

# KYRGYZ NEWSPAPER COVERAGE ON AFGHANISTAN FAVORS WESTERN VIEWS

By *Elmira Toktogulova, CIMERA, Kyrgyzstan*

**Kyrgyzstan's media do not dispute the fairness of and need for air strikes in Afghanistan. The media reflects the position taken by society and the authorities, which is consent to what other, stronger, countries have decided.**

Kyrgyzstan is one of two Central Asian countries having no common border with Afghanistan (Kazakhstan is the other), and its resources are scarce. It is also very far from being a leading nation. As a result, Kyrgyzstan used to wait for its neighbours' decisions on major regional issues before expressing its opinion, taking into account the interests of its stronger and richer neighbours. As far as Afghan issues are concerned, Kyrgyzstan's position is reflected in the nature and issues raised by the media. The media is dealing more with the interests of America, Russia, Uzbekistan, and the Taliban concerning regional and world problems, rather than the interests and position of Kyrgyzstan itself.

## FIRST RESPONSE

All of Kyrgyzstan's print media, referring to foreign news agencies, carried short news articles on the missile strikes and bombing in Afghanistan the day after the operation began. *Res Publica* published an article on October 9th, 2001 with the rhetorical headline «Third world war?» which reported on the events in Afghanistan and referred to official sources in America: «Air-raids and missile strikes in Afghanistan started by the USA and Great Britain on Monday night will continue for several days, Pentagon's offi-

cial representatives stated. The strikes will continue until the anti-aircraft defence and aviation, as well as the military (Taliban) infrastructure are destroyed.»

The governmental newspaper *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* carried none of its own commentaries on the recent

«The placing of American military base in Uzbekistan increases the investment appeal of the Central Asian republic.»

developments in Afghanistan while reporting on the start of the military operation. It confined itself to news obtained from other agencies, and reported on the start of the antiterrorist operation and a statement made by Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, all under the front page headline, «Time for retribution» (October 9th, 2001).

Looking through other Kyrgyz newspapers on the same day, one could not find any official or public statements concerning the events developing in Afghanistan, except for a statement made by Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in support of the American and British antiterrorist operation in Afghanistan and ... a statement made by Islam Karimov, President of neighbouring Uzbekistan. Two papers, *Moya Stolitsa*

and *Vecherny Bishkek*, published Karimov's statement «in connection to the situation developing around Afghanistan» without any of their own commentary.

From the very beginning, the Uzbek president's statement precisely articulated the problem, which was probably his reason for making it. From its first lines the statement dealt with the «news attack and propagation of insinuations» concerning the position taken by Uzbekistan, its cooperation with a number of western countries, and the circumstances in Afghanistan as a whole. What is remarkable is that amongst the sources «of fabrication and news attacks» the President named Russian television and media, as well as a number of «foreign media», without specifying which. He also noted that such «news attacks» were possible because «our (Uzbekistan's) press and television do not inform our people in a timely fashion and give no explanations about this issue. The result is that the public misunderstands which foreign media news is truthful and which is false.»

## KYRGYZ OPINION POLL

The newspaper *Obschestvenny reiting* (Public rating) (October 10th, 2001) devoted its regular poll to the pros and cons of Kyrgyzstan's cooperation with the US within the framework of the antiterrorist operation: «Pros: Kyrgyzstan has confirmed its adherence to civilized and advanced society. But, confrontation with the Taliban regime will grow. Thus it

is very important not to spoil our good relations with the Arab world, but on the contrary strengthen them by adhering to Muslim values. (...) To a greater degree these are political pluses for Kyrgyzstan. For years we have struggled with terrorism on our own. Having joined the antiterrorist alliance, Kyrgyzstan is sure that its problems will be decided jointly. Cons: Threats from the Taliban. Economic gains are possible, but depend on to whom offers will be made and who will execute them.» On October 16th, 2001 Res Publica published the article «Karimov's choice», in which it analysed the pros and cons of Uzbekistan's cooperation with the USA. «The placing of American military base in Uzbekistan increases the investment appeal of the Central Asian republic,» believed the author.

### UZBEK REACTIONS

«There are obvious benefits for Tashkent to the creation of a military union with America as well. Firstly, Islam Karimov will obtain a strong ally in the struggle against fundamentalists. Secondly, the country, which has the largest army among the region's states, has long strived for political leadership in Central Asia and hopes to achieve its goals with the help of the US. Thirdly, by renting military and civil infrastructure to Americans, Uzbekistan expects direct material benefits. Fourthly, indirect benefits may be rather considerable, as the availability of an American military base in a restless country, as a rule, comforts American investors very much,» the article stated. Although though the article only deals with the interests of the superpowers and those countries bordering Afghanistan, such reports are very frequent in the

Kyrgyz media, because they present readers with the viewpoint of the forces operating in the region and the current situation from a geopolitical point of view.

Two days after the Americans had started the attacks on Afghanistan, Moya Stolitsa (October 10th, 2001) published its first editorial analysis of the situation: «The Taliban rattles its sabre at the CIS borders». The author doubts that military action in Afghanistan will bring peace to the country, or as

naticism undermines the basic principles of orthodox Islam.

The author was puzzled by the fact that during the first days of its military operation in Afghanistan, America threw down food aid packages along with bombs and rockets: «Does someone really seriously expect that humanitarian aid makes it possible to convert Afghanistans to one's faith?» The author concentrates on how the events in Afghanistan will echo in Central Asia. He presented infor-

The author was puzzled by the fact that during the first days of its military operation in Afghanistan, America threw down food aid packages along with bombs and rockets: «Does someone really seriously expect that humanitarian aid makes it possible to convert Afghanistans to one's faith?»

to its neighbours. He also emphasizes, «Americans have done everything so that their strike on the Islamic State of Afghanistan (ISA) would not look like the aggression of a great power against an Islamic country.» Russia's position, and the USA's attitude to it, was stated as follows: «... first of all, America needed Russia as an ally. For Russia, over the course of the recent twenty years, the Afghani issue had been not a headache, but it also has a passionate desire to take revenge for the lost war.»

The author explain part of the Muslim world's consent to Americans' action as follows: «The main reason that eastern countries supported the USA were the deep economic ties America was inclined to sever with those who disagreed with its position on Afghanistan.» In addition, according to the author Muslim theologians in those eastern countries that positioned themselves as allies of the US believe that the Taliban's militant fa-

mation on the accumulation of several thousand Taliban fighters near the borders with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, who were preparing to attack these countries «for their support of the US.» While Uzbekistan's officials refute this information, the author, believing its truth, ponders on the probable consequences of Taliban attack on Central Asian countries. The author forecasts that a Taliban attack on Tajikistan would be «rather bloody on both sides.» However, recent measures on security cooperation in the CIS have guaranteed that any intrusion into Central Asia from the outside would be repulsed efficiently enough.

### THE KYRGYZ VIEW

On October 16th, 2001 the opposition paper Res Publica published its first article analysing the Afghani problem under the headline «No hope without knowledge, no freedom without faith». Regretting the necessity to speak about

the war, the author writes about the actions of those who relate to its organization or influences such decisions: «Destroy, bomb, persecute, raze to the ground, beat the heads of those who are stubborn with an axe.» This is the language of a civilized world in the international news space. Certainly, the West would be not the West if there were no courageous and reasonable people. The German and French press is overflowing with not only analysis, but also with critical articles about the organizers of this new «crusade». The essence of all the questions is «Well, what else?» What other conclusion could Americans and their «friends» in the antiterrorist coalition come to? What should we do with the causes provoking terrorism on a global scale? Which is the path to peace? Do we have any alternatives? (...) It is a striking fact. Nobody proposes discussing the right of each civilization to live according to its own ideas. Remove military bases and leave alone land that does not belong to them, don't economically blockade any country. (...) Terrorism cannot be justified, but in order to put up with it we should separate it from Islam, and having separated them, try to understand how to live together on one planet. It is clear that only the differential coexistence of two worlds is possible, as well as non-interference in one another's principles. Any other way leads to catastrophe.»

Of the hundreds of deputies, politicians and officials holding high positions, only a few have publicly expressed their opinions concerning the military operation begun in Afghanistan. Felix Kulov, one of Kyrgyzstan's best-known opposition politicians and leader of the opposition party «Ar-Namys», who was sent to jail by

the authorities, gave an interview to Res Publica (October 30th, 2001) in which he expressed his agreement with President Akaev's decision to support the US in its antiterrorist operation in Afghanistan. «To my mind, there was no alternative to such a decision,» said Kulov. «Kyrgyzstan, along with other Central Asian states of the

«Destroy, bomb, persecute, raze to the ground, beat the heads of those who are stubborn with an axe.» This is the language of a civilized world in the international news space.

CIS, should become a locomotive in the counteraction against reactionaries and militant ideologists who consciously distort Islam and contrast Muslim states with other countries.»

#### CRITICIZING CRITICISM

«What is there behind the facade?» This was the headline in Slovo Kyrgyzstana (October 12th, 2001) that sharply criticised the position taken on Afghanistan by Tursunbai Bakir uulu, a Member of Parliament and leader of the Erkin Kyrgyzstan party, at a press conference. The people's deputy spoke against America's military action in Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan's participation in the «military aggression.» According to the deputy, Kyrgyzstan should under no circumstances grant its air space to the American air force, because the Taliban can respond by committing terrorist acts in Kyrgyzstan. Private newspapers responded without spirit to this statement, while Slovo Kyrgyzstana commented on his words as follows: «... the opposition in Kyr-

gyzstan, no matter what epithets and regalia it would decorated itself with, has nothing sound to offer to society so far». Further on the author questions why the deputy needed to announce his opposition to the authorities, and what was behind his «patriotism»? «It is rather strange,» the author notes, «that while all of progressive mankind is resolute in its decision to excise the cancerous growth of terrorism and extremism, a member of the Kyrgyz parliament publicly takes the side of the Taliban. (...) What force moves Tursunbai Bakir uulu? A dragging pain for the motherland, or a readiness to join the struggle against the «faithless»?»

#### HOME ISSUES

Some newspapers published detailed articles that explained the Taliban, extremist organisations active in Kyrgyzstan, and the current inter-relation between politics and religion. Delo No (October 25th, 2001) published articles about the Hizb ut-Tahrir party and the Taliban. The article «Is Hizb ut-Tahrir preparing to attack?» stated, «society, it seems, is coming to understanding that this prohibited religious organization is not as harmless as some politicians have attempted to assure their compatriots.» According to the author, Kyrgyzstan's special services are sure that the rapid expansion of extremist ideas in Kyrgyzstan is related to the populations' religious illiteracy. «Their emissaries distort the Koran's surahs and interpret the sacred book of Muslims to their own benefit. However, the party also includes intellectuals and even representatives of the power structures,» the article states. Special services explain it by the desire to use the party in order to satisfy somebody's polit-

ical ambitions. However, the people's attitude to Hizb ut-Tahrir is rather one of suspicion. The author continues, «... After September 11, adherents of the movement preferred to be in hiding. However, recently, according to special services' data, the management of the Kyrgyz branch of the extremist party (Hizb ut-Tahrir has its headquarters in London) received instructions to promote anti-American feelings in Central Asian countries bordering Afghanistan.»

«Afghani hospitality, or seven naive questions about Afghanistan» was an article in Delo No in

which the author gives «answers to the hottest questions on Afghanistan, referring to the opinions of leaders of the Afghani refugees community in Kyrgyzstan and a domestic expert who has studied Afghanistan for many years. «Who are Taliban? Is it possible to intimidate the Taliban with bombings? Is peace possible in Afghanistan?» These are a few of the questions answered in the article.

Res Publica (October 9th, 2001) published an article under the headline «The peculiarities of the Hizb ut-Tahrir party in Kyr-

gyzstan», which detailed the party's raison d'être, its structure, ideology, methods of work, the reasons behind its appearance and spread in Kyrgyzstan, and the attitude of society and the authorities to it. The author concludes: «By and large the authorities do not know what to do with Hizb ut-Tahrir», and that they are unable to find an ideological counterattack. Therefore, the current most efficient tool of counterattack is recognised to be Islamic spiritual leaders, who can carry out the necessary work to elucidate their parishioners.