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UZBEKISTAN'S AI LITERACY: A NEW SOFT-POWER SIGNAL OF OPENNESS AND INNOVATION

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The concept of soft power formulated by Joseph Nye defined, as a state's ability to achieve desired outcomes through the attractiveness of its culture, values, and foreign policy rather than through coercion or material incentives remains one of the key analytical tools for describing the intangible resources of state influence in the twenty-first century [1]. In the context of rapid digital transformation, the dimensions of "cyber power" and digital diplomacy expand this category, where infrastructure, platforms, data, and the digital skills of the population become autonomous sources of foreign-policy influence [2].

Against this backdrop, nationwide literacy in artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly viewed not only as a tool of domestic development, but also as a resource for projecting an attractive image of the state one that is open, innovative, and youth-oriented. Contemporary research on AI policy emphasizes that AI literacy is shifting from a narrowly educational domain to the category of a comprehensive national strategy, one that incorporates issues of digital sovereignty, equity, and civic participation [3].

Uzbekistan, through the consistent implementation of the Digital Uzbekistan – 2030 Strategy and the national strategy for the development of artificial intelligence technologies through 2030, positions AI as a key element of economic modernization and public sector governance [4]. The Five Million AI Leaders initiative becomes a logical extension of the country's commitment to developing national human capital in the digital sphere and crucially a new resource of soft power and digital nation branding.

The purpose of this brief is to analyze the Five Million AI Leaders project within the framework of the concepts of soft power and digital diplomacy, and to demonstrate how nationwide AI literacy can strengthen Uzbekistan's position on the international stage.

From an international perspective, AI is increasingly being employed as an instrument of soft power and technological diplomacy a trend clearly observable in the case of China, where AI technologies and platforms are used to enhance cultural influence and promote the image of a technologically advanced global power [5]. For Uzbekistan, which aspires to become a regional digital hub in Central Asia, nationwide AI literacy represents a logical step toward shaping its own profile of "digital soft power."



Uzbekistan's national policy in the field of artificial intelligence is grounded in several key strategic documents that collectively shape the overall architecture of digital transformation. At the center of this system is the Digital Uzbekistan – 2030 Strategy, aimed at developing modern digital infrastructure, e-government, the digital economy, and the domestic market for high-tech solutions [6]. It outlines long-term priorities related to increasing the efficiency of public administration, expanding digital services, and stimulating the growth of the local IT sector.

An important component of the regulatory framework is the Strategy for the Development of Artificial Intelligence Technologies until 2030, approved by Presidential Decree of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. RP-358 of 14 October 2024. This document sets concrete quantitative targets and the mechanisms for achieving them. Among the priorities are: increasing the volume of AI-based products and services to USD 1.5 billion by 2030; placing the country among the fifty states with the highest level of government readiness for AI deployment; establishing no fewer than ten artificial intelligence research laboratories; and building a critical mass of specialists through the enhancement of public knowledge and skills in this domain [7]. These measures aim to create a national research and applied AI ecosystem capable of competing at the global level.

According to UzDaily (2025), the number of higher education institutions training IT specialists has nearly tripled; reaching 145, while the number of students enrolled in IT programs has exceeded 80,000. In parallel, more than two million young people have completed training under the national “Bir Million Dasturchi” project, making it one of the largest IT-education initiatives in the region [8].

The public announcement of the initiative to train “five million AI leaders” at the international artificial intelligence forum in Tashkent was structured in a way that conveyed several clear foreign-policy signals to the global audience.

First, the initiative positions Uzbekistan as a country that systematically invests in its youth and its future.

Second, within the framework of the initiative, Uzbekistan is presented as an open partner in the high-technology sphere. The partnership with Nvidia, the establishment of a technology-transfer office in Silicon Valley, and the organization of internships for young specialists in leading technology companies in the United States, the United Arab Emirates, and Europe all signal the country's intention to integrate into global innovation chains. This approach fundamentally differs from models of “closed digital sovereignty” and reinforces the image of Uzbekistan as a state that combines the protection of national interests with a readiness for deep international cooperation.

Third, the initiative strengthens Uzbekistan's positioning as a regional hub for artificial intelligence and digital technologies. The regular convening of the Silk Road AI Forum and its status as an international platform for AI dialogue contribute to consolidating Tashkent's role as a nodal point for digital agenda discussions across Eurasia [9]. In this way, the country not only participates in the global discourse but also becomes one of the centers of its institutionalization.

An analysis of Uzbekistan's initiative for large-scale AI literacy development shows that it is shaping a qualitatively new dimension of the country's soft power. The nationwide scope of the program allows AI literacy to be viewed not as a narrow component of educational reform, but as a strategic state resource that integrates economic development, democratic participation, digital sovereignty, and international positioning. This fully aligns with the global scholarly trend in which AI literacy is embedded within the broader context of public policy and becomes an instrument of long-term competitiveness, institutional modernization, and the strengthening of a state's international authority.

The Five Million AI Leaders project strengthens Uzbekistan's digital brand as a youth-oriented, open, and innovative state. Its emphasis on mass education, opportunities for young people, and global internships creates an appealing external narrative of a country where the future is understood not as a slogan, but as a concrete educational program and a predictable career trajectory. Such a representation contributes to positioning Uzbekistan as a state that seeks to ensure that its youth become full-fledged participants in the digital economy.

The international dimension of the initiative significantly enhances its value as an instrument of digital diplomacy. Partnerships with leading technology companies and universities, the organization of international artificial intelligence forums, and the engagement of foreign experts transform AI literacy into a channel of foreign-policy communication. Uzbekistan's integration into global professional and expert networks strengthens its influence within international discussions on the future of artificial intelligence and digital governance.

To strengthen the foreign-policy potential of the project, it is advisable to embed it into the institutional practice of digital diplomacy.

First, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, diplomatic missions, and national booths at major international forums such as the United Nations, OECD, UNESCO, the World Economic Forum, the Organization of Turkic States, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, should incorporate the Five Million AI Leaders initiative into presentations.

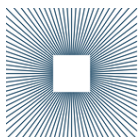
Second, it is important to regularly prepare reports, success stories, and materials in English that reflect the actual progress of the initiative and are tailored to a global audience.

The next step could be the promotion of AI literacy as a "right and an opportunity" for young people. Such an approach would allow the project to be linked to the Sustainable Development Goals specifically SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) [10]. It is essential to emphasize that AI literacy is an important competency not only for programmers, but also for representatives of all modern professions doctors, teachers, lawyers, engineers, and public servants.

Finally, it is necessary to strengthen the ethical dimension of AI literacy. Incorporating modules on AI ethics, data protection, and human rights in the digital environment into educational programs would further underscore Uzbekistan's commitment to international standards for the responsible and secure use of AI. This, in turn, would reinforce the country's image as a reliable and mature participant in the global dialogue on artificial intelligence governance.

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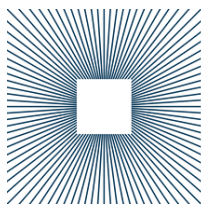
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