

Soft power in Uzbekistan's foreign policy: stereotypes and problem of creating a new image.

Introduction

Uzbekistan is a unique country in the Central Asian region. It is the only republic that borders all the other Central Asian states. After taking over as president in 2016, Shavkat Mirziyoyev launched large-scale reforms in virtually every sector. Since these changes are bound to affect Uzbekistan's internal economic, social, and political life, and since they directly affect Uzbekistan's foreign policy. Uzbekistan's foreign policy has become more open and aimed at creating effective mechanisms for conducting soft power.

Much has been written and said already about Sh. Mirziyoyev's first years in office, which has been defined as the Uzbek "thaw" or "spring". Sh. Mirziyoyev has certainly striven to resolve or at least mitigate tensions in the region, mainly Uzbekistan's persistent quarrels with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Border controls, strict visa regimes and high tariffs, on top of stagnant – not to say conflictual – governmental relations had turned the region into a place of relatively low intraregional trade at the global level.¹

Until 2016, there were very bad stereotypes about Uzbekistan, which were constantly criticized by international organizations, foreign oppositionists and political dissidents. According to their statement, Uzbekistan was isolated and less attractive in the international arena for global political partners. Uzbekistan's proximity to unstable countries such as Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan has increased political elite concerns about possible liberalization and made the country more authoritarian. The secular and religious opposition was eliminated. Uzbekistan's economy, based on agriculture and industry, was in crisis. Schoolchildren, students, and teachers were forced to pick cotton. The media was controlled by the State, and there was no criticism of government policies. Due to rising unemployment, a large number of Uzbek migrants worked abroad, mainly in Russia.

Shavkat Mirziyoyev's reform: elimination of stereotypes and creating a new image

For the president, the key element in shaping the new image of Uzbekistan was to address the issue of relations with neighbors and political openness to the world's superpowers, and the most important goal was to stimulate the economy to achieve macroeconomic and microeconomic growth. Sh. Mirziyoyev has created a new dynamic both within the country and in the region.

¹ Soft power under Mirziyoyev: Change and continuity in Uzbekistan's foreign policy // by Bernardo Teles Fazendeiro // <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/soft-power-under-mirziyoyev/>

The priorities of Uzbekistan's foreign policy were the development of relations with the countries of Central Asia and the solution of existing problems. Sh. Mirziyoyev made his first foreign visit to Turkmenistan in March 2017. In the same year, he repeatedly met with President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev, which played a huge role in the development of relations between the two countries. In addition, the head of Uzbekistan did everything possible to develop relations with powerful countries. In October 2017, Mirziyoyev became the first president of Uzbekistan to visit Turkey after a 21-year hiatus. During the visit, Sh. Mirziyoyev met with Turkish entrepreneurs and took part in the Uzbekistan-Turkey business forum.

In addition to internal continuity, the key priorities of foreign policy remain largely the same: Sh. M. Mirziyoyev acknowledged his commitment to independence in Uzbekistan's foreign policy, multilateral integration and the rejection of military blocs. The lack of security in Central Asia in the 1990s was the main reason for Islam Karimov's (Uzbekistan's first president) refusal to deepen regional cooperation. Sh. Mirziyoyev has been more receptive to soft power broadly conceived. According to Harvard University Joseph Nye Jr., soft power is "getting others to want the outcomes that you want" in that it "co-opts people rather than coerces them."²

It is about attraction, building trust, fostering openness and admiration, and this conception has found a receptive audience beyond the United States, in China most evidently. In effect, soft power allows one to speak of liberalization in the absence of liberalism, of brokering economic and political openness in the absence of major structural and legal reforms. In Uzbekistan the executive authority continues to be the major catalyst of reform. When compared to Karimov, Mirziyoyev has prioritized dialogue over confrontation in the region, spoken of connectivity and showed openness to World Trade Organization membership.³

Today, Uzbek officials emphasize the need for cooperation with other Central Asian countries and adopt a friendlier tone with all their regional counterparts. For example, using the "soft power" tool, they call for joint efforts to build regional power plants and distribute electricity fairly, thus reducing the source of regional conflicts. Sh. M. Mirziyoyev visited many neighboring countries, signed important socio-economic agreements, including security agreements. Many business leaders accompanied the presidential delegations. Uzbekistan welcomed the participation of representatives of leading international institutions, as well as major foreign governments in these visits.

² J. Nye. Soft Power the Means to Success in World Politics // Academia.edu. 2004 // https://www.academia.edu/28699788/Soft_Power_the_Means_to_Success_in_World_Politics Joseph S. Nye Jr

³ Soft power under Mirziyoyev: Change and continuity in Uzbekistan's foreign policy // by Bernardo Teles Fazendeiro // <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/soft-power-under-mirziyoyev/>

Besides striving for external openness, Sh. M. Mirziyoyev also made many efforts for internal changes: launching political reforms, releasing political prisoners, freedom of speech for journalists, restructuring the National Security Service, fighting corruption and nepotism.

The image of the Uzbek official has started to change. Instead of being cloistered away in impregnable offices, they are active on social media, are not afraid to talk about problems, and give interviews, including to foreign media. Now officials talk to the public, and even attend the scene when there is a problem. Another area of transformation under Mirziyoyev is the media. Journalists are now permitted to cover real political events, and access to some foreign websites has been unblocked. Agencies have been set up to protect journalists. Cautious criticism of the authorities has become possible in the Uzbek media, and human rights violations, corruption, and official negligence are no longer taboo subjects, even for regional journalists. Facebook and Telegram have become the main platforms for discussion, and popular bloggers have emerged.⁴

The reforms carried out in Uzbekistan in 2016-2021 brought the following results:

United States government removed Uzbekistan from the special watch list of “countries of particular concern” for governments that engage or tolerate “severe violations of religious freedom”, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stating that Uzbekistan had made “concrete progress” in the field of religious freedom and human rights. In another PR coup, Uzbekistan became a member of the UN Human Rights Council and was applauded by world leaders and the international press.⁵ In the new Index of Economic Freedom, Uzbekistan significantly improved its position and took 114th place out of 186. In the Open Data Inventory (ODIN) ranking, Uzbekistan ranked 44th in the world and 1st in Central Asia, with 63 points. Uzbekistan ranked 44th in the World Happiness Report, becoming the happiest country in the CIS.

In recent years, Uzbekistan has been actively included in various popular ratings: Corruption Perception Index (where Uzbekistan has improved its position), the Index of Freedom of Movement and Attractiveness of the passport (Uzbekistan is becoming more open), the Human Development Index (where Uzbekistan has demonstrated a high HDI). The world community recognizes that the country has changed a lot in recent years, and the reforms carried out by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev have benefited it. Also, in October 2020, Uzbekistan was included in the top ten safe countries in the world according to Gallup's version and in the top 50 of the world rating of open data availability.

However, the biggest proof of positive changes is the recognition that Uzbekistan received in 2019-then the British magazine *The Economist* named the republic the country of the year.

⁴ Yuriy Sarukhanyan “Reformed or Just Retouched? Uzbekistan’s New Regime”
<https://carnegie.ru/commentary/82839>

⁵ <https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/there-wont-be-political-reform-in-uzbekistan-heres-why/>

Along with the global indicators, there are many positive changes in the entire Uzbek sector. In 2021 Uzbekistan's economy is expected to grow at least 5 percent, and the budget deficit will not exceed 5.4 percent of gross domestic product. In 2021, special attention will be paid to healthcare and support the youth.

Problem creating a new image.

Despite the large-scale reforms in Uzbekistan, there are obstacle which hinder creating a new image. Firstly, during Islam Karimov's over 26-year rule in Uzbekistan, authorities detained thousands of people on politically motivated charges, and police stations, and forced millions of citizens, including children, to pick cotton in abusive conditions.⁶ This policy of Islam Karimov may make it difficult for Uzbekistan to create a new image today. Because until 2016, Uzbekistan was considered a gross violator of human rights.

Secondly, there are some unresolved internal social and economic problems. The lack of natural gas and power outages during the cold season may provoke protests in some regions of Uzbekistan. Current gas shortage is 20 million cubic meters per day.

Thirdly, corruption in Uzbekistan exists on many levels. The international anti-corruption organization Transparency International has published the annual Corruption Perception Index for 2020. Uzbekistan took the 146th place out of 180 in the rating, rising by seven positions compared to 2019.⁷

Lastly, the key problems of young people in Uzbekistan are access to education and employment opportunities, according to the UNICEF report. The report also showed that a significant proportion of young people (54.6%) do not study, are not employed or do not receive vocational training after completing compulsory secondary education. This figure increases sharply for women after 18 years and is 74% for women aged 25-30 years.⁸

Future expectations

To get rid of old stereotypes, the government is pursuing a policy under the slogan "New Uzbekistan". In his speech, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev noted that: "Today, the phrase New Uzbekistan is perceived of in the international arena not just as a new notion, but also as a reflection of reality." This is a recognition of the fact that over the past years Uzbekistan have reached a completely new stage of development and achieved significant success on this path. The foundation of a new Renaissance is being laid in Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan is developing new plans and strategies for the development of the country. In accordance with the State Program for the

⁶ Uzbekistan: Authoritarian President Karimov Reported Dead // <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/02/uzbekistan-authoritarian-president-karimov-reported-dead>

⁷ Corruption perceptions index // <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/uzb>

⁸ Youth of Uzbekistan: Challenges and Prospects. Report by UNICEF, the Nationwide Movement Yuksalish, and the Youth Union of Uzbekistan. // <https://www.unicef.org/uzbekistan/en/node/1431>

implementation of the Action Strategy for the five Priority Areas of Development of the Republic of Uzbekistan in 2017-2021, it is planned to strengthen the international image of the Republic of Uzbekistan, bringing objective information about the reforms carried out in the country to the world community. In general, Uzbekistan's foreign policy priorities are aimed at building a stable, fair and democratic state, promoting the country's external openness and developing regional and multilateral cooperation.