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Chapter 3

“RECOGNIZE THE SPIES”

Transparency and Political Power in Uzbek Cyberspace

Sarah Kendzior

On 19 May 2011, Aleksey Mitrofanov, a Russian politician and blogger, announced that a revolution was taking place in Uzbekistan. “What I said years ago would happen is finally happening—unfortunately,” Mitrofanov (2011) reported on his blog for the radio station Echo Moscow. “On 18 May, 10,000 people in Tashkent and 15,000 in Ferghana and Andijon took to the streets. In Andijon and Ferghana, people were shot. The exact number of victims is not known ... External signals have been received. The internal pressure is phenomenal. Everything is ready to explode.”

Uzbekistan’s mass uprising came as news to the people of Uzbekistan. On 21 May, Ferghana News, an independent Central Asian news agency and website sympathetic to dissident causes, asked its readers to corroborate Mitrofanov’s claims. Uzbeks responded that the streets of Uzbekistan were as quiet as ever and denounced Mitrofanov as a provocateur. But soon the topic turned to whether this rumor could ever become a reality. “Of course nothing will happen, the

Notes for this chapter begin on page 63.

Uzbeks are weak!" proclaimed one reader, adding: "There are more agents of the national security services than there are people! In the comments posted [on the Ferghana website] there is one NSS [national security service] agent after another!" Other Uzbeks agreed. "Don't go on this site if you're from Uzbekistan," cautioned one of them. "Half the people reading and writing are in the NSS." Another reader warned: "Quietly, law enforcement agencies, including the NSS, are reading and commenting on this and other sites ... use a proxy server."¹ A conversation about whether revolution was possible had turned into a conversation about whether discussing revolution online was possible. In the mind of most readers, both were ill-advised, and for the same reason—the unseen, ubiquitous presence of Uzbekistan's national security services.

In this chapter, I examine how the specter of Uzbekistan's national security services has shaped Uzbek online political discourse, curtailing prospects for activism despite the Internet's potential for fomenting political change. "In a system of ubiquitous spying ... everybody may be a police agent and each individual feels himself under constant surveillance," Hannah Arendt ([1951] 1968: 431) wrote of Stalin's totalitarian regime, a description equally apt for authoritarian post-Soviet states like Uzbekistan, whose national security services (NSS) are the literal and figurative heirs to the KGB. From 1991, when it became an independent state after the collapse of the Soviet Union, until his death in 2016, Uzbekistan was ruled by Islam Karimov, a Communist apparatchik turned nationalist dictator who retained the most pernicious aspects of Soviet rule. Obsessed with threats to his power, Karimov employed a massive security apparatus to monitor the activities of real and perceived opponents and scan the population for signs of dissent. The NSS holds jurisdiction over the Ministry of the Interior, which operates the national guard and special forces as well as the ubiquitous *militsiya* (police) forces that patrol Uzbekistan's streets. Citizens have come to fear the frequent and arbitrary arrests made by NSS agents, who, operating under no legal oversight, comprise the most powerful internal security force in Central Asia.

The Internet, at first glance, would seem to offer sanctuary from the surveillance of the state. On the Internet, Uzbeks can access censored information, debate controversial topics, and find like-minded individuals with whom to organize for political change. They can operate in secrecy, cloaking themselves in anonymous avatars, or can connect through semi-closed social media networks such as Facebook. Many Uzbeks use the Internet to voice dissent, particularly since 2005, when a government massacre of protesters in Andijon prompted Uzbekistan's journalists and dissidents to flee the country and reconnect later online.² Since 2005, dissidents have published censored works, written exposés on state crimes, and attempted to lay bare the secrets of one of the world's most closed and brutal regimes. Such acts of transparency, as Clare Birchall (2011: 134) notes, are often lauded as a panacea for political problems, particularly when they involve the Internet, which many have cited as an ideal medium through which to incite political change.³ "The enduring belief in transparency persists," Birchall argues, "because we like to think that revolution and transparency lead to more knowledge, to knowability, but the unknowable

is always at play” (ibid.: 146). For Uzbek dissidents, the great unknowable is the NSS, which has damaged attempts to mobilize despite never being caught participating directly in Uzbek online communities. It is enough that they *seem* to be intervening, that they are certainly listening, monitoring, and recording—and that it is impossible for Uzbeks to use the Internet without accepting this as inevitable. The NSS inhibits whatever space they inhabit—physical, psychic, and virtual. Far from being a means to evade Uzbek state control, the Internet is an NSS playground.

In this chapter, I use the example of the NSS during Karimov’s rule to reflect on how the psychic hold of a police state manifests itself on the Internet. Numerous scholars have examined the police as an “all-pervasive, ghostly presence” (Benjamin 1978: 287)—a shadow entity that exerts a psychic force as powerful as the physical force it wields (cf. Aretxaga 2003; Derrida 1991). “The spectral double of the police acts like the permanent body of the state, a presence interiorized as the law, at once fearful and paternalistic, familiar and strange, uncanny, a presence that one cannot shake out of oneself,” writes Begoña Aretxaga (2003: 406) of this elusive yet pervasive power. What happens, then, when this ‘spectral double’ manifests itself in a medium renowned for its transparency, a medium that some trumpet as a veritable guarantor of democracy because it forces state secrets into the open? I contend that the psychic power of the security forces is reaffirmed online even as its physical presence—and to some degree its air of mystery—diminishes. There are two arguments for this. The first is that while the Internet may give citizens a newfound ability to interact and organize, it does not ameliorate their pre-existing fears, biases, and suspicions—in fact, it often exacerbates them. In previous works (Kendzior 2006, 2011), I discussed how the emergence of Uzbek opposition websites in 2005 reified the cynical political culture of Uzbek dissidents and furthered their internal fractiousness. In these pages, I explore cynicism’s frequent partner, paranoia, and how it has similarly inhibited Uzbek political activity. Uzbek paranoia is to some extent a logical response to extreme circumstances—what George Marcus (1999) characterizes as ‘paranoia within reason’—but it is also a reflection of what Jonathan Bach (2010: 288) calls “paranoia [as] a structural condition of rule.” The paranoia that has structured Uzbekistan during its two decades of independent statehood does not dissolve on the Internet; rather, it is amplified and given new life.

This brings me to my second argument: that there are qualities inherent to the architecture of the Internet that breed paranoia, despite—and occasionally because of—the ‘transparency’ conferred by the medium. In recent years, numerous scholars have raised concerns about the erosion of online privacy (Nissenbaum 2009; Solove 2007; Zittrain 2008), the tyranny of digital memory (Lanier 2010; Mayer-Schönberger 2009), and the use of the Internet for state surveillance (Kalathil and Boas 2003; Morozov 2011). Most of these concerns have revolved around the consolidation of what was once the Internet’s very human chaos into impersonal monopolies on knowledge and information, such as Google, Facebook, and Wikipedia, which are controlled by powerful corporations or faceless ‘crowds’. Internet users have become anxious about personal data posted online, who accesses it, and how users can change or erase their

own information—often coming to the terrible realization that they cannot. In a perceptive essay for the *New Yorker*, Adam Gopnik (2011) describes the way that "the Internet gets inside us": "Everything once inside is outside, a click away; much that used to be outside is inside, experienced in solitude. And so the peacefulness, the serenity that we feel away from the Internet ... has less to do with being no longer harried by others than with being less oppressed by the force of your own inner life." It is relief, in other words, from a kind of paranoia: an incessant patrolling of the digital self.

For Uzbek dissidents, the Internet has given rise to twin anxieties: suspicion that others are not who they say they are, but are in fact NSS agents, and unease about what the NSS will do with the digital trail they are leaving behind. Both of these fears are rooted in paranoia shaped by life in a police state, but they have become magnified by the Internet's increased orientation toward the rote display of private life. The architecture of Web 2.0, with its ceaseless imperative to reveal all (and its merciless cataloging of all that one has revealed) prompts users to stroll gaily into the panopticon only to regret it later. In a paranoid political culture, such transparency is more than just 'oversharing': it is a form of political powerlessness. In a landmark study of paranoia in politics, Elias Canetti (1973: 292) noted: "Power is impenetrable. The man who has it sees through other men, but does not allow them to see through him." As Uzbek dissidents become progressively more open online, the silence of the NSS becomes deafening, and so the NSS becomes, perversely, the object of their obsession. Online, Uzbek dissidents wrestle with competing desires: to inform other Uzbeks about their activity (in public) and to lay the groundwork for what that activity will be (in secret). Both of these goals are inhibited by the dual mechanisms of Internet and state surveillance. Much as most of us have internalized the Internet, so have Uzbeks internalized the NSS, and the combination of self-consciousness and suspiciousness that results is a serious impediment to mobilization.

In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss how the specter of the NSS shapes online Uzbek political life. First, I trace the development of Uzbekistan's paranoid political culture under Karimov and examine the NSS as an *olabo'ji*, or 'boogeyman'—a shadow entity bestowed with almost unworldly power. Second, I explore the NSS as a weapon that online dissidents use against each other in their internal politics. Here I examine the accusations of 'spying' that dissidents routinely lob to discredit each other and how the murky online presence of the NSS has exacerbated pre-existing political tensions. While frightening as a specter, the NSS is perhaps even more unnerving when its mechanisms are revealed. Warning that the power of the state does not dissipate even when 'unmasked', Aretxaga (2003: 401) writes: "On the contrary, such mystifying power often seems to be augmented by such unveiling of the state's scandalous life, triggering an endless proliferation of discourses about the state at all levels of social life." The Internet has allowed dissidents, as Aretxaga puts it, "to gaze into the labyrinthine interiority of state being" (ibid.) as never before. But these revelations do not reassure anyone of the state's inherent weakness; instead, they stoke paranoia by making a shadow force 'real' in a medium where reality is always in question, where the self is always in check.

Paranoia and the State: The NSS as Boogeyman

Before exploring the issue of paranoia in Uzbek online politics, it is important to explain how paranoia functions as a mechanism of the Uzbek state. Uzbekistan's late president, Islam Karimov, rose to power on a nationalist platform largely borrowed from the Uzbek opposition (*muxolifat*) that had emerged in the aftermath of Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* reforms. When Uzbekistan became independent after the collapse of the Soviet Union—an unexpected development that many Uzbeks greeted with unease—Karimov, then first secretary of the Uzbek Communist Party, became president. He began consolidating his rule in two ways: by promoting what Andrew March (2003) calls an 'ideology of national independence', a teleological progression of the Uzbek nation-state from which Karimov's power and policies were assumed to naturally flow, and by constructing a massive security apparatus to ensure that his ideology was put into practice. (Conversely, as March notes, the ideology was used to justify Karimov's authoritarian control.) From 1992, Karimov outlawed opposition parties, censored independent media, banned foreign travel, and arrested citizens deemed inappropriately political or religious. Nick Megoran (2008) links these policies to what he describes as Karimov's 'discourse of danger', which asserted that Uzbekistan is constantly under threat from hostile forces. Karimov's written works, mandatory readings in Uzbekistan's schools and universities, warned Uzbeks that they are vulnerable to 'secret and open attacks' and that the state is their only protection. Karimov assured Uzbeks of their inherent greatness, linking it to a primordial Uzbek *ma'naviyat*, or 'morality', but he insisted that this moral fiber is in constant threat of decay due to the conspiracies of foreigners, Islamic terrorists, and any individual who can be linked with either of the two. Creatively applied, this could be almost anyone. Dissidents were routinely cast as 'enemies of the people' whose *o'zbekchilik* (Uzbekness) was always in question.

In an insightful analysis of paranoia in politics that draws on theories advanced by Canetti, Bach (2010: 294) argues that the success of a ruler can be evaluated by how effectively he or she draws the population into his delusion: "The more paranoid a ruler becomes, the more essential it is that others share the ruler's system of delusions and conspiracies. This leads to what we can identify as successful and unsuccessful paranoid rulers in Canetti's structure of rule: The *successful* paranoid ruler will make the people share his paranoia, and they will feed on it together." In this respect, Karimov can be seen as a successful paranoid ruler—in part because he succeeded in blending his national ideology so seamlessly with the manpower needed to maintain it, but also because his carefully calibrated rhetoric taps into genuine anxieties of Uzbek citizens, solidifying their notions of citizenship in the shaky aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse. As Megoran (2008), Kendzior (2011), and others note, Karimov's propaganda reflects values—national autonomy, moderate Islam, sanctity of family—that many Uzbeks hold and want to protect, including members of the Uzbek opposition, who do not oppose state ideology but seek to make it legitimate in practice. It is not 'the state' that scares dissidents—indeed,

a good number of opposition members served in the Karimov administration in the early years of Uzbekistan's independence and helped create its national ideology. Rather, they fear its shadow forces: the very forces tasked with protecting Uzbek citizens from people like them. For the opposition, the NSS is an inverted mirror of state-sanctioned paranoia.

Although always immense, the NSS has grown significantly since 2005, the same year in which the number of Uzbek dissident websites increased. On 13 May 2005, a large protest in the city of Andijon over the country's deteriorating social and political conditions was suppressed by state troops who fired indiscriminately into the crowd, killing around 800 people. As a result of the Andijon violence and the brutal crackdown on dissents that followed, most of Uzbekistan's opposition fled into exile, where they began creating anti-government websites. Back in Uzbekistan, the NSS was expanded so that it subsumed the interior ministry and the police, giving rise to a state security apparatus so enormous that in 2007 it staged its own 'Olympic' games. The NSS was also put in charge of monitoring the Internet and circumventing the sudden proliferation of dissident material. NSS officials patrol Uzbekistan's cyber cafés, curtail access with blocks and firewalls, and track and arrest users attempting to download illicit content. One Uzbek in Tashkent, who was trying to visit an opposition website in 2006, found an NSS officer at his door within minutes (IWPR 2006). Others have reported being beaten or arrested by NSS agents shortly after posting controversial content, and still others have reported that their personal e-mails and social media pages have been hacked (Front Line Defenders 2010). Already in 2011, NSS officers began confiscating laptops at the airport, checking browsing history, and interrogating anyone with a record of visiting websites critical of the government.⁴

Judging by the lengths to which the NSS goes in order to control Internet access—Uzbekistan now has some of the most severe Internet restrictions in the world, despite the small proportion of citizens online—it is clear that the regime sees the Internet as a threat. And to some degree it is, in that it enters an element of unpredictability into the veneer of state control. Yet when one examines Uzbek online works about the security services, one finds not a sense of empowerment over the ability to remark openly about government crimes but rather frustration that the NSS's enigma endures even in an era of digital transparency.

In 2009, a prominent Uzbek blogger remarked on his futile search for information about the state's shadow organs: "Every morning, I type 'national security services' [*milliy xavfsizlik xizmati*] into Google. This is like hiring a poor laborer to excavate an immense treasure trove—you can't find what you're looking for, and eventually I'm dragged downward, that is, into the place of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan." He noted that government websites describe in detail all internal branches but one—the NSS—and added a list of questions that, in an ideal world, Uzbek journalists would be able to ask their government: How many people are in the NSS? How does it function? Who are their leaders? What are their official roles? These are basic questions, and the fact that they remain elusive in an era of unparalleled information access

only highlights the NSS's impenetrability. On the Internet, the imbalance of power that persists on the ground in Uzbekistan is replicated: dissidents make themselves newly visible in order to attract adherents, while the NSS remains a cipher, listening without being heard.

Some Uzbek dissidents, unable to diminish the security services' power through exposure, focus their online efforts on critiquing the NSS's psychic hold. One such example, published in April 2006 on the no longer active dissident website Muslim Uzbekistan, is a popular article titled "Is it the Boogeyman or the *Militsiya*?" Written pseudonymously by a member of the Uzbek political opposition, the article opens with an anecdote from the author's youth. Every day, before his mother would leave for work on the collective farm, she would tell the author: "If your baby brother wakes up and cries, rock the cradle. If that doesn't work, tell him the boogeyman [*olabo'ji*] is coming, and that will make him afraid not to sleep." "Who is the boogeyman?" the author asked. "From what I know, he was some sort of shah [*podsho*], some murderous tyrant [*odamxur*]," she said. "I think he was the son or grandson of Genghis Khan. Or maybe a wild beast. I don't know, this is something we learned about from our parents. They scared us by saying the boogeyman was coming, so we would pretend to be asleep." Years later, the author was married with children of his own. One night, while his wife was putting the children to bed, he overheard her say: "Sleep, stay quiet, the *militsiya* are coming. You must sleep or else they will take you." Startled, he asked his wife why she had said this. "Why, all mothers tell this to their children," she replied. "This is how they scare their children to sleep."

"Is it the Boogeyman or the *Militsiya*?" which was widely reprinted across the Uzbek web, is notable for its assertion of tyranny as an Uzbek inevitability, positioning the state security forces as the modern incarnation of the ruthless rulers of Uzbekistan's past. Fear has always been an Uzbek weapon, one that Uzbek mothers have long wielded over their beloved children and that the Uzbek government now wields over its people. The story argues that a primal power is at work, lulling people into complacency not through its outright assertion of force, but through the subtle way it renders people unwilling to act. "The *militsiya* are our own," the article concludes sarcastically. "In an independent country, is it not good to have everything be our own? How else will mothers get their children to sleep? *Or is it time to wake up?*" Comparing the modern *militsiya* to the shahs and khans of yore—who were promoted by the Karimov administration as predecessors and role models—the author inverts the administration's ideology of national independence, portraying Uzbeks as automatons paralyzed by their own paranoia, their centuries of subjugation a natural counterpart to their rulers' unyielding power.

In 2009, I interviewed the author of this article, a well-known dissident and former Karimov administration official. He told me that his tale of the boogeyman was not the only work he had written about the state security services. In 2007, as he was hiding out in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, he published a series of online articles written under a different pseudonym—he has over a dozen—about the NSS's illegal attempts to track him down. Like the boogeyman story, these articles served no pragmatic purpose other than to attest to

the perseverance and power of the police. Most Uzbeks who read them were sympathetic to the protagonist's plight, but they offered no suggestions that might help him. Instead, they merely offered their condolences as he chronicled his doom. Readers also had no idea that the articles were in fact written by the subject of the story. The author told me that he used pseudonyms to protect his family, who are still in Uzbekistan, because he feared recrimination would be worse if the NSS knew he was writing about them online. Yet he wanted his story to be told—if only to serve as a reminder that, even abroad, no Uzbek is safe. Now living out of the country, he sometimes publishes under his own name and at other times under a pseudonym, writing articles about his persecution in and outside of Uzbekistan and occasionally deciding to delete them later. He is torn between chastising Uzbeks for their cowardice and being prudent as to his own protection. In order to participate in the Internet's open environment, he must close himself off.

In a study of Stalin's legacy in Siberia, Caroline Humphrey (2003: 184–185), drawing on Freud, notes that the reason "paranoic projections and identifications are closed, that is, resistant to unraveling ... is because *there is in fact a certain truth to them*." It is in this way that the paranoid political culture of Uzbekistan is perpetuated on the Internet even by those seeking to escape it. The aforementioned dissident writes of the *militsiya* as boogeyman to criticize how Uzbeks have internalized their oppressors, cowering like children at their grandiose power. Yet in relaying the story of his own persecution, he proves that there is good reason for this fear. Criticizing the NSS online may be an act of defiance, in that it contradicts the Uzbek government's representation of itself as just and benevolent, but it also reminds Uzbeks that they are in constant danger—that, in fact, the boogeyman is *real*.

"It is on the basis of secrecy that states work their magic," writes David Nugent (2010: 699), echoing other studies that link the control of secrecy to the establishment of social order (Penglase 2009; Taussig 1997). Ironically, as the NSS is written about online, its magic only grows, because the only 'secret' revealed is the open secret of its brutality: a fact that the Uzbek government hardly wants advertised but that every Uzbek already knows. In the next section, I address how the specter of the security services has damaged relationships between dissidents, who must not only grapple with the NSS's looming online presence, but also learn to deal with those who leverage it for personal and political gain.

Paranoia in the Opposition: The NSS as a Weapon

In February 2007, Isyonkor, a popular Uzbek dissident website that became inactive in 2008, published an article titled "Josuslarni tanib oling!" (Recognize the Spies!). The author, a prominent dissident living in the United States, called upon members of the opposition to free themselves from "NSS games" by becoming more vigilant in their online environment. He described three spies who frequent Uzbek opposition websites ("a master at computers," "a man

close to an opposition leader,” “a person who knows almost everyone in every opposition group”), but he gave no names. Immediately, the comments section was filled with speculation about who the spies might be. Among the suggested culprits were the editor of the website, the writer of the article, and several of the commenters. Other readers decried the article, wondering why Isyonkor, at that time the most influential of Uzbek websites, would publish such an inflammatory piece.

An accusation of spying is one of the most effective ways to sabotage an Uzbek opposition member or group. Since I began reading Uzbek dissident websites in 2006, such allegations have appeared with increasing frequency. Dissidents are routinely denounced as *josuslar* (spies), *SNBchi/MXX xodimlari* (NSS officers), or *maxsus xizmatchilar* (secret agents), sometimes in articles written by other dissidents, but more often in comments left by anonymous readers. To some extent, the accusations of spying are a by-product of the long-standing fractiousness of the Uzbek opposition, which has been at war with itself since it emerged in the late 1980s. In 1990, Birlik (Unity), the first Uzbek opposition group, split when dissatisfied dissidents left to form Erk (Will), a rival group. Both were outlawed in the early 1990s, and many of their members were jailed or forced into exile. Since the Andijon events of 2005 and the simultaneous rise of Uzbek political websites, a number of new opposition groups have emerged, but they have been as plagued with infighting and as politically ineffective as past groups.

In a previous work (Kendzior 2011), I argued that the Internet strengthens the cynical culture of Uzbek dissidents because the qualities that make online communities so attractive—the ability to speak freely, to post anonymously, to enter uninvited and disappear without warning—are the very features that foster internal contention. The same can be said about the Uzbek political culture of paranoia. Uzbek dissidents assume that their online environment is being monitored and that what they say can be used against them. Some dissidents use pseudonyms and comment anonymously in order to protect themselves. However, they are aware that others are also acting under aliases and that agents of the NSS may be among them. ‘Outing’ another dissident as an agent can be an act of loyalty to other dissidents, an act of personal vengeance against a political rival, or itself an act of NSS deception—that is, an NSS agent posing as a dissident accuses a dissident of posing as an NSS agent. On the Internet, there is no way to tell. Furthermore, there is no need to tell—the rumor itself is the problem.

Several scholars have noted the way that rumor constructs an ‘alternative public sphere’ (Perice 1997), which gains salience when the rumors are presented in a written form (Bubant 2008; Herriman 2010). For Uzbek dissidents growing up in a propagandistic police state, the ‘alternative public sphere’ has long been the *only* public sphere, a claim that could arguably be made for many post-Soviet authoritarian states (Komaromi 2008). Uzbek news travels through *mish-mish* (gossip) as pervasively as through official channels, but the assumption that all information is unreliable, and all sources biased, has had the perverse effect of ensuring that all rumor is taken seriously. This is not to say all rumor is believed—on the contrary, most information is received with

skepticism—but that it is shared, parsed, and discussed to a degree belying its dubious origins. Rumors that spies are posing as dissidents have a particular insidiousness because they exacerbate paranoia about the omnipresence of the NSS as well as a general inclination to distrust fellow dissidents. To spread such a rumor is to exploit a weakness in Internet culture that inherently favors the state. After all, there is no doubt that the NSS is spying on everyone—the only question left is, who are its agents? That is an inflammatory question when expressed orally, but expressed on the Internet, where it is endlessly copied and cached, it is a question that stops attempts at political organization dead in their tracks.

In the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings, two new Uzbek opposition groups emerged, vowing to capitalize on the revolutionary fervor and foment similar events in Uzbekistan. The first group, Yetar (Enough), which described itself as a youth group, planned to organize a massive rally in Tashkent in July 2011. Its plans were announced via a memo e-mailed to Yangi Dunyo—a popular news site and the successor to the aforementioned Isyonkor—on the unfortunate date of 1 April. The Uzbeks who did not believe it to be an April Fool's Day joke immediately presumed it to be a government plot and asked Yetar to identify its leadership. Yetar, whose e-mail address was the unhelpful `etar2011@gmail.com`, responded by saying it could not reveal any information about its membership online because doing so would jeopardize its operation.

The transparency of the Internet was what allowed a fledgling dissident group like Yetar to attract public attention, and it was also the very thing that made the group operate in secret. This was both plausible and completely infuriating (infuriating, in a sense, because it was so plausible), and dissidents devoted a great deal of time trying to ascertain the legitimacy of the group. In late May 2011, a Yetar representative announced, via dissident websites and Facebook, that the group was canceling its July protest “due to incredible measures taken against our peaceful protest by the Uzbek authorities, who put our own people involved in the organization in the country under suspicion, and Karimov's willingness to use weapons against peaceful demonstrators.”⁵ Readers responded to this news by again raising the specter of the NSS. Some claimed that the NSS was responsible for spying on Yetar online and ruining their revolution; others reiterated the claim that Yetar was in fact the NSS and that the whole thing had been devised by the Uzbek government to make uprisings seem unfeasible.

Both of these are reasonable but also paranoid assumptions, and, in the end, they are damaging. Yetar's emergence coincided with the formation of a second new group, O'zbekiston Xalq Harakati (O'XH, People's Movement of Uzbekistan), a merger of several pre-existing Uzbek dissident groups headed by Uzbekistan's most famous dissident, Muhammad Salih, a poet, the Erk leader, and a former presidential candidate. Because Yetar and the O'XH appeared at the same time—the same time, notably, that the aforementioned Russian politician Mitrofanov was fabricating stories about violently suppressed protests—many readers of Uzbek websites expressed suspicion that the sudden appearance of both parties was part of a government plot to lure dissidents into

NSS-patrolled groups. Unlike with Yetar, few dissidents doubted the O'XH's veracity—some of its members are quite famous—but they did doubt the group's motivation and remained skeptical of its plans for revolution. Whether or not Yetar existed, the fact that it announced its goals on the Internet, and then renounced them as untenable, made similar announcements from other groups seem dubious as well. Was Yetar real? Was the O'XH a government plot? It almost does not matter because the Internet flattens the distance between accusation and information, making rumors as meaningful as the reality. From June 2011 to April 2012, the first entry about the O'XH in Google was not the group's own website, but a popular article published on multiple dissident websites titled "The People's Party of Uzbekistan Is a Secret NSS Operation."⁶ There was nothing anyone could do to change that.⁷

Allegations of NSS involvement are damaging when aimed at groups, but are particularly pernicious when they concern the reputation of individual dissidents. This brings me to a scandal that emerged in the online dissident community in the spring of 2011. To some degree, I am hesitant to relate it, as any attempt to chronicle interpersonal conflict on the Internet has the potential to worsen it by duplicating, and reifying, spurious accusations. Although the information I cite is publicly available, I am not using names so as to avoid the damage incurred when one's Google results designate one as a traitor or a spy. Such is the paradox of writing an article about political rumor on the Internet: in trying to understand the rules, you inevitably become part of the game.

In February 2011, the editor of an Uzbek website accused a prominent dissident of being a member of the NSS. Both parties were exiles living close to each other abroad, and when the editor hurt his hand in a car accident, he enlisted the help of the dissident to run his website. During his tenure, the dissident published articles in which he accused various asylum-seeking Uzbek refugees of being Islamic terrorists. The editor, incensed by what he thought was the smearing of vulnerable parties, announced that this confirmed his suspicion that the dissident was actually a regime agent, adding that he had witnessed the dissident spying on Uzbeks abroad and reporting his findings to government agents. He accused the dissident of purposefully trying to stir up trouble in the opposition and endangering Uzbek refugees.⁸

According to the editor, the dissident responded to these accusations by threatening to hurt the editor's relatives in Uzbekistan, and the editor went to the police of the European country in which they both lived. The police promised to look into it, and in the meantime the editor published a series of articles detailing the various ways that the opposition had been compromised by the traitor in their midst. These allegations were echoed by readers in the comments section of his and other websites—but along with them came new allegations against the editor. Since 2005, the editor has also been accused of being in the NSS numerous times, in part because his brother-in-law had worked briefly for the security services. The editor and his wife have protested those who have said that this means they, too, are guilty of NSS involvement, claiming that the brother-in-law had enlisted only to investigate the murder of his father, a Soviet-era dissident who had been murdered by the KGB from the inside.

This anecdote likely strikes those unfamiliar with Uzbek politics as unduly dramatic, gossipy, and conspiratorial—but what is important to note is that underlying each accusation is vulnerability about the Uzbek virtual environment and the people who inhabit it. Each claim has the ring of truth and precedent: the Karimov regime had, in fact, used the Internet to smear innocent people as terrorists, and dissidents have, in the past, shifted their allegiances to the government while in exile. There is no reason *not* to believe anything, and so it falls on the accused to build a case for their innocence, not by defending their own honor—for who would believe them?—but by publicly speculating on the nature of their accusers and, most notably, on the nature of the Internet itself.

In March 2011, the accused dissident attempted to clear his name in an article published on another website. First noting that for the Uzbek opposition, "the words 'secret agent' and 'informer' have come to mean much more than the words 'fight, freedom, and the future of the people,'" he goes on to ask his readers to "think logically about what an agent is." The first task of an agent, he states, is to infiltrate parties, find out who their leaders are, and learn their ideas. Since the Uzbek opposition has no functional parties, leaders, or ideas, he continues sarcastically, they are immune in this respect. The second task is to keep track of developments. This is a ridiculous task, he implies, since Uzbeks exaggerate everything they are doing and use online aliases to make their ranks seem larger. The third task of an agent is to infiltrate the dissident community by making friends through e-mail and Skype. Here the dissident's snarky tone disappears, and he becomes reflective:

Ask yourself: How do I know [dissident's name]? And then you will realize that they [his accusers] do not, and that you have become a 'victim' of Internet provocateurs, who impose their opinions and personal hatred on others, namely, you. The result is that you become a 'zombie' who struggles not just with the dictatorship, but with your colleagues. Subjected to others' opinions, you start to hate people whom you have never seen. Only the Uzbek opposition, with the aid of Internet journalism, would make a hero out of a former agent of the NSS⁹ and check those who escaped for validity, accusing their former friends and colleagues of being agents of the NSS and MVD [Ministry of Internal Affairs]. So it is best not to believe the gossip, and always try to talk with someone if possible.

What is notable about this response is that the dissident accuses the Internet, as a medium, of creating the same paranoid conditions that the NSS is said to intentionally provoke. Much as a fellow Uzbek writer drew a comparison between the boogeyman and the *militsiya*, here Uzbek Internet users are rendered as 'zombies', manipulated by a torrent of information that they can never verify, but which seems to confirm all their worst suspicions. The Internet, in other words, does the NSS's dirty work for it. To some degree, this is an unfair reification of an impersonal medium—but it is the impersonal nature of the medium, combined with the very personal accusations of the people who use it, that makes it so perilous. Participants in Uzbek online communities face the scrutiny not only of amorphous regime agents, but of their peers, who clock and catalogue

their suspicions. This dissident's discomfiting declaration—that the illusion of the NSS is as effective as the reality—shows how hard it is for Uzbek activists to build the trusting relationships on which political action is premised.

Conclusion

For Uzbek dissidents, the Internet is not a revolution but an evolution, whereby the long-standing political culture of cynicism and paranoia has been shifted into a medium that both circumvents the conditions that generated it—the Uzbek state—and strengthens its most pernicious aspects. Praising the Internet's potential to augur political transparency fails to account for what 'transparency' means to the people who use it. Uzbek dissidents who expose the corruption of the Uzbek state are never liberated from its control, not only because of the pervasive psychological hold the state wields, but also because of the Internet itself. Individuals who fear being watched or followed have voluntarily placed themselves in a medium that allows people to watch or follow them. While the Internet offers the opportunity for connection, it also allows for pseudonymity and anonymity that bolster internal suspicions. The architecture of Web 2.0 lends itself well to organizations like the NSS despite the best efforts of dissidents to use the medium to their advantage.

Aretxaga (2003: 397) notes how security apparatuses lock the "state's own citizens in a paranoid gaze that curtails civil rights and extends terror through the social field." Although the Internet has been heralded as a sanctuary from repressive regimes, for Uzbeks fleeing the NSS, it provides little relief. Whether online or offline, the 'social field' of Uzbeks is comprised of social relationships based on a shared experience of cynical and paranoid political culture. The Internet reaffirms the police state's panopticon: one does not know who is watching or why—only that one is being watched. The digital gaze of the NSS is both external and internal, frightening in its presence and unnerving in its absence. That Uzbeks may be watched by those with whom they have established direct interpersonal relationships—agents posing as dissidents, or dissidents suspected of being agents—further complicates the idea of the Internet as a venue for 'free' expression. The experience of Uzbek dissidents scattered around the world suggests that when the state's "powerful insubstantiality" (Taussig 1992: 113) is technologically amplified by the Internet, its threatening force is able to inhibit whatever space the citizens inhabit—physical, psychic, and virtual. The affect of fear and paranoia created by interaction between citizens and real or imagined agents of the state follows them even into exile or refuge, far beyond the state's physical borders (cf. Bozzini, this book). The Internet, rather than freeing dissidents from fear of the state, amplifies and extends the reach of its gaze across not only social spaces, but physical ones as well.

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Notes

1. See "Uzbekistan: Rumors of Mass Unrest in Several Cities Have Not Been Confirmed," Ferghana News Agency, 20 May 2011, <http://www.fergananews.com/news.php?id=16758&mode=snews>.
2. See Kendzior (2006) and Megoran (2008) for more on the Andijon events and Kendzior (2011) for more on Uzbek dissident websites.
3. See Shirky (2008) for a representative example.
4. "Farg'ona aeroportida yo'lovchilar noutbuki tekshirilmoqda" [Visitors to the Ferghana Airport Are Having Their Laptop Computers Searched], Ozodlik Radio, 6 June 2011, http://www.ozodlik.org/content/fargona_aeroportida_yolovchilar_noutbuki_tekshirilmoqda/24212860.html.
5. See Yetar's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/#!/pages/%D0%95%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%9F%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B0We-demand-the-dismissal-of-Islam-Karimov/179071258811897>.
6. The search conducted to obtain this result was "O'zbekiston xalq harakati." I have conducted this search monthly since June 2011, and the result is always the same—and potentially very damaging to the group.
7. Bach (2010: 297) has noted how the "disaggregation of the self into data alters boundaries of public and private and leads to a radical reconfiguration of agency and individual autonomy." Google and other algorithmic search engines are a prime example of this phenomenon.
8. In 2008, another website had accused this dissident of being in the NSS. In addition, the dissident himself had published a very popular article in 2005 speculating that yet another dissident group was a cover for an NSS operation.
9. This reference is to Ikrom Yakubov, an alleged NSS officer who defected and went into widely publicized exile in 2008, unnerving both the state and its opponents in the process.

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