

Trust as a Moral-Institutional Resource for Strengthening Social Relations in New Uzbekistan

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Abstract. This article examines trust as a moral-institutional resource in the transformation of social relations in New Uzbekistan. Instead of treating trust as passive approval or as an attitude that public institutions can directly demand, the study conceptualizes it as a reasoned expectation produced when moral commitments, everyday experience, and institutional performance converge. The research uses conceptual reconstruction, normative-legal analysis, institutional analysis, and mechanism mapping. Its source base combines classical and contemporary theories of trust with Uzbekistan's constitutional and strategic framework and international governance standards. The study proposes a six-dimensional trustworthiness model consisting of legal reliability, procedural fairness, transparency, responsiveness, competence, and meaningful participation. It also identifies a recurring trust cycle linking normative guarantees, everyday institutional encounters, citizen feedback, correction, and renewed expectations. The findings show why transparency without intelligibility, participation without visible influence, digitalization without inclusion, and moral education without consistent institutional practice may fail to generate durable trust. Particular attention is paid to the mahalla as a bridge between interpersonal and institutional trust and to the risks of particularism, informal mediation, digital exclusion, and formalistic consultation. The article concludes that the defensible policy objective is not to maximize trust as such, but to increase institutional trustworthiness while preserving critical scrutiny, lawful contestation, and mechanisms of trust repair.

Keywords: trust, institutional trust, social relations, New Uzbekistan, human dignity, procedural fairness, transparency, civic participation, mahalla, trustworthiness

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Yeni Özbəkistanda sosial münasibətlərin möhkəmləndirilməsində etimadın mənəvi-institusional resurs kimi rolu

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Xülasə. Məqalədə Yeni Özbəkistanda sosial münasibətlərin transformasiyası kontekstində etimad mənəvi-institusional resurs kimi araşdırılır. Etimad passiv razılıq və ya dövlət institutlarının birbaşa tələb edə biləcəyi münasibət kimi deyil, mənəvi öhdəliklərin, gündəlik təcrübənin və institusional fəaliyyətin uyğunlaşması nəticəsində yaranan əsaslandırılmış gözlənti kimi şərh olunur.

Tədqiqatda konseptual rekonstruksiya, normativ-hüquqi və institusional təhlil, həmçinin mexanizmlərin xəritələndirilməsi metodlarından istifadə edilir. Mənbə bazası etimadın klassik və müasir nəzəriyyələrini, Özbəkistanın konstitusion və strateji sənədlərini və beynəlxalq idarəetmə standartlarını birləşdirir. Hüquqi etibarlılıq, prosedur ədaləti, şəffaflıq, cavabdehlik, səriştəlilik və mənalı vətəndaş iştirakından ibarət altıölçülü institusional etibarlılıq modeli təklif olunur. Həmçinin normativ təminatları, gündəlik institusional təmasları, vətəndaş rəyini, düzəlişi və yenilənmiş gözləntiləri birləşdirən etimad dövrü əsaslandırılır. Təhlil göstərir ki, anlaşıqlılıq olmadan şəffaflıq, real təsir olmadan iştirak, inklüzivlik olmadan rəqəmsallaşma və ardıcıl institusional təcrübə olmadan mənəvi tərbiyə dayanıqlı etimad yaratmaya bilər. Şəxslərarası və institusional etimad arasında körpü rolunu oynayan məhəllə institutuna, eləcə də partikulyarizm, qeyri-rəsmi vasitəçilik, rəqəmsal təcrid və formal xarakterli məsləhətləşmə risklərinə xüsusi diqqət yetirilir. Nəticə etibarilə əsas siyasət məqsədi etimadı süni şəkildə maksimumlaşdırmaq deyil, tənqidi nəzarəti və hüquqi etiraz imkanlarını qorumaqla institutların etimada layiqli fəaliyyətini gücləndirmək olmalıdır.

Açar sözlər: *etimad, institusional etimad, sosial münasibətlər, Yeni Özbəkistan, insan ləyaqəti, prosedur ədaləti, şəffaflıq, vətəndaş iştirakı, məhəllə, institusional etibarlılıq*

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Introduction

Trust is one of the least visible but most consequential conditions of social coordination. Individuals routinely act without complete information about other people, organizations, and public institutions. They enter contracts, use public services, accept professional expertise, delegate authority, and cooperate with strangers because they expect that relevant actors will behave within recognizable moral and institutional limits. Trust therefore does not eliminate uncertainty; it makes coordinated action possible despite uncertainty. Luhmann treats this capacity as a mechanism for reducing social complexity (Luhmann, 2017).

The problem becomes sharper during periods of accelerated institutional and social change. Reform modifies rules, procedures, technologies, expectations, and the distribution of responsibility. Citizens must repeatedly decide whether new institutions are predictable, fair, competent, and responsive enough to justify cooperation. At the same time, governments face a temptation to interpret trust as public approval and criticism as its opposite. That interpretation is analytically weak. A citizen may criticize a policy while trusting lawful institutions, and may outwardly comply while privately believing that formal procedures are ineffective. Trust must therefore be separated from loyalty, political support, optimism, and simple satisfaction.

Contemporary governance research warns against treating declining trust as a narrow communication problem. The OECD framework emphasizes reliability, responsiveness, integrity, openness, and fairness as governance drivers associated with public trust (OECD, 2024). This shifts attention from what citizens are told to believe toward what institutions repeatedly do. The distinction is especially important where reform agendas combine administrative modernization, digital public services, participatory mechanisms, social-policy expansion, and renewed emphasis on civic and moral education.

In Uzbekistan, the normative architecture of the current reform period explicitly places human dignity, social state obligations, accountability, and service to citizens within the constitutional order. Article 2 of the 2023 Constitution provides that the state expresses the will of the people, serves their interests, and that state bodies and officials are accountable to society and citizens (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2023a). The Uzbekistan–2030 Strategy similarly frames effective governance, rule of law, human development, and civic participation as interconnected priorities (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2023b). The Law on Openness of Activities of State Authorities and Administration establishes access to information and greater responsibility for decisions as legal objectives (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2014), while the Law on Public Control institutionalizes forms of citizen oversight (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2018).

These legal commitments are important, but normative commitment cannot be used as evidence that trust has already been achieved. That would confuse institutional design with social outcome. Trust emerges when rules survive contact with everyday experience: when a service is delivered as promised, a decision is explained, similar cases receive similar treatment, a complaint can alter an error, and public participation leaves a trace in the final decision. Conversely, a sophisticated reform can weaken trust if citizens experience arbitrary discretion, opaque criteria, humiliating procedures, repeated non-response, or unequal access.

The intellectual problem is therefore twofold. First, trust has a moral dimension rooted in honesty, promise-keeping, responsibility, reciprocity, and respect for the other. Second, modern societies cannot rely on personal virtue alone; they need rules and organizations capable of making trustworthy conduct reproducible beyond family and face-to-face networks. Classical Central Asian ethical thought already connected good government with justice, virtue, and cooperation. Al-Farabi's account of the virtuous city, for example, makes the quality and orientation of leadership central to collective flourishing (Al-Farabi, 1985). Modern trust theory adds the institutional question: how can those expectations be stabilized among strangers and across complex organizations?

This article addresses that question through the case of New Uzbekistan. Its purpose is to develop a conceptual model of trust that connects moral values, social relations, and institutional performance without reducing any one of them to the others. The central thesis is deliberately demanding: public policy cannot directly manufacture trust. It can, however, make institutions more worthy of trust. From this thesis, the article develops six criteria of institutional trustworthiness and a feedback-and-repair cycle for evaluating whether reforms become credible in citizens' lived experience.

Materials and Methods

The study is conceptual and qualitative. It synthesizes published scholarship on trust with Uzbekistan's constitutional, strategic, and legislative framework and comparative governance standards. Themes developed in the author's wider research guide the formulation of the problem, but they are not treated as empirical data. The analysis is organized around one explanatory question: under what conditions do moral expectations become institutionally reproducible trustworthiness?

Four analytical methods are used. First, conceptual reconstruction distinguishes interpersonal, generalized, and institutional trust and separates trust from confidence, approval, obedience, and uncritical belief. Second, normative-legal analysis examines the 2023 Constitution, the Uzbekistan–2030 Strategy, legislation on openness, public control, and personal data as formal commitments that shape legitimate citizen expectations (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2014, 2018, 2019, 2023a, 2023b). Third, institutional analysis compares these expectations with functional requirements derived from modern trust theory and public-governance research. Fourth, mechanism mapping identifies the sequence through which a legal or moral norm becomes an everyday experience, receives feedback, is corrected after failure, and either strengthens or weakens future expectations.

The theoretical frame combines Luhmann's complexity-reduction approach, Giddens's analysis of trust in abstract systems, Putnam's social-capital perspective, and Hardin's relational account of trustworthiness (Luhmann, 2017; Giddens, 1990; Putnam, 1993; Hardin, 2002). The OECD framework is used comparatively as an operational reference for governance drivers; it is not used to infer Uzbekistan-specific trust levels because the article does not contain a nationally representative survey (OECD, 2024).

A negative-case test is applied throughout the analysis. For every proposed trust-building mechanism, the study asks how the same mechanism could fail or produce the opposite effect. Openness can become information overload; participation can become ceremonial consultation; mahalla solidarity can become favoritism; digitalization can create exclusion or opacity; and moral education can lose credibility when institutional practice contradicts its message. This stress test is necessary because the normative language of trust can otherwise conceal weak accountability. The study does not estimate the level of public trust in Uzbekistan, establish causal effects of a particular reform, or claim that formal legal provisions are uniformly implemented. Its results are a conceptual framework and a set of testable mechanisms. Empirical validation would require representative surveys, regional comparisons, service-user data, interviews, and longitudinal measurement.

Results

The first result is a three-level structure of trust. At the moral level, trust depends on perceived honesty, promise-keeping, responsibility, and respect for the dignity of others. At the relational level, repeated interaction creates expectations of reciprocity and mutual assistance within families, neighborhoods, workplaces, and civic networks. At the institutional level, trust concerns whether impersonal rules, public authorities, and professional systems can be expected to act lawfully, competently, and fairly. These levels are connected but not interchangeable. A society may possess strong family solidarity while displaying weak confidence in impersonal institutions; equally, a formally efficient institution may fail to command durable trust if citizens consider its procedures unfair.

This distinction matters in the Uzbek context because family, neighborhood, kinship, hospitality, mutual assistance, and moral reputation remain important social resources. They can reduce isolation and enable rapid cooperation. Yet particularized trust has a boundary problem. When obligations to relatives, acquaintances, or local networks override universal rules, the same social closeness that supports solidarity may generate favoritism, informal brokerage, or unequal access. The policy challenge is not to replace local trust with anonymous bureaucracy but to convert the cooperative strengths of close networks into generalized norms of fairness. Putnam's distinction between bonding and bridging social capital is useful here: cohesion within groups becomes socially productive when bridges across groups and impersonal rules prevent closure (Putnam, 1993).

The mahalla illustrates this duality. It combines neighborhood familiarity, self-governance traditions, social assistance, and a point of contact with public programs. Its proximity allows problems to be identified earlier than they might be by distant institutions. However, proximity also creates risks involving privacy, informal influence, social pressure, and inconsistent treatment. A trustworthy mahalla therefore cannot rely on the proposition that everyone knows everyone. It requires transparent eligibility criteria, confidentiality, conflict-of-interest safeguards, explainable allocation of resources, and accessible routes of appeal. Local familiarity becomes an institutional asset only when embedded in rules that protect persons who lack strong local connections.

The second result is a six-dimensional model of institutional trustworthiness. The first dimension is legal reliability: rules should be sufficiently stable, knowable, and consistently applied for citizens to

plan their actions. The second is procedural fairness: comparable cases should be treated comparably, affected persons should be heard, and decisions should not depend on irrelevant status or informal access. The third is transparency: information must be timely, intelligible, and capable of verification, rather than merely uploaded. The fourth is responsiveness: institutions must acknowledge problems, provide reasoned answers, and act within meaningful time frames. The fifth is competence: a respectful institution that cannot solve the problem remains unreliable. The sixth is meaningful participation: citizens must have lawful opportunities to influence decisions, and institutions must show what happened to the input they received.

The model deliberately uses the term trustworthiness rather than trust. Trust is ultimately an attitude and judgment of the trustor; a public institution cannot legitimately order a citizen to feel it. Institutional trustworthiness, by contrast, refers to properties and practices that can be designed, monitored, and corrected. This shift changes the administrative question from ‘How do we increase citizens’ trust?’ to ‘What evidence would justify citizens’ trust in this procedure?’ The latter question is less vulnerable to propaganda, more compatible with critical citizenship, and more easily translated into performance standards.

Uzbekistan’s current legal framework provides normative support for several components of this model. Constitutional accountability and the social-state principle create expectations concerning service and responsibility (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2023a). The openness law connects access to information with the responsibility of public bodies for decisions (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2014). The public-control law supplies a legal basis for civic oversight (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2018). The Uzbekistan–2030 Strategy provides a broader reform framework in which public administration, human development, law, and civic institutions are linked (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2023b). These documents should be interpreted as standards against which practice can be examined, not as substitutes for evidence about implementation.

The third result is the identification of a norm-to-experience gap as the central vulnerability of trust during reform. Institutional reform begins with a rule or declared principle, but citizens encounter it through concrete interfaces: a school, clinic, mahalla office, court, service center, digital portal, employer, or local administration. Giddens’s analysis of abstract systems is instructive because systemic confidence is continually shaped at access points where ordinary users meet representatives of complex systems (Giddens, 1990). A single encounter does not determine all institutional trust, but repeated experiences of arbitrariness or respect can become generalized expectations.

This gap explains why communication alone cannot repair weak trust. If an institution advertises openness but a citizen cannot obtain the basis for a decision, more publicity may deepen skepticism. If a public consultation collects proposals without explaining acceptance or rejection, participation may become evidence of non-responsiveness. If moral education emphasizes honesty while institutional rewards favor informal privilege, the contradiction teaches a more powerful lesson than the formal curriculum. Moral values and institutional design therefore reinforce each other only when word and practice remain sufficiently aligned.

The fourth result concerns digital trust. Digital public services can reduce travel, waiting time, repetitive paperwork, and opportunities for discretionary interference. They can also create auditable records of applications and decisions. These benefits strengthen reliability when the user can see status, responsibility, deadlines, and avenues for correction. Yet digitalization is not synonymous with fairness. Citizens differ in connectivity, disability, language, device access, and digital literacy. An exclusively digital service may improve average speed while making access worse for a vulnerable minority. Inclusion therefore requires assisted and alternative channels rather than a forced choice between modernization and human support.

Data use introduces a second digital problem. The Uzbek Law on Personal Data establishes a legal framework for the collection, processing, and protection of personal information (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2019). From a trust perspective, compliance should be supplemented by intelligibility: citizens need to know why data are collected, how they affect decisions, who can access them, and how an error can be corrected. Where automated classification or decision support is used, a meaningful human-review mechanism is necessary to contest opaque or inaccurate outcomes.

The fifth result is a participation-feedback mechanism. Participation should be differentiated into information, consultation, involvement, collaboration, and oversight rather than treated as a single category. Not every technical decision requires a popular vote, but decisions that distribute local resources or reshape everyday public space often require more than one-way information. OECD guidance on citizen participation emphasizes clarity of purpose, accountability, inclusion, information, resources, and evaluation as quality conditions for participation (OECD, 2022). In practical terms, a trustworthy consultation should publish a ‘trace of proposals’: which issues were raised, which were accepted or rejected, and why. This makes influence visible without pretending that every proposal can become policy.

The sixth result is a closed-loop model of trust repair. Trustworthy institutions should be evaluated not by an unrealistic promise of zero error but by what happens after error. The proposed cycle has five stages: normative guarantee, institutional encounter, citizen feedback or contestation, correction and repair, and renewed expectation. Repair requires acknowledgment of the problem, impartial review, an appropriate remedy, and procedural change aimed at preventing recurrence. An apology without correction is symbolic; compensation without acknowledgment may remain merely technical; punishment without organizational learning may not prevent repetition. Institutional learning closes the cycle.

This cycle also produces a more defensible monitoring system. Inputs measure resources, authority, staff capacity, and accessibility. Process indicators measure timeliness, equal treatment, transparency, and participation. Outputs record services delivered, decisions issued, complaints resolved, or corrections made. Impact indicators examine whether citizens experience greater procedural fairness, can solve problems without informal brokers, use lawful complaint channels, and cooperate across social boundaries. High output volume by itself is not evidence of trust. A system can process many applications quickly while remaining difficult to understand or unfair in exceptional cases.

Taken together, the results produce a moral-institutional interpretation of social relations in New Uzbekistan. Trust is not an optional emotional addition to reform. It is the relationship between justified expectations and repeated evidence. Moral norms define what actors owe one another; relational practices provide everyday experience; institutions generalize these expectations beyond personal networks; feedback detects failures; and repair protects cooperation when expectations are violated.

Discussion

The proposed model challenges the assumption that more trust is always better. Social science provides strong reasons to reject a simple trust-maximization objective. Unconditional trust can enable abuse, corruption, misinformation, or authoritarian paternalism. Hardin’s relational approach is useful because trust is warranted with respect to particular actors, interests, and contexts rather than as a universal moral command (Hardin, 2002). A mature civic order therefore needs calibrated trust: enough confidence to cooperate, enough scrutiny to demand evidence, and accessible institutions for contesting decisions.

This point also changes the interpretation of public criticism. Criticism conducted through lawful and evidence-based channels may be a sign of institutional engagement rather than alienation. Citizens who expect reasons, appeal decisions, request data, or participate in oversight are acting as subjects of the legal order. A government that treats all skepticism as disloyalty may suppress precisely the feedback needed to become more trustworthy. Conversely, a culture of generalized suspicion in which no institution can ever earn credibility makes collective action prohibitively costly. The desired equilibrium is therefore critical trust, not obedient trust and not permanent distrust.

The model also clarifies the place of national moral traditions. Uzbek social life contains powerful repertoires of reciprocity, respect, neighborhood assistance, hospitality, and responsibility. These are genuine resources, but romanticizing them would be a methodological error. Every moral tradition operates under contemporary conditions of urbanization, migration, market exchange, digital communication, generational change, and institutional differentiation. Traditional solidarity should be evaluated by whether it protects dignity and extends fair cooperation, not by whether it reproduces every inherited hierarchy. The strongest synthesis is one in which moral closeness supports care while universal legal standards prevent exclusion.

A similar qualification applies to the mahalla. The institution is frequently presented as an inherently trust-producing community form. That claim is too broad. The mahalla can generate trust when it resolves problems predictably, safeguards confidentiality, distributes assistance on transparent grounds, enables participation, and connects residents to formal rights. It can undermine trust when personal familiarity substitutes for rule-based treatment or when administrative assignments overwhelm representative and self-governing functions. Its value should therefore be measured through citizen experience and distributive outcomes, not through institutional symbolism alone.

Digitalization presents another test of the framework. A purely technocratic view assumes that automation reduces corruption and therefore increases trust. The relationship is not automatic. Automation can reduce face-to-face discretion while simultaneously concentrating informational power, hiding decision rules, or excluding people with limited access. Trustworthy digitalization requires at least four conditions: traceability of the process, understandable reasons for outcomes, correction of inaccurate data, and a human pathway for exceptional or contested cases. Efficiency is only one dimension of institutional competence; it cannot cancel fairness or accessibility.

The six-dimensional model has practical value because the dimensions can conflict. Greater legal control may reduce discretion but create delays. Faster service may rely on data integration that raises privacy concerns. Open consultation may widen participation but allow highly organized groups to dominate. Local autonomy may improve responsiveness but produce territorial inequality. These are not reasons to abandon reform. They are reasons to evaluate trade-offs explicitly. A trust impact review could ask, before a major procedural change, who gains or loses access, which discretion is created or removed, how decisions can be challenged, what data are used, and whether affected groups can understand the new rule.

The framework is consistent with the OECD finding that trust is associated with citizens' perceptions of reliability, responsiveness, openness, integrity, and fairness, while adding two emphases drawn from the Uzbek research context: competence at everyday access points and meaningful participation that leaves a visible trace in decisions (OECD, 2024). Putnam's distinction between bonding and bridging social capital clarifies how close community ties can support wider cooperation, while Hardin's relational approach explains why trust must remain actor- and context-specific (Putnam, 1993; Hardin, 2002).

Limitations

There are important limits to the present study. First, it is not a survey of Uzbek public opinion; statements about mechanisms should not be read as measurements of national trust. Second, legal and strategic texts reveal formal commitments but do not independently demonstrate implementation. Third, trust varies by object: a citizen may trust a local service but distrust a national institution, or trust professional competence while questioning distributive fairness. Fourth, national averages can hide differences by region, age, gender, income, disability, and digital access. These limitations define the next empirical stage rather than weaken the conceptual distinction between trust and trustworthiness.

Future Research

Future research should therefore test the model with mixed methods. A survey should measure each institution separately and disaggregate legal reliability, fairness, transparency, responsiveness, competence, and participation instead of asking only whether respondents ‘trust the state.’ Service-user journey studies can identify where procedures fail. Interviews and focus groups can explain why identical outcomes are interpreted differently. Administrative data can track response time and correction rates. Regional comparisons can test whether mahalla practices bridge or reproduce inequality. Longitudinal measurement can then establish whether improvements in institutional trustworthiness precede changes in citizen trust rather than merely correlate with them.

Conclusion

Trust should be understood as a moral-institutional relationship rather than a political slogan or a psychological attitude detached from experience. In New Uzbekistan, the constitutional emphasis on human dignity, accountability, openness, participation, and social-state responsibility provides a significant normative architecture for that relationship. Its credibility, however, depends on how these principles are translated into everyday encounters between citizens and institutions.

The article’s main contribution is the shift from trust promotion to trustworthiness production. The proposed model identifies six conditions that public institutions can reasonably be held accountable for: legal reliability, procedural fairness, transparency, responsiveness, competence, and meaningful participation. These conditions link moral expectations to institutional design. They also expose weak substitutes for trust: publicity without evidence, consultation without influence, digital speed without inclusion, and moral instruction without consistent practice.

A second contribution is the closed-loop trust cycle. Normative guarantees create expectations; institutional encounters test them; feedback reveals failure; correction and remedy restore fairness; and renewed experience reshapes future expectations. This makes trust repair as important as trust formation. Institutions become credible not because they never fail, but because errors can be recognized, contested, corrected, and used for organizational learning.

For Uzbekistan, the practical implication is demanding but clear. Strong family and mahalla ties should be preserved as resources of solidarity while being connected to universal standards of rights, privacy, equal treatment, and accountability. Digital reform should increase traceability without making citizens invisible to the system. Civic participation should show a demonstrable path from voice to decision. And public institutions should be evaluated by whether citizens can obtain lawful solutions without informal intermediaries.

The objective is therefore not a society in which institutions are trusted automatically. It is a society in which trust can be justified, criticism can be expressed without destroying cooperation, and distrust triggered by failure has a lawful path toward repair. Such calibrated trust is more demanding than

symbolic unity, but it offers a firmer foundation for sustainable social relations and institutional legitimacy.

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