

A Study on the Negative National Image of Uzbekistan in Western News Media

Beruniy Alimov

Uzbekistan National University, Uzbekistan

Abstract: This paper examined the coverage by foreign news media of various aspects of the country of Uzbekistan for about two decades. The outcomes of the long-term personal observation and analysis revealed that the media in the West offered mainly one-sided critical stories, media in the CIS countries ran flip-flopping coverage, while those in Asian states printed somewhat positive articles. Because such coverage by foreign media appears to continue for the foreseeable future and coverage of reforms implemented by this country may not be objectively reflected by them, the Uzbek government needs to establish some measures to improve this kind of negative national image spread by the Western news media.

When countries like Uzbekistan make efforts to carry out reforms, negative coverage of this country can be especially damaging.

Keywords: Foreign news media, National image, Coverage of reforms, Positive coverage, Negative coverage, Public diplomacy

Introduction

The author of the paper served at 3 Uzbek embassies abroad and visited 22 countries around the world (from 1996 to 2011) and worked at

information agencies of the Uzbek government in the capacity of a public information officer (PIO) for almost 25 years. The experiences as a PIO, whose mission is mainly to deal with foreign journalists and to assess news coverage of Uzbekistan by their media, led the researcher to suspect that their coverage was not very favorable to Uzbekistan.

This paper purports to show that the national image of Uzbekistan has been largely portrayed negatively by the powerful Western media. This kind of negative coverage by foreign news media is sure to form negative images in the minds of foreigners and in turn, those of Uzbek nationals. Considering that we live in a globalized world interconnected with various communication technologies, unfavorable coverage of Uzbekistan by these foreign media could flow into Uzbekistan and affect Uzbeks negatively. While serving as a public information officer for over two decades, the researcher frequently faced negative coverage of Uzbekistan by foreign media such as those in the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany and other Western countries. This kind of negative coverage of this country by the Western media led the researcher to think that it is really urgent that certain measures should be taken to improve the national images portrayed by these foreign media. However, this paper first shows how serious the negative coverage by the Western media is, and raises the urgency of taking some measures to deal with this serious issue.

Issue Raising

Independent Uzbekistan's founding President Islam Karimov (incumbent from 1991 till presently) once voiced his serious concerns about foreign media's unfavorable coverage of this country. Although it may be true that powerful and global Western news media have their own independent editorial line, their constant negative coverage of this country led President Karimov to raise serious doubts about their

editorial intentions in 2009. He even suspected some evil political intentions by these Western media: ... it becomes clearer that behind these actions, there are evil intentions of certain political centers to exert an influence skillfully by using philosophical, ideological and informational tools to the states which are independently building their life and future, and particularly Uzbekistan. These Western media make our sons and daughters with immature worldviews go astray of their chosen path, inject into their hearts the views deemed to be totally alien and dangerous to us, and deprive us of our spiritual roots and foundations (Karimov I.A. 2009, p. 6).

Karimov may not be the only person worried about Western media's portrayal of Uzbekistan. Many of Uzbekistan's intellectuals share his views.

The reasons why a country like Uzbekistan's national image portrayed by the overwhelming Western media are important are varied. If a country is continually described negatively by the giant Western media, this country may lose respect among the people on the globe and finally lose its national prestige. The result will be loss of competitive edges in inducing foreign investment, foreign tourists, and finally losing international reputation and competitiveness.

In addition, when countries like Uzbekistan make efforts to carry out reforms, negative coverage of this country can be especially damaging. What is more worrisome to countries like Uzbekistan is that there may not be effective tools to handle negative coverage conducted by these powerful Western global news media. This is especially because these media are operated by the powerful media empires based on the principles of 'freedom of the press.' However, to Uzbeks' eyes, this kind of coverage appears to have been based on some political intentions, motivated by commercial purposes, or caused by simple lack of understanding of Uzbek society.

For over several decades, the world media space has been controlled by the globe's largest Western media companies. Because of this, information on the globe has been disseminated to the world public in the shape and substance handled by owners of the Western media giants (Infowars, 2013, May 21). In this regard, information provided by these news media may be one-sided. Michael Snyder of Economic Collapse says that "the mainstream media do not want you to look at 'the man behind the curtain'. They just want you to stay plugged into the 'programming' that they are feeding you without asking any questions. Such circumstances may do harm not only to country's external image, but also its domestic one. Negative news could nurture in citizens' minds a mood of uncertainty in the future."

In comparison with the potency of Western media giants, local news media in Uzbekistan are deemed too weak to counterbalance the negative coverage of the former. In addition, one can ask a logical question such as "To what extent can the globe's largest news disseminators observe the principle of fairness in their reportage?" What interests do these international media giants serve? At a time when the news, information and communication technologies can turn into an instrument of influencing the hearts and minds of people, it is vitally important to secure favorable coverage by these news media.

Research Questions

Considering that major foreign news media's coverage of Uzbekistan can shape the overall national images of this country, this research tried to analyze news coverage of major countries' media. So the research questions could be framed as follows:

- 1) What foreign news media portrayed Uzbekistan in the positive light and what are representative stories of positive coverage?

- 2) What foreign news media portrayed Uzbekistan in the negative light and what are representative stories of negative coverage?

Research Methods

The researcher of this paper, while serving as PIO for a long period, accumulated lots of news articles and routinely and regularly evaluated foreign news media's coverage of Uzbekistan. The researcher has implemented a long-term evaluation of these foreign news articles and formed an impression of them. The research methods will be personal observation in the capacity of a PIO and evaluation over a long period of time by citing representative articles to support the researcher's argument.

Researcher's analysis of foreign media's coverage of Uzbekistan has extended for over two decades and examples of positive and negative coverage were collected. But research results are mainly be centered on coverage by major foreign print media.

For this paper the researcher has led the research and has provided basic information; and the second researcher has supplemented logic and supplied additional facts and rearranged and refined the overall paper. However, considering that negative coverage can have more powerful influence on humans than positive coverage, this paper has placed more emphasis on the negative coverage of major foreign news media and tried to show concrete representative stories, i.e., problematic coverage that portrayed Uzbekistan in the negative light. Here, the definition of positive versus negative coverage is not offered and follows just the commonsensical thinking.

Research Results

1) Overall Analysis of Foreign Media's Coverage

2) The overall outcome of the long-term personal observation and evaluation of foreign news media's coverage of Uzbekistan revealed that news media in the West-the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States-seemed to be offering largely one-sided critical and negative stories of Uzbekistan. In comparison, news media in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)-Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan-seemed to flip-flop in portraying Uzbekistan, sometimes negatively and sometimes positively. However, news media in Asian countries-Japan, China, South Korea, India, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt-largely published favorable articles.

Generally speaking, news stories about Uzbekistan were regularly published in the periodicals of the CIS states and countries of the East. In particular, news media in Russia, Kazakhstan, China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, India, Turkey, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates ran stories of Uzbekistan quite regularly (once or twice a month). But Uzbekistan was not regularly covered by the news media of the Western countries such as the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom. In reality, although more than twenty years have passed since the independence of the country of Uzbekistan in 1991 and the inception of reforms by this government, national efforts to improve its overseas image portrayed by the Western media have not yet been launched. Negative coverage of Uzbekistan by the Western media may be attributable to this kind of lack of efforts at the government level (Researcher of this paper has been following many of the news articles of these countries mentioned above, but here only some representative news articles of some countries have been selected to illustrate negative or positive coverage about Uzbekistan).

Why did the Western media not cover this country profusely? Paucity of Uzbek coverage by the Western media may be in part attributable to scarcity of information provided by the foreign countries to these foreign media, or to lack of foreign media's interest in

Uzbekistan (Concerning insufficient coverage on Uzbekistan by the U.S. media, provision of little information could be part of the reasons. For example, in the period from April to May 2000, the U.S. State Department initiated press meetings with local reporters from 10 states in the country, who worked for large local newspapers, magazines and television stations. Most of the American journalists who participated in the meetings admitted that they were not provided sufficient information about Uzbekistan (Zoghby J. 2000). Part of the reasons may also be that public information efforts by Uzbekistan government ministries and agencies, state bodies and companies, and Uzbekistan embassies overseas haven't been effective in dealing with foreign media. In order to have more positive coverage by the foreign media, these state organizations should have acted together in a concerted manner just as they were in an orchestra.

However, it should also be underscored that Uzbekistan's socio-political life, specifically, elections and the processes related to them are sometimes particularly well covered by foreign news media. For instance, the world's news media paid a large attention to the presidential elections held in March 29, 2015. This could be due to the publicity efforts made by the Information Agency "Jahon" at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, which gave a number of press conferences to publicize the presidential election.

3) Western News Media: One-sidedly Critical and Negative

The coverage of Uzbekistan by Western news media has been generally negative. In particular, print media in some countries of the West, for example, the U.S.-based *The New York Times* newspaper, the German *Der Spiegel* magazine and some British news media were evaluated to have been publishing mostly negative, one-sided and non-objective articles. For example, *The New York Times*, in its September 8,

2007 issue (Anna Kisselgoff, 2007, August 9) wrote about Uzbekistan in a negative light, even while there did not exist any clear evidence to report negatively. This newspaper vaguely hinted that there may be something wrong concerning death of an Uzbek director: Mark Weil, an internationally known theater director in Uzbekistan, whose troupe, Ilkhom, caused controversy at home with its experimental productions, was fatally stabbed late Thursday night in Tashkent. He was 55. Mr. Weil died in a hospital after being attacked in front of his apartment building, a spokesman for his troupe told The Associated Press. Neighbors saw two young men waiting for him, The A.P. reported. At that time Uzbek newspapers were not clear on this issue and did not say anything about whether the death of Mark Weil was accidental or intended by others.

The New York Times, in its September 12, 2008 issue (Sabrina Tavernise, 2008, September 13) cited limited sources in a sensitive human rights issue in this country, thus reporting one-sidedly: An Uzbek journalist and human rights advocate, Solizhon Abdurakhmanov, went on trial in the city of Nukus on Friday on charges of trying to sell drugs, according to his brother, Bakhrom Abdurakhmanov. Solizhon Abdurakhmanov was arrested in June. His brother, who is representing him at the trial, said the police planted marijuana and opium on the underside of Mr. Abdurakhmanov's car, while it was being repaired and arrested him after he picked it up. Mr. Abdurakhmanov has worked for *The New York Times* as a local guide and for other news organizations, including Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America, and he has provided legal aid to Uzbeks caught in the machinery of Uzbekistan's authoritarian government (Researcher tried to look for news on this issue, but found that none of Uzbek official newspapers informed about the situation on this topic).

The New York Times, in its December 17, of 2013 issue (Mirovalev M., Kramer E. 2013, December 18) criticized that

Uzbekistan allows children to work in the form of forced labor in picking cotton. *The New York Times*' correspondent Andrew E. Kramer wrote that "It is one of the world's most bizarre systems of agricultural labor, possible, perhaps, only in one of the world's most cloistered and repressive societies." This story sounded quite loaded and emotional compared with other *New York Times* articles. The child labor is not a common topic for local media, but the governmental news agency *Jahon* (*Uzbek word meaning World*) gave a counter-argument to this article: In 2008, Uzbekistan ratified the Convention 182 of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour and ILO Convention 138 on the minimum age for admission to employment, which are successfully implemented. In order to strengthen the responsibility of economic entities and individuals for violation of the inadmissibility of the use of child labor, as well as for violation of labor legislation in respect of persons who have not attained the age of eighteen, in 2009 adopted the Law on Amendments to the Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan on administrative responsibility in connection with the improvement of the legislation on the protection of minors (Jahon Information Agency. 2015, June 25).

A German weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel* in its February 4, 2014 issue (*Der Spiegel*, 2014, February 5), reported that the events taking place in Ukraine could also occur in Uzbekistan. *Der Spiegel* correspondent writes that "too great a fear that the pictures out will cause a political crisis in these countries. Local regime with all costs trying to prevent a repeat of mass demonstrations in May 2005, as a result of the shooting of a peaceful demonstration, killing more than 500 people, and the international sanctions were introduced."

But in this connection, one of the most powerful news agencies of the West, the Associated Press correspondent Burt Herman writes (M.spokesman.com, 2015, May 21), that the Uzbek President Islam

“Karimov has blamed Islamic militants for the unrest that began May 13, 2005 in Andijan and denies his troops fired on unarmed civilians there. He dismisses claims of rights activists who put the death toll at over 700”. AP tried to be objective by citing both sides. One can also observe various negative stories on Uzbekistan in the news outlets such as the United States’ “Voice of America,” “Liberty” and catholicculture.org web-portal.

The British media, BBC included also very frequently portrayed Uzbekistan’s politics in the negative light. Especially, this country’s print media, being one of the major Western media, have largely portrayed Uzbekistan negatively. For example, *The Guardian*, in its May 16 of 2005 issue, wrote that (Nick Walsh, 2005, May 16): The British government clashed openly with Uzbekistan yesterday over the violent suppression of a protest in the former Soviet republic and that the Foreign Office said that had left hundreds dead. In an unusual condemnation of a country routinely described as a loyal ally by both Britain and the US, Jack Straw, the foreign secretary, said yesterday there had been a “clear abuse of human rights”.

However, in an interview with Uzbek television, Dr. Shirin Akiner, a professor at the University of London who visited Andijan shortly after the massacre, supported the Uzbek government’s version of the event. Akiner said, “These people were not peaceful demonstrators, these were rebels, they were armed. On the square, there were no protests or demands from the local people, there were just some people who stood and watched what happened” (Uzbek Television and Radio Company, “Akhborot” (News), May 29, 2005).

Besides that, *The Guardian*, in its April 4 of 2015 issue, in a critical manner said that “the electoral commission reported a whopping 91.08 % turnout. To no one’s surprise, the incumbent president won another five-year term, with 90.39 % of the vote” (Alec Luhn, 2015). In contrast to the *Guardian*’s report, Uzbekistan National Information

Agency said that “the process of voting at polling stations established at representative offices of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan, India, as well as in Europe and neighboring states continues. The elections are being held in full compliance with the democratic principles enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Law on the elections of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan and other laws” (Uzbekistan National Information Agency, 2015, March 29).

However, British media very infrequently carried neutral to positive topics concerning Uzbekistan, describing this country as having a rich history and providing tourism opportunities but also suffering from ecological problems related to the Aral Sea, which has been drying up for decades. For example, *the Guardian* published an article entitled “Timur’s Registan: Noblest Public Square in the World” on March 31, 2015 and ran a rather positive story (The Guardian, 2015, March 31).

Additionally, a British online journal Earth Times posted a story with a headline “A Future for Aral Sea is Hopefully Assured” (Jahon Information Agency, 2014, November 7).

The story described today’s deplorable situation of the Aral Sea, its negative impact on the region’s environment and the poor health of its population, as well as the measures undertaken by the Uzbekistan government and the international community to address the tragedy of the Aral Sea.

The London-based Russian-language news web-portal “Profile Russia” posted a news story headlined “The Representatives of the Great Britain on Uzbekistan’s Modern Development and Achievements” on February 27, 2015 (Profile Russia, 2013, February 28).

It is a well-known news media outlet for its fair and objective portrayal of Uzbekistan.

4) **Russian News Media: Flip-flopping**

Russian media largely reflected the current political relations between Moscow and Tashkent. Throughout the years it has been changing “like weather”. That means sometimes Russian media spread positive stories about Uzbekistan, and sometimes it spread negative information. For example, we can see following positive stories. News portal “Infoshos.ru” in its December 25, 2009 issue, wrote that “Uzbekistan is enjoying the fruits of democracy - the right of voting” (Tatyana Sinytsina. 2009, December 25). Correspondent of Infoshos said that he got a chance to see the Parliamentary elections in Uzbekistan “with his own eyes” and, accordingly, “here even a letter of election law, it is clear, cannot be broken”. Another Russian media, Information Agency “Regnum,” in its December 29, 2014 issue, said that, “Uzbekistan will direct 3.05 billion USD for a number of projects to mitigate the environmental damage caused by the shrinking of Aral Sea. Projects will be financed by loans from international financial institutions in the amount of \$ 2.15 billion and own funds of the Uzbek side (Regnum Information Agency. 2014, December 29).”

In contrast, sometimes Russia’s *Moskovskiy Komsomlets* (Moscow’s *comsomol*) newspaper and *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (Truth of *comsomol*) newspaper, “RIA Novosti” (Russian News Agency) and “Golos Rossii” (*Voice of Russia, radio channel*) spread negative stories about Uzbekistan. For instance, *Moskovskiy Komsomlets* in its February 6, 2013 issue (*Moskovskiy komsomolets*, 2013, February 6), said that: “20 citizens of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan were detained for prostitution in Astana. During the raid, police arrested 67 people, including a girl of easy virtue, pimps and drivers of private taxis, carrying girls. Identified 20 women in prostitution are nationals of neighboring countries such as the Republic of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.”

Local media in Tashkent sometimes criticize Uzbek citizens, who work as prostitutes abroad. But this particular story was not dealt with in local newspapers at that time.

Some stories were simply neutral. For example, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* wrote that “On September 29th, 2015, in Tashkent, an unknown man threw Molotov cocktails to the US embassy. In the incident, fortunately, nobody was hurt. One of the devices exploded, but no one was hurt. Security measures were strengthened, according to employees of the embassy. The embassy is now working normally. The police found out the reasons of what happened. This is not the first attack on the US embassy in Uzbekistan. In the year of 2004, for example, a bomb exploded in front of the embassy. Several people were killed and local extremists claimed responsibility.” None of Uzbek official media reported on this topic.

Asian News Media: Largely Positive

Overall, news media in Asian countries such as Japan, China, and Turkey tried to carry regular coverage on Uzbekistan. Their coverage also seemed to be relatively objective. The presidential election in Uzbekistan held in March of 2015 was actively covered by the Japanese media. And other news media carried in-depth coverage of this country. The Japan-based Nippon-Evrasia newspaper (it means Japan-Europe newspaper) published a story headlined “Uzbekistan--On the Path to Consistent Democratic Development,” in which it offered a comprehensive analysis of social and political gains achieved during the years of independent progress of Uzbekistan (Result of researcher’s search online). This newspaper informed that Uzbekistan paid a special attention to holding presidential elections--the most important institution of democracy and a form of expression of people’s will. Coverage of this newspaper on Uzbekistan’s election was, on the whole, positive and to

the point. The newspaper commented that effective normative and legal basis of elections was created in the country. The article said as follows: The elections in Uzbekistan were administered in pursuance with national legislation requirements and standards of international law, in the condition of openness and transparency. In general, Uzbek voters cast their ballots on an equality basis and direct and secret voting was implemented. The interference of state bodies was not allowed in the election processes.

In dealing with other topics, researcher's observations showed that the Chinese "Jinmin Jibao" newspaper and "Xinhua" news agency actively covered Uzbekistan's domestic life and its foreign relationships. Both media outlets ran a number of news stories on the course of economic reforms in Uzbekistan, the successes achieved along the road as much as the plans for the future. The Chinese reporters presented information on Uzbekistan in a positive tone. Such news articles mainly conveyed broad facts with confirmative information. For example, stories of this newspaper offered very detailed information about a certain event, the persons participating in it, the venue and goals for holding such an event and others. In recent years, the "Jinmin Jibao" newspaper ran more than 100 stories on Uzbekistan per year and "Xinhua" news agency about 80 stories. It is expected that the amount of news stories on Uzbekistan provided by the news agency will be on the rise, considering that the "Xinhua" has set a goal to turn itself into the largest one in the world.

Discussing Chinese journalists' active service in Uzbekistan, it seems necessary to dwell on Li Chuyfa's many years of activity. He served as a correspondent of the economic newspaper "Jingji Shibao. He mainly wrote news articles on the courses of economic and social reform in Uzbekistan. Besides, Li Chuyfa has actively covered the multifaceted cooperation ties ever developing between Uzbekistan and China. In 2012, Li Chuyfa was awarded the National Prize "Oltin qalam" (Uzbek word

meaning “Golden pen”) in the category of “the best news story on Uzbekistan written by foreign journalists.” He was awarded by Journalists’ Union of Uzbekistan for improving media image of this country.

The “TRT” television, the news agency of “Cihan” and “Anadolu” of Turkey respectively were evaluated to have informed their audiences on various aspects of Uzbekistan’s life by disseminating varied information on relevant topics. Most of the news aired and printed by the Turkish media outlets can be said to be fair and true. There was no negative coverage of Uzbekistan. These news outlets paid a special attention to the information distributed by official sources, resulting in positive coverage as a result. The materials spread seem to be spreading positive information about this country.

Atif Ala, correspondent of the “Cihan” News Agency, who served for more than fifteen years in Tashkent, wrote on average around 500 stories a year. Mr. Ala participated in the immediate coverage of important political and cultural events. In particular, this correspondent not only produced news texts but also ran exclusive photos and videos on the processes of presidential elections of this country, celebrations of Navruz (an ancient New Year’s celebration held on March 21), and Independence Day celebrations (September 1, starting from 1991). (Atif Ala, 2011, September 1). For many years the “TRT” television channel has been airing from Tashkent live coverage of Uzbekistan’s national holiday festivities in cooperation with Uzbekistan National Television and Radio Company. Bakhtiyor Abdukarimov, special correspondent of the Turkish “Anadolu” News Agency, is ranked among the most successful journalists, who showed excellence in his foreign journalism service. He dispatched nearly 1,000 news stories per year. In 2012, Mr. Abdukarimov was awarded the National Prize “*Oltin qalam*” in the category of “the best articles on Uzbekistan published in the foreign mass media.

Conclusion: Negative Coverage Needs Be Addressed

As was shown above, analysis of foreign news media's coverage of Uzbekistan could be categorized into three groups: critical, flip-flopping (or, whimsical), and positive. The above was a summation of analysis by the researcher over a period of the past 25 years in more than 20 countries based on personal observation. The news media's titles and selected articles are representative cases worthy of noting in this paper. To summarize the long-term analysis, it could be described as the following. The news media in the West (the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States) mostly provided one-sidedly critical stories. The media in the Commonwealth of Independent States (Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan) have covered Uzbekistan in a whimsical manner. The newspapers in major Asian countries (Japan, China and Turkey) largely ran positive stories on Uzbekistan. However, generally speaking, foreign news media did not sufficiently cover Uzbekistan's efforts to reform itself and negative coverage by the Western media is serious.

The Uzbekistan government needs to consider ways of expanding the scope of work with foreign correspondents in Tashkent and that of the foreign embassies operating overseas. In fact, many governments on the earth already are actively engaged in improving their national image under the name of "public diplomacy." Uzbeks need to pay more attention to both theoretical and practical aspects of improving their country's overseas image.

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