

LANGUAGE DIPLOMACY IN HIGHER LEARNING EDUCATION AS A DEVELOPING TREND IN RUSSO-UZBEK CULTURAL DIPLOMACY (2020S)Author: **Karen Eghlimi Torshiz**

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Abstract: Why is Russian higher education expanding in Uzbekistan even though the country is pushing for nationalization? The answer that this study discovered is that there exists a dual-track system at play. Through combining Critical Discourse Analysis and Process Tracing, the paper shows that Russian branch campuses actually act as buffer to shield technical and professional cooperation from the volatility of political narratives. Thus, it becomes possible for Russia and Uzbekistan to maintain professional cooperation that is stable.

Keywords: Linguistic Diplomacy; Russo-Uzbek Relations; Cultural Diplomacy; Higher Education; Educational Diplomacy

Introduction

By 2020, the dynamic in the Russo-Uzbek strategic partnership has transformed from mere general partnership and to that of a more targeted approach where both countries compete for soft power influence (Valdai Discussion Club, 2026). A primary vehicle for this statecraft is higher learning institutions, which is such a vital arena even as Uzbekistan navigates through the competing demands of building a post-Soviet national identity and pushing for regional modernization (Agadjanian & Nedoluzhko, 2021, p. 1; Wolkov, 2020, p. 2). It is believed that such rapid development of Russian branch campuses in the country (e.g. MGIMO and MPEI) represents an essential strategy that allows having an impact on linguistic and professional level in the region (Khaydarov, 2023, p. 208; Frank.uz, 2025). These Russian-led tertiary education institutions are acting as vital structural anchors that hold the partnership between Russia and Uzbekistan together and kept the cooperation between nation steady even when political narratives fluctuate (Pogorelskaya, 2025; Government of the Russian Federation, 2026). This two-way approach is the very reason why these partnerships able to continue even until today despite political friction.

Much of the literature, such as work by Glazunova et al. (2022), observe this Russian branch campus expansion from a binary framework that views Russian soft power as either a monolithic, encroaching threat or an aging, declining influence (Nye, 2019, p. 12). As Laruelle (2021) highlights that if one sees it from this binary perspective does not fully capture the real big picture since it provides a narrow dichotomy and obscures the true complexity of these dynamics. She urges researchers to move beyond these simplified narratives by analyzing Russia's niche soft power (targeted influence). This analytical approach remains insufficient to address the central paradox defining the relationship between the two nations. This model fails to address the contradiction in the state-level policies in favor of establishing national language dominance in Uzbekistan. Such policies are enshrined in the country's constitution adopted in 1992 and further confirmed through the presidential decree of 2020 (Bakhtiyorov, 2025, p. 3; Wolkov, 2020, p. 1). It conflicts with the ongoing instrumental requirement for Russian language proficiency in

professional settings. These trends are deeply embedded in the region's long-standing history of language reform (Schlyter, 2001, p. 2). In the current political climate, the conversation has shifted toward the implications of joining the Eurasian Economic Union (EUEU) and the rising concern over the threat of linguistic hegemony (Murtazashvili, 2020, p. 1). Yet, academic literature provides an insufficient analysis of what Lytvynenko (2025, p. 6) coins a 'linguistic tightrope' that Tashkent is forced to walk. Within this context, identity-driven symbolic friction can obscure a resilient, carefully managed institutional integration that persists despite post-imperial shifts in ethnic identity (Agadjanian & Nedoluzhko, 2021, p. 1; Saida, 2025, p. 2).

Recent studies on the Central Asian Higher Education Area by Pogorelskaya et al. (2024) and the wider politics of language (Ibrakhimova, 2024, p. 334), has effectively pinpointed the tension between identity and diplomacy. Examples of institutionalizing these cooperation efforts on a state level emphasize the high-level support received by the programs. They range from creating the International Organisation for the Russian Language (Goryachkin, 2024). However, current literature oversimplifies the issue by viewing linguistic presence as a uniform force which insufficiently acknowledge it as a complex site of institutional contestation (Laruelle, 2021; Pogorelskaya et al., 2024).

A significant blind spot in the literature is that there is a lack of clear understanding of the causal mechanisms sustaining this partnership. There is a need to take a closer look at the legislative tools which enable this cooperation, specifically the 2002 Cabinet of Ministers resolution (Cabinet of Ministers, 2002) and the 2025 dual-education mandates (Cabinet of Ministers, 2025), which despite their importance is under-researched. These policy frameworks serve as a crucial buffer that shield technical educational cooperation from the periodic and high-visibility symbolic friction that can dominate the public discourse.

Thus, this paper aims to theorize Linguistic Diplomacy as a calibrated instrument of cultural soft power. This research investigates how high-level diplomatic mandates translate into operational branch campuses by combining Critical Discourse Analysis and Process Tracing. Multilaterally and at an expert level, there are now established routes of institutional support for bilateral relations, which effectively safeguard the Russian-Uzbekistan relationship from the current level of unprecedented intensity of tensions that are engulfing the world today, allowing for long-term bilateral interaction, despite the continuing instability and volatility in the current world (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2026; Valdai Discussion Club, 2026).

Research Methodology

To examine how official diplomatic policy translates into practice, this paper utilizes a dual-lens methodological framework by combining Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of legislative documents with Process Tracing. The study outlines the causal linkages that underpin how higher-level diplomatic missions become concrete institutional practices. The current research project employs mixed methods to address the issue between policy discourse and practical results.

I am using a dual-track framework to look at two different things. First, it helps me understand the 'why' behind the policy or the ideas and motivations that drive these decisions. Second, it also lets me look at the 'how' or the actual or practical steps being taken to set up these higher education programs on the ground.

My study uses a three-tier data approach that span from the post-independence years to the 2026 geopolitical context:

- **Tier 1:** Focuses on Legislative and Executive Mandates. This research examines the legal basis for national identity policy and language policy through the 1989 Uzbek Republic Official Language Law (Republic of Uzbekistan, 1989), and the 2020 Presidential Decree on the advancement of the Uzbek language (President of The Republic of Uzbekistan, 2020).

- **Tier 2:** Considers the Diplomatic and Strategic Communication. This level is all about the official messaging that justifies why the two countries are working together on education. This paper will analyze diplomatic papers (minutes produced by the sixth meeting of the Joint Commission (Government of the Russian Federation, 2026), and documents issued by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2026), reports produced by the International Institute for Central Asia (International Institute for Central Asia, 2025), operational documents released by Rossotrudnichestvo, including its strategy of 2025 (Rossotrudnichestvo Representative Office, 2025), and collaboration programs in the areas of science and education (Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2026).

- **Tier 3:** Focuses on Institutional Implementation Records. This part of my paper tracks the actual and day-to-day implementation of these policies. We are looking at the hard administrative evidence such as the 2002 Cabinet of Ministers resolution on Russian branch campuses, and the more recent 2025 mandates on dual education. In order to assess how this looks in practice, I utilized a variety of documents obtained from each of the four random Russian universities: MGIMO (n.d.), Plekhanov (n.d.), St. Petersburg State University (2022), and MPEI (2026). Finally, I have also included some documents that demonstrate how these are being applied in the real world, such as those related to the establishment of new Russian language centers (Rossotrudnichestvo, 2023), updates pertaining to scientific co-operatives (Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025), and latest records for educational fairs (Rossotrudnichestvo, 2025).

I have divided the analysis into two interrelated phases:

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): I begin with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by utilizing Fairclough's (2010) approach to deconstruct official legislative and diplomatic texts. When I analyze the framing and specific lexical choices within these documents, I examine how policymakers navigate the potential clash between national identity and the growth of Russian higher education.

Process Tracing: To move beyond discourse, Process Tracing (Beach & Pedersen, 2019) is used to verify if and how these mandates translate into practice. The establishment of Russian universities' branch campuses is not treated as static events, but as the outcomes of causal mechanisms sparked by the diplomatic agreements analyzed in Tier 2.

By mapping the temporal sequence: from the issuance of decrees (Tier 1) to the signing of bilateral cooperation agreements (Tier 2), and the operational launch of branch campuses (Tier 3), this method identifies the transmission belts of policy implementation. This dual-lens approach enables the study to validate if diplomatic mandates are merely symbolic or if they effectively dictate the boom of Russian educational infrastructure in Uzbekistan.

Findings

This paper uncovers what perceived as a paradox of Uzbekistan's simultaneous push for nationalization and the booming expansion of Russian higher education is not a contradiction. It is a unique and intentional policy design. Through CDA, the study observe that the state employs Strategic Compartmentalization (isolating policy domains into distinct tracks) to prevent

ideological friction. Through process tracing, the findings reveal that this isolation managed to shield diplomatic agreements from nationalist pressure which allow for booming institutional growth.

CDA: Parallel Narratives

The evidence suggests that the state intentionally separates its messaging. In doing so, the separation of 'National Identity' (Tier 1) and 'Developmental Utility' (Tier 2) into distinct spheres allows the government to effectively manage the narratives so that there is no overlap which would lead to conflict.

- **Track A: The Identity (Legitimacy Discourse):** Legislative documents utilize emotive and nationalist word choices. The government justifies its legitimacy using concepts of "patriotism" and "tradition," which were institutionalised through the law enacted in 1989 on its official language (Republic of Uzbekistan, 1989) and reaffirmed in the presidential decree in 2020 (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2020), where an emphasis is placed on core issues.

- **Track B: The Instrumental (Developmental Discourse):** Diplomatic and ministerial records move towards the use of technocratic and utilitarian word choices. Here, Russian presence is framed as a logistical necessity for "*modernization*" and "*connectivity*". Official reporting from the International Institute for Central Asia (2025) and diplomatic transcripts regarding the Equal partnership in Greater Eurasia (Government of the Russian Federation, 2026; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2026) highlight mutual economic gain and not cultural or linguistic hegemony.

Process Tracing: The "Transmission Belt" Mechanism

If CDA clarifies the rationale behind this compartmentalization, Process Tracing shows how the state operationalizes it. By tracing the causal sequence (Tier 3), we see a clear 'transmission belt' where high-level diplomatic engagement provides the 'Trigger' for cooperation, which is then formalized through ministerial directives (the 'Transmission') and finally realized as real institutional infrastructure (the 'Output').

- **The Trigger:** High-level summits serve as the main trigger for such cooperation. Thus, the emphasis made on developing a '*comprehensive strategic partnership*' during the 6th meeting of the Joint Commission (Government of the Russian Federation, 2026) forms the necessary political momentum to advance joint initiatives.

- **The Transmission:** This political will is formalized through specific mandates. The Cabinet of Ministers (2025) issued directives that aimed at '*organizing dual education*'. Additionally, Uzbekistan's Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation (2026) actively coordinates these frameworks to make sure scientific integration. These documents turn official diplomatic pledges into actual policy.

- **The Output:** The application of this strategy can be clearly traced in the formation of branch campuses such as those of MGIMO, Plekhanov, St. Petersburg State University, and MPEI. They are additionally facilitated by actions aimed at the creation of language resource centers (Rossotrudnichestvo, 2023) as well as organization of educational fairs (Rossotrudnichestvo, 2025). By presenting these actions as crucial in achieving the goals of technical modernization and development of engineering skills (Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, 2025), the government succeeds in circumventing the nationalistic discourse characteristics of 'Track A,' thereby avoiding significant domestic pushback.

Discussion

The results implies that linguistic diplomacy operates on two levels. One is a means by which the process of nation building can be facilitated while at the same time securing the necessary strategic alliances that allow for the development of higher education in collaboration with Russia. Legislative mandates focus on radically increasing the authority of the Uzbek language. The operational sphere of higher education continues to expand through established and stable networks. My results mirror what Ibrakhimova (2024) observed: the friction between asserting a national identity and pursuing diplomatic goals is a central feature of how language policy functions in this region (pp. 335, 337, 338).

While scholars often characterize Russian soft power as either a monolithic expansion or a waning post-Soviet legacy (Glazunova et al., 2022; Nye, 2019), the evidence here suggests something else: a reality defined by a strategic compartmentalization. Moving beyond the Laruelle's (2021) niche influence model, we find that the state uses a buffer system to insulate institutional and technical cooperation from volatile political narratives.

A limitation of this study is its heavy reliance on top-down legislative and diplomatic documentation (Tier 1 and Tier 2) to infer the causal mechanisms of institutional implementation (Tier 3). The dual-lens framework may be effective in mapping the 'how' of the policy operationalization, it does not fully capture the grassroots reception of these programs. By prioritizing institutional output in 2026, the study does not account for future fluctuations in public sentiment that could happen outside of the legislative or administrative record.

Conclusion

This study has investigated the function of linguistic diplomacy as a strategic instrument of soft power within the Russo-Uzbek educational landscape (2020–2026). By employing a dual-lens framework that combines Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Process Tracing, this paper resolved the apparent paradox of concurrent nationalization and Russian educational expansion. The findings reveal that this is not a contradiction, but an intentional policy design characterized by Strategic Compartmentalization. Through a buffer system, the state manages to firewall the institutional and technical cooperation from volatile political narratives. This stability safeguards professional relationships. Russian university branch campuses expand through a transmission belt mechanism that converts high-level diplomatic directives into tangible institutional outcomes.

This insight is a major deal for international relations and educational diplomacy, mainly because it pushes back against the common belief that a state's identity politics dictate the success of every cross-border partnership. By recognizing this dual-track strategy, scholars and policymakers can get a clearer image of how countries like Uzbekistan successfully balance their own sovereign nationalization goals while concurrently maintaining a deep and practical cooperation in science and education with their regional partners. It highlights that niche (targeted) soft power can operationalized through the professionalization of technical cooperation, which can exist in a safe space separate from national identity debates.

Future research should investigate three avenues to extend the findings of this study. First, comparative regional analysis is required to determine whether this Strategic Compartmentalization is a uniquely Uzbekistan's strategy or a wider regional phenomenon. If

this dual-lens framework is also applied to Central Asian neighbors, it may also clarify the prevalence of these transmission belt mechanisms. Second, longitudinal alumni studies are vital to check if branch campus graduates view their education as a purely vocational commodity or are they internalizing the soft power values intended by the Russian state. Third, a granular curricular content analysis comparing syllabuses between Russian branch campuses and local institutions would test the validity of the utility-first narrative. As it can reveal if this seemingly neutral space stays ideologically static or helps the transmission of embedded normative content.

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