
Samarkand

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Uzbekistan in the 21st Century

The international conference 'Uzbekistan in the 21st Century: Transition and Integration' convened at Samarkand State Institute for Foreign Languages on 12-13 May 1999. The conference was co-sponsored by the institute and the Association for the Advancement of Central Asian Research (AACAR), with Yusuf Abdullaev (Rector, SSIFL) and Reuel Hanks (Editor, *Journal of Central Asian Studies*) serving as co-directors. Several hundred people were in attendance, and the event was extensively covered by local and national media in Uzbekistan.

A total of 45 scholars participated from Uzbekistan, the United States and the United Kingdom, with papers organized into four broad sessions: 'Economic Issues', 'Political Issues', 'Spirituality Issues' and 'Educational

Issues'. The first session included commentary on strategy for economic reform, investment potential, the possibility of creating 'free economic zones' in Uzbekistan, and the future development of tourism in the country. This spectrum of topics certainly is crucial to economic development, but many commentators avoided the most serious issues: a rapidly-expanding workforce without corresponding economic expansion, the lack of substantial and geographically-dispersed foreign investment, and political instability, as evidenced by the February bombings in Tashkent.

The session on political issues included papers on the mass media in Uzbekistan, women's role in the political process, and the status of Karakalpakstan, among others.

One paper dealt with the concept of 'eastern democracy' in Uzbekistan, an attempt to cast the country's authoritarian administration in the most favourable light possible by redefining the character of 'democracy'. The most interesting and enlightening presentations dealing with 'spirituality' focused on the traditional role of Sufism in Uzbek society, the role of the *mahalla*, and the difficulties of reconstructing the country's history and the creation of a 'national awareness' among Uzbekistan's citizenry.

The final session included a detailed presentation on educational reform by Yusuf Abdullaev, the country's leading specialist on Western educational systems, and two papers on the challenges of training educational specialists in modern pedagogical

techniques. The speakers were in general agreement that Uzbekistan's educational system, particularly higher education, is in need of restructuring, but the suggested methods and means of achieving reform were quite varied. Many participants, both Uzbeki and foreign, expressed enthusiasm for the rare chance to dialogue directly with colleagues working on similar issues and problems. Select papers from the conference will be considered for forthcoming issues of the *Journal for Central Asian Studies*. The co-directors envision organizing a similar conference for the spring of 2001. ◆

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