

DIGITAL DIPLOMACY IN STRENGTHENING THE NATIONAL IMAGE (CASE OF THE REPUBLIC OF UZBEKISTAN)

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Abstract: *The importance of social networks in strengthening the image of the country and organizing extensive awareness-raising activities in the world of media space is increasing more and more. The article examines the problems of the formation of the state image in the information age and the role of digital diplomacy in the implementation of foreign political tasks of the state as well as strengthening its positive image in this process. The author focuses on the issues of achieving rational and effective use of the possibilities of social networks by the media. At the same time, the researcher also studied the relationship between public diplomacy and state branding in the foreign political system of the country. In the article, a special place is devoted to strengthening the positive image of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the possibilities of rational use of digital diplomacy tools in this direction. According to the researcher, digital diplomacy, provided with the necessary intellectual, technological, and organizational resources, can become one of the effective means of promoting the foreign political interests of the republic. In this direction, the implementation of complex measures aimed at activating the efforts of state institutions can be considered one of the priorities in the near future.*

Keywords: *State Image, Country Branding, Digital Diplomacy, Internet, Social Networks.*

Today, the image of the country has become an important factor in international politics and economy, which can be equated with natural and human resources, and the scientific and technological potential of the state to a certain extent. Interest in the theory and practice of country image formation, various surveys, and ratings on the attractiveness of the country's image is becoming increasingly popular among the public. Therefore, subjective factors are playing an important role in modern international relations, in which technologies such as political marketing, branding, image-making, and image manipulation are widely used.

The development of information technologies, in particular the Internet, opened a new page in the formation of the state image. In this regard, it should be noted that the place and role of digital diplomacy in the implementation of foreign

political tasks of the state, in particular, in strengthening its positive image, is increasing.

In the Address of the President of Uzbekistan Sh. Mirziyoyev to the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the urgency of implementing the "Digital Uzbekistan - 2030" program, which envisages the improvement of all spheres of state and community life and economy with the help of digital technologies, was emphasized. From this point of view, in order to further improve the activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the system of state administration bodies, the issue of its digitization is becoming an objective necessity¹.

Of course, it is difficult for the Internet space to contain the processes and events occurring in the life of the state with all their complexity and versatility. However, compared to the traditional mass media, most of which are currently operating on the Internet, the Internet space provides an opportunity to get acquainted with a relatively wide variety of opinions, forms of perception and imagination, evidence, and news about a particular country. One of them is social networks on the Internet. A social network is an interactive and multi-user website whose content is contributed directly by the participants themselves. Social networks have radically changed the traditional form of human communication. Not only the possibility of listening but also the presence of its visual form in remote communication gave a significant impetus to the widespread popularity of virtual conversations.² Approaching this issue from a synergistic point of view, modern social networks on the Internet represent a complex self-organizing, emergent (suddenly appearing, unexpected) communication system. Social networks create opportunities such as informing about events in a timely manner, searching for or organizing groups according to the scope of interest and collecting information. International and national social networks are used to communicate between residents of one region or with residents of another region (exchange of information, establish or maintain contacts, search for work), as well

¹ Address of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev to the Oliy Majlis of December 29, 2018. Official website of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan:

http://parliament.gov.uz/uz/events/other/24607/?sphrase_id=3811923

² Мамутова Д. Молодежь по обе стороны реальности /Д.Мамутова.. URL:

www.fikr.uz/blog/CivilJournalism/11603.html

as help network participants achieve regional goals, provide social mutual support between them, and gives opportunities to shape the image of the region.

It is necessary to pay attention to the possibility of targeted use of social networks in improving the international image of the country and its position through the wide promotion of culture, history, and achievements of the state. The reason is that shaping a positive image of the state on the Internet, in particular with the help of social networks, serves to fulfill the following tasks:

- attraction of investments;
- attracting tourists to the country;
- determination of reliability and stability in the eyes of investors;
- achieving strengthening of political influence in the country and abroad;
- increase the effectiveness of cooperation with other territorial units, public and private scientific organizations and universities, in particular with enterprises;
- the emergence of the effect of "country of origin" (Country of Origin) of goods and services;
- the formation of a sense of belonging to the nation and pride in being a citizen of the country _³

When talking about social networks, based on their functional tasks, today they can be categorized as follows:

- Popular social networks (Facebook, MySpace, VKontakte, etc.);
- real-time communication networks between Internet users (Skype, ICQ, MSN Messenger, etc.);
- internet-chats (conversation sites) that serve several users to interact and engage in real-time communication;
- internet-forums that serve to create interesting and relevant topics and leave comments on them and conduct discussions on these topics;
- web blogs consisting of personal online journals of individual users;
- Wiki-reference portals that can be filled in and edited by visitors;
- Internet that allows you to post personal video materials for free –hosts (YouTube).

According to statistics, as of January 2023, the number of social media users reached 4.76 billion people, which is 59.4% of the world's population. ⁴The number of registered users on Facebook network is almost 2.9 billion has become

³ Динни, К. Брендинг территорий. Лучшие мировые практики/К.Динни. -М., 2013. -31 р.

⁴Global social media statistics. <https://datareportal.com/social-media-users>

the most popular social network in the world. It is followed by YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, WeChat, and others respectively.

Due to the increasing popularity of social media platforms, websites, and digital devices, if we imagine Web 2.0. revolution⁵ in a mixed state with the terms we mentioned above, we can see the contours of digital diplomacy emerging, which at first glance is devoid of the strategy related to the practice of the foreign political agencies of the state taken separately, as well as combining public diplomacy and soft power with each other.

According to the researchers, digital diplomacy can be seen as a *change management tool*. For example, country branding implemented through digital diplomacy channels (eg, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) can serve as an effective tool in the image and position management (reputation management). By digital diplomacy, we mean the extensive use of social media platforms by a country to achieve its foreign policy goals and actively manage its image and position.⁶

Digital diplomacy occurs at two levels: the level of *foreign political offices* and the level of *embassies located in different regions of the world*. By operating at these two levels, states can ensure that relevant information in the fields of foreign policy and country branding is consistent with the specific characteristics of the local public in terms of history, culture, values, and traditions, and in this way, help to positively receive their foreign policy and the image they want to promote. Digital diplomacy can overcome many of the country's brand barriers. Since ministries of foreign affairs can organize work horizontally with other government branches and agencies, and vertically with local embassies and diplomats, foreign policy agencies can control the cooperation between all interested parties in the branding process.

In the 21st century, introducing the public to cultural, social, and national potential is becoming important as a factor of "soft influence" on the formation of the country's image. In this part of the research work, we will focus on the concept

⁵ Web 2.0. The term revolution refers to the unprecedented rise in popularity of social media platforms, which have evolved in recent years, leading to high levels of digital connectivity and dependence on electronic devices in various aspects of society's lives.

⁶Manor, I. and Segev, E. "America's selfie: How the US portrays itself on its social media accounts" In *Digital Diplomacy: Theory and Practice*, ed. Carnelius Bjola, and Marcus Holmes (New York: Routledge, 2015), p.94.

of "image" and the formation of the state image. "The image of the state is a concept built on the basis of comprehensive views of the state, based on its objective characteristics, taking into account the historical peculiarities of the state's development, formed with the help of information and communication technologies, and combining the public experience of the people." ⁷The concept of the image can be interpreted in several ways. On the one hand, the image can be seen as a communication process. On the other hand, as a result of communication. Such a dualistic approach appears as a definition of the concept of image that is not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary.

The formation of the desired state image is a dynamic process that can be viewed from different perspectives. First, it reflects the main trends of state development; secondly, it means the ability to present these processes to the world community; thirdly, the issue of formation and development of the country's image should be considered as a set of methods and tools aimed at realizing national interests in the globalizing world, the country's position in the international information flow and communicative space.

It is known that the term "branding" is used in commerce, marketing, tourism and other fields. However, in recent years, the concept of "state branding", which is not limited to covering the tourism sector, has been put into circulation. An effective strategy of state branding is seen as a factor that forms a positive image of the country, ensures the flow of foreign capital and tourists.

Some countries use public diplomacy for country branding as well as for strategic purposes. Especially the policies of Central and Eastern European countries before joining the European Union (EU) and NATO organizations can be a clear example of this. Thus, public diplomacy can be understood as a strategy that can effectively strengthen the "soft power" potential of the state.

In our opinion, it is appropriate to briefly touch on the scientific and theoretical views of scientists on the issue of political brand. The principles of political branding ⁸were developed by Jacques Segela, co-founder and creative director of the leading European agency Euro RSSG. Later, the theory of "four-

⁷Быба, Ю. Международный имидж России глазами российской общественности / Ю. Быба // Актуальные проблемы политики и политологии в России. –М., 2005. -145.

⁸ Бодрийяр Ж. Система вещей. –М., 2001.

dimensional branding" was developed by the Swedish conceptualist Thomas Red. According to this theory, successful branding is built in the minds of people as a value system along four main directions: rational, emotional, spiritual, and social.⁹

Russian scientist V. N. Lyaporov mentioned that the state brand is an important political symbol, which reflects the common emotional feeling that unites all the territorial units of the state, the sense of pride for the Motherland. Every modern state has an immanent (objective) brand idea, which constitutes the quintessence of national cultural experience. Discovering these features and bringing them into the form of a brand concept is an important task of political management.¹⁰

Among the local scientists, A.O. Fayzullaev's opinions on the branding of the country are noteworthy. According to the scientist, country branding is not limited to advertising its tourists and other important aspects; on the contrary, country branding means the development strategy of this country: it covers issues such as the role of the state in the international and domestic arena, the implementation of identity politics, the establishment of politics, economy, social life, as well as the specific aspects of building relations with foreign countries.¹¹

At a time when the image of the state is being formed in an environment of intense competition, digital diplomacy can serve to strengthen the image of the republic by satisfying the general public's need for objective information about the changes related to the Republic of Uzbekistan and establishing a direct dialogue with it, strengthening the international position of the country as a tourism and investment object. In recent years, the concept of "brand promotion" (branding) through ICT and the Internet has been actively used.

According to Simon Anholt, the leading British specialist of our time in the field of image and country branding, the country's image in foreign markets is becoming more and more strategic in the context of globalization. He said that without achieving a positive position and a "nation-brand" (nation-brand), countries cannot succeed in the fight for consumers and gain respect from foreign

⁹ Сегела Ж. Ностальгия по будущему. –М.,2006.

¹⁰ Lyaporov V.N. Formirovanie brand-politik v sovremennoy Rossii. // Autoref . diss k.p.n. _ М.:2008, - S.9.)

¹¹ Faizullaev A.O. Imij strany kak strategy razvitiya gosudarstva. Mejdunarodnye otnoshenia, No. 1, 2008. -P.78.

countries.¹² In order to show the proximity of the concepts of state branding and public diplomacy, S. Anholt proposes to consider the concept of branding as a relatively broader concept that includes all external communication of the country, and public diplomacy as the external communication of the government, which is the main part of branding. Later, his thoughts partially changed, and the British expert emphasizes that¹³ the concept of public diplomacy is not only a system of information dissemination but also means the development of the state's foreign policy based on the establishment of two-way dialogue and the study of foreign public opinion.

Thus, summarizing the above points, it's possible to define the concept of state brand as a policy related to the formation and promotion of a positive image of the state, its existing political, and socio-cultural values, and traditions, conveyed by the country to the outside world as important information by coordinating the activities of a large number of state and non-state actors.

Eytan Gilboa, a recognized Israeli scientist in the field of international communication and public diplomacy, put forward a theoretical prism that shows the similar aspects of the concepts of "public diplomacy" and "branding".¹⁴ As a prism summarizing the means of branding and public diplomacy, it proposes to use their intended duration of influence: both directions of communication have short-, medium- and long-term means, which makes it possible to view these concepts through a single analytical prism. Within the framework of this analytical approach, it is possible to argue about the duration of the effect of certain tools. Nevertheless, the value of this approach lies in the fact that it can be further extended by the appropriate sources of soft power with appropriate communication tools.

Thus, despite the different interpretations of the relationship between public diplomacy and state branding in the country's foreign communication system, it becomes clear that both elements are capable of influencing the perception of the country's image by the foreign public and influencing its soft power. This

¹²Internet address: http://unickom.ru/brand_109.html

¹³ Simon Anholt . Editorial Public diplomacy and place branding: Where's the link? // Place Branding (2006) 2. Pp. 271-272.

¹⁴ Ethan Gilboa. Searching for a Theory of Public Diplomacy. // The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 2008. P . 73.

situation, in turn, allows us to think about the commonality between the above concepts, despite the different aspects.

In the context of the Republic of Uzbekistan, which is one of the rapidly growing information technology markets in the region, it is necessary to consider the possibilities of digital diplomacy based on the current situation and development prospects of the information sector in the state economy, national security, state administration system. It is also necessary to maintain a balance between the "soft power" of the republic in the security and information space and the active foreign policy aimed at strengthening the international position. It is important to take consistent measures to involve representatives of the private sector and civil society, ensuring the leading and coordinating role of the state in the implementation of tasks related to the achievement of foreign political goals.

It is known that in recent years, the modernization of the country has been one of the priority tasks as an important condition for the development of various spheres of society's life. This experience of state building attracts the attention of researchers who are interested in studying the essence and directions of the development of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

According to foreign experts, traditional mass media and media companies can effectively use social networks. It is possible to reveal and effectively promote various aspects of the phenomenon of the country's image by means of the "Internet Network" social network.¹⁵ It is worth noting that a number of mass media operating in Uzbekistan are working on the wide use of the possibilities of social networks. Currently, the activities carried out in this direction are among the relatively new and important trends in the field.¹⁶

For example, the National Information Agency of Uzbekistan (uza.uz) provides information for Facebook, Twitter, and RSS audiences. The agency is effectively using the "mobile version" designed for mobile phones. Also, one of the points worthy of recognition is that currently, the National News Agency of

¹⁵Gubanov, D. Social network: model of informational influence, control and resistance / D. Gubanov . -M., 2010. -228 p.

¹⁶ Kosimova, N. Technological foundations of Internet journalism / N. Kosimova . - Tashkent , 2012. -122.
Qudradho'jaev Sh. As a journalist from the Internet use / Sh. Kudrakh'o'jaev. - Tashkent , 2010. -44. Rashidova, D. Internet journalism / D. Rashidova, N. Muratova. - Tashkent , 2007. -138.

Uzbekistan is posting information in seven foreign languages (Russian, English, French, German, Spanish, Arabic, and Chinese) on the Uza.uz website.

The "Jahon" news agency under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan (jahonnews.uz - in Russian, English, and Uzbek) operates on the above-mentioned social networks, as well as on the Google+ platform.

It is possible to get acquainted with the news of UzReport news agency (uzreport.com: in Uzbek, Russian, and English) directly through Facebook and Twitter.

It is noteworthy that the "Uzbekistan Today" newspaper, published in Uzbek, English, and Russian languages, is connected to a number of popular social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, VKontakte, and Odnoklassniki.

Today, Internet technologies open wide horizons in terms of working with information and its receivers. As an example, the organization of special groups in social networks organized according to the sphere of interest and uniting our compatriots with a patriotic spirit, appreciating the country's history and culture, can also contribute to strengthening the prestige of our country in the international media space.

At the same time, it is necessary to choose central ideas and images and carry the brand of the country around them. In our opinion, the image strategy to be chosen in this matter should not only be compatible with local spirit, culture, and mentality, but also serve as a catalyst for the further development of statehood and national belonging, and should be able to give a bright image of the state and society to be built in the future.

Based on the above points, it can be noted that it is desirable to create a national brand of Uzbekistan that reflects the country's rich natural, cultural, and touristic potential. Today, there is no unified country branding and PR policy in various fields, including cultural heritage, tourism, country history, material, and spiritual national values. The country's image in the above-mentioned areas has been formed in a scattered and decentralized manner.

Decrees of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated October 12, 2017, in order to widely promote the tourism potential of the regions of the Republic of Uzbekistan in the world, create favorable conditions for tourists who

expect to visit our country, remove existing problems in the field on a systematic basis, increase the responsibility of local government bodies in the implementation of these tasks, as well as the further development of the tourism sector Decree No. PQ-3129¹⁷ of July "On measures to further increase the responsibility of the executive bodies of the tourism sector" is of particular historical significance.

According to the decree, the proposals of the official ministries and agencies, hokims of Khorezm, Bukhara, Samarkand, and Tashkent regions, and the Ministry of Finance to introduce the positions of deputy hokims of Khorezm, Bukhara, Samarkand and Tashkent regions on issues of tourism development and to organize their secretariats were approved.

The following are defined as the main tasks of the deputy governors on issues of tourism development:

- implementation of the state policy in the field of tourism in the region, determination of activities aimed at ensuring the implementation of the concepts and programs adopted in the field;
- implementation of cooperation and agreements with foreign countries in the field of tourism, especially on increasing the flow of tourists and attracting them together with the competent authorities;
- to study the demand for tourist services based on an in-depth analysis of the industry, to identify existing problems and obstacles in this regard, to develop appropriate models for the development and improvement of the industry, and to define future plans;
- improvement of the infrastructure of the tourism sector in economic, ecological, social, cultural, and other directions and tourism attractions in the area, defining and implementing specific measures for their improvement;
- development of additional tourism routes, the establishment of entertainment complexes in order to widely attract foreign youth, organization of expositions reflecting the history, lifestyle, customs, and traditions of our people in cultural heritage objects;
- coordinating the development and implementation of regional programs of tourism development in the field of tourism;
- coordinating the work of regional departments of ministries, offices, and committees responsible for tourism development issues;

¹⁷ Ўзбекистон Республикаси Президентининг расмий веб-сайти. <http://president.uz/uz/lists/view?id=779>

- attracting modern information and communication tools to the field of tourism, to take measures to widen the existing tourist potential of the republic by cooperating with foreign tour operators and mass media.

In connection with the further development of tourism in our republic, the The adoption of the Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated February 3, 2018 "On additional organizational measures to create favorable conditions for the development of the tourism potential of the Republic of Uzbekistan" Decree¹⁸ No. PF-5326 made a radical turn in the following field.

This Decree provides for the establishment of a visa-free regime for citizens of Israel, Indonesia, South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Turkey, and Japan, as well as crew members of foreign airlines operating regular flights to the Republic of Uzbekistan for a period of 30 days from the date of entry into the territory of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

Also, for citizens of the European Union, a number of countries in East Asia and the Middle East, as well as 39 countries such as the Republic of India, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States of America, a tourist voucher to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan or an application of a legal entity or individual offering to the Republic of Uzbekistan Starting from February 10, 2018, a simplified procedure for issuing tourist visas was introduced, which provides for the cancellation of the requirement to submit documents and the issuance of visas within two working days, excluding the day of receipt of documents.

In order to further activate the promotion of the country's tourist, cultural, natural, and sports potential, the "National Tourism Product Promotion Center" under the State Committee for Tourism Development of the Republic of Uzbekistan was reorganized as the "National PR Center" under the State Committee for Tourism Development of the Republic of Uzbekistan. and he was assigned the task of organizing the promotion of the tourism potential of the republic. At the same time, starting from July 1, 2018, the system of issuing electronic entry visas for citizens of a number of foreign countries was introduced.

¹⁸ Uzbekistan Republic President February 3 , 2018 " Uzbekistan Tourism potential of the Republic development for comfortable conditions create according to addition organizational measures about". Decree No. PF-5326 <http://lex.uz/docs/3548467>

In addition, the “Dunyo Bo`ylab” TV channel, which broadcasts around the clock by decree, is part of the State Committee for the Development of Tourism of the Republic of Uzbekistan for the development of domestic tourism, active recreation, and sports tourism, the conservation and use of cultural heritage and natural resources, including protected natural areas, appointed media partner for event coverage. The implementation of the specified activities will create more favorable conditions for the rapid development of domestic and pilgrimage tourism and the comprehensive use of their rich potential.

In order to strengthen the positive image of the country, Facebook, Twitter, VKontakte, LinkedIn, YouTube, Muloqot.uz at the regional, district, city, and micro district levels talk about the life and achievements of the Uzbek people held in reforms in the country. It is advisable to create official pages posted on popular social networks such as Zionet, Mytube. Secondly, it is necessary to cover the culture and traditions of our regions, the appearance of cities, villages, quarters, sights, and the lifestyle of local residents in the audiovisual form on the pages of social networks. It is advisable to acquaint with the geographical features of the country, its flora and fauna, acquaint the local youth of the regions with the life and work of famous people from different regions, and acquaint them with the practical art of local masters in order to increase their thoughts about themselves, their creative abilities and interests.

In conclusion, it can be said that digital diplomacy, provided with the necessary intellectual, technological, and organizational resources, can become one of the effective means of promoting the foreign political interests of the republic. In this direction, it is appropriate to consider the implementation of complex measures aimed at activating the efforts of state institutions as one of the priorities in the near future.

At present, the importance of social networks in strengthening the country's image and organizing extensive awareness-raising activities in the world media space is increasing. One of the next tasks is to achieve rational and effective use of the possibilities of social networks by mass media.

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