

## Indicators and Ratings in Global Governance: New Trends<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*Numerous indicators and ratings aimed at assessing and comparing states based on different criteria, such as volume of gross domestic product (GDP), freedom of speech, gender equality, or attractiveness of local cuisine, have become an integral part of contemporary communications and international relations. Country rankings can be used as a basis for agenda setting, political influence, or developing approaches to global governance. National governments sometimes use rankings developed by international intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations, or in some cases by business entities, as benchmarks for their countries' development and national scorecards and indexes. Or, if the ratings are considered unsatisfactory, governments can distance themselves from such reports, accusing their authors of political bias.*

*Lately, the phenomena of international indicators and ratings, the principles behind their development, and their influence and usage in the context of global governance have attracted attention of researchers specializing in international relations and other social science disciplines.*

*This article examines different theoretical approaches to analyzing the phenomena of indexes and ratings and provides evaluation of the phenomena. The author focuses on the premises for the increasing interest in comparative approaches and emergence of newly developed ratings and indexes, highlights limitations and weaknesses of such approaches, and examines new trends in the field and possible scenarios of its future development in the context of current global transformations.*

**Keywords:** global governance, indicators, indexes, ratings, political ideologies, power, influence, international organizations

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## Introduction

Numerous indicators and ratings providing a basis for assessing different phenomena and comparing achievements have become an integral part of contemporary life and often are used to inform decision-making. Investors focus on securities' yields and credibility ratings, parents select schools and universities for their children using comparative tables, and new car buyers look at safety or fuel efficiency scores.

Country lists and ratings have also become an everyday reality on the global level. Not only international relations experts, but also mass media and the general public are familiar with such ratings: reports and publications about country rankings based on different criteria, from gross domestic product (GDP) and inflation data to levels of happiness, media freedom, or road safety are a regular occurrence.

Researchers in Russia and other countries have been studying indicators, ratings, and similar instruments from different angles. There are publications focusing on the methodologies of various indexes, their advantages and weaknesses, and their potential influence on international actors and national strategies (see I. V. Andronova and A. G. Saharov [2022], C. Arndt and C. Oman [2006], P. Bakvis [2007], E. M. Kharitonova [2015], R. Pinheiro-Alves and J. Zambujal-Oliveira [2012], E. Sadovaja, A. Bardin, and E. Dovbysh [2016], A. G. Saharov and K. M. Dorohina [2023], A. R. Zenkov [2022], and others). Economists and international relations experts regularly cite ratings to demonstrate certain trends and patterns. However, researchers are not always able to keep up with the pace of the ever-growing number of international comparative studies and their scope expansion. So far, a relatively small number of works analyzing the phenomena of indicators, ratings, and similar instruments, the dynamics of their development and their place in global governance, and theoretical aspects and mechanisms influencing decision-makers have been published. This article reviews those publications focusing on the phenomena of ratings as such and offers the author's reflections on, and analysis of, the new trends in this area.

During the last 10–15 years, an increased interest in this theme and its consolidation in the literature can be observed. Several works looking at the role of ratings in global governance [Cooly, Snider 2015; Davis et al., 2012b] and special editions of scientific journals focused on the theme, including by *Review of International Studies* in 2015 and *International Organization* in 2019, have been published. Their authors use terms like “global benchmarking” (meaning a separate type of transnational practices based on developing and using comparative metrics and measuring performance against them) [Broome, Homolar, Kranke, 2018; Broome, Quirk, 2015] or global performance indicators (GPIs) [Kelley, Simmons, 2019]. In general, such works look at the entirety of different indicators, ratings, blacklists, and other instruments that evaluate, rank, classify, and compare countries according to different criteria.

## Creation of Indicators

The definitions of the terms are a starting point for discussion. First, there are certain indicators—broadly speaking, assessments of different phenomena. Economists, sociologists, and other specialists use indicators for assessments, strategic planning, and forecasting. The use of indicators in governance not new. However, an interesting, and to some extent novel, characteristic of post-industrial society, which is particularly noticeable in the context of global governance, is a pursuit to quantify and present, in the form of figures, graphs, and tables, not only easily quantifiable measures (such as life expectancy, number of immigrants, or prevalence of infectious diseases) but also more complicated concepts such as corruption, the human rights

situation, democratic freedoms, gender equality, or ethnic tensions. Moreover, there is a tendency to bring to a common denominator and quantify, on a global level, phenomena that can be interpreted and understood somewhat differently in different cultures and societies. The ideological conditioning of many of such indicators is also obvious, as they are based on priorities inherent to certain political ideologies.

The development of any indicator is based on a certain methodology. Upon closer examination it often turns out that it is compiled from other indicators, forming a kind of “Russian doll,” sometimes with additional expert assessments. For instance, the international organization Reporters Without Borders assesses press freedom using quantitative research on malpractice against journalists and complements it with expert opinions using questionnaires on a number of topics. An overall score for each country is calculated using a special formula [2022]. Often new ratings build on already existing data, for instance, provided by United Nations (UN) agencies or other prominent organizations.

Various country rankings and ratings are then formed based on one or several indicators (in English the word “index” is also used). Sometimes they are presented in the form of a list assigning a category to each country (for instance, the non-governmental organization (NGO) Freedom House divides countries into free, partly free, and not free). Alexander Cooley from Columbia University made a distinction between rating and ranking [2015]: the first is about assigning a certain category (such as a country’s credit rating or dividing countries into free, partly free, and not free) while the second is about a hierarchy of countries according to a certain criteria.

Countries’ blacklists or watchlists are in some way opposite to ratings and include states that are last in the list according to some criteria or are leaders in terms of violations in some area. Researchers also regard them as GPIs (see for instance J. C. Morse [2019]).

Indicators and the ratings based on them can be described as only the tip of the iceberg. They are aimed at presenting complex and multifaceted phenomena in the form of illustrative, easy to understand numbers. As for the “underwater” part, methodology, it can significantly vary. And, this is exactly where the definitions of terms and concepts such as a definition of gender equality, human development, or democracy are contained. In some cases, there is a process of developing and harmonizing definitions and approaches used to calculate global indicators and its gradual integration on country and regional levels. As an example, infant mortality rates calculated according to the World Health Organization’s (WHO) definitions can differ from the indicators used in individual countries; application of standard approaches around the globe so that countries can be compared based on the same data collection methodology is a lengthy process. In other cases, definitions of key terms and concepts and evaluation criteria are formed by the ratings’ authors and disregard variations between national governance systems or cultural diversity.

## Research Approaches

The selection of indicators and ratings to be analyzed in the context of global governance can be based on different premises. Some authors focus on the indicators directly related to governance and public administration, such as corruption perception index, financial stability, and rule of law [Malito, Umbach, Bhuta, 2018]. Others examine the whole spectrum of indicators used on the supranational level, including world university ratings, scores by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and immunization data [Davis et al., 2012a].

The modern indexes and ratings boom is characterized by a considerable expansion of thematic areas, authors, and methodologies. According to the authors of a book published by

Palgrave [Malito, Umbach, Bhuta, 2018], almost any phenomenon or concept, from economic openness to human development, women's rights, democracy, corruption, budget transparency, rule of law, or state fragility is considered suitable for measurement, generalization, and ranking. However, the all-embracing inclusivity the authors refer to is not universal, and the ideological conditionality is clearly visible: for instance, country ratings based on conservative or religious values do not have a wide circulation as opposed to the ratings based on liberal, green, or feminist ideologies.

The emergence of numerous new ratings can be regarded in the context of globalization and efforts aimed at developing a system of global governance, considering "the complexity of the modern world and its functioning and ever-growing volumes and scope of regulation on all levels, from national to global" [Baranovsky, Ivanova, 2015, p 12]. Global governance, in turn, requires information that can be presented in a form of indicators. New information technology is making the accumulation of an enormous amount of data and access to it possible. At the same time, indicators and ratings are manifestations of efforts to simplify, responding to the need to express complex and often contradictory phenomena in a form of simple and comparable numbers, summarize a huge amount of diverse data, and come to straightforward conclusions. The excessive volume of information and overwhelming data comprehensible only by experts can be simplified and presented to political leaders, civil servants, and the general public with the help of indicators and thus used for decision-making. Indicators and ratings can also be regarded as a response to a key global governance challenge, the legitimacy deficit. They can be positioned as non-partisan, unbiased, and objective and can become an instrument for legitimization or consolidation of norms and rules promoted by different actors.

The American anthropologist, S. E. Merry, described the emergence of a new indicator culture within which indicators are regarded as a possible way to navigate today's complex world and wrote about "the seductions of quantification" [Merry, 2016]. The increasing popularity of indicators and ratings goes hand in hand with increasing criticisms of such instruments. Not only can the instruments themselves be biased and their authors and experts responding to questionnaires prejudiced, but also complex social and political processes are inevitably simplified and distorted when presented through figures and ratings, and such instruments become disconnected from the cultural and local context. While numerical assessments can help identify problems and trace their dissemination, there are also risks of "distorting the complexity of social phenomena." Merry noted that numerical knowledge is not closely connected to more qualitative forms of knowledge and that "it leads to oversimplification, homogenization, and the neglect of the surrounding social structure" [Ibid, p. 1].

Therefore, the phenomena of global indicators and ratings itself has become a research focus for sociologists, anthropologists, international relations specialists, and legal scholars. Researchers are looking both at the causes of the increased interest in measuring different phenomena and at the challenges connected to the attempts to quantify complex social realities with diverse cultural and political substance.

## Influence on Decision-Making

Creators of the ratings are often quite open about the fact that the purpose of their work is to put pressure on the governments and advocate reforms in a certain direction. It is a common practice to include recommendations for governments willing to improve their positions in the ratings into the final reports. Ratings do not only reflect existing reality and its perceptions, but in some ways create such reality, in many cases in line with a certain political ideology. As some authors described it, "as both the demand and supply of indicators grew, various actors began to

realize that they could deploy GPIs as policy tools.” A growing number of tools such as ratings and rankings, comparing governments and countries, are used to “pressure, shame, or provoke competition among states” [Kelly, Simmons, 2019, p. 4]. J. G. Kelly also wrote about “score-card diplomacy” and the fact that ranking countries according to certain criteria has become a common practice of influence, for instance in connection to foreign aid distribution [2017]. Others noted that “burgeoning production and use of indicators in global governance have the potential to alter the forms, the exercise, perhaps even the distributions of power in certain spheres of global governance” [Davis et al., 2012a, p. 72].

Emerging power relations can be illustrated by comparison to students’ ratings in educational institutions. Depending on the ratings criteria, the behaviour of students will be influenced. For instance, if ratings were based on attendance rates and homework completion, the list of top students would be arranged in one way; if the scores were given for sports accomplishments or ability to solve mathematical problems of increased complexity, the order in the list would be different. If the place in the rating affects a student’s reputation, endorsement from peers or parents, or future employment prospects, different rating strategies and selected indicators would influence every student’s priorities and educational strategies.

Therefore, the ways ratings affect political decision-making and government priorities also need to be examined. Ratings results can be disregarded or considered biased or, on the contrary, can be utilized to demonstrate and reiterate the results of government policy; in any case, national governments consider them and can even integrate them into strategic programmes and documents. For instance, the so-called May decrees by the president of Russia published in 2012 included a requirement to become one of the top 20 countries in the World Bank’s *Doing Business* report by 2018. [President of Russia, 2012a], and to ensure that at least five Russian universities get into the top 100 of the world university rating [President of Russia, 2012b]. It is obvious that today, during the drastic reconsideration of Russia’s relations with western countries, and after the publication of the new Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation positioning Russia as a “unique country-civilization” [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023], attitudes toward the country’s positions in different ratings are inevitably being reconsidered.

Government institutions can react to ratings in different ways. Some governments use the data about their countries’ top positions in public advertisements in mass media. Other adapt the ratings’ criteria for their own strategic planning. Finally, if the scores are unsatisfactory, governments can question the authority of the rating in question and accuse its creators attempting to inflict economic losses and destabilize the situation. A. Cooley looked at a government’s potential reaction from two possible points of views: rationalist and socially driven responses [2015]. Experts using rationalist approaches would expect governments react to important ratings in a way that allows improving their respective positions with minimal effort. Moreover, he cited so-called Campbell effect, Campbell having stated in the 1970s, in connection to educational assessments, that “the more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor” [Campbell, 1979, p. 85]—meaning that some changes can be simulated and indicators tailored to achieve satisfactory positions in ratings. On the other hand, considered from a constructivist point of view, changes in states’ behaviour due to the norms and social pressure created by the ratings would be more important.

Another interesting problem is connected to the possible ways ratings influence the behaviour and possible theoretical approaches. In this regard, authors mention shaping discourse, agenda-setting, and forming goal and priorities; they also mention P. Bourdieu’s symbolic power [2007] and normative power [Manners, 2009], explore relations between governance indicators, knowledge, and power [Löwenheim, 2008], or argue that indicators are comparable to

law [Merry, Davis, Kingsbury, 2015]. An analytical review by Russian researchers looking at ranking governments according to the climate agenda, closely related to the theme of ratings and indicators, discussed several theoretical approaches: the English school of international relations, looking at inclusion or exclusion from international society; from critical theory or neo-Marxist points of views, including in the context of a hegemonic control over discourse, and in terms of Foucault's normalizing judgement [Zhornist et al., 2021].

Another important question that needs to be explored is who exactly creates those indexes, ratings, blacklists, and other instruments and what is their role in the shaping global agenda. Non-state actors are becoming more and more active in this regard, as well as in other areas: non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are creating and supporting many of the well-known ratings and indexes. These include, for instance, the Corruption Perceptions Index, the Freedom in the World Report by Freedom House, the Fragile States Index by the United States Fund for Peace think tank, and many others. At the same time, large intergovernmental organizations use indicators, ratings, and blacklists as instruments for global governance. For example, indicators used for the UN sustainable development goals are designed to influence governments' policies, while the UN Human Development Index is oriented toward promoting a certain understanding and ideology of "human development" [Davis et al., 2012b].

Various universities, think tanks, and private consulting agencies also take part in creating global indexes and ratings (see Kharitonova [2015]), as do national governments. For example, the U.S. Department of State publishes a human trafficking report in which it ranks countries according to their position on the human trafficking problem and efforts to tackle it [2019].

This raises a question about how exactly some international relations actors gain the right to make judgments regarding countries' state of affairs—what is the basis of their authority and influence and what are their goals? Some scholars argue that the ranking and ratings organizations "act as judges, global monitors and regulators, advocates, and as branding exercises to claim ownership over issues" [Abdelal, Blyth, 2015, p. 39].

Prominent American researchers M. Barnett and M. Finnemore explored international organizations as bureaucracies and consider classification and organization of information to be one of the sources of their power. As bureaucracies, international organizations "classify the world" and are involved not only in solving problems and pursuing collective interests but in defining those problems and interests [2004]. The authors stressed that control over information is crucial for international organizations. They "can collect some data and information, but not others," establish categories, fix meanings, and diffuse norms. Their authority "allows them to persuade and induce compliance with existing rules," they "define new categories of problems to be governed and create new norms, interests, actors and social tasks" such as development, refugees, or promotion of human rights [Ibid, pp. 31–32].

Therefore, this refers to an ability to construct reality and to create new categories and benchmarks for international relations actors. The power and influence of such organizations is based on their mandates, moral authority, and expert positioning in their respective fields. In this regard indicators and ratings become important instruments of influence. Presented as unbiased and objective, and as universal for all countries, they establish the categories and interests promoted by different actors in public consciousness and create competition between governments, highlight role models, and articulate ways for improvement.

American researchers W. N. Espeland and M. Sauder noted that successful indicators "often produce powerful and unanticipated effects: they can change how people think about what they do, what is comparable, how excellence or mediocrity is defined, or even who they are" [2012, p. 86].

It may also be noted that NGOs and international organizations and businesses are motivated to create country lists because they are easy to use and attractive for mass media, social

networks, and other informational resources. Ratings have a potential to attract public attention to the theme in question, whether it is gender equality or press freedom, and to the organization itself. Ratings become a part of communication and branding strategies, packaging complex concepts and issues into a ready-to-use media product and become a basis for news making. For example, a Google Trends analysis of the keywords “corruption perception” shows that popularity peaks coincide with publication dates of a corresponding report, published annually toward the end of January. Comparing search trends for “press freedom” with publication dates of the reports by the Reporters Without Borders gives a similar picture.

Information from ratings and rankings published by a credible organization disseminates and multiplies. In cases when a state’s positions are high or have significantly improved, governmental agencies, as well as loyal media and public figures are keen to use the data to demonstrate their policies’ efficiency. If results of a rating are, on the contrary, not satisfactory, this becomes a news item for opposition and NGOs and allows to criticism of the government.

Ratings shape information space and facilitate consolidation of certain concepts and their interpretations. For example, M. Bukovanski (U.S.) looked at the Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International and noted that, by focusing on government corruption rather than corruption in corporations, the report already shifts the focus of the term itself and makes it more applicable for public service rather than financial transparency and bribery in private sector [2015].

## New Challenges in Today’s World

Contemporary discrepancies and imbalances in a transforming world order pose a number of important research questions connected to global indicators and ratings. The indicators and evaluations that are being used today are an integral part of the international relations system that is increasingly under pressure, and the parameters of a new system will not be defined soon.<sup>2</sup> Today, Russia’s role and its place in global governance and therefore, attitudes toward existing ranking systems governance are being reconsidered inside the country. Presumably, after radical revision of the country’s relations with western countries outlined in the new Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, ratings and opinions published by western governments will lose their leverage over Russia’s political leadership. Neither press freedom ratings, nor corruption perception indexes and other similar publications are likely to be used as a benchmarks or action guides. Unprecedented sanctions pressure places the country in a unified blacklist from the western political elites’ point of view, and some of the mechanisms of influence through ratings and indexes will be irrelevant against the background of the wider agenda. Confrontation with the collective West, therefore, is losing some importance in terms of shaping Russia’s foreign policy, and there is a possibility other countries will reconsider their positions in this regard.

At the same time, there are efforts to create a new system of global governance that some actors consider more just. For example, the XIV BRICS Summit Beijing Declaration published in 2022, calls for “making instruments of global governance more inclusive, representative and participatory” [President of the Russian Federation, 2022]. Accordingly, the place of international indexes and ratings in the future will depend on the configuration that emerges after the period of turbulence. Experts discuss a range of scenarios, “from chaos to multipolarity” [Baranovsky, 2021] and therefore approaches to evaluating and comparing countries and determining the indicators and parameters will be different. If the current trends continue, data collection systems are likely to develop further, with an ever-increasing volume of statistics and

<sup>2</sup> More on this in A. Dynkin and M. Burrows [2016].

expert opinions. New instruments for data analysis and new competing ratings and indicators are likely to emerge. A different scenario, in which the world is divided into separate spheres of influence, could see each of those spheres develop its own set of ratings and evaluations, not always matching those of another centre of power, and entailing separate systems for data collection and processing with corresponding governmental and non-governmental structures and their own development targets. On the other hand, it is possible that a movement away from western-led indicators, whether in science, education, press freedom, or minority rights, could make comparing different countries, cultures, and societies less relevant in terms of global governance. Accessibility of information technologies and visualization instruments could also lead to overproduction in this sphere and would make ratings and indexes rather a part of entertainment and educational space; their current authors would, to an extent, lose their monopoly on developing targets and benchmarks for development and its evaluation.

Therefore, various scenarios can be envisioned, including the emergence of new global indicators, taking into account cultural and social diversity and not aimed at unification; the growth of number of ratings and fragmentation of evaluation and ranking systems and the emergence of competing sets of such systems favourable to one or the other centre of power; or, on the contrary, a reduction in the number of indicators used in global political life and a return to ratings that can be objectively measured and confirmed, with more subjective evaluations taken away from the decision-makers' sight.

However, such scenarios remain hypothetical. Ratings and indicators are widely used in the contemporary world in the context of global governance. They are designed not only to keep track on certain facts and trends, but also to shape the agenda, create targets and benchmarks for international relations actors, attract attention to certain phenomena and concepts, and define leaders and those lagging behind. Indicators and ratings are being used by international organizations, NGOs, mass media, universities and businesses, and also by government agencies. Some of the most prominent can to an extent influence government policies. The emergence of new ratings, including those evaluating governments based on criteria that are difficult to quantify, indicates the demand for ranking in order to shape the agenda and attract attention to certain spheres and also to the authors of such ratings. Such activity can be regarded as an alternative and informal way of influencing participants of international relations in the global governance context.

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