

Concept of “Uzbek Intelligentsia” in historical-cultural and socio-philosophical discourse

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Abstract

Purpose: This study explores the evolution of the concept of “Uzbek intelligentsia” across historical epochs, from Jadidist reformism and Soviet ideological restructuring to post-independence digital civic engagement. The aim is to understand how the intelligentsia has functioned as a mediator between tradition and modernity while shaping national identity and social consciousness.

Research Methodology: A qualitative, multi-layered approach was employed, combining cultural-historical analysis, conceptual mapping, and critical discourse analysis. Primary sources such as Jadid-era publications, Soviet documents, and post-independence media were examined alongside discourse markers coded using NVivo software. Comparative analysis with Russian and Kazakh contexts was also conducted to situate the Uzbek experience within broader post-Soviet trajectories.

Results: The study finds that the Uzbek intelligentsia represents a dynamic and adaptive identity shaped by shifting political regimes and cultural transformations. In the Jadidist period, intellectuals promoted Islamic enlightenment and educational reform. During the Soviet era, they embodied a paradox of cultural preservation and ideological conformity. In post-independence Uzbekistan, the intelligentsia has diversified, with new actors emerging through digital platforms such as blogs and social media. Despite these shifts, recurring conceptual nodes such as marifatchi (enlightener) and xalqparvarlik (people-centeredness) remain central, reflecting enduring moral-intellectual responsibility.

Conclusions: The Uzbek intelligentsia is best understood not as a fixed class but as a fluid and dialectical process, continuously redefined by historical contingencies and existential questions. It serves as both a product of and a contributor to national transformation.

Limitations: The study is limited to qualitative interpretation and does not include quantitative generalization of public perceptions.

Contribution: This research provides a theoretical framework for viewing the intelligentsia as a socio-historical and ethical process, offering insights for understanding intellectual identity in post-authoritarian and digital societies.

Keywords: *Cultural Identity, Digital Intellectuals, Discourse Analysis, Jadidism, National Reformism, Soviet Ideology, Uzbek Intelligentsia*

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1. Introduction

The concept of “intelligentsia” in the Uzbek context occupies a central position in constructing national consciousness and identity. Historically, the intelligentsia has not merely been understood as a group

of educated individuals but as cultural mediators and ethical actors engaged in social transformation. In Uzbekistan, this concept has undergone a dynamic transformation from its Islamic scholarly origins and Jadidist reformist currents, through the ideological reshaping of the Soviet period, to its recent evolution in the era of national revival and “New Uzbekistan.” These transitions have produced a multifaceted and layered understanding of the intelligentsia that is deeply rooted in both historical experiences and contemporary sociopolitical realities (Burkhanova, 2021; Ulugbekovich & Sobirovich, 2025).

In classical sociological and philosophical discourse, the intelligentsia is typically seen as the bearer of critical consciousness and moral authority, often in opposition to the dominant political order. However, this Western conceptualization does not fully align with the cultural and historical trajectories of Central Asia. The Uzbek intelligentsia’s synthesis of Islamic ethics, national reformism, and post-Soviet pragmatism is unique. Unlike the Russian intelligentsia of the 19th century, which often positioned itself in opposition to the state, the Uzbek intelligentsia has historically engaged with state and religious institutions in a more integrative manner. This represents a form of engaged intellectualism that seeks to balance tradition and progress (Bengtson & Nielsen, 2023).

This study is particularly relevant in light of the contemporary developments in Uzbekistan. Since 2016, under the reforms introduced during the presidency of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has entered an era frequently referred to as “New Uzbekistan.” This era emphasizes modernization, openness, and strengthening of national identity (Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan, 1999). In this sociopolitical context, the role of the intelligentsia has become even more critical. The state’s focus on national development, technological progress, and civic engagement has reactivated debates on the purpose, function, and identity of the intelligentsia in society (Turdiev, 2024).

Despite this relevance, scholarly attention to the concept of “Uzbek intelligentsia” remains limited, especially from a socio-philosophical perspective. Most existing literature addresses historical narratives or biographical accounts but fails to interrogate the intelligentsia as a conceptual category embedded in power, identity, and ideology. This study seeks to fill this gap by framing the intelligentsia as both a discursive construct and a socio-historical actor (Herlina, Rumengan, & Indrawan, 2024). This research builds on previous studies and integrates contemporary tools such as discourse analysis and conceptual mapping to reveal how the idea of intelligentsia has been redefined across different epochs from Jadidism and Sovietization to digital-age intellectualism (Turdiyev Bekhruz Sobirovich, 2025).

The periodization of the Uzbek intelligentsia’s development offers significant insights into the evolution of national consciousness. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Jadid movement emerged as a key force in promoting Islamic enlightenment, educational reform, and cultural modernization. Figures such as Mahmudkhoja Behbudi and Abdurrauf Fitrat epitomized this movement, establishing newspapers, schools, and literary platforms that challenged traditionalist thought while respecting Islamic values. The term “marifatchi” or “enlightener” became a defining archetype of the intelligentsia, linking education with social responsibility (Burkhanova, 2021).

Under Soviet rule, the intelligentsia were restructured to serve ideological ends. While the state suppressed nationalist sentiments and religious expression, it simultaneously institutionalized an Uzbek cultural elite of authors, scientists, and artists who were tasked with creating a “Soviet Uzbek” identity. This process was marked by a paradox: while national culture was officially endorsed through state-sponsored publications and institutions, any deviation from Soviet ideology was harshly penalized. Thus, the intelligentsia was caught between collaboration and resistance, shaping a complex identity that persists in post-Soviet Uzbekistan (Odilov & Karimov).

The post-independence era witnessed a reconfiguration of the intelligentsia’s roles. With the collapse of ideological uniformity, new discourses emerged on nationalism, Islamic heritage, and global integration. Intellectuals have found new platforms, ranging from traditional print media to digital spaces such as blogs and Telegram channels, to express diverse perspectives on culture, politics, and identity (Haydaraliyeva, 2023). These shifts necessitate a rethinking of what it means to be an intellectual in contemporary Uzbekistan today. Is the intelligentsia still defined by its educational

background and moral authority? Or has it become more fragmented, influenced by market dynamics and state co-optation, and less effective?

This study proposes a conceptual framework that positions the intelligentsia as a dynamic intellectual identity rather than a static group. This identity is dialectically formed through interactions with societal conditions in response to crises, reforms, and shifts in political regimes. Drawing on philosophical notions of temporality, this study argues that the intelligentsia is best understood as a process of becoming, shaped by the "questions of existence" posed at each stage of national development. In other words, the intelligentsia embodies society's ethical and cognitive responses to its historical challenges (Baert & Morgan, 2018; Tabeikyna, Kamalova, Hasanov, Dzhumagaliyeva, & Demeuova, 2021).

In doing so, this research also addresses the broader implications of intelligentsia in post-authoritarian societies. The intelligentsia plays a pivotal role in the reconstruction of civil society, the struggle for intellectual freedom, and the resurgence of national culture. Moreover, in the context of globalization and digitalization, new forms of intellectual labor are emerging that transcend traditional categories of work. These include online influencers, digital educators, and civic journalists who shape public discourse without necessarily fitting the classical definition of intelligentsia (Roberts & Oosterom, 2024; Yilmaz, Akbarzadeh, Abbasov, & Bashirov, 2025).

In sum, the relevance of this research lies in its attempt to historicize and theorize the Uzbek intelligentsia as a cultural, political, and epistemological category. By combining historical and cultural analysis, conceptual mapping, and discourse analytics, this study provides a comprehensive and nuanced account of how this category has been produced, challenged, and redefined. It invites scholars to reconsider the intelligentsia not merely as a legacy of the past, but as a critical actor in shaping the future of Central Asian societies.

2. Literature Review

The concept of "intelligentsia" has historically played a central role in shaping national identity and guiding sociopolitical transformation, particularly in post-colonial and post-Soviet societies. In the context of Uzbekistan, the intelligentsia cannot be understood merely as a class of educated elites; it is more appropriately conceptualized as a sociocultural formation deeply embedded in national reformism, Islamic values, and post-Soviet reconfiguration. This section reviews key academic discussions surrounding the intelligentsia in Uzbekistan and similar societies by drawing on philosophical, historical, and discourse-analytical perspectives.

In Western scholarly traditions, the intelligentsia is often associated with critical opposition to dominant regimes, particularly in the Russian and European contexts of the 19th century. The role of intellectuals in Central Asia differs significantly owing to their integration with religious and state structures, particularly during the Soviet era. While the Russian intelligentsia tended to position itself antagonistically to autocracy, the Uzbek intelligentsia embraced a more integrative posture, seeking reform from within existing structures (Askarov, 2019).

Scholars such as have emphasized the foundational influence of Jadidism, a reformist movement that synthesized Islamic education with Enlightenment ideals. The Jadids, including Mahmudkhoja Behbudi and Abdurrauf Fitrat, were not merely educators or writers; they were architects of modern Uzbek ideas. As Ziyodova (2022) noted, these figures embodied a form of hybrid intellectualism, wherein Islamic ethics served as the moral compass for modernization efforts. Their legacy continues to influence contemporary discourses on national identity (Lazzerini, 2023; Turdiyev Bekhruz Sobirovich, 2025). The Soviet period marked a drastic shift in the intelligentsia's structure. The Soviet state instrumentalized intellectual labor by institutionalizing a state-sanctioned cultural elite. Uzbek writers, artists, and academics were simultaneously empowered and restricted by this policy. They were expected to promote the Soviet ideology while preserving national characteristics. This paradoxical relationship created what is called a "double consciousness" in Uzbek intellectual life: an oscillation between national authenticity and ideological conformity (Salimov, 2022).

Discourse analytical studies highlight how this legacy persisted in the post-independence period. Since 1991, Uzbekistan has witnessed multiple phases of national identity reconfiguration, with intellectuals playing a key role in legitimizing and contesting dominant narratives. Particularly after 2016, under the political shift toward “New Uzbekistan,” public intellectuals have been re-empowered through digital platforms such as Telegram, YouTube, and independent news outlets. These platforms facilitate pluralistic discourse, allowing the emergence of non-traditional intellectuals such as digital educators and civic influencers (Widiastuti, Umar, & Hafiziandra, 2024). This underscores the importance of reconceptualizing intelligentsia not as a static entity but as a dynamic category responsive to shifting socio-political structures. They advocate for a framework that understands the intelligentsia through temporality and transformation, wherein each historical epoch presents new “questions of existence” that the intelligentsia must address. This perspective resonates with the philosophical traditions of existentialism and pragmatism, which prioritize human action in response to contextual challenges (Knox & Kurmanov, 2024).

In a regional comparative context, compares the role of the intelligentsia in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, noting that while both countries experienced similar Soviet legacies, the Uzbek case is distinguished by the enduring influence of Islamic reformism on the intelligentsia. He argues that this has led to a more cohesive form of national intellectual identity, albeit one constrained by authoritarian modernization. How digital transformation has reshaped intellectual labor, allowing for new forms of participation and critique beyond traditional academic and state-sanctioned channels (Azimzhanov & Myssayeva, 2025).

An important methodological contribution to this field is provided by (Burkhanova, 2021), who integrates NVivo-based content analysis of media discourse with conceptual mapping. Her study reveals that terms such as “Xalqparvarlik” (populist humanism) and “Marifatchi” (enlightener) are consistently used in Uzbek public discourse to legitimize the intelligentsia's moral authority. These micro-concepts help bridge historical periods from the Jadid reformers to contemporary bloggers by emphasizing the continuity of ethical commitments. Recent scholarship also interrogates the gendered dimensions of the intelligentsia. This study examines the marginalization of female intellectuals during the Soviet and early post-Soviet eras. Although prominent women participated in reformist and nationalist movements, their contributions have largely been erased from mainstream narratives. In the current digital age, female influencers and educators are increasingly reclaiming their place, thereby expanding the boundaries of intelligentsia to include gender equity and feminist epistemologies (Asyha, Astuti, Subandi, Syarifudin, & Makbuloh, 2024).

Finally, philosophical contributions by (Turdiyev Bekhruz Sobirovich, 2024) conceptualizes intelligentsia as a dialectical force that both shapes and is shaped by sociopolitical crises. They argue that intellectual identity is best understood as a process of becoming, which evolves in response to historical ruptures and cultural shifts. This aligns with the present study's aim to define the intelligentsia not through rigid criteria such as education level or occupation but through ethical responsiveness and discursive relevance. In summary, the literature suggests that the Uzbek intelligentsia is a historically contingent, ethically engaged, and structurally dynamic entity. It cannot be reduced to Soviet or post-Soviet categories but must be understood as an evolving cultural and intellectual phenomenon. This study seeks to build upon existing research by offering a more integrated theoretical framework that bridges historical-cultural analysis with discourse analysis and philosophical interpretation.

3. Methodology

This study employs a multi-layered qualitative methodology that integrates cultural-historical analysis, conceptual mapping, and critical discourse analysis to investigate the intellectual trajectory and socio-philosophical role of Uzbek intelligentsia. The aim is to situate the intelligentsia not only as a historical category but also as a living conceptual process shaped by national reformism, ideological transitions, and evolving digital landscapes.

The study began with a cultural-historical approach, which served to trace the formation and evolution of the intelligentsia from the late 19th century to the present day. This includes the analysis of primary

historical sources such as Jadid press materials, Soviet-era documents, and post-independence media publications. These sources were categorized chronologically into three phases: Jadidist reformism (1870–1920), Soviet ideological structuring (1920–1991), and post-independence reconfiguration (1991–2025). This stratification allowed for diachronic analysis, offering a clearer view of how different political and cultural regimes influenced the self-perception and functions of the intelligentsia (Salimov, 2022; Turdiyev Bekhruz Sobirovich, 2025).

The conceptual analysis component drew on the proposed method but was updated using recent frameworks of semantic field analysis and micro-conceptual mapping (Wodak, 2016). In this stage, the central concept “Uzbek intelligentsia” was disaggregated into constituent micro-concepts such as “marifatchi” (enlightener), “xalqparvarlik” (people-centeredness), “Islamic enlightenment,” and “digital civic engagement.” These sub-concepts were then mapped semantically to analyze their relationships and transformations across different historical periods.

To enhance analytical precision, this study utilized NVivo qualitative analysis software. A corpus of media texts, blog posts, academic articles, and government documents from 1991 to 2025 was uploaded to NVivo software. Through thematic coding, the software identified the most frequent discourse markers linked to the intelligentsia. Special attention was paid to keywords such as “identity,” “authority,” “nation,” “Islamic reform,” and “digital public sphere.” These markers were then interpreted in relation to their social context, enabling the study to identify ideological shifts in the construction of intellectual authority in Uzbekistan (Flick, 2018).

A comparative analytical framework was also developed to distinguish the structural and functional differences between the Uzbek intelligentsia and similar categories in post-Soviet societies, such as Kazakhstan and Russia. This framework compares aspects such as language policy, religious identity, intellectual freedom, and post-authoritarian transformation. This comparison illuminates how the Uzbek experience is shaped by the enduring legacy of Islamic reformism and a unique negotiation with state power. Scholarly works such as these provide comparative insights into post-Soviet intellectual trajectories. A triangulation strategy was applied to ensure robustness. The findings derived from the conceptual analysis, NVivo coding, and comparative frameworks were cross-referenced at each stage. In cases of contradictions, secondary verification was conducted using academic journals, online interviews, and media archives. Major reference points included the Enlightenment Archive of Central Asia, the Jadid Database, and official publications from the Ministry of Higher Education of Uzbekistan.

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the study. All citations were accurately referenced using the APA 7th edition format, and no copyrighted material was reproduced without appropriate attribution. An informed consent approach was not applicable because the research did not involve human participants but rather relied on publicly available sources. Moreover, to ensure terminological clarity, a multilingual glossary was developed to standardize complex terms from Uzbek, Russian, Arabic, and Persian, allowing for a consistent and culturally sensitive interpretation of key concepts.

The research process was divided into five phases:

1. Collection and digitization of primary sources: newspapers, blogs, legal texts, and historical documents.
2. Keyword coding was performed using NVivo for recurring discourse patterns and thematic clustering.
3. Conceptual mapping of intelligentsia-related themes across three historical epochs.
4. Comparative analysis of regional intellectual patterns.
5. Triangulation and synthesis of results to ensure analytical coherence.

The use of qualitative methodology implies limitations, particularly the challenge of statistical generalization. However, this is compensated for by the depth of cultural and conceptual insights offered by qualitative methods. Furthermore, this research opens pathways for future mixed-method

studies that may integrate surveys or big-data analytics to explore public perceptions of intelligentsia in the digital age (Flick, 2018). In conclusion, this layered methodological approach allows for an interdisciplinary exploration of the Uzbek intelligentsia as both a cultural institution and philosophical construct. It provides a structured and historically grounded understanding of how intelligentsia identities have evolved in response to societal transitions from colonialism to independence and from Soviet centralization to digital globalization (Asyha et al., 2024).

4. Result and Discussion

The cultural-historical approach serves as the foundational method for tracing the emergence and ongoing evolution of the Uzbek intelligentsia, spanning from the late 19th century to the present era. By systematically analyzing primary sources, including Jadid-era periodicals, Soviet-era documents, and post-independence media content, this study delineated three distinct chronological phases: Jadidist reformism (1870–1920), Soviet ideological structuring (1920–1991), and post-independence reconfiguration (1991–2025). This clear periodization enabled a diachronic analysis that clarifies how successive political and cultural regimes shaped the intelligentsia's self-awareness and societal role.

In the Jadidist phase, intellectuals such as Mahmudhoja Behbudi and Abdurrauf Fitrat pioneered educational and cultural reform rooted in Islamic ethics. They founded new-method schools, launched periodicals such as *Samarkand* and *Ayina*, and initiated public theater to foster civic consciousness, effectively blending religious values with modernist visions. A recent historical study confirms that this movement laid the critical groundwork for modern Uzbek intellectual identity, including mass literacy and national awakening (Maxsutovna, 2025).

The Soviet era introduced a paradoxical transformation: intellectualism was both promoted and restrained by the state. The state institutionalized authors such as Choʻlpon, Oybek, Sadriiddin Ayni, and Fayzullo Khodjayev as cultural elites tasked with developing a “Soviet Uzbek” identity. Yet, any deviation from the prescribed socialist realism, such as Choʻlpon’s nationalist leanings, was harshly punished. This created a dual consciousness, balancing nationalist or Islamic authenticity with enforced ideological conformity (Adams, 2021). The state's simultaneous efforts to suppress “bourgeois nationalism” while translating Uzbek classics into Russian highlights this contradiction (Odilov & Karimov).

Following Uzbekistan's independence in 1991, the intelligentsia diversified amid changing political, religious, and techno-cultural landscapes. Nationalistic and Islamic discourses resurfaced, and debates on language policy (Cyrillic vs. Latin scripts) have intensified. In the early 1990s, activists worked to decolonize language and strengthen Uzbek, reflecting the intelligentsia’s influence on state and cultural identity. Under the “New Uzbekistan” reforms post-2016, public intelligentsia has re-emerged through official channels and digital platforms such as Telegram and YouTube (Syafrihal, Wibisono, & Nurhatisyah, 2024). Civic bloggers, educators, and influencers now occupy discursive spaces that were formerly closed to state-sanctioned actors.

Throughout these eras, recurring conceptual “micro-nodes” such as *marifatchi* (enlightener) and *xalqparvarlik* (people-centeredness), consistently embody the core feature of intelligentsia: acting as mediators between tradition and modernity. These archetypes persist from the Jadid school founders to today’s digital educators and civic influencers, reflecting a resilient thread of moral and intellectual responsibility (Fatiha, Saharuddin, & Makkasau, 2024). Cultural-historical stratification thus clarifies a longitudinal pattern: each epoch delivered new existential questions to which the intelligentsia responded, be it nation-building, ideological conformity, cultural preservation, or navigating a digital civic sphere. This approach reveals the intelligentsia not as a static social class but as a fluid identity consistently reshaped by historical contingencies and shifting sociopolitical structures (Askarov, 2019; Khairi, 2016).

Table 1. Comparing analysis of Uzbek and Russian intelligentsia

Criterion	Russian Intelligentsia	Uzbek Intelligentsia
Historical Roots	Emerged in the 18 th –19 th centuries, based on European Enlightenment and noble culture.	Formed in the 19 th –20 th centuries from Jadids (reformers) and the Soviet-educated elite.
Ideology	Clash between Westernizers and Slavophiles, later socialism and liberalism.	Past national revival intertwined with Soviet internationalism, later moderate Islam and secularism.
Attitude Toward Religion	Predominantly secular, with atheistic tendencies in the USSR.	Complex blend of Islamic traditions and Soviet/post-Soviet secularism.
Language and Culture	Russian as the dominant language, oriented toward European culture.	Bilingualism (Uzbek + Russian) and fusion of Turko-Persian and Soviet cultural models.
Political Role	Varied – some groups (Decembrists, populists, dissidents) were politically active, advocating change, while others avoided radicalism.	Integrated into the Soviet system while preserving national identity; post-Soviet era saw a split between liberals and state-aligned conservatives.
Post-Soviet Challenges	Crisis of identity, division between liberals and statist.	Preference for a conservative-modernist model under state control.
Contemporary challenges	Globalization, value conflicts, brain drain – balancing tradition and modernization.	Pressure from authoritarian systems necessitates independent thought and defense of intellectual freedom.

5. Conclusion

Human qualities represent specific forms of existence that correspond to the prevailing socio-cultural and historical conditions of existence. These qualities are not fixed or universal; rather, they are shaped by the particular configurations of social development at a given point in time. When the conditions of existence shift due to technological advancement, political transformation, or cultural change, new existential questions emerge, prompting the formation of new human qualities as responses to these altered realities. In this sense, human qualities are deeply contextual and tied to the temporal nature of human existence.

Acknowledging the complexity, temporality, and selectivity of human qualities means recognizing that these traits are not eternal or immutable. They cannot be conceptualized as static “forms” that remain identical across different epochs. Rather, qualities evolve through a continuous process in which certain existing traits may be redefined or replaced by new traits. Simultaneously, new attributes may emerge that better align with the prevailing environment and lived experience. This dynamic interplay between the individual and their surrounding context ensures that human qualities are always in flux, adapting, responding, and shaping.

In this framework, the formation of intellectual identity, or the identification of the intelligentsia, occurs dialectically within a self-regulating system. Intellectualism does not surface as a predetermined class trait but as a condition that emerges when inherited qualities are no longer adequate to address the demands of a changing socio-environmental context. It reflects a rupture or dissonance at which older forms of thinking or engagement become misaligned with emerging historical realities.

However, once established, intellectual identity does not remain passive. It acts on the environment by engaging in critique, innovation, and transformation. Through cultural articulation, critical reflection, and civic action, intellectuals contribute to reshaping the structures that produced them. This interaction initiates a new cycle of transformation, wherein the altered environment demands further redefinition of intellectual identity. Thus, the intelligentsia exists as a fluid and evolving phenomenon, both shaped by and shaping the trajectory of social development.

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