

## International

# Uzbek spies attacked dissidents with off-the-shelf hacking tools

## Cybersecurity firm Kaspersky exposes secret Uzbek hacking unit

**LONDON:** Uzbek intelligence officers have used commercially-available computer spying tools to launch a series of cyber attacks against activists and dissidents, researchers at Moscow-based cybersecurity firm Kaspersky said yesterday. The findings show how governments around the world are able to buy sophisticated hacking tools and expertise from outside vendors to spy on activists, journalists and political rivals.

Kaspersky researcher Brian Bartholomew named Unit 02616 of Uzbekistan's National Security Service as the team behind the attacks. The service, also sometimes referred to by acronyms in Russian or Uzbek, changed its name to State Security Service last year but is still often referred to abroad as NSS. According to two people with knowledge of the attacks, the targets of the NSS have included regional news outlets Fergana News, Ertuz, Centre1 and the Palestine Chronicle, all of which report on the Uzbek government. The publishers did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Bartholomew, speaking at the Virus Bulletin cybersecurity conference in London, said he was able to attribute the activity directly because of mistakes the hackers made covering their tracks online. In some cases they tested their attacks on computers running Kaspersky's antivirus software. In one case, Kaspersky traced a cyber attack it was investigating to a domain listed in a public registry as belonging to a man named OT Khodzhabbarov. He had listed his organization in the directory as "Military Unit 02616".

Publicly-available Uzbek business records

show Military Unit 02616 is a state-owned entity. A person called Omonillakhon Tulkunovich Khodzhabbarov is named as an NSS officer in an Uzbek presidential degree awarding him a military honour in 2005. The NSS did not respond to questions submitted via the Uzbek Foreign Ministry and Uzbek embassy in London. Reuters was unable to reach Khodzhabbarov for comment and the Uzbek presidential administration did not respond to questions about his role at the NSS or the award he received.

Kaspersky said it had detected Unit 02616 carrying out attacks using software from German firm FinFisher. FinFisher did not respond to repeated requests for comment. Emails from an Italian spyware vendor, Hacking Team, posted on Wikileaks in 2015, showed that the NSS was a customer. After a merger this year, the company is now part of Swiss-Italian cyber intelligence firm Memento Labs, whose head, Paolo Lezzi, said the Uzbek government was not currently a customer and he had no knowledge of Hacking Team's former operations.

### Homegrown hacking

Uzbekistan, a former Soviet republic of 32 million people in Central Asia, has made efforts to improve its human rights record following the death of President Islam Karimov, who ruled the country from 1989 until he died in 2016. But the government is still regularly criticized by human rights groups over its actions against dissidents, including reports of torture and widespread surveillance of journalists and other activists. Claudio Guarnieri,

head of Amnesty International's Security Lab project, said Uzbek authorities were known to target "people who are outspoken and critical about the conduct of the government" with cyber attacks in an effort to discredit them with compromising material.

Kaspersky's Bartholomew declined to identify any specific targets of the NSS hacking but said the unit was attacking "human rights activists, journalists and other dissidents. We didn't see much outside the country, it was internally focused." As well as purchasing off-the-shelf hacking tools, Unit 02616 began developing its own framework called "Sharpa" in October 2018 to hack computers

and mobile phones, Bartholomew said. It is not clear whether the system has yet been used in any attacks. Bill Marczak, a senior research fellow at Canada's Citizen Lab research group, said it was common practice for customers of commercial spyware vendors to invest in efforts to develop their own in-house tools. "Uzbekistan's NSS has been on our radar for some time as an organization that's been interested in acquiring offensive hacking tools," he said. Countries like this want to "advance their hacking capabilities quickly so they turn to outside vendors," he added. "But the goal is always to eventually become more independent." — Reuters

## 9 killed as typhoon lashes South Korea

**BUSAN:** At least nine people were killed and several others missing after Typhoon Mitag lashed South Korea with heavy rain and strong winds, authorities said yesterday. The storm hit southern parts of the country on Wednesday night, prompting flood warnings and triggering landslides in affected areas. A total of nine people were killed across the country as of yesterday afternoon, the Ministry of Interior and Safety said, but the toll was expected to rise with several people missing.

A woman in her 60s was found dead after her home was buried in a landslide in

the southern port city of Busan and around 600 rescue workers were trying to locate three others believed to be trapped beneath the rubble. Park Young-hak was inside his tool shed—later buried in the landslide—and said he escaped after hearing a loud "roar". "When I ran out to see what it was the house next to me had already disappeared," Park told AFP. More than 1,000 homes were damaged and over 1,500 people evacuated their houses in advance, the ministry said. Mitag is the 18th typhoon this year and seventh to hit the Korean peninsula.—AFP

## Unkempt? Panelo tells critics Duterte smells 'refreshing'

**MANILA:** Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's spokesman defended him against critics who described him as looking unkempt when he met with Russia's prime minister, saying he is "very hygienic" and that "his body emits a refreshing scent". Salvador Panelo, who is traveling with Duterte in Russia, challenged "kibitzers" to try to be close to the president to find out how he smells.

"That's what ladies tell me when they kiss PRRD, that he smells good", Panelo said, referring to President Rodrigo Roa Duterte, who is in Russia for a working visit. Pavel Vondra, an editor at CRO Plus radio, on Thursday posted on Twitter a photo of Duterte shaking hands with Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev as he called out the Philippine leader for showing up "a bit unkempt".

Photos and video of the meeting showed

Duterte in a ill-fitting suit with his necktie hanging loose. Vondra, in his tweet, said "The Russian internet is having a blast: 'Did he drink all night?', 'Did he just leave the pub?', 'Do Filipinos know what a (state visit) protocol is?' people ask." Coming to Duterte's defence, Panelo said the president merely loosened his tie because "he feels suffocated and very uncomfortable".

"PRRD dresses up for comfort, he is not particular on unsettling other people", Panelo said. Duterte, 74, once said he had never owned a suit and does not wear socks. The firebrand leader typically wears a polo shirt, jeans and slip-on loafers, and on formal occasions has dressed in a barong, a traditional long-sleeved Filipino shirt, and suits. Filipinos are drawn to Duterte's no-nonsense, man-of-the-people style, which sits oddly with the pomp and protocol he encounters in the international political arena.—Reuters



**MOSCOW:** Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte (center) attends a meeting with Russian Prime Minister in Moscow. — AFP