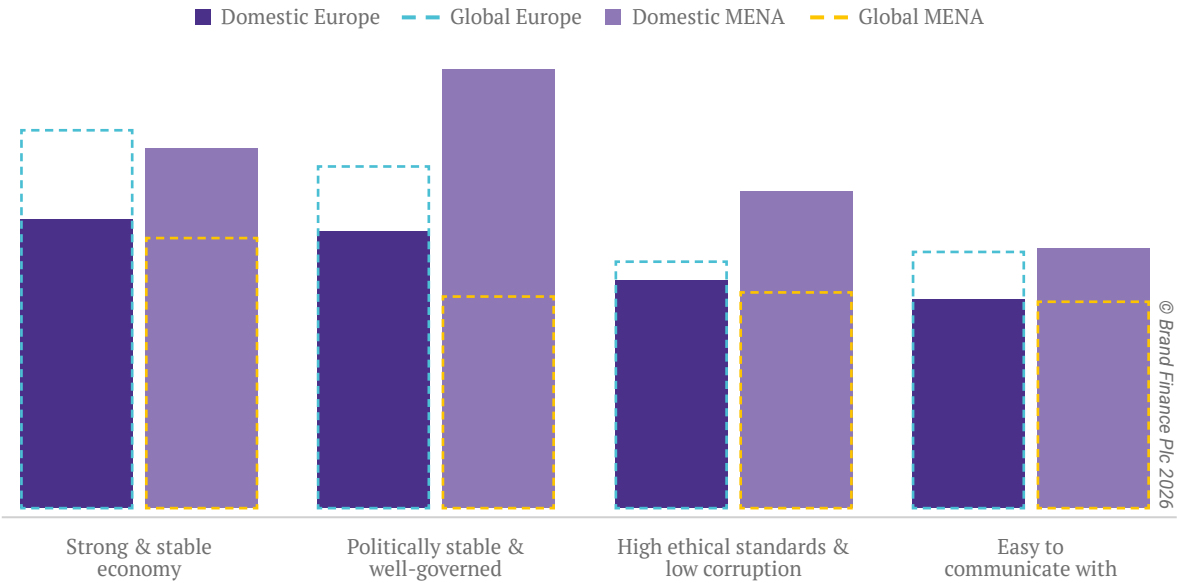
Regional divergence: Europe and MENA

While domestic–global perception gaps are evident across regions, their direction and magnitude vary significantly. The contrast between Europe and the Middle East & North Africa (MENA) is particularly pronounced.

Europe: domestic scepticism amid strong global reputation

In Europe, domestic audiences consistently rate their countries lower than global audiences on several attributes, including a *strong and stable economy*, *political stability*, *high ethical standards*, and *ease of communication* (Figure 3).

Average score for European & MENA markets domestically and globally (Figure 3)



This results in a negative domestic–global gap across multiple governance-related indicators.

Despite this domestic scepticism, European countries continue to benefit from strong global reputational capital. Long-established perceptions of institutional robustness, economic resilience, and democratic governance continue to shape international views, even as domestic audiences express greater dissatisfaction.

This divergence reflects the high expectations European citizens place on public institutions and governance standards. Extensive media scrutiny, political pluralism, and direct exposure to policy shortcomings contribute to more critical domestic assessments. Global audiences, by contrast, often evaluate Europe relative to other regions, reinforcing a more favourable comparative perception.

For nation brands, this imbalance presents a strategic challenge. Persistent domestic scepticism can erode internal trust and constrain policy ambition, even when international reputation remains strong.

Over time, this disconnect risks undermining the credibility and sustainability of the nation brand abroad too.

MENA: strong domestic confidence, limited global uptake

MENA countries exhibit the opposite pattern. Domestic perceptions are substantially higher than global perceptions across all pillars and attributes. This indicates a high level of domestic confidence in national direction, reform agendas, and institutional performance (Figure 3).

These positive domestic assessments likely reflect visible transformation, large-scale investment, and coherent national narratives that resonate strongly with citizens. However, the comparatively lower global scores suggest that international audiences have not yet fully absorbed or validated these changes.

In this context, the domestic–global perception gap represents unrealised reputational potential rather than a risk. The challenge lies in converting domestic confidence into externally recognised credibility.

What domestic–global perception gaps reveal about legitimacy and credibility

Domestic–global perception gaps are not inherently problematic. Their strategic significance lies in direction, scale, and persistence.



When examined together, these gaps offer a diagnostic tool for understanding where national reputation is constrained by weak internal legitimacy, and where it is limited by insufficient external recognition.

Where domestic perceptions are lower than global perceptions, as observed across much of Europe, the primary risk is not reputational decline abroad but erosion of internal confidence. Persistent domestic scepticism towards economic stability, governance, ethical standards, and ease of communication can weaken the coherence between lived experience and external messaging. Over time, this misalignment risks undermining policy credibility, reform momentum, and public support for international engagement, even when global reputation remains comparatively strong.

Conversely, where domestic perceptions exceed global perceptions, as seen across much of MENA, the challenge is one of under-leveraged reputation. Strong domestic confidence in governance, education, leadership, and stability does not automatically translate into international credibility. Without external validation, domestic achievements may fail to deliver proportional gains in influence, investment, or attractiveness, limiting the strategic return on reform and investment.

In both cases, the perception gap signals a misalignment between experience, evidence, and reputation. Understanding why this misalignment persists is essential for effective nation brand management.

Three structural dynamics help explain these divergences. First, information asymmetry plays a central role. Citizens experience institutions, education systems, and governance outcomes directly, while international audiences rely on mediated signals that are often partial, delayed, or filtered through legacy narratives. Second, reputational inertia slows the pace at which global perceptions adjust. Long-standing associations continue to shape international views long after domestic conditions have evolved, whether positively or negatively. Third, there is a critical distinction between confidence and credibility. Domestic confidence may be

rooted in lived improvement and national pride, but global credibility depends on comparability, transparency, and trust in independent sources.

How perception gaps should reshape nation brand strategy

1. Design credibility rather than assume it

Institution-led pillars, particularly governance and education, require translation rather than promotion. Improvements in these areas must be accompanied by internationally recognisable proof points, including:

- + benchmarking and rankings
- + accreditation and standards
- + third-party evaluation
- + partnerships with globally trusted institutions

Performance alone is insufficient; credibility must be intentionally constructed.

2. Use economic narratives as strategic gateways

High-transfer pillars such as economic performance and business attractiveness are more readily legible to global audiences. These pillars can act as gateways through which governance and education reforms gain traction, particularly when institutional improvements are linked to tangible economic outcomes.

3. Treat domestic sentiment as a reputational asset

Domestic perception should be understood as a strategic indicator, not a background variable. Sustained gaps between domestic sentiment and global reputation weaken the long-term foundations of a nation brand by eroding internal trust, legitimacy, and confidence. These are not only political assets; they are reputational ones.

4. Calibrate strategy to regional gap patterns

Perception gaps vary systematically by region and demand tailored responses:

- + **Europe:** prioritise rebuilding domestic trust through transparency, service delivery, and visible institutional responsiveness.
- + **MENA:** accelerate international recognition of domestic progress through validation, engagement, and credible global signalling.

Uniform nation branding strategies risk reinforcing, rather than correcting, these misalignments.

Aligning internal confidence with external credibility

Domestic and global perceptions represent two distinct but interconnected dimensions of national reputation. The gap between them offers insight into where confidence exists, where credibility is lacking, and where strategic intervention is most needed. Rather than viewing these gaps as inconsistencies to be resolved, nation brands should treat them as signals, revealing where reputation is constrained by scepticism at home or by invisibility abroad.

In an era where influence increasingly depends on trust and legitimacy, nation branding can no longer focus exclusively on external audiences. Aligning internal confidence with external credibility is now a central task for place brand managers seeking to build durable soft power and sustained global appeal.

Beyond the game: Measuring sport’s impact on Nation Brand strength



Scott Moore
Sports Services Manager,
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Sports & Soft Power

Sports remain one of the most impactful ways nations project their identities, values, and capabilities.

The Paris 2024 Olympic & Paralympic Games reimagined urban mega-events with a focus on sustainability and inclusivity, and EURO 2024 in Germany advanced ESG practices at scale.

The Copa América 2024 and the ICC Men’s T20 World Cup 2024 brought top-tier football and cricket to new audiences, including matches on US soil, while Saudi Arabia’s sports investments highlighted its importance in economic strategy, tourism strategy, and geopolitical influence.

These collectively affirm that sporting events have evolved beyond a standalone driver of Soft Power into powerful platform for nations around the world to showcase their best qualities.

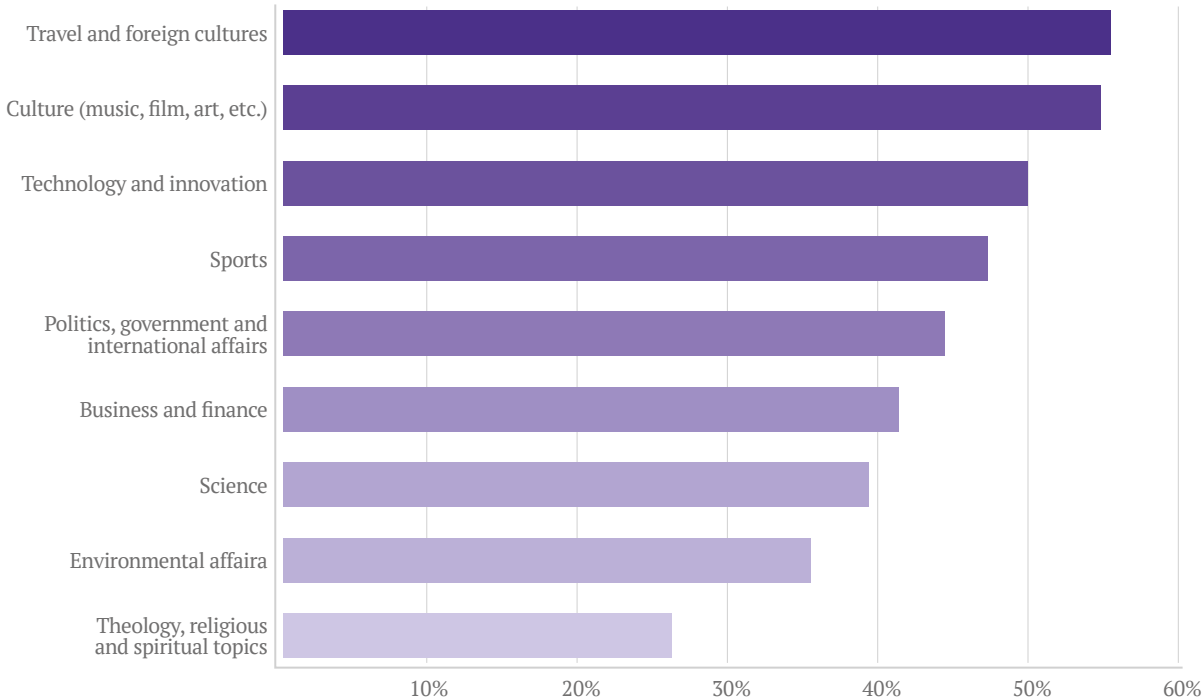
Global interest and why it matters

According to Brand Finance GSPI research, sports continues to rank among the most engaging cultural domains globally. Nearly half of respondents (47%) indicated they are interested in sports in this year’s study (Figure 1).

Within sport, football is the world’s common language, while regional preferences – for instance, cricket in India and South Asia, basketball in China, and the NFL in the US - create bridges to specific audiences (Figure 2).

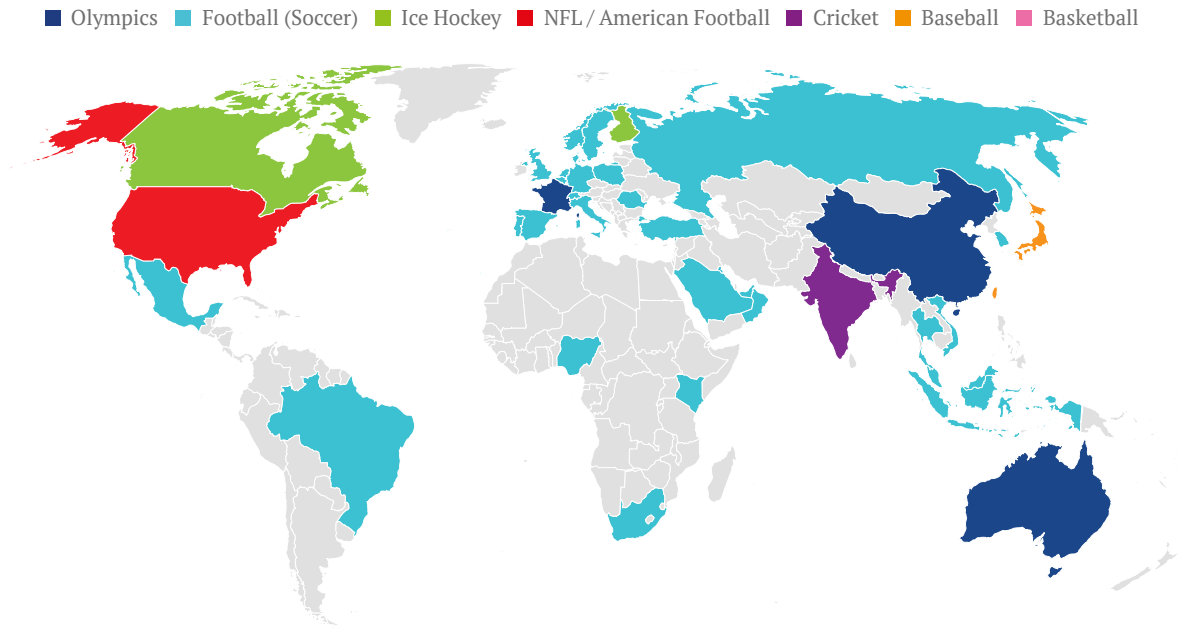
Which of these topics interests you? (Figure 1)

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Favorite sport by market (Figure 2)

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This universal appeal means sports offer unparalleled reach for countries seeking to project identity and values, as evidenced by the Argentina Football Association (AFA).

anchored by deep cultural heritage and iconic talent, translates into measurable improvements in perceptions across key dimensions of nation brand strength (Figure 3).

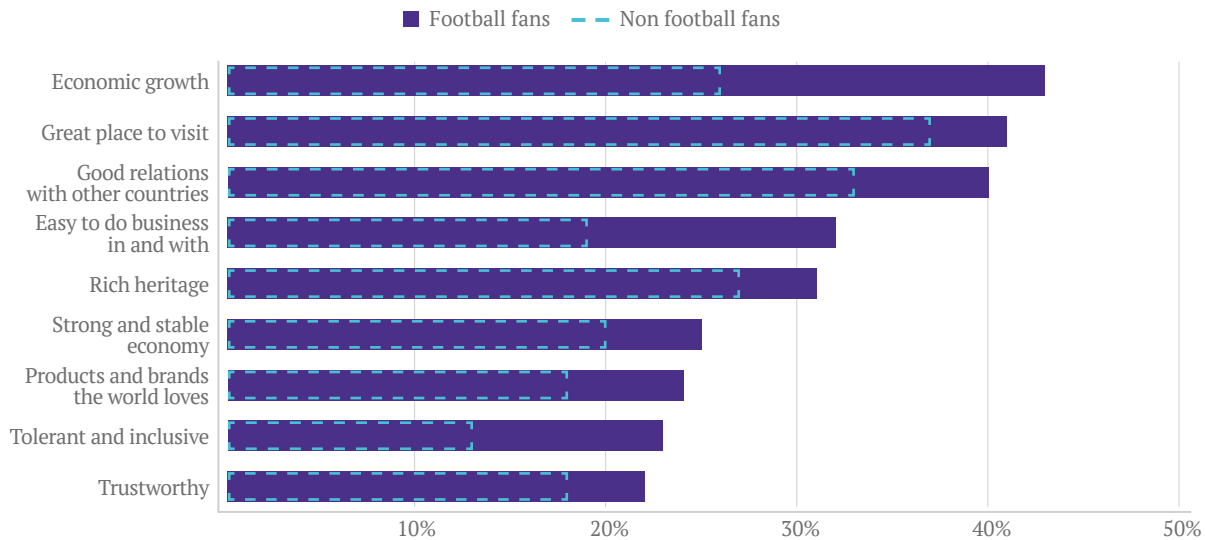
Sports teams drive a nations Soft Power

Brand Finance analysis of the AFA demonstrates how the nation’s football success, which is

Football-engaged audiences associate Argentina more positively on attributes like *economic growth, heritage, trustworthiness, ease of doing business in and with, and good relations with other countries* than non-fans do.

Argentina Nation Brand Perceptions (Figure 3)

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Those perception uplifts translate into increased willingness to visit, invest, study, and buy, which are important outcomes for policymakers and business (Figure 4).

This effect extends to the private sector. The AFA's brand strength and global reach raise awareness and consideration for commercial partners (e.g financial services and FMCG partners), illustrating how nation-team-sponsor ecosystems share and multiply value. This is Soft Power in action: a virtuous circle where emotional affinity fuels economic impact, which in turn funds better programmes and broader reach.

It also shows that countries do not need to host to benefit. Sustained excellence by a national team paired with coherent storytelling and partner activation can deliver measurable gains in nation brand equity and commercial value.

Leader in sports

The Global Soft Power Index *Leader in sports* ranking offers another lens on how sport intersects with Soft Power. Brazil and Argentina remain at the top, reflecting their deep-rooted football heritage, while the United States holds third place, driven by the global reach of its sports leagues and consistent Olympics table-topping success.

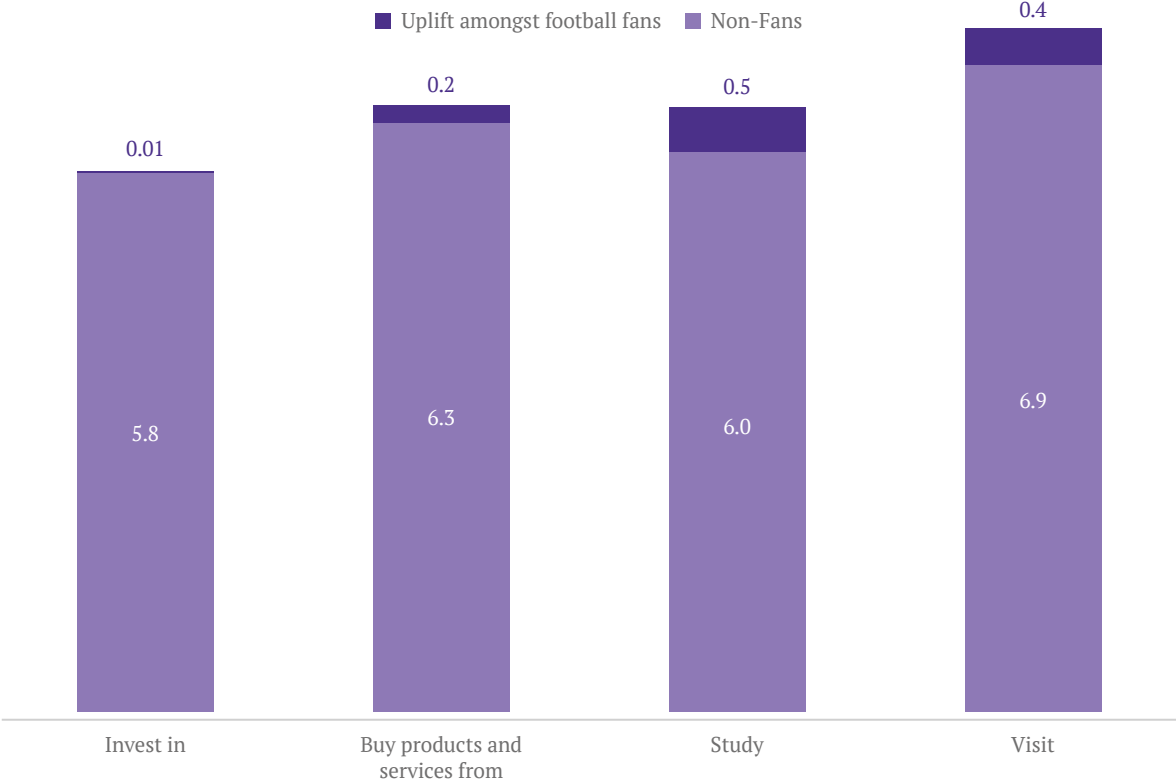
The most striking 2026 result is Saudi Arabia, which has climbed seven places, as the Kingdom invests heavily in football, golf, and other marquee sports (Figure 5). This surge underscores a key insight, while hosting events or acquiring star talent can buy attention, lasting influence depends on what that attention reveals. If the experience aligns with values like accessibility, inclusion, and sustainability, the reputational gains endure. If not, the effect risks being short-lived.

Sports investment as a Soft Power strategy

Saudi Arabia’s rise in the 'Leader in sports' ranking is the result of a deliberate nation branding strategy.

Nation Brands: Uplift fans vs Non fans (Figure 4)

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Over the past two years, the Kingdom has invested significantly into sports as part of its Vision 2030 diversification agenda. Investments in football, LIV Golf, boxing, and Formula 1 have positioned Saudi Arabia at the centre of global sports headlines. These moves have expanded tourism, attracted international talent, and secured major broadcasting deals, creating a perception of dynamism and ambition.

The strategy demonstrates how sport can serve as a lever for economic development and nation branding, but it also highlights the importance of credibility. For these efforts to translate into enduring Soft Power, Saudi Arabia must pair investment with delivery across the values that sport embodies, or it risks being seen as transactional rather than transformational.

Why measurement matters


























Sport’s impact on soft power is certainly real, but it is mediated through other drivers. That is why measurement is essential.

Tracking the chain from exposure to perception to behaviour allows governments to justify infrastructure investments and helps sponsors quantify ROI. Our data shows that the strongest predictor of influence remains whether people follow a country’s affairs closely, a metric that mega-events and elite teams can dramatically boost.


























However, attention alone is not enough to increase Soft Power - nations must convert visibility into trust through competence and values.

Sport is the world’s most effective attention engine. Countries that pair this attention with substance, including sustainable infrastructure, cultural depth, and transparent delivery, will find sport a long-term asset for reputation, influence, and economic growth. Those that treat it as a shortcut risk fleeting gains and heightened scrutiny.

Leader in sports Ranking & Score 2026

<div>1 =</div> <div>1</div> <div></div> <div>BRAZIL</div> <div>Score 6.4 -0.4</div>	<div>2 =</div> <div>2</div> <div></div> <div>ARGENTINA</div> <div>Score 6.1 -0.4</div>	<div>3 =</div> <div>3</div> <div></div> <div>UNITED STATES</div> <div>Score 5.7 -0.7</div>	<div>4 ▲</div> <div>5</div> <div></div> <div>SPAIN</div> <div>Score 5.2 -0.3</div>	<div>5 ▼</div> <div>4</div> <div></div> <div>GERMANY</div> <div>Score 5.2 -0.4</div>
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<div>21 ▼</div> <div>16</div> <div></div> <div>CROATIA</div> <div>Score 2.9 -0.4</div>	<div>22 ▲</div> <div>24</div> <div></div> <div>NIGERIA</div> <div>Score 2.8 0.0</div>	<div>23 ▲</div> <div>28</div> <div></div> <div>QATAR</div> <div>Score 2.8 +0.3</div>	<div>24 ▼</div> <div>20</div> <div></div> <div>COTE D'IVOIRE</div> <div>Score 2.6 -0.3</div>	<div>25 ▼</div> <div>22</div> <div></div> <div>KENYA</div> <div>Score 2.6 -0.3</div>

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<div>26 =</div> <div>26</div> <div></div> <div>SWEDEN</div> <div>Score 2.6 -0.1</div>	<div>27 ▼</div> <div>25</div> <div></div> <div>BELGIUM</div> <div>Score 2.5 -0.2</div>	<div>28 ▼</div> <div>27</div> <div></div> <div>SOUTH KOREA</div> <div>Score 2.4 -0.2</div>	<div>29 =</div> <div>29</div> <div></div> <div>NEW ZEALAND</div> <div>Score 2.4 -0.1</div>	<div>30 ▲</div> <div>31</div> <div></div> <div>NORWAY</div> <div>Score 2.4 +0.1</div>
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Soft Power under strain: Shifting perceptions of global institutions



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With hard power often chosen over soft power by national leaders, trust in international institutions is beginning to show visible signs of strain. Net Positive Influence data (Figure 1), which captures whether institutions are seen more as a force for good than a negative influence, suggests that many of the world's most prominent international bodies, particularly those associated with Western leadership, are losing ground in the eyes of global audiences. While most organisations continue to be viewed positively overall, the trend over time is unmistakable.

Whether this marks a rejection of multilateralism remains open to debate. What is clearer is a broader shift in mood, influenced by uncertainty, fatigue, and growing doubts about the ability of institutions to deliver on their promises. It reflects a broader pattern in this year's Global Soft Power Index with many

established Western powerhouses also showing signs of soft power erosion. As confidence in traditional centres of influence weakens, the goodwill once extended to the systems and structures underpinning international cooperation also appears to be under pressure.

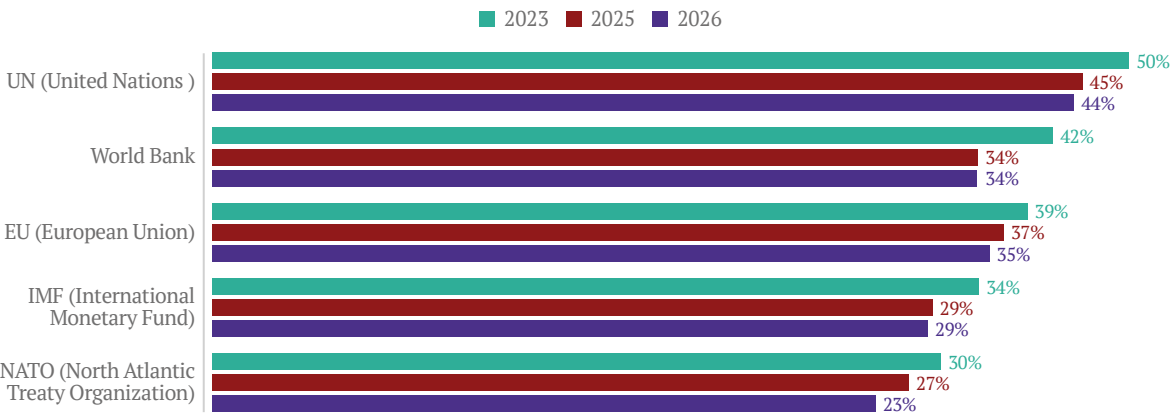
Trust in global institutions softens amid political and geopolitical volatility

These shifts do not exist in isolation. They are unfolding against a backdrop of political and geopolitical volatility that is beginning to erode confidence in institutions that have underpinned the international system for generations. The impact of President Donald Trump's 'America First' agenda continues to loom large in this context. Ongoing questions about whether a more inward-looking or transactional approach could re-emerge have added to doubts about the durability of the institutions that rely on consistent US engagement.

Nowhere is this tension more evident than in NATO. Despite its renewed strategic relevance amid heightened geopolitical pressures, public sentiment has moved in the opposite direction. Prolonged conflict, fears of escalation, and the prominence of military responses over diplomatic outcomes appear to be weighing on perceptions. Rather than reinforcing confidence, the current environment is prompting questions about whether security is increasingly being defined through force rather than cooperation.

Net Positive Influence globally (Figure 1)

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Results cover 58 markets where the question was asked in 2023. Net Positive Influence = positive - negative.



If NATO highlights how security institutions are being reassessed under pressure, the picture is more nuanced for bodies with broader diplomatic and economic mandates. The United Nations, while still registering the highest positive influence overall, has nevertheless seen its standing soften since 2023. This does not point to a loss of relevance, but rather to growing frustration with the organisation’s limited ability to prevent or resolve major conflicts, most notably those in Ukraine and Gaza. While the UN continues to be viewed as a force for good, expectations around delivery appear to be rising faster than perceptions of impact.

A similar softening is evident among economic institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. Both remain net positive, yet their influence has also weakened over time, reflecting persistent concerns around inequality, austerity, and elite decision-making. These narratives tend to gain traction during periods of economic stress, and recent global pressures appear to have reinforced them, contributing to a more cautious and questioning public mood.

Diverging sentiment within member nations

Importantly, this softening in perceptions is not confined to audiences outside these institutions. A closer look at sentiment within member states themselves suggests a similar pattern. Among European Union nations, 17 of the 24 included in the analysis (Figure 2) registered a decline in perceptions of the EU’s net positive influence since 2023. The same pattern appears within NATO, where also 17 of the 27 NATO member nations researched (Figure 3) recorded a softening in sentiment. This points to a more complex dynamic, in which confidence is being reassessed not only from the outside, but from within.

The case of Poland illustrates this tension particularly clearly. Despite being one of NATO’s most vocal nations when it comes to security on the Alliance’s eastern flank, Poland registers the largest decline in perceptions of the EU’s net positive influence. The divergence points to a broader reality: active engagement and advocacy within one institution do not automatically carry over to others, especially when economic priorities and political debates come into play.

The global mood matters

At the heart of these trends lies a broader deterioration in global mood. Armed conflicts continue to dominate headlines and daily consciousness. Cost-of-living pressures persist across both developed and emerging markets. At the same time, uncertainty about the global economy, whether linked to inflation, debt, or fears of a sudden market correction associated with emerging technologies such as AI, has left many people feeling uneasy about the future.

Brand Finance’s Global Soft Power Index research consistently shows that soft power is highly sensitive to this emotional climate. When optimism fades, appreciation becomes harder to sustain. Institutions that once symbolised reassurance and stability are more readily associated with inadequacy, even when their underlying role remains vital.

A lesson in brand management

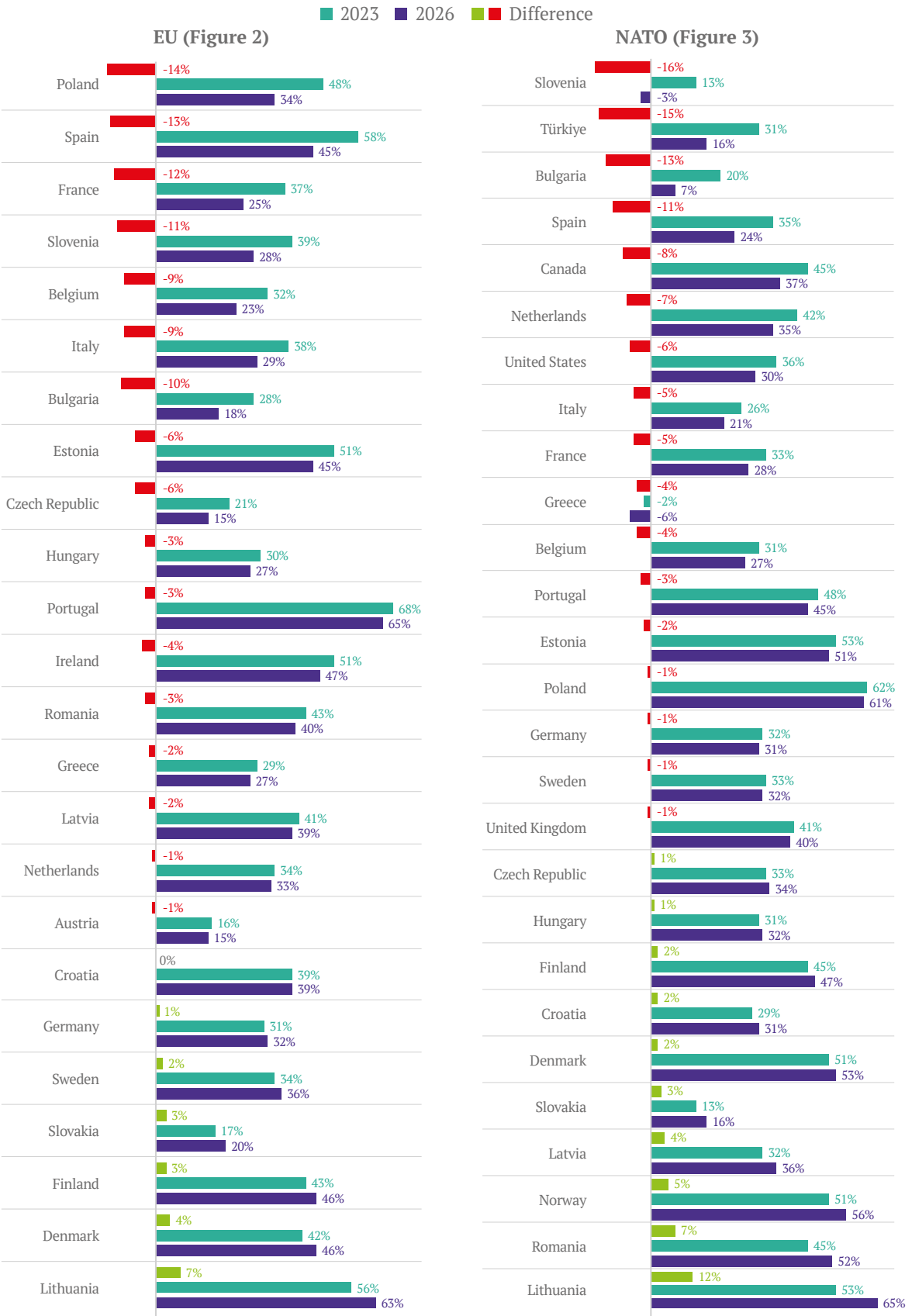
Importantly, there are reasons to believe that this erosion of trust could prove cyclical rather than permanent. History suggests that confidence in international institutions rises and falls alongside broader economic and geopolitical conditions. As uncertainty recedes and stability returns, perceptions can and often do recover.

Despite current pressures, international institutions remain central to addressing shared global challenges, from security and development to climate and technological change. Importantly, net positive sentiment across many institutions suggests that they continue to be seen as a force for good, even as confidence has softened. Rebuilding trust will take time, but the foundations of cooperation remain firmly in place.

For institutions themselves, the lesson is clear. Maintaining soft power in today’s environment requires more than technical competence. It demands clarity of purpose, visible impact, and the ability to communicate relevance in a world where patience is limited and expectations are high.

Net Positive Influence among member states | EU & NATO

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Results for 24 EU and 27 NATO members covered by the research.



04+

Nation Brand Spotlights

Advancing China's global soft power through consistency and innovation



Wu Liming
Chief Correspondent
of China's Xinhua News
Agency London Bureau



Gao Wencheng
Correspondent
of China's Xinhua News
Agency London Bureau



As economic competitiveness, cultural creativity and international engagement increasingly converge, China's continued rise in global soft power reflects a shift from narrative-driven influence to performance-based reputation.

In an interview with Brand Finance, Wu Liming, chief correspondent of China's Xinhua News Agency London Bureau, and Gao Wencheng, correspondent at the bureau, share how alignment between capability and credibility is translating China's development momentum into sustained global influence.

What fundamentally explains China's rise in the Soft Power Index?

China's growing soft power is rooted in consistency between words and deeds. Soft power is not merely about storytelling; it is about tangible delivery.

China's development trajectory has entered a phase where its results are difficult to ignore. Economic resilience, technological upgrading, and global engagement have combined to produce experiences that external audiences can verify.

How do China's industrial and technological advances translate into soft power rather than just competitiveness?

In 2025, Chinese automaker BYD surpassed its long-established global competitor Tesla to become the world's

largest seller of pure electric vehicles by annual volume.

Made-in-China products are no longer valued for price but also for reliability and technological "cool." This model combines a deep talent pool, an extensive manufacturing ecosystem and economies of scale, enabling breakthroughs in sectors from electric vehicles to artificial intelligence and renewable energy.

As these products become part of daily life, industrial credibility is converted into soft power, building trust through consumer experience.

How is China's cultural soft power evolving beyond traditional forms?

China's cultural influence is increasingly driven by contemporary creativity alongside its civilizational heritage. While traditional culture continues to attract global interest, modern cultural IP has become a new vector of soft power, especially among younger audiences.

Designer toys, animation and gaming have demonstrated how Chinese creativity can travel without translation. Characters like Labubu, created by Beijing-based toy giant Pop Mart, illustrate how storytelling, design, and emotional connection can transcend geographical boundaries.

These cultural products have reinforced the idea that contemporary Chinese culture

can be playful, emotionally resonant and globally legible.

What role do brands, consumer experience and tourism play in shaping China's national image?

Brands and mobility have become central to how countries are perceived. Chinese brands increasingly function as everyday touchpoints, at work, on the road and in popular culture, making China more familiar to global audiences.

Tourism amplifies this effect. One year after the introduction of a 240-hour visa-free transit policy, inbound foreign arrivals reached over 40 million, representing year-on-year growth of more than 27 percent.

How does China's approach to global cooperation reinforce its soft power trajectory?

China's soft power is strengthened by a results-oriented approach to international cooperation. Rather than emphasizing ideological alignment, China prioritizes connectivity, trade facilitation and development.

Infrastructure projects, trade and global initiatives gain credibility when they deliver visible benefits. For many partners, China's development experience offers a reference, not as a template, but as evidence that modernization paths can be diverse, pragmatic and context-specific.



Costa Rica



Rank #73 ▼ #71
Score 37.1/100 0.0



Adriana Acosta Rivas
Place Branding, Marketing
& Communications Director,
esencial Costa Rica



Costa Rica has built a unique international reputation over the years. What do you believe sets the country apart on the global stage, and how does this distinct identity contribute to its soft power?

Costa Rica’s reputation is grounded in more than four decades of strategic decisions aimed at building a dynamic, open, and business-friendly economy—without ever compromising sustainability. This long-term vision became the foundation of our Nation Brand.

The positioning of essential COSTA RICA has been developed over more than 12 years, allowing the country to build and sustain a reputation that we consider solid and credible, primarily due to the consistency of its message. Our Nation Brand has successfully articulated Costa Rica’s value proposition as a destination

for tourism, foreign direct investment, the promotion of exportable goods and services, and the projection of the Costa Rican identity and values.

Over time, the brand has evolved to respond to the needs of public and private stakeholders, citizens, and global trends. This evolution has been guided by continuous market research and ongoing national and international benchmarking.

Most importantly, Costa Rica’s international narrative is not based solely on messaging or campaigns. It is supported by measurable results and a long-standing track record in environmental protection, peace, equality, human talent development, and active international engagement in these areas—elements that strongly reinforce the country’s soft power.

Costa Rica’s sustainability, eco-tourism, and social initiatives are widely admired. How is the country leveraging these strengths to build partnerships, attract talent and investment, and engage more effectively with the global community?

Costa Rica has ensured that its value proposition evolves in line with its target audiences and shifts in the global context, while remaining faithful to its core identity. The mandate defined for essential COSTA RICA, with a strategic vision toward 2035, places sustainability and climate action at the center of the Nation Brand strategy, and this

vision guides all international promotion efforts.

Our investment attraction strategy prioritizes companies that value clean energy and align with Costa Rica’s holistic approach to sustainability—one that integrates environmental protection with social responsibility, fair labor conditions, and constructive engagement with local communities.

In parallel, Costa Rica’s tourism promotion focuses on attracting visitors who seek meaningful, nature-based experiences, and who value responsible tourism operators.

These experiences allow visitors to connect not only with Costa Rica’s biodiversity, but also with its communities, culture, and the distinctive character of its people.

This same value proposition supports talent attraction. Costa Rica offers advanced professional environments—particularly in high-value sectors such as medical devices and advanced manufacturing—while enabling a balanced lifestyle that combines professional growth with access to nature, cultural richness, and a high quality of life.

Finally, exports play a key role in projecting Costa Rica’s soft power. Through our products and services, we bring Costa Rica’s values to global markets, emphasizing origin, sustainability, and innovation as core elements of our international positioning.

Looking ahead, what are the main priorities for Costa Rica to strengthen its nation brand and soft power? Are there specific areas where the country sees opportunities to engage more effectively with the global community?

Costa Rica’s main priority is to continue strengthening the 2035 Nation Brand strategy across all pillars it promotes. In this context, the country’s participation—through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—in international forums and multilateral platforms related to sustainability, climate action, and inclusive development is essential to ensure that Costa Rica’s experience and perspective contribute to global dialogue.

At the same time, Costa Rica will continue to promote investment, talent and tourism in markets that value long-term commitment to environmental stewardship, social progress, and human well-being.

Costa Rica firmly believes it has demonstrated that economic size is not a prerequisite for global relevance, and that consistency, values, and a long-term vision can position a country as a respected reference in the international community—one shaped by a distinctive national model where economic growth and environmental responsibility advance together.



From internal transformation to global recognition:
El Salvador’s new image



Morena Ileana Valdez Vigil
Minister of Tourism,
El Salvador



The current international recognition for El Salvador is the product of a deliberate process of structural transformation that has been driven by the Salvadoran State as it strives to redefine El Salvador’s position on the world stage.

From a strategic and political standpoint, the Government of El Salvador recognizes that the global perception of the country doesn’t change simply by redesigning graphics and symbols, but rather through firm decision-making, cohesive public policy, and tangible results.

In this context, the strides El Salvador has made in terms of security, governance, economic development and a commitment to growing

tourism have been a decisive part of shaping a new national narrative and driving El Salvador’s rise in the Global Soft Power Index.

El Salvador’s national brand strategy is not circumscribed to a logo or singular communications strategy; it is a State policy oriented around a strategic repositioning of the country on an international scale.

As part of this positive recognition, El Salvador’s current strong international reputation has a direct influence on the country’s efforts to attract investment, grow the tourism industry, strengthen cooperation and deepen strategic alliances.

The Country Brand strategy is built through policy decisions, structural reforms, and concrete results to back up the new national narrative.

El Salvador has actively promoted the growth of strategic sectors such as tourism, infrastructure, innovation, and digital economies, sending a clear message of openness and modernization. This vision seeks to diversify the economy, drive competition, and position El Salvador as a trusted partner in an increasingly dynamic and competitive international environment.

In the case of tourism, El Salvador exceeded its projections in 2025, receiving

4.1 million international visitors and 3.635 billion dollars in foreign currency revenue. This represents a 4% increase in total visitors and a 7% increase in foreign currency revenue compared to 2024.

The sustained growth curve for this sector continues to trend upward each year. These results position El Salvador as the country with the top tourism results in the Americas, according to the UN Tourism World Tourism Barometer.

Beyond economic results and tourism performance, the strength of the Country Brand can be seen in El Salvador’s international reputation and the perception of trust, key elements of soft power.

The structural transformations driven by the State, such as improved security and governance, have created an enabling environment for investment and international cooperation, further strengthening El Salvador’s position as a trustworthy strategic partner in the region and around the world.

El Salvador’s projection outward is complemented by active and strategic diplomatic efforts to strengthen alliances, attract business opportunities, and promote investment, culture, and tourism. Through these strategic efforts, the Country Brand is a public policy instrument that directly connects State actions with

outcomes for the country’s reputation, investment, and tourism, bringing together a cogent narrative about the country and its future.

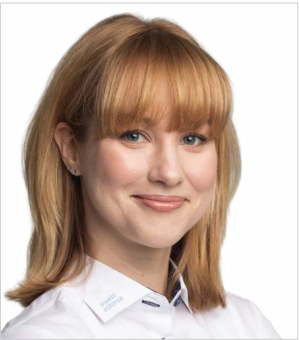
The impact of these policies can be seen in the 2026 edition of the Global Soft Power Index developed by Brand Finance, where El Salvador now ranks 76th globally, and sits in the top 10 in Latin America.

This achievement is not just an indicator for the success of the country’s strategies; it further cements international recognition for the structural transformations and State vision that have helped El Salvador reposition itself on the global map.

Looking to the future, El Salvador will continue to bolster its image through comprehensive policy-making to strengthen innovation, sustainable development, security, and competitiveness.

These actions will help the country to continue its rise through the national rankings, while projecting a solid, trustworthy, and attractive image for investors, tourists, and strategic partners the world over.





Eliis Randver
Head of Marketing
and Campaigns,
Enterprise Estonia (EIS)



Enterprise Estonia has actively used insights from the Global Soft Power Index to track perceptions and inform the new nation brand strategy. How does the Index support your decision-making, and how has it helped Estonia prioritise to strengthen its soft power internationally?

We believe that every smart choice starts with facts. When you live in a country every day, it’s easy to develop blind spots about how others truly see you. To deliver messages that resonate globally, and even more so with specific audiences tailored to each market, you need to understand their perspective. The Global Soft Power Index gives us that clarity. It enables us to assess in detail, across key themes, whether the image we believe we project aligns with reality.

That’s why we’ve invested heavily in decoding the GSPI results and translating them into actionable insights for partners shaping Estonia’s international image. We host regular brand meetups, share updates through newsletters and briefings, and speak extensively about Estonia’s brand, its perceived strengths, and the tools that help us tell our story.

Although Estonia has only been using the Global Soft Power Index as a strategic tool for a few years, its findings have been extraordinary. We see clearly that tracking these insights over time is essential for spotting patterns and trends that short-term snapshots simply cannot reveal.

This long-term perspective is what enables us to strengthen Estonia’s voice on the global stage.

Estonia is internationally recognised for its leadership in digital governance and innovation. How are these strengths supporting Estonia’s business environment and helping attract investment, talent, and entrepreneurship globally?

We are not just Estonia: we are e-Estonia. In 2025, we proudly announced to the world that Estonia is 100% digital: every public service is online. This is more than a milestone; it’s a powerful selling point. In Estonia, living, starting a business, and running it, is genuinely straightforward, fast, and convenient.

This digital-first approach reflects who we are as a nation: smart, agile, and innovative. We have a maker’s mindset. We’ve always had to achieve more with less, and that drive has made us pioneers. We are strong defenders of democracy, and our commitment to these values has earned global recognition.

These qualities have shaped Estonia into one of the most entrepreneurial nations globally. We are proud to have the highest number of unicorns and startups per capita. Our groundbreaking e-Residency programme -the first of its kind- allows entrepreneurs anywhere to run businesses in Estonia using our digital infrastructure.

Today, more than 134,000 e-residents have established over 39,000 companies here, meaning one in five new businesses in Estonia is created by e-residents. For a small country, this has a remarkable economic impact and it is proof that innovation can transcend borders.

While many nations move away from their environmental and social commitments, Estonia is proud to communicate sustainability among its core values with renewed strength as part of its nation brand strategy. Why do you consider it so important?

Estonia is known for its unspoiled nature, clean air, and vast forests, which symbolise our dedication to preserving the planet. We have a lively cleantech sector and innovative startups we can be proud of. Culturally, Estonians have a strong connection to nature, making it both logical and essential to foreground this in our core messaging. It is a defining element of Estonian identity and offers an authentic reflection of what everyday life in Estonia looks like. This is broader than a mere political viewpoint, and we believe it won’t lose its relevance.



Why Research Is the Bedrock of National Reputation



David Downs
CEO,
New Zealand Story



In the world of soft power, credibility is everything.

Countries can invest heavily in branding, storytelling, and campaigns, but without a solid foundation of research and insight, those efforts risk becoming performative rather than persuasive.

Research is not a supporting act in nation branding; it is the platform we all stand on. It provides legitimacy, direction, and discipline in how countries understand themselves - and how they are understood by others.

For a country brand agency like New Zealand Story, or indeed for any similar agency, we have to keep coming back to evidence - research gives us permission to speak with authority. It grounds our storytelling in evidence rather than just aspiration. Without it, narratives become inward-looking, shaped more

by domestic self-image than by external reality. Its enticing to tell the story of what you WANT to be known for, but that has to start with what you are ALREADY known for - warts and all.

At its best, soft power is not about telling the world who YOU think you are. It is about engaging with how the world already sees you, understanding the gaps, tensions, and opportunities in those perceptions, and shaping messages that resonate authentically with where audiences are today. That process begins with insight.

In addition, research ensures you don't get lost in a local narrative with no external reference. Nations often tell stories they like about themselves, assuming that those stories will translate seamlessly across borders. In practice, they may not.

Insights challenge assumptions. They reveal how a country's reputation differs across regions, audiences, and issues - from trust in governance to perceptions of innovation, sustainability, culture, or openness. They show what is already working, what is misunderstood, and what is simply not believed. This is not always comfortable, but it is essential. Soft power is built on trust, and trust depends on honesty - especially with ourselves.

Critically, research does not just tell us what people

think; it tells us where they are starting from, their ground truth. That starting point matters. The most effective national narratives are not universal slogans broadcast to the world. They are carefully calibrated messages that meet audiences where they are, acknowledge existing perceptions, and then invite them to see something new.

This is where insights-led creation becomes powerful. Research allows countries to move from generic messaging to tailored storytelling - adapting emphasis, tone, and proof points for different markets and sectors.

A country perceived as safe but distant might focus on openness and partnership. One seen as innovative but untested might prioritise credibility and scale. Another known for natural beauty may need to work harder to communicate economic sophistication or technological capability. (New Zealand has aspects of all these perceptions show up in our research).

This is not about abandoning a core national story.

It is about expressing it with nuance. Research helps define the enduring truths at the heart of a country's identity, while also revealing how those truths can be framed differently without losing integrity. The result is coherence without uniformity - a consistent reputation that still feels relevant and responsive.

Insights also act as a discipline against overclaiming. In an age of heightened scepticism, bold assertions without evidence can quickly undermine credibility. Research helps identify which claims are believable, which require proof, and which are best left unstated for now. It ensures that narratives are not just compelling, but defensible.

Finally, research provides a feedback loop. Soft power is dynamic, shaped by global events, policy decisions, cultural moments, and economic performance. Ongoing insight allows countries to track shifts in perception over time, understand the impact of their actions, and adjust their storytelling accordingly.

In the end, research makes creativity effective. It gives storytellers confidence that their work is anchored in reality, aligned with audience understanding, and capable of building trust over time.

For countries seeking to strengthen their soft power, insights are not optional. They are the source of legitimacy - and the difference between being heard and being believed.



South Africa



Rank #43 ▼ #41
Score 44.2/100 -0.7



Sithembile Ntombela

General Manager
of Marketing,
Brand South Africa



Africa's potential continues to be undermined by negative narratives dominating world media. What are the three positive outlooks for the continent in 2026 that everyone should be aware of?

Africa's peculiarity is its ability to turn constraint into creativity and diversity into strategic advantage.

Africa is moving from the margins of global decision-making to being a strategic partner in a multipolar world. AfCFTA regional infrastructure corridors and value-addition policies will further reposition Africa from a collection of fragmented markets to an emerging integrated economic space. This shift strengthens Africa's bargaining power in trade, manufacturing, food systems and critical minerals.

Africa is dominated by the young, skilled population – a huge advantage. The youth is innovative especially in the creative art space. Therefore, I see 2026 as a defining moment year where growth in fintech, agritech, healthtech, AI-enabled services and the creative economy will remain a key counter-narrative to pessimism. These sectors are solving local problems at scale while generating employment and global competitiveness. This is evident of the notion that Africa's growth story is increasingly internally driven, resilient and innovation-led for the world.

Lastly, Africa's cultural industries: music, fashion, film, design, language and storytelling are increasingly shaping global

popular culture. Culture in Africa is not peripheral; it is economic, political and identity-forming; a true reason to believe in Africa's soft power that is organic, youth-driven and globally influential, without being state-engineered.

South Africa hosted the G20 summit last year and is taking an active role in setting the agenda internationally. What are the key issues that you champion as a country?

Firstly, G20 was successful, evident in endorsement and feedback loops from various heads of states.

One of the most prominent issues was debt relief and financial equity for developing countries where South Africa pushed for more transparent and fair sovereign credit ratings. It advocated reducing the cost of capital for low-income countries and strengthening multilateral mechanisms, mobilising climate finance and shaping the just energy transition agenda by boosting flows of public and private finance for clean energy.

Amongst other spotlights, South Africa broadened participation to include youth, women, grassroots groups and civil society, emphasising people-centered perspectives on global economic issues and staying true to its values of Ubuntu and inclusivity.

Brand South Africa is one of the leaders globally in leveraging nation brand value as a tool to track progress.

What is it that makes this metric so helpful for your organisation?

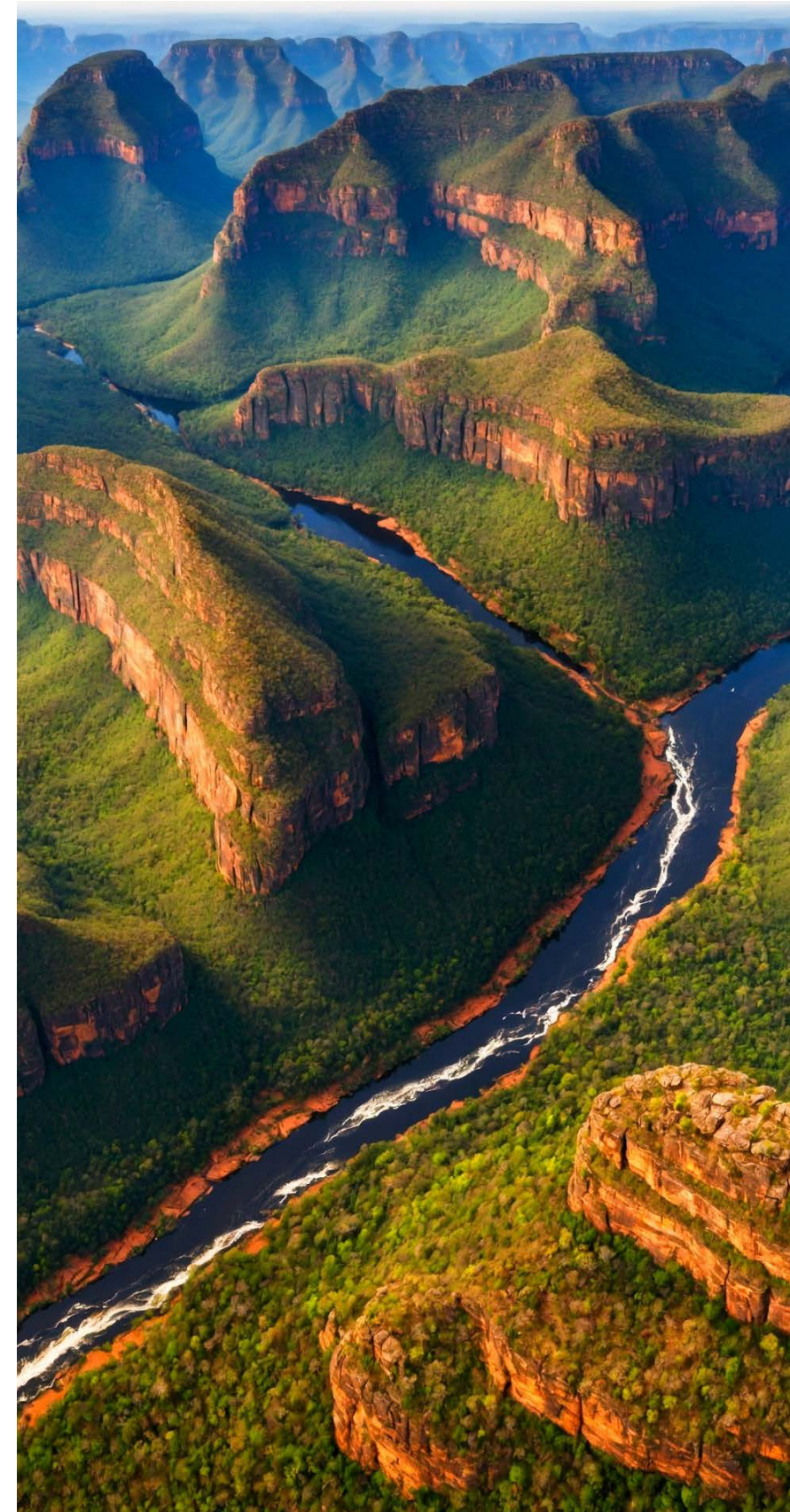
A lot of nation branding agencies have had to show and demonstrate reasons why they exist. Our focus on nation brand value is purely to emphasise the opportunity for investing in South Africa, profile sectors driving this growth, and harness this growth through our messaging.

Moreover, it is common practice that most countries use nation brand indices purely as reputation scorecards. The tides are changing to focus on the economic benefit story.

Brand South Africa goes further by tracking brand strength alongside economic, social and governance indicators, allowing brand value to act as a diagnostic tool for progress.

As per global standards, Brand South Africa explicitly connects brand value to:

investor confidence, trade competitiveness, national cohesion and international credibility. This integration reflects a developmental state logic, uncommon but increasingly recognised as best practice. South Africa has demonstrated a successful private, public partnership (PPP) story and intentional collaborations that will enhance the nation brand's reputation. The drivers of the nation brand value is private sector, and this is a rock solid approach that will continue to benefit how South Africa shows up on a global stage.





Sofia Bard
Head of Unit,
Sweden Image Analysis
Unit, Swedish Institute



The Swedish Institute has been instrumental in developing Sweden's new nation brand strategy. How has research and data, including from the Global Soft Power Index, informed the development and implementation of the strategy? And how do evidence-based insights help ensure the brand remains credible, coherent, and responsive in a changing world?

Research and data have been fundamental in shaping Sweden's new nation brand strategy. The strategy is built on extensive analysis combining quantitative and qualitative insights from international studies such as the Global Soft Power Index and the World Values Survey, alongside interviews, workshops, and hearings with stakeholders. We also conduct continuous media monitoring in 53 languages,

providing real-time insights into global conversations. This combination of perception data, stakeholders' insights, and media intelligence ensures a comprehensive understanding of how Sweden is viewed, how it can contribute globally, and which narratives may impact its reputation. Evidence-based insights have enabled us to identify Sweden's core strengths.

A particularly important insight from the data was a performance-perception gap: Sweden ranks strongly in innovation and competitiveness measures, yet perceptions of Sweden as an innovative nation are weaker in several markets. Closing this gap became a strategic priority.

Through the Brand Sweden Report, SI tracks familiarity, reputation, and distinctiveness linked to the strategy. By leveraging data from the GSPI, the strategy is anchored in perceptions and benchmarked against comparable nations.

The report serves as a strategic tool for stakeholders, enabling them to follow trends, benchmark performance in key markets, and adapt messaging to global shifts. This approach ensures the brand remains authentic, consistent, and agile in a rapidly changing world.

Sweden continues to be perceived as a role model in good governance, counting among the top nation brands for ethical standards, tolerance and inclusivity, safety and security, respect for law and human rights, and international

cooperation. In a more uncertain global context, how does Sweden protect and project this reputation for trust and stability, and why is it central to Sweden's international influence?

Sweden's reputation for trust and stability rests on something fundamental: a strong democracy. It is a cornerstone of both our national identity and international image. Democracy shapes Sweden's institutions, companies, culture, and global engagement; ensuring transparency, inclusion, and respect for fundamental freedoms. During the development of Sweden's brand strategy, many aspects were discussed, but agreement on this foundation was clear.

With over two centuries of peace, Sweden has evolved into a pioneering democracy that champions freedom, equality, and opportunity. This societal model, built on trust and sound governance, projects stability internationally and strengthens Sweden's credibility as a partner.

The Brand Sweden strategy highlights three qualities that resonate globally: reliability, collaboration, and creativity. Reliability fosters long-term partnerships and stability, essential for business and diplomacy. Collaboration reflects Sweden's leadership style, addressing complex challenges through cross-sector and international cooperation. Creativity drives innovation and positions Sweden as a leader in technology, sustainability, and culture.

In a world where trust and stability are rare and highly valued, Sweden seeks to stand out as a reliable, collaborative, and forward-thinking nation. This enhances competitiveness and contributes to progress. Our tradition of embracing change and sharing strengths reinforce Sweden's role as a constructive and innovative international actor.

Looking ahead, with commitment to sustainability waning around the world, how can Sweden's own nation brand values and wider soft power influence help reinvigorate global efforts to counter climate change?

Sweden's ability to inspire global sustainability efforts stems from the same base that underpins its reputation for trust and stability: a strong democratic foundation, a collaborative approach, and innovation.

"Space to Grow" is our brand promise: a clear expectation of the value Sweden offers, framing sustainability as a pathway to progress, economic, social, and cultural. This optimistic narrative makes climate action aspirational, aligning with Sweden's tradition of embracing change and building the future together. The idea is that by combining democratic legitimacy with innovative capacity, Sweden can contribute to reinvigorate global momentum for sustainability and demonstrate that trust and creativity are powerful tools for transformation.



Switzerland



Rank

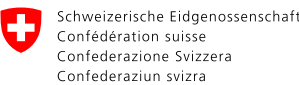
#7 ▲ #8

Score

63.2/100 -1.7



Alexandre Edelmann
Head of Presence
Switzerland



Switzerland ranks number #1 for more soft power metrics than any other nation brand in the Global Soft Power Index, topping our medal table yet again. It is also showing particular resilience while most Western nations record significant declines this year. What is the secret sauce of Switzerland's nation brand strength?

Switzerland's soft power strength lies less in a single "secret sauce" than in its ability to combine and balance several assets at once. In that sense, Switzerland is something of a Swiss Army knife of soft power, performing strongly across many of the categories measured in the Index.

Several structural factors underpin this performance. Our political system encourages open democratic debate, giving citizens regular opportunities to express themselves, while at the same time ensuring long-term stability through a federal government

based on consensus. This stability provides the conditions for Switzerland's economic, scientific and human strengths to develop over the long term.

International partnerships are at the core of these domains, and Switzerland's perceived reliability is essential for cooperation in areas such as business, research and innovation. Stability also builds trust and credibility. In an increasingly volatile world, these qualities act as safe-haven values and help explain Switzerland's resilience compared to other Western countries.

Crucially, people know what Switzerland stands for, and this clarity and predictability are key assets in times of uncertainty.

From a geopolitical perspective, at a time when blocs and alliances are being reshaped, Switzerland's long-standing tradition of dialogue gives it a distinctive role. Switzerland consistently promotes respect for rules and international law and hosts a large number of international organisations, reinforcing its position as a trusted platform for dialogue and cooperation.

Switzerland continues to lead in perceptions of governance, safety, and trust, which sets the bar very high for all public and private institutions in the country. What is the best approach to managing crisis situations that might go against high expectations from international audiences?

Switzerland's very strong positioning in governance, safety and trust is a real asset and gives the country a clear advantage. At the same time, the higher the expectations, the greater the reputational risk when events run counter to this image.

In that sense, Switzerland faces a form of heightened sensitivity: the stronger and more positive the baseline perception, the more visible and immediate the impact of incidents that contradict it. The contrast effect is stronger, and deviations from expectations tend to be noticed and judged more sharply than in countries with lower or less clearly defined reputations.

In a crisis situation, the first response must be political and institutional. Communication cannot replace decisions; it can only accompany them.

When a potential reputational risk appears on the radar, we focus on anticipating likely reactions and preparing clear, coherent responses. The Swiss approach values restraint and avoids immediate reactions or overreactions. Tone already constitutes a response in itself. Even if this approach is not always fully understood in the short term, over time it tends to reinforce credibility and trust with international audiences.

As the host to international organisations such as the United Nations and international gatherings like the World Economic Forum, Switzerland is one of the key

proponents of multilateralism. How can nation brands leverage global platforms effectively to enhance soft power?

For Switzerland, hosting international organisations and major global gatherings is not primarily about leveraging these platforms for national self-interest, but about contributing to dialogue. This is a long-standing Swiss tradition, rooted in the 19th century and further strengthened in the 21st, and it reflects a deep-seated conviction that shared rules and multilateral frameworks benefit all actors, whether states or the private sector. Switzerland has developed a strong capacity to bring together stakeholders with divergent views, based on the belief that dialogue must continue precisely when it becomes difficult.

A significant part of Switzerland's international perception is linked to this role as a host and facilitator. The expression "being the Swiss at the table" captures this culture well. While the primary objective is not branding, Switzerland's image clearly benefits from it: its usefulness to others becomes particularly visible on these global platforms. This creates a virtuous circle, in which trust in the country enables Switzerland to play this role, and this role in turn reinforces trust. At a time when multilateralism is being redefined, Geneva is more necessary than ever, and Switzerland remains firmly committed to supporting and strengthening it.



The Emirates as a global hub for trade, talent and innovation



Saeed Al Eter
Chairman,
UAE Government
Media Office



In a year marked by global volatility and declining trust, the UAE has maintained a top-10 position in the Global Soft Power Index while many major nations have seen sharp declines. What do you see as the key factors behind the UAE's consistency and credibility on the global stage?

Today's world is an uncertain place, marred by geopolitical jostling and more open conflicts than we have seen since World War Two. Recessionary pressures are undoubtedly building in many parts of the world and a lot of people are finding the future increasingly unpredictable.

In that difficult global environment, the Emirates is increasingly seen as a safe haven for investment, but also for people to build global enterprises based on a sound and stable financial, economic and regulatory environment.

The Emirates has grown to be a major global locus for international trade, finance and logistics. Every year over 150 million people pass through our airports and we are home to the world's largest international airline, busiest airport and largest man-made harbour.

At the same time, our doors are open, a country where people from around the world come to pursue their dreams, innovating, creating and thriving in security, tolerance and peace. The message is consistent and clear: you can bring your ideas,

your aspirations, your talent to the Emirates and we'll help you turn them into concrete reality on a global stage.

The UAE continues to rank among the world's leading nations for *Business & Trade*, with standout performance in ease of doing business, future growth potential, as well as economic strength and stability. How is the UAE using these strengths to reinforce its position as a global hub for trade, investment, and talent?

The Emirates has maintained a sharp focus on economic growth and diversification and has pursued a clearly stated goal of targeting global markets and partnerships.

The large number of CEPAs, comprehensive economic partnership agreements, we have entered into over the past five years is testament to that, and has also clearly shown that these agreements bring enormous mutual benefit and directly impact not only trade volumes but also diverse economic opportunities.

Our strong growth in trade, particularly in the non-oil sector, has underpinned our taking a position among the world's top exporters and importers.

We're trading with the world: not just in moving goods, but offering ideas, people, talent and expertise.

How has the UAE's soft power played a role in attracting new investment and talent?

We've been unequivocal in our message that the Emirates is open to anyone with an idea, a dream, with ambition and talent. And we've been just as clear that we want to work with innovators and creatives, researchers and startups to turn their ideas into reality, to scale their ambitions and help expand businesses to global scale.

That's a very straightforward invitation and it's not a campaign slogan, but a genuine reflection of what this country offers.

In a world where people are being encouraged to reject the 'other', to push against immigration and resort to protectionism, we stand for quite the opposite.

We want you here, we want your talent, we want you to thrive.

We offer zero income tax, a secure and tolerant environment, ease of doing business, consistent governance, clear regulation and an investment environment second to none.





Larissa Perdomo
Country Brand Manager,
Uruguay XXI



Uruguay is a global leader in sustainability, generating nearly 100% of its energy from renewable sources. How does sustainability shape Uruguay’s nation brand today and how does it help the country stand out internationally?

Uruguay’s achievement of generating between 94% and 98% of its electricity from renewable sources has fundamentally transformed its positioning as a global sustainability model.

The country’s energy transition—driven by wind, hydropower, solar, and biomass demonstrates that it is possible to achieve a nearly decarbonised electricity matrix while sustaining economic growth.

Uruguay has not only achieved energy independence, but now exports electricity surpluses to Argentina and Brazil, reducing cost volatility, strengthening energy security, and creating new jobs.

The country’s reputation for reliability, innovation, and institutional strength in sustainability has become a key competitive advantage, attracting foreign investment and reinforcing Uruguay’s international profile, particularly in emerging sectors, such as green hydrogen.

Food and drink products such as Uruguayan beef play an important role in shaping international perceptions. How does Uruguay use country-of-origin and geographical indication

branding to increase familiarity, build trust, and reinforce its nation brand globally?

Uruguay operates one of the world’s few mandatory national livestock traceability systems, enabling each animal to be tracked from birth to export and providing an exceptional level of transparency in beef production.

This system integrates advanced technology with detailed geographic information across much of the country’s productive territory, allowing precise monitoring of both livestock movements and the environmental conditions in which production takes place.

Territorial precision enables Uruguay to certify production standards and product origin with a high degree of reliability. These capabilities are further strengthened by certifications linked to grass-fed production and natural pasture systems monitored through geolocation, reinforcing key attributes such as animal welfare and sustainability.

Within this framework, Uruguay has positioned itself as a regional pioneer by becoming the first South American country to export carbon-neutral beef.

As global competition for investment intensifies, Uruguay uses Brand Finance’s Nation Brand Value on top of the Global Soft Power Index data to make decisions. How does financial data help Uruguay measure long-term success, inform strategic decision-

making, and prioritise areas for future growth?

Uruguay has strategically adopted the Nation Brand Value methodology developed by Brand Finance, together with data from the Global Soft Power Index, to quantify reputation as an economic asset.

This data-driven approach transforms abstract perceptions into measurable financial metrics, enabling Uruguay to better assess long-term performance, identify high-potential sectors, and guide investment decisions more effectively.

The 2024 Brand Finance study played a key role in shaping and informing the country’s strategy for the coming period, particularly by supporting efforts to engage with new and under-explored markets where Uruguay’s strengths and value proposition are less well known.

By linking reputation indicators with economic and trade objectives, Uruguay is able to prioritise resources, strengthen international positioning, and support sustainable growth through informed, evidence-based decision-making.



The Virtuous Circle of Place Branding

Place brand building starts with investment in the place brand

which results in an incremental improvement to familiarity and perceptions and in effect Soft Power.

Increased Soft Power positively impacts a place brand's performance

resulting in increased economic growth captured in place brand value – available to further invest in the place brand.



Brand Finance can help you

- measure perceptions of your place brand
- evaluate ROI at every stage in this virtuous circle
 - develop a successful strategy

Contact us at softpower@brandfinance.com



Explore Data-Driven Insights on Nation, City, and Corporate Brands



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