Chapter 2
From the Second World to Global South?
Narratives of Tajikistan in Western Media

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ABSTRACT

Tajikistan has experienced numerous barriers to economic and political development over the past 100 years. Pressured into joining the Soviet Union, which lasted nearly 70 years, Tajikistan sank into a civil war upon achieving its independence. This resulted in numerous deaths, displacement, and infrastructural devastation. Since the conflict, Tajikistan has experienced tremendous economic growth and positive social developments; however, Western media overwhelmingly focuses on isolated incidences of violence and socioeconomic trends that casts Tajikistan in a negative light. This also creates a “horn effect” that frames the Tajik socioeconomic situation as underdeveloped and lacking freedoms. A narrative analysis of stories on Tajikistan from the United States’ top 10 news outlets from 1998 to 2018 portrays unrepresentative and paternal pictures of Tajikistan’s political, economic, and social developments.

INTRODUCTION

Ask the average person their opinion of the state of the world, and their answers are likely to be rather bleak. In fact, this phenomenon is well-documented in Hans Rosling’s book, Factfulness: Ten Reasons We’re Wrong About the World—and Why Things Are Better Than You Think. Rosling developed a short survey that asked individuals to determine what percent of the world’s population lives in poverty, goes without vaccines or secondary education, and lives to middle age, among other questions. Rosling spent several decades asking individuals from all walks of life—including students, international organization analysts, and businesspeople—what they believed the answers to those questions were. The results were, much like clickbait, shocking. Survey takers striving to answer the questions correctly were much

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more often incorrect in their answers compared to someone guessing the answers. The common trend of the survey takers was that they consistently under-estimated the level of development in developing countries while over-estimating the level of poverty experienced by residents of the Global South (Rosling, Rosling, & Rönnlund, 2018). In reality, the past two decades have seen Global South societies continue to grow and expand their economies. Simultaneously, their capacity to become consumers of global goods continues to grow (Rodrik, 2014). Members of the Global North look to the increasingly consuming Global South to contribute in keeping the international economy strong through their new purchasing power. Given the high expectations and hopes for the Global South, one would expect mass media and news outlets to mirror this expectant attitude; however, media representation from the Global North tend to frame economic growth as a small part of these countries’ identities. Reporting tends to take a dual approach of sensationalism and a paternalism when reporting on the Global South.

An excellent case study that illustrates the broader problems of reporting on the Global South by global media outlets is found in the reporting on Tajikistan in American news channels. Tajikistan has experienced tremendous growth despite several circumstances that could have resulted in setbacks. Tajikistan was pressured into joining the Soviet Union for nearly 70 years. Immediately after its independence in 1991, it descended into civil war over the direction of post-independence governance (religious or secular). The civil war resulted in an estimated 100,000 deaths, 1 million refugees and internally displaced peoples, and extensive infrastructural damage valued over USD $7 Billion—five times greater than Tajikistan’s 1991 GDP of $1.3 Billion (“Tajikistan,” 2018a).

Twenty years later, the Tajik GDP is over $7 Billion, and sustaining an annual growth of over 7%. The poverty rate has fallen below 30% for the first time since independence (when it hovered at 80%), and social measurements continue in positive trends as well.

A government-established National Testing Center works to promote better access and equality in education. Additionally, access to clean water continues to grow, and the number of people with food insecurity continues to fall. Micro-grants are available to women at unprecedented rates, and citizens note a capacity for material possessions unseen during or after the country’s membership in the Soviet Union (Aliev, 2018). The 2016 GDP per capita was 60% higher than it was in 1990, recovering after a -70% dip in per capita GDP during the civil war.

Not only has the past century seen economic and social growth, but it would not be an exaggeration to say that the growth over the past 20 years has been miraculous.

Tajikistan has experienced incredible growth in infrastructure developments, quality of life, and democratic freedoms. Despite all this, Western media overwhelmingly focuses on events and socioeconomic trends that frame Tajikistan in a negative light. This is not an isolated phenomenon, as there is a strong tradition of Western media representing developing countries in a negative light (Alam, 2007; Lugo-Ocando, 2015). This raises an interesting question: do the dominate global media narratives interact in a way that perpetuate negative perceptions of Global South countries?

Using Tajikistan as a case, this chapter begins by providing an overview of media theory focusing on Global North/Global South relations. This transitions to an overview of Tajikistan’s recent history to provide context as part of the Global South. It also outlines current challenges Tajikistan faces, as identified by Tajik domestic media and government reports. The chapter then contrasts these self-identified challenges with reporting trends from dominate American news channels and newspapers with global reach from 1998 to 2017. This analysis uncovers a trend in negative portrayals of Tajikistan that are rarely presented in isolation. Instead, narratives addressing social, economic, political, and religious spheres interact to deepen negative portrayals of Tajikistan. After identifying the narrative trends in news
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