

Everyday life at the edge of collapse: elite autobiographical narratives of the late Soviet transformation in Uzbekistan

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Abstract

This article examines everyday life at the edge of systemic collapse, focusing on how the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the emergence of independent Uzbekistan were experienced and interpreted by members of the intellectual and administrative elite. Drawing on seventeen in-depth interviews conducted within an international oral history project (2023–2025), it analyses elite autobiographical narratives as a key site through which large-scale political transformations were understood, negotiated, and retrospectively reinterpreted. Rather than presenting the collapse of the Soviet system as a sudden rupture, the findings show that it was widely perceived as the outcome of a gradual process of internal erosion. At the same time, independence was experienced in fundamentally ambivalent terms: as both an anticipated development and a source of uncertainty embedded in everyday practices, expectations, and social routines. This ambivalence is traced through three interrelated dynamics: declining trust in Soviet ideological and institutional frameworks, region-specific experiences such as the “cotton affair” and structural economic dependence, and the interpretative role of elite actors navigating between Soviet socialisation and enduring cultural references. By foregrounding everyday life as an analytical lens and elite autobiographical narratives as empirical material, the article contributes to debates on late socialism, memory, and post-Soviet transformation. It argues that systemic collapse is not primarily lived as a singular historical break, but as a prolonged and uneven process mediated through habit, uncertainty, and reinterpretation.

Keywords

Everyday life; systemic collapse; late socialism; Uzbekistan; elite narratives; oral history; post-Soviet transformation; Central Asia

1. Introduction

*“There is a Chinese curse which says: ‘May you live in interesting times.’
Like it or not, we are living in such times.”*
— Robert F. Kennedy

The late 1980s and early 1990s in Uzbekistan constituted not merely a political and institutional rupture associated with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emergence of an independent state. They also marked a profound transformation of everyday life, in which the relatively stable routines of late socialism intersected with new forms of social and cultural self-understanding. Rather than unfolding as a coherent “transition,” this period was experienced as a complex and often contradictory reconfiguration of meanings, practices, and expectations.

This article examines these transformations through the lens of expert autobiographical narratives, focusing on representatives of Uzbekistan’s intellectual and administrative elite. It draws on in-depth interviews conducted between 2023 and 2025 as part of a broader international research project led by Marianne Kamp (Indiana University), bringing together scholars from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, the United States, and Turkey. The study explores how systemic change was perceived, interpreted, and retrospectively reconstructed by actors who were themselves embedded within the institutional structures of the Soviet system.

By focusing on elite narratives, the article does not seek to produce a representative account of late Soviet everyday life. Rather, it aims to illuminate the internal logic of the system “from within,” capturing how individuals positioned close to centres of power understood both their own life trajectories and the broader transformation of the state. These narratives provide access not only to lived experience, but also to reflexive interpretations shaped by professional expertise, political involvement, and subsequent reinterpretations of the past.

2. Methodological approach: elite narratives, memory, and everyday life

Methodologically, autobiographical accounts are treated not as transparent reflections of historical reality, but as sites of memory construction. They are shaped by temporal distance, selective recollection, and the interpretive frameworks through which the Soviet past is understood in contemporary Uzbekistan. This requires a critical reading that situates personal testimony within wider socio-political and cultural contexts.

The empirical material is based on interviews with seventeen respondents, most of whom occupied positions within the Soviet-era intelligentsia or administrative apparatus. While this focus provides access to informed and analytically rich perspectives, it also entails certain limitations: these accounts reflect a specific social milieu and cannot be uncritically generalised to the broader population. At the same time, they offer valuable insight into mechanisms of governance, informal practices, and internal tensions that remain largely inaccessible in official sources.

Data collection presented particular challenges. Several respondents were reluctant to be recorded, especially when discussing politically sensitive topics, which in some cases necessitated reliance on detailed handwritten notes. These constraints are themselves indicative of the enduring sensitivities surrounding the late Soviet period and its aftermath. Despite these limitations, the material offers a nuanced perspective on how systemic transformation was experienced and subsequently narrated by actors situated at the intersection of power, knowledge, and memory.

The interview process was guided by a flexible thematic framework designed to capture both individual life trajectories and the broader cultural contexts through which respondents interpreted their experiences. Rather than relying on a rigid questionnaire, the conversations addressed key domains such as family background and early socialisation, educational experience, professional trajectories in the late Soviet period, and attitudes towards official discourse, including media narratives and political rhetoric. Particular attention was paid to everyday practices, including participation in Soviet rituals, patterns of social interaction, and the coexistence of official and informal cultural repertoires.

A central part of the interviews focused on the critical years between 1989 and 1991. The aim was not merely to reconstruct events, but to understand how these processes were perceived at the time and how they are retrospectively interpreted today. Respondents were encouraged to reflect on their understanding of systemic change, their emotional responses to the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the ways in which these transformations affected their personal lives, careers, and social environments. Special emphasis was placed on how the end of the Soviet system was framed—whether as the loss of stability and security, or as the emergence of new opportunities linked to independence, cultural revival, and economic transformation.

The final stage of the interviews addressed memories of the first celebrations of independence, both official and informal. These accounts provide insight into the symbolic and

emotional dimensions of the transition, revealing a wide spectrum of responses, ranging from uncertainty and anxiety to cautious optimism and a sense of historical rupture.

In addition to the verbal content, attention was paid to the performative and affective aspects of narration. Notes were taken on tone, hesitation, and non-verbal cues during the interviews, which proved significant for subsequent analysis. Such observations help to contextualise individual testimonies and to identify moments where memory intersects with sensitivity, self-censorship, or retrospective reinterpretation.

3. Late Soviet Uzbekistan as a space of contradictions

The historical period under discussion, spanning from the 1970s to the early 1990s, was marked by profound internal tensions. Often described as a period of “stagnation,” it was simultaneously characterised by the gradual accumulation of socio-economic problems that ultimately contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union¹. In this context, Soviet Uzbekistan occupied a distinctive position. It was frequently portrayed as the “eastern showcase” of the USSR, symbolising the success of Soviet modernisation in Central Asia.

As the largest republic in Soviet Central Asia, Uzbekistan—and particularly its capital, Tashkent—played a prominent role within the Soviet system. Official narratives emphasised decolonisation, internationalism, socialist progress, and the “friendship of peoples,” presenting the Soviet Union as a benevolent force in contrast to Western imperialism. These narratives were also projected externally, especially towards countries in Asia and Africa.

Recent scholarship has challenged the notion of Uzbekistan as a peripheral space within the Soviet Union. Riccardo Mario Cucciolla, for example, argues that late Soviet Uzbekistan actively contributed to shaping the international political and cultural image of the USSR, particularly in relation to the Global South. From this perspective, the republic appears not as a passive recipient of Soviet policies, but as an active and multi-layered component of Soviet statehood².

At the same time, a growing body of research has shifted attention from official ideological frameworks to everyday experience as a key site of historical understanding. Timur Dadabaev has demonstrated that, in the Central Asian context, historical consciousness is often

¹ EFIMOV, N. *Raspad SSSR. 1991 god* [Распад СССР. 1991 год; *The Collapse of the USSR. The Year 1991*]. Moscow: Veche, 2021. 320 p.

² CUCCIOLLA, Riccardo Mario. Sharaf Rashidov and the international dimensions of Soviet Uzbekistan. *Central Asian Survey*, 2020, vol. 39, no. 2, pp. 185–201.

constructed through lived experience rather than formal ideological narratives³. Similarly, Central European scholarship on post-socialist transformation has emphasised that systemic change cannot be reduced to political and institutional shifts alone, but entails a deeper reconfiguration of everyday practices, social identities, and cultural codes.

In this respect, the Central Asian case differs markedly from Central European post-socialist experiences. As ethnographic and sociological studies of the region have shown, the collapse of state socialism in East Central Europe was frequently narrated – both in popular discourse and in early scholarly accounts – as a „return to Europe“ or a „restoration“ of pre-socialist capitalist normality, often accompanied by a rhetoric of civilisational rupture with the communist past.^{4,5} By contrast, the Uzbek elite narratives analysed here suggest a different temporal logic: systemic change is perceived not as a revolutionary break or a „leaving behind“ of the Soviet, but as a prolonged and uneven process of internal erosion, in which institutional continuities, personal adaptations, and gradual redefinitions of loyalty play a far greater role than sudden political conversion.

Within these complex and often contradictory processes, political and intellectual elites played a particularly significant role. Positioned at the intersection of power and knowledge, they were not only observers but also active participants in the functioning of the Soviet system. As Cucciolla notes, local elites in Uzbekistan occupied influential positions within the party-state apparatus and were directly involved in shaping both domestic governance and international representation⁶. The long tenure of Sharaf Rashidov as First Secretary of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan (1959–1983) exemplifies this dynamic. Closely connected to the Soviet leadership, he was perceived internationally as a representative of a modern, educated Muslim republic integrated into the Soviet system, and actively engaged in diplomatic missions abroad.

However, beneath this image of stability, structural tensions were already becoming apparent. Large-scale corruption networks linked to cotton production began to emerge, involving actors at multiple levels of the system, from local administrators to central authorities. These developments were accompanied by a series of criminal investigations and arrests,

³ DADABAEV, Timur. Power, Social Life, and Public Memory in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. *Inner Asia*, 2010, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 25–48.

⁴ VERDERY, Katherine. *What was Socialism, and what Comes Next?*. Princeton University Press, 1996.

⁵ BURAWOY, Michael; VERDERY, Katherine (ed.). *Uncertain transition: Ethnographies of change in the postsocialist world*. Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 1999.

⁶ CUCCIOLLA, Riccardo Mario. Sharaf Rashidov and the international dimensions of Soviet Uzbekistan. *Central Asian Survey*, 2020, vol. 39, no. 2, pp. 185–201.

commonly referred to as the “cotton affair.” At the same time, interethnic tensions and the gradual emergence of alternative political movements signalled a growing erosion of ideological consensus. Within segments of the Uzbek elite, a quiet but noticeable disillusionment with the system began to take shape.

It is against this backdrop that the present study turns to the perspectives of contemporaries, approaching this complex period through the lived experiences and retrospective interpretations of those who observed and experienced it from within.

4. Elite childhoods and Soviet socialisation

A striking feature of the interviews is that most respondents came from families belonging, in one way or another, to the Soviet administrative, educational, or cultural establishment. Their recollections of childhood are therefore shaped by proximity to the structures of power, but not by unambiguous ideological loyalty. On the contrary, what emerges from these narratives is a socially privileged milieu marked by a distinctive blend of Soviet institutional embeddedness, high educational aspiration, residual pre-Soviet family memory, and muted but persistent attachment to national and religious traditions. The result is not a simple story of ideological conformity, but a more complex picture of late Soviet subject formation in Uzbekistan.

Lola, born in 1963 and later employed in the publishing house *Soviet Uzbekistan* before teaching at the Oriental Faculty of Tashkent State University and subsequently at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy, framed her childhood in explicitly nostalgic terms:

“I was born in the USSR. I was brought up in the spirit of the Soviet Union. I am a product of my time. Thank you for my childhood” (laughs). “It was a good childhood. People were kind, warm, simple, approachable, modest. My parents were well educated, from a party background. My grandmother was the director of a publishing house. Everything that was published, all the publishing houses, were under her authority. She opened bookshops across the republic. My grandfather was a Soviet official in the executive committee. Before the war, he had studied in Moscow, at the Bauman Higher Technical School. During the Second World War, my grandparents returned to their homeland, where my grandmother was involved in placing evacuated children and my grandfather in evacuating large factories to Central Asia. Ours was a well-known family; my grandmother was the sister of the famous Uzbek Soviet writer G. Ghulam.”

This account is revealing not only for its nostalgic tone, but also for the ease with which Soviet belonging is articulated through family biography, educational prestige, and institutional respectability. At the same time, such narratives often contain another layer: the memory of

families who had once belonged to the pre-revolutionary commercial, religious, or landowning strata, and whose earlier status remained present, if not publicly emphasised, in family memory.

Lola herself immediately introduced this second strand:

“On my mother’s side, my grandfather and great-grandfather came from a very prosperous family. They were wealthy merchants in pre-revolutionary times. My grandfather was highly educated, travelled extensively in Europe and Russia, and had connections with Savva Morozov’s trading house. He always insisted that the children should receive a good education. He used to say: ‘If you want to defeat the enemy, master his language and his way of thinking.’ There were many books in the house, and all the children learned to play the piano.”

This juxtaposition is significant. The respondents’ childhood memories do not point to a total replacement of older identities by Soviet ones, but rather to their partial layering. Soviet upward mobility and institutional integration coexisted with memories of dispossession, religious lineage, mercantile status, or older forms of cultural capital. Such hybrid social backgrounds complicate any simple opposition between “traditional” and “Soviet” worlds.

The same pattern appears in the testimony of Uktam, born in 1949, who later became director of a rural school, then a party functionary, and eventually a deputy in the Uzbek parliament:

“My father was the son of a devout man. Having found the books hidden by his father, he taught himself to read. He knew both the old Uzbek script and Cyrillic. He knew the Holy Qur’an by heart. During the height of the repressions in the 1930s, he was exiled to the village of Oyim. Around 1935 he married my mother there. My father served in the Second World War, and my maternal grandfather was drafted into a labour battalion before the war and disappeared there.”

Here, Soviet biography is inseparable from memories of repression, Islamic learning, and family loss. The late Soviet elite milieu represented in these interviews was therefore not exclusively secular or ideologically homogeneous. Rather, it was often shaped by earlier experiences of violence and dislocation, even where later generations successfully entered Soviet institutions.

A similar ambivalence can be observed in the narrative of Ravshan, born in 1956, later a leading researcher at the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan and subsequently its director:

“I was born in Fergana in 1956, into a family of salaried employees. At first my parents worked in teaching, but later my father moved into party and Soviet organs. He served for several years as first secretary in two districts of Fergana region, while my mother worked as a school director. My mother’s great-grandfather had been a large landowner in the Fergana Valley, and his son became one of the first journalists in the early Soviet period. More broadly, her family came from the distinguished khoja estate. My brothers also worked in different spheres: the elder one, a doctor of historical sciences and political scientist, worked

for about nine years at the Uzbek embassy in the United States, while my younger brother became a poet of so-called alternative literature and published exclusively in Russian.”

What is particularly noteworthy here is the extent to which Soviet official advancement, older local prestige, and later intellectual diversification appear within a single family trajectory. These biographies reveal that elite integration into the Soviet order did not erase prior forms of social distinction; rather, it often absorbed and rearticulated them.

Arustan’s recollections are perhaps even more explicit in showing how Soviet professional incorporation could coexist with memories of repression, religious authority, and scientific privilege:

“I was born in Nukus. My paternal grandfather was a well-known ishan from a Kazakh lineage. During the famine he fled with his family to Karakalpakstan, but was later arrested and sent to Karlag. When the files of the convicted were opened, I managed to find the documents and the only surviving photograph. My father fought at the front and died early from his wounds. My stepfather was a party committee secretary. More broadly, my relatives in Nukus belonged to what one might call the scientific elite. One cousin was a nuclear physicist, another a biologist, another a hydrogeologist, another a geophysicist and expedition leader. My mother, before moving to Nukus, taught German in an officers’ school in Samarkand. At that time Nukus was a closed city; chemical defence troops were stationed there because of the secret laboratories connected with chemical and bacteriological weapons on Vozrozhdeniya Island. During glasnost and perestroika I even published a couple of articles on this subject, which caused me certain difficulties. After independence, the laboratories were closed.”

Shukhrat’s account similarly conveys both intimacy with the Soviet administrative world and a deep awareness of fear as a structuring element of late Stalinist and post-Stalinist life:

“I was born in 1956 in Samarkand region. My father was then chairman of a kolkhoz, and my earliest memories go back to the early 1960s, the Khrushchev period. Almost every day his friends, other kolkhoz chairmen, gathered in our large house to discuss what was happening in the region and in the country. My father was a cautious man. In 1952 he had organised a Muslim wedding for his eldest son. Someone denounced him, he was expelled from the party, and a criminal case was opened. Then Stalin died, and he was reinstated both in the party and in his post. I remember that when Khrushchev was removed and Brezhnev came to power, these men would gather in our house, drink a little, and speak frankly about the country. My father was careful in what he said, although he was a direct man. The interrogations by the security organs had clearly left their mark.”

Taken together, these interviews suggest that late Soviet elite childhoods in Uzbekistan were not characterised simply by ideological socialisation from above. They were also shaped by family memory, inherited caution, and a tacit awareness that public conformity and private knowledge did not always coincide.

Another recurring theme is the centrality of Russian-language education and, in many cases, Russian as a language of family communication. This does not indicate straightforward Russification in a crude assimilationist sense; rather, it points to the ways in which access to education, career advancement, and social prestige were mediated through Russian linguistic capital. Yet, significantly, this often coexisted with continued attachment to Uzbek or Karakalpak cultural worlds.

Lola recalled:

“We spoke half in Uzbek and half in Russian, but mostly in Russian. When I was little, my mother went to Moscow for postgraduate study and took me with her. I attended nursery there, so naturally I grew up in a Russian-speaking environment. But my mother’s grandfather was resentful towards Soviet power. He had once been a wealthy man, but the Revolution crushed him: his houses were confiscated, he even spent a short period in prison, and his wife was repeatedly summoned for interrogation together with her little daughter, my mother. She was terrified of all those security structures. So in my grandfather’s family they did not especially like Russians, yet they themselves remained Russian-speaking” (laughs).

Ravshan was equally explicit about the association between Russian-language schooling and elite formation:

“I studied in a Russian school. In the 1960s and 1970s Fergana was a Russian-speaking city. It was a rather elite school, attended by the children of the Soviet nomenklatura—first secretaries of district committees, chairmen, deputy chairmen of regional executive committees, and others. I grew up in that circle. We were interested in many things: sport, music, and in a sense politics as well. But of course in the 1970s, and even in the early 1980s, we knew very little. Information in Uzbekistan, as in the USSR generally, was heavily rationed. We often had to search for alternative information. We began listening to the so-called ‘hostile voices’, for example Voice of America. In 1971 I first heard Voice of America in Uzbek, and by coincidence the programme was devoted to a musical group. The popularisation of so-called bourgeois musicians was not welcomed, and we even got into trouble over it, although my father managed to smooth the matter over.”

Arustan, by contrast, emphasised the intellectual atmosphere of the home:

“My stepfather was an extremely erudite man. There was a huge library at home. Already in the 1960s he subscribed to books on philosophy, sociology, aesthetics, Russian literature, and recordings of classical music. We grew up on all of this. At the same time, thanks to our mother, we knew the traditions and customs of the Karakalpaks.”

Uktam’s account presents Russian schooling not as a rupture with local identity, but as a deliberate family strategy of advancement:

“I wondered why I had been sent to a Russian school. It turned out that this had been the initiative of my brothers, and my father supported it. Because of his own education, and in accordance with the demands of the time, he showed his children the path by which knowledge had to be acquired.”

These narratives indicate that Russian functioned less as a marker of cultural self-denial than as a medium of mobility, distinction, and participation in Soviet modernity. Yet this did not necessarily entail the abandonment of local traditions. Rather, respondents repeatedly describe bilingual or culturally layered homes in which Russian education and national-cultural reproduction coexisted.

The same duality appears in recollections of early moral and symbolic socialisation. When asked whether they had been raised on Soviet, Russian, or Uzbek examples, respondents often described a mixed repertoire rather than a single ideological framework.

Lola noted:

“Probably more on Soviet examples, because I studied in a Russian school. But in the family they also told Uzbek fairy tales. I remember how, after morning tea, my grandmother and her mother would begin speaking in Russian and then gradually introduce Uzbek proverbs, sayings, even verses into the conversation, before moving on to Uzbek songs and asking me to dance: ‘Lola, dance...’”

Ravshan recalled a more standard Soviet canon:

“As in all schools, education in our school was built on well-known Soviet heroes: Pavlik Morozov, Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya.⁷”

Shukhrat’s recollections are especially revealing, because they show how reading practices could bridge Soviet and national frames:

“There was a great deal of reading in our house. My father loved novels. My elder brother studied for a time in a Russian school in the city, but then my father transferred him back to an Uzbek school in the district so that his upbringing would not be affected. At the beginning of the 1970s we bought a television. There was only one channel, and only in the evenings: news and concerts. So we read a lot. Up to the eighth class I read Uzbek classics in Uzbek; after that I began reading in Russian, starting with Sholokhov’s *Virgin Soil Upturned*, then Jack London, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Aitmatov. Dostoevsky remained my favourite writer. I was brought up mainly on Soviet literature.”

Arustan’s response was more ironic and distanced:

“No one really brought me up. Later I was educated in a boarding school with a strong musical orientation and a very high-quality teaching staff. I was only just accepted into the Pioneers and the Komsomol—perhaps I was a hooligan. After the army I was given a recommendation to join the party, but when I returned to Nukus I was told I would need to pay a bribe in order to enter. That existed too.”

⁷ Pavlik Morozov, a Soviet schoolboy widely promoted as a symbolic youth hero after allegedly denouncing his father and subsequently being killed in 1932; and Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, a Soviet partisan and intelligence operative executed by German forces in 1941 and later canonised as a Hero of the Soviet Union.

What these testimonies show is not the absence of Soviet socialisation, but its incompleteness. Respondents consistently describe themselves as products of the Soviet era, yet at the same time insist that they did not lose touch with older cultural, historical, or religious roots. Family memory, reading practices, domestic ritual, and informal forms of transmission all acted as spaces in which alternative identifications were preserved.

This is particularly evident in the role of religion and national history. Respondents recalled that Muslim festivals continued to be observed privately, that *plov* was prepared for important occasions, that weddings and funerals remained organised according to national custom, and that fasting was sometimes practised discreetly rather than publicly. Ravshan stated:

“There were books on history in our house, and we observed national traditions. I read them, looked at them, and became interested in our history. At school I was indignant that the history of Uzbekistan was taught from a very thin booklet in which many things were omitted, whereas the history of the USSR was essentially the history of Russia.”

Uktam offered an especially telling example of accommodation between official Soviet roles and private moral authority:

“I had to move into work connected with the ideology of the Communist Party. Before agreeing, I said anxiously to my father: ‘Father, they are inviting me to become secretary of the district committee.’ As you know, atheism prevailed at that time, yet at home we read the Qur’an every day. My father said to me: ‘Listen, this is not something to compare in that way. If you wear a tie but do not betray people, live honestly, and call people to good, there is nothing wrong in that. Such is the time.’ He also said: ‘If the time does not look at you, then you look at the time. Do not be ashamed.’”

He then added:

“I regret nothing. Like other village children, I herded cattle and worked around the house, but because my father read so many books at home, this passed on to me as well. Not all books written in the old Uzbek script were religious. Once a book was read aloud to me, and later I discovered it was Aristotle and Plato. Imagine it: in a remote Uzbek village, my father would say, ‘This state is a false state.’”

Such passages are analytically important because they show that loyalty, adaptation, and scepticism were not mutually exclusive. Soviet careers could be morally rationalised within family frameworks that drew on religion, older literacy traditions, and pragmatic accommodation to “the times”.

Memories of Soviet ceremonial life are similarly ambivalent. Respondents remembered official holidays vividly and often with genuine warmth, but they also stressed that participation in these rituals did not necessarily imply deep ideological conviction. Lola recalled 1 May, 7 November, and New Year as “bright days”, associated above all with festivity and family

pleasure. Ravshan remembered demonstrations as enjoyable social occasions rather than moments of political commitment:

“We went to the demonstrations, and it was interesting, but we did not think much about the ideological basis. We simply relaxed with friends. Later these holidays began to irritate me. I started to feel a certain falseness, a kind of performance; it was a ritual. The activists themselves did not believe in what they were telling us.”

Shukhrat likewise stressed the domestic, rather than ideological, dimension of Soviet celebrations:

“The main holiday was New Year. It was a family celebration. Many relatives gathered; the older generation celebrated separately, with vodka. We decorated the tree, and my father bought us new clothes. We also wore new clothes for the May holidays and went out for the October holiday, 7 November. I do not remember specifically national Uzbek holidays from that time; they came later.”

Arustan’s account introduces yet another perspective, one shaped by labour fatigue and exposure to semi-dissident intellectual milieus:

“Why did I dislike Soviet holidays? Because we had to give concerts on the same day and at the same time. I was the leader of a musical ensemble, and on those days I was exhausted. My friends joked that I was the organiser of mass festive disorder. I had studied at the Higher Trade Union School in Leningrad, where some of the professors were in a kind of honorary exile, not allowed to work in other institutions because of their free-thinking attitude towards current party policy. They taught us, and it was there that the first rock groups and a certain opposition appeared. I lived in Leningrad with a relative who had served during the war as commissar on the cruiser *Kirov*. He told me a great deal about the Kuznetsov case. What stayed with me most was the fear in his voice when he remembered it.”

The same tension between performative participation and growing internal distance is visible in memories of Soviet youth organisations. Lola described herself as an enthusiastic Pioneer and Komsomol member:

“I was quite an active Pioneer and Komsomol member; I liked it. I remember how solemnly I was inducted into the Pioneers at the V. I. Lenin Museum. Later, when I joined the Komsomol, we memorised the statutes.”

When asked whether this enthusiasm stemmed from the ideals themselves or from outward symbols, she paused before answering:

“I liked it. I liked the fact that at school we marched in formation on holidays and everything felt solemn. Being summoned for criticism to the Komsomol committee was interesting.”

Yet her later recollections reveal how quickly such engagement became routinised bureaucratic practice:

“After university, when I started work at the journal *Soviet Uzbekistan*, I was assigned to be the Komsomol organiser of the institution, collecting dues, organising political hours, and occasionally reporting to the district committee” (laughs). “I did it for about a year, and then moved to the Institute of Scientific Atheism, where people were usually recruited from ‘reliable families’.”

Ravshan, by contrast, recalled emotional detachment rather than commitment:

“To be honest, I was never particularly distinguished by Pioneer or Komsomol zeal. I joined the Komsomol among the very last. I was not a dissident, but I was indifferent to propaganda. When we were taken for several months to the cotton harvest, I saw women and children in the fields while planes were spraying cotton defoliants from above. Later we learned it was butifos, something like Agent Orange in Vietnam, harmful to people. The whole cotton campaign was extremely damaging, especially for education. In the ninth and tenth classes I began to think about this, and there were heated arguments with friends. Gradually a feeling of protest emerged; it did not form all at once, but I began to reflect.”

Here, everyday Soviet experience itself produced the beginnings of critical distance. What mattered was not abstract ideology alone, but the friction between official claims and embodied observation.

Respondents also spoke positively, on the whole, about schooling and higher education, despite recognising the ideological saturation of the system. What stands out, however, is the clear stratification of access. Many respondents studied at prestigious institutions—most notably the Oriental Faculty of Tashkent State University or elite history faculties—which were heavily populated by the children of party and administrative elites. Soviet education, in these accounts, appears as both a mechanism of mobility and a space of reproduced hierarchy.

Shukhrat remarked:

“Under Brezhnev I do not remember that everyone lived badly; there was no hunger. There were difficulties compared to previous years, of course, but not everyone felt them. I remember that some children in class brought maize bread, whereas at home we had fine white bread, and we exchanged it with each other.”

Lola described her student years as “golden”, but immediately qualified this by referring to snobbery among the children of the nomenklatura:

“They were the children of well-off parents, of the nomenklatura, distinguished by arrogance and a sense of superiority. They were brought in their parents’ official cars and dressed accordingly. In other words, what people would call ‘the golden youth’.”

Ravshan and Shukhrat likewise emphasised the high quality of university teaching, the strength of the professoriate, and the formative importance of these institutions. These recollections should not simply be dismissed as nostalgia. Rather, they point to one of the paradoxes of late Soviet Uzbekistan: even in a system increasingly marked by ideological

fatigue and structural crisis, elite educational institutions continued to produce significant intellectual capital.

This becomes particularly clear in the respondents' subsequent professional trajectories. Lola's move from the Oriental Faculty to the journal *Soviet Uzbekistan* and then to the Institute of Scientific Atheism illustrates the tight links between elite education, ideological administration, and specialist expertise. Her account is especially revealing because it shows how the Soviet regulation of religion relied not only on repression, but also on expert knowledge:

“In 1985 I began working at the journal *Soviet Uzbekistan* under the Society of Friendship and Cultural Relations. The entire leadership were, as a rule, graduates of the Oriental Faculty. A year later I moved to the Institute of Scientific Atheism under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan, where I worked on Islam. The institute mainly prepared analytical reports on the religious situation in the republic, including the number of people attending mosques and churches. In the mid-1980s anti-religious propaganda intensified in the Soviet Union, and measures were tightened against those categories of the population whom the authorities regarded as ‘active Muslims’. I remember that even one of the leaders of the institute was dismissed because he had buried a relative according to Islamic custom.”

This testimony is highly suggestive: it indicates that the late Soviet state's anti-religious policies could themselves contribute to alienation, particularly among the national intelligentsia and the clergy. Lola concluded succinctly:

“With the beginning of the collapse of the USSR, the institute was closed, and I moved into teaching.”

Ravshan described a different but related shift:

“In 1989 I was appointed to the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan. I began working on previously unstudied, even forbidden themes: the political history of Turkestan, the history of Uzbek enlighteners and public figures, the Jadids. At that time Uzbek historians started to work actively on subjects that had earlier been taboo: uprisings in Central Asia, collectivisation, repression, and so on.”

Shukhrat's account is more conventional but equally important in showing the material and institutional side of late Soviet upward mobility:

“After my studies I was assigned, as a young specialist, to an institute in Angren, about one hundred kilometres from Tashkent. Before leaving, I worked for a month in the archives department of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan. By then I was already a member of the CPSU. In Angren I was given a place in a dormitory, and later my own flat as a young specialist.”

Taken together, these professional narratives show that for this milieu the late Soviet period was not remembered solely as a time of ideological control, but also as one of institutional order, educational seriousness, and structured career pathways. At the same time, the interviews reveal that this order was already marked by contradiction: by social privilege, by selective access, by quiet scepticism, and by growing awareness that the official system no longer fully corresponded to lived reality.

5. From late socialism to systemic crisis

Respondents consistently recalled the late 1980s and early 1990s as a period of acute uncertainty, intense discussion, and accelerating social change. In their accounts, this was not simply a chronological transition from Soviet rule to independence, but a layered and often disorienting experience in which political argument, economic deterioration, moral re-evaluation, and shifting cultural loyalties unfolded simultaneously. The interviews suggest that the crisis was perceived not as a single rupture, but as a gradual destabilisation whose signs had been visible for some time. For some, the death of Brezhnev already symbolised the end of a recognisable world; for others, the decisive turning point came later, with glasnost, the erosion of ideological certainty, and the emergence of previously unthinkable public speech.

At the same time, the respondents were fully aware that late Soviet society had not been socially uniform. Members of the party-administrative milieu remembered that nomenklatura families had access to better living conditions, including special shops and protected channels of supply. Yet these privileges did not prevent a broader sense of unease. On the contrary, the contrast between relative material shelter for some and growing dysfunction in society at large sharpened awareness that the system was becoming untenable. In retrospect, several respondents presented the collapse not as an accident, but as the outcome of objective structural causes.

One of the clearest indications of the changing climate was the appearance of critical texts and the publication of material that would previously have been blocked by censorship. Arustan recalled this moment as one of intellectual release:

“At that time I prepared an article in which I analysed major newspapers in Uzbekistan and Karakalpakstan—articles, interviews, and other materials relating to laws and government decrees under discussion. I used content analysis, measuring volume, content, and authorship. I tried to show the whole imitation of so-called nationwide discussion. I went to Moscow, entered the editorial office of the well-known sociological journal *SotsiS*, showed it directly to the editor, and the article was published. That was in 1990. It was already a different time; it had become possible to write and to speak.”

This recollection is significant because it captures a fundamental feature of the late perestroika period: the sudden widening of the discursive field. What had previously been confined to private scepticism or guarded conversation now began to acquire public form. Yet this opening did not produce a single ideological orientation. Rather, it generated competing interpretations of what change meant and what its legitimate limits should be.

Arustan's further remarks on Karakalpakstan illustrate this point well:

"In Karakalpakstan a public organisation for the protection of the Aral Sea emerged, as well as the *Khalk Mapi* party ('The People's Goal'), led by one of the region's party figures, whose aim was separation from Uzbekistan. I also published an article in a republican journal in which I tried to show the unrealism of such goals."

Here, the broadening of political space did not lead only to liberalisation or national revival in a straightforward sense; it also produced regional agendas, ecological mobilisation, and new political claims whose legitimacy was contested even by those who welcomed greater openness. The respondents' narratives therefore reveal a fragmented and uneven political awakening rather than a unified movement towards one shared future.

For Uktam, the coming of Gorbachev had a strong intellectual effect, above all because it altered the range of reading, discussion, and self-reflection available to educated people:

"What happened after M. S. Gorbachev came to power had a great impact on us. I studied philosophy and the social sciences seriously and was interested in politics. Imagine it: in those years we subscribed to seven journals and around ten newspapers. The pluralism of the 1990s influenced our worldview to a certain extent. We knew Pushkin, but we did not know Navoi. Reading all this, I realised: 'I am Uzbek,' and I began to study what was my own. Fortunately, my father read a great deal of classical Uzbek literature, and those books were in our home. I began to study Uzbek national poetry under his influence."

This passage is particularly telling because it shows that the erosion of Soviet ideological monopoly did not necessarily lead respondents away from intellectual life, but rather towards new hierarchies of cultural value. What appears here is not a simple rejection of Soviet culture, but a rebalancing of symbolic reference points: Pushkin remains, but Navoi re-enters the horizon. National self-awareness thus emerges not in opposition to literacy and education, but through them.

Ravshan's account likewise presents 1989 as a formative year in which the centre of Soviet political life became newly visible and newly contestable:

"1989 was a special year; the first Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR began its work. At that time I was on a placement in Moscow. I heard speeches by B. Yeltsin, V. Novodvorskaya, A. Sobchak... We had these discussions in Tashkent as well. I brought opposition newspapers from Moscow, and the others read them with great interest. Interesting

television programmes began to appear. Public and political life in Tashkent was less dynamic, but change was also taking place there. A number of socio-political movements appeared—*Birlik*, *Erk*, *Tumaris*, *Intersoyuz*, and others.”

He then added a more explicitly analytical interpretation:

“Part of my circle—scholars professionally engaged in history, ethnology, and political science—believed that an objective process was under way. The planned economy, the arms race, the Afghan war—all this had led to growing disbelief in communist ideas. It became difficult to deceive people any longer. Not everyone agreed; there were still many apologists who sincerely believed that everything was the work of the CIA and Western intelligence services. But the socio-economic and socio-political problems were objective in character. Many understood that the crisis was not the result of enemies’ intrigues, but of economic, social, and political problems. I felt it was a systemic crisis and that something would happen.”

This is an important passage because it reveals that at least part of the intelligentsia retrospectively frames the Soviet collapse not in conspiratorial terms, but in structural ones. At the same time, Ravshan’s testimony also makes clear that such an interpretation coexisted with older reflexes of ideological suspicion. The late Soviet crisis, in other words, did not dissolve political culture overnight; it exposed competing explanatory frameworks that cohabited in the same social world.

Alongside these political and intellectual shifts, respondents repeatedly emphasised worsening material conditions. Here the recollections become more immediate and corporeal: shortages, rationing, inflation, and the disappearance of goods from shops. Lola recalled the violence of monetary collapse in intensely personal terms:

“At that time many products were issued by ration card. I remember the moment when, overnight, all the money that had been saved lost its value. My father had been planning to buy a plot of land and, like a respectable citizen, kept his money in the bank. After the inflation he had a stroke; he became very ill. It was so unexpected. It affected many people.”

Ravshan described similar processes in terms of regional inequality:

“Everything began disappearing from the shops. If something could still be found in Tashkent, in Fergana the shelves were empty. In some regions, as people used to say, those with ‘Moscow supply’ were in a better situation.”

Such memories show that the crisis of the late Soviet order was not experienced only through political debate, but through the erosion of everyday predictability. Material shortages destabilised not only household economies, but also trust in the system’s capacity to reproduce ordinary life.

For some respondents, however, perestroika also opened new institutional opportunities. Shukhrat described how reforms changed the internal governance of his institute:

“In 1986 I was dean of the industrial-pedagogical faculty of the Tashkent Regional Institute. Previously deans had been appointed; with perestroika they began to be elected. I was elected. Then, in 1987, I was appointed vice-rector. In this way I became involved in the public life of the city.”

This type of recollection reminds us that the late Soviet reform period could also be experienced as one of empowerment, procedural liberalisation, and enhanced participation—at least for certain actors in certain institutions. Yet even these openings did not eliminate the continuing weight of ideology. Uktam’s account is useful precisely because it refuses a simplistic opposition between belief and adaptation:

“It cannot be said that the ideology of that time had no influence on us. I too was a member of the Communist Party, because it was the only political force, and if you had any active position at all, you were accepted into it. But then, in the 1990s, under the influence of what was happening to me, changes took place in my worldview. Perhaps because I was an educated person, knew both Russian and Uzbek, and read a great deal, I was included in an agitprop group—they called me a propagandist. In February 1990 elections to the Supreme Soviet of Uzbekistan took place. I was then chairman of a district electoral commission. The winds of democracy were blowing, and people began to understand themselves more. At that time the legislation already allowed groups to nominate candidates for deputy. I too was nominated and elected.”

What this suggests is that late Soviet political transformation cannot be reduced to a clean moral divide between regime loyalists and independence-minded reformers. Some of the same individuals moved through party structures, propaganda work, electoral procedures, and later national reorientation. Their biographies testify less to ideological conversion in a narrow sense than to the plasticity of political subjectivity during a period when institutional certainty was dissolving.

Respondents also recalled that the early perestroika years briefly generated a sense of improvement. As private initiative began to develop and the economy seemed momentarily to revive, some felt that life might become easier. Yet this optimism proved fragile. By 1991, the atmosphere had once again thickened with anxiety. Families and colleagues followed events closely through newspapers and television, trying to grasp what was happening and where it might lead. Several respondents stressed the profoundly ambivalent emotional texture of this period: on the one hand, confusion and fear; on the other, a lingering assumption that the crisis might prove temporary and that normality would somehow return.

Some even interpreted perestroika and glasnost through conspiratorial lenses, seeing them as another manoeuvre by the security apparatus or the old party elite to safeguard their assets and prevent a more radical upheaval. Such views are analytically important not because

they explain events, but because they reveal the depth of distrust through which many people interpreted rapid systemic change. In these accounts, uncertainty was epistemic as well as political: it was not only unclear what would happen, but also unclear how events should be understood.

At the same time, respondents repeatedly noted a gradual shift in public mood once independence began to appear as a real possibility. Although the first reaction was often bewilderment, this was increasingly accompanied by the sense that a previously closed space had opened. Public speech became freer; greater attention was paid to the national language, to tradition, and to local history. New university departments devoted to Uzbek language and literature or to the history of Uzbekistan were established. Yet even at this stage, not everyone believed that the Soviet order had truly ended; many continued to assume that everything might somehow revert.

Ravshan expressed this process in historical rather than emotional terms:

“The attempt to preserve the country through perestroika, or through coercive measures such as the January 1991 events in Vilnius⁸, ultimately failed. The growth of national self-consciousness was obvious. In the national republics people began to look at their own history differently. The conviction grew stronger that only leaving the Union would make more self-sufficient development possible.”

Lola described the same shift more intimately, as a change in linguistic and familial practice:

“We began to think more about our self-identification. Most people in our circle had finished Russian schools in their time. We began to send our children more often to Uzbek schools and to speak more in our native language. They would have a better future that way.”

This is a crucial point. In the respondents’ memories, national reorientation did not emerge only through formal political programmes; it also manifested itself in apparently modest but symbolically powerful everyday decisions—above all in the sphere of language and education. The transfer of children from Russian to Uzbek schools signalled not simply pedagogical preference, but a reassessment of what kind of future now seemed imaginable and desirable.

The interviews further suggest that students and young people played an especially important role in making social change visible. Shukhrat recalled:

⁸ The January 1991 events in Vilnius refer to a series of confrontations between 11 and 13 January 1991, following Lithuania’s declaration of independence, involving Soviet military forces and pro-Soviet actors on the one hand and supporters of Lithuanian independence on the other.

“At that time active student demonstrations began. Party organs constantly asked us to explain that demonstrations were bad, that the party was acting correctly, and that people should not give in to provocations.”

When asked whether young people understood their own actions, he answered in a way that reveals the breadth of social mobilisation:

“In the city of Angren there lived many Russian-speaking people, including representatives of peoples deported to Uzbekistan during the war—Crimean Tatars, Koreans, Meskhetian Turks, Chechens, Germans. These events were perceived as an opportunity for historical justice. The first demonstrations were by Crimean Tatars, demanding the right to return to Crimea. Young people played an active role. Youth of all nationalities were active, previously banned books and dissident texts began to circulate, while we tried to explain to them the ‘correct line of the party’. At that time I was secretary of the party organisation of the institute. Before an official holiday, students from the faculty of Uzbek philology came to me and proposed changing some of the slogans and writing them in Uzbek. One of them was: ‘The Uzbek language must become the state language.’ Previously slogans had mainly been prepared in Russian. Later there was a denunciation against me. The issue was raised in the city party committee, and I received an oral reprimand for that slogan in Uzbek.”

This episode is especially valuable because it condenses several aspects of the broader transformation: the politicisation of language, the activism of youth, the continuing reflexes of party control, and the fact that seemingly modest symbolic shifts could still provoke institutional sanction. It demonstrates that the late Soviet public sphere in Uzbekistan was being renegotiated not only through formal politics, but through disputes over language, slogans, and the symbolic order of public life.

Shukhrat also emphasised the role of the creative intelligentsia, particularly members of the Writers’ Union of Uzbekistan, in engaging the younger generation:

“People from the Writers’ Union often came to us, and I did not obstruct their meetings with our youth. They agitated for independence, and the young listened very attentively. Perestroika was a difficult time. When we met with the miners of our city, they complained about everyday hardship, the absence of quality healthcare, the lack of democracy, and had many grievances against the management of mines and factories. Out of ten people present, two left the party in protest.”

This testimony reveals that political transformation was inseparable from wider social discontent. Independence was not discussed only in abstract national terms; it was also articulated through grievances about labour conditions, health care, democratic deficits, and the failures of local authority. National emancipation and social frustration thus fed into one another.

At the same time, the respondents did not portray the early reform years as a simple upward march towards national freedom. Several noted that at first many people believed in the future and expected improvement, only to be sobered by policies such as the anti-alcohol campaign, which was remembered as intrusive and socially maladapted. Shukhrat observed that for miners working exhausting shifts, restrictions on alcohol were felt not as moral reform but as yet another disruption in already difficult living conditions. In this sense, early disenchantment did not arise only from high politics; it also stemmed from the growing mismatch between reformist rhetoric and the material realities of everyday life.

Finally, respondents differed in how they retrospectively evaluated the prospect of independence itself. Shukhrat remembered a meeting at the city party committee in which one official warned that if the Union collapsed, “we would end up like Afghanistan”. He and his fellow historians rejected this view:

“We expected life to improve; we believed independence would bring us improvement. Not everyone shared that opinion. Even after independence was proclaimed, however, power remained in the hands of the former Soviet-era party nomenklatura. In my view, they were not capable of building a new Uzbekistan.”

This final remark is important because it introduces a note that recurs across many post-Soviet recollections: independence was welcomed as an opening, but the social actors who inherited power remained, in many cases, deeply continuous with the old system. The respondents therefore did not narrate 1991 as a pure beginning. Rather, they describe it as a moment in which the symbolic and political foundations of public life shifted rapidly, while institutional personnel, habits of governance, and structures of authority proved far more resistant to change.

6. Independence as ambivalent experience

Respondents’ recollections of the first Independence Day are striking for the combination of solemnity, uncertainty, and emotional ambivalence they convey. On the one hand, nearly all of them remembered a sense of pride in the fact that they now lived in Uzbekistan as an independent country. On the other, this pride was often accompanied by hesitation, incomprehension, or even anxiety. Independence was not experienced simply as a triumphant culmination of national aspirations, but as a moment in which symbolic elevation and practical uncertainty coexisted.

Several respondents emphasised that the first celebrations felt different from Soviet official ceremonies. They remembered them as solemn, but less ritualised and less burdened by

the formulaic speeches of the past. Students, in particular, were often described as especially enthusiastic. Yet even in these festive recollections, the novelty of the situation remains palpable. Ravshan recalled above all “the attempts to oppose official structures”, noting that such gestures had felt unprecedented at the time. Lola similarly remembered that “people began to think and argue openly about the problems of society”. Shukhrat described the moment in more concrete institutional terms:

“I remember the first celebration, on 2 or 3 September 1991. We gathered our students, and I too spoke, solemnly announcing independence to them. But to be honest, at that point we still did not think that we had become definitively independent.”

This hesitation is analytically important. It suggests that even when independence had been declared, its finality and meaning were not yet fully grasped. For many, the end of the Soviet Union remained difficult to imagine as an irreversible fact. Shukhrat explicitly noted that by 1991 everyone understood that the Union was moving towards disintegration, yet many still assumed it would survive in some altered form. In this sense, independence entered everyday consciousness unevenly: it was declared politically before it was fully absorbed emotionally or cognitively.

The respondents’ descriptions of their immediate reactions further underline this diversity of experience. Tursunboy, who at that time worked in the police, recalled the event in openly traumatic terms:

“When Gorbachev dissolved the USSR in 1991, all of us were seized by panic. How were we now supposed to live? We had lived from 1917 to 1991 under the USSR, and the Soviet way of life had seeped into our blood.”

In this formulation, Soviet life appears not simply as a political order, but as a deeply embodied habitus. The collapse of the Union therefore threatened not only institutions, but an entire structure of everyday orientation. By contrast, Arustan remembered the declaration of independence in almost the opposite register:

“I learned of Independence Day in Uzbekistan while I was in Moscow. My reaction was: finally—why did they wait so long? After all, the USSR was an empire, and empires sooner or later collapse. I regarded the disintegration of the USSR as understandable, as a historically inevitable development. Uzbekistan gained new opportunities. For example, together with colleagues I created a private research centre, and we worked quite successfully, including in the interests of our state.”

Here, independence is narrated not as loss, but as historical logic and practical opening. The Soviet collapse becomes legible within a broader imperial framework, while the new state

is understood as creating space for intellectual and institutional initiative. Ravshan occupied a somewhat different position again, less emotional and more analytical:

“I had sensed earlier what was going to happen. For some it was almost a tragedy. For me it was a historically inevitable result—a consequence of a complex set of factors, though I would prioritise the subjective dimension. It did not significantly affect my everyday life. For me, independence is a major historical achievement, but at the same time also an enormous responsibility. We have achieved a great deal, but many unresolved problems remain.”

This duality—achievement and burden, emancipation and responsibility—recurs frequently across the interviews. Independence is rarely presented as a simple liberation. Rather, it is valued because it opens historical possibility, even where its immediate consequences were painful or uncertain.

At the same time, the interviews reveal a strong retrospective tendency to rationalise the collapse of the USSR and the subsequent consolidation of the Uzbek state. Arustan, for example, framed the Soviet disintegration as the result of destructive rather than evolutionary change:

“We understood why the USSR collapsed. It was a wave that began breaking everything apart, whereas things should not have been broken; they should have been transformed gradually, as in China. The new party leaders went along with this destruction. Yeltsin, for example, could only become the ‘tsar of Russia’ by dissolving the USSR, and that is what he and his followers did. In Uzbekistan everyone wanted independence, wanted self-rule, but they were also afraid. In my view, I. Karimov was a brilliant politician: he created a sound economic basis, implemented a soft form of shock therapy, and restrained the radicals. Sh. Mirziyoyev later opened the borders, and capital began to be used in the interests of Uzbekistan.”

Such passages are revealing not only for what they say about 1991, but for how later political developments are read back into that moment. Respondents often retrospectively stabilise the uncertainty of the early 1990s by emphasising the necessity of order, the prudence of gradualism, and the role of strong leadership. This does not render their testimony uninformative; on the contrary, it shows how contemporary memory of independence has been shaped by subsequent state narratives of stability, sovereignty, and pragmatic development.

Uktam’s recollections are especially important in this regard because they combine first-hand parliamentary experience with an explicitly moral interpretation of independence:

“Among the deputies there were different and strong people, members of the intelligentsia, and I felt the approach of a very pleasant wind of change. The declaration of independence meant that the country would become independent. I was not an adventurer; I existed within that system. But, honestly speaking, we understood that Independence was the highest good. The leadership of Uzbekistan at that time acted correctly and showed restraint. Everything was only beginning. The party still existed. There were communists and non-communists, and

these two groups might have split into two hostile camps. A very wise decision was taken: we do not divide into reds and whites, we are one people, one society.”

He then offered a detailed recollection of the parliamentary session itself:

“When independence was declared, I was sitting in the parliamentary hall, on the left, in the third row. There were many opinions. Some thought that independence was something found on a platter and dropped from the sky. I could even see doubt and emotion among the members of the Supreme Soviet, the parliamentarians. But for me it was not like that: independence was a great blessing from Allah for us. At that moment the right decision had to be taken, and it was taken. When Islam Karimov declared the independence of Uzbekistan, to be honest, some deputies felt their hearts contract with anxiety: what are we to do now? Such moments existed. Yet before that, people had heard the speech of Odil Yakubov, a prominent Uzbek writer, at the Congress of People’s Deputies of the USSR. When our President said that he was declaring the independence of our country, those people were the first to rise and applaud, and then everyone else stood up. Why did not all deputies stand and applaud immediately? Everyone interprets that in their own way. One has to understand that we had lived under an enormous machine. What had that machine done before? Civil war, repressions, the ‘cotton affair’⁹, and so on. And now we declared independence. Naturally the question arose: what next? We were living people, and such thoughts were inevitable.”

This testimony is especially rich because it captures both the theatricality and the fragility of the founding moment. Independence is narrated here neither as spontaneous unanimity nor as chaotic rupture, but as a decision taken under conditions of deep inherited fear. The hesitation of the deputies becomes itself historically meaningful: it marks the lingering force of the Soviet political machine even at the moment of its symbolic undoing.

The respondents also agreed that the first half of the 1990s was materially difficult. Economic life is remembered as harsh: salary delays, electricity shortages, rationing, empty shops, and the breakdown of accustomed distribution systems. Yet these same memories often contain a counter-narrative of resilience. Several respondents insisted that the republic “quickly pulled itself out of this situation”, that new universities were opened, and that society gradually adapted, even if economic difficulties later returned. Such retrospective balancing is characteristic of many post-Soviet narratives: hardship is acknowledged, but folded into a broader story of endurance.

Uktam, once again, linked these difficulties to the necessity of firm rule:

⁹ The so-called ‘cotton affair’ (*khopkovoje delo*, Russian: «хлопковое дело»), a series of corruption-related prosecutions in Soviet Uzbekistan in the 1980s, was later widely criticised for serious procedural violations, including coercion, intimidation, and forced confessions. In 1989, official commissions of the CPSU Central Committee and the Supreme Soviet confirmed these irregularities, and criminal proceedings were subsequently initiated against several investigators. In December 1991, shortly before the formal dissolution of the USSR, President Islam Karimov granted amnesty to those convicted in connection with the case within Uzbekistan.

“A strong will was needed. When Mr Gorbachev said, ‘Now there are two presidents in the USSR,’ one’s heart did not tremble—this was undoubtedly a historical moment. I want to say one thing: even among the deputies of the Supreme Soviet there were people who supported the respected I. Karimov and gave him strength. One of them was Shavkat Miromonovich Mirziyoyev, who at that time was chairman of the credentials commission, one of the young democrats. He acted thoughtfully and pragmatically. There were factors that strengthened Karimov. The situation was extremely tense. I was personally involved in several critical moments. A firm hand was needed then. Our mentality, and many other things, made that necessary. I do not wish to humiliate anyone, especially because I love my people deeply. Internationalism is in our blood; we have always been friendly towards other peoples. We did not begin expelling other nationalities, which is why representatives of different nations still live among us. I remember that there was even a shortage of wheat and bread. The situation was very tense and critical. The most active years of our work fell precisely in that period. If one remembers it now—shops were empty, there was fear, but also courage and determination; one might say that ‘the street ruled’ then. As the Russians say, these were our own ‘wild nineties’. Even then, a firm hand was required.”

He added a particularly telling detail:

“At that time I myself was growing rice. My mother had land on the banks of the Koradarya, and I harvested one tonne of rice; that was our means of survival. Although I was a school director, an intellectual, I still had to do this in order to survive.”

This passage vividly illustrates the collapse of the old symbolic distinctions between intellectual and subsistence labour. Even educated state employees were drawn directly into material strategies of survival. Such memories reveal how independence was lived not only as national achievement, but as a reorganisation of everyday economic existence.

At the same time, not all respondents framed the early independent state in explicitly statist or leader-centred terms. Ravshan retained a more sober distance:

“Many people asked: what has this independence actually given you? We still hear such talk today. The road to independence is thorny. But we have achieved much. I had neither euphoria nor nostalgia. I understood that the old system could not provide all the necessary conditions. Although many retained nostalgia, and many are still ready for revanche—we can still see that today—declaring independence is one thing; continuing it is much harder.”

Arustan compressed a similar position into a shorter formula:

“Independence—or what people call the Karimov regime—preserved the stability of our country.”

These remarks are analytically useful because they show that support for independence did not necessarily imply romantic nationalism. Rather, it was frequently articulated through the language of stability, continuity, and the avoidance of chaos. Independence became acceptable, and later legitimate, not simply because it fulfilled a national dream, but because it appeared to offer the possibility of order after systemic disintegration.

Respondents also repeatedly linked independence to responsibility. In their accounts, society had not been fully prepared for sovereignty. There were many mistakes, including on the part of the republican leadership: factories closed, economic ties with other republics were broken, specialists left the country, and disappointment emerged quite quickly in the early years. Yet these problems were often narrated as “growing pains” rather than as reasons to question the legitimacy of independence itself. Here too we can observe a characteristic post hoc logic: the costs of statehood are acknowledged, but are retrospectively framed as the necessary price of sovereign development.

This is particularly visible in the sphere of education and language policy. Respondents noted that the post-independence years saw an expansion of Uzbek-language groups in higher education, the arrival in capital-based universities of more students from the provinces, and a broader revaluation of the state language. At the same time, these changes created new tensions, especially between Russian-speaking Uzbek lecturers and local students, where differences of language and dialect became more visible. This, in turn, reinforced the perceived need for wider use of Uzbek in professional and educational environments. Yet even here the interviews do not produce a simple nationalist line. Some members of the intelligentsia expressed caution about the introduction of the Latin script, viewing it as an additional burden on educational continuity rather than as an uncomplicated symbol of de-Sovietisation.

Lola stressed the continued importance of human capital formed under the Soviet educational system:

“We still had strong and capable specialists—teachers who had once received a truly excellent education. Many had studied abroad. At that time they sought, at least, to train professionals who would meet modern requirements, thereby mitigating some of the negative effects of these problems. Many of these specialists now work abroad, including in diplomatic structures.”

Ravshan framed the future in more civilisational terms:

“We have considerable potential and deep historical roots. On this land, our ancestors built states and contributed to world civilisation; we have much to be proud of. These historical and cultural foundations give us reason to hope for a worthy future.”

Shukhrat, by contrast, emphasised entrepreneurial energy:

“Our entrepreneurs have already begun creating joint ventures; we are building cooperation. Enterprise is in our blood. We are the most enterprising people here in Uzbekistan.”

These formulations are clearly shaped by later national discourse, but they are nevertheless revealing. They show how the meaning of independence came gradually to be

anchored in three linked ideas: historical depth, educational capacity, and economic initiative. In this retrospective frame, sovereignty is not merely political separation; it is the condition for the fuller realisation of national potential.

The respondents generally agreed that the end of the USSR and the emergence of independence were, in the end, historical processes with an inner logic. Older generations had suffered under Soviet rule; younger, intellectually ambitious people had come to see the limits of socialism; others met the collapse with indifference rather than enthusiasm. Yet apprehension persisted, and some segments of society continued to insist that independence had been unnecessary, harmful, or imposed from outside by the West. The interviews are important here precisely because they do not erase these disagreements. Instead, they show that Uzbek independence, like the broader Soviet collapse, remained an object of argument rather than a universally self-evident good.

Shukhrat recalled this uncertainty vividly:

“For me it was a great shock when the CPSU ceased to exist. I came to my institute—I had my own office—and suddenly everything had vanished. When the party ceased to exist, we began seriously to wonder what further global problems this perestroika would bring. Some began blaming Gorbachev for destroying the Union. But many expected good changes.”

This is a useful reminder that even among educated respondents who later endorsed independence, the disappearance of the Soviet institutional framework could still be experienced as a shock. The collapse of party structures produced not only political opportunity, but also existential emptiness.

Even so, when respondents reflected on the longer trajectory of independence, they generally described it as an expanding field of possibility rather than a regrettable detour. Arustan put it simply:

“There are prospects for the development of our country. It is good that we have our own independence. I believe in the enterprise of our people.”

Uktam tied the future more explicitly to memory and pedagogy:

“Our President rightly says: ‘Respected elders, share your rich life experience with the young.’ Young people must know this history. Why, for example, did I bring to the museum we created in memory of the victims of repression the families whose ancestors suffered in Soviet times—their children, their elders? Because when they see all this in the museum, they come out different people. Did we have such conditions then? We were afraid to speak; it was forbidden. When we gave our school the name of Babur, there were times when we could have been punished for it. We simply kept silent; we were afraid.”

In the end, when asked what independence meant personally, respondents often paused before answering. Their replies tended to move away from ideology towards a more intimate

language of future-oriented pragmatism: independence meant the possibility of a better life for one's children, the chance to provide them with a good education, and the hope that they might become self-reliant. At the same time, many stressed that Uzbekistan was only at the beginning of this path and that much remained to be done.

The interviewers noted that most respondents still retained some degree of nostalgia for the Soviet Union—above all for its social security and everyday predictability. Yet this nostalgia did not translate into a desire to reverse the course of history. On the contrary, the dominant conclusion across the interviews is that, whatever its contradictions and costs, Uzbekistan now has no other path than that of independent development.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that the relationship between Uzbek society and the Soviet state was more complex than a simple narrative of domination and resistance would imply. Although resistance to Soviet rule in Central Asia—particularly in Uzbekistan—was intense and prolonged during the early decades of Soviet power, by the late Soviet period the USSR had nevertheless come to be widely perceived as a familiar and, to a significant extent, internalised political framework. What had emerged was not merely institutional integration, but a form of Soviet sociality embedded in everyday practices, expectations, and identities.

At the same time, by the 1980s this system had entered a phase of profound internal erosion. The interviews analysed in this article consistently indicate that the disintegration of the Soviet Union was not experienced as a sudden or incomprehensible rupture, but rather as the culmination of a longer process of structural weakening. For many respondents, the collapse of the USSR was anticipated, even if its precise form and timing remained uncertain. The initial reaction of broad segments of the population was therefore neither uniformly enthusiastic nor overtly resistant, but was often marked by indifference, ambivalence, or cautious anticipation.

The relative acceptance of independence, as reflected in the respondents' narratives, can be explained by a convergence of several interrelated factors. First, by the late Soviet period the USSR had entered a systemic crisis characterised by declining trust in officially proclaimed communist ideology, growing awareness of economic and technological lag behind Western countries, and the visible failure of reform efforts during perestroika. Rather than resolving existing tensions, the reforms of 1985–1991 intensified them, exposing contradictions that could no longer be contained within the existing institutional framework.

Second, specific regional experiences played a crucial role in shaping perceptions of the Soviet system. In Uzbekistan, the legacy of the so-called “cotton affair” of the 1980s—marked

by accusations, prosecutions, and sanctions disproportionately affecting representatives of the national elite—contributed to a sense of injustice and latent disillusionment. At the same time, Uzbekistan’s position within the Soviet economy as a predominantly raw-material supplier, combined with relatively low living standards and persistent ecological and water-management problems, reinforced the perception of structural imbalance within the Union.

Third, the role of the elite proved decisive. As noted by S. Abashin, on the eve of the Soviet collapse there existed a “quiet dissatisfaction and non-acceptance” among segments of the Uzbek elite, for whom the transformation of the political system was both an opportunity and a destabilising experience¹⁰. The interviews analysed here confirm that elite actors were not merely passive recipients of systemic change, but active interpreters and mediators of it. Their biographical trajectories—often combining Soviet institutional integration with awareness of pre-Soviet social origins—enabled them to reframe independence as both historically grounded and pragmatically necessary.

At the same time, the declaration of independence in 1991 was experienced by many respondents as unexpected, even if it was later interpreted as consistent with the preceding trajectory of events. This apparent contradiction points to an important analytical distinction between structural anticipation and experiential perception: while the collapse of the Soviet system could be understood as inevitable, its immediate realisation generated uncertainty and concern. Fears regarding economic survival, institutional continuity, and political stability were widespread. The dependence of many sectors on all-Union economic networks, combined with concerns about unemployment, the withdrawal of subsidies, and the breakdown of established supply chains, contributed to a cautious and, at times, sceptical attitude towards independence.

Concerns about potential interethnic tensions and regional instability further complicated the reception of sovereignty. Given the multi-ethnic composition of Uzbek society—including a significant Russian-speaking population concentrated in major urban centres—independence was, for some, associated with the risk of nationalist exclusion or social fragmentation. Moreover, the Soviet Union itself continued to function as an important symbolic reference point, perceived by many as a shared homeland and a guarantor of stability. In this context, independence did not immediately replace Soviet identity, but entered into a field of competing and overlapping identifications.

¹⁰ YARMOSHCHUK, Tatiana. *Intelligentsiya ukhodit v oppozitsiyu. Natsional'nye dvizheniya v respublikakh nakanune raspada SSSR. Chast' trinadtsataya: Uzbekistan*. Current Time, 11 January 2023 [online]. [accessed 16 April 2025]. Available from: <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/ussr-uzbekistan/32217736.html>

The relative indifference observed among parts of the population can thus be interpreted not as political apathy in a narrow sense, but as the result of habituation to a long-standing institutional order combined with uncertainty about viable alternatives. Decades of life within a centralised system had normalised dependence on state structures, making the prospect of autonomous development both desirable and unsettling. For Russian-speaking urban populations in particular, independence raised concerns about linguistic and cultural repositioning within the new state framework.

Importantly, the oral histories analysed here indicate that, for a considerable segment of the population, independence in 1991 was experienced less as a moment of liberation than as a period characterised by anxious uncertainty. This perception, however, was not static. Over time, initial uncertainty gave way to more differentiated evaluations, shaped by subsequent political, economic, and social developments.

From a longer-term perspective, respondents increasingly interpret independence as a framework of opportunity rather than disruption. It is associated with the possibility of cultural self-definition, the strengthening of national identity, and the pursuit of an autonomous foreign policy. The transition to a market-oriented economy and the development of new sectors—including finance, information technologies, education, healthcare, and energy—are seen as key elements of this transformation. At the same time, respondents recognise that these potentials have been unevenly realised, constrained both by the authoritarian features of the political system in the 1990s and early 2000s and by the structural legacies of the Soviet period.

Only in more recent years—particularly after 2016—do respondents begin to describe independence as more fully realised in practice, associating this period with greater openness, reform, and a more active use of opportunities that had long remained only partially fulfilled. Importantly, these perceptions should not be read as evidence of a clear break with the past. Rather, they reflect a retrospective reframing of independence as a longer and still unfinished process in which continuity and change remain closely intertwined.

Despite persistent nostalgia for certain aspects of Soviet life—most notably perceived social security and stability—the respondents overwhelmingly agree that there is no viable alternative to independent development. Independence is thus not idealised as a perfect achievement, but accepted as a historical condition that entails both opportunity and responsibility. In this sense, sovereignty is understood less as an endpoint than as an ongoing process, requiring continuous negotiation between inherited structures, present challenges, and future aspirations.

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