

## Openness is the key to soft power<sup>1</sup>

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July 26, 2024

### Executive Summary

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and the Cold War began to end, people walked westward, not eastward, pulled by the magnetism of the West's soft power. If we are on the precipice of another Cold War, the importance of soft power will arise again. My new book *Measuring Soft Power in International Relations* re-conceptualizes soft power from the perspective of the influenced, rather than the influencer. The result is the Soft Power Rubric, a method for measuring soft power of countries that makes possible country comparisons, historical analysis, and regional assessments. This policy brief ranks soft power countries from 1990 to 2020, identifies Japan's unique role in American conceptions of soft power; compares the soft power strengths of Russia, China, and India; and identifies countries like Canada, Spain, South Africa, and Australia, where their soft power exceeds their economic and military influence in the world.

### Policy Implications

- The foundation of soft power is social interaction among people across national borders. The more open a country is, the more likely its soft power will grow. The more closed it is, its soft power will diminish over time. The policy implication is that domestic conditions, including specifically in policy areas such as migration, education, tourism, and media, have a direct impact on a country's global soft power standing.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Shihoko Goto for support and Blair Ruble for comments on this policy briefing.

- The Soft Power Rubric calculations show that measurement based on indicators like immigration, international education, and international travel, produce results that resonate with the experience of foreign policy experts and other soft power measurements largely based on public opinion polls. The Rubric's advantage is that data are already published regularly, without the need for opinion survey which are costly, and necessarily must be limited to a small number of countries. This creates new vistas for policy analysis. Soft power influence can be compared across countries and across time. Now, also possible would be to study the soft power of aggregations - regional groupings like ASEAN, economic groups like the OECD, or military alliances like NATO.
- Much as GDP calculations, which began in earnest after World War II, spurred more official attention to industry production statistics, the Soft Power Rubric will stimulate more interest in the collection and public dissemination of statistics that document social interaction between peoples of different countries.

## Introduction

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and the Cold War began to end, people walked westward, not eastward. One reason was the allure of popular culture, especially American, including movies, television, and particularly the music (Zhuk 2011). American popular culture was not only *not* state sponsored, but also bracingly anti-establishment, which added to its influence. Soft power, not just guns and money, closed the twentieth century's Cold War. If we are on the precipice of another Cold War, we can expect it will become important again. *Measuring soft power in international relations* reconceptualizes soft power from the perspective of the influenced rather than the influencer. It also establishes a model for measuring it, the *Soft Power Rubric*. Quantifying soft power opens the possibility of comparisons across countries and analyses across time.

How is soft power useful in foreign policy? Careful social science research over the past thirty years builds a strong case. For big headline issues, like asking foreign countries to help you fight a war, foreign public opinion is critical to winning support. In studies of US soft power, foreign public opinion can be directly affected by factors like policy credibility, effectiveness of economic aid, and opportunity for direct interaction with Americans (Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2009) (Goldsmith, Horiuchi, and Wood 2014) (Goldsmith and Horiuchi 2012). The research evidence shows that it is not international trade that drives soft power, but rather soft power influences trade. People do business with foreigners they trust and like (Datta 2014) (Rose 2016) (Allen et al. 2020). Of the four elements of the Soft Power Rubric, the most influential channel for cultivating soft power relationships is education. Several studies document that over time, the more foreign students from a country study in the US, the more likely that country will take a turn toward democracy in coming years (Atkinson 2014) (Spilimbergo 2009) (Datta 2014). *Measuring Soft Power in International Relations* includes a full literature review of the social science evidence of soft power's effects.

The Soft Power Rubric tracks changes in the volume and direction of interactions that people have with foreigners. Three elements are direct people-to-people interactions: emigrating, studying abroad, and traveling abroad. The fourth element is a mediated interaction: watching foreign movies. Emigration reflects a person’s ultimate integration in a foreign society, permanently moving family and home to another country. Studying abroad reflects a person’s serious interest and commitment to understanding another society by spending substantial financial resources and formative time in a foreign country. Visiting a foreign country reflects a short-term interest in a foreign society. Watching a movie expresses an interest or curiosity about another country.

Figure 1 shows that these indicators range from short-term attraction, such as buying a ticket to see a movie from another country, to long-term attraction, such as emigrating to a foreign country. What matters is not how many movies a country produces but rather how many foreigners choose to watch them.

**Figure 1: The Soft Power Rubric: Indicators of Social Integration Across Borders**

<i>Short-term attraction</i>	<b>Watch a movie</b>	<b>Visit a country</b>	<b>Study abroad</b>	<b>Emigrate</b>	<i>Long-term attraction</i>
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While ranking is not how the Soft Power Rubric is primarily useful, it is possible to construct. These rankings are constructed based on how many immigrants live in a country, how many foreign students are enrolled in its universities for a degree, and how many foreigners visit.<sup>2</sup> Using the Soft Power Rubric, Table 1 shows the top ten soft power countries from 1990 to 2020.

<sup>2</sup> For movies, the number of foreigners who buy tickets is available for a much smaller set of countries, which makes country-to-country comparisons possible but not global rankings.

**Table 1: Soft Power Rubric Global Rankings, 1990–2020**

<b>Rank</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>2020</b>
1	US	1	US	1	US	1	US
2	France	2	France	2	France	2	France
3	Canada	3	Germany	3	UK	3/4	Germany
4	Russia	4	Russia	4	Germany	3/4	UK
5	UK	5	UK	5	Russia	5	Spain
6	Italy	6	Canada	6	Italy	6	Russia
7	Australia	7	Italy	7	Canada	7	Canada
8	Spain	8	Spain	8	Spain	8	Türkiye
9	Saudi Arabia	9	Australia	9	Ukraine	9	UAE
10	Japan	10	Switzerland	10	Australia	10	Italy

Table 1 is calculated by taking a country's rank in terms of number of immigrants, foreign students, and visitors, and summing those ranks. Further details on public data, methods, and sources, are in the book.<sup>i</sup>

Table 2 unpacks the rankings for 2020. The US leads in number of immigrants and foreign students, and is second largest host of foreign visitors. France is first for visitors, seventh for immigrants and eighth for students. Germany hosts the second largest immigrant population in the world, is fourth for students and 14<sup>th</sup> for visitors. United Kingdom is third for students, fifth for immigrants and 12<sup>th</sup> for visitors. Russia is fourth for immigrants, fifth for students, and 24<sup>th</sup> for visitors.

**Table 2: Soft Power Rubric Elements Data: US, Germany, Russia, UK, France**

Country	2020 Immigrants	Series rank	Country	2020 Students	Series rank	Country	2019 Visitors	Series rank
US	50,632,836	1	US	957,475	1	France	217,877,000	1
Germany	15,762,457	2	UK	489,019	3	US	165,478,000	2
Russia	11,636,911	4	Germany	333,233	4	UK	40,857,000	12
UK	9,359,587	5	Russia	282,922	5	Germany	39,563,000	14
France	8,524,876	7	France	246,378	8	Russia	24,419,000	24

Behind the numbers in Table 2, it is possible to further unpack the countries that send immigrants, students, and visitors to these top soft power countries. In terms of reciprocal action and mutual feeling, looking at where people from these top soft power countries go when they emigrate, study abroad, or travel, creates a companion analysis. The resulting study can present a picture of a country's soft power network – who it attracts and to whom it is attracted – which can change over time. Other types of social interaction across borders can also be included to create a richer picture. *Measuring Soft Power in International Relations* includes a set of illustrative case studies. The Soft Power Rubric is an approach that opens new vistas for research and understanding.

## Foundations of the Soft Power Rubric

A country's soft power actually resides in the minds of foreigners and their view of the world, not the hands of government officials. Suppose we think of soft power as generated not only by nation-states but by ordinary people expressing their interest in foreign countries. Suppose further that our country has soft power when foreigners think of us as “we” rather than as “they.” In effect, soft power relationships exist when others include us as part of their community; we become friends of their nation. People express interest in foreign countries by engaging in activities like watching foreign movies and traveling, studying, and migrating abroad.

This sequence from considering those in that country as “they” and progressing to the point that “they” become “we,” is a process of social integration. Political scientists like to talk about collective action – when a community of people is willing to work together for a common good, *even at some expense to their individual self-interest*. Another political science idea is social capital – the good will people accumulate after working, arguing, and otherwise being part of each other’s lives over a period of time. Reciprocal action builds trust, trust builds social capital, social capital is the basis for collective action. Soft power is not just about being popular with foreigners, it is about winning their respect and affection to the point that when asked, they may be willing to help us in our time of need, even at some cost to themselves. Further, when we have soft power relationships with foreigners and they ask for our help, we respond, even at some cost to ourselves. Soft power relationships are successful when feelings are mutual and actions are reciprocated.

The Soft Power Rubric measures soft power resources, the potential for a country to have a soft power relationship with another. GDP, a measure of economic power resources, sums the financial value of goods and services produced by an economy. The numbers of military bases, aircraft carriers, or personnel are measures of military power resources (Global Firepower 2023). More resources likely mean more success, but there is no guarantee. A bigger GDP does not guarantee the upper hand in a trade negotiation. More military bases do not ensure victory in war. However, more resources make success more likely, and the depletion of resources heightens the risk of failure. Similarly, the Soft Power Rubric reveals the volume and intensity of people-to-people interactions that form the basis of many individuals’ views of foreign countries and the foundation of a country’s soft power resources. More soft power resources no more predict greater political cooperation than more military resources predict victory in war. However, it is reasonable to expect that the presence of major soft power resources itself alters perception and behavior.

The Soft Power Rubric makes visible the connection between personal ties and domestic issues with international ties and foreign policy issues. Growing up in a small, Southern city in the U.S., I had classmates from Korea, Vietnam, and Iran. Friends complained about having to go to Hebrew school on the weekend, just like I had to go to Chinese school. We also had teachers from Cuba and East Germany. These are the experiences that formed my childhood worldview and can be captured by the Soft Power Rubric. From a different perspective, but with similar import, in the early days of calculating the Gross National Product, women's unpaid work inside the family home was officially ignored in national statistics. As women entered the work force, economists began to recognize the quantifiable, financial value of that kind of economic production. Similarly, the Soft Power Rubric quantifies these personal relationships and makes clear their connection to broader context of international relations.

### **Japan's Unique Role in the American Conception of Soft Power**

The US-Japan relationship figures prominently in the development of the modern soft power concept. After World War II, Japan's economy grew rapidly, its GNP surpassed France and Great Britain in 1967; Germany in 1972. Harvard's Ezra Vogel published *Japan as No. 1* in 1980, extolling Japan's, meritocracy, communitarian sharing of wealth, and low crime rate (Vogel 1980). The US auto industry suffered against their Japanese competitors and anti-Japan feelings ran high. In 1982 former Chrysler employees murdered Vincent Chin, mistaking him for Japanese, whom they blamed for automaker layoffs (Lee 2015). Japan's per capita GDP exceeded the US for the first time in 1988 and held for the next nine years. It is in this American context of fear, loss, and lashing out against Japan, in which Joseph Nye published his first works on soft power in 1990, which framed US global influence as founded not primarily on economic strength – on the wane – but instead on soft power – its cultural and social superiority (De Gracia 2021).



Today, the American animus against Japan has evaporated. Japanese culture is deeply entwined in American and European popular culture. According to the Soft Power Rubric, Japan is one of the soft power leaders of the Indo-Pacific. Fear of Japan's economic power has now faded, although Japan's economy is still large. One factor may be that Japan is more open to foreigners today.

**Figure 2: Japan: GDP, Immigrants, Foreign Students, and Foreign Visitors, 1990-2020**

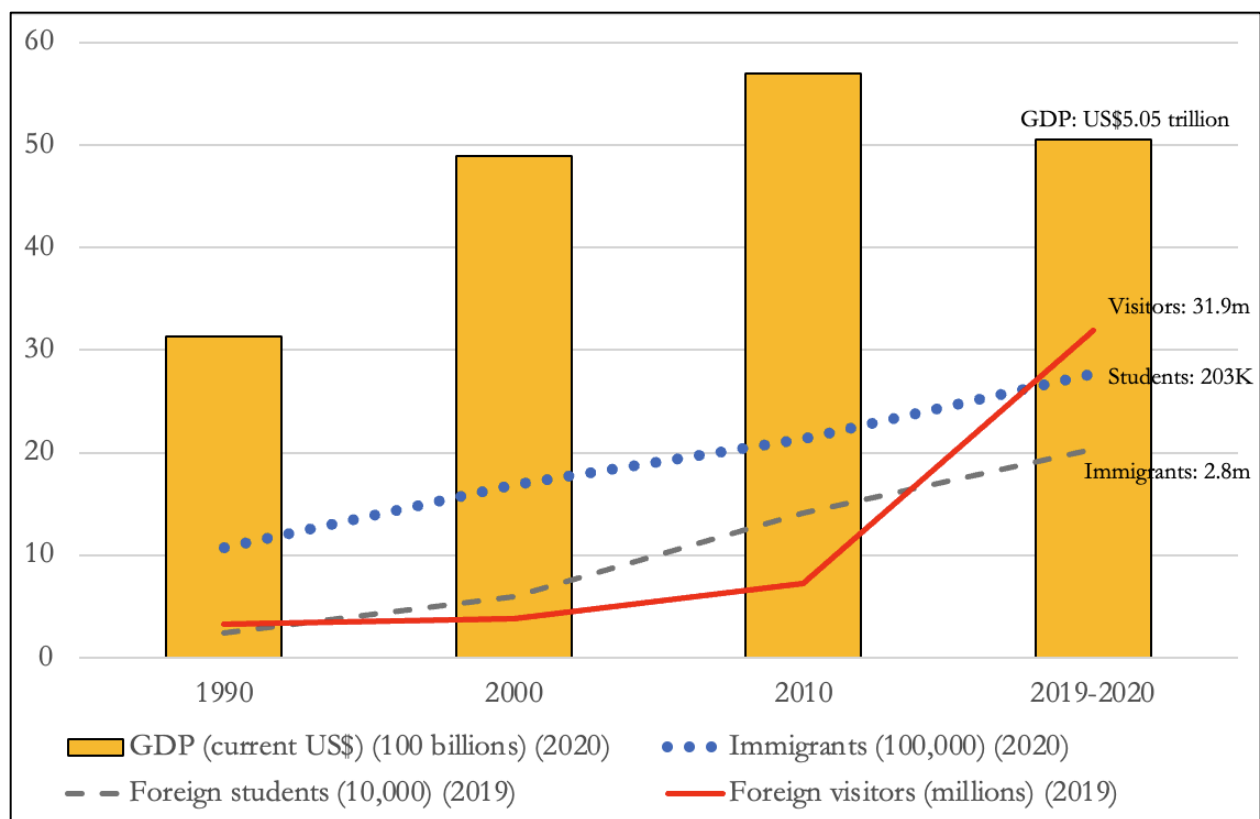
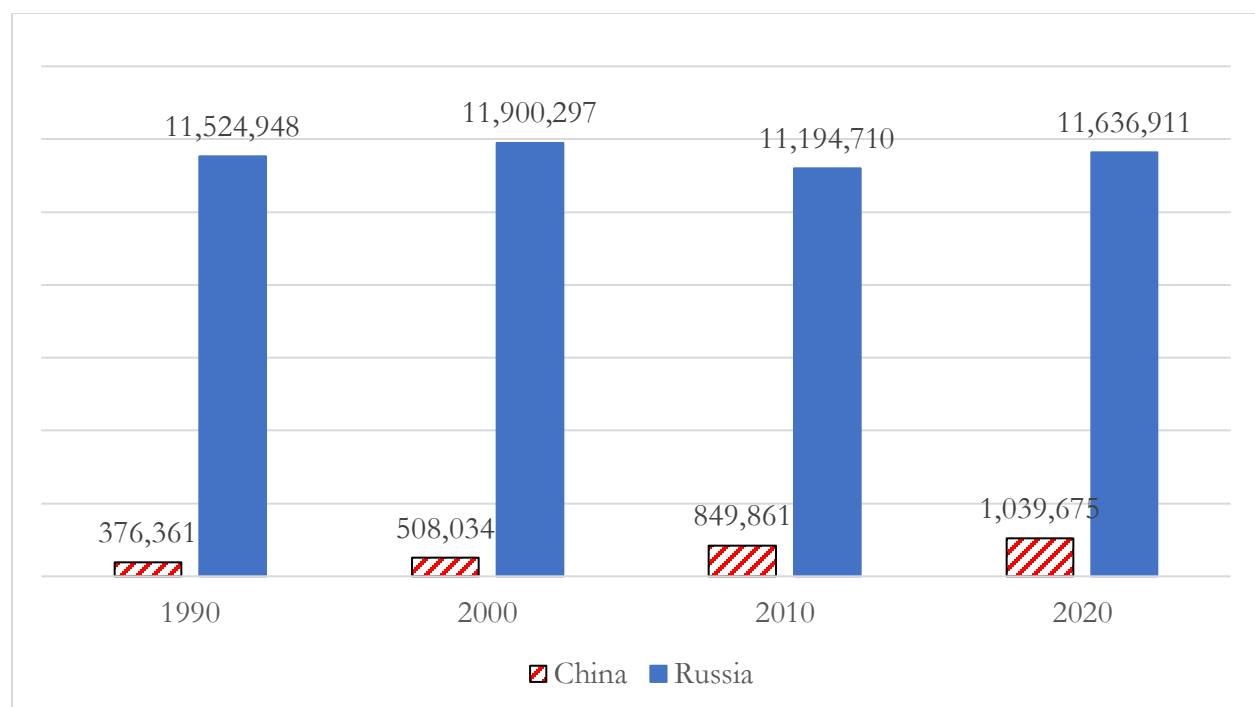


Figure 2 shows in these intervening decades, more people had the opportunity to communicate with Japanese and learn about Japan, and vice versa. Between 1990 and 2020, the number of immigrants triple, foreign students quadrupled, and foreign visitors grew six-fold.

## China and Russia's Openness Compared

*Measuring Soft Power in International Relations* includes a chapter comparing Russia and China. Figure 3 highlights one of its main points, comparing foreign immigrants living in Russia and China from 1990 to 2020. In 2020 Russia's immigrant community was 11.6 million, the fourth largest in the world, behind the United States, Germany, and Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile China's immigrant community more than doubled from 1990 to 2020; at just above 1 million in 2020, it ranked fifty-fourth in the world.

**Figure 3: Immigrants to Russia and China, 1990-2020**



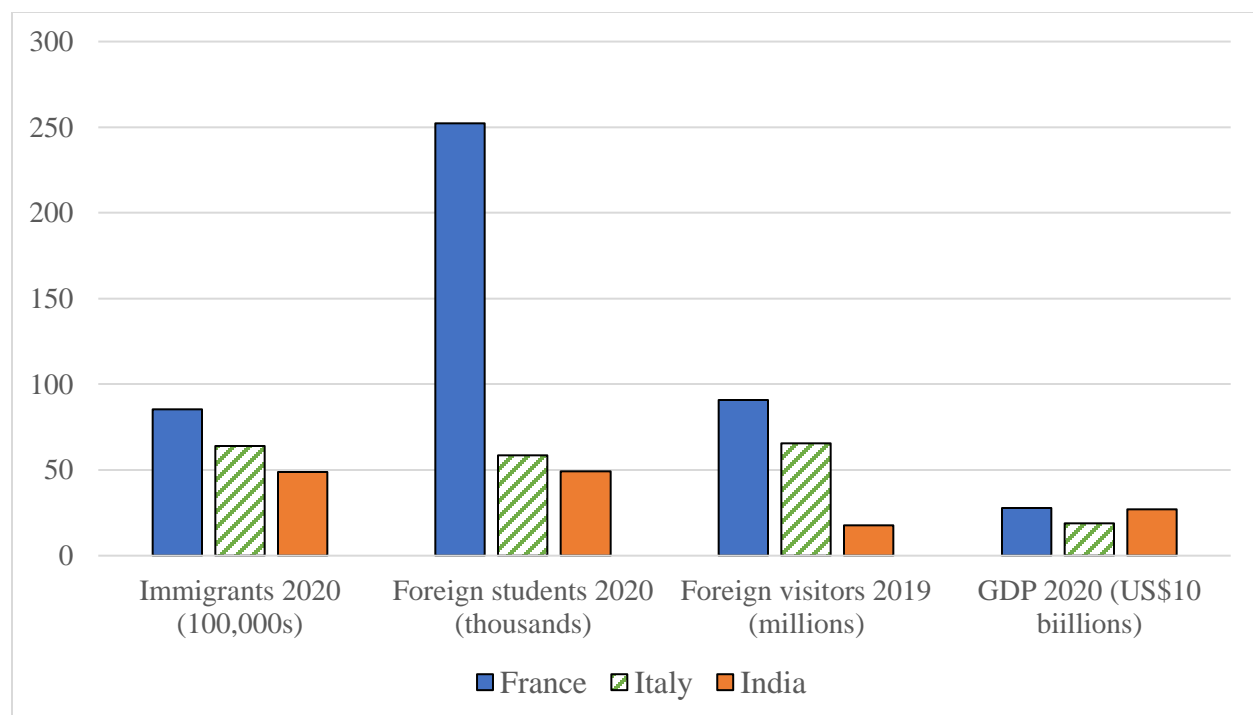
In general, Russia has a longer history of being more open to foreigners -whether immigrants, students, or visitors, although Western sanctions since its invasion of Ukraine make it harder for foreigners to go to Russia. In contemporary times, China under Mao was closed to the outside world, and only began to open under Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s. In 1990, China had 376,000 immigrants, in 2020, 1 million. Foreign students grew from 5000 in 1990 to 201,000 in 2019. Foreign visitors ballooned from 1.7 million in 1990 to 162.5 million in 2019, prior to the COVID

pandemic. If China's openness to foreigners continues to grow, we will see if American attitudes toward China follows the path of attitudes toward Japan.

### India's Soft Power and Economic Power Compared to France and Italy

India is part of the G20, but not part of the G7, even though its economy is larger than some G7 members. Might soft power influence be as important a factor in joining the G7 as economic size? Figure 4 compares India's Soft Power Rubric data to France and Italy, both G7 members. Whereas in terms of GDP size, in 2020, India is already at a level comparable to France and Italy, in the other arenas of hosting foreign immigrants, foreign students, and foreign visitors, France and Italy attract more foreigners.

**Figure 4: India, France and Italy: GDP and Soft Power Rubric Elements Compared**



In 2020, India's GDP is larger than that of both Italy and France. However, in terms of hosting foreign immigrants, India has 4.9 million immigrants compared to Italy's 6.4 million and France's 8.5

million. In terms of hosting foreign students, France hosts five times more students than India. In terms of attracting foreign visitors, in 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic, France and Italy each host over three times more than India. The Soft Power Rubric is one way to capture the intangible attraction that foreigners have for a particular country .

### **Countries With More Soft Power Than Economic or Military Power**

There are countries with more soft power than their economic or military significance would predict. For example, South Africa became an international model for delivering social justice after a long history of racist exploitation. There is a cluster of studies of South Africa’s soft power in the Africa region, especially as it transformed from international pariah to a moral authority on peace and reconciliation after apartheid ended. It is now the only African country in the G20. Building on its moral standing, South Africa’s relaxed immigration policies, and hosting of international events augments its soft power (Ogunnubi and Isike 2015). Table 3 shows data for South Africa and several other countries in terms of economic size, armed forces size, and Soft Power Rubric ranking.

**Table 3: Spain, Canada, South Africa: Indicators of Soft, Military, and Economic Power**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Soft Power Rubric 2020—Rank</b>	<b>Armed forces personnel, total 2019—Rank</b>	<b>GDP (current US\$) 2020—Rank</b>
Spain	5	33	14
Canada	7	8	12
Australia	12	66	13
South Africa	23	56	39

Like South Africa Spain, Canada, and Australia countries are with more soft power than military or economic influence. Spain is among the top five countries for foreign visitors; Canada is among the top ten countries for immigrants and foreign students. Australia is second only to the US in hosting international students. Their openness to foreigners may be the key to their soft power resources.

The Soft Power Rubric reconceptualizes soft power in a way that opens new vistas for future investigations. It offers the possibility of empirical measurement across countries and across time. It connects the lived experience of individuals to the collective understandings of communities to the behavior of nation states. These combine to make culture and values as tangible as money and firepower in the study of international relations. Finally, the Soft Power Rubric underscores that it is those arenas for open social interaction between countries that create conditions for soft power to grow. Genuine, authentic exchanges among people are the foundation of soft power. Soft power relationships are mutual in feeling and reciprocal in action. Furthermore, openness to foreigners requires courage, for not only do such exchanges change the visitors, they also change the hosts.

**About the author.** Irene S. Wu, Ph.D. is a lecturer at Georgetown University and a senior economist at the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC). She was a Wilson Center fellow from 2017-2018. [\*Measuring soft power in international relations\*](#) is available from Lynne Rienner publishers (mention NBA for discount). Further explorations of the Soft Power Rubric is available at <https://www.ireneswu.com/measuring-soft-power>. This work reflects her own views and not those of the FCC, its Commissioners, or staff.

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## Further reading

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<sup>i</sup> All the data used in the Soft Power Rubric are collected and published by international organizations and available for free—online for recent data and in yearbooks at public libraries for earlier data. Typically, annual data takes two years to be published. Note that education and visitor data plunged in 2020 and has not yet recovered to 2019 levels.

**Migration data.** The UN Population Division publishes immigrant stock information in five-year increments for over 200 countries. The most recent publication is available at [un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock](http://un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock). 2020 is the most recent year

**Study abroad.** UNESCO publishes online the number of foreign students enrolled in a country's universities, including the students' country of origin at [data.uis.unesco.org](http://data.uis.unesco.org). The specific series is "International Student Mobility in Tertiary Education—Inbound Internationally Mobile Students by Country of Origin." These data are for over 200 countries from 1999 onward. Earlier data are available in UNESCO Statistical Yearbooks from 1960 to 1999.

**International travel.** The UN World Tourism Organization publishes visitor and tourism data at [www.e-unwto.org/toc/unwtotfb/current?expanded=undefined](http://www.e-unwto.org/toc/unwtotfb/current?expanded=undefined). Country-specific data on outbound tourism are available from around 1999 onward. Earlier data from 1960 forward are published in the United Nations World Tourism Organization yearbooks and in summary form in UN Statistical Yearbooks, available online at [unstats.un.org/UNSDWebsite/Publications/StatisticalYearbookPastIssue](http://unstats.un.org/UNSDWebsite/Publications/StatisticalYearbookPastIssue).

**Movies.** UNESCO publishes online the top ten movies by admissions as reported by several dozen countries from 2005 to 2017 at [data.uis.unesco.org](http://data.uis.unesco.org). Prior years' data on the importation for foreign films are published in the UNESCO Statistical Yearbook from 1970 to 1999; however, these are data on production, not on audiences.

**Calculating Soft Power Rubric rankings.** To arrive at a global ranking, I compiled the data for the three series for all countries reporting. The next step is to rank countries in each of the series. For example, in 2020 Russia is the fourth largest destination for immigrants, Canada is eighth largest, and Türkiye is twelfth largest. Then, for each country, I take the sum of the three ranks. For Germany, in 2019 it ranks second in the world in immigrants, fourth in the world in foreign students, and fourteenth in the world for foreign visitors; the sum of ranks for Germany equals twenty. The final step is to rank the "sum of ranks." Only those countries reporting data for all three series are included.

**Gross National Product/Gross Domestic Product.** From World Bank Development Indicators, see <http://data.worldbank.org>

