

## ЖУРНАЛИСТИКА

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### BRANDING UZBEKISTAN<sup>4</sup>



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#### Abstract

The creation of a 'national brand' required a wide-ranging survey of the features that give Uzbekistan its individuality, including a unique geography, great natural beauty, rich historical traditions, well educated population, diversified economy and a balanced foreign policy.

This article is published for the first time based on the permission of Dr.Akiner's family members. She has presented numerous papers at international conferences and high-level seminars in leading think tanks, international organizations and universities in some 20 countries, including Uzbekistan.

**Keywords:** brand; image; government; slogans; change; foreign policy; international media.

### ЎЗБЕКИСТОН БРЕНДИНГИ

**Ширин АКИНЕР**  
(1943 йил 16 июнь – 2019 йил 6 апрель)  
Британиянинг Марказий Осиё бўйича етакчи олимаси эди.  
Лондон Университетининг Шарқ ва Африка тадқиқотлари мактаби  
(SOAS)нинг илмий ходими фазифасида меҳнат қилган.

#### Аннотация

“Миллий бренд”ни яратиш турли ўзига хосликларни таҳлил қилишни талаб этади. Мавжуд барча ўзига хосликлар, жумладан бетакрор географик муҳит, чексиз табиий гўзалликлар, бой тарихий анъаналар, яхши таълим олган аҳоли, диверсификациялашган иқтисодиёт ва балансланган ташқи сиёсат – Ўзбекистонга индивидуаллик бағишлайди.

Ушбу мақола доктор Ш.Акинернинг оила аъзолари рухсати билан илк бор эълон қилинмоқда. У 20дан ортиқ мамлакатларда, шу жумладан Ўзбекистоннинг етакчи таҳлил марказларида, халқаро ташкилотлар ва университетларда ўтказилган халқаро конференциялар ва юқори даражадаги семинарларда кўплаб мақолаларини тақдим этган.

**Калит сўзлар:** бренд; имиж; ҳукумат; шиорлар; ўзгаришлар; ташқи сиёсат; халқаро ОАВ.

<sup>4</sup> The article has been edited by the author.

## БРЕНДИНГ УЗБЕКИСТАНА

Ширин АКИНЕР

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### Аннотация

Создание «национального бренда» потребовало широкого обзора особенностей, которые придают Узбекистану индивидуальность, включая уникальную географию, огромную природную красоту, богатые исторические традиции, хорошо образованное население, диверсифицированную экономику и сбалансированную внешнюю политику.

Данная статья публикуется впервые на основе разрешения членов семьи доктора Ш. Акинер. Она прочитала многочисленные доклады на международных конференциях и семинарах высокого уровня в ведущих аналитических центрах, международных организациях и университетах примерно в 20 странах, включая Узбекистан.

**Ключевые слова:** бренд; имидж; правительство; лозунги; изменения; внешняя политика; международные СМИ.

### *Soft Power and 'Nation-Branding' find Developer tab*

The idea that 'soft power' – the use of persuasion and cooptation – could serve as an alternative, or at least an addition, to the 'hard power' of military force as an instrument of foreign policy, was first proposed by Joseph Nye in 1990. He identified the chief elements of soft power as a country's culture, values and 'performance', as demonstrated by its domestic and foreign policies.<sup>5</sup> This theory resonated with the mood of the times (especially détente with the Soviet Union) and was soon embraced by scholars as well as by practitioners of public diplomacy. Subsequently, one of the outcomes of this line of thinking was the notion of 'nation-branding'. This proposed the use of commercial marketing techniques to maximise the soft power potential of a nation. Thus, 'nationbranding' seeks to highlight the unique assets, achievements and advantages of a particular state, thereby to enhance its competitiveness in the international arena. In today's globalised world, nationbranding is recognised as a useful tool to enable a state to stand out against the clamour of teeming bids to secure foreign investment and export markets, as well as to gain political stature, cultural respect and intellectual 'weight'.<sup>6</sup> Nation-branding also plays an important role in the domestic sphere by generating self-confidence and national pride. The national

<sup>5</sup> For a concise summary of these ideas, see J. Nye, 'Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy', *Cultural Diplomacy*, Winter, 2010 < <http://www.publicdiplomacymagazine.com/soft-power-and-cultural-diplomacy> >.

<sup>6</sup> Simon Anholt is regarded as the pioneer and champion of this concept. He sets out the basic principles in his paper 'Branding places and nations', in *Brands and Branding*, The Economist and Profile Books Ltd, 2003, London, pp. 213- 226.

‘brand’ is a composite representation of the multi-dimensional elements that constitute the unique identity of a given state. The objective is to differentiate that state from all others, especially those with similar profiles. Typically, the brand will include slogans and images, also references to distinctive cultural assets (including ‘popular’ items such as notable historical events, food, music, and so on). Above all, the brand must be memorable, and have authenticity i.e. to reflect a reality that can be observed and experienced.

‘Branding’, whether of a product or a nation, is never simple, never spontaneous, and never easy. It cannot be addressed piecemeal, in small, unrelated steps. Instead, if it is to be successful, it requires a comprehensive vision, implemented in a systematic, coordinated manner. The prime mover in the creation of a benign national image must be the government. However, the practical implementation of the project may be entrusted to various specialists, including marketing and advertising agencies (national or foreign), who might help to shape and deliver the message. The slogans and images connected with national brands are calculated to have popular appeal, but they must also be rooted in a serious policy agenda. An interesting example is Scotland, which labelled itself ‘the best small country in the world’. This innocuous-sounding slogan was in fact the product of a thorough analysis of the problems that the country faced, and the measures that were required to resolve them. The Scottish government realised that the country had rich human and natural resources but ‘if it was to compete in the global economy and secure its future prosperity’, it was necessary ‘to tackle urgently the single biggest challenge to our future success. Scotland’s population is declining.’ Thus, the emphasis on the county’s advantages (including the idea of ‘small is beautiful’ to suggest community spirit and friendliness) was not simply self-congratulatory, but consciously aimed at ‘attracting fresh talent to Scotland’.

### **Aggressive ‘Negative-Branding’**

The malign mirror image of ‘positive nation-branding’ is the aggressive use of ‘negative-branding’. Frequently employed tactics include false allegations and ‘fake news’. It can be directed against a variety of targets, including individuals, organisations and states. The aim is to attack the target’s integrity, destroy its credibility and thereby undermine its legitimacy. The end result is that serious debate and enquiry is stifled by sensational, personalised accusations, thereby deflecting attention from the proper examination of complex issues (recent examples include public exchanges on the UK Referendum on EU membership, and on the 2016 US presidential election). These features are characteristic of what has been dubbed the age of ‘post-truth’.

Countries that are exposed to deliberate reputational attacks react in various ways. Israel, for example, responds to allegations that it considers to be unjustified by swiftly issuing formal, strongly-worded, rebuttals. Russia, by contrast, used to ignore such provocations. In recent years, however, it has adopted a more proactive policy, challenging inaccurate reports and providing its own version of events. This approach, which disputes conventional ‘authoritative sources’, is having some international success – to the dismay of its opponents. All the Central Asian states have been affected by some degree of ‘negative-branding’. Kazakhstan has made sporadic attempts to combat this by launching its own national promotion campaigns. In the other states, little discernible action has been taken, in part owing to a lack of adequate resources, but also because it has not been regarded as a priority. There are signs that this is beginning to change, particularly in Uzbekistan.

With regards to Uzbekistan, after a brief ‘honeymoon’ period in the 1990s, Western attitudes towards the country became increasingly hostile, arguably because of the country’s determinedly independent foreign policy. May 2005, there was an armed insurgency in Andijan. Within Central Asia (in all five states) there was suspicion that this was an attempted *coup d’état*.<sup>7</sup> However, Western governments, supported by the Western media, immediately claimed that Uzbek troops had ‘massacred thousands of peaceful, unarmed civilians’. It was at this point that Western criticism of Tashkent’s ‘obduracy’ escalated into a vindictive crusade not only against President Karimov and the Uzbek political establishment, but against anyone who dared to disagree with the prevailing narrative. Whether or not this campaign was motivated by a desire to bring about ‘regime change’ is a matter for speculation. To put the situation into perspective, there were undoubtedly abuses of human rights in the country. To some extent, this was a legacy of the Soviet criminal justice system. It was also a reaction to the very real internal and external security threats that emanated from a chronically volatile region. Steps to reform the Uzbek penal system were introduced soon after independence, not in response to foreign criticisms but because it was regarded as essential for the well-being of the country.

Inevitably, it was a slow process. Introducing new legislation is easy, but changing mind-sets is a very different matter. Gradually, however, perceptible progress was achieved through a combination of better enforcement of domestic regulatory measures and quiet, steady cooperation with international partners.

Meanwhile, in the West, Uzbekistan became a ‘toxic brand’: to work with Uzbekistan was a reputational hazard for institutions, companies and individuals. This negative branding continued, and indeed was strengthened throughout the remaining years of Islam Karimov’s time in office. Yet despite Western sanctions and

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<sup>7</sup> Author’s personal discussions with Central Asian analysts and academics in 2005-06; interestingly, this view has grown stronger in subsequent years.

malign stereotyping, the Uzbek government continued to pursue its own model of development. As the folk saying puts it, ‘The dogs bark, but the caravan passes on’. When President Karimov died in September 2016, the efficacy of that model could be judged by the very real progress that had been made in transforming the country from a Soviet republic into a fully functioning independent state. The achievements of these years laid the foundations for the next phase of development. The election of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, previous Prime Minister (2003-16), to the post of President, represented continuity in many ways, but it also introduced a shift in outlook and policy priorities. One aspect of this was greater engagement with the international community. It soon became apparent that reputational damage, whether deserved or not, was a serious liability: it weakened legitimacy, undermined trust, and impeded external political and economic cooperation. Consequently, the government now began to pay more attention to the country’s image. This entailed identifying the measures that would be required to convey a more objective, and also a more attractive, picture.

### **Defining the National Brand: Action Strategy 2017-2021**

The creation of a ‘national brand’ – a composite, communicable picture of the country’s distinctive assets – was a qualitatively different exercise. It required a wide-ranging survey of the features that give Uzbekistan its individuality, including a unique geography, great natural beauty, rich historical traditions, well educated population, diversified economy and a balanced foreign policy (see Appendix for more detail). The sum total of these assets constitutes the raw material for the nationbrand. However, different audiences have different interests (e.g. tourist agencies, educational establishments etc.). So, while the brand had to convey a strong sense of unity, it also had to possess sufficient flexibility to encompass cultural and regional diversity.

Defining the national vision is a vital step towards the creation of a nation image/brand. It is therefore significant that in February 2017, before embarking on branding initiatives, the Uzbek government published its Action Strategy.<sup>8</sup> This was a comprehensive plan of the reforms that would be implemented in the next five years. It set out concrete goals, but these were framed by moral and civic principles. One of the key features was inclusivity, headlined by the motto ‘Creating the Future We Want!’ In practical terms, inclusivity was embedded in the extensive process of public consultation, monitoring and feed-back. A second basic principle was accountability. By announcing the policy objectives for the next five years, together with a summary

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<sup>8</sup> For text, see < <http://tashkenttimes.uz/national/541-uzbekistan-s-development-strategy-for-2017-2021-has-beenadopted-following-discussion> >.

of the modalities for achieving these goals, the government set benchmarks for its own performance – and thereby established the criteria whereby it would be judged and held responsible.

The Strategy brought coherence and unity to the chief vectors of the government’s internal and external policies. Four of the five objectives concerned reforms in the domestic sphere (governance, law, economic liberalisation and social services provision). These had already been identified as priority areas in the state programme for the year, announced under the rubric ‘2017: Year of Dialogue with the People and with Human Interests’. The foreign policy element in the Strategy was accorded secondary importance compared with the attention paid to the domestic sphere. Nevertheless, despite the brevity of this section, these articles were of crucial importance, since they set out the principles for foreign policy engagement (‘balanced, mutually beneficial and constructive’). This did not signal a change of direction, but rather of tone: henceforth, foreign relations were to be conducted in a friendly, business-like manner, between partners of equal standing. Significant steps to improve relations with neighbouring state had been initiated soon after President Mirziyoyev took office. However, following the publication of the Strategy, this process was accelerated.

Since then, notable progress has been made in the resolution of long-standing disputes with neighbouring states, and there are moves towards better regional cooperation. Relations with international players, too, appear to be more amicable;<sup>9</sup> the provision of humanitarian aid is another sign of good will.<sup>10</sup> Serious steps have been taken to ease foreign economic relations, including the introduction of currency convertibility in September 2017. It is against this background of reform that the Strategy touched briefly on the need to improve the country’s image (‘Development of measures on further strengthening the international image of the Republic of Uzbekistan’). It did not indicate how this was to be achieved, apart from calling for the intensification of personal contacts and cooperation. This was a good starting point, since direct interaction is one of the best ways to strengthen relationships. The current forms of contact are outlined below.

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<sup>9</sup> A concise analysis of these developments is given by Iskander Zakirov and Yuliya Nevskaya, *Uzbekistan's New Foreign Policy Doctrine*, Central Asia Analyst, 18 September, 2017

<<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analyticalarticles/item/13470-uzbekistans-new-foreign-policy-doctrine.html>>. See also commentary by Vladimir Norov, Director of the Institute for Strategic and Interregional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, at the meeting of the Astana Club in the Kazakh capital, 13-14 November 2017: <<https://astanatimes.com/2017/11/role-of-new-regional-policy-of-uzbekistan-in-political-and-economic-processes-in-central-asia/>>.

<sup>10</sup> In September 2017, according to reports in the Bangladeshi press, Uzbekistan made one of the largest donations of emergency relief aid to the Rohingya refugees; see <<http://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2017/09/17/uzbekistansend-relief-goods/>>. It was an act of generosity, but it also raised Uzbekistan’s profile in the region.

## **Tourism**

Tourism is one of the most important channels through which to promote a benign national image, since it brings foreigners into direct contact with the local population, allowing them to form their own impressions of the mood and material conditions of those societies. It is also a valuable source of revenue for the host community. Consequently, many countries now devote considerable resources to promoting their tourism industry. Uzbekistan is fortunate in this respect, as it has an extraordinarily rich array of tourist attractions and this draws visitors from all over the world. They are rarely disappointed: rather, they are enchanted by the beauty of the environment and the openhearted generosity of the people – and are impressed by the level of social and economic development. Uzbekistan has wisely refrained from encouraging low-budget mass tourism which, in so many parts of the world (e.g. Greece, Spain and Nepal), has had a deeply unpleasant impact on the local environment. Instead, after a somewhat hesitant start in the early 1990s, the state authorities have grasped the benefits of careful, long-term planning. The result is a diversified set of tourist options, which include modestly priced home-stay packages; exclusive luxury holidays; adventure and special interest holidays (skiing, mountaineering and bird-watching etc.); eco-tourism and health tourism (e.g. mud baths, hot springs, therapeutic massage); and religious tourism to historic sites (Buddhist, Christian and Islamic). There are also numerous ‘Silk Road’ tourist itineraries, which demonstrate Uzbekistan’s geographic and historical links with the wider neighbourhood.<sup>11</sup>

The government has provided substantial funding for upgrading tourist facilities.<sup>12</sup> This enables the physical infrastructure to be upgraded, but also improves the training of guides and other service personnel. There is a state tourist board, as well as a growing number of privately owned tourist organisations; similarly, there are innumerable private-sector hotels. Uzbekistan is a regular participant in world tourism fairs and exhibitions, likewise in smaller, regional tourist promotion events. A number of bilateral cooperation agreements have been signed with, for example, Azerbaijan, China and Indonesia; cooperation with Turkey is especially strong, enhanced by several joint ventures. There are also regional initiatives within the country. For example, in October 2017, a tourist programme was launched that

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<sup>11</sup> An important development was the opening, in 2004, of the World Tourism Organisation’s ‘Silk Road Office’ in Samarkand, dedicated to coordinating international and national projects in this field.

<sup>12</sup> This included the allocation of \$50 million in August 2017, to improve the tourism infrastructure in the Tashkent region,

<https://en.trend.az/casia/uzbekistan/2785890.html> >. For developments in Bukhara, see <  
<http://uza.uz/en/politics/president-shavkat-mirziyoyev-tourism-important-branch-of-our-10-03-2017> >.

centred on the Ferghana Valley and featured local attractions.<sup>13</sup> It was part of the nationwide tourist development programme, but it was differentiated by its own ‘brand image’, which focused on local attractions. Measures such as these have greatly helped to increase tourist traffic to Uzbekistan. However, this still only scratches the surface of the country’s tourism potential, so there is plenty of scope for further expansion of this sector. As target audiences become more diverse, promotional campaigns, too, need to be more imaginative and carefully segmented to suit different interests and requirements: in this field, one size definitely does not fit all. Yet while celebrating diversity there needs to be a certain national unity – a ‘family resemblance’ – in the approach to advertising. The challenge of finding a viable ‘brand’ emblem is well illustrated by the different designs that have been tried out.<sup>14</sup>

### **Collaborative Projects, Seminars and Conferences**

Another way to promote the national image is through international collaborative projects and meetings. This is noted in the Strategy, which calls for better cultural and educational links with other countries. In the past two decades there have been a number of such ventures. Some have been very successful and have laid the foundations for lasting partnerships and friendships. Good examples of joint projects that benefitted all the participants are those based at the Tashkent State Agrarian University. Partnerships to develop archaeological sites have also generally been successful. In other cases, the results have been disappointing, yielding little genuine benefit for the Uzbek side. The problem was usually that the agreements were structured in such a way as to favour the interests of the foreign partners (individuals or institutions). This was a particularly common occurrence in projects in the political or social sciences. Recently, however, Uzbek partners have started to be more forthright about their expectations, and to take steps to ensure that they get what they want from such ventures. Consequently, international institutional cooperation in the academic sphere is becoming more robust and yielding better results for all concerned (foreign university campuses in Tashkent are listed in the Appendix).

Seminars and conferences also provide opportunities for improving mutual understanding. There are, though, pitfalls: the participants often talk past each other, delivering set messages. To some extent, this is due to the lack of a common goal, as well as different expectations of the outcomes of such encounters. Western participants often see their role as ‘winning over’ the Uzbek side to their point of view. The Uzbeks, in turn, frequently assume that Western counterparts have

<sup>13</sup> See < <http://www.podrobno.uz/cat/podrobno/u-fergany-poyavilsya-svoy-turisticheskiy-brend/?> >.

<sup>14</sup> For a selection of these images, see

<<https://www.google.co.uk/search?q=uzbekistan+tourism+logo&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=0ahUK Ew iGk Jrj rMPX Ah WG J sAK H U z v Ar A Q s A Q I j w &biw=1236&bih=925>>. Initiatives such as Ferghana Valley Tourism are also developing their own distinctive tourist logos.



‘superior’ knowledge, not only about the world at large but specifically about the Eurasian region. In fact, it is the Uzbeks who are far more knowledgeable about their neighbours, not only as they are today, but in historical perspective. (Nineteenth-century British reports on India, Afghanistan and Central Asia reveal a woeful degree of ignorance; sadly, with rare exceptions, the situation is not very different today.) It also happens that some Western participants are not entirely straightforward: they express approving views while in Uzbekistan but when they return home, give a very different, excessively negative, account. This is not surprising: ‘political correctness’ is one of the requirements for success in many Western institutions, so speaking out in defence of a ‘toxic’ state is not always easy.

It is of course necessary to be familiar with Western strategic thinking, but this is only one strand of international relations. Seminars and other such discussions are more fruitful when the Uzbek participants are bolder in stating their own positions and seek a more genuine exchange of views. This is beginning to happen. The ‘International Workshop on the Foreign Policy of Uzbekistan within the Strategy of Actions 2017-2021’, held at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy (UWED), Tashkent, in September 2017, was remarkable for its innovative approach to programme planning: instead of set presentations, there were free-flowing exchanges between the participants – an unusual procedure for an Uzbek institution, where spontaneity is usually not much in evidence. The wide range of international participants on this occasion (from America, Russia, China and other Asian and European states) meant that no single point of view dominated the discussions. The result was an unusually stimulating exchange of views. It also contributed to changing perceptions of the national image, since some of the Western participants who had previously been outspoken critics of Uzbekistan left with a distinctly more favourable impression – and for once, recounted this to others when they returned home.

### **Multi-Media Platforms**

The dissemination of national ‘news and views’ plays a vital role in shaping a country’s international profile. Uzbekistan has several electronic and print platforms, state-owned as well as private. Some of these sites are in English. Unfortunately, they are rarely well publicised. Consequently, only foreigners who are interested in Uzbek views on a specific issue will take the trouble to seek out such platforms. Therefore, it would be helpful if Uzbekistan had a stronger Internet presence, with sites that were not only more accessible, but attractive in terms of lay-out, graphics and prose style. This requires creativity and lightness of touch instead of the pedantic style that characterises some of the conventional media. As in other fields, though, the situation is changing for the better, as some outlets, especially in the private sector, are

becoming more wide-ranging and imaginative in their content. Moreover, they are starting to challenge, directly or indirectly, the dubious reports and ‘fake stories’ that circulate in the international media. Social networks could also be more fully exploited to convey a rounded picture of Uzbek life. Typically, this would include news items, but also general information about society and culture. A good example of this type of outreach is the International Press Club (IPC), launched in Tashkent in April 2017. Its objective is to provide an interactive platform to serve as a link between the state and civil society. The IPC also holds workshops and training seminars for mass media representatives, aimed at raising awareness of the national and international information environment.<sup>15</sup>

An important goal should be the establishment of an Uzbek media centre abroad. It is noteworthy that stations such as Al-Jazeera, RT (*Russia Today*) and CGNTV (Chinese foreign language television service) have had a significant impact on public opinion around the world. Channels such as *Euro News* do occasionally carry short Uzbek-based reports. This is a good start; yet random items, devoid of context, seldom make a lasting impression. By contrast, a dedicated Uzbek media centre, no matter how small, would convey a coherent Uzbek perspective on domestic affairs, as well as regional and international developments. Feature-length films are also a good way to project the national image. Uzbekistan has a flourishing film industry and a number of sumptuous historical ‘docu-dramas’ (modern dramatizations based on semi-factual accounts) have already been produced. However, the messages conveyed by such productions are sometimes rather mixed, as they are trapped between the need for historical accuracy and the desire to popularise a particular individual or event. This dilemma is not unique to Uzbekistan: the same problem is encountered in the ‘semi-factual’ historical films made elsewhere in the world, including in France, Britain and other Western countries. This can only be avoided by having a firm concept of the purpose of the film, which should clearly distinguish between entertainment and factual history. Films on modern themes could also be given prominence; co-productions with foreign partners would give greater visibility to such ventures and would be regarded as more independent and objective.

### **Culture and Sport**

The outreach value of sport and culture is often overlooked, yet these are effective conduits for all forms of advertising, including the promotion of the national brand. Uzbekistan has an impressive history of achievements in the arts and in sport, in both national and international traditions. For example, *kurash* is a national style of wrestling, with roots that reach back over several millennia. It was still such an

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<sup>15</sup> See <[http://news.uzreport.uz/news\\_2\\_e\\_150682.html](http://news.uzreport.uz/news_2_e_150682.html)>.

important martial art in the fourteenth century that Amir Timur (Tamerlane) reportedly had his troops trained in *kurash*. By the twentieth century, though, it had become an amateur sport, scarcely known outside Central Asia. Nevertheless, immediately after independence, President Karimov grasped the potential of *kurash* as a national image through which to promote the country's culture, history and traditions at home and abroad – in effect, to use it as a proto-national brand. Thanks to his support, *kurash* associations have since been established in many parts of the world and international tournaments are held regularly. Among the top medal holders, there are several British champions.

Many other forms of sport are practiced in Uzbekistan and national teams, as well as individual athletes, regularly deliver medal-winning performance in the Olympic Games and other international competitions. Uzbekistan does have a number of individuals who have established formidable reputations at home and abroad. One of the best known is Ravshan Irmatov (b. 1977), the internationally respected football referee. He was voted 'Best Referee in Asia' in 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2014; among his other distinctions, he refereed the final matches of the 2008 and 2011 FIFA Club World Cup, and the 2010 World Cup opening match between South Africa and Mexico (the youngest referee of an opening World Cup match since 1934). In the arts, too, there are outstanding performers. These include famous exponents of *maqom*, a national musical form, as well as excellent performers of Western-style music. The coloratura soprano Barnokhon Ismatullaeva (b. 1991), for example, is one of several young Uzbek singers to win international acclaim. Trained in Tashkent, she has won prizes in major singing competitions and frequently performs in leading opera houses in Europe. The achievements of individuals such as these are their own, but they also bear witness to the creative environment in Uzbekistan and the willingness to engage with the wider world. They are part of the Uzbek national narrative – and as such, could be powerful 'cultural ambassadors' for their country.

### **Challenging Negative Branding**

Developing a positive nation brand is, as outlined above, a difficult undertaking. A separate and even more challenging task is to dispel a negative image, especially when it is constantly reinforced by 'smear campaigns'. This is the problem that faces Uzbekistan. To understand the pervasive impact of this negative branding, it is worth looking at some of the 'information' in the public domain. The results of a Google search, for example, on the position of women Uzbekistan, are revealing. The predominant topics are: a) accounts of the abuse that Uzbek women suffer; and b) dating sites that suggest these women are so desperate to escape ill-treatment that

they will do anything to free themselves from bondage. The Wikipedia entry, which purports to be ‘objective’, gives substance to this narrative with lurid allegations of self-immolation, forced sterilisation and bride-kidnapping.<sup>16</sup> Much of this comment is extremely tendentious and in some cases quite simply wrong. Of course life is not universally perfect: as in every society, there are individual instances of abuse, but this is most certainly not the general experience. On the contrary, as attested by international organisations working in the country, health and social care services for women and children in Uzbekistan are excellent for a country of this size and income bracket – and bear favourable comparison to many more prosperous parts of the world. Yet if a casual researcher –businessman, politician or potential tourist – wants to get some background information on Uzbekistan, this is the sort of information that they are likely to find: how are they to know that it is inaccurate? Learned institutions are not necessarily much better. University students soon realise that if they present an overly benign account of developments in Uzbekistan, they risk being marked down – a concern that is usually reflected in the bibliographies of their essays and dissertations.<sup>17</sup>

This, then, is the size of the problem that needs to be addressed. Quite obviously, there are no quick, simple fixes. In the long term, increased outreach and interaction will change perceptions by demonstrating a different reality. Nevertheless, present action is also necessary. Firstly, false or misleading information should be challenged and refuted with factual, verifiable evidence. Secondly, where problems do exist there needs to be an account of how the problem has been addressed. In the case of child labour, for example, Uzbek organisations have worked closely with the World Bank, International Labour Organisation (ILO) and other international organisations to monitor the situation; also, firm action has been taken to punish those who violate the employment laws. These twin steps – the rebuttal of false information and the provision of information regarding remedial action – must be widely publicised. This matters, because in most Western societies there is a common assumption that silence means assent. Consequently, if the Uzbek authorities do not challenge libellous allegations, the international public will automatically assume they are true.

### **Communicating the Brand/Image**

‘Image’ and ‘brand’, as noted above, are closely related, but they belong to different epistemological categories and for dissemination, require different approaches and skill sets. A ‘brand’, as commonly understood, is essentially a

<sup>16</sup> See < [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women\\_in\\_Uzbekistan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_Uzbekistan) >. This is not a unique example of misinformation about Uzbekistan –Western print and electronic media regularly disseminate such material.

<sup>17</sup> Author’s personal discussions with university students in the UK over the last couple of decades.

marketing tool – a way of publicising a particular product or idea. To be successful, the brand must embody a vision, but it is not the vision itself, only a means of alluding to that vision. The brand is like a hieroglyph or icon: in a highly compressed way it communicates information by drawing on a repertoire of familiar associations and perceptions. To be effective, it needs to be transparent enough to be comprehensible, also memorable, easily reproduced and simple to transmit. A ‘nation brand’ is, in effect, shorthand for the ‘national idea’, but it is also a communications tool. Fashioning a ‘nation brand’ is a far more complex task than creating a product brand since it needs to convey, in emblematic form, so many different messages, drawn from the national culture to internal and external policies. These are specialised undertakings, requiring the involvement of professionals with experience in public relations and marketing. Yet, as the examples cited in the first section of this paper indicate, even with such help it is all too easy to strike the wrong note and to harm rather than enhance the ‘national image’ by an inappropriate brand label. It is possible that one of Uzbekistan’s tourist labels will eventually be adopted as the basis for the ‘national brand’, but in any case, it is important not to rush the process. Rather, it is the credible implementation of the vision, and the communication of that process to the domestic sphere and to the wider world, that establishes the image – and will carry conviction, with or without a specific brand label.<sup>18</sup>

What is indispensable is a strong communications strategy. The message (or cluster of messages), no matter how packaged, will need to be ‘broadcast’ through a variety of channels and in a variety of formats. This includes the use of established conduits for inter-personal contact, such as tourism and educational collaboration; print media (books, journals and other paper publications); promotional films (factual documentaries and creative feature films) and news and current affairs reporting. It also means making full use of digital devices and platforms to communicate – and to receive feedback – on the country’s image. It is part of a global trend towards democratisation – today, everyone can join the conversation, express an opinion. Uzbekistan has made great strides in implementing e-government systems, likewise e-commerce and e-legal services (*e-sud*), so there is an understanding of the capabilities of digital communication.<sup>15</sup> Some senior Uzbek political figures are active users of Instagram, Twitter and other networking channels. Foremost among them is President Mirziyoyev, who maintains a constant flow of digital messages and exchanges in Uzbek and Russian. Such informal engagement makes policy makers seem accessible and ‘one of us’. By embracing this technology, Uzbekistan is hastening the reform process. Moreover, if effectively managed, it could help to

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<sup>18</sup> A thoughtful introduction to nation-branding in Uzbekistan is given by Alisher Faizullayev (scholar, writer, and former senior diplomat), available online at: <<https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2017/04/19/country-branding/>>; also of interest is the discussion that follows it, which debates the choice of ‘national brand image’ and raises questions about modes of communication.

enhance the nation's international image. Yet it should not be forgotten that digital technology is merely a medium: it can be used to transmit benign messages, but also be used to inflict great damage. Far from aiding democratisation, some see it as a serious threat to democracy, since it is (so far) impossible to control. Consequently, it provides unparalleled opportunities for 'weaponising information' by such means as the dissemination of fake news and 'edited' photographs designed to spread sedition and to destabilise society. This takes 'negative nation branding' to a whole new level. It is yet another challenge that Uzbekistan (like governments all round the world) must face as it seeks closer engagement with the global community.

### ***Conclusions: Hopeful Signs?***

At the time of writing, the Strategy is not quite a year old, but there are already some hopeful signs. One is that greater accessibility, whether through tourism or other forms of direct interaction, are creating a favourable impression – and upbeat assessments are being spread by social networks and personal contacts. Secondly, Uzbeks themselves appear to be genuinely pleased by current developments: this is apparent in discussions in international conferences, but also in casual conversations with local people. It is particularly evident among the youth, who are proud of their country and its traditions, but who also feel confident enough to reach out to other cultures and to create a vibrant synthesis of different trends and styles in music, fashion and performance art. Common epithets to describe Uzbekistan refer to its hospitality, great history, magical scenery, superb handicrafts and other such delights. Yet alongside these enduring characteristics there is another trend emerging – buoyant optimism. This was neatly summed up by a young university student who, when asked what word she would use to describe the current national mood, replied instantly 'Dynamic Uzbekistan!'

————— Uzbekistan works closely with international organizations to develop e-government. See further Shakhlo Khasanova,

'E-government in Uzbekistan: critical success factors for development' <

[https://www.egovernment.uz/en/press\\_center/publication/e-government-in-uzbekistan-critical-success-factors-fordevelopment/](https://www.egovernment.uz/en/press_center/publication/e-government-in-uzbekistan-critical-success-factors-fordevelopment/) >;

<sup>15</sup> Dilfuza Akramjon qizi Khamidova, 1<sup>st</sup> year MA student of International Relations and Foreign Affairs at UWED, in discussion with the author in September 2017.

BRANDING UZBEKISTAN

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