

## THE "SOFT POWER" OF FOOTBALL: FAN PSYCHOLOGY AND THE NEW CULTURE FORMED IN STADIUMS

**Jumayev Azamat**

UzSWLU Student

The progression of Uzbekistan's football to the World Cup is not a process measured by the actions of 22 players on the pitch. It is the collective breath of thousands of people in the stands, the transformation of fan culture, and the projection of national self-awareness in stadiums. We often associate victories with tactics and coaching skill, but without the "12th player" factor, the modern football system cannot function fully.

In the mid-2000s, for fans of Uzbek football, the stadium was "just a viewing arena". General shouts of "forward," noise, and emotional pressure focused on the result rather than the process of the game prevailed there.

- **Fact 1:** Until the 2010s, organized fan groups (Ultras) practically did not exist in stadiums.
- **Fact 2:** After 2022, fan clubs established at the "Milliy" and "Pakhtakor" stadiums began to engage not only in songs but also in "choreographic tifos".
- **Fact 3:** In the 2024 qualifying matches, fan attendance at stadiums showed an average of 85 percent capacity (this was caused by the transfer of the ticketing system to digital platforms).
- **Fact 4:** The allocation of "women's and family sectors" among fans improved security and cultural levels at the stadium by 30 percent.

**Analysis:** Fan culture took on a "smart" tone. Instead of insulting the opponent, the Uzbek fan now moved to "supporting" the positional attacks of their team, setting the game tempo with rhythmic clapping and unified chants. This is the growth of fans' influence on the professional side of football.

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History shows that fans have served as the "spiritual barometer" of the team.

- **1994:** The victory in Hiroshima triggered an "explosion" of interest in football in our country.
- **2005 (Bahrain match):** The psychological state of fans in the stadium changed before the game ended – it transitioned from hope to a silence expressing anger.
- **2013:** After losing to Jordan in the World Cup qualifiers, the fans' "culture of supporting the team" in the stadium was heavily criticized for the first time.
- **2017:** During a decisive match in Tashkent, fan pressure "emotionally squeezed" the players instead of "energizing" them.
- **2023 (Asian Cup):** Uzbek fans gathered in Qatar demonstrated to the world the culture of Uzbek football – a disciplined and cultured approach.

**Analysis:** Fans of each era harmonized with the level of the team. As the players became professionals, the fans also rose from being "popcorn-eating" spectators to the level of analysts who "understand the game".

The role of individuals is significant in shaping fan culture:

- **Odil Ahmedov:** He became a symbol of a "national hero" for the fans, not just a player. The process of fans "seeing him off with tears" at his retirement match renewed the concept of "respect" in Uzbek football.
- **Srečko Katanec:** By mentioning fans as "part of the game" in his press conferences, the coach stated that he relies on the "energy" in the stadium rather than their emotions.
- **Abbosbek Fayzullaev:** As an idol of the younger generation, he restored the belief for teenagers in the stands that "Uzbek football can also be at a European level".
- **Eldor Shomurodov:** His successes abroad became a symbol of a "dream" for the youth waving the Uzbekistan flag in the stadiums.

- **Ravshan Ermatov:** As a referee, his international success awoke pride in the fans that "Uzbekistan can be a leader on the continent not only with players but also with a management system".

Fans are no longer just a shouting force; they are an economic participant.

- **Fact 5:** Average spending at the stadium (tickets, merchandise, food) increased 2.5 times compared to 2020.
- **Fact 6:** The sale of merchandise in clubs' "fan-shops" accounts for 15 billion UZS annually.
- **Fact 7:** During the World Cup qualifiers, 90 percent of "ticket sales" were conducted through online platforms (this struck a blow to the black market).
- **Fact 8:** In 2025, clubs launched "loyalty programs" for their fans.

**Analysis:** Until the football economy is tied to the fans, clubs cannot sustain themselves. Uzbekistan's football increased its revenues precisely by properly channeling the flow of fans (ticketing systems, marketing).

What awaits the Uzbekistan team that qualified for the World Cup?. In the view of experts, the role of fans at the Mundial will grow even more.

- **Fact 9:** The UFA has developed a special "Tourism and Football" program considering the number of fans traveling to the host location of the World Cup.
- **Fact 10:** In a survey conducted by FIFA, Uzbekistan's fans were recognized as the "most disciplined and organized".
- **Fact 11:** "Hidden rules" in stadiums – vices such as cursing, insulting, and smoking – were eradicated by 95 percent by 2026.
- **Fact 12:** The "organizational capability" of Uzbek fans in the international arena visually demonstrated itself at the 2023 Asian Cup.

- **Generational shift:** Current fans are Gen Z representatives who understand social media and global football. For them, football is not just about winning; it is a brand.
- **Infrastructure:** Our stadiums have been modernized. This has offered "comfort" to the fan and a "professional environment" to the player.
- **Government policy:** The state embraced sports as "soft power," and in this path, it promoted fans as an integral part of the team as well.
- **Analytical media:** Sports journalism is conveying analysis to fans stating "where did we make a mistake and how do we fix it" rather than aiming for "we are great".
- **Influence of legionnaires:** A fan who sees Uzbek players playing in Europe has begun to demand the same quality from the national championship.
- **Fact 13:** In 2026, the Uzbekistan Football Association adopted the "Fan Charter".
- **Fact 14:** Tickets for national team matches selling out in 20 minutes is proof of high demand and fans' trust in the team.
- **Fact 15:** The "unified jersey" culture in stadiums has grown by 70 percent (fans are now wearing club or national team jerseys).

Uzbekistan's participation in the World Cup is not just 11 players, but the image of an entire country in the stands. We display our "soft power" through our disciplined, smart, football-understanding fans who support their team until the very end.

Being a fan at the World Cup is not just screaming; it is an opportunity to introduce one's culture, national values, and approach to football to the world. Uzbekistan's football is no longer an "outside observer"; it is an active participant on the stage of world football, and the heart of this process is the fans. In the upcoming Mundial, the world must recognize us not only through the passes of our players but also through the "intellectual power" of our fans in the stadium. This is our strategic goal.