

Trust and Deception in (Post-)Soviet Uzbekistan

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Summary:

The breakdown of the Soviet Union together with the dissolution of the socialist order was experienced as a painful severance from a life people in Uzbekistan had been intimately familiar with. The emotional response aroused by Uzbek independence becomes apparent in oral accounts of trust and deception. The older generation tends to view the past as having been a time of mutual trust, while acts of hostility and deception are seen as characteristic of the post-Soviet social condition. Younger people are, in comparison, more temperate in their evaluation of the current social environment. Nevertheless, there seems to be some agreement that one must still exercise caution in interactions with others if trouble is to be avoided. I suggest that such an outlook may also be indicative of an uncertainty with regard to appropriate agency among Uzbeks both young and old.

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Introduction

For the people of Uzbekistan, life did not change abruptly on September 1, 1991 with the declaration of independence, nor with the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union on December 25 of the same year. The policies of perestroika and especially of glasnost — the latter permitting a more open discussion of political and social issues as well as a freer dissemination of information — had an impact on the way Uzbek people thought and went about their everyday lives. After independence the formerly omnipresent state withdrew only gradually from the many spheres of daily life that it had previously been involved in, consequently leaving citizens to cope by themselves with their economic and social problems.

Still, as I shall argue, we need to understand how many people must have experienced a form of rupture — of being violently severed from the past — in their transition to a post-Soviet mode of existence. Soviet indoctrination had hitherto been too thorough, enveloping all areas of life in order to wholly absorb the individual.¹ If all of one's efforts were aimed at the achievement of a collective goal — namely

¹ According to Huber (2006: 130–131), socialist states were working toward substituting interpersonal relations with relations between the individual and the state; as perceived by critically minded subjects, this represented an intrusion into the private sphere. See also, Hosking (2013: 19).

Communism — that the authorities asserted was drawing closer to realization, the failure of the socialist project and the collapse of the value system that it had helped to establish must have felt like the most improbable of outcomes — or, worse, just a bad dream. To this day, some people cannot make sense of the ideological shift that came after 1991. As my Uzbek host mother once matter-of-factly observed, “Wasn’t it strange how Lenin — formerly revered by everyone — was suddenly considered to be some kind of villain?”²

The economic decline setting in after independence was for families and individuals alike the issue of most immediate concern. Some state-owned enterprises were

interpretation of Uzbek people's feelings with regard to their current social environment.⁴

The past as a time of mutual trust

Whereas today one is free to praise independent Uzbekistan and the achievements of its government, voicing any kind of criticism is a different matter altogether and can have negative consequences. This even applies to more general statements of unhappiness. People usually resort to self-censorship, but if they should wish to speak their mind they will only do so among those held to be trustworthy. An exception to this unwritten rule would be the short-term encounter that takes place during a taxi ride, an occasion for the airing of the most straightforward statements and complaints.⁵ When drivers talk about the current state of affairs or condemn the new zeitgeist, they do not always relate the present to the past. If they do, though, older people are more likely to consider the Soviet period in favorable terms and to present a disparaging view of contemporary life.

In this vein, let me describe what was probably the most memorable assertion that I ever heard in Uzbekistan during a taxi ride. One evening in the autumn of 2007, I was in conversation with an ethnic Uzbek driver in his late fifties or early sixties who talked himself into a rage as we passed by Independence Square (*Mustaqillik Maydoni*) in Tashkent city center. In an outburst of emotion, the catalyst for which I cannot recall, he declared that the only suitable place for Uzbeks was the bazaar, as they can cheat and take advantage of one another there — behavior that, according to him, in Soviet times would have simply been out of the question. Similarly, only recently, in an interview with a member of the Bukharan Jewish community of Uzbekistan who moved to Germany a decade ago, the septuagenarian responded to my question about life in his home country today with the words “people betray one another” (*odamlar aldaydi bir-birini*). Such accounts of deception are quite common when Uzbeks talk about their contemporary everyday experiences.

Opposing perspectives, correlated with age, are apparent from the following account given by an informant of Bukharan origin currently living in Tashkent. He relates how, in discussion, his father often voices regret for the vanishing of an ethos of solidarity in society. Feeling challenged, my informant will then remind his father that — unlike in Soviet times — one can today buy a wide variety of products in the shops. Material wealth is not his concern, replies the father, but rather the social environment. They did not have to worry about survival in the past either, but at the

⁴ I use research materials accumulated in the context of an anthropological study on the aspirations of young male Uzbeks in Tashkent, which also included recent migrants from the provinces. My findings therefore relate primarily to people of an urban middle-class background. The methods that I employed were participant observation and interviews.

⁵ This openness may naturally also have to do with the fact that a foreigner like me takes a position external to the social and cultural systems in place, and can therefore serve as a confidant.

same time they trusted one another so fully that storeowners left their doors unlocked at night. In the countryside, sacks of flour lay piled up in front of the stores without anybody touching them.

Nostalgic views of the Soviet past such as this one commonly prevail among members of the older generations.⁶ When interpreting such utterances, we can see a pattern emerge. While deception is perceived as a common experience today, the Soviet past is associated with comradeship and mutual support.⁷ Furthermore, whereas people once allegedly felt assured of the goodwill of others, trust has seemingly become a limited commodity in contemporary Uzbekistan.⁸

In my experience, the younger generation does not seriously question the somewhat idealistic manner in which some parents and grandparents remember former times. They will often declare their own ignorance about the circumstances of daily life during the Soviet era. Occasionally they criticize aspects of Soviet culture in order to defend the achievements of independent Uzbekistan. After all, simply accepting a lower ranking for the new project of state-building as compared to the socialist project that the older generations had shared in would be to admit defeat and failure. This is, for example, how I interpret the reaction of my informant from Bukhara to his father's grievances. State propaganda — some of which is compulsory reading in the university — certainly plays a role in the forming of opinions about the Soviet experience as well. However, in spite of the occasional criticisms voiced by young

6 Originally a medical term used to express feelings of “grief and obsession with a return to the place of origin,” nostalgia is today rather understood as “a sociotemporal yearning for a different stage or quality of life” (Boyer 2010: 18). Post-socialist nostalgia does not, according to Boyer (ibid.: 18–19), represent the desire to return to a socialist system but rather to recapture the experience of life at that time — and should, hence, be seen as some kind of coping behavior in an unfamiliar and seemingly hostile present. It is in line with this latter reading of nostalgia that I would want to interpret memories of the Soviet period such as those mentioned in this article. In Uzbekistan there exists no nostalgia industry of the kind that can be found, for example, in Mongolia (cf. the paper by Ines Stolpe in this volume), Germany, or Russia, which produce sentimental or humorous portrayals of the socialist past.

7 The topos of the humane Soviet period versus a selfish and relentless mentality predominant today is characteristic of the whole post-Soviet space. Garey, for instance, quotes Buriat villagers in rural Siberia as saying: “People do not want to help each other out. Everything is for money.” (2012: 45). Writing about post-Soviet Lithuanian society, Vonderau (2010: 141) mentions how having money has come to be seen as imperative in order to own some of the good things in life and to leave other citizens behind.

8 In the Uzbek language, the closest equivalent for the term “trust” would be *ishonch*. The Uzbek Language Interpretive Dictionary (*O’zbek Tilining Izohli Lug’ati* 2006: 257–258) describes it as a feeling sensed in relation to a person or a thing, inducing faith and confidence. That person or thing is associated with the quality of reliability and sentiments of hope. When looking at the verb form *ishonmoq*, it becomes clear that in the Uzbek understanding trust depends on what one can expect others to do or to refrain from. According to the aforementioned dictionary (ibid.: 257), you trust someone when you can be sure that this person is not going to deceive you (*pand bermaydi, deb bilmoq*). To rely and pin your hopes on someone or something (*suyammoq; umid bog’lamoq*) is a further connotation of the verb. However, it also means to believe in the truth of something (*haqiqat, chin deb bilmoq*).

Uzbeks, they essentially agree with the image of the past that is common among older people.

Acts of deception and hostility

The statements from the previous section indicate a popularly perceived tendency for modern Uzbek people to deceive one another for material profit.⁹ There are also accounts of acts motivated by ill intent toward assumed competitors. An example would be the practice of reporting on co-workers in the office, as mentioned by my informants. An ambitious employee may, in this way, inform their superior about a colleague's lack of work discipline, his/her inexcusable prolonging of their lunch break, or private phone calls made during work hours. There are also cases where people turn directly to the state in order to cause their perceived competitors or enemies trouble. A person wishing ill will make use of slander (*to'hamat*) to call the attention of the prosecutor's office or the tax authorities to a purported criminal offence.

The severe consequences of this course of action are best illustrated by way of a small anecdote: When I worked as a lecturer at the Tashkent Financial Institute in 2007, I noticed one day that a colleague of mine seemed greatly distressed and, enquiring about her condition, I learned that her father had just been arrested. In her account, a certain businessman had accused her father — himself an entrepreneur — of some financial crime such as fraud or tax evasion, and despite her father's innocence he was still imprisoned and his assets expropriated. In response to the injustice my colleague acted decisively, taking legal advice and turning for help to an influential contact from the Uzbek senate. Her efforts were not in vain, for in the end her father was released — and it is now the other businessman who sits in prison.¹⁰ A person who had made false accusations in order to get rid of a competitor seems to have been rightfully punished by how things eventually turned out in this case.

Informants and respondents that I have talked to tend to regard attempts to deceive others and cause them harm as linked to the widespread phenomenon of competition. For the sake of employment positions, access to resources, an economic advantage, influence, and ultimately status (*obro'*), people in Uzbekistan make use of means that are not always entirely fair and above board.

9 In the field, people would mostly use the verb *aldamoq* when speaking about deception. The Uzbek dictionary (*O'zbek Tilining Izohli Lug'ati* 2006: 69) tells us that *aldamoq* refers to lies and false statements (*yolg'on-yashiq gaplar*), and can mean as much as deluding with promises (*va'dalar bilan laqillatmoq*). The fact that deception may be intentionally employed is possibly more apparent in another connotation, as *aldamoq* also stands for creating a false impression (*noto'g'ri tasavvur tug'dirmoq*) alongside distracting or misleading (*chalg'itmoq*) someone.

10 The whole affair raises questions about the thoroughness of the Uzbek criminal investigation process and the legitimacy or arbitrariness of jurisdiction in the country.

Although those from different generations may not find common ground in their overall evaluation of the post-Soviet present, younger people do not deny the existence, the prominent place, and even the problematic effects of rampant competition in Uzbek society. The standard excuse for the shortcomings of the system, together with its social consequences, is the alleged recency of an adjustment to models of parliamentary democracy and economic liberalism alongside the overall chaos of the political transition process. Confidently, many assume that after the completion of the transition the system will operate more satisfactorily, the most immediate difficulties will be overcome, and the livelihood of each person will be guaranteed. Instead of looking back, the younger generation is thus disposed to looking ahead to the future.¹¹ Some individuals are indeed doubtful about the pace and direction of state development and feel discouraged by the unfolding of their own life's course. One of my informants, who had become increasingly disillusioned by the conditions vis-à-vis the Uzbek labor market, eventually made up his mind and left for Ukraine in order to find better work there. On the whole, though, my research results suggest that young Uzbeks look toward the future with hope and do their best to create a gratifying existence for themselves and their families. A number of them state that their religious belief helps to contain worries and equips them with a sense of confidence in the face of what is going to come.

The cautious citizen

Considering the above, it is not surprising that people perceive the existence of only little trust in society. At times, conversations came to a point where someone would declare that there is just no trust (*ishonch yo'q*) among people. The present situation is distinguished from the past in remarks such as “no trust is left” (*ishonch qolmadi*). People are concerned about being taken advantage of or becoming the victim of someone else's scheming. The mother of an informant in an elevated position always implored him that he should carefully read every contract he signed, because each could potentially be later used as evidence in a criminal case instigated to damage him professionally and personally. Supposedly, one can no longer even be certain that old friends or immediate family members will not resort to treachery when large amounts of money are involved.¹²

From the accusatory tone that older Uzbeks sometimes choose for their narrations, I deduce that the state is held at least partly responsible for these insufferable conditions. After all, the social order was largely a product of state policy under the old system and developments were steered by the Communist Party. As such,

11 For Kyrgyz images of the future, see Féaux de la Croix (2010).

12 I cannot remember ever hearing an actual account of such betrayal though, which may be an indication of a discursive pattern rather than a factual description when it comes to the Uzbek social reality.

statements like these can be read as expressions of a deeply felt popular sense of having been betrayed by the state alongside a widespread lack of trust in the current governance system. To cope with current conditions in Uzbek society, as they are perceived by people at large, demands caution in one's interaction with other citizens more generally and the state in particular. The cautious citizen is the appellation I have come up with to indicate the attitude adopted in light of these circumstances.

One is well advised, though, to put the comparison of past and present into perspective. It would be overly simplistic to just concur with those of the older Uzbeks who see the present dominated by competition while still cherishing the Soviet past as a time of natural solidarity and altruistic behavior. There are plenty of sources available reminding us of selfish conduct in the local neighborhood and the employment of ruthless career strategies in the workplace that tarnish the image of a wholly harmonious life in late Brezhnev-era Soviet society, not to mention in earlier periods.¹³

Chto delat'?

Not doubting the overall notion of a loss of trust in the Uzbek social environment, I want to suggest some further possible interpretations as well. It seems to me that one may also read the above statements as expressions of an uncertainty with regard to appropriate agency. People from the older generation who have not managed to adapt to the new system are unaware of the rules of the current game. Young Uzbeks, on the other hand, are fortunate enough to have a variety of options at their disposal — but also need to take greater responsibility for their life trajectories. The actions of others may seem threatening when they cannot be properly anticipated or when they turn out to be part of a successful strategy that one lacks the necessary knowledge to counter. After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the emerging business elite was quick to work out how to undertake their commercial activities in the new circumstances while the majority of the people, however, kept on going as if the socialist order was still intact.

My Uzbek host father, Abdulla aka, probably serves as a good example for someone from the latter category: Having spent the early years of adulthood as a soldier in Afghanistan, where he was wounded when a Mujahedeen bullet went right through his hand, he returned to his native Uzbekistan to find the Soviet state system had dissolved. Instead of being received as a war hero, Abdulla aka had to scour the labor market to find a way to provide for his young wife and children. There was little demand for his carpentry skills, however, and until this day he only earns money through participation in occasional construction projects. With the obligation

13 See, for instance, Mehnert (1981: 161–162) and Mars and Altman (1986). For a fictional account, see Nazarov (2002).

to arrange the weddings of his four children, a great financial burden is currently weighing down on the household. In a socialist society, Abdulla aka would have surely found his place — but now he instead spends his afternoons and evenings in front of the TV set so that the moving images can carry him away to foreign lands. Once I observed an outburst of rage from him that seemed to be saying more about his degree of frustration than about the irritating matter at hand. The eldest son had forgotten to prepare dinner, instead writing messages on his mobile phone. Furious, Abdulla aka grabbed the telephone, smashed it against the wall of the yard, and started beating the boy. Since mobile phones were at that time still more strongly associated with the new affluent stratum of the population and their dealings, I am inclined to see the disproportionate reaction to a minor failure as an expression of utter disappointment with a system Abdulla aka no longer understands.

In comparison with the Soviet past, the lives of young Uzbeks are today less regulated — which means more freedom, but which also requires making deliberate choices.¹⁴ This applies to the issue of choosing a profession, for instance. An informant of mine, originally coming from Qashqadaryo Province in the south of Uzbekistan, points out that until recently one's profession was not a matter of choice. In the pre-Soviet period the father's trade customarily determined the son's occupation, whereas people today are altogether more free (*mustaqilroq*) than they used to be. He continues his argument by turning to the Soviet period, when the state restricted one's freedom of choice. The planned economy was responsible for the rigorous organization of all social processes. After being properly educated, for instance, you were placed in a particular job whether you liked it or not: "That was not the kind of work you wished for, but what they told you to do" (*Bu xohlagan ish emas, ular sizga aytgan ish*).

Nowadays, students with outstanding grades or the required means can spend a year or more at a university in Europe, North America, or Southeast Asia. And a religious-minded person may live in Uzbekistan in accordance with Muslim principles if they so choose. It would be only reasonable if young people felt challenged by the manifold options available today.¹⁵ When the position of the state toward its citizens becomes less patronizing, one is obliged to make use of their own cognitive faculties and thus to take responsibility for any achievements and failures that are to ensue. The Uzbek family still exerts a great influence on the decision-making of their offspring, however, and must be classified as a strong counterweight to any self-determined agency.

14 One reason for the greater divergence of the courses of young people's lives across post-Soviet Central Asia may be found in the demise of the youth organization (

More than two decades after the breakdown of the Soviet Union, traces of the forceful impact of this event remain clearly discernible in Uzbek society. In accounts of trust and deception, people convey an emotional response to the experience of a rupture with a familiar way of being. While the older generation tends to embrace and glorify the Soviet past, young Uzbeks instead tie their hopes to the future. The present, though, seems to be only moderately appealing — regardless of one's age.

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