

### A Brief Introduction to Political Country Rankings

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## A Brief Introduction to Political Country Rankings

By Heiko Pleines, Bremen

### The Nature of the Rankings

Since Freedom House began assessing the extent of freedom in the countries of the world in 1972, the idea of handing out “report card”-style audits to entire societies has won increasing numbers of supporters. In the last decade, several organizations launched new projects which systematically and comparatively assess the political state of affairs. As a result, the areas under investigation are being increasingly differentiated and the ranking systems are becoming increasingly complex.

Whereas the first Freedom House project, *Freedom in the World*, only differentiated political and civil rights, the organization’s *Nations in Transit* series, begun in 1995, now encompasses seven topic areas ranging from “democracy and governance,” “electoral process,” “independent media,” “civil society,” and “corruption” to “judicial framework and independence.” The Bertelsmann Transformation Index, which was introduced in 2003, evaluates nearly 40 indicators. The Global Integrity Report, which was first issued in the same year, tracks almost 300 indicators, but due to this in-depth level of investigation, only covers a smaller number of countries. In addition, there are several rankings that consciously focus only on certain aspects of a political system, such as freedom of the media or corruption.

The increasing number of indicators has also complicated the evaluation process. Whereas the first Freedom House ranking simply offers scores from 1 through 7 and groups all countries of the world into just three categories (free, partly free and unfree), the newer indices are based on composite values which allow for a more differentiated ranking of all countries in the world.

All political country rankings primarily refer to the ideals of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, and assess the extent to which individual countries meet these ideals. Perfect democracies with rule of law thus receive the highest marks, while dictatorships are generally at the bottom of the tables. Some rankings, however, also take into account the rulers’ management qualities or socio-economic indicators and criteria related to economic policy.

Most of the rankings are based on expert assessments. As a rule, one or two experts write up a country study, which is subsequently reviewed and, if necessary, corrected by other experts. The experts are generally well acquainted with the country in question in their capacities as academics or journalists. Alternatively, some indices such as the Corruption Perception Index published by Transparency International evaluate broader expert surveys. As a reaction to the increasing number of indices, the World Bank has created a meta-index. Worldwide Governance Indicators summarize the results of a total of 31 indices under the heading of a new index.

### Valid Data?

While many academics use country rankings in order to compare democratization processes internationally and to identify causal factors in successful transformations, others view such rankings as public-relations stunts or even as misleading.

The limits of their explanatory power can be seen when comparing several indices that purport to measure the same variables. Since 2002, the freedom of the press has been assessed by as many as three independent rankings, namely Freedom of the Press Rating (Reporters without Borders), *Nations in Transit—Media*, and the Press Freedom Index (both from Freedom House). The significant discrepancies in the development of the individual indices for many countries illustrate the limitations of quantifying the freedom of the press.

Overall, there are three major points of criticism concerning political country rankings. The first problem is that they rely on the subjective appraisals of experts. These experts derive their opinions from journalistic publications and from their own personal assessments as academics, journalists, and business professionals; as a rule, they have no access to other non-public sources. At the same time, the experts, who generally only scrutinize one country, are limited in their ability to draw comparisons between different countries. Therefore, there is no guarantee that two experts assessing different countries that are on the same level of development will award the same ranking to their respective countries. Because of changing experts and revisions of underlying criteria and indicators most rankings are also not comparable over time for the same country. Diego Giannone demonstrates this point exemplarily in an analysis of changes in the questionnaire of the Freedom House ranking.

The World Bank also tones down the applicability of its Worldwide Governance Indicators in the fine print. The section on “frequently asked questions” states that changes in country rankings over time may be caused by four dif-

ferent factors. Three of these are related to changes in surveying methods and are not connected to the development of the country in question. In conclusion, it is stated that two of these factors “typically only have very small effects on changes.”

The second problem of country rankings is the index construction. Often far-reaching assessments are drawn from a relatively low number of specific indicators. Moreover, the selection and weighting of the individual indicators necessarily has a subjective dimension and can influence the final index value considerably. That means the rankings do not simply state facts. They in fact claim that some aspects of political systems are more important than others and they try to have an impact on public debates through publication of their rankings. Again the study by Diego Gianone presents related criticism in a concise way.

A third problem of country rankings is the focus on precise scores and ranks, which suggest an accurateness which is simply not given. Often insignificant differences in the scores of individual dimensions of the rankings can move countries up or down several places. Bjørn Høyland et.al. have studied the uncertainty inherent in the estimation of scores. In this respect they praise the approach by Freedom House: “The classification of countries into groups based on the index score is in our view a better strategy than providing complete country rankings based on the same index score. While complete country rankings are very uncertain, the allocation of countries into groups is a much less uncertain endeavour, provided that one is willing to accept a limited number of groups.”

## Conclusion

In summary the validity of country rankings is limited and results need to be assessed critically. This is why, for example, the World Bank declares: “We recognize there are limitations to what can be achieved with this kind of cross-country, highly-aggregated data. Therefore, this type of data cannot substitute for in-depth, country-specific governance diagnostics as a basis for policy advice to improve governance in a particular country, but should rather be viewed as a complementing tool.” This is probably also why most organizations supply extensive country studies together with their country rankings. These, however, generally tend to be disregarded by the media and the general public.

A major problem of country rankings is thus that shorthand representations in the news media overstretch the explanatory power of such indices. This is particularly true of the Corruption Perceptions Index, published by Transparency International, which is regularly described in the mass media as a ranking of the world’s most corrupt countries, with development trends being indicated by comparison with the previous year. In its notes on the index, Transparency International denounces both of these uses as inadmissible. The index only measures perceptions, not actual corruption. Studies have demonstrated that this is a significant distinction. Direct comparisons with the values for the previous year are not admissible because of variations in sources used, moving averages over several years, and other methodological problems.

## Documentation

The following documentation offers an overview of the major political country rankings and their evaluation of the three countries of the South Caucasus. Each ranking is briefly introduced based on information provided online by the institution responsible for the ranking. For each ranking the position of the three South Caucasian countries is then indicated in tables and graphs. To allow for a comparison, the values of some further countries have been included.

### *About the author*

Dr Heiko Pleines is head of the department of politics and economics at the Research Centre for East European Studies (University of Bremen). He has been working as an independent country expert for the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, Global Integrity and Transparency International.

### *Further reading*

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*Continued overleaf*

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## DOCUMENTATION

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