

INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION AND EVERYDAY SOCIAL EXCLUSION: A CASE STUDY FROM UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract: This article studies how political culture and everyday social behavior affect state soft power through international education. Using Uzbekistan as a case study, it examines how the growing number of international students interacts with social attitudes in a changing political context. Although official policies promote openness and international cooperation in education, everyday social interactions often develop outside formal rules and institutions.

Based on political culture theory and the concept of soft power, the article argues that informal social practices have political importance because they influence how a state is perceived by foreign publics. The study concludes that differences between official policy goals and everyday social behavior can reduce the effectiveness of international education as a tool of public diplomacy, showing the need to consider informal aspects of political culture in governance and reform strategies.

Keywords. Soft power; Political culture; International education; Xenophobia; International students; Uzbekistan.

Introduction. International education has become an increasingly prominent instrument of soft power in contemporary international relations. By attracting foreign students, states seek to cultivate long-term goodwill, shape external perceptions, and project an image of openness, modernity, and cultural attractiveness. Universities, scholarship programs, and academic mobility are thus embedded not only in educational policy but also in broader strategies of public diplomacy. However, the effectiveness of international education as a soft power tool depends not solely on institutional design or official narratives, but on the social environments in which foreign students experience the host country.

Much of the existing literature approaches international education through a policy-centric lens, emphasizing state strategies, regulatory frameworks, and formal international cooperation. This perspective implicitly assumes that exposure to the host country's educational system will translate into positive attitudes among international students. Yet such assumptions often overlook the role of everyday social interactions, where informal norms, social hierarchies, and cultural attitudes operate beyond the reach of formal governance. In this sense, soft power is not produced exclusively by institutions; it is negotiated and sometimes undermined in daily life.

This article focuses on xenophobia and ethnic discrimination as informal social practices that shape the lived experiences of international students and, consequently, influence perceptions of the host state. Xenophobia is understood here not only as overt hostility, but also as subtle forms of exclusion, stereotyping, and unequal treatment based on ethnic or cultural background. These practices may persist even in contexts where official discourse promotes tolerance, inclusivity, and international openness. When such contradictions arise, they create a gap between the symbolic goals of state policy and the social realities encountered by foreign publics.

Uzbekistan provides a particularly relevant case for examining this dynamic. In recent years, the country has actively pursued educational internationalization as part of a broader reform agenda, increasing the intake of international students and positioning itself as an emerging regional hub for higher education. Official policies emphasize cooperation, hospitality, and global engagement. At the same time, everyday social interactions remain shaped by historical legacies, informal rule systems, and ethnicized perceptions of “insiders” and “outsiders.” For international students, these dynamics often become visible in routine encounters within universities, public spaces, and service environments.

The central argument of this article is that xenophobia and ethnic discrimination, as elements of political culture, have direct implications for state soft power through international education. Informal social practices influence how international students interpret official narratives and assess the credibility of state-led openness. When everyday experiences contradict policy messages, the persuasive capacity of international education as a tool of public diplomacy is weakened. By examining the Uzbek case, this study demonstrates that soft power cannot be fully understood or effectively managed without accounting for the informal dimensions of political culture that shape social behavior beyond formal institutions.

Methods. This study adopts a qualitative case study design to examine how xenophobia and ethnic discrimination toward international students affect state soft power through international education. A qualitative approach is appropriate given the focus on perceptions, meanings, and informal social practices that are not easily captured through quantitative measures. The aim is analytical rather than statistical generalization, linking empirical observations to theories of political culture and soft power.

Uzbekistan was selected as a case due to its ongoing reform agenda and increasing use of international education as a soft power instrument. As a post-Soviet state promoting openness and internationalization, Uzbekistan provides a context in which formal policy goals coexist with informal social norms. International students were chosen as the primary unit of analysis because they directly experience both state-led educational policies and everyday social interactions.

The study draws on multiple qualitative data sources to ensure triangulation. These include semi-structured interviews with international students, informal conversations used to contextualize interview data, and analysis of public discourse in media, social networks, and university environments. In addition, official policy documents on international education were examined to identify formal objectives and contrast them with everyday social practices.

The analysis is guided by political culture theory and the concept of soft power, with particular attention to informal norms, everyday behavior, and perception formation. Data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns of xenophobia and ethnic discrimination and to assess their implications for the effectiveness of international education as a soft power tool.

The study is limited by the subjective nature of personal experiences and a non-representative sample of respondents. It also focuses on perception-based outcomes rather than measurable policy effects. Despite these limitations, the approach provides insight into informal social dynamics that shape foreign perceptions of the host state.

Results. International students reported recurring experiences of xenophobia manifested in both explicit and subtle forms. One common pattern involved ethnic stereotyping, where students were routinely categorized based on perceived national or ethnic origin. Such stereotyping often

shaped expectations regarding behavior, trustworthiness, or social status and influenced how individuals were approached in everyday interactions.

Linguistic discrimination also emerged as a frequent experience. Students who spoke with accents or lacked proficiency in the dominant local language reported being treated with impatience or dismissed in public and institutional settings. In some cases, language differences became a basis for exclusion from social interaction or for unequal treatment in service encounters.

Social exclusion in public spaces was another recurring theme. Respondents described being ignored, avoided, or treated as outsiders in shared environments such as cafes, markets, and public transport. These practices were often informal and non-confrontational, yet contributed to a persistent sense of social distance.

Finally, differential treatment in services was reported across multiple domains, including housing, transportation, and bureaucratic procedures. International students noted inconsistencies in access to information, pricing, and responsiveness when compared to local residents, particularly in informal or semi-formal service settings.

Xenophobic practices were observed across a range of everyday contexts. Within universities and dormitories, international students described mixed experiences. While institutional policies formally emphasized inclusion, informal peer interactions sometimes reflected social hierarchies based on ethnicity or nationality. Shared living spaces occasionally became sites of exclusion rather than integration.

Public transport and marketplaces were frequently identified as environments where ethnic difference became most visible. Students reported heightened attention, unsolicited comments, or avoidance in these settings, especially during routine activities. These interactions were typically brief but repeated, reinforcing perceptions of social otherness.

Informal social encounters, including casual conversations and everyday exchanges, further contributed to the overall experience. In these contexts, the absence of formal rules allowed informal norms and attitudes to shape behavior, often amplifying distinctions between local residents and foreign students.

As a result of these experiences, international students commonly developed a distinction between what they perceived as “official Uzbekistan” and “everyday Uzbekistan.” The former was associated with institutional narratives of openness, hospitality, and international cooperation, while the latter was defined by routine social interactions that often contradicted these messages.

Repeated exposure to xenophobic practices led to an erosion of trust in official openness narratives. While students did not necessarily reject state policies outright, they increasingly questioned their practical relevance and credibility. For some respondents, this discrepancy resulted in ambivalent or negative attitudes toward the host society, shaped less by formal educational experiences and more by everyday social encounters.

Discussion. The findings suggest that xenophobia toward international students should be understood not as isolated acts of individual prejudice, but as part of a broader configuration of political culture. While formal rules and institutional frameworks in Uzbekistan emphasize inclusivity and international engagement, everyday social behavior continues to be shaped by informal norms that operate independently of official policy. These norms regulate social

boundaries by distinguishing between those perceived as belonging to the national or cultural in-group and those marked as outsiders.

The persistence of ethnic hierarchies in everyday interaction reflects historical and social legacies that predate recent reform initiatives. Long-standing patterns of social organization, combined with limited exposure to sustained intercultural contact, contribute to the reproduction of exclusionary attitudes. As a result, xenophobic practices become normalized within routine interactions, even in the absence of explicit hostility or legal discrimination. This normalization gives such practices political significance, as they shape how the state is experienced and interpreted by foreign publics.

The results challenge the assumption that international education automatically generates attraction and positive perceptions of the host state. While educational institutions may function as formal channels of soft power, their impact is contingent on the broader social environment in which students reside. In this case, negative everyday experiences frequently outweighed the symbolic value of educational opportunities or institutional hospitality.

Soft power relies on credibility and emotional resonance, both of which are undermined when official messages of openness conflict with lived reality. Repeated exposure to exclusionary behavior reduces the persuasive capacity of state narratives and encourages skepticism toward reform discourses. Rather than fostering identification with the host society, international education in such contexts may produce ambivalence or disengagement, limiting its effectiveness as a diplomatic resource.

A central insight of this study is the existence of a gap between state-level policy objectives and everyday social practices. While the state actively promotes internationalization and inclusivity through educational policy, these goals are not consistently supported by social behavior at the grassroots level. Xenophobia persists in informal settings precisely because it remains outside the scope of formal governance and regulation.

This gap points to a broader governance blind spot: informal behavior is rarely addressed as a political variable. Policies tend to focus on institutional capacity, legal frameworks, and international partnerships, while neglecting the social conditions necessary for their success. Without mechanisms to address informal norms and social attitudes, internationalization strategies risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the Uzbek case. They highlight structural limits of soft power strategies in reforming or semi-authoritarian states, where rapid policy change may not be accompanied by parallel shifts in political culture. In such contexts, international education can expose contradictions between official narratives and social realities, potentially weakening rather than strengthening a state's international image.

These dynamics are also relevant for other post-Soviet and Global South countries pursuing educational internationalization as a development or diplomatic strategy. The study underscores the need to move beyond policy-centric analyses of soft power and to account for informal social practices that shape perception formation. Without attention to political culture at the everyday level, efforts to leverage international education for diplomatic influence are likely to produce uneven and unpredictable outcomes.

Conclusion. This article has examined how xenophobia and ethnic discrimination toward international students shape the effectiveness of international education as a soft power instrument. Using Uzbekistan as a case study, the findings demonstrate that everyday social

interactions play a critical role in shaping foreign perceptions of the host state. While official policies promote openness and international cooperation, informal practices of exclusion and stereotyping continue to influence how international students experience and interpret these initiatives.

Ignoring xenophobia weakens public diplomacy by undermining the credibility of state narratives. When everyday experiences contradict institutional messages, international education loses its persuasive potential and may generate ambivalent or negative attitudes rather than attraction. In this sense, soft power is constrained not by policy intent, but by the social conditions under which policies are enacted.

The study highlights the need to integrate informal dimensions of political culture into education governance. Addressing internationalization solely through institutional frameworks is insufficient if everyday social norms remain unexamined. Greater attention to social interaction, cultural mediation, and inclusion at the informal level would strengthen the alignment between policy goals and lived experience.

Future research could expand this analysis through comparative studies across different national contexts or by examining long-term perception outcomes among former international students. Further work may also explore how universities and local communities can function as intermediaries between state policy and everyday social practice in the production of soft power.

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