The Optics of Leadership: A Comparative Exploration of Uzbek and Tajik Presidential Posing on Instagram

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Abstract

How might a leader in Central Asia take a selfie? This paper explores the Instagram accounts of the presidents of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – two countries with authoritarian regimes and varying information and communications technology – in order to reach conclusions on the evolving role of social media in governance. Instagram offers a forum where the two presidents can project their personal leadership style, draw attention to official events, potentially interact with (or received interaction from) other accounts, and use national identity images as a part of their leadership role. These activities cater to domestic audiences as well as feed into the dynamics within the wider social media sphere. This paper explores how, even though the style and substance of the two leaders' posts differs greatly, Instagram use opens a door to posturing for a virtual audience.

Keywords

ICT – social media – Instagram – Tajikistan – Uzbekistan – identity – authoritarianism

1 Introduction

Social media is a stage – a scrollable, curated, framed, photoshopped platform. These factors make social media a place to project one's identity. But identities are made of many layers, each one revealing a new context and a new shape to the beholder.

Social media may have a disproportionate effect in Central Asian states as it is one of the best modes to reach the citizens and give shape to the national

narrative. The rapid rise of the platform's use in Central Asia makes it important to think more about identity and messaging disseminated through this digital space. It is also increasingly important to understand the role of social media platforms, such as Instagram, in the messages or discursive regimes present in the Central Asian region. Is social media use any different from how content from a classic press service is consumed? Does social media offer a distinct set of tools and norms for "social authoritarianism"? And what are the underlying infrastructures that support the leaders on one hand, and the citizens on the other? Can one exist without the other?

This paper seeks to understand the role of social media in projecting national identity, the way the presidents of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have attempted to harness a new approach to visual imagery to reach an audience, and how the audience responds to that identity projection. It attempts to explore the official presidential accounts in depth and to note the responses (likes and comments) on these official posts. Uzbekistan was once under the closed regime of Islam Karimov, but now, under the new leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, it promises to be more modern, open, and forward-looking. Its leadership is highly sensitive to the potential of digital space, and the official Instagram accounts are clearly tailored to project a certain message. Tajikistan is a country poorly connected in digital space and, correspondingly, it is led by a president lacking social media savvy. Compared to Uzbekistan, slightly fewer people in Tajikistan are on Instagram (Dall'Agnola and Wood 2022), and so the official account has less incentive to invest in directing the messaging and imagery in that "digital space." Nevertheless, both leaders are investing effort in the platform, which makes this content interesting to track in the visual media era.

The structure of the present work is as follows. First, this paper presents a review of the relevant literature and methodology specific to this research. Then, a background is provided on the information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure, internet access, and Instagram use in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The paper then provides an in-depth analysis of the social media accounts of Uzbek President Mirziyoyev and Tajik President Rahmon and their official messaging and outreach to the public through the medium of Instagram.

2 Literature Review

This paper draws on Anderson's (1991) idea of imagined communities, envisioning Instagram as an intersection of the real community (in that content on the platform depicts real things) with a new, imagined community, where

users can interact with the primary official content and each other.[1] In the 1990s, long before the advent of Instagram, the literature already identified virtual space as a place for identity construction (Donath 1998). The relationship between leadership and identity is particularly important when considering the Central Asian countries, which have a top-down hierarchy of identity; for example, Bohr (1998) identified the top-down apparatus in Central Asian states for identity construction and legitimization, partly in the bureaucracy, but partly in the acting of power and legitimacy. In addition to the general construction of identity through social media, Reid (2003) notes the importance of leadership in creating identity and social strata. Though Reid does not include social media research as a method, in this paper I argue that the social media sphere is a continuation of the projection of leadership into that new virtual space.

My article also aims to broaden our understanding and application of "community mapping" in social ethnographic research (Parker 2006; Perkins 2013). Interactions and components within a community can tell researchers about value systems and relationships in place within the community; the interactions and components suggest that community mapping enables researchers to better understand the key components of a community and the way those components interact with each other. Parker (2006) puts forth the idea of physically mapping the relationship between different spaces. Perkins (2013) takes that idea and applies it to other social relationships: namely, those in cycling, religious, artistic, and green space communities. As we move further into the digital era, I seek to explore whether some aspects of community mapping can be applied to the digital sphere of social media, with a particular focus on Instagram. I argue that it is possible to "map" the community of Instagram through monitoring digital interactions – likes and comments – and such research can facilitate an understanding of how various accounts relate to each other (or do not), creating a map of digital space.

The literature on nationhood, identity, and construction in Central Asia is broad and diverse. Several articles have pointed out the free-for-all nation construction that ensued in Central Asia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (e.g., Roy 2000 and Sabol 1995): there were many forces operating on this national identity construction and few rules or systematic methodologies to determine how or in what way a national identity consensus should emerge. The result was a paradox of bottom-up imagery with top-down implementation. In the introduction to their edited volume on nationhood and identity,

1 Anderson's idea of "imagined communities" was successfully applied to Kazakhstan by Sarsembayev in 1999.

Isaacs and Polese (2016) discuss post-Soviet identity construction in Central Asia through the ethnonational construct of Brubaker (1996). The phenomenon of this identity was largely built on, and required a top-down promotion of symbols, institutions, and practices by the visible leadership (cf. Isaacs and Polese 2016). Promotion reinforced nationhood and identity in tandem to legitimize the leaders' position at the helm of that nationhood as its guiding force and embodiment (Matveeva 2009). Identity promotion takes place internally and externally, and leaders project the nation's identity abroad (Marat 2009). Earlier literature has identified Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as interesting case-studies to study identity construction. Kurzman (1999) looks at the creation of "traditional" practices in Uzbekistan before the fall of Karimov's regime. Blakisrud and Nozimova (2010) explore the making of historical legacies in Tajikistan. Previous research has covered the nexus of identity in Central Asia, considering, for example, traditionalization (Beyer and Finke 2019).

The identity literature, alongside Reid's (2003) discussion of the leadership's role in controlling that narrative and projecting authority, would be consistent with comparative authoritarian literature specific to the Central Asian region (e.g., Schatz 2008; Gerschewski 2013; Polese et al. 2017). These works emphasize the importance of space and legitimacy projected through controlling the narrative and discourse – both[2] impacted through social media, albeit in non-traditional ways. This body of work on identity development and methods of authoritarianism in Central Asia could be improved by exploring control over digital space. There is a growing body of research evaluating how authoritarian-leaning governments control digital space. Keremoglu and Weidmann (2020) offer a comprehensive literature review of leaders' control of the internet, which ranges across ICT infrastructure, blackouts, censorship, and identity crafting. Fidler (2014) assesses the rise of "dictator publicity" and the crossover between domestic spaces and international (non-domestic) spaces via the internet. Fidler's assessment of the internet moving from domestic to international space is given added relevance in Maerz's (2016) piece on e-government, in which she shows that Uzbekistan uses e-government for external (i.e., non-domestic, international) approval, whereas Kazakhstan uses e-government for internal (i.e., domestic) approval. This would be another example of using digital space to control the official narrative, and it contributes to the variety of outcomes one would expect to see within a comparison of authoritarian regimes. Finally, a 2020 article by Krithika Varagur notes the complicity of

2 While narrative refers to the corpus of words and images and discourse is more focused on words, to the exclusion of images.

outside mini-celebrities (influencers) in playing along and promoting the narratives these regimes want to project.

Several works identify Instagram as a medium for general identity construction. For example, Iqbal, Karsisi, and colleagues (2019, 193) apply a constructivist framework to look at the effects of surrounding environment and how identity on the "communal layer" creates Instagram persona – individually and within a community. Can Yilmaz (2017) compares perceived and projected self-identity to idealized online identity, applying Goffman's (1959) frame for impression management in identity within social interactions and Berger's (2008) identity signaling as well as the "cultural relativism" of such identity symbols within the group. Gündüz (2017) explores the interplay between social media and identity construction and considers the similarities and differences between real-life communities and interactions and those found online.

There is research on social media in identity construction in the Central Asian countries, but its potential is still nascent. Notably, Glukhov (2017) uses a constructivist approach to look at the networks forged among Central Asian migrants abroad in Russia, mostly focusing on symbolic gestures and semantics on VKontakte. Connected to social media, Ruget and Usmanalieva (2019) make a compelling case for the importance of mobile phone usage to Kyrgyz migrant workers living in Russia. One of their key points is the importance of the mobile network to promote connectivity between migrants and their home country and to enable them to build a sense of self and nation while abroad, as part of the diaspora (though their paper emphasizes that person-to-person support given through mobile networks takes place despite the government, not because of it). Another paper has taken a comparative look at Kazakhstan and Russia's use of Instagram for signaling nationalization (Kudaibergenova 2019). Studies have identified Uzbekistan and Tajikistan as meriting a comparative identity study (e.g., Abramson 2002), but there is no comparison between the two countries on the evolution of identity through a performative or public platform, and the implications for identity formation are an open question.

In this paper I argue that it is the differences between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan that make the comparison so interesting. Each has a sizable minority of the other's titular ethnic group. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan rely deeply on migrant laborers for remittances and, as such, have a heightened need for social media and technological ways to connect migrant workers to their communities at home, as noted by Glukhov (2017) and Ruget and Usmanalieva (2019) in their studies, which focused on migrant workers and identity.

There must be someone to project to: an audience. There must also be an interest from the audience to consume this projected narrative. In this context,

I believe that Turkmenistan does not merit comparative consideration because its leader has no significant social media presence and the country is so closed. Kyrgyzstan's leaders lack the potential "cult of personality" quality in the public sphere – and the subsequent command of digital space and image projection – observed in the other Central Asian countries. Kazakhstan's leader, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the hand-picked successor to Nursultan Nazarbayev, has the only account that comes close to Mirziyoyev (though his account has only about half the followers of Mirziyoyev's). Uzbekistan under Mirziyoyev has come to embody the authoritarian modernization seen in Kazakhstan under Nazarbayev and now Tokayev. Under Karimov, Uzbekistan's social media strategy was much more similar to the one employed by the leadership in Tajikistan. Comparing Uzbekistan to Tajikistan is a way to take stock of both where Uzbekistan was and how far it has come, and where Tajikistan might go in the coming years, contributing a better understanding to the varieties of authoritarianism and identity within the region. Importantly, there are few identity-construction pieces written on Uzbekistan in the post-Karimov regime. Karimov's regime was known for being closed off and isolated and, by comparison, his successor, Mirziyoyev, has tried to promote an open, dynamic Uzbekistan – something for which Instagram is an important tool.

If the more recent dates on some of the cited pieces are indicative, Instagram, social media, and the crossover between public and private internet use are pressing topics that will only become more important and more relevant to a variety of disciplines in the coming years. In this paper I seek to unpack the nexus of identity construction, visual projections, national imagery, and public relations efforts exerted in a top-down manner in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In this article I aim to add to the application of identity literature to social media in Central Asia by documenting some of the basic dynamics of social media present in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in the hopes of creating a baseline from which to build further knowledge about that topic. I also wished to introduce Instagram as a new place where leader-at-the-helm imagery is manifesting in these countries. Finally, my paper could also set the stage for further research comparing Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan that could aim to determine where the two might converge in the coming years, or which, between the two, is doing better.

3 Methodology

The methodological approaches to social media are varied. Certain tools allow for a more quantitative style of analysis, and these tools have been used to

draw generalized conclusions about the interplay of identity and social media projection, especially where language is concerned (Koltsova et al. 2017). Other studies have focused more on a deeper dive, that is to say, qualitative analyses of individual posts (usually based on those receiving the most likes/comments). This study opted for a mixed approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methods. There is much to be gained by focusing on the specific metrics of engagement with a given post. But, as I will describe in more detail later, these figures can be deceiving. It is possible to "buy" likes and comments on Instagram, and this can warp assessments of the genuine degree of engagement with a post. Certain metrics have been established to determine whether post engagement is genuine (e.g., the ratio of an Instagram account's follower to the comments on that account's posts, or the ratio of an Instagram account's follower to the likes that a particular account receives). Also, I argue that much can be learned by looking at the Instagram accounts from a more qualitative perspective. In the qualitative approach, even "fake" likes and comments serve a purpose less captured by the sweeping generalized data – because such interactions imply the account is trying to send a message of being popular and having high engagement. Qualitative analysis of Instagram – a mostly image-focused platform – also tells the observer about the imagery being used, what sort of text accompanies the imagery, and whether that is consistent, varies, or is generally consistent with some variation.

In this case, my personal interest initiated the dive into qualitative and quantitative data for the Central Asian leaders' Instagram accounts. Much of the world consumes social media. Once I got a handle on the accounts of Mirziyoyev and Rahmon (among others), in spring 2019, I followed their updates, stories, and posts. This gave me a sense of the type of photos and videos they post (including their similarities and differences), the variation in the accompanying text, the number of likes, the types of comments, and the frequency of Russian, Uzbek, Tajik, and English, as well as, of course, emojis. In this experience, too, the difference between the two leaders is apparent: it was easy to read through and note all Rahmon's posts, as well as all the comments on his posts: there are very few. It was harder to do this for Mirziyoyev, as he maintains two accounts (English and Uzbek/Russian), his posts are far more numerous, and the comments on his posts are also far more numerous.

I also looked into accounts of Instagram users who interacted with the official accounts – determining whether the account was likely to be real or fake, what sort of photos the account posted, and in what language. Again: for Rahmon, it was easy, as he has few followers, fewer likes, and very few commenters. But Mirziyoyev has thousands of likes from different Instagram users, and it was difficult to track each one. I have started working on a spreadsheet

to compile information about the posts. The spreadsheet notes the types of images in the post, the language of the accompanying text (with keywords), the date of the post, and the numbers of likes and comments. For this paper, I initially drew partly on the work contained in that spreadsheet. However, as there was such a disconnect between the accounts of Mirziyoyev and Rahmon, I ended up deciding to work backwards: I found the most popular posts on Rahmon's account, noted those, and then found similar corresponding posts on Mirziyoyev's account – having proportional popularity, a similar media type (e.g., a religious, national, or "leadership" post), or coverage of the same event (e.g., a holiday or a state visit or conference). This was an attempt to bring parity to two very different social media strategies.

4 Background: Instagram, ICT Infrastructure, and Internet Access in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan

Uzbekistan's and Tajikistan's presidents both have official Instagram accounts. But as I will demonstrate in this paper, they use those accounts, and the audience reach of those accounts, in different ways. The Uzbek president uses two accounts – a primary one in Uzbek/Russian and a secondary one in English – to broadcast messages of his leadership and Uzbek nationhood to his population, surrounding regions, and the English-speaking world many miles away. The Tajik president uses one account that has few interactions and seems to have few illusions about its reach into the wider population. The outreach of the two presidents corresponds with the ICT infrastructure and internet reach in the two countries. It also corresponds to the priority each president's administration has put on advancing the ICT infrastructure and internet access – Uzbekistan wants more and sooner, and in Tajikistan this is less urgent. There are important similarities and differences in the account strategies, audience, and projected features of identity. In this section I will explore the basic facts about the two accounts, set forth examples of identity imagery used in the two accounts, and describe some examples of public commentary and interaction with the two accounts in the form of comments, tags, or re-posts.

Instagram is unique in that it offers several mediums for identity promotion. Instagram offers single-image and multi-image (up to 10) vignette posts, which are permanent and scrollable. A viewer can "like" and comment on the post and can see others who have liked and commented. The platform also offers "stories," snapshots on display, that disappear after 24 hours. A user can save stories for later viewing, which are then available as circular "tabs" at the top of the user's page. Instagram often prompts a user to group certain

stories by theme (e.g., "holidays!" or "home baking"). The user who posted to their story can see other users who have viewed their story, but the individual viewer (who viewed the story of the original poster) cannot see others who have viewed the story. If an account has its direct message inbox open, a viewer can direct message the user who posted the story, which serves as a semi-chat function, similar to services offered by Telegram, Facebook, or VKontakte. An account's "followers" are visible to the public, as are those the account follows. Instagram is searchable by people, places, and hashtags (#), which are particularly important for tracking a post and gaining traction among followers. Instagram's rise in Central Asia is all the more stunning because it does not come pre-downloaded with many mobile phone services. But, as Glukhov (2017) has noted, Instagram is multi-language-friendly in its interface, unlike VKontakte, which is Russian-centric. This appeals to Central Asian users. It is a force of imagery to be reckoned with.

The foundation of this visual force use is connectivity through reliable ICT infrastructure. Global organizations have identified ICT infrastructure as a key investment needed in the Central Asia region (ESCAP 2017; OECD 2018). Even so, the country-by-country breakdown already reveals large gaps in access and availability. Access and availability are affected by the infrastructure, but also by cost. Treatment by the national and local governments also differs – censorship is more prevalent in Tajikistan than Uzbekistan (Interview with anonymous regional source, October 2020). The priorities of the local population also must be considered: Tajikistan's poverty, urban-to-rural divide, and sustenance farming suggest different uses for time and resources. Such factors as population location and primary occupation also changes the peer group and audience of social media posts that exist within the community. Likewise, this impacts the reach and importance of social media posts from governing figures.

4.1 *Tajikistan's ICT Infrastructure, Internet, and Instagram*

As of October 2020, there were 743,100 Instagram users in Tajikistan, representing 7.7% of the population (NapoleonCat Tajikistan 2020). The male/female split was 77% to 23%, making men the dominant user group. Unsurprisingly, the largest age group represented comprised users between 18 and 24, who accounted for 280,000 of the users. The platform's popularity is growing at an astonishing rate. Just two years ago, in October 2018, Tajikistan had 301,000 users, i.e., 3.1% of its population (NapoleonCat Tajikistan 2018). Then, the dominant user group was the 25 to 34 group, but interestingly, the male/female split has stayed the same (NapoleonCat Tajikistan 2018). Instagram use has more than doubled in two years, making it an important trend to follow in Tajikistan's social media growth.

Tajikistan is a landlocked country that flanks China, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. It is the poorest country in the region, deriving a large percentage of its GDP from remittances (World Bank 2019). More than 93% of the country is mountainous. In Tajikistan, reports suggest that only around 34.9% of the country has reliable access to the internet (Kemp 2021). This is up from 9.3% in 2009 (Silk Project 2009). Currently, Tajikistan has 111.53 mobile cellular subscriptions per 100 people (World Bank 2020). It has 21.96 internet users per 100 people (Ibid.). Most of its ICT projects have been funded by outside donors and financing, including $5 million USD in 2001 with TT Mobile (MTL) and an undisclosed amount for an infrastructure project with TK-Mobile in 2005 (Ibid.). As a 2008 paper points out, Tajikistan was considered one of the fastest-growing ICT markets in Central Asia (Atoev and Ibodova 2008, cf. CIPI 2007). But that paper also points out that the underlying infrastructure in Tajikistan is some of the most expensive in the world – upwards of $100 USD per Mbps/month in Tajikistan – creating high barriers to entry and use by citizens, especially in rural areas.

The Tajik government has not shown enthusiasm about implementing the infrastructure to make the internet more accessible, and the government has not been consistent in courting donors or drafting policy to overcome access barriers (Anonymous interview, September 2020). Tajikistan's geographic isolation makes it expensive and challenging to link up to the Trans-Asia-Europe Fibre Optical Cable System (TAEFOS). Uzbekistan, in contrast, is connected to the TAEFOS. Tajikistan plans to use a separate infrastructure project (a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to China, via Tajikistan), to lay a new fiber-optic Telecom link (World Bank 2016). Still, until a comprehensive link is in place in Tajikistan, the internet remains expensive and unreliable. This affects how the Tajik population uses and relates to ICTs. A 2007 study by the Presidential ICT Council and CIPI found that "technology is considered a luxury, not a tool," and "the local community of developers is weak," among other things (Atoev and Ibodova 2008, cf. CIPI 2007). But 3G, 4G, and beyond offer cellular access to the internet in Tajikistan against the backdrop of prohibitively expensive fixed-line connections (Jenish 2018). The Tajik government has taken bold public steps to "reprimand" and fight back against high costs – which are broadcast to the public – but the geographic, infrastructural, and cost barriers will take time to overcome (UNDP 2002).

Tajikistan, though it is landlocked, is a transit country with a rich cultural heritage. The online community offers a huge amount of potential to the Tajik people to communicate with the outside world, interact with foreigners and their own migrants abroad, and further Tajik cultural heritage. To facilitate all these things, the country must have a better ICT connection with the world (Government of Tajikistan 2003, cf. Ershova and Hohlov 2006; UNDP 2002).

These lower rates of social media use by the Tajik leadership does not mean that Instagram does not have a place in Tajik society: it does. The Rahmon regime does project national identity expectations on its citizens. It is chiefly President Rahmon and his family who post on official Instagram accounts, but these profiles are paltry in their popularity compared to those of other regional leaders and international leaders alike. As a result, there is less responsiveness to the messaging put out by the Rahmon government through social media. There is less overall social media use in Tajikistan, which is perhaps partly explained by the comparatively under-developed ICT infrastructure and internet access. However, as described above, internet access is growing. Because the Rahmon account is so poorly maintained and not a primary vector for projecting Tajik identity into the ether, there is not much Tajik interaction with the account. The Instagram use that does exist in Tajikistan does, however, respond to government messaging. It tends to be savvier and more subversive compared to the clumsy government management. There have been several cases of Instagram posts by Tajiks that push back against government policy or "mainstream" views of what Tajik society ought to be and represent. Alternatively, there is a subset of Tajik Instagram users that do not respond to government policy or try to be subversive but who are instead projecting their own ideas onto other cultures or subsets, that are usually western- or Russian-centric.

4.2 *Uzbekistan's ICT Infrastructure, Internet, and Instagram*

Instagram is the most-downloaded app on iOS in Uzbekistan – even ahead of Telegram (Tuhtasinov 2019). As of October 2020, Uzbekistan has 3,281,000 Instagram users, 9.8% of its population (NapoleonCat Uzbekistan 2020). Like Tajikistan, most users are men – 70.4% of Uzbek Instagram accounts belong to men, and 29.6% belong to women (NapoleonCat Uzbekistan 2020). The dominant user group is slightly older in Uzbekistan compared to Tajikistan: users aged 25 to 34 were the largest group, accounting for 1.25 million. Comparing these numbers to the September 2018 figures, the observer can see growth similar to the Tajik context. Two years ago, there were 1,394,000 Instagram users in Uzbekistan, i.e., 4.2% of the population (NapoleonCat Uzbekistan 2020). The male/female split was about the same: 71.1% to 28.9%. The largest user group was also the same – ages 25 to 34 accounted for 340,000 users.

Uzbekistan, in contrast to Tajikistan, has been working hard to ensure its population has consistent access to internet and Wi-Fi. As a World Bank (2016) report details: "Since 2012, the Government of Uzbekistan has taken concrete steps towards implementing digital technologies and has

launched two programs to advance digital development in the country: the 'ICT Infrastructure Development Program 2015–2019' (9 projects) and the 'E-Government Development Program 2013–2020' (28 projects)". The World Bank report also notes the importance of Uzbekistan's e-government program, which lowers the barrier to accessing government information online, encourages e-participation, and incorporated user feedback on the platform. The result is – potentially – increased transparency, better access to data (through the Open Data Portal), and better accessibility. The 2016 World Bank report concludes that "Uzbekistan has confirmed its readiness to collaborate with the World Bank and with other countries in the region to develop a competitive ICT sector and triple its weight in the national economy."

The country has actively courted funding and projects to widen its ICT infrastructure. This effort has been especially prominent following the change in leadership after long-time Uzbek leader Karimov's death. When his appointed successor, current Uzbek President Mirziyoyev, came to power, there was a projected shift in the openness of Uzbekistan, regionally and globally. The appearance of openness was not difficult to achieve relative to Karimov's extraordinary abundance of isolation. This has created an interesting baseline for measurement, though: most of what Uzbekistan does is inherently more "open," "transparent," and "forward-looking" when compared to Karimov's regime. That does not mean that, seen on its own, without comparison to Karimov's regime, Mirziyoyev supports a significant degree of openness – the debate is ongoing whether Mirziyoyev's politics, foreign policy, and reforms will be long-lasting or whether they are a short-term attempt at public relations (Stronski 2020).

Still, the Uzbek government's focus on building ICT networks has broadened the reach of the internet in Uzbekistan. This has two effects, which I will study in more detail. The first is that President Mirziyoyev is able to use social media to project to his own people – he has a sizeable domestic audience, and he uses it to project images of Uzbekistan. He also projects public relations images of the government's activity (it is no doubt part of their communications strategy). This can encourage a sense of "transparency". The second effect is the response of Uzbek accounts, which can take three paths – they can track and positively re-project the images and sense of Uzbekistan put forward by the official presidential accounts; they can create a counter-culture, subversive to the homogenous Uzbek imagery put forward by the official accounts; or they can take a third path, putting out content that represents a "different" identity of Uzbekistan (or projecting an image of westernness/Russianness) but that is not done in reaction to official imagery of what it means to be Uzbek.

5 The Official Accounts: Mirziyoyev and Rahmon

In this section I will explore the basic facts about the two presidential accounts, set forth examples of identity imagery posted by each one, and describe some examples of public commentary and interaction with the two accounts in the form of comments, tags, or re-posts.

5.1 *President Mirziyoyev*

President Mirziyoyev's audience is domestic and international. He has a Russian/Uzbek account and an English-language account. Sometimes the accounts post the same photos and text (with a translation or approximate value translation), and at other times the accounts diverge in their coverage. Mirziyoyev also makes good use of Instagram stories – a valuable tool. Each story is available for only 24 hours, but this type of post is more interactive than regular posts in showing the day-to-day life of the account holder. A sample of these stories, though, shows mostly photos and videos that are also displayed on the official account. On the control side, Mirziyoyev's team can see how many and what accounts interact with the stories (and whether account interaction is up or down); on the Instagram posts, the account holder is able to monitor comments and "likes." The Mirziyoyev accounts do not have a habit of responding to comments (a thorough review of the posts did not reveal a single instance), but the comments are not closed.

Uzbek President Mirziyoyev's primary Uzbek/Russian account, @Mirziyoyev_SH, has upwards of 3.1 million followers. The account follows one other account – his own English-language equivalent. The account has a blue check, which is a sign social media platforms use to indicate the "authenticity" of the account of a semi-prominent to prominent public figure (Instagram 2020). To earn a blue tick, the user must go through an authentication process. It might seem like a small effort, but the blue tick has come to represent better transparency in a world where some people pretend to be others. The blue tick can be considered as some measure of the savviness of the social media user's account. The main profile photo depicts Mirziyoyev in front of an Uzbek flag. Mirziyoyev's account description is in Uzbek and Russian. It has a link to the official presidential website. The account is open to direct messages (DM s), which means that any person can message the presidential account unsolicited. In theory, this means that someone managing the account could respond. Visuals on President Mirziyoyev's Uzbek/Russian account have been reasonably well thought out. Mirziyoyev makes use of the highlights at the top of his account page to display trips to foreign countries and official events where he has spoken. As for the more traditional feed material, Mirziyoyev has more

than 2,074 posts, including videos and photos. Mirziyoyev's posts garner tens of thousands of likes and hundreds or thousands of comments. An original analysis of the posts showed likes that tally above 10,000, and comments are reliably in the tens or hundreds (@Miziyoyev_sh Instagram 2020). Comments mostly feature emojis such as hearts, flowers, or kisses. The visual content of Mirziyoyev's account is well tailored but not original. Most posts feature the Uzbek flag (or a similar color scheme) with Mirziyoyev with doing things in his official capacity – giving speeches from a podium or desk, meeting with world leaders, touring a site, asking questions, gesturing, etc. Importantly, most of the descriptions for the posts on this account are written in Uzbek and Russian using Cyrillic characters (@Miziyoyev_sh Instagram 2020). Average photos of Mirziyoyev reliably garner about 16,000–17,000 likes, even if the photo is the same as or nearly identical to another photo posted back-to-back. Mirziyoyev does smile in photos! And those smiling photos, on average, even though they are also official, tend to perform better than non-smiling photos with double or sometimes triple the number of likes, getting likes well into the 30,000–60,000 range (@Miziyoyev_sh Instagram 2020).

One of the photos that best shows Mirziyoyev's attempt at Instagram savvy is from August 26, 2019. Mirziyoyev stands in a crowd of local and foreign bloggers, smiling – everyone's phones are out snapping selfies, taking videos, and recording. In the moment, the official photographer snapped a photo and captured the fourth wall between performance and real, depicting the citizenry and their relationship to the president. The post has 56,703 likes and 378 comments – modest by the currency of "likes," but it is one of the better-performing posts in terms of comments. In the text, Mirziyoyev notes,

> […] bloggers play an important role in promoting the reforms in our country, our culture and historical monuments to the world. – I am very glad to see you in our native Uzbekistan, in Samarkand, the center of ancient civilization. Today we are creating a new history of Uzbekistan. Our goal is to serve our people, please people and ensure that they look to the future with confidence. I hope that you will also contribute to this.
>
> @Miziyoyev_sh Instagram 2020

Most of the comments on this post are the clapping hands, rose, and heart emojis, as well as other congratulatory, supportive messages.

I was not able to verify every Instagram account that follows President Mirziyoyev to confirm that they are not shell accounts or bots. The likes-to-comments ratio on Mirziyoyev's account reveals some disparity; sometimes there are thousands of likes compared to fewer than 200 or even 100 comments.

The likes-to-followers ratio is slightly better, but it is not a foolproof indication of an account's authenticity: an account with a 1–3% engagement rate can be suspected of inauthenticity (Gupta 2021). With Mirziyoyev's 3.1 million followers, some of the more basic photos (of the president giving press conferences and the like) have an engagement ratio of around .05%, but a more popular photo can run between 1–1.6%, which is reasonably authentic. The videos register "views," not just likes, and the view does not have to be complete to count. This makes it more difficult to gauge total reactions, but Mirziyoyev's views tend to get numbers in the same range as photos – tens of thousands – and there are videos with views in the hundreds of thousands (https://www.instagram.com/mirziyoyev_sh/). The less popular videos are more difficult content, usually long speeches (between 5–10 minutes) given by Mirziyoyev. These have been particularly prevalent since the advent of COVID-19 in Central Asia. The lower engagement is to be expected, but it is a clever tactic for the Uzbek press service to broadcast the president's speeches via Instagram. Some of the more popular videos are shorter snippets, typically not more than three minutes, where the account addresses issues like religion (and freedom of religion, with more than 116,00 views and more than 150 comments: https://www.instagram.com/tv/CDS03bhBctQ/?hl=pl); education and funding (with more than 222,000 views and over 1,100 comments: https://www.instagram.com/tv/CCoVcjNB1c6/?hl=pl); and state visits (which range in popularity; one with Erdogan received more than 260,000 views and more than 500 comments: https://www.instagram.com/tv/B81nF36BT4S/?hl=pl). Comments are most frequently in Uzbek – phonetic and Cyrillic – and Russian. Emojis are often used. As others have pointed out, one of the appeals of Instagram is the multi-language nature of the social media, as opposed to VKontakte, which is a Russian-dominant platform (Glukhov 2017).

This social media savvy is not perfect. Some of Mirziyoyev's videos have editing errors (such as being shown sideways). Mirziyoyev's "tag" section is fairly well curated (especially as compared to Rahmon's, as the paper will shortly explore), but it lacks the iron-clad PR image put forth by more polished and practiced public-figure accounts (for example, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge; former US President Barack Obama, who has zero photos in his "tagged" section; or former president of the EU People's Party, Donald Tusk).

There is also something about Mirziyoyev's account that strains credulity: the number of views and likes can approach the inauthentic. The engagement on some of Mirziyoyev's videos and posts is on par with (or surpass) the posts of well-known global leaders like German Chancellor Angela Merkel or Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin. Yet Uzbekistan has a large, young demographic that is increasingly using sites like Instagram to receive and spread

information. And Uzbekistan has expressed interest in placing itself at the forefront of digital and technological trends. The country's policy is to harness this momentum. It is beyond the scope of my paper to fully ascertain whether all – or the majority – of Mirziyoyev's followers are real people, bots (which is more difficult to determine on Instagram than on other social media platforms, e.g., Twitter), or people with multiple shell accounts. For the purposes of this paper, a devised PR program to craft a popular account – even through fraudulent means – is noteworthy because that account still has an audience to which it is projecting. A "fake it till you make it" approach to Mirziyoyev's social media still implies there is someone worth faking for. This could be Mirziyoyev himself, though if this were true, it is probable the same phenomenon would be visible from similar regional leaders, and it is not. The only account that comes close to Mirziyoyev's popularity (real or faked) is Kazakhstan's President Tokayev. The activity on Tokayev's account, like that on Mirziyoyev's, is eyebrow-raising but still a plausible number given the country's population, internet user, and Instagram user demographics.

When Mirziyoyev came to power, he made it clear that he wanted to make a more open, engaging Uzbekistan. Effective access to and use of social media contributes to that. But there might be more to the unique grooming of the president's account. The page bears the mark of his daughter, Saida Mirziyoyeva. Until January 2020, Saida was the deputy head of the established Uzbek state agency for communications and media regulation; she left her job there for a similar position in the private sector (CNA 2020). Mirziyoyeva is savvy with media – especially social media. And it is likely that she has influenced the way her father and the Uzbek state saw the messaging and projection potential of Instagram to reach Uzbeks.

In April, Mirziyoyeva posted one of her most popular photos, which had more than 80,000 likes and 899 comments. In her description – in Uzbek and Russian – she wrote,

> At a time when the whole country is in quarantine and self-defense mode, journalists and bloggers continue their work. In addition, the work and problems of the media have increased. In this regard, we held a regular meeting of the Public Council under the National Fund for Support and Development of Mass Media in the form of a videoconference.
>
> https://www.instagram.com/p/B-7k9usJt0M/

Mirziyoyeva, like her father's official account, posts descriptions in Russian and Uzbek. Occasionally, she includes an English translation as well, as with a photo of her sitting with former British Prime Minister Theresa May in Dubai

(https://www.instagram.com/p/B8vWPjRJIyJ/). Unlike the official account for the president, Mirziyoyeva does venture into the realm of the personal, sharing photos of home life (https://www.instagram.com/p/B5P8sjznmw9/), and even her father, the president, in a more relaxed personal moment (https://www.instagram.com/p/B0_GkCTHTyf/). The result is twofold: users feel they have access to the life of the first daughter, and they feel they want to emulate that life.

Accounting for the Mirziyoyeva factor is important, because it helps explain the appeal of her father's Instagram strategy. Instagram watchers look at the depth of a given personality – how many followers and interactions – but also the width of that personality – how many fan accounts and tags it gets. Mirziyoyeva made sure both were prioritized. And that width of personality can account for the resonance of national ideas, as well as projections of those ideas by or to the population. Mirziyoyeva functions as a modern, accessible, aspirational foil to her father, and other Uzbeks wanted to copy that. The result was that fandom for Mirziyoyeva translated into access to, and interest in, her father. It also meant more laudatory interest in the family as a whole – expressed, for example, through the creation of fan pages. One fan page for the Mirziyoyev family had more than 368,000 followers, and posts (mostly pictures of the family) received likes in the thousands or occasionally tens of thousands (https://www.instagram.com/fan_mirziyoyeva/?hl=pl). Another fan page for Mirziyoyev has more than 166,000 followers, with likes for posts (which feature the family in addition to the president) numbering in the thousands (https://www.instagram.com/fan_mirziyoyev/?hl=pl).

5.2 *President Rahmon*

In contrast to Mirziyoyev's accounts and his daughter's, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon's Instagram profile is sparse. First, there is no certain indication that this is the official account run by the Tajik press service. There is no blue tick mark to confirm that the account's possession has been validated. The description, which is in Russian and Cyrillic Tajik, says it is the account of the Tajik press service. The link leads to a presidential Telegram account which has 548 members (https://t.me/emomalirahmon/). The Instagram account's direct message access has been disabled. Rahmon's account has 17,400 followers; the account follows no one. Unlike Mirziyoyev, Rahmon offers no English-language equivalent. The account has a total of 543 posts. Monitoring of the account over several months showed that the president does not regularly use the "stories" feature – hardly ever. But there are two highlights, each with one photo: one of Rahmon meeting with Putin, and a second of Rahmon meeting with Mirziyoyev.

In terms of data collection and analysis, Rahmon's account is much easier to follow precisely because there is so little information posted. The account now has a total of eight videos, four of which have been posted within the last six months. The most recent, a video of a speech given by President Rahmon on the Naruz holiday in March 2021, has tens of thousands of views and hundreds of comments. Rahmon's photo posts are significantly less popular than Mirziyoyev's. Most have accumulated hundreds rather than thousands of likes. His most recent post is from April and notes the celebration of Naruz, detailing the president's trip to the Sughd region, including pictures of the very modern-looking Khujand International Airport. The post shows the presidential plane, a chartered jet by the privately owned Tajik company Somon Air, the snow-covered Tajik mountains, the president's arrival at the airport, and flowers – it has 1,046 likes. Another popular post, with 668 likes, notes the celebration of Ramadan in 2020 (https://www.instagram.com/p/B_USKz4B5_7/). In this post, Rahmon sits at a desk with a background flanked by two Tajik flags and a gilded background. The post, in Tajik, links to the presidential press service and includes a transcription of Rahmon's speech in honor of Ramadan. Another post, with 740 likes, celebrates the New Year (https://www.instagram.com/p/B6xTH6RqP9P/). Again, Rahmon sits at a desk with white roses in the foreground; in the background are two Tajik flags, one on either side of the president, and imagery of the presidential palace. The text, in Tajik, is a transcription of President Rahmon's New Year's speech. The only difference between this post's description and that accompanying the aforementioned Ramadan post is the lack of a link to the official press service account.

Another popular post, with 735 likes, depicts Rahmon seated in a gold chair in front of a body of water, and a table with a bouquet of white roses is next to him: the post describes his call with Uzbek President Mirziyoyev; the description is Russian and makes use of hashtags (https://www.instagram.com/p/B3O9X8xIrpp/). The language note is important. Recall that most, nearly all, of Mirziyoyev's posts were in Russian and Uzbek, but Rahmon's account is far less consistent with its Russian use. Rahmon's Instagram is almost exclusively in Tajik with Cyrillic characters, with some exceptions (such as the call with Mirziyoyev). And though the post uses hashtags, all the key phrases are about Rahmon, Tajikistan, and Dushanbe – only the description mentions Mirziyoyev. Neither of Mirziyoyev's accounts are tagged, and he is not mentioned in the hashtags. One post particularly pertinent to this research shows Rahmon in an ornate chair. The description explains that Rahmon is fighting against the high price of internet access in Tajikistan. The post has 495 likes and an array of comments expressing gratitude, with some in Russian and most in Tajik (https://www.instagram.com/p/BwmlvspBq7M/; https://

www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-antimonopoly-service-head-qodirzoda-dismissed-criticism-internet-price-hike/29898568.html). The further back into Rahmon's timeline a viewer goes, the sparser the likes and comments become. Early posts are lucky if they break 100 likes, and most posts have zero comments.

There is a shock waiting for any viewer who steps into the photos in which Rahmon is "tagged." These are found on the third tab, where miscellaneous posts and users have mentioned the handle. Some images and videos have more views than the president's own posts. Some videos make extensive use of filters to add a makeup effect and even a gender shift. It is unclear whether the Tajik press service routinely removes the tags from these posts, or whether the Tajik press service is oblivious.

Rahmon's feed is full of projected "Tajikistan" imagery and words, and the national character is manifested in the staging or mentioned in the comments. Features include the beauty of the landscape, the greatness and lushness of the agriculture, the piety of the people – these are all things stressed in the descriptions accompanying Rahmon's photos and in the photos themselves. Rahmon looks at traditional Central Asian dishes, such as plov (https://www.instagram.com/p/B-2h12ehLeO/); he meets with students and performers in traditional dress; he judges and handles Tajik-grown fruits and vegetables (https://www.instagram.com/p/CDoBswfB7BH/); he votes (https://www.instagram.com/p/CGPeJmFh0h1/). He attends the opening of fancy, refurbished kindergartens that showcase the best of Tajik modernity and investment (https://www.instagram.com/p/B-LSa6YB0uw/). Of course, he meets with world leaders; some of his most popular photos depict his meetings with Mirziyoyev. In one of his less-Tajik moments, Rahmon visits Santa: in this photo, Rahmon is surrounded by commercialized Christmas decorations including Santa dolls, sitting on what appears to be a Santa chair and posing with Santa and Mrs. Clause (https://www.instagram.com/p/BsEEhzgh5AB/). Rahmon looks jolly, but the post only has 282 likes.

5.3 *Identity Control and PR: Mirziyoyev vs. Rahmon*

The reaction to politicization of posts on Instagram is important. Certainly, the posts of the two leaders – Mirziyoyev and Rahmon – are inherently seen within the context of the public performance of leadership (Bohr 1998). Even if either of the two makes a "normal" or ostensibly "non-political" post, the post is still political by virtue of the president's presence. Consider the popularity of the "Stars – They're Just Like Us!" profiles in several western magazines, which show famous people doing "normal people" things, such as eating pizza, jogging, or picking their kids up from school. The suggestion is that the next time the reader eats pizza, jogs, or picks up their children, the reader can feel

a bit more like Brad Pitt, Nicole Kidman, or Hailey Bieber. And the staging and accessibility of Instagram has made such comparisons even easier. The same goes for the presidential posts: even if Rahmon or Mirziyoyev is doing something normal, the projection to the populace is that they do that normal thing *as president*. Consequently, the next time an Uzbek or Tajik does the same action, they can be proud or feel as though they share something in common with the presidential itinerary. At least, in theory. But as my review of the posts on Mirziyoyev and Rahmon's official Instagram accounts reveals, there are very few "just like us" moments. Most posts focus on presidentialism, the dignity of the office, and official business.

Mirziyoyev is doing a much better job of effectively using social media to control the narrative of the nation. His posts have much more interaction – real or fabricated. Even if there is some fabrication, the likes still serve a purpose: their volume would keep his posts trending and ensure they would be seen by more users on Instagram within the Uzbek sphere. Mirziyoyev also clearly has a strategy that extends beyond his immediate circumference. He, or his media team, is aware of the importance of social media in shaping discourse and public space. He has reached out to "influencers" on Uzbek social media and beyond. He has made effective use of stories to lend his government transparency and to interact with other leaders. The success of Mirziyoyev's outreach makes sense within the context of his regime. He is seeking internal legitimacy, and a degree of external legitimacy, by controlling his presence in the digital space. Since coming to power, Mirziyoyev has broken strongly with the domestic policies and ruling style of his predecessor. Part of that break has also brought more relations with the international community and within the Central Asia region. A strong social media presence is a way to build on the legitimacy of those projects (and his rule) by advertising the projects, Mirziyoyev's role in them, and their "Uzbek-ness," as well as raising awareness. The young, digitally savvy audience of Uzbekistan is a key crowd to target, and other leaders and viewers abroad are also part of the potential audience.

Rahmon has not approached Instagram with the same finesse, but does he need to? Far fewer Tajiks have Instagram or use it actively. The digital space has yet to develop to the point where its control by leadership is important to controlling the discourse on nationhood or creating the official community of Tajikistan online. Further to the point, Rahmon's leadership in Tajikistan is far different from that of his counterpart in Uzbekistan. Rahmon came to power after a protracted violent conflict. Under his leadership, many Tajiks have sought peace and stability. Rahmon has less incentive to court his own people through a social media charm offensive, or even to court other nations outside the immediate sphere of leaders he already sees at CIS summits. Rahmon

does not seem to believe he needs the visibility strategically, nor does he think there will be an internet audience there to view it. How can a post contribute to national identity if few citizens can see it? And why advertise evidence of do-gooding to prop up your legitimacy when no one is questioning your legitimacy? Why bother? Back to my earlier point on the varieties of authoritarianism and control of the digital space: Rahmon seems to have judged that the digital space is not worth controlling, since no one uses it in Tajikistan on the scale seen in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, or Kyrgyzstan. The snail's-pace development of ICTs in Tajikistan further backs this point: internet and mobile phone use are just not as prevalent in Tajikistan as they are elsewhere in the country, which means Instagram is less prevalent, which means broadcasting to a domestic crowd on such a medium is a waste of effort; broadcasting to an external crowd is unnecessary. As I have pointed out in the opening of this paper, though, internet penetration and social media use will only increase in Central Asia, as will general mobility. Tajiks abroad are already looking for better ways to communicate with their families at home, and regional connectivity will be quick to bring slower developments up to speed as citizens compare standards of living and access to goods and services. Tajikistan won't be a blank zone forever. Time will tell whether Rahmon has made the right gamble, as well as how his strategy will change should Tajikistan catch up with other Central Asian trends in ICT s, mobile phone connectivity, and social media usage.

While it is beyond the immediate scope of my paper, a full community map of the private accounts interacting with the official presidential accounts would yield further information about the wider communities within Central Asia. Another avenue for further research would be a deeper review of the language variations between the accounts, in line with the work of Koltsova et al. (2017). Because language has been such an important part of identity construction in Central Asia, it could be interesting to see how interactions change based on the use of Russian, Uzbek, Tajik, emojis, or other options. One of the most critical aspects of power and legitimacy in the Central Asian countries is the control of the space and narrative. Central Asian leaders, such as Mirziyoyev and Rahmon, have long used control of space – public and private – to direct, confirm, or correct the narratives of their leadership and the country's trajectory. The rise of the internet and other technologies in the past two decades, and the penetration of social media intertwining with everyday life in the last decade, has given the leadership a new "space" to control, or manipulate. The question arises (perhaps to be explored in another paper) of whether the space is a one-way mirror – reflecting the image of the nation – or a two-way mirror – giving the non-official parties a glimpse into the narrative of the elite, and vice versa.

6 Conclusion

Social media – especially Instagram – is growing rapidly as a vehicle for identity projections. In the literature, papers handling identity constructions and variations on identity discuss influencers, selfie strategy, geotagging, marketing, and symbols; there are dozens of directions for the study of image projections in the digital sphere. In this paper I have attempted to give an overview of the direction of Instagram use in the official and unofficial spheres of discourse, comparing two Central Asian countries. I believe that it is important to continue to observe the interplay between the tangible, physical ICT infrastructure – including the two countries' official policies towards encouraging further connectivity – and the intangible world of identity construction and ideational connectivity. Together, they are two aspects of the very important matter of identity, nationhood, and the future directions of two Central Asian countries.

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