

THE SWEDISH INSTITUTE'S SCHOLARSHIP POLICY AS A SOFT POWER INSTRUMENT

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This paper examines how soft power, nation branding and academic cooperation came together in the scholarship policy pursued by the Swedish Institute (SI) from 1995 to 2023. An investigation of the organisation's materials, scholarship statistics and feedback interviews with SI programme alumni suggests that the implementation of the scholarship policy was erratic during the study period. A comprehensive analysis of the Institute's efforts was carried out to describe the relationship between nation branding, soft power and education. The focus was on the principles and practices behind promoting Sweden's image in an international educational setting, the evolution of the Institute's scholarship policy and the effect of soft power and nation branding on a grantee's academic track. Interactions between the SI and grantees during and after their stay in the country and scholarship distribution were examined to understand the dynamics behind the scholarship policy. The study draws on the concepts of nation branding and soft power to explore the corresponding elements in certain regional and national cases during the study period. It is concluded that the Institute is an effective tool of Sweden's soft power, with its scholarship policy promoting the Government's official position on global social, economic and political development. SI grantees complete their chosen programmes and get acquainted with the country's social and political institutions. As of today, the educational component seems to be subordinate to nation branding and soft power.

Keywords:

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

Introduction

The globalization and internationalization of higher education in the late 20th and early 21st centuries are closely tied to a country's image promotion through public diplomacy. In this context, donor countries develop support mechanisms for incoming foreign students or interns, providing them with insights into the social, cultural, and political landscape of the host country. Until 2022, the schol-

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arship policies implemented by the EU and national foundations and agencies in Europe and America towards Russia generated mixed reactions. There has been a contentious debate surrounding the role of scholarship support in aligning the grantee with the foreign policy and soft power of the donor country. Following the Ukrainian crisis and subsequent tensions between Russia and Western nations, critical narratives began to emerge regarding Nordic foundations and their activities in Russia's North-Western Federal District. For example, Norwegian programmes were found to be closely intertwined with the soft power strategies of the country, and the organizations hosting these programmes experienced a significant surge in allegations of political and ideological influence.¹ However, it's worth noting that Norway's efforts to promote its national brand through education and academic mobility are comparatively less robust when compared to Sweden's initiatives.

This paper delves into an analysis of the Swedish Institute's (SI) activities, with a particular focus on its grant and scholarship policy, as well as the institute's role in the realm of soft power and nation branding between 1995 and 2023. Debates surrounding the allocation of resources to these facets of SI's work have remained a subject of considerable debate both within Sweden and among foreign stakeholders. According to the official stance of the Swedish Institute, all these pivotal initiatives align with its overarching mission. This mission is centred on fostering sustainable development and promoting international cooperation, with a specific emphasis on the Baltic Sea region.² The scholarship and grant policy can be viewed as integral components of both nation branding and soft power, aimed at strengthening Sweden's global influence. The Swedish Institute (SI) has specifically identified Russian students, doctoral candidates, researchers, and university teachers as target groups for its scholarship and grant programmes. Despite the fact that the SI among the other scholarship agencies suspended Russian participation in their programmes in 2022, an exploration of practices adopted in foreign nations can provide valuable insights for updating the nation's branding strategy and exploring new approaches in Russia.

To assess the relationship between soft power, nation branding, and education, it is essential to scrutinize the fundamental aspects of SI's activities. This examination begins by studying the positioning principles employed by Sweden as a country offering educational services. Subsequently, an analysis of the SI scholarship policy strategy and practices is crucial. Moreover, it is essential to ascertain the balance between the educational trajectory pursued by the grantee and their engagement with Swedish soft power and nation branding.

The rationale for focusing on these specific aspects is grounded in the close interconnection between the Swedish Institute's grant and scholarship policies

¹ What is behind the Western interest towards indigenous peoples of the Russian North? 2017, *State commission on development issues of the Arctic*, URL: <https://arctic.gov.ru/2017/10/30/> (accessed 10.05.2023).

² Our mission, *Swedish Institute*, URL: <https://si.se/en/about-si/our-mission/> (accessed 28.08.2022).

and the broader context of Swedish nation branding on the global stage.¹ Indeed, this connection significantly influences the selection of target groups for scholarship support and shapes the manner in which the Swedish Institute interacts with its program alumni. The Institute actively positions its grantees and alumni as ‘ambassadors’ representing Sweden and the universities where they pursued their education or internships.² This is undeniably associated with the cultivation of a favourable image for the country when an alum returns to their homeland after completing their education.

Contemporary state of the research

The examination of education as a soft power instrument has been a subject of increasing interest in a burgeoning body of literature over the past few decades. This interest originated in the late 1980s when Joseph Nye introduced the concept of ‘soft power’ [1, p. 153–171; 2, p. 223–232]. American scholars have often characterized the Scandinavian experience, particularly that of countries with limited ‘hard power’, as distinct from states combining both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ power elements (Michael Brian, Christopher Hartwell, Wei Shanjing) [3, p. 64–75]. Another perspective within American academia regards soft power as a means of mitigating hostility towards the donor country in a specific region (William Rugh) [4]. It is important to note that Joseph Nye and his followers have criticized interpretations of his ideas as situations “without losing counterparts” [5]. Nevertheless, this perspective on soft power is discernible in the national Arctic strategies of the Nordic countries, with Sweden being a notable example [6, p. 156–159; 7, p. 90–99; 7, p. 54–57; 9, p. 18–28; 10, p. 127–136; 11, p. 289–308; 12, p. 97–103].

Russian researchers, such as Anatoly Torkunov, have concentrated on factors influencing competitiveness in BRICS educational exports [13, p. 85–93]. Anatoly Smirnov and Irina Kokhtulina have analysed soft power as a global security determinant [14]. Yuri Sayamov has studied it as a catalyst for sustainable development [15, p. 17–29]. Natalya Antonova, Anastasia Sushchenko, and Natalya Popova have highlighted the role of soft power through education in the competition for global leadership [16, p. 31–58]. The majority of Russian scholars have focused more actively on the case of the USA than on other countries (for instance, Ekaterina Antyukhova, Olga Frolova, Maksim Braterskiy, Andrey Skirba) [17, p. 123–136; 18, p. 86–98; 19, p. 197–209; 20, p. 49–54; 21, p. 130–144]. Additionally, the case of the Confucius Institute and its efforts

¹ Vår historia — SI 75 år! 2020, *Swedish Institute*, URL: <https://si.se/om-si/var-historia/> (accessed 02.02.2023).

² Sweden Alumni Network, *Swedish Institute*, URL: <https://si.se/en/how-we-work/alumni/> (accessed 02.02.2023) ; SI alumni visit Sweden with high-level delegation from Georgia, 2020, *Swedish Institute*, URL: <https://si.se/en/si-alumni-visit-sweden-with-high-level-delegation-from-georgia/> (accessed 02.02.2023) ; SI alumni among 33 sustainability talents, 2018, *Swedish Institute*, URL: <https://si.se/en/si-alumni-among-33-sustainability-talents/> (accessed 02.02.2023).

to promote the Chinese language and culture has been extensively discussed in Russian political and international studies (Tatiana Andreeva, Kristina Kern) [22, p. 25]. This experience can provide valuable insights when studying Sweden's case, given the country's interest in the Swedish language as a tool for self-representation on the global stage.

Yulia Shestova and Inna Ryzhkova conducted a study on academic mobility within the context of soft power. They reached the conclusion that educational export significantly influences the image of the donor state, particularly in cultural and civilizational dimensions [23, p. 153]. Researchers from the Lomonosov Northern (Arctic) Federal University and the Arkhangelsk Research Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences, including Pavel Zhuravlev, Oksana Zaretskaya, Andrey Podoplekin, Andrey Repnevskiy, and Aleksandr Tamitskiy, examined research and education cooperation as a key driver of development in the Arctic region. Their focus was on the research cooperation infrastructure across the Arctic Eight countries and beyond [24]. However, the Swedish case remains relatively underexplored in this context. Its distinctive feature lies in the integration of nation branding, development assistance, and soft power strategies with scholarship, grant, and educational policies. Swedish scholars, Andreas Åkerlund and Nickolas Glover, have delved into the Swedish Institute's scholarship policy, emphasizing its role in combining elements of public diplomacy and development assistance [25; 26; 27, p. 147–167; 28]. Thomas Lundén has examined the reinforcement of Swedish influence in the Baltic republics through public diplomacy and academic cooperation during the final years of the USSR [29, p. 336–347]. Nevertheless, certain aspects and outcomes of these policies have remained underexplored, including the specific mechanisms of interaction with scholarship recipients and alumni of SI scholarship programmes [30; 31, p. 79–80]. Despite sustained interest in this subject [32], the specific Swedish case has received limited attention outside of Sweden. Surveys conducted within the country often have affiliations with the Swedish Institute, as seen in the works of James Pammement. He has focused on the mainstreaming and promotion of the country's image and its role in international communication on the global stage [33; 34].

Methodology of the research

This research integrates fundamental concepts of 'soft power', 'public diplomacy', and 'nation branding'. The concept of 'soft power', introduced by Harvard University professor Joseph Nye in the late 1980s, defines it as "the ability to influence 'the other' through one's own example and its voluntary acceptance by the recipient, without resorting to force or other coercive measures" [35, p. X]. Complementing this is the concept of 'public diplomacy', which involves exerting an informational influence on foreign public opinion. In the context of this study, it is significant as foreign students develop a positive perception of the donating country during their study period. Perceptions of an enhanced lifestyle and quality of life in the donating country act as the foundation for the voluntary transfer of practices, encompassing political, cultural, economic, and social development models [36, p. 33]. Additionally, the concept of nation branding is em-

ployed to analyse how Sweden constructs its image through scholarship, grant, and educational policies, as well as informational initiatives. In this context, the country's image functions both as a means of soft power and as its product [37, p. 27–30; 37]. These terms and concepts serve as the framework to elucidate their interconnections within the key actions of the Swedish Institute.

The research commences chronologically with the establishment of the Visby programme in 1995. This programme has manifested itself as an instrument for academic cooperation, nation branding, and exerting soft power by Sweden towards the Baltic states, Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. The concluding chronological point for this study is the year 2023. By this year, the initial consequences of excluding Russia from the SI programmes in 2022 due to the Swedish official position towards Ukraine would have manifested.

The materials selected for analysis fall into distinct categories. The first category comprises official publications by the Swedish Institute available on its website: news releases, reports, and programme announcements. These sources offer insights into the financial trends of SI programmes, the organization's approaches to target groups, and the objectives set by the organization in specific contexts.

The second category of materials is feedback from the SI alumni. After the first presentation of the *SI Alumni Newsletter* in 2002 this form of information policy turned into regular practice.¹ Later the alumni feedback was published on the SI website under the heading *SI Stories*.² These publications give an opportunity to assess the impact of a programme on a grantee and his or her professional development. In addition, the alumni feedback makes it possible to analyze his or her perception of Sweden, its values and the possible transfer of Swedish practices to the country of origin. This is a small-numbered category of publications since it requires the alumni's consent and pre-moderation of the interview before release.

The Swedish Institute as a soft power and nation branding instrument

The Swedish Institute was established in 1945 with the primary aim of raising awareness about Sweden on the international stage and fostering international cooperation for the country, particularly in the realms of culture, education, and research.³ The Institute has carried out an active scholarship policy towards concrete countries and regions in various forms since the 1990s. The Swedish Institute also plays a pivotal role in executing the nation branding policy, as it is tasked with promoting Sweden as a nation that offers ideal conditions for top-tier higher education, impactful global social initiatives, and cutting-edge research endeavours. The Institute showcases these opportunities as a testament to the contributions of the Swedish populace and the embodiment of the inclusive Swedish mindset, which welcomes foreign students.

¹ *SI Alumni Newsletter*, 2002, N°1, *Internet Archive Wayback Machine*, URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20060827223544/http://www.si.se/upload/Docs/Alumni/Alumni1-02.pdf> (accessed 15.05.2023).

² *Swedish Institute*, 2023, URL: <https://si.se/en/news/> (accessed 15.05.2023).

³ *Vår historia — SI 75 år! Swedish institute*, 2020, URL: <https://si.se/om-si/var-historia/> (accessed 02.02.2023).

Positioning Sweden as a country giving an opportunity to pursue higher education is a task of the *Study in Sweden* website launched in 2003.¹ These efforts are also reflected through various sections on the SI website. The website promotes the SI's mission as "cultivating and maintaining interest and trust in Sweden worldwide" while fostering cooperation in the Baltic region and contributing to global development. Consequently, the SI places a strong reliance on public diplomacy, actively encouraging interpersonal connections between the involved countries. The Institute also conducts assessments of Sweden's international awareness levels and proactively promotes the country's image through various media platforms.

According to the official stance of the Swedish Institute, Sweden is an exceptionally attractive destination for education due to the nation's advancements and the values upheld by its population. Swedish societal norms, particularly in economics, social organization, and environmental consciousness, are cited as compelling reasons for choosing Sweden as a study destination. The SI highlights Sweden's innovative business practices, alongside an optimal balance between work or study and personal life. Moreover, the SI emphasizes Swedes' readiness for collaborative work and cooperation, coupled with a deep respect for personal space, individual choices, and the principle of equal opportunities, as key attributes of the Swedish social fabric. Of paramount importance, according to the SI, is Sweden's openness to diverse cultures, including its willingness to immerse incoming foreign students in the national culture. The SI also underscores the ecological awareness of the Swedish population as a cherished national value and a motivating factor for selecting Sweden as a study destination.²

The *Study in Sweden* website vividly illustrates the SI's endeavours in showcasing Swedish society and academia as a highly conducive environment for pursuing education at all levels. It is prominently highlighted that international students can acquire not only valuable professional skills but also enriching socialization experiences within an international context. The 'Swedish way' in terms of social and economic development is presented as an optimal model of orientation for graduates of exchange programmes. This underscores the SI's role as a vital component of Sweden's soft power within its foreign policy framework. The organization actively lends its support to the promotion of Swedish national values and the dissemination of the country's development model on the global stage.

The SI scholarship policy correlations between academic cooperation, nation branding and soft power in the Baltic and the EU Eastern Partnership, 1995 – 2020

The evolution of the SI's scholarship policy aligns with the organization's priorities and the broader objectives of Swedish foreign policy. When we examine how Sweden positions itself and promotes its contemporary national values, it becomes evident that the scholarship policy has been linked with Swedish

¹ Study in Sweden, 2003, *Internet Archive Wayback Machine*, URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20031008160846/http://www.sweden.se/templates/SISFrontPage_4908.asp (accessed 18.05.2023) ; Plan your studies, *Study in Sweden*, 2023, URL: <https://studyinsweden.se/> (accessed 18.05.2023).

² Moving to Sweden, 2023, *Study in Sweden*, URL <https://studyinsweden.se/moving-to-sweden/the-swedish-way/> (accessed 02.02.2023).

soft power since the 1990s. Notably, the annual funding allocated to the scholarship policy has seen substantial growth from SEK 180 million in 1997 to SEK 470 million in recent years. In 2022, a significant portion of this budget, totalling SEK 294 million, was earmarked for scholarships and grants. This financial commitment underscores the central role of scholarship programmes in advancing Sweden's soft power and foreign policy objectives.¹ It proves the importance of the SI scholarship programmes for Swedish soft power, nation branding and academic cooperation.

The initial focus of the Swedish Institute's scholarship policy, nation branding efforts, and the projection of Swedish soft power through the SI was directed towards the Baltic states, Poland, and Russia. Notably, special attention was given to the regions encompassed within Russia's North-Western Federal District. This targeted approach was reflective of the SI's strategic efforts to engage with these regions and advance its objectives in the realms of education, culture, and diplomacy.² This collaborative engagement commenced in 1995 and took shape in two distinct forms. The first form involved the provision of scholarships to facilitate student, doctoral candidate, and professorial exchanges with Sweden. The second form of support was directed towards sponsoring cultural initiatives and promoting the teaching of the Swedish language.

In the framework of the Partnership for Culture (*Partnerskap för Kultur*), a wide array of cultural exchanges and activities was organised. These initiatives encompassed exhibitions, concerts, conferences, and media workshops, creating a vibrant platform for participation and dialogue including Sweden, Finland, Russia, the Baltic states, Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine. The overarching emphasis of these cultural initiatives was placed on reinforcing values such as freedom of speech, diversity, democracy, and collective resilience, resonating with the core principles of Swedish soft power and diplomatic efforts in the region.³ Therefore, after the socio-economic and political reforms in the post-Soviet area had taken place, the SI initiated its soft power activities to promote the Swedish understanding of democratic values.

The establishment of the SI Visby programme in 1995 served as a clear demonstration of Swedish foreign policy and national branding priorities. This programme was strategically designed to bolster academic cooperation and advance the goals of the Swedish Institute.

The SI Visby programme aimed to support exchanges at Swedish partner universities, offering students the flexibility of choosing between semester or aca-

¹ Our mission, 2023, *Swedish Institute*, URL: <https://si.se/en/about-si/our-mission/> (accessed 03.02.2023).

² VISBYPROGRAMMET, 1998, *Swedish Institute*, 1998, URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/19980205040731/http://www.si.se/stipendier/visby.html> (accessed 17.05.2023) ; *Ett årtionde med Central- och Östeuropa. En sammanfattning från Svenska Institutet*, 2001, Stockholm, s. 22.

³ *Ett årtionde med Central- och Östeuropa. En sammanfattning från Svenska Institutet*, 2001, Stockholm, s. 33.

demical year options. Beyond this, the programme facilitated the pursuit of master's degrees in Sweden and provided valuable opportunities for doctoral students and professors to engage in internships. These well-structured options played a crucial role in reinforcing academic collaboration between Swedish universities and their partner institutions in Russia, Poland, and the Baltic states, aligning with the broader objectives of Swedish diplomacy and international engagement.¹ The programme was named after the Swedish city of Visby on the island of Gotland, which used to be a Hanseatic trade centre until the 15th century. In the late 20th century, the Visby municipality became a part of the New Hanseatic League and spearheaded the creation of a youth forum known as the 'Younger Hansa'. The choice of branding for this initiative reflects its intended role as a successor to historical connections and the influence that Sweden had historically wielded in the Baltic region. However, the primary focus of this initiative was placed on fostering constructive Swedish influence on its neighbouring countries.

The first recipients began their studies with the support of the Visby programme in 1997. Over the period from 1997 to 2000, the SI allocated SEK 120 million in scholarship payments to students and professors from Russia, the Baltic states, Poland, and Ukraine. Approximately 7,000 students, doctoral candidates, and university educators received this support during their time in Sweden. The programme's outreach extended to include not only Russia, the Baltic states, Poland, and Ukraine but also Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.² The allocation of scholarships between 1997 and 2020 exhibited some fluctuations. In the initial year, there were 240 successful applications, but this number gradually declined to 64 in the academic year 2002/03. Subsequently, between 2004 and 2011, there was a gradual increase, with the number of scholarships fluctuating between 186 and 250. However, the numbers then declined again, reaching 92 successful applications in 2013–2014. In 2016, there were 105 applicants who received a positive decision [28, p. 41], and this number remained relatively stable until a major reorganization of the SI's programmes took place in 2020.³ Fluctuations in the number of scholarships were primarily driven by several factors, including the expansion of geographical coverage within SI scholarship programmes, the mobility of Swedish students and teachers abroad, and support for the teaching of the Swedish language in the North-Western region of Russia.

Prior to 2013, Russian citizens constituted the largest group of recipients of Visby scholarships. The number of Russian scholarship recipients reached its peak at 96 in the academic year 2010/11, after which it experienced a decline. In 2015, Ukrainian recipients surpassed Russians in the number of scholarships,

¹ The SI Visby Programme, 2017, *Uppsala Universitet*, URL: https://indico.uu.se/event/454/contributions/728/attachments/722/926/171213_UA_Visby_short.pdf (accessed 02.02.2023).

² Vår historia — SI 75 år! 2023, *Swedish Institute*, URL: <https://si.se/om-si/var-historia/> (accessed 02.02.2023).

³ Sverige i världen Svenska institutet 75 år, 2020, *Swedish Institute*, URL: <https://si.se/app/uploads/2020/11/sverige-i-varlden-svenska-institutet-75-ar.pdf> (accessed 02.02.2023).

with 36 positive decisions compared to 34 for Russians. Nevertheless, Russian recipients continued to be a significant and prominent target group for SI programmes [28, s. 41].

In the early years of the Visby programme, students and professors from the Russian North-Western Federal District constituted a distinct and special group. The Swedish government demonstrated its commitment to fostering cultural, educational, and academic dialogue in the European North through its support and initiatives in this region.¹ Meantime, the number of scholarships allocated for students and professors in social sciences and the humanities was slightly higher than for applicants specializing in natural sciences and engineering [28, s. 5]. This distribution reflects a close alignment with the concept of soft power, as it served as a mechanism for promoting the Swedish interpretation of key values such as freedom of speech, equality, democracy, a multi-party system, market economy, and the welfare state model. These values were disseminated through Western social and political theories, effectively broadcasting them to the post-Soviet space.²

Apart from Russia, the Visby programme extended its outreach to include Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic states. The scholarship policy toward these countries underscored Sweden's commitment to imparting its model of democracy, market economy, and the welfare state. Simultaneously, it aimed to promote the Swedish language and culture. Sweden's active role in assisting Poland and the Baltic states with their European integration immediately after their accession to the EU in 1995 was instrumental. Consequently, a significant proportion of scholarship recipients were from the fields of social sciences and humanities. This strategic approach sought to align the legal theory and practice, social policies, and political culture of these countries with those of Sweden and the EU. This emphasis can be observed in scholarship allocation statistics, particularly during the early years of the Visby programme's existence, where Polish, Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian recipients outnumbered their Russian counterparts [28, s. 41].

However, after 2004, the number of Polish and Baltic scholarship recipients began to decline, as these countries became EU members and other EU mobility programmes became available to them. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were included in other student and teacher mobility support programmes within the EU.

With the initiation of the EU's Eastern Partnership in 2009, the Swedish Institute implemented a new approach to its scholarship policy. The organization shifted its priorities to focus on Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The objective was to strengthen EU cooperation with these countries, and Swedish efforts were strategically aligned with this overarching goal. Additionally, the SI designated Ukraine as one of the priority recipients of its scholarship programmes. This decision was closely connected to the special emphasis placed on Ukraine by both the EU and Sweden. The primary target group for these schol-

¹ *Ett årtionde med Central- och Östeuropa. En sammanfattning från Svenska Institutet*, 2001, Stockholm, s. 33.

² SI Alumni Newsletter, 2004, N° 3, s. 4-5; Högt deltagande av östeuropeiska studenter i sommarkurser runt om i Sverige, *Internet Archive Wayback Machine*, 2009, URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20090831231518/http://si.se/Svenska/Innehall/Pressnyheter/Nyheter/Nyheter-2009/Hogt-deltagande-av-osteuropeiska-studenter-i-sommarkurser-runt-Sverige/> (accessed 18.05.2023).

arships included students intending to study fields such as social theory, political studies, journalism, EU law, global processes, and migration [28, s. 45]. This shift highlighted the prevalence of soft power considerations in the scholarship policy.

In 2014, the SI scholarship policy encountered new challenges as a consequence of the imposition of anti-Russian sanctions and a broader negative trajectory in cooperation with Russia. Consequently, in the academic year 2015/16, Ukrainian candidates received the highest number of scholarships. Russian recipients constituted the second-largest group [28, s. 41], but their numbers began to decline thereafter. This decline was also associated with the development of new scholarship programmes for other target groups in Europe and across the world, along with the subsequent reorganization of the SI mobility support initiatives.¹

In 2015, the Swedish Institute expanded the coverage of the Visby programme to include advanced-level Swedish language learning. Two years later, the Institute announced that applicants who wished to pursue their studies in Swedish would be recognised as a priority target group.² The SI justified it with the need to support the Swedish language teaching in the Russian North-Western Federal District. Besides, the SI became responsible for distributing scholarships within the *North2North* mobility programme of the University of the Arctic consortium designed to support inbound mobility to Swedish UArctic member universities. So, shrinking the Russian participation in the Visby programme was partially compensated via academic mobility support for the Arctic regions and Swedish language and culture teaching support in Russia. This shift in the Swedish Institute's scholarship policy signalled a change in priorities away from Russia and towards supporting nation branding efforts and collaboration with universities in the North-Western Federal District that offered Swedish language courses. This realignment was consistent with the rhetoric highlighting the Arctic as a region where constructive cooperation among its member states took precedence over disputes occurring in other parts of the world.³

In the final years of the Visby programme (2019—2020), the scholarship policy reflected Sweden's priorities towards Russia and the EU Eastern Partnership countries. These policies were designed to promote the ideals of democra-

¹ The Visby programme awarded an average of 10 out of 40-50 scholarships to Russian students in the last years of its operation in the postgraduate and post-doctoral internship track and 12 out of 63 scholarships for master's studies. For the academic year 2022/23, 19 out of 432 scholarships were awarded to Russians for master's studies at Swedish universities. Also, since 2015, a separate quota has previously been foreseen for learners of Swedish and those interested in studying it further in Sweden. SI Scholarships for Global Professionals (SISGP), *Internet Archive Wayback Machine*, 2022, URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20230206084632/https://si.se/app/uploads/2022/04/si-scholarship-recipients-2022_revised.pdf (accessed 03.02.2023) ; The Swedish Institute Visby Programme, *Indico*, 2017, URL: https://indico.uu.se/event/454/contributions/728/attachments/722/926/171213_UA_Visby_short.pdf (accessed 10.02.2023).

² The Swedish Institute Visby Programme, *Indico*, 2017, URL: https://indico.uu.se/event/454/contributions/728/attachments/722/926/171213_UA_Visby_short.pdf (accessed 10.02.2023).

³ International Arctic Forum outlines — 2019, 2019, *Arctic — the territory of Dialogue*, URL: <https://forumarctica.ru/the-forum/results/> (accessed 21.05.2023).

cy, equality, and the rule of law, including the dissemination of best practices associated with the ‘Swedish way’. However, it is worth noting that the number of scholarships for students specializing in natural sciences and engineering was relatively limited. For example, out of 65 scholarships in 2019, only 8 were designated for students in these fields,¹ and 10 from 63 in 2020.² In addition, more than a third of scholarship funds in 2019, and half of them in 2020 were given to Ukrainian and Georgian citizens. This was a way to implement the Swedish soft power concurring with policies of several EU countries towards Kiev and Tbilisi. This statement also holds true for Russia. Even though a relatively small number of scholarships were allocated to Russian candidates (10 in 2019 and 16 in 2020), the majority of students specialized in social studies and the humanities.

These study programmes operate within the framework of Western social and political theories that have been developed over the past few decades. Furthermore, under the guidance of the Swedish Institute (SI), students pursuing their degrees become familiar with the political and social systems of Sweden in specific cases, as exemplified in feedback interviews with alumni from Georgia.³ Another case with Ukrainian scholarship holders demonstrates their priorities to transfer Swedish digital interaction practices between the Government and citizens.⁴ Considering these facts, and the ‘Swedish way’ best practices promotion we can conclude that the SI understands the education programmes as a soft power instrument. The scholarship holder can keep his or her contacts with the SI via the *SI Network for Future Global Leaders* and *Sweden alumni network* associations upon graduation.⁵ The organization positions all its scholarship holders as prospective ‘global leaders’. So, the soft power instrument contains a feedback option as well.

¹ Swedish Institute Scholarship Programmes. Visby Programme — 2019/2020, 2019, *Swedish Institute*, URL: <https://si.se/app/uploads/2019/04/list-of-successful-candidates-visby-programme-2019.pdf> (accessed 02.02.2023).

² Swedish Institute Scholarship Programmes. Visby Programme — 2020/2021, 2020, *Scholarships in Europe*, URL: <https://www.scholarshipsineurope.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/list-of-successful-candidates-visby-programme-2020.pdf> (accessed 10.02.2023).

³ My years as an SI scholar will equip me to serve my country in advancing human rights protection, 2023, *Swedish Institute*, URL: <https://si.se/en/my-years-as-an-si-scholar-will-equip-me-to-serve-my-country-in-advancing-human-rights-protection-and-democratic-development/> (accessed 11.02.2023).

⁴ I want to be helpful for my country. It’s a mission I have, 2023, *Swedish Institute*, URL: <https://si.se/en/i-want-to-be-helpful-for-my-country-its-a-mission-i-have/> (accessed 19.05.2023).

⁵ The Swedish Institute graduates 370 international students at Stockholm City Hall, 2022, *Swedish Institute*, URL: <https://si.se/en/the-swedish-institute-graduates-370-international-students-at-stockholm-city-hall/> (accessed 11.02.2023) ; SI alumni among 33 sustainability talents, 2018, *Swedish Institute*, URL: <https://si.se/en/si-alumni-among-33-sustainability-talents/> (accessed 11.02.2023) ; SI alumni visit Sweden with high-level delegation from Georgia, 2020, *Swedish Institute*, URL: <https://si.se/en/si-alumni-visit-sweden-with-high-level-delegation-from-georgia/> (accessed 11.02.2023).

The Swedish Institute's scholarship policy since 2020: institutional and political changes

In 2020 the SI scholarship programmes merged into a single option called the *SI Scholarship for Global Professionals*. 420 applicants were awarded scholarships in the academic year 2020/21.¹ 359 applicants from 42 countries in 2021/22² and 432 students from 41 countries in the academic year 2022/23.³ 299 scholarships were awarded in the academic year 2023/24.⁴ Besides, the initiative became an SI Visby programme successor: Russia and the EU “Eastern Partnership” remained its participants. Nonetheless, the students coming from these countries were to participate in selection procedures competing with applicants from other countries on the same grounds.

During the transition period in the academic year 2019/20 the SI scholarship funds were subject to distribution among chosen target groups. The largest one included students from African, Asian and Latin American countries who aimed to pursue their master's studies at Swedish universities.⁵ Only the Republic of South Africa is subject to a separate category: 13 applicants from this country were awarded SI scholarships, a number comparable to that of Russian citizens.⁶ In addition, the SI introduced a special quota for applicants from Turkey and the West Balkans (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Northern Macedonia, Kosovo). In this group, Turkish applicants were predominant, receiving 10 scholarships, a number comparable to the number of approved applications from Russia.⁷ This distribution policy aligned with the EU's soft power strategy, which aimed to encourage selected countries to voluntarily participate in EU policies in the region before 2022. This statement is particularly relevant to Turkey, South Africa, and Serbia.

¹ More than 400 scholarships awarded to international students, 2020, *Swedish Institute*, URL: <https://si.se/en/more-than-400-scholarships-awarded-to-international-students/> (accessed 13.05.2023).

² Swedish Institute Scholarships for Global Professionals, 2021, *Internet Archive Wayback Machine*, URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20210815224331/https://si.se/en/apply/scholarships/swedish-institute-scholarships-for-global-professionals/> (accessed 13.05.2023).

³ The Swedish Institute award scholarships to 432 foreign students for studies in Sweden, 2020, *Swedish Institute*, URL: <https://si.se/en/the-swedish-institute-award-scholarships-to-432-foreign-students-for-studies-in-sweden/> (accessed 13.05.2022).

⁴ Scholarship recipients academic year 2023/2024, 2023, *Swedish Institute*, URL: <https://si.se/app/uploads/2023/04/si-scholarship-recipients-2023.pdf> (accessed 13.05.2022).

⁵ Swedish Institute scholarship recipients 2019/2020, 2019, *Swedish Institute*, URL: <https://si.se/en/swedish-institute-scholarship-recipients-2019-2020-swedish-institute/> (accessed 03.02.2023).

⁶ Swedish Institute Scholarships for South Africa (SISSA) — 2019/2020, 2019, *Swedish Institute*, URL: <https://si.se/app/uploads/2019/04/list-of-successful-candidates-sissa-2019-2020.pdf>. (accessed 03.02.2023).

⁷ Swedish-Turkish Scholarship Programme and SI Scholarships for the Western Balkans 2019/2020, 2019, *Swedish Institute*, URL: <https://si.se/app/uploads/2019/04/list-of-successful-candidates-turkey-w.-balkans-2019.pdf> (accessed 03.02.2023).

After Russia had launched a special military operation in Ukraine, the SI suspended Russian participation in its scholarship programmes and increased its support for Ukrainian educational and non-governmental organisations. The Institute places emphasis on projects related to supporting cultural and artistic activities, as well as civil society initiatives aligned with EU-oriented values and drawing inspiration from the ‘Swedish way’.¹ The academic year 2022/23 was the last one when the SI awarded scholarships for Russian applicants. 19 Russian students specializing in social studies, economics and the humanities received scholarship support that year. As of 2023, Russian applicants are unable to submit applications for SI scholarships. Although the Institute provides support to various Ukrainian educational and non-governmental organizations, the number of scholarships for Ukrainian applicants has remained relatively low. Only 16 applicants in 2022² and 7 applicants in 2023³ were awarded scholarships within the SI programmes. This fact is connected with the evolution of the SI priorities towards Ukraine.

Recipients of SI scholarships pursuing master’s degrees in Swedish universities come from diverse academic fields. The majority of those benefiting from SI Scholarships for Global Professionals are enrolled in programmes related to Natural Sciences, Medicine, and Engineering. This reflects Sweden’s self-presentation as a nation committed to aiding in the economic development and welfare systems of the recipients’ home countries.

For those pursuing degrees in social sciences and humanities, many have chosen programmes like International Leadership, Global Development Issues, and Gender Studies. These academic choices align closely with Sweden’s efforts to promote its vision of freedom, democracy, equality, multiculturalism, and welfare in developing nations through courses grounded in Western social theories from recent decades.

Among scholarship recipients from Turkey, Ukraine, Belarus, and the Western Balkans, students specialising in humanities make up a significant portion. These trends underscore Sweden’s focus on using education for foreign students as a tool of soft power, aimed at aligning these countries with Sweden’s foreign policy goals and fostering the European integration of several nations.

Conclusion

Since the 1990s, the Swedish Institute’s scholarship and grant policy has undergone significant transformations. Initially, the main focus was on promoting Sweden internationally and nurturing cooperation with its neighbouring countries. However, over time, it has transformed into a multifaceted soft power instrument. A pivotal component of this transformation has been the scholarship policy, which

¹ The Swedish Institute’s support to Ukraine 2022-2023, 2023, *Swedish Institute*, URL: <https://si.se/en/the-swedish-institutes-support-to-ukraine-2022-2023/> (accessed 19.05.2023).

² SI Scholarships for Global Professionals (SISGP) Recipients 2022, 2022, *Internet Archive Wayback Machine*, URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20220429200126/https://si.se/app/uploads/2022/04/si-scholarship-recipients-2022_revised.pdf (accessed 19.05.2023).

³ SI Scholarships for Global Professionals (SISGP) Recipients 2023, 2023, *Swedish Institute*, URL: <https://si.se/app/uploads/2023/04/si-scholarship-recipients-2023.pdf> (accessed 19.05.2023).

plays a vital role in furthering Sweden's official objectives and shaping a favourable national image. Through its scholarship programmes, the Swedish Institute exerts influence on Sweden's relations with the recipient countries while also encouraging the adoption of Swedish values and social and political practices. The exposure of scholarship recipients to these aspects serves as a means of popularizing the 'Swedish way' of life. Foreign students who pursue their education in Sweden are expected to promote Swedish values in their home countries and beyond. The Swedish model of social and economic development is presented as a globally suitable paradigm. This approach became particularly evident when the Swedish Institute shifted its emphasis towards Ukraine and curtailed its cooperation programmes with Russia. Prior to these changes, similar methods were used in collaboration with universities in the Russian North-Western Federal District, particularly in the promotion of the Swedish language and culture.

In response to narratives propagated by Sweden through scholarship policies and soft power, there is a need for specific countermeasures that encompass both institutional forms and content development.

The Swedish Institute's scholarship policy, as a soft power instrument, operates in two distinct forms. Firstly, for developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, it serves as a means of training specialists in natural sciences, engineering, and medicine. This showcases Sweden as a nation committed to aiding developing countries in addressing their social and economic challenges.

Secondly, for Russia, the Eastern Partnership countries, and Turkey, a different approach is taken. The emphasis here is on supporting scholarship recipients pursuing studies in social sciences and the humanities. In this context, the Swedish Institute places a strong emphasis on programmes that draw from Western social theories and related practices in conceptualizing human and minority rights, the relationship between authorities and citizens, multiculturalism, and more. Consequently, the implementation of this soft power instrument is geared towards encouraging the voluntary adoption of Swedish values and practices as a suitable development model by scholarship recipients and their home countries. The Swedish Institute, in collaboration with the Swedish government, now regards its scholarship programmes as a vehicle for exporting its social, cultural, and political practices abroad.

Positioning a graduate of a scholarship programme as a 'bearer' of Swedish values and practices reinforces the earlier assertion. The 'success stories' of the SI alumni programme, published by the organization, clearly indicate their alignment with the 'Swedish way' of development and their readiness to promote this model, which was formed and strengthened during their studies in Sweden. Consequently, the scholarship policy of the Swedish Institute has evolved into an increasingly powerful instrument for nation branding and soft power, particularly in the latter half of the 21st century. In this context, the SI international academic cooperation has become subservient to the objectives of soft power and nation branding.

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