

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF SMES IN KAZAKHSTAN AND UZBEKISTAN: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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OPEN ACCESS

How to cite this paper:

Kenzhetayeva, A. S. (2026). Media Representations of SMEs in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan: A Comparative Analysis. *Journal of Governance, Economics, and International Affairs*, 1(1), 122-142.

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ISSN Print:

ISSN Online:

Received:

14.08.2026

Reviewed:

18.08.2026: 23.08.2026

Accepted:

26.08.2026

JEL Classification:

P26, Z13, D72

MRNTI Code:

04.51.41

DOI:

Issue:

Vol. 1, Issue 1 (2026)

Abstract

This article examines how online newspapers represented small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan between 2020 and 2023. It investigates the economic and social roles attributed to SMEs, the visibility given to different actors, and the relationships between private enterprises and the state. The study employs comparative qualitative content and framing analysis of 187 newspaper articles, comprising 113 articles concerning Kazakhstan and 74 concerning Uzbekistan. Each article was assigned one primary content category and dominant codes covering SME roles, actor visibility, state-SME relationship, policy objectives, responsibility attribution, and temporal context. The findings reveal a state-centered representation of SME development in both countries. Government officials and agencies received greater visibility than entrepreneurs, while regulation and government assistance were more prominent than market autonomy. According to Kazakhstan's coverage, SMEs were more frequently portrayed as vulnerable and affected by regulatory, financial, logistical, and external pressures. Uzbek coverage placed greater emphasis on government support programs and representation of SMEs as recipients of assistance within economic reform. The study concludes that newspaper coverage in both countries positioned SMEs as economically important actors, but still closely connected to government. The analysis contributes to research on the public role of SMEs in Central Asia by demonstrating how media discourse is constructed within different national and temporal contexts.

Keywords:

small and medium-sized enterprises; media framing; Kazakhstan; Uzbekistan; state-business relationship; economic development; public discourse.

Authors' individual contribution:

Conceptualization — A.K.; Methodology — A.K.; Data Collection — A.K.; Data Analysis — A.K.; Interpretation — A.K.; Writing — Original Draft — A.K.; Writing — Review & Editing — A.K.; Visualization — A.K.; Supervision — A.K.

Declaration of conflicting interests:

The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

1. Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) occupy an important position in contemporary economic development. They contribute to employment, entrepreneurship, market competition, innovation, regional development, and the diversification of production. In transition economies, SMEs also carry broader political and institutional significance because their development is frequently treated as evidence of market reform and the expansion of private economic activity.

The role assigned to SMEs is particularly important in post-Soviet Central Asia. Following independence in 1991, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan introduced reforms intended to expand private enterprise and reduce the dominance of centrally administered economic structures. However, SMEs are not exclusively represented through measurable contributions to output or employment. Government institutions, international organizations, business associations, experts, and news organizations also produce narratives about SME development. Within these narratives, SMEs may be portrayed as independent market actors, vulnerable businesses, recipients of government assistance, innovation sources, or partners in national development.

Examining these representations matters because public discourse helps identify how the economic roles of entrepreneurs and different forms of government intervention are publicly understood. Nevertheless, existing research on SMEs in Central Asia has concentrated primarily on firm performance, regulatory conditions, access to finance, and government support. Less attention has been given to how news media construct the public meaning of SME development.

This article addresses this gap by examining newspaper representations of SMEs in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan during 2020-2023. It asks three related questions: Which economic and social functions were most frequently attributed to SMEs? How were SMEs positioned in relation to the state, policy objectives, and other actors? What similarities and differences appeared between the two national media corpora? The selected period includes the COVID-19 pandemic, the January 2022 domestic crisis in Kazakhstan, and regional economic disruptions associated with the Russia-Ukraine conflict. These developments increased public attention to business survival, government assistance, domestic production, transportation, investment, and longer-term economic adaptation. The empirical analysis draws on 187 online newspaper articles: 113 concerning Kazakhstan and 74 concerning Uzbekistan. The articles are examined through comparative qualitative content and framing analysis. The study identified the principal subjects of SME coverage and analyzed the roles attributed to SMEs, the actors receiving the greatest visibility, the state-SME relationships constructed in the articles, the policy objectives connected to entrepreneurship, problem and responsibility attribution, and the temporal context of coverage.

The article makes two principal contributions. First, it extends research on SME development beyond conventional measures of firm performance and business-environment conditions by examining how the meaning of SMEs is constructed in public discourse. Second, it provides a comparative analysis of SME representation in two post-Soviet countries that share important historical and institutional legacies but have followed different paths of economic reform. The study demonstrates how media discourse connects entrepreneurship with national development priorities and constructs the relationship between private enterprise and the state in two post-Soviet Central Asian contexts.

2. Literature Review

SMEs, Institutions, and Economic Development in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan

SMEs are commonly associated with employment creation, market competition, entrepreneurship, and the expansion of private economic activity (Ayyagari et al., 2007). However, in post-socialist economies, private-enterprise development occurred within institutional systems undergoing extensive changes in ownership, regulation, and state-business relationships, and these transformations followed different trajectories across countries (Blanchard, 1997; Brezinski & Fritsch, 1996; Havrylyshyn, 2020; Myant & Drahokoupil, 2011). Comparative research on transition economies further shows that differences in institutional development, enterprise restructuring, and the effectiveness of market-oriented reforms contributed to substantial variation in post-socialist economic performance (Svejnar, 2002). Research on post-Soviet property transformation further demonstrates that the emergence of private ownership did not necessarily produce a settled division between government institutions and market actors (Barnes, 2006). Research on Central Asian enterprise development further shows that the emergence of entrepreneurs and private markets remained closely connected to state formation, political institutions, and changing patterns of social stratification (Özcan, 2010). These historical conditions provide important context for understanding why the public role of SMEs in Central Asia continues to be closely connected to the state.

OECD data in Kazakhstan indicate that SMEs accounted for a substantial share of employment and national output by the end of the period examined in this study (OECD, 2024). Research also demonstrates a positive relationship between SME production and Kazakhstan's economic growth, strengthening the policy argument that SME expansion can contribute to diversification and economic resilience (Syzykova & Azretbergenova, 2025). Studies of eco-innovation similarly present Kazakhstan's SMEs as potential participants in energy efficiency, technological modernization, and environmentally sustainable development. Nevertheless, their capacity to assume these roles vary considerably (Pyagay et al., 2025).

Earlier research on Uzbekistan found that SME development was constrained by the institutional conditions inherited from central planning, including limited access to affordable credit and the continuing prominence of large organizations (Khalmurzaev, 2000). Uzbekistan's reform agenda has also attached growing importance to entrepreneurship and private-sector development. Recent policy assessments connect SMEs to employment creation, exports, industrial development, digitalization, and the transition toward a more competitive economy (OECD, 2023b). Because Uzbekistan has a young and expanding labor force, SME development is frequently presented as a mechanism for generating employment and supporting economic participation. At the same time, the state still defines development priorities, designing business programs, allocating resources, and communicating the expected contribution of private enterprise.

The relationship between SMEs and the state is not adequately captured by a simple opposition between public control and private markets. Institutions structure the incentives and constraints facing economic actors and connect contemporary economic activity to historically developed formal rules and informal practices (North, 1990). Entrepreneurship research demonstrates that institutional environments shape the opportunities, constraints, and legitimacy of private enterprises, particularly in emerging and transitional economies (Bruton et al., 2010). SMEs may operate as private organizations while simultaneously depending on state support, training, infrastructure, tax benefits, export programs, and regulatory reforms. Supply-chain finance remains relatively underdeveloped across Central Asia and the Caucasus, creating a policy rationale for government and institutional initiatives intended to improve access to financial services (Bhalla & Sutken, 2023). Public discourse surrounding these programs may present SMEs as vulnerable enterprises requiring protection, as beneficiaries of state assistance, or as strategic partners contributing to national objectives.

The period from 2020 to 2023 made these representations especially important. During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments introduced emergency measures, while newspapers devoted increased attention to business continuity, employment, financial assistance, and economic recovery. As immediate public-health restrictions receded, public discussion increasingly incorporated digitalization, innovation, exports, domestic production, and longer-term economic adaptation. The Russia-Ukraine conflict in February 2022 introduced an additional source of regional economic uncertainty. The war and the international sanctions imposed in response disrupted established trade and transportation networks, contributed to inflationary and currency pressures, and increased the importance of alternative transport corridors, domestic production, and diversified international partnerships for Central Asian economies (OECD, 2023a, 2023b). These developments created an important context within which SMEs were represented in public discourse. Research on international

news coverage demonstrates that media attention changes across different stages of a crisis and that national media systems influence which actors, policies, and interpretations receive prominence (Ngai et al., 2022; Wirz et al., 2022).

Media Framing and the Public Representation of SMEs

News media do not simply reproduce events, statistics, or government announcements. Through decisions about what to report, which sources to quote, and which interpretations to emphasize, news organizations participate in defining the public meaning of economic developments (Absattar et al., 2022; Mussa et al., 2025; Wirz et al., 2022). Framing refers to the selection and increased visibility of aspects of an issue in ways that define problems, identify causes, make evaluations, assign responsibility, or promote possible responses (Entman, 1993). A frame does not necessarily require journalists to make an explicit argument. It may emerge through repeated attention to particular actors, statistics, examples, causes, or policy solutions.

Recent comparative research demonstrates that differences in media systems, source selection, and national contexts can influence which topics, actors, and interpretations become prominent in news coverage (Ngai et al., 2022; Wirz et al., 2022). Applied to SME reporting, framing analysis makes it possible to examine how newspapers define the economic and social significance of private enterprises. One frame may emphasize business vulnerability and adaptation amid economic disruption, while another may emphasize SMEs as recipients of government assistance or contributors to national development (Bach & Swartz, 2022). Newspaper coverage may also differ in whether it places entrepreneurs, government officials, experts, international organizations, or statistical agencies at the center of the narrative (Mussa et al., 2025; Wirz et al., 2022). Recent entrepreneurship scholarship treats framing as an important mechanism through which economic actors and activities acquire legitimacy (Snihur et al., 2022).

Cross-national media research further shows that coverage is influenced by differences in political institutions, journalistic practices, and media systems. Comparative studies of pandemic reporting have identified differences in the topics emphasized, sources quoted, emotional strategies employed, and responsibility assigned across national media environments. (Ngai et al., 2022; Wirz et al., 2022). These findings do not mean that every outlet within a country uses the same frame. Rather, they demonstrate why national context and outlet characteristics should be considered when comparing media representations. This point is particularly relevant in Central Asia. Research on online media in Kazakhstan indicates that linguistic and emotional choices can influence how events and public issues are interpreted (Absattar et al., 2022). More recent framing research concerning Kazakhstan demonstrates that domestic and foreign news organizations can construct different interpretations of the same events (Mussa et al., 2025). These studies address political and social

issues rather than SMEs, but they confirm the applicability of framing analysis to Kazakhstan's media environment.

Existing research on SMEs in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan predominantly examines economic performance, access to finance, regulation, digitalization, innovation, exports, and government support (Bhalla & Sutken, 2023; OECD, 2023a, 2023b, 2024; Pyagay et al., 2025; Syzdykova & Azretbergenova, 2025). This literature provides important evidence about the contribution and development of SMEs but devotes less attention to how their economic and social roles are constructed in public discourse. Media-framing research, by contrast, demonstrates that news organizations participate in defining economic problems, identifying legitimate beneficiaries of government intervention, and connecting public policies to broader social values (Bach & Swartz, 2022; Snihur et al., 2022). Nevertheless, limited comparative research has examined how news media construct the economic and social roles of SMEs and their relationship with the state in post-Soviet Central Asia

This study addresses that gap through a comparative qualitative analysis of 187 online newspaper articles published between 2020 and 2023, including 113 articles concerning Kazakhstan and 74 concerning Uzbekistan. The analysis examines six dimensions of SME representation: the roles attributed to SMEs, actor visibility, state-SME relationships, policy objectives, problem and responsibility attribution, and temporal context. These dimensions are compared across the two national corpora to identify similarities and differences in how SMEs and their relationship with the state were publicly represented.

3. Materials and Methods

This study employs a comparative qualitative content-analysis design, informed by media-framing theory, to examine how online newspapers represented SMEs and their role in economic development in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan between 2020 and 2023. Qualitative content analysis is appropriate for identifying recurring meanings, interpretive patterns, and differences in how media sources define economic issues, emphasize particular actors, and connect SMEs to broader policy objectives. Framing analysis further directs attention to how news coverage selects and gives prominence to particular aspects of SME development, including employment, economic recovery, diversification, modernization, innovation, exports, regional development, and government support (Entman, 1993; Ngai et al., 2022; Wirz et al., 2022).

3.1. Case Justification

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were selected for analytical comparison because they share Soviet institutional and administrative legacies. Both states have identified SME development as an

important component of economic diversification and growth. At the same time, they have followed different trajectories of economic reform and state-business relations. Kazakhstan pursued comparatively earlier market liberalization and greater integration with international investment, and its economy remained highly influenced by natural-resource production and exports. Uzbekistan maintained a more state-directed economic model for a longer period before accelerating market-oriented reforms after 2016 (OECD, 2023a, 2023b). These shared historical foundations and divergent reform trajectories make Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan appropriate cases for comparative analysis. In both countries, the state remains highly visible in designing business policies, announcing support programs, and defining the contribution expected from private enterprises. Nevertheless, differences in economic structure, policy priorities, and state-business relations may influence how newspapers present SMEs and their role in national development.

Therefore, this comparison examines whether media coverage in the two countries attributes similar economic and social functions to SMEs, gives visibility to similar actors, and constructs comparable relationships between SMEs and the state. It also identifies national differences in the framing of SMEs as market participants, recipients of public assistance, contributors to economic recovery, or partners in national development.

3.2. Data Sources

The empirical material consists of online newspaper articles addressing SMEs and private-sector development in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Newspaper coverage was selected because it provides a record of how economic developments, government programs, and statistical trends were communicated publicly. The articles are treated as media texts rather than as direct evidence of SME performance or entrepreneurs' experiences. The study period, from January 1, 2020, to December 31, 2023, encompasses the COVID-19 pandemic, the initial stages of economic recovery, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and subsequent regional economic adjustment. These events increased public attention to business continuity, employment, government assistance, domestic production, trade, and the economic role of SMEs.

Articles were identified through separate Google News searches for Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan using combinations of the keywords "business," "SMEs," "business in Kazakhstan," "SMEs in Kazakhstan," "business in Uzbekistan," and "SMEs in Uzbekistan." To be included, an article had to focus substantively on SMEs, entrepreneurship, business regulation, government support, or related economic developments in one of the two countries. Official, commercial, and independent online news sources were included to capture different forms of public representation. Duplicate articles, inaccessible webpages, and articles that mentioned business only superficially were excluded. The search for the two countries was conducted and reviewed separately. Articles

were assigned to a national corpus according to the country constituting their principal subject. Following screening, the final analytical corpus consisted of 187 articles: 113 concerning Kazakhstan and 74 concerning Uzbekistan.

The unit of analysis was the individual newspaper article. The sample was designed to capture variation in public representations of SMEs rather than to represent every media organization or all SME-related reporting in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

3.3. Coding and Comparative Analysis

The articles were initially organized into four broad content categories: Business Challenges, Reforms, Statistics, and Government Support and Policies. Business Challenges included reporting about conditions affecting SMEs and private enterprise. Reforms included legislative, regulatory, and administrative changes. Statistics covered information about the number of SMEs, employment, economic output, sectoral distribution, and other indicators. Government Support and Policies included financial programs, tax measures, training initiatives, export assistance, and other state interventions. Each article was assigned only one code corresponding to its dominant thematic category. The dominant category was determined by the article's headline, principal subject, and the issue receiving the greatest substantive attention. Secondary subjects mentioned in the article were not coded separately. This procedure ensured that categories were mutually exclusive and that each article was counted only once.

Following the primary classification, a second interpretive stage examined how SMEs were represented within the four content categories (Table 1). Six dimensions were considered: the role attributed to SMEs, actor visibility, the state-SME relationship, policy objectives, problem and responsibility, and temporal context. The initial coding recorded relevant interpretive elements within each dimension, allowing multiple elements to be noted where present. A single dominant code was then assigned within each dimension for quantitative comparison. Each article received one dominant code for every interpretive dimension. When several elements appeared, the dominant code was determined by the article's overall emphasis, including the headline, central problem, most prominent actor, and principal policy response, as applicable to the dimension being coded. Detailed notes were retained to preserve contextual information. Articles concerning Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were initially coded separately and subsequently compared to identify similarities and differences in SME roles, visible actors, policy priorities, and portrayals of state–business relationships. The purpose was not to assess the accuracy of national media coverage but to examine how SMEs were publicly represented during a period of crisis, recovery, and economic adjustment.

All articles were coded by a single researcher using the coding framework presented in Table 1. Accordingly, intercoder reliability statistics were not calculated. Coding consistency was addressed

through a structured review procedure. The coding framework and category definitions were established before the final coding stage and applied systematically across both national corpora. Following the initial coding, the dataset was reviewed for consistency in the application of categories and dominant codes. Ambiguous cases were reassessed against the category definitions and the article's primary emphasis before final coding assignments were established.

Table 1. Interpretive Dimensions of SME Media Representation

Analytical Dimension	Description	Interpretive Indicators
Role attributed to SMEs	Principal economic or social role assigned to SMEs	Independent market actor; employment/growth contributor; innovation source; recipient of assistance; partner in national development; vulnerable business
Actor visibility	Actors who receive prominence in the article	Government official or agency; entrepreneur or business; business association; expert; international organization; statistical agency
State-SME relationship	Principal relationship constructed between SMEs and the state	Regulation and enforcement; government assistance; state-led development; public-private partnership; financial/infrastructural dependence; market autonomy
Policy objective	Main development objective associated with SMEs	SME growth; employment; domestic production and diversification; regulatory reform; digitalization and innovation; exports and trade; access to finance; economic recovery; regional or rural development
Problem and responsibility	Actor or condition primarily presented as responsible for the issue or its resolution	Government; business; market conditions; external crisis; shared public-private responsibility; no responsibility assigned
Temporal context	Main temporal frame connecting the article to the study period	COVID-19 disruption; recovery and reopening; geopolitical or external shock; domestic policy/economic disruption; longer-term adjustment; no temporal context

Source: Compiled by the author based on the study dataset.

4. Results

4.1 Characteristics of the Media Corpus

The final analytical corpus consisted of 187 newspaper articles addressing SMEs, entrepreneurship, business regulation, and related economic developments in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Of these, 113 articles concerned Kazakhstan and 74 concerned Uzbekistan. Because the national samples differed in size, the comparison relies primarily on within-country percentages rather than raw frequencies.

Each article was assigned to one mutually exclusive primary category: Business Challenges, Reforms, Government Support and Policies, or Statistics. The subsequent interpretive analysis produced one dominant code for each of the six dimensions defined in Table 1.

4.2 Primary Categories of SME Coverage

The Kazakhstan corpus was relatively evenly distributed across the three largest categories. Reforms constituted the largest category, representing 29.2% of the articles, while Business Challenges and Government Support and Policies each accounted for 26.5%. Articles in the Statistics category constituted the remaining 17.7%. No single category dominated the Kazakhstan coverage. Instead, the articles divided their attention among institutional changes, problems affecting business activity, and government measures intended to support enterprise.

Table 2. Primary Categories of SME Coverage in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan

Primary category	Kazakhstan, n	Kazakhstan, %	Uzbekistan, n	Uzbekistan, %
Business Challenges	30	26.5	13	17.6
Reforms	33	29.2	18	24.3
Government Support and Policies	30	26.5	32	43.2
Statistics	20	17.7	11	14.9
Total	113	100.0	74	100.0

Source: Compiled by the author based on the study dataset.

Note. Percentages are calculated within each national corpus. Differences in the number of articles mean that percentages provide a more appropriate basis for comparison than raw counts.

A different distribution appeared in Uzbekistan. Government Support and Policies was the largest category, accounting for 43.2% of the Uzbek articles. This proportion was 16.7 percentage points higher than the corresponding proportion in Kazakhstan. Reforms represented 24.3% of the Uzbekistan corpus, while Business Challenges accounted for 17.6% and Statistics for 14.9%.

The most notable difference concerns the prominence of government support and policy initiatives. Uzbek coverage more frequently focused on concessional loans, subsidies, tax benefits, access to land and infrastructure, sector-specific incentives, and government initiatives supporting entrepreneurship. Kazakhstan's coverage gave comparatively greater attention to business challenges. These included administrative pressure, taxation, access to finance, transportation and logistics, imported inputs, enforcement practices, and the effects of economic disruption. Nevertheless, government support remained an important category in both countries. These results do not mean that Kazakhstan's newspapers ignored government support or that Uzbek newspapers overlooked business problems. Rather, they indicate differences in the relative visibility assigned to these subjects within the selected articles.

4.3 Dominant Roles Attributed to SMEs

The primary categories identify each article's central subject but do not fully explain how SMEs were represented. Table 3 therefore compares the dominant economic or social role attributed to SMEs in each national corpus.

Table 3. Dominant Roles Attributed to SMEs

Dominant SME role	Kazakhstan, n	Kazakhstan, %	Uzbekistan, n	Uzbekistan, %
Independent market actor	24	21.2	16	21.6
Recipient of assistance	26	23.0	24	32.4
Employment/growth contributor	17	15.0	12	16.2
Innovation source	1	0.9	2	2.7
Partner in national development	10	8.8	7	9.5
Vulnerable business	35	31.0	13	17.6
Total	113	100.0	74	100.0

Source: Compiled by the author based on the study dataset.

Note. Each article received one dominant SME-role code. The detailed coding notes may contain additional secondary roles that are not counted in this table.

In Kazakhstan, the most frequent representation portrayed SMEs as vulnerable businesses. This frame appeared in 35 articles, accounting for 31.0% of the Kazakhstan corpus. These articles emphasized difficulties such as limited access to finance, administrative pressure, unpredictable regulation, transportation constraints, shortages of production inputs, high operating costs, and exposure to economic disruption. SMEs were consequently presented as private enterprises whose survival and development could be constrained by institutional, financial, or structural conditions. The second most common role in Kazakhstan was recipient of assistance, which appeared in 23.0% of the articles. The independent market actor category represented 21.2%, while employment/growth contributor accounted for 15.0%. The partner in national development role accounted for 8.8% of the Kazakhstan corpus. Only one Kazakhstan article assigned primary emphasis to SMEs as a source of innovation.

The Uzbekistan corpus produced a different ordering. Recipients of assistance was the most frequent dominant role, accounting for 32.4% of the articles. This representation was consistent with the prominence of Government Support and Policies shown in Table 2. Uzbek articles frequently described enterprises as recipients of concessional finance, tax relief, subsidies, equipment compensation, access to land, infrastructure, government procurement, and sector-specific development measures. Vulnerable businesses accounted for 17.6% of the Uzbekistan corpus, compared with 31.0% in Kazakhstan. This 13.4-percentage-point difference indicates that vulnerability was substantially more prominent in Kazakhstan's selected coverage. By contrast, the representation of SMEs as independent market actors was nearly identical: 21.2% in Kazakhstan and

21.6% in Uzbekistan. The proportions portraying SMEs as employment/growth contributors were also similar (15.0% in Kazakhstan and 16.2% in Uzbekistan), as were those portraying SMEs as partners in national development (8.8% and 9.5%, respectively). Innovation was uncommon as the dominant representation in both countries. It accounted for 0.9% of Kazakhstan's articles and 2.7% of Uzbekistan's. Digitalization, technological modernization, and innovative production appeared as secondary themes in a number of articles, but they rarely displaced regulation, assistance, vulnerability, or economic contribution as the central representation of SMEs.

4.4 Additional Dimensions of Media Representation

Table 4 presents the complete distribution of dominant codes across the five additional interpretive dimensions: actor visibility, state-SME relationship, policy objective, problem and responsibility, and temporal context.

Table 4. Distribution of Additional Interpretive Dimensions of SME Media Representation

Interpretive dimension / dominant code	Kazakhstan, %	Uzbekistan, %
Actor visibility		
Government official or agency	58.4	70.3
Entrepreneur or business	10.6	18.9
Business association	15.9	0.0
Expert	4.4	2.7
International organization	0.9	1.4
Statistical agency	9.7	6.8
Total	100.0	100.0
State-SME relationship		
Regulation and enforcement	41.6	33.8
Government assistance	28.3	29.7
State-led development	3.5	1.4
Public-private partnership	16.8	16.2
Financial/infrastructural dependence	5.3	6.8
Market autonomy	4.4	12.2
Total	100.0	100.0
Policy objective		
SME growth	7.1	9.5
Employment	14.2	1.4
Domestic production and diversification	12.4	12.2
Regulatory reform	30.1	33.8
Digitalization and innovation	2.7	4.1
Exports and trade	8.0	17.6
Access to finance	6.2	14.9
Economic recovery	15.0	0.0
Regional or rural development	4.4	6.8
Total	100.0	100.0
Problem and responsibility		
Government	54.0	73.0
Business	5.3	1.4
Market conditions	7.1	0.0
External crisis	11.5	1.4
Shared public-private responsibility	15.9	9.5
No responsibility assigned	6.2	14.9
Total	100.0	100.0
Temporal context		
COVID-19 disruption	23.0	0.0
Recovery and reopening	24.8	2.7
Geopolitical or external shock	4.4	4.1

Domestic policy/economic disruption	2.7	5.4
Longer-term adjustment	38.1	83.8
No temporal context	7.1	4.1
Total	100.0	100.0

Source: Compiled by the author based on the study dataset.

Note. Totals are based on the underlying frequencies; displayed percentages may not sum to exactly 100.0% due to rounding.

Government actors dominated the coverage in both countries, although this pattern was more pronounced in Uzbekistan. Government officials or agencies were the dominant visible actors in 58.4% of Kazakhstan articles and 70.3% of Uzbekistan articles. Entrepreneurs or businesses were the dominant actors in only 10.6% and 18.9%, respectively. Kazakhstan differed in the greater visibility of business associations, which constituted the dominant actor in 15.9% of articles but did not appear as the dominant actor in the Uzbekistan corpus. Statistical agencies accounted for 9.7% of Kazakhstan articles and 6.8% of Uzbekistan articles, while experts and international organizations were rarely the dominant voices. The distribution indicates that SME-related news in both countries was communicated primarily through institutional and governmental actors rather than through entrepreneurs themselves.

The state-SME relationship displayed greater variation. Regulation and enforcement constituted the most common frame in Kazakhstan (41.6%) and Uzbekistan (33.8%), followed by government assistance (28.3% and 29.7%, respectively). Public-private partnership was almost equally represented in the two countries, accounting for 16.8% in Kazakhstan and 16.2% in Uzbekistan. However, market autonomy was more visible in Uzbekistan (12.2%) than in Kazakhstan (4.4%). Financial or infrastructural dependence accounted for 5.3% and 6.8%, respectively, and explicit state-led development was uncommon in both countries (3.5% and 1.4%). These results indicate that relationships involving regulation, government assistance, and public-private partnership were more prominent than market autonomy in both national corpora.

Policy objectives reveal somewhat different national priorities. Regulatory reform was the most frequent dominant objective in both Kazakhstan (30.1%) and Uzbekistan (33.8%). In Kazakhstan, economic recovery accounted for 15.0%, employment for 14.2%, and domestic production and diversification for 12.4%. Uzbekistan placed considerably greater emphasis on exports and trade (17.6%) and access to finance (14.9%), while domestic production and diversification represented 12.2%. Digitalization and innovation remained relatively uncommon as dominant objectives in both corpora, accounting for only 2.7% in Kazakhstan and 4.1% in Uzbekistan.

The problem and responsibility dimension provides particularly strong evidence of the state-centered character of the coverage. Government was identified as the principal actor responsible for addressing or associated with the issue in 54.0% of Kazakhstan articles and 73.0% of Uzbekistan

articles. Shared public-private responsibility accounted for 15.9% and 9.5%, respectively. External crisis was the dominant problem and responsibility code in 11.5% of Kazakhstan articles, compared with 1.4% in Uzbekistan. Market conditions accounted for 7.1% in Kazakhstan and did not emerge as a dominant code in Uzbekistan. Direct attribution of responsibility to businesses themselves was uncommon in both countries.

Temporal framing produced the clearest difference between the two national corpora. Kazakhstan's coverage was distributed across several periods: 38.1% of articles were framed within longer-term economic adjustment, 24.8% around recovery and reopening, and 23.0% around COVID-19 disruption. The remaining articles were associated with geopolitical or external shocks, domestic policy or economic disruption, or lacked a clear temporal frame. Uzbekistan's coverage was much more concentrated, with 83.8% of articles situated within longer-term adjustment. COVID-19 disruption did not emerge as a dominant temporal frame in the Uzbek corpus, while recovery and reopening accounted for only 2.7%. This contrast indicates that Kazakhstan's SME coverage was more frequently associated with different contexts of disruption, recovery, and adjustment, whereas Uzbek coverage was more consistently related to a narrative of reform and economic modernization.

5. Discussion

The findings demonstrate a shared state-centered representation of SME development in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The analysis reveals meaningful differences in how the two national media corpora constructed the position of private enterprise. Government institutions were the most visible actors in both countries. Government was most frequently presented as the principal actor responsible for addressing or associated with SME-related issues. Nevertheless, Kazakhstan's coverage more frequently portrayed SMEs as vulnerable businesses operating amid regulatory, financial, logistical, and external pressures. Uzbek coverage more often presented them as recipients of government assistance within a broader narrative of reform and economic modernization. The comparison therefore suggests two variations of a broader state-centered narrative. One emphasizes the protection and adaptation of businesses facing constraints and disruption, and another emphasizes their development through government support and reform initiatives.

The results are consistent with scholarship showing that private enterprise in post-Soviet economies remains embedded in institutional arrangements in which government plays an important economic role. The emergence of private ownership did not necessarily produce a clear separation between state institutions and market actors. Governments continue to influence access to finance, land, infrastructure, procurement, taxation, and other resources important to business development. The media representations identified in this study reflect this institutional configuration, but they also

show how it is reproduced through public narratives. News reports frequently positioned government officials and agencies as the actors authorized to identify business problems, announce reforms, and articulate development priorities. Entrepreneurs themselves were considerably less visible as the principal voices interpreting SME development. Therefore, SMEs were represented as economically important actors, but their significance was related to policy objectives such as employment, formalization, domestic production, exports, access to finance, and economic growth.

The national differences show that this state-centered representation was not uniform. Kazakhstan's relatively balanced distribution among business challenges, reforms, and government support produced a more problem-oriented representation of entrepreneurship. Vulnerable businesses constituted the largest SME-role category, and coverage frequently connected business activity to COVID-19 disruption, recovery and reopening, geopolitical or external shocks, and other periods of economic adjustment. Uzbek coverage was more strongly concentrated around government support and longer-term adjustment. SMEs were frequently portrayed as recipients of concessional credit, subsidies, tax benefits, land, infrastructure, and other forms of assistance. Entrepreneurship was connected to exports, access to finance, domestic production, diversification, and regional development. These differences should not be interpreted as evidence that Uzbek SMEs experienced fewer constraints. Rather, they show that the selected media corpora assigned different levels of visibility to business vulnerability, government assistance, and longer-term economic adjustment.

These differences illustrate why national and temporal context matters in the construction of economic meaning. In this case, Welter's (2011) contextual approach to entrepreneurship emphasizes that entrepreneurial activity cannot be understood independently of the institutional, social, spatial, and temporal environments in which it occurs. The findings extend this perspective to media representation. SMEs were not portrayed through a universal set of economic functions, but through roles and relationships created by the circumstances emphasized within each national corpus. Research on crisis communication similarly demonstrates that media attention and interpretation change across periods of disruption, recovery, and adjustment (Ngai et al., 2022; Wirz et al., 2022).

The findings suggest that media representations of entrepreneurship provide an additional perspective on state-business relations in post-Soviet economies. Existing research examines these relationships through formal institutions, regulatory frameworks, or enterprise-level experiences. Media framing reveals another dimension: how the roles of private enterprise and the state are publicly constructed and legitimized. The prominence of government actors across both corpora suggests that the public meaning of entrepreneurship remains closely connected to state institutions even where SMEs are formally private market actors. At the same time, the contrast between

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan demonstrates that state-centered representation is not uniform. It varies according to national policy priorities and periods of economic disruption and adjustment.

These patterns should not be interpreted as direct measurements of government policy effectiveness or SME performance. Framing analysis examines how issues are selected, organized, and presented in public communication (Entman, 1993). Greater media attention to government support does not demonstrate that assistance reached SMEs effectively. Similarly, frequent coverage of business vulnerability does not establish that all SMEs experienced the same constraints. Instead, the findings identify which actors, relationships, responsibilities, and explanations were made most visible within the selected media corpus.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how newspapers represented SMEs in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan during 2020-2023, a period marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, economic recovery, domestic disruption, and changing regional trade conditions. The comparison demonstrates that SME development was presented as closely connected to state institutions in both countries. Government officials and agencies received greater visibility than entrepreneurs, while regulation and government assistance were considerably more prominent than market autonomy.

Important national differences nevertheless emerged. Kazakhstan's coverage distributed attention relatively evenly among reforms, government support, and business challenges. It also portrayed SMEs more frequently as vulnerable businesses affected by regulatory uncertainty, financial limitations, logistical constraints, and external disruptions. Uzbek coverage placed greater emphasis on government support programs and represented SMEs more often as recipients of assistance within a longer-term narrative of economic reform and modernization. Thus, the two corpora reflected different versions of a state-centered understanding of entrepreneurship. Business vulnerability, disruption, and recovery were more visible in Kazakhstan, whereas government assistance and longer-term economic adjustment were more prominent in Uzbekistan. These findings have practical implications for public communication about entrepreneurship. They suggest the value of providing greater space for SME owners, business managers, and independent experts to explain how policies operate in practice. Broader reporting could complement announcements of reforms and support programs with greater attention to their implementation, accessibility, and consequences for different types of enterprise. Greater attention to innovation, market autonomy, and firm-level experience could contribute to a more comprehensive public understanding of the SME sector.

Future research could compare official and independent outlets, examine changes in framing over time, and combine media analysis with interviews or surveys of entrepreneurs. Such research

would clarify whether public representations of SME development correspond with the experiences of businesses themselves.

Ethics Approval / Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable. This study analyzed publicly available newspaper articles and did not involve human participants or the collection of personal data.

Data Availability Statement

The coding data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Generative AI Use Disclosure

Generative AI was used for language editing and improving the clarity and organization of the manuscript. The author independently conducted the research, data collection, coding, analysis, and interpretation of the findings and takes full responsibility for the final content.

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ҚАЗАҚСТАН МЕН ӨЗБЕКСТАНДАҒЫ ШОК-ТЫҢ МЕДИАДАҒЫ БЕЙНЕСІ: САЛЫСТЫРМАЛЫ ТАЛДАУ

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Түйін:

Бұл мақалада 2020–2023 жылдар аралығында Қазақстан мен Өзбекстандағы онлайн-газеттердің шағын және орта кәсіпорындарды (ШОК) қалай сипаттағаны қарастырылады. Зерттеуде ШОК-қа берілген экономикалық және әлеуметтік рөлдер, әртүрлі акторлардың медиадағы көріну деңгейі, сондай-ақ жеке кәсіпорындар мен мемлекет арасындағы қатынастар талданады. Зерттеу Қазақстанға қатысты 113 және Өзбекстанға қатысты 74 мақаладан тұратын барлығы 187 газет мақаласына салыстырмалы сапалық контент-талдау және фреймдік талдау жүргізуге негізделген. Әр мақалаға бір негізгі мазмұндық санат және ШОК рөлдерін, акторлардың көрінуін, мемлекет пен ШОК арасындағы қатынастарды, мемлекеттік саясат мақсаттарын, жауапкершіліктің жүктелуін және уақыттық контексті қамтитын басым кодтар берілді.

Зерттеу нәтижелері екі елде де ШОК дамуының мемлекетке бағдарланған сипатта ұсынылғанын көрсетеді. Мемлекеттік лауазымды тұлғалар мен мемлекеттік органдар кәсіпкерлерге қарағанда медиада көбірек көрініс тапты, ал реттеу мен мемлекеттік қолдау нарықтық дербестікке қарағанда басымырақ болды. Қазақстандық материалдарда ШОК реттеушілік, қаржылық, логистикалық және сыртқы қысымдардың әсеріне ұшырайтын осал кәсіпорындар ретінде жиірек сипатталды. Өзбекстандық материалдарда мемлекеттік қолдау бағдарламаларына көбірек назар аударылып, ШОК экономикалық реформалар аясында көмек алушы ретінде жиірек ұсынылды. Зерттеу екі елдің газет материалдарында ШОК экономикалық тұрғыдан маңызды акторлар ретінде көрсетілгенімен, олардың қызметі мемлекетпен тығыз байланысты болып қалғанын қорытындылайды. Бұл талдау медиа дискурстың әртүрлі ұлттық және уақыттық контекстерде қалай қалыптасатынын көрсету арқылы Орталық Азиядағы ШОК-тың қоғамдық рөлін зерттеуге үлес қосады.

Түйін сөздер: Шағын және орта кәсіпорындар; медиалық фрейминг; Қазақстан; Өзбекстан; мемлекет пен бизнес арасындағы қатынастар; экономикалық даму; қоғамдық дискурс.

Автор туралы мәлімет

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МЕДИЙНЫЕ РЕПРЕЗЕНТАЦИИ МСП В КАЗАХСТАНЕ И УЗБЕКИСТАНЕ: СРАВНИТЕЛЬНЫЙ АНАЛИЗ

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Аннотация:

В данной статье рассматривается, как онлайн-газеты освещали деятельность малых и средних предприятий (МСП) в Казахстане и Узбекистане в период с 2020 по 2023 год. Исследование анализирует экономические и социальные роли, приписываемые МСП, представленность различных акторов в медиаматериалах, а также характер взаимоотношений между частными предприятиями и государством. В исследовании применяется сравнительный качественный контент-анализ и фрейм-анализ 187 газетных статей, из которых 113 посвящены Казахстану и 74 — Узбекистану. Каждой статье была присвоена одна основная тематическая категория, а также доминирующие коды, отражающие роли МСП, представленность акторов, отношения между государством и МСП, цели государственной политики, атрибуцию ответственности и временной контекст.

Результаты исследования выявляют государственно-центричное представление развития МСП в обеих странах. Государственные должностные лица и органы власти были представлены в медиаматериалах чаще, чем предприниматели, а регулирование и государственная поддержка занимали более заметное место, чем рыночная автономия. В казахстанских материалах МСП чаще изображались как уязвимые предприятия, испытывающие регуляторное, финансовое, логистическое и внешнее давление. В узбекских материалах больше внимания уделялось государственным программам поддержки, а МСП чаще представлялись как получатели помощи в контексте экономических реформ. Исследование показывает, что газетные материалы в обеих странах представляли МСП как экономически значимых акторов, деятельность которых при этом оставалась тесно связанной с государством. Анализ вносит вклад в изучение общественной роли МСП в Центральной Азии, демонстрируя, как медийный дискурс конструируется в различных национальных и временных контекстах.

Ключевые слова: малые и средние предприятия; медиафрейминг; Казахстан; Узбекистан; государственно-деловые отношения; экономическое развитие; публичный дискурс.

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