

China's long arm

How Uyghurs are being silenced in Europe

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INDEX
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A VOICE FOR THE PERSECUTED

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Foreword

ON THIS PAGE you will find an extract from the poem 'Hopes float on the Mediterranean' by exiled British-Uyghur poet, writer, and academic Aziz Isa Elkun⁰¹.

"Although I have been living in London for more than two decades, the memory of my homeland is fresh," he told Index. Elkun's poem alludes to his hopes to pursue a freer and more peaceful life in Europe, but he still feels strong ties with his Uyghur homeland in north-western China, an area known as East Turkistan or Xinjiang.⁰²

Despite being in the Sardinian city of Cagliari, Elkun sees the landmarks of his region, including the cities of Kashgar and Atush, and the Tarim River.

"The Uyghurs used to have a fantastic

city like Cagliari with fortresses, but China destroyed them all."⁰³

He told Index that he wants his poem to "reach and connect the Uyghur diaspora, make visible and bring greater understanding to Uyghur culture, and serve as an act of resistance by preserving Uyghur identity as my people are faced with genocide".⁰⁴

"As a conscious and free human and British citizen, standing against the regime's brutal oppression is my basic right to exercise, and it's not up to China," he told Index.⁰⁵ ✕

01: Elkun, A. I. (2021) Interview with Index, By Marks, F. (28 September 2021).

02: Most Uyghurs refer to their homeland as "East Turkistan", although it is more widely known in the West by its Chinese name, Xinjiang. Index uses 'Xinjiang' to refer to the region, as it is the most widely known term in Europe.

03: Elkun, A. I. (2021) Email correspondence, To Marks, F. (22 December 2021).

04: Index uses the term 'genocide' on the basis of the Uyghur Tribunal judgement ruling "beyond reasonable doubt" that the Chinese government is committing genocide against the Uyghur people. Available at:

<https://uyghurtribunal.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/UT-judgment-version-for-approval-by-GN-07.25-2.pdf>

[Accessed 9 December 2021]. See also the Essex Court Chambers first legal opinion. Available at:

https://14ee1ae3-14ee-4012-91cf-a6a3b7dc3d8b.usrfiles.com/ugd/14ee1a_3f31c56ca64a461592ffc2690c9bb737.pdf

[Accessed 1/09/2021]. See also the (March 2021) Newlines Institute Report. Available at:

<https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/Chinas-Breaches-of-the-GC3-2.pdf> [Accessed 7 December 2021].

05: Ibid. (Elkun, A. I. ,2021).

Extract from 'Hopes float on the Mediterranean'

The colourful street leads straight to the fortress
Every step reminds me of Kashgar
Their noodles and pastries are like ours
The figs of Atush grow here throughout the seasons.

Hopes are floating on the Mediterranean Sea
They arouse great desire in the heart of a desert boy
Gusts of wind kiss my chin without asking consent
They drag me to the sea to swim with the sun.

This island has witnessed countless ages of history
Though the spirit of the Romans has diminished
Elkun seeks a moment of comfort here
Even though his life belongs to the Tarim!

20 September 2016

Cagliari, Italy

Introduction

ON 5 JULY 2009, Nijat Turghan was planning a demonstration outside the Swedish parliament.⁰⁶ This was in a bid to draw attention to the violence that was unfolding in his home province of Xinjiang.⁰⁷ In Xinjiang's capital Ürümqi, a protest demanding an investigation into the killing of at least two Uyghur workers had taken place that day. It had turned violent and was about to become one of the worst episodes of ethnic violence in China's recent history.⁰⁸

As he was organising the demonstration, Turghan started receiving calls from the Chinese authorities. "I got many calls from the Chinese police, who tried to make me nervous," Turghan told Index. He said they told him that it wouldn't be good for his family members if he participated in such activities. "They tried to destroy my psychology and my willingness [to

engage], but I didn't give up"⁰⁹.

Turghan said that when he came to Europe in 2004, he expected that he would finally be safe to express his beliefs and opinions without being subject to intimidation and interference. "But there's no guarantee [of safety] for any Uyghurs, even if they are not politically active and they love the Chinese government."¹⁰

Alerk Ablikim, a Dutch Uyghur, said he was only a schoolboy when he first felt intimidated by what he called "the long arm of the Chinese Government".¹¹ He had been invited to speak on the Dutch Youth News Network (Jeugejournaal) in the wake of the Ürümqi Riots and, during the broadcast, he cast doubt on the official death toll (197 people).

The following week, when his mother had her regular phone call with her sister in Xinjiang, Ablikim's aunt was upset. "She told

us that we were egoistic, that we had caused many problems for her, and we didn't think about them," Ablikim recalled in an interview with Index. "That showed me how far reaching the control and interest [of the Chinese government] is."¹²

"Not speaking out causes guilt; but speaking out causes fear," a Germany-based Uyghur woman, who preferred to speak anonymously, told Index. Referring to Berlin's Brandenburg Gate and France's Eiffel Tower, she said that every democratic country in the West has a symbol of freedom. "But it is all symbolic but there is no depth. I never feel the freedom that I wanted. I never feel such freedom because of a chain-like thing from China on my neck."¹³

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) insists that Xinjiang is an inseparable part of Chinese territory, that its ethnic groups are part of the

There's no guarantee [of safety] for any Uyghurs, even if they are not politically active and they love the Chinese.

Chinese nation, and that their culture is part of Chinese culture. A paper entitled "Historical Matters Concerning Xinjiang", which was issued by the Central Office of Foreign Propaganda in 2019, is where the CCP's historical narrative regarding Xinjiang is most →

06: Turghan is the Chairman of the Uyghur Educational Association in Sweden; Turghan, N. (2021) Interview with Index on Censorship, by Ní Mhainín, J. (15 October 2021).

07: The region's predominant ethnicities are Uyghur (46% of the population - although decreasing), Kazakh and Uzbek amongst other minorities indigenous to the area. Source: Human Rights Watch (2021) "Break Their Lineage, Break Their Roots" (19 April 2021). Available at: https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/19/break-their-lineage-break-their-roots/chinas-crimes-against-humanity-targeting#_ftn173 [Accessed 18 October 2021].

08: Human Rights Watch (2009) "We Are Afraid to Even Look for Them". Enforced Disappearances in the Wake of Xinjiang's Protests, HRW (20th October). Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/10/20/we-are-afraid-even-look-them/enforced-disappearances-wake-xinjiangs-protests> [Accessed 7 October 2021].

09: Turghan, N. (15 October 2021).

10: Ibid. (Turghan, N., 2021).

11: Ablikim is the political secretary of Free Uyghur; Ablikim, A. (2021) Interview with Index on Censorship, by Ní Mhainín, J. (3 December 2021).

12: Ibid. (Ablikim, A., 2021)

13: Anonymous (2021) Interview with Index on Censorship, by Ní Mhainín, J. (22 October 2021).

→ apparent.¹⁴ “Needless to say, the narrative is highly tendentious, artfully worded to emphasise ‘Chinese’ dynastic connections, and in places baldly inaccurate,” James Millward of Georgetown University told Index.¹⁵

Despite its inaccuracies, any efforts to publicly challenge or dispute the narrative are characterised by the CCP as “hostile” and the remit of terrorists.¹⁶ Many Uyghurs prefer to refer to their home province as East Turkistan, but the CCP insists that there has never been a state known as East Turkistan.¹⁷

“Xinjiang is a Chinese word, it’s not its Uyghur name,” explained Alerk Ablikim. “Xinjiang means ‘New Borderland’, which has a colonial aspect to it.”¹⁸ Because the name

Xinjiang emphasises the region as a part of China, refusing to use this term is considered by the Chinese authorities to be a hostile act.

Since 2010 the CCP has intensified its use of forced assimilation methods against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. This includes oppressive policies such as the arbitrary detention of one million Uyghurs in mass internment camps, torture, sexual assault, sterilisation, and forced labour.¹⁹ But as evidenced by Turghan’s and Ablikim’s experiences, the Chinese government’s repression extends well beyond its borders, and into Europe.

It is difficult to ascertain exactly how many Uyghurs are living in Europe, but the World Uyghur Congress estimates that there are

approximately 12,500.²⁰ Most of the incidents of threats and intimidation that occur in Europe happen in countries where Uyghurs are most populous, primarily north-western Europe. Most live in the Netherlands and Sweden, but there are also sizable communities in Belgium, Germany, and the UK.²¹

To what extent is the Chinese government using its technological and economic leverage, combined with cultural and diplomatic networks, to intimidate, silence, and discredit Uyghurs in Europe?²² Index on Censorship has spoken to members of Europe’s Uyghur community in an effort to ascertain the scope and scale of the interference in Uyghurs’ right to freedom of expression. ✘

14: The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China (2019) Historical Matters Concerning Xinjiang, People’s Republic of China (July) Available at: http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201907/21/content_WS5d33fed5c6d00d362f668a0a.html [Accessed 11 October 2021].

15: Millward, James. (2021) Interview - Index on Censorship, by Marks, F., Outlook (3 November 2021).

16: The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China (July 2019).

17: Ibid. (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China., July 2019).

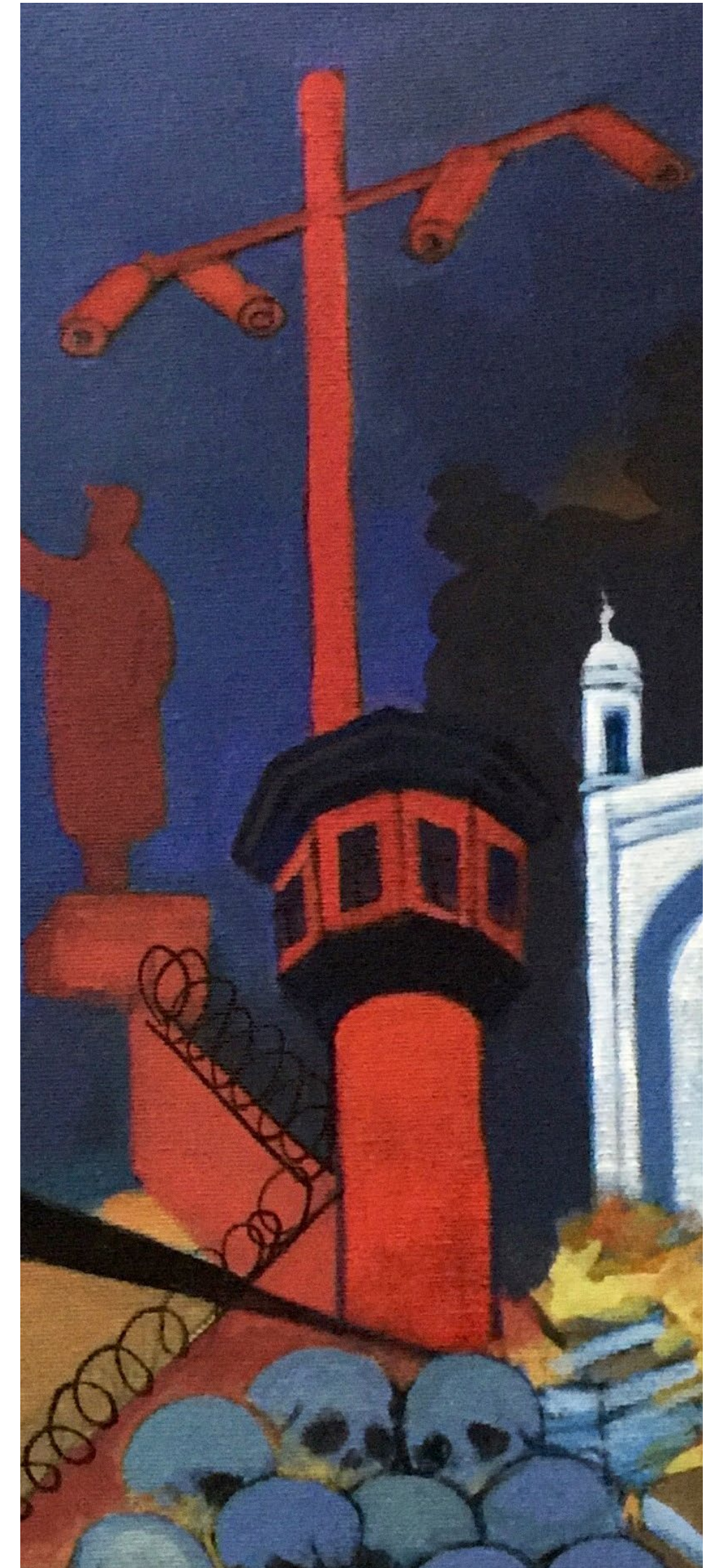
18: Ablikim, A. (3 December 2021).

19: Index uses the term “internment camps” to describe the detention centres in Xinjiang, which the CCP refers to as “Vocational Training and Education Centres”.

20: The World Uyghur Congress estimates these figures via outreach to Uyghur organisations and word-of-mouth. Source: Isa, D. (2021) Interview with Index on Censorship, By Marks, F (29 September 2021).

21: Ibid. (Isa, D., 2021).

22: For the purposes of this report, Index defines “Europe” as the European Union and the United Kingdom.



Fearing for their families

NYROLA ELIMÄ,²³ A Swedish Uyghur whose family remains in Xinjiang, had been in contact with her mother every day since she left home in 2010.²⁴ “But in 2017, my mother sent me a message to say she cannot be in contact with me anymore,” Elimä told Index.²⁵ “I had already heard from others who have family members in Xinjiang that their relatives had been cutting them off from WeChat.”²⁶

Elimä was one of thousands of Uyghurs outside China who were receiving similar messages or being deleted from social platforms by their friends and relatives in Xinjiang at the time. Mass surveillance in the province was becoming more sophisticated and speaking with someone abroad became one of the many

criteria that could lead to internment.²⁷ Any resistance to the regime, which can be as simple as answering the phone, is seen and heard by the local Xinjiang authorities.

Elimä has since managed to regain occasional contact with her mother, after her mother initially contacted her on the directions of the Chinese authorities, but most Europe-based Uyghurs that spoke to Index said that they currently have no contact with their family members in Xinjiang. “My father was released from a concentration camp after 20 months, but I still don’t have contact with him because I don’t want to put him at risk,” Nijat Turghan told Index.²⁸

British Uyghur Rahima Mahmut told Index that she thinks about calling her brothers or

sisters in Xinjiang every day.²⁹ “But I am fully aware that if they are being left alone and living in their own home, if they answer my phone call that will put them at risk of being detained,” she said.³⁰

She believes that her relatives, and the relatives of other Uyghur activists, are effectively being held hostage by the Chinese authorities. “Most Uyghurs living in Europe decide not to speak up because they still have family members and friends in East Turkistan. They fear the Chinese government will retaliate [against] them speaking out by harming their loved ones still in the region,” Mahmut told Index.³¹

For Nyrola Elimä, the fact that her family is at the mercy of the Chinese authorities is

an ongoing trauma. “Most of the time when I have a nightmare, I’m standing there and there’s a [sheet of] glass between me and my parents. I see them suffering but I just cannot go through,” she told Index.³²

Family members are sometimes forced to become mouthpieces for CCP propaganda in state-sponsored videos. Many of these videos, which appear on CCP-linked channels, appear to be aimed at discrediting Uyghurs abroad who are speaking out about the atrocities being committed in Xinjiang.

After his father died in 2017, Aziz Isa Elkun regularly used Google Earth to “visit” his father’s tomb. But in mid-2019, he discovered that the burial site had been laid bare.³³ Ten days after he appeared in a CNN report about →

23: Arkin, Z. (2021) Email correspondence with Index on Censorship. By Marks, F (16 December 2021).

24: Elimä is a supply chain analyst and researcher for Forced Labour Lab at the Helen Kennedy Centre, Sheffield Hallam University; Elimä, N. (2022) Interview - Index on Censorship. By Ní Mhainín, J. (4 January 2022).

25: Ibid. (Elimä, N., 2022).

26: WeChat is a Chinese multi-purpose instant messaging, social media and mobile payment app.

27: Greer, T. (2018) 48 Ways to Get Sent to a Chinese Concentration Camp, Foreign Policy (13 September 2021). Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/13/48-ways-to-get-sent-to-a-chinese-concentration-camp> [Accessed 8 December 2021].

28: Turghan, N. (15 October 2021).

29: Mahmut is the UK Director of the World Uyghur Congress, and Executive Director of Stop Uyghur Genocide.

30: Mahmut, R. (2021) Interview - Index on Censorship. By Marks, F. (15 September 2021).

31: Mahmut, R. (2022) Correspondence with Index on Censorship, To Marks, F. (21 January 2022).

32: Elimä, N. (4 January 2022).

33: Elkun, A.I. (2019) ‘I saw my father’s tomb from Google map...’ (13 July 2019). Available at: <https://twitter.com/AzizIsaElkun/status/1150169136154234880?s=20> [Accessed 15 October 2021].

→ the destruction of graveyards in Xinjiang, the television channel CGTV (which operates under the control of the CCP) published a video featuring Elkun's mother and sister.³⁴ In the video, they appeared at what they said was his father's new burial site, stating that the remains were voluntarily moved to more durable tombs.³⁵ "We are satisfied with the current arrangement," his mother said in the video.³⁶

"They forced my mother to speak, arranging a staged platform to discredit what I say," Elkun told Index. "It is artificial propaganda, but a new method that did not even exist five years ago."³⁷

In January 2020, the Global Times published an "exclusive interview" with relatives of Rebyia Kadeer.³⁸ The video opened by saying

the interviews were conducted in response to Kadeer's concerns that thirty of her family members had been detained in Xinjiang. "When you left Xinjiang, I was a little girl. Back then I didn't understand what you had done. Now [that] I am a post-grad student I learn about your misdeeds. You constantly accuse the Chinese government of engaging in Uyghur cultural genocide. It is completely untrue," one of her granddaughters says in the video.³⁹ "If you don't believe me, you can see it in Xinjiang with your own eyes," her son concludes.⁴⁰

Far from putting family members in Europe at ease, these videos often provoke further concern. "Rather than aiming to be realistic and credible, the stiltedness and scripted nature serve as a demonstration to Uyghur activists



When Uyghurs see their relatives on [video], knowing how much coercion, fear and violence has gone into making them testify, it breaks people's hearts.

the extent of power and control [the CCP] maintain over their loved ones," Emily Upson of the University of Newcastle told Index.⁴¹ She said that Kadeer's son's suggestion that she come to Xinjiang can be interpreted as a thinly-veiled threat given that Uyghur activists know that to return to Xinjiang would mean certain incarceration if not worse.⁴²

The videos appear to be aimed at discrediting Uyghur activists, but Rune Steenberg of Palacky University Olomouc says that the videos primarily serve as a tool of intimidation. "When Uyghurs see their relatives on [video], knowing how much coercion, fear and violence has gone into making them testify against them, it breaks people's hearts," →

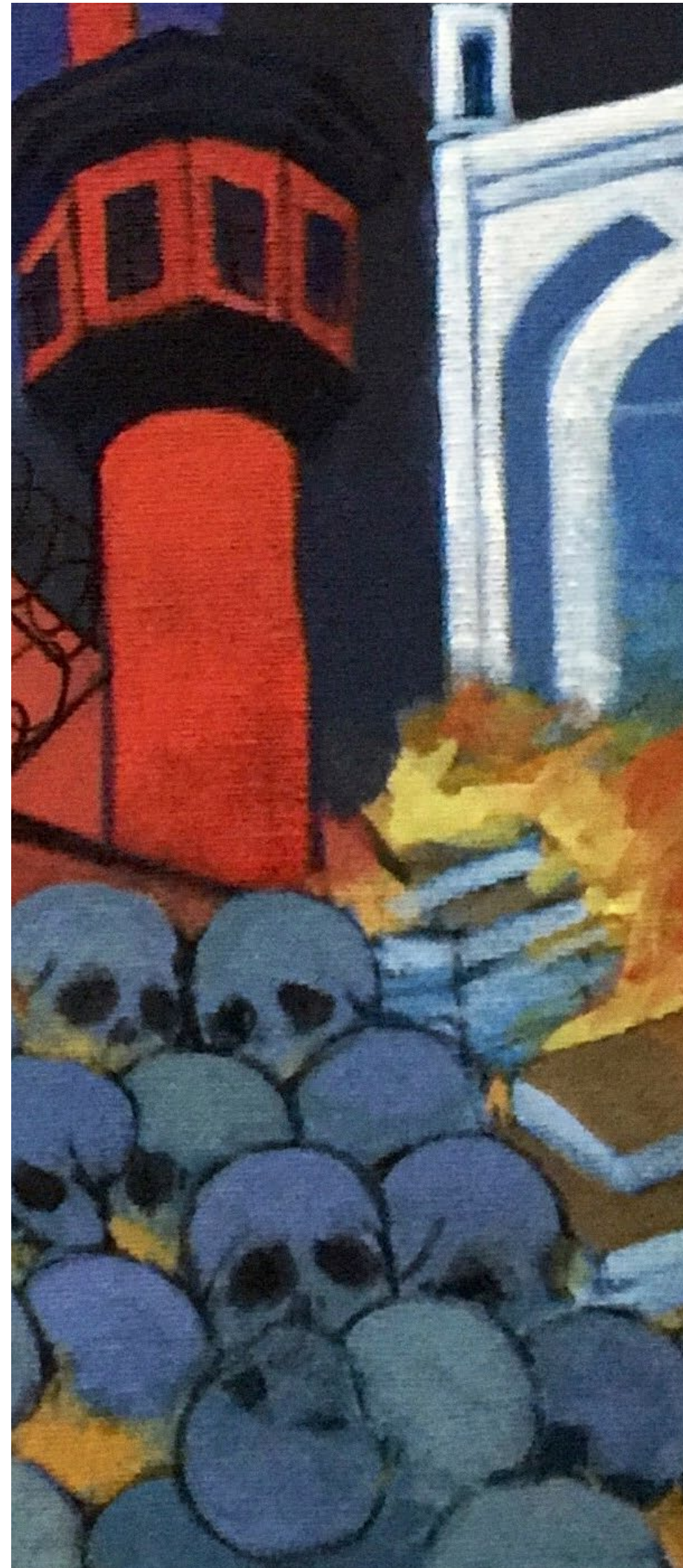
- 34: Rivers, M. (2020) More than 100 Uyghur graveyards demolished by Chinese authorities, satellite images show, CNN (3 January). Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/02/asia/xinjiang-uyghur-graveyards-china-intl-hnk/index.html> [Accessed 5 October 2021]; Xiaonan, Wang Zeyu. (2020) CGTN Exclusive: Tracking down relocated Uyghur graves in China's Xinjiang, CGTN (11 January). Available at: <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-01-11/CGTN-Exclusive-Tracking-down-relocated-Uyghur-graves-in-NW-China-Nak37jfg1G/index.html> [Accessed on 3 November 2021].
- 35: Elkun, A.I. (28 September 2021).
- 36: Xiaonan, Wang Zeyu. (CGTN, 11 January 2020).
- 37: Elkun, A.I. (28 September 2021).
- 38: Kadeer is the former President of the World Uyghur Congress.
- 39: Global Times. (2020) Granddaughters refute Rebiya Kadeer in exclusive interview with Global Times, YouTube (10th January). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aeEFuGnbV-s> [Accessed 24 November 2021].
- 40: Ibid. (Global Times., 2020).
- 41: Upson, E. (2021) Interview with Index on Censorship. By Marks, F and Ni Mhainin, J (7 September 2021).
- 42: Upson, E. (2021) "The Government Never Oppresses Us" UHRP (January). Available at: https://docs.uhrp.org/pdf/POLVReportFinal_2021-01-29.pdf [Accessed 9 September 2021].

→ Steenberg told Index.⁴³

Some Uyghurs believe that by staying silent, they are giving their relatives the best chance of living in relative safety. But others believe that their family members are at risk no matter what precautions they take.

“For me, everything I do is like a casino. Nobody knows what China will do to my family or other Uyghurs,” German Uyghur activist Gulzire Taschmemet told Index. “But if I did nothing, China would still arrest my family. There are many examples of this, so I work harder. No matter how small the hope, I will keep fighting for my family and my nation.”⁴⁴

Nyrola Elimä also believes that her silence won't help her family. “I was silent and then they became even [more] aggressive,” she told Index. “It would be nice if every Uyghur spoke out – if every single one of us spoke about what happened to us, then maybe China would realise their intimidation is not working”.⁴⁵ ✘



Espionage

WHEN JASUR ABIBULA was contacted for the first time in several years by an old friend in Xinjiang, he was a bit suspicious. “It was 2019 and no one could have contact with friends or relatives abroad,” Abibula’s stepson Ahmedjan Kasim told Index.⁴⁶ The friend asked Abibula, who lives in the Netherlands, if he would meet him in Dubai and offered to pay for his flights and his hotel for the week.

While Abibula found no reason to distrust his friend of 30 years, Kasim’s mother Asiye Abdulaheb was concerned. She had recently received extremely sensitive and important documents relating to the crackdown in Xinjiang, which were then in the process of being verified by researchers and investigative journalists.⁴⁷ “My mum told him it’s better not to go because it’s really suspicious. She

had the documents, and she was nervous that something would happen to him,” Kasim told Index.⁴⁸

In September 2019 Abibula, who is a Dutch citizen, boarded a plane to Dubai. He was met, not only by his friend, but by several Chinese security officials. After days of questioning, the officials handed Abibula a USB stick and told him to put it in Abdulaheb’s laptop when he returned home.⁴⁹

“They knew that my mum had the document, and they wanted to know who leaked that document from the Uyghur region so they could arrest them,” Kasim explained. “They also encouraged him to cooperate by offering him a lot of money and free travel from Europe to the Uyghur region to visit his [elderly] mother”.⁵⁰

Chinese officials’ use of such threats and

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43: Steenberg, R. (2021) Interview - Index on Censorship, By Marks, F. (29 September 2021).

44: Taschmemet, G. (2021) Interview - Index on Censorship, By Marks, F. (3 November 2021).

45: Elimä, N. (4 January 2022).

46: Kasim is the Political Secretary of the Dutch Uyghur Human Rights Foundation; Kasim, A. (2021) Interview with Index on Censorship, by Ní Mhainín, J. (16 November).

47: The documents were leaked to the ICJ and published in November 2019: ICJ (November 2019). Available at: <https://www.icj.org/investigations/china-cables> [Accessed 20 November 2021]; Allen-Ebrahimian, B. (2019) Exposed: China’s Operating Manuals for Mass Internment and Arrest by Algorithm, ICJ (24 November). Available at: <https://www.icj.org/investigations/china-cables/exposed-chinas-operating-manuals-for-mass-internment-and-arrest-by-algorithm> [Accessed 17 November 2021].

48: Kasim, A. (16 November 2021).

49: Ibid. (Kasim, A., 2021).

50: Ibid. (Kasim, A., 2021).

→ incentives to coerce Uyghurs residing in Europe to act as informants was repeatedly raised in interviews carried out by Index. “Several Uyghurs told me that when they went home [to Xinjiang], the police were already at their house waiting,” Rahima Mahmut told Index. “They felt intimidated. The police didn’t arrest them, but said ‘we will look after your family, we will pay you for what you [will] do’.”⁵¹

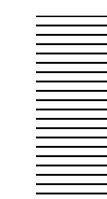
For some, it is extremely difficult to reject these advances from the Chinese authorities, especially if they don’t have citizenship from a country other than China. If they refuse to collaborate, they may have their passports confiscated and be forced to remain in Xinjiang.⁵² Becoming an informant may allow them to return to and remain in Europe, while enabling their families to live in relative safety.

“It is a tiny minority who succumb to pressure and threats. They are essentially

blackmailed with some of the most difficult terms such as threats against their children, siblings and parents,” Mahmut told Index.”⁵³

The threat to Uyghurs has not gone unnoticed by Europe’s security services. “China’s intelligence activities also involve espionage against dissidents and the Tibetan and Uyghur communities in Sweden,” the Swedish Security Service’s most recent report stated.⁵⁴ “These activities are seen by China as part of its efforts to protect its territorial integrity from perceived threats and to protect the Communist Party.”

Since 2015 Belgian Uyghur Alim Sidiq has been contacted twice by the same Chinese government agent. The agent was initially friendly, Sidiq told Index, promising to be helpful and take care of his parents.⁵⁵ But then the agent asked Sidiq to provide information and suggesting that he work for the CCP. “He asked me [to] share the names of Uyghurs here,



It is a tiny minority who succumb to pressure and threats. They are essentially blackmailed

I refused. He asked me to work for them, I refused,” Sidiq said. “I can’t break the law in Belgium by sharing the information of others.”

In 2021, Sidiq received a voice message on WhatsApp from a Russian number. It was from his brother. Sidiq was surprised that his brother could be in Russia because he believed his passport had long been confiscated by the authorities in Xinjiang. After he replied, Sidiq received a second voice message. “The second voice message was him, the agent [from] 2015,” Sidiq said. “I was angry with him [for] troubling my family. I was very clear that I won’t work for him.”

But espionage has effects beyond those who

spy and who are spied on. It sows distrust among Uyghurs communities and may further discourage them from exercising their right to freedom of expression. “How can you know you can trust anyone?” Aziz Isa Elkun asked during his interview with Index. “I don’t want to speculate, but don’t underestimate China’s long [arm] as a security concern.”⁵⁶

The arrest of Babur Mehsut, in Sweden in 2009 created mistrust among the local Uyghur community, Nijat Turghan told Index.⁵⁷ A former mayor of Xinjiang’s Hotan City, Mehsut had arrived in Sweden with the help of the UNHCR. All the while, he was unlawfully working for the Chinese government by →

51: Mahmut, R. (15 September 2021).

52: UHRP (2017) The Fifth Poison: the Harassment of Uyghurs Overseas, UHRP (28th November). Available at: <https://uhrp.org/docs/The-Fifth-Poison-The-Harrassment-of-Uyghurs-Overseas.pdf> [Accessed 18/11/2021].

53: Mahmut, R. (21 January 2022).

54: Swedish Security Service, Annual Report 2020. Available at: <https://www.sakerhetspolisen.se/download/18.4ffe9b31787cb4eddc4ec/1624002656682/Swedish%20security%20service%20annual%20report2020.pdf> [Accessed 26 January 2022]

55: Sidiq, A. (2022) Correspondence with Index on Censorship, To Marks, F. (27 January).

56: Elkun, A.I. (28 September 2021)

57: Turghan, N. (15 October 2021).

Chinese local police contact Uyghurs in the diaspora, asking them for information about their [lives], even about their partners or spouses.

→ collecting information about Uyghurs in Sweden and around the world.⁵⁸ “Because he was a highly respected man, nobody suspected him,” Turghan said.⁵⁹

Suspicion about potential spies means that many Uyghurs are always looking over their shoulder, Rahima Mahmut told Index.⁶⁰ This distrust further discourages Uyghurs from speaking out, for fear they could be endangering themselves or their families. “Not knowing

who among them might be reporting back to Chinese security agents plants seeds of suspicion and mistrust that take root and further feed the sense of isolation and fear.”⁶¹

The CCP not only uses espionage to intimidate and gather information about Uyghurs in Europe, but they have also been contacting members of Uyghur communities - either directly or indirectly - to elicit personal information from them. The aim of gathering

this information is reportedly the creation of a global registry of all Uyghur citizens abroad.⁶²

“Chinese local police contact Uyghurs in the diaspora, including those living in France, asking them for documents or information about their social and professional life, even about their French partners or spouses,” French Uyghur Dilnur Reyhan of the Université Libre de Bruxelles told Index.⁶³

At the end of 2017, Belgian Uyghur Eminjan Onbulkasim was contacted by his parents in Xinjiang.⁶⁴ “I was asked to tell them all my information and family situation,” he told Index.⁶⁵ His parents told him they would be sent to an internment camp if he didn’t provide them with the information, he told Index. He doesn’t know whether they have been interned as he hasn’t heard from them since then.

Nyrola Elimä told Index that the authorities had used her mother to seek personal information from her, including a copy of her Swedish passport and home address. At first, she refused but gave in after her mother pleaded with her not to make the situation difficult.

“Why would they ask for my Swedish passport? I took it as intimidation – as a threat,” Nyrola told Index.⁶⁶ Despite being in Sweden, Nyrola felt intimidated. She tried to protect herself by hiding her identity and remaining silent. “Not only did I change my name, but I also changed my address. At that time, I never thought I would speak out. I thought I would just hide myself.”⁶⁷ ✘

58: Goldstein, Ritt (2009) “Is China Spying on Uighurs Abroad?” Christian Science Monitor (14 July). Available at: <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2009/0714/p06s12-woap.html> [Accessed 18/11/2021].

59: Turghan, N. (15 October 2021).

60: Mahmut, R. (15 September 2021).

61: Amnesty International (2020) Nowhere Feels Safe. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2020/02/china-uyghurs-abroad-living-in-fear> [Accessed 5 October 2021].

62: Allen-Ebrahimian, B. (2018) Chinese Police Are Demanding Personal Information From Uighurs in France (2 March), Foreign Policy. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/02/chinese-police-are-secretly-demanding-personal-information-from-french-citizens-uyghurs-xinjiang> [Accessed 18 November 2021].

63: Reyhan, D. (2021) Re: Index on Censorship Interview, To Marks, F., Outlook (22 October).

64: Onbulkasim is the President of the Belgium Uyghur Youth Union .

65: Onbulkasim, E. (2022) Correspondence with Index on Censorship, To Marks, F. (26 January).

66: Elimä, N. (4 January 2022).

67: Ibid. (Elimä, N., 2022).

Threats and intimidation

“FEEL SAFE IN Germany, but not 100%,” Gulzire Taschmemet told Index.⁶⁸ In 2017 Taschmemet’s sister Gulgine disappeared after she returned to Xinjiang from Malaysia where she was studying.⁶⁹ Since then Gulzire has been actively campaigning for her release. She hoped her activism would force the Chinese authorities to free her sister, but instead Taschmemet has been subject to indirect and direct attempts to silence her activism.

After more than two and a half years of not hearing from her family, she received a phone call from them in May 2020. During the short call, her sister Gulgine reassured her that she was fine, and that she was now working as an English teacher. On that basis, Taschmemet’s family urged Gulgine to stop her campaign work. Taschmemet believed that her family

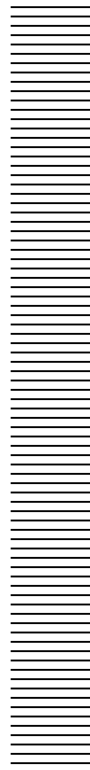
were acting under duress and on instructions from the Chinese authorities. She has therefore continued her campaign.⁷⁰

In December 2020 she faced a more direct threat, when she was contacted on Telegram by someone who identified themselves as a government official from Ürümqi. The official told her he was travelling to Ghulja, where her family lives.⁷¹ They said that she should “not do any anti-CCP activities and stay at home and live a quiet life with the children.”⁷²

“After I started speaking out and I became more prominent in the news, the first form of intimidation was in an email in Uyghur, which told me to ‘stay put or else,’” Alerk Ablikim told Index.⁷³ He said the stories of intimidation he’d heard from other Uyghur activists had prepared him to receive such threats.⁷⁴

Since then, Ablikim has continually been subject to efforts to intimidate and silence him. In early 2020, he and more than two dozen other Uyghurs met with the American ambassador to the Netherlands to discuss the situation facing Uyghurs in the Netherlands.

When he was travelling home after the meeting, he received a phone call. “I got a call from a private number, and I answered,” he told Index.⁷⁵ “I heard something in the background, so I stayed silent and tried to listen carefully. I heard screaming. It sounded very much like it was in Chinese. I was quite shocked. I didn’t know what to think. My first thought was: is this my father?” He ultimately concluded that it wasn’t his father, though couldn’t be sure since he hasn’t heard his father’s voice since he was sent to an



I heard something in the background, so I stayed silent and tried to listen carefully. I heard screaming. It sounded very much like it was in Chinese.

internment camp in 2017.⁷⁶

“We are really aware of the danger of activism,” Ahmedjan Kasim told Index.⁷⁷ He →

68: Taschmemet, G. (3 November 2021).

69: Shahit. (2021) Entry 406 - Xinjiang Victims Database. Available at: <https://shahit.biz/eng/viewentry.php?entryno=406> [Accessed 4 November 2021].

70: Yang, W. (2020) DW interview: Uighur woman remains ‘unfree’ despite release from re-education camp, DW Freedom (19 May 2020). Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/dw-interview-uighur-woman-remains-unfree-despite-release-from-re-education-camp/a-53493328> [Accessed 24 November 2021].

71: Taschmemet, G. (2022) Correspondence with Index, To Marks, F. (21 January 2022).

72: Taschmemet, G. (3 November 2021).

73: Ablikim, A. (3 December 2021).

74: Ibid. (Ablikim, A., 2021).

75: Ibid. (Ablikim, A., 2021).

76: Ibid. Ablikim, A., 2021).

77: Kasim, A. (16 November 2021).

→ said that he and his family lived in fear after the China Cables, which his mother contributed to, were published in 2019.⁷⁸ Several weeks after publication, a video was posted on YouTube in which the chief editor of state tabloid Global Times warned Kasim's mother, Asiyeh Abdulaheb that she needed to watch out for the US intelligence agencies and "Xinjiang independence groups", which "are capable of anything".⁷⁹

Abdulaheb also received death threats, including a threat in the Uyghur language via an anonymous Facebook account. "That man or woman told her that she had to stop what she was doing otherwise her body would end up in pieces in front of our house," Kasim told Index. "We're living in Europe - it's safe here, but if something like that happened, the police would never be on time."

In October 2021 Zumretay Arkin was in Athens for the World Uyghur Congress to protest the 2022 Beijing Olympics. Arkin told Index that after a press conference two individuals, who identified themselves as Chinese, were tailing her. "They were also waiting at the lobby entrance with [people] we suspected to be undercover agents."⁸⁰

Arkin found the incident extremely intimidating. "The incident in Greece made me realise how unsafe I could feel as a Canadian citizen living in Europe, just because of the nature of my work, but more specifically because of my ethnic identity," Arkin told Index.⁸¹ "It was also an indication of how far the Chinese government is willing to go to silence activists everywhere."⁸² ✘

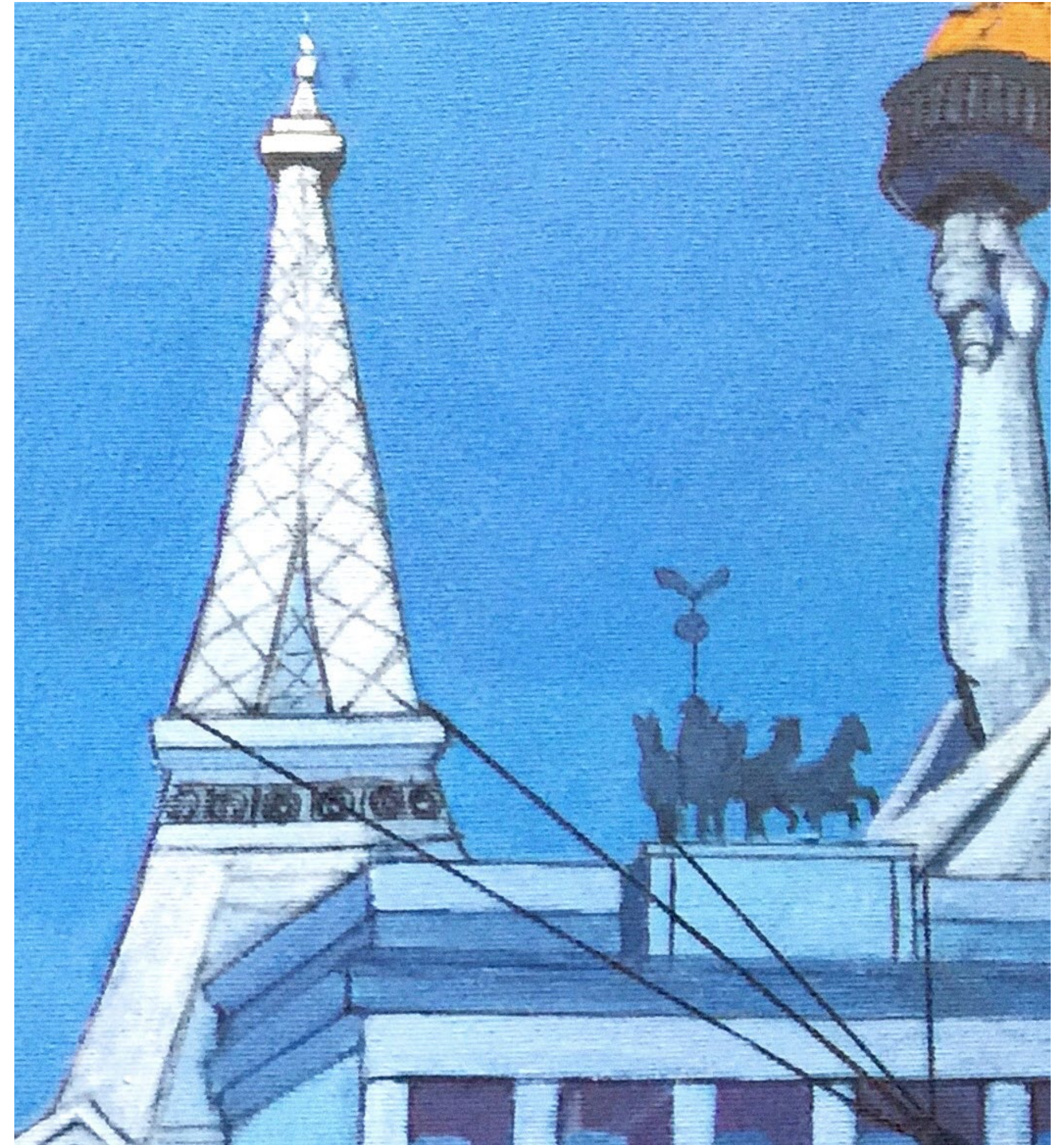
78: Allen-Ebrahimian, B. (2019) Exposed: China's Operating Manuals for Mass Internment and Arrest by Algorithm, ICIJ (24 November). Available at: <https://www.icij.org/investigations/china-cables/exposed-chinas-operating-manuals-for-mass-internment-and-arrest-by-algorithm> [Accessed 17 November 2021].

79: Guan Video (2019) 胡锡进: "爆料新疆文件"的她, 该防范的不是中国而是美情报局的利用, YouTube (9 December). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGJJTZxtuQ> [Accessed 17 November 2021].

80: Arkin is the Project Director for the World Uyghur Congress; Arkin, Z. (2021) Email Correspondence with Index on Censorship. By Marks, F (16 December 2021).

81: Ibid. (Arkin, Z., 2021)

82: Ibid. (Arkin, Z., 2021).



Who is protecting Uyghurs in Europe?

“WE ARE AWARE of reports of members of the Uyghur diaspora – including in the UK – being harassed by the Chinese authorities in an effort to intimidate them into silence, force them to return to China, or co-opt them into providing information on other Uyghurs,” British MP Nigel Adams wrote in response to a question about the silencing of Uyghurs in March 2021.⁸³ “The FCDO continues to monitor the situation closely”.⁸⁴

But when Index asked the FCDO how many cases of Uyghur harassment they had recorded as part of their monitoring, they replied that they do not record such information.⁸⁵ They said their monitoring consists of discussing the

issue with stakeholders and following public reporting. The Home Office also said they were aware of reports, but don’t collate any data on the issue.⁸⁶

“[I]t’s vitally important that the FCDO proactively monitors these incidents to understand how widespread this practice is. We shouldn’t sit by while they are silenced,” Catherine West MP told Index.⁸⁷ “It’s completely unacceptable that Uyghurs in Europe are facing intimidation, reprisals, and attacks at the hands of the Chinese Government.”

As unacceptable as it is, many Uyghurs are continuing to face intimidation without any hope of meaningful support or action from the

authorities. In 2021, almost 66% of Uyghurs in liberal democracies said that they do not feel their host government takes the intimidation and harassment they face seriously.⁸⁸

“I think the Dutch government can do better because the Uyghur community does not feel heard or protected,” Alerk Ablikim told Index. Ablikim is among those who have been urging his government to begin monitoring state-sponsored harassment of the Uyghurs.⁸⁹ “We asked the minister if it would be possible to set up a registry where we can, for example, say what kind of intimidation [we’re facing],” Ablikim told Index. “But the minister was very hesitant. His position was that there is a legal framework out there, which is to file a

complaint to the police - that we should make use of that usual process.”

This was very similar to the response of the FCDO and the Home Office in the UK, both of which said that any Uyghurs targeted by such harassment should contact the police.⁹⁰ But contacting the police offers little recourse to those who are worried about what consequences a police report could have for their families in Xinjiang.

“[T]he Metropolitan Police cannot do anything to tackle that threat,” Rahima Mahmut told Index.⁹¹ “As Uyghur rights activists we need cooperation from the government, and the responsibility lies with them to use all means available to them to try →

83: Adams, N. (2021) China: Uighurs - Question for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, UK Parliament (8 March). Available at: <<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-03-03/162694>> [Accessed 12 October 2021].

84: Ibid. (Adams, N., 2021); In June 2021 a report recommended that the “government should conduct an urgent consultation with members of these communities in the UK to determine the extent of harassment they are facing and the type of support they require, offering support and protection as appropriate.” Source: House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (2021) Never Again: The UK’s Responsibility to Act on Atrocities in Xinjiang and Beyond, House of Commons (8 July). Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/78/foreign-affairs-committee/news/156425/foreign-affairs-committee-publish-report-never-again-the-uks-responsibility-to-act-on-atrocities-in-xinjiang-and-beyond> [Accessed 1 November 2021].

85: Marks, F. (2021) FOI2021 24424 Response Letter.pdf, WhatDoTheyKnow (30 September) Available at: https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/792311/response/1887313/attach/3/FOI2021%2024424%20Response%20Letter.pdf?cookie_passthrough=1 [Accessed 1 December 2021].

86: Kinnock, S. (2021) Uighur: China - Question for Home Office, UK Parliament (23 September). Available at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-09-23/53911> [Accessed 1 November 2021]; Adams, N. (8 March 2021).

87: West is the UK’s Shadow Minister for Asia and the Pacific; West, C (2022), Written Correspondence with Index on Censorship. To Ní Mhainín, J. (26 January 2021).

88: Hall, N., Jardine, B. (2021) “Your Family Will Suffer” - How China is Hacking, Surveilling, and Intimidating Uyghurs in Liberal Democracies, UHRP, Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs (November). Available at: <https://uhrp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/UHRP-Your-Family-Will-Suffer-Report.pdf> [Accessed 17 November 2021].

89: Ablikim, A. (3 December 2021).

90: Kinnock, S. (2021) Uighur: China - Question for Home Office, UK Parliament (23 September 2021). Available at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2021-09-23/53911> [Accessed 1 November 2021]; Adams, N. (8 March 2021).

91: Mahmut, R. (21 January 2022).

→ to bring the genocide (including the threats, harassment, and blackmail involved) of my people to an end.”

The need for active government cooperation was reiterated by Margarete Bause, a former member of Germany's Bundestag. “Although it is known that Uyghurs are regularly threatened and put under pressure here in Germany, there is no state support or contact point,” she told Index. “If individuals feel threatened, they can turn to the police or the intelligence services. In my experience, however, that's no use”.⁹²

Some Uyghurs who have proceeded with filing police complaints told Index that they have found the process to be unsatisfactory. Alerk Ablikim referred to a mass complaint that was filed by 58 individuals in 2020 regarding threats, intimidation, discrimination, coercion and blackmail against Dutch residents and their Xinjiang-based family members at the hands of

the CCP.⁹³ “The fear of reporting intimidation to the police was only overcome by doing it as a group,” Ablikim explained.⁹⁴

Although the Dutch Public Prosecution Service agreed that the reported offences are punishable under Dutch criminal law, they said they would be unable to properly investigate because a full criminal investigation would require Chinese cooperation. “Now that criminal intervention is not opportune, the reports will be dismissed with a policy dismissal,” their decision concluded.⁹⁵

Such seemingly insurmountable dead-ends to police investigations are demoralising and could discourage many Uyghurs from filing similar complaints in the future. Even if complaints cannot be fully investigated, police forces and government departments across Europe should be compiling data to demonstrate the scale of the issue.

The Metropolitan Police Service, which is responsible for policing in Greater London where the majority of Uyghurs in the UK live, doesn't currently hold any retrievable information on state-sponsored harassment of Uyghurs. The service told Index that they don't classify the Uyghurs as “Uyghurs”, but as Turkish.⁹⁶

“We are Uyghurs by ethnicity. However, we are connected to Turkic groups by culture, tradition, and language,” Alim Sidiq told Index.⁹⁷ “I don't agree [that] we are labelled as Turkish [...] on paper. We are Uyghurs.”

The lack of proper categorisation poses a significant challenge to effective monitoring, as Uyghurs face specific challenges unlike those facing other Turkic groups.⁹⁸ Effective monitoring is essential as it will provide a comprehensive view of the extent to which the CCP is interfering in Europe's Uyghur

communities' right to freedom of expression. It will also equip diplomats and policymakers with the necessary information to address the issue with the Chinese authorities.

“They know what they're doing is wrong. That's why they're working so hard to deny it and so hard to silence us,” Nyrola Elimä said, referring to what the Chinese government is doing in Xinjiang. “But somehow our lawmakers, policymakers, politicians, or our governments – not all but some of them – are ok with that.”⁹⁹

“I never thought people would get censored in Europe. I never thought that China would have such a long arm to choke someone's throat. You cannot see it physically, but you know it's there,” Elimä said. “It's my fundamental right to speak out.” ✘

92: Bause, M. (2021) Written Correspondence with Index on Censorship. To Marks, F. (12 October 2021).

93: OM (2020) Aangiften Oeigoeren in Nederland: beslissing OM, Openbaar Ministerie (25 August). Available at: <https://www.om.nl/actueel/nieuws/2020/08/25/aangiften-oeigoeren-in-nederland-beslissing-om> [Accessed 8 December 2021].

94: Ablikim, A. (3 December 2021).

95: OM (2020) Aangiften Oeigoeren in Nederland: beslissing OM, Openbaar Ministerie (25 August). Available at: <https://www.om.nl/actueel/nieuws/2020/08/25/aangiften-oeigoeren-in-nederland-beslissing-om> [Accessed 8 December 2021].

96: Metropolitan Police (2021) Freedom of Information Request Reference No: 01/FOI/21/021193, Email Correspondence with Marks, F. (30 September 2021).

97: Sidiq, A. (2022) Correspondence with Index on Censorship, To Marks, F. (27 January 2022).

98: Turkic groups include Uyghurs, Turks, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen.

99: Elimä, N. (4 January 2022).



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