

**NATIONAL REVIVAL IN THE UZBEK SSR DURING
PERESTROIKA (1985–1991): A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS
WITHIN POST-SOVIET TENDENCIES**

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Abstract. *This article examines the processes of national awakening in the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (Uzbek SSR) during the period of Soviet restructuring known as perestroika (1985–1991), placing them within the broader framework of national revival movements that emerged across the post-Soviet space. Drawing on historical, political science, and comparative methodologies, the study analyzes the role of intellectual elites, language policy reform, and civic mobilization in shaping Uzbek national identity under late Soviet conditions. The article argues that while Uzbekistan's national movement shared structural similarities with Baltic and Caucasian counterparts — including the centrality of language legislation and cultural organizations — it diverged significantly in its trajectory owing to institutional constraints, the dominance of the Communist Party apparatus, and the absence of mass street mobilization. The Birlik (Unity) Popular Movement is analyzed as the primary vehicle of national articulation, and its limitations are compared against analogous movements in Estonia, Latvia, and Georgia. The findings contribute to broader theoretical debates on nationalism under authoritarian conditions and the uneven character of decolonization within the Soviet empire.*

Keywords: *perestroika, Uzbek SSR, national revival, Birlik movement, post-Soviet nationalism, comparative analysis, language policy, Soviet identity.*

Introduction

The late Soviet era marked a decisive rupture in the political and cultural landscape of the USSR, as Mikhail Gorbachev's twin policies of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring) inadvertently unlocked space for suppressed national identities across the Union's fifteen republics. Whereas the Baltic states and the South Caucasus have received considerable scholarly attention as emblematic cases of national mobilization leading to independence, Central Asia — and Uzbekistan in particular — remains underrepresented in comparative frameworks [1]. This lacuna is significant: as the most populous Muslim-majority republic, Uzbekistan's path to independence illuminates the differential logic of Soviet collapse and the heterogeneous character of post-Soviet nation-building.

Uzbekistan's national movement during perestroika was neither passive nor uniform. The emergence of the Birlik Popular Movement in 1988, the landmark Uzbek Language Law of 1989, and growing tensions over resource distribution and cultural autonomy all represented meaningful expressions of national consciousness [2]. Yet these developments unfolded within a political environment marked by elite continuity, restricted civic space, and the enduring dominance of the Communist Party apparatus. The result was a national awakening that was real but constrained — a phenomenon that defies simple categorization within existing typologies of nationalist movements.

This article contributes to the growing comparative literature on Soviet and post-Soviet nationalisms by situating Uzbekistan's experience

within Miroslav Hroch's three-phase model of small-nation nationalism, while also engaging with Benedict Anderson's framework of imagined communities and Rogers Brubaker's analysis of nationalizing states [3]. The central question guiding this analysis is: to what extent did the national revival in the Uzbek SSR conform to or deviate from the structural patterns observable in other Soviet republics, and what factors account for these divergences [4]?

Methods and Materials. This study employs a comparative historical methodology, drawing on a synthesis of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include legislative documents (notably the 1989 Uzbek Language Law and Birlik's founding program), digitized Soviet-era periodicals from the Uzbek SSR (*Pravda Vostoka*, *Yoshlik*), and memoirs of participants in the national movement. Secondary sources encompass monographs on Soviet nationality policy, comparative works on post-Soviet transition, and recent historiography on Central Asian identity formation [5].

The comparative framework involves a structured three-case analysis: Uzbekistan is assessed alongside Estonia and Georgia as representative cases of, respectively, successful Baltic national mobilization and turbulent Caucasian ethnopolitics. These cases were selected for their methodological variety — Estonia represents a highly institutionalized, elite-led movement with mass support; Georgia exemplifies volatile ethnic conflict intersecting with nationalism; Uzbekistan represents a top-controlled, culturally expressive yet politically managed form of national revival. The analytical categories applied across all three cases include: (a) the role of indigenous intellectual elites; (b) the nature of language and cultural policy reform; (c) the degree of mass civic mobilization; and (d) the response of the

Communist Party apparatus, allowing for both pattern recognition and causal differentiation.

Results. The analysis reveals several key findings. First, intellectual elites played a pivotal role in catalyzing national consciousness in all three cases, though their relationship with political authority varied markedly. In Estonia, the intellectual community operated in relative openness and aligned quickly with mass civic organizations such as the Estonian Popular Front, founded in 1988. In Georgia, intellectuals became embedded in ethnically charged conflicts, instrumentalizing national discourse for political mobilization. In Uzbekistan, the founding figures of Birlik — primarily academics and writers such as Muhammad Salih and Abdurahim Pulatov — articulated demands for cultural sovereignty and language rights but were systematically marginalized by the ruling Communist Party government from 1989 onward [6].

Second, language legislation functioned as a critical site of national assertion across all three republics. The adoption of titular language laws in 1989 — in Estonia, Georgia, and Uzbekistan alike — represented a shared structural moment of symbolic sovereignty. However, the degree of implementation diverged sharply: Estonia pursued aggressive language normalization integrated with civic mobilization, while Uzbekistan adopted the law but implementation remained halting due to the persistence of Russian-language institutional infrastructure and elite bilingualism [7].

Third, and most decisively, the scope of mass mobilization differed fundamentally. Estonia and Georgia witnessed large-scale street demonstrations and civic coordination that transformed national movements into political forces capable of driving independence agendas.

Birlik, by contrast, was denied official registration until 1991, prohibited from participating in elections, and subject to continuous harassment. Its peak membership of approximately 400,000 — while significant — never translated into the sustained public pressure observable in Tallinn or Tbilisi. The strategy of incorporating nationalist rhetoric while suppressing organizational independence effectively contained Uzbek civic nationalism without eliminating its cultural dimensions [8].

DISCUSSION

The comparative findings suggest that Uzbekistan's national revival during perestroika is best understood not as a failed or incomplete version of Baltic nationalism, but as a structurally distinct formation shaped by the intersection of authoritarian institutional continuity, Islamic cultural heritage, and Soviet-era economic dependencies. Applying Hroch's framework, the Uzbek national movement appears arrested at Phase B — the stage of patriotic agitation by cultural activists — without achieving the mass mobilization characteristic of Phase C. This arrest was not historically inevitable but was actively produced through political repression and elite co-optation [9].

The case also invites reconsideration of theoretical assumptions embedded in much of the post-Soviet nationalism literature, which has often privileged the Baltic and Caucasian trajectories as normative benchmarks. Central Asian nationalisms operated within a distinctive structural matrix: the absence of a pre-Soviet independent state tradition, the intertwining of national and Islamic identities, the relative economic dependence on Moscow, and the presence of large Slavic settler populations all conditioned the modalities of national expression. This does not make Uzbek nationalism less authentic, but it does make it differently constituted — oriented more toward cultural and linguistic

sovereignty than toward formal secession, at least until the late summer of 1991 [10].

Furthermore, the Uzbek case raises productive questions about the relationship between nationalism and authoritarianism. The post-independence government did not simply suppress national identity; it actively appropriated nationalist symbols, rehabilitated pre-Soviet historical figures such as Amir Temur (Tamerlane), and repositioned Uzbek cultural heritage as a legitimating resource for the new state. This dynamic of authoritarian nationalism — wherein the state colonizes national identity rather than opposing it — represents an important variant within the broader post-Soviet landscape and deserves further theoretical elaboration.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the national revival in the Uzbek SSR during perestroika constituted a genuine but structurally constrained movement whose trajectory diverged from Baltic and Caucasian patterns due to a combination of institutional, political, and historical factors. The Birlik movement gave organizational form to Uzbek national aspirations, the 1989 Language Law crystallized symbolic demands for cultural sovereignty, and intellectual elites articulated a vision of Uzbek identity that transcended Soviet categories. Yet the absence of mass mobilization and the systematic co-optation of nationalist discourse produced an independence achieved from above rather than below — a form of decolonization that retained substantial continuities with Soviet-era power structures.

These findings carry implications for both historical understanding and theoretical development. Comparatively, they challenge the unreflective application of European nationalist models to Central Asian

contexts and call for frameworks sensitive to the specific legacies of Soviet governance, Islamic civilization, and authoritarian resilience. For scholars of post-Soviet politics, Uzbekistan represents not an anomaly but an instructive case of how national movements can be simultaneously activated and contained — a pattern with broader relevance for understanding nationalism under non-democratic conditions.

Future research should deepen the archival investigation of Birlik's internal documents and expand the comparative scope to include Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, where analogous but differently inflected national movements unfolded during the same period. Such work would further illuminate the diversity of national revivals within the Soviet periphery and contribute to a more globally sensitive theory of nationalism.

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