

FORMATION OF UZBEK NATIONAL CULTURE IN THE EARLY YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE

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Abstract: This article examines the formation and transformation of Uzbek national culture during the early years of independence, focusing on key political, social, and cultural reforms implemented between 1991 and 2000. Drawing on historical, legal, and theoretical sources, the study explores how the newly established state prioritized cultural revival, national identity, and the restoration of historical memory after decades of ideological restrictions under the Soviet regime. Particular attention is given to the development of cultural policy, the institutional strengthening of cultural infrastructures, the revival of traditional values, and Uzbekistan's increased engagement with international cultural organizations. The findings highlight that the initial decade of independence served as a critical foundation for redefining national cultural identity, modernizing cultural sectors, and fostering a renewed sense of heritage and self-awareness in society.

Keywords: uzbek culture, independence, identity, cultural policy, cultural revival, historical memory, traditional values, cultural modernization, post-soviet transformation, uzbekistan's cultural development, early independence period

INTRODUCTION

The early years of Uzbekistan's independence marked a decisive turning point in the nation's cultural, political, and ideological development. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Uzbekistan faced the complex task of redefining its national identity, reconstructing its cultural foundations, and restoring historical values that had long been overshadowed by centralized ideological control.[1] In this period of profound transformation, culture emerged not only as a symbolic element of national self-determination but also as a strategic resource for strengthening social cohesion, promoting unity, and consolidating the newly independent state. The legacy of the Soviet era had left deep structural and ideological imprints on cultural institutions, artistic expression, education, and collective memory. Many traditional practices, religious customs, and elements of intangible heritage had been marginalized or altered in accordance with Soviet ideological frameworks. Consequently, the early 1990s witnessed an urgent need to revive suppressed cultural forms, reassess the nation's historical trajectory, and reconstruct an authentic cultural narrative grounded in indigenous values and civilizational heritage. The ideological shift toward national revival—commonly referred to as "milliy tiklanish"—became a guiding principle that shaped the government's cultural policies and societal reforms. In this context, Uzbekistan introduced a wide range of initiatives aimed at building a stable cultural infrastructure, preserving historical sites, revitalizing national holidays, reestablishing traditional arts, and strengthening cultural education. At the same time, the country expanded its partnerships with international organizations such as UNESCO and

ISESCO,[8] thereby positioning itself within the global cultural community while articulating a distinctive national cultural identity. The purpose of this article is to analyze the formative processes of Uzbek national culture during the first decade of independence, focusing on the political, historical, and ideological forces that shaped cultural renewal. By examining legislative reforms, institutional changes, and evolving cultural discourses, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Uzbekistan laid the foundation for a modern, yet historically conscious national cultural paradigm.[3]

THEORETICAL–HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The formation of Uzbek national culture in the early years of independence must be understood within a broader theoretical and historical framework shaped by colonial legacy, ideological transformation, and the emergence of post-Soviet nation-building processes. During the Soviet era, cultural development in Uzbekistan was largely subordinated to centralized policies aimed at promoting socialist ideology, suppressing national consciousness, and reshaping local cultural practices. Traditional forms of cultural expression—such as religious rituals, indigenous arts, historical narratives, and symbolic heritage—were either marginalized, regulated, or selectively reinterpreted to fit Soviet political objectives. This produced a dual cultural landscape: an official, state-sanctioned culture aligned with socialist values, and an informal culture maintained within families and communities. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought about a radical ideological vacuum, creating both challenges and opportunities for newly independent Uzbekistan. From a theoretical standpoint, the early independence period represents a classic case of postcolonial cultural reconstruction, in which a nation seeks to reclaim its suppressed heritage, reformulate its identity, and establish new cultural paradigms free from prior hegemonic influences.[4] The concept of “national revival” became central in articulating a renewed cultural philosophy dedicated to restoring historical continuity and affirming civilizational roots. Historically, the early 1990s coincided with a period of institutional fragmentation and socioeconomic instability, which directly influenced cultural policies. Cultural institutions inherited from the Soviet system lacked modern infrastructure, financial resources, and autonomous decision-making mechanisms. This environment necessitated comprehensive reforms to rebuild cultural governance, rehabilitate historical memory, and cultivate a unified national narrative grounded in indigenous traditions. Thus, the theoretical–historical background of this analysis demonstrates that cultural formation during independence was both a response to structural constraints and a deliberate state-led strategy for ideological consolidation and nation-building.[5]

In the first decade following independence, Uzbekistan pursued an active and multidimensional cultural policy aimed at establishing a stable foundation for national cultural development. The state prioritized legislative reforms to institutionalize cultural autonomy and protect the cultural heritage of the nation. Key documents, including the “Law on Culture” (1996) and various presidential decrees, played a decisive role in regulating cultural activities, ensuring state support for artists, safeguarding material and immaterial cultural heritage, and enhancing the institutional capacity of cultural organizations.

The early cultural policy emphasized three core objectives:

1. Institutional restructuring – Many cultural institutions, such as theaters, museums, publishing houses, and research centers, were reorganized to operate within the framework of national ideology rather than Soviet administrative directives. The Ministry of Culture was reformed to develop long-term strategies for cultural modernization and heritage preservation.

2. Cultural infrastructure development – Significant investments were directed toward restoring architectural monuments, supporting regional cultural centers, and revitalizing the performing arts. This period saw the renovation of historical sites, the establishment of new cultural houses, and the promotion of national crafts as part of cultural tourism initiatives.

3. Ideological consolidation through culture – The state conceptualized culture as a critical tool for strengthening social unity, promoting patriotism, and reinforcing the newly formed national identity. Cultural programs, public events, and media initiatives were aligned with the ideological goals of independence, including national pride, historical continuity, and moral education.

As a result, cultural policy during the early independence years functioned as both a mechanism for administrative reform and a strategic instrument for shaping the ideological foundations of the emerging Uzbek nation-state.

The revival of national identity stands at the core of Uzbekistan’s cultural transformation during the early independence period. After decades of ideological homogenization under Soviet rule, Uzbek society sought to reestablish its cultural distinctiveness by reconnecting with historical traditions, symbolic heritage, and deep-rooted civilizational values. This process was driven by a collective aspiration to restore cultural continuity and overcome the imposed cultural amnesia of the Soviet era. Several key elements characterized this revival:

1. Restoration of historical memory – Independence enabled a renewed examination of historical figures, events, and intellectual traditions previously censored or distorted. Celebrations dedicated to Amir Temur, Mirzo Ulug‘bek, Alisher Navoiy, and other prominent scholars and rulers played an important role in reinforcing national pride and historical consciousness.

2. Reinstitution of traditional customs and rituals – Cultural holidays such as Navro‘z regained their official status and began to be celebrated publicly on a nationwide scale. Traditional arts—including embroidery, ceramics, musical heritage, and classical maqom—received institutional recognition and state support.

3. Revalorization of indigenous values – National identity was reconstructed around traditional concepts such as community cohesion (mahalla), respect for ancestors, hospitality, and family-centered social ethics. These values were promoted through educational reforms, literature, and nationwide cultural programs.

4. Language and symbolic identity – The adoption of the Uzbek language as the state language, as well as the creation of national symbols (flag, coat of arms, anthem), reinforced the ideological and symbolic foundations of national identity.

Through these initiatives, Uzbekistan advanced a comprehensive cultural ideology that positioned national heritage not merely as a historical inheritance but as a foundation for modern nation-building and socio-cultural development.

During the early independence years, Uzbekistan actively engaged with the international cultural community as part of its strategy to gain global visibility, exchange cultural knowledge, and establish itself as a sovereign cultural actor. This integration aimed not only to present Uzbekistan’s rich heritage on the world stage but also to align the nation with global frameworks for cultural preservation and development. Uzbekistan’s cooperation with UNESCO, ISESCO, and various international foundations played a pivotal role in advancing cultural diplomacy. Several historical sites, including those in Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva, were inscribed on

the UNESCO World Heritage List, highlighting their universal cultural significance.[9] Such international recognition contributed to strengthening Uzbekistan's cultural identity globally and enhancing its cultural tourism sector. In addition, cultural festivals such as "Sharq Taronalari" (Melodies of the East), launched in Samarkand in 1997, provided platforms for intercultural exchange and positioned Uzbekistan as a center for global artistic dialogue. These festivals brought together musicians, scholars, and cultural experts from diverse countries, fostering mutual understanding and expanding Uzbekistan's cultural influence. Furthermore, international cultural integration encouraged collaboration in fields such as archaeology, restoration, museum development, and artistic education. Through academic partnerships, joint research projects, and cultural exhibitions, Uzbekistan promoted a dynamic image of its evolving cultural landscape while learning from global best practices in cultural governance.

Modernization of culture in Uzbekistan during the initial decade of independence involved the transition from a centrally controlled Soviet cultural model to a more pluralistic, diverse, and innovative cultural system. This process sought to harmonize traditional heritage with contemporary global influences, thereby creating a modern cultural paradigm that remained rooted in national identity.

Three major dimensions shaped this modernization:

1. Cultural diversification and openness – With the removal of ideological restrictions, artists, writers, filmmakers, and musicians gained greater creative freedom. New genres, artistic methods, and contemporary themes emerged, reflecting both global trends and local realities. Private cultural initiatives, non-governmental cultural organizations, and independent creative studios began to appear for the first time.
2. Development of cultural industries – The shift toward a market-oriented economy facilitated the emergence of cultural entrepreneurship. Publishing, cinema, fashion, and design industries started to develop as part of the broader creative economy. Cultural products increasingly catered to both domestic and international audiences.
3. Technological and educational modernization – The introduction of new technologies transformed cultural production and dissemination. Media reforms, digitalization of archives, and modernization of cultural education institutions helped integrate Uzbekistan into the global information and cultural space. Art schools, conservatories, and universities expanded their programs to include modern artistic disciplines alongside traditional arts. The modernization of culture during the early independence period therefore represented a balanced synthesis of tradition and innovation, contributing to the formation of a dynamic cultural ecosystem capable of adapting to global transformations while preserving the authenticity of Uzbek cultural identity.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of the cultural transformation that occurred during the early years of Uzbekistan's independence demonstrates that the formation of national culture was neither a spontaneous nor exclusively symbolic process. Instead, it emerged through a complex interaction of political reforms, historical re-evaluations, and sociocultural mobilization. The state's decisive role in shaping cultural policy was particularly significant. By prioritizing nation-building and cultural revival as core components of post-independence development, governmental institutions provided both ideological direction and structural support for the restoration of national identity. This top-down approach created a coherent cultural narrative capable of unifying a population that had recently emerged from the homogenizing influence of Soviet ideology. At the same time,

the revival of national identity depended greatly on the active participation of society itself. Intellectuals, writers, artists, and educators contributed to constructing a renewed understanding of Uzbek cultural heritage. Their efforts to reexamine historical figures, reintroduce classical literature, and restore traditional values helped form an intellectual framework that resonated with the general population. This dynamic indicates that cultural formation in early independence was a hybrid process, combining state policy with grassroots engagement, where both forces mutually reinforced the emergence of a modern national consciousness. Another central theme of this period was the negotiation between tradition and modernity. While the revival of pre-Soviet cultural elements strengthened national pride, the simultaneous aspiration to modernize—visible in educational reforms, cultural infrastructure development, digitization of cultural resources, and expanding global partnerships—signaled that Uzbekistan sought not only to restore its past but also to redefine its cultural future. This balance between continuity and change was essential for building a cultural model that aligned with both national values and global dynamics. International cultural integration further accelerated this process. Cross-cultural collaborations, global exhibitions, UNESCO partnerships, and foreign cultural missions enabled Uzbekistan to present its cultural heritage to the world while adopting international standards in arts, preservation, and cultural management. These interactions broadened the country's cultural horizons, allowing for exchange, innovation, and a more diverse cultural landscape. Overall, the findings suggest that the early independence period laid the foundational pillars of contemporary Uzbek culture through a combined emphasis on historical revival, national identity construction, modernization, and global engagement. The long-term impact of these processes is evident today, as Uzbekistan continues to advance cultural reforms, reinterpret heritage through modern lenses, and position itself as a dynamic cultural actor in the international community. The early 1990s, therefore, represent not only a period of transition but also a decisive moment in establishing the ideological and institutional basis of modern Uzbek national culture.

CONCLUSION

The early years of Uzbekistan's independence marked a historically transformative period in which the foundations of modern national culture were decisively shaped. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the country embarked on an intensive process of redefining its cultural identity, reclaiming its historical heritage, and constructing a new ideological framework aligned with the goals of state sovereignty. The revival of national values, reinterpretation of historical narratives, and rehabilitation of cultural symbols collectively contributed to the consolidation of a distinctive national consciousness. State-led cultural policy played a central role by articulating strategic priorities in heritage preservation, promotion of the Uzbek language, establishment of new cultural institutions, and ideological education. However, this transformation was not limited to governmental initiatives; it was reinforced by the active involvement of intellectuals, artists, and the wider public in re-evaluating cultural memory and promoting traditional arts, literature, and social values. This synergy between institutional reforms and societal participation created a durable cultural framework that continues to influence the nation's developmental trajectory. Simultaneously, the pursuit of modernization and global integration shaped the formation of a culture that is historically grounded yet responsive to contemporary challenges. International partnerships, cultural exchanges, and UNESCO-led initiatives helped situate Uzbekistan within broader global cultural networks, encouraging innovation while maintaining strong links to tradition. Overall, the analysis demonstrates that the formative cultural processes

of the early independence period established the ideological, historical, and institutional underpinnings of Uzbekistan's present-day cultural identity. These developments laid the groundwork for ongoing reforms in the cultural sector and continue to inform the nation's evolving vision of cultural modernization and international engagement. Thus, the early 1990s represent not only a moment of political transition but a critical point of cultural renaissance that continues to shape Uzbekistan's national character in the 21st century.

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