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EVERYDAY TRANSNATIONAL LIVES OF UZBEK MIGRANTS IN RUSSIA

A Socio-Legal Perspective

Rustamjon Urinboyev and Sherzod Eraliev

Introduction

Transnational migration has been on the agenda of social scientists for more than three decades (Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992; Vertovec, 1999; Levitt, 2001a). Transnational migrants, living their lives across the border of two (or more) nation-states, continue to remain part of the fabric of everyday life and social relations in home country, while simultaneously becoming part of the socio-economic processes in their receiving country, thereby making home and host society a single arena for social action (Portes, Guarnizo, & Landolt, 1999; Schiller, Basch, & Blanc, 1995). These transnational linkages are multistranded (e.g., economic, social, cultural, political, institutional, emotional) and entwined in the lived experiences of migrants and their left-behind families and communities (Kelly & Lusi, 2006; Levitt, 2001b).

One of the key themes in this research field literature is migrants' legal transnationalism, that is, how migrants' pre-migratory cultural and normative repertoires (values, attitudes towards the law, entrenched behavioural patterns, accustomed social practices and informal norms) influence their everyday lives and experiences in their host society (Ballard, 2006; Kubal, 2013a; Menski, 1993; Shah, 2009). However, the existing studies on migrants' legal transnationalism largely focus on the case studies of immigrant communities in "established countries of immigration" such as the United States, Australia, Canada and Western European countries. Despite extensive research on migrants' legal transnationalism, there has been little scholarly investigation of similar issues in the context of non-Western migration hubs such as Russia that has become a "migration hotspot" after the fall of the Soviet Union, hosting large numbers of migrant workers from Central Asia. Given the "varied geographies of transnationalism" (Dunn, 2010), it is reasonable to assume that migrant transnationalism is not the same everywhere, holding different meanings, forms and functional roles depending upon the socio-political context, legal environment, economic system and cultural factors. Another factor that adds to this lacuna is that we know relatively little on the gendered experiences of legal transnationalism, a research field that needs further empirical investigation.

Thus, based on the above considerations, in this chapter, we aim to explore Central Asian migrants' legal transnationalism and how these experiences unfold in the life trajectories

of male and female migrants. More specifically, we will address the following questions in our study: What are the peculiarities of migrant legal transnationalism in the Russian migration context? How do these peculiarities play out in the lives of male and female migrants? What are the implications of the Russian migration context, combined with a focus on gender dimension, for migrant legal transnationalism scholarship, as well as for broader debates within migration studies? To address these questions, we utilise the cases of both female and male migrants originating from Uzbekistan. This chapter is based on a multisited transnational ethnography of Uzbek migrant workers in Russia and in their home village in Uzbekistan. We collected the ethnographic material during 14 months of fieldwork in Moscow, Russia and the Fergana Valley, Uzbekistan, between January 2014 and November 2019. These field sites were chosen because Moscow is the capital city and largest metropolis in Russia, featuring the highest number of migrant workers. Likewise, we chose the Fergana Valley because it is the primary migrant-sending region in Uzbekistan, given its population density and high unemployment rate. We, both authors, owing to our Uzbek origin and cultural competence, and language skills (Uzbek and Russian), had direct access to social spaces and daily life of Uzbek migrant communities in Moscow and their left-behind families and communities in the Fergana Valley. The ethnographic material was primarily collected through observations and informal interviews. To ensure maximum anonymity, the names and whereabouts of informants have been changed, and only the most general information about the informants and fieldwork sites are provided.

Uzbek Labour Migrants in Russia

Russia is one of the main destinations for migrants in the world. In 2019, it stood fourth globally both as a destination (around 10 million migrants) and the country of origin amongst immigrants (IOM, 2019, p. 26). Migrants from Central Asia constitute the largest portion of the migrant workforce, mostly employed in unskilled jobs. Given the varying methods and purposes of registering foreigners, Russia's responsible agencies provide a range of figures on the number of economic migrants.

Labour migration from Uzbekistan to Russia started in the mid-2000s (Abashin, 2013). According to statistics from December 2020, more than two million Uzbek citizens were present within the territory of the Russian Federation (Florinskaya & Mkrtchan, 2020). The great majority of Uzbek migrant workers are young male with a secondary school education (Eraliev & Urinboyev, 2020). Most of these migrants originate from rural areas, have secondary school education and possess a poor command of Russian language. Therefore, they are mostly employed in low-skilled and low-paid jobs. Owing to high accommodation costs and precarious working conditions, migrants rarely bring their spouses to Russia. They send the bulk of their earnings to left-behind families, leaving little for themselves to cover bare necessities. However, tendencies in recent years reveal a growing share of female migrants in Russian labour market. Women make up at around 15%–20% amongst migrants from Uzbekistan (Rocheva & Varshaver, 2017). Whilst construction sites, farms and similar areas where physical strength is required primarily employ men, female migrants can find jobs predominantly in trade (supermarkets and shops), catering (restaurants, hotels and food factories) and domestic (care) and cleaning services (Eraliev & Heusala, 2021).

Accordingly, the aforesaid migratory trends reflect the social changes currently taking place in both Central Asia and Russia (Abashin, 2014; Reeves, 2012; Ruget & Usmanalieva, 2008; Urinboyev, 2018). Anyone walking along the streets of large Russian cities such

as Moscow, Saint Petersburg or Yekaterinburg quickly notices numerous Uzbek cafés and choyxonas. These cafés not only serve as eating places for Uzbek and other Central Asian migrants but can also be viewed as an indication of migrants' transnational place-making practices. These migratory flows also carry important implications for migrant-sending communities in Uzbekistan as millions of Uzbeks move for the first time (i.e., becoming a “nomad”) to Russia, leaving behind their families and community. Historically, Uzbeks have always been the most sedentary population in Central Asia, preferring to earn their livelihood in their home country (Levi, 2007). Even during the Soviet era, ethnic Uzbeks exhibited the lowest mobility rate among Soviet ethnic populations (Ilkhamov, 2013). In the 1980s, experts attributed Uzbeks' reluctance to voluntarily migrate to a presumed innate and incorrigible cultural attachment to their families and mahalla (Abashin, 2014). Hence, because of their settled lifestyle, Uzbeks successfully preserved their traditional structures and social hierarchies despite the Soviet Union's coercive strategies. This contrasts to nomadic nations in the region, such as the Kazakh and Kyrgyz populations, which proved more receptive to Soviet modernisation policies (Levi, 2007). Rapid economic decline and the collapse of welfare state arrangements after the collapse of Soviet Union significantly shaped the mobility patterns and lifestyles in the region. We can no longer divide the Central Asian nations into settled and nomadic categories. Today, in both urban and rural areas of Uzbekistan, labour migration has become rather normal—that is, it is a widely accepted livelihood strategy used by households to meet their livelihood needs. Thus, the Uzbek lifestyle has become increasingly transnational since they live their lives across the border between two countries, simultaneously living everyday life and maintaining social relationships in both Russia and Uzbekistan.

Having situated in two transnational social fields, Uzbek migrants bring their “legal baggage” (Kubal, 2013b)—their attitudes towards the law, moral codes, religious values, established behavioural patterns and the accustomed social practices that they internalised prior to their migratory experiences—and capitalise on it when organising their daily life in host society. At the same time, they also adapt their behavioural norms and practices to the conditions in their host society. Therefore, when trying to examine Uzbek migrants' everyday experiences and adaptation strategies in Russia, there is a need to provide the reader with the contextual information on Uzbek legal culture.

The everyday social order in traditional Uzbek society—including social positions, gender roles and hierarchies, kinship groups and community—stems largely from patriarchal norms and collectivistic values, whereby an elder man decides the most important family and community affairs (Kandiyoti & Azimova, 2004). In a traditional family in Uzbekistan, men are considered the head of the family and, as such, are responsible for winning the bread, whilst women are viewed as homemakers and, thus, responsible for bearing children and taking care of household chores. The eldest male is delegated the authority to make most of the decisions, which become obligatory to other family members. The prevalence of traditionalism and gender hierarchies most likely results from the fact that Uzbekistan features a Muslim majority (nearly 90% of the population) and represented the “heartland” of three Sharia law-based independent states (Khiva and Kokand Khanates and the Emirate of Bukhara) until the late-nineteenth century (Khalid, 2015; Louw, 2007). Whilst the Russian empire, which conquered the Central Asian khanates in the late-nineteenth century, did not interfere much in the internal structure of these states, the Soviets carried out intensive modernisation projects impacting all aspects of life (Martin, 2001). Along with economic modernisation, Soviets' atheism and women's emancipation policies deeply affected the social organisation of the Central

Asian republics (Edgar, 2006; Northrop, 2004). However, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, nation-building policies in each Central Asian country to some degree were accompanied by the partial reestablishment of traditional Islamic norms, influencing the social structure of society, especially the position of women (Peshkova, 2014).

Accordingly, the aforesaid behavioural imperatives, gender hierarchies, expectations and social sanctions emanating from the “collectivistic culture” (Triandis, 2018) shape the basic parameters of everyday life and social relationships in Uzbek society. These cultural and normative repertoires remain crucial both locally (in Uzbekistan) and transnationally (in Russia). Uzbek migrants import and adapt their pre-migratory cultural and normative repertoires to Russia, especially when they work and live under the conditions of undocumentedness and informal employment (Urinboyev & Polese, 2016). These processes become particularly visible when observing how Uzbeks deal with the cumbersome bureaucracy, legal ambiguities, arbitrary law enforcement, informal labour relations and economic insecurities. As we will empirically demonstrate in the next sections, these experiences are gender-sensitive, meaning that they play out differently in the case of male and female migrants.

Case Studies

The first part of the empirical data focuses on the experiences of two female Uzbek migrants in Moscow. In the second part, we will present the case study of Uzbek male construction workers and their transnational experiences. We chose these cases on the basis that they represent empirically relevant examples of the gendered experiences of vulnerable migrant groups and reveal important dynamics of migrants’ legal transnationalism. The first case is of Munira, whose life trajectories were adversely affected by her “legal baggage” that led to unfavourable legal outcomes in the host society. The second case tells the story of Farida who was a victim of rape and had to become an underage mother of two children. The third case centres around the transnational lives and experiences of male migrants who work in Moscow’s construction sector. We use pseudonyms for all of these four migrants and other individuals that appear in their life stories.

Case Studies of Female Migrants

The first case revolves around the experiences of Munira Usmonova, a female migrant from an eastern region in Uzbekistan. Since she was an orphan brought by impoverished grandparents, she was unable to marry by the time she reached her early 20s, a situation considered shameful by many traditional families in Central Asia. She agreed to become a “second wife” to Umid, who was already in an official marriage with another woman with whom he had a child. Faced with financial difficulties, Umid left to work in Moscow and brought Munira there in 2013. Before the birth of her first child, Munira lost her passport. Umid persuaded her to present herself to the hospital staff using his surname, Razzakova, and later brought a fake certificate to the hospital confirming the loss of “Munira Razzakova’s” identity documents, including her passport and work permit. That document had the seal of Ryazan police department, a city 200 km away from Moscow, and a stamp from Moscow’s Chertanovo district police department. Moreover, the document stated that “Munira Razzakova” was a citizen of Morocco. As expected, the maternity ward issued a birth certificate stating not that the child was born to Munira Usmonova, a citizen of Uzbekistan, but to “Munira Razzakova,” a Moroccan citizen. Munira and

Umid continued to live together, not paying much attention to recovering the document. In the meantime, their second child was born. In 2018, police stopped Umid for an ID check and discovered that he had overstayed in Russia without proper documents, leading to his deportation. At first, Umid promised that he would send money to Munira so that she could recover her documents and return to Uzbekistan. However, he later stopped corresponding with Munira, who was now in Russia without the proper means to support herself or her children.

Initially, some friends and sympathisers in a shared flat helped with the housing rental and food expenses, but gradually she was left with nothing. Because she was kicked out of several rental flats, her case gained Uzbek-language media attention. This led to heated discussions in an Uzbek segment of social media. With the Uzbek Women's Committee endorsement and the Uzbek Embassy's support, Munira was able to, first, recover her own identity documents and, later, her children's documents. This took her and her pro bono lawyer visiting many organisations in Russia and several months. Ultimately, Munira was able to leave Russia with her children (with money raised via social media) in mid-March 2020, just before the pandemic-induced lockdowns began in Russia and Uzbekistan.

The second case focuses on the story of Farida, a female migrant from Uzbekistan, who became a mother of two children at the age of 16 and was herself raised in a single-parent household by her mother. Desperate to find a job, her mother went to Russia, taking 11-year-old Farida with her. In Russia's Lipetsk city, because they were living in a shared apartment with other tenants, another migrant raped the then 12-year-old Farida when her mother was at work. The rapist was sentenced to jail, but Farida became pregnant and decided not to abort, thus giving birth to a child at the age of 13. Since Farida herself was a minor, her mother was listed as the mother of the newborn child on the Russian birth certificate. Farida's mother juggled temporary low-paid jobs and, when Farida turned 15, she decided that her daughter should marry someone who could sustain her. Because Farida was still a minor, her mother decided that a *nikah*, a religious marriage ceremony not recognised by state authorities, was sufficient in order for her and another 35-year-old migrant to live together. Farida was 16 when she gave birth to her second child. At this point, both her mother and her husband had abandoned her. Farida now found herself in a trap: she had neither a place to live nor documents to return to Uzbekistan. First, it would be extremely difficult without her mother's presence to obtain a passport from the Embassy of Uzbekistan in Moscow. Second, even if she managed to leave, she would not be able to travel with her older child, who is legally her mother's daughter. Technically, it would be possible to obtain travel documents if Farida's mother applies for her passport and signs a power of attorney for the child to travel with Farida. But Farida does not know her mother's whereabouts.

The Case Study of Male Migrants

This section presents a case of Uzbek male migrants who work in construction sector in Moscow. Our case revolves around Misha, a workteam leader, and his brigada (a team of construction workers) and their experiences of legal transnationalism.

Misha is a pioneer Uzbek migrant who brought many of his co-villagers and acquaintances (around 200 by 2014) to Moscow. He arrived in 2002 when labour migration was still a new phenomenon in Uzbekistan. At the time of fieldwork, he worked as a *posrednik* (middleman) in the construction sector, acting as an intermediary between migrant workers and Russian employers. Misha's main role is to find well-skilled migrant

construction workers, take full responsibility for the quality of the construction work and address migrants' daily concerns (e.g., accommodation, food) and legal problems (e.g., police problems).

It is not so easy to find skilled, reliable migrant construction workers who will perform their tasks in accordance with state standards and not steal construction materials. Kinship is more important than reputation in this case, but workers' reputation is also a key factor when Misha selects workers for his brigade. When Misha approaches someone who is not from his village, or at least his district, they rarely agree to work under him. Coming from the same village creates not only a social bond but also social responsibility in the workers' mind. Both the family of the middleman and the workers share a territory and interact daily to the point that non-compliance with the agreed obligations from either side would trigger a chain reaction with the workers' families putting direct pressure on the middleman's family in the village, a thing that might not happen if the two men's families lived far from one another.

Thanks to this mechanism, Misha's *erkakcha gap* (literally "man's word") is enough for his workers, and he allows migrants to work without any documents. The work of a middleman in the Russian construction sector is largely informal. An amount is agreed upon and paid gradually as the construction project progresses. There is no written agreement between Misha and his co-villagers, and they rely on *ko'cha qonunlari* (laws of the street) and *erkakchilik* ("manliness") rules to get things done. Misha receives payment from Russian middlemen and then distributes the money to his workers, taking a *dolya* (share) of between 10 and 15% of each worker's salary. As other studies have demonstrated, the embeddedness of work and social relationships generate mutual dependence and a long-term reciprocity relationship that all parties are happy to continue. This relationship exists on two levels, the local and the transnational, reinforcing the relations not only between actors but also their families in their home village.

At the time of fieldwork, Misha's brigada consisted of 12 migrant workers, and their main job was installing new windows in mid-rise and high-rise buildings. On average, the brigada worked 10–12 hours per day, without taking any days off. They endured harsh conditions, working on the 17th floor despite the freezing cold weather (the outdoor temperature was -25°C). They only took a day off in exceptional circumstances, such as when supplies were delayed or in case of an emergency. Misha usually purchased food, and the brigada cooked meals for themselves. This means every day one migrant, on a rotating basis, could be assigned to prepare lunch and dinner for everyone. In this kind of relationship, there is no clear boundary between work and non-work activities in the brigada's daily life.

Furthermore, there is no clear boundary between workers and supervisors. Misha takes care of his dependents under the assumption that happy workers are better workers. He may do small favours for some of his workers, such as buying cigarettes or sending money home on someone's behalf, even if Misha has to advance the sum from his own pocket. Eventually, this combined position of older brother and line manager allowed him to have more leverage. His workers knew that they can count on him but he also knew that, should he need extra help, they would be available to provide it. Likewise, the brigada members were at the centre of a complex matrix of relationships. In Moscow, they operated under Misha, respected his authority and called him elder brother, regardless of their age difference. While they have little choice but to trust that he will deliver their salaries, take care of them if they face difficulties and help them with documents, this trust is based on the understanding that, given their family connections, it would be too costly for him to cheat

on them. Any monetary advantage would bring only short-term benefits and would be countered by retaliation at the village level.

Almost all brigada members had smartphones and regularly used Odnoklassniki and Telegram Messenger to check the latest news, view photos of Russian girls and send instant messages to their families and mahalla networks. New technologies allowed them to remain in touch with their families in a quasi-real time exchange of information between the village and the workers in Moscow. The brigada's Moscow adventures were the most popular subject of "village talk." Misha's capacity to provide for his countrymen not only put him in a higher position in Moscow, but it also enhanced the prestige and reputation he and his family enjoyed in Shabboda village. Given that Misha provided many village residents with jobs in Moscow, his family members enjoyed high social status and prestige in the village. When invited to weddings, Misha's father was always offered a premium table and served more quickly than others. Misha was especially praised by the parents of his brigada for employing and taking care of their sons.

Despite his high social status, Misha's prestige is surprisingly tenuous. As long as he is perceived as bringing more benefits than troubles, he will be supported by his brigada and mahalla. However, when this comes into question, or the benefits are not tangible, any kind of allegations might be used to attack him. In April 2014, tensions within the brigada emerged. The brigada had completed half of a window installation job in Moscow but had not been paid since January. Two workers left and others were considering it. The issue was both local, they need money to eat and survive in Moscow, and transnational, since all their families were expecting remittances money. Misha took a clear stand, insisting that he, too, was a victim of circumstances, blaming Russian middleman and the construction firm's representative.

As the brigada was in daily contact with their families and mahalla, the problems in Moscow quickly travelled to Shabboda village. Relatives of Misha's workers started putting pressure on Misha's family, by spreading gossip at *guzar*, *choyxona*, and weddings where people gather and talk. This raised rumours in the village about Misha's exploitative behaviour and emboldened many fellow villagers to confront him through his family. Misha, in the villagers' view, was supposed to secure the brigada's salary irrespective of the circumstances. After all, the brigada trusted him and worked hard during the cold winter. This was based on an understanding that a person must never assume *posrednik* role if he cannot keep his word. Tempers flared and some villagers went as far as to accuse Misha of human trafficking. He was held responsible for the brigada's undocumented status in Russia and the possibility that, if caught, they would be banned from re-entering Russia for five years.

Religion was also invoked. Misha was portrayed as a bad Muslim who earns money through *harom* (sinful) means. The brigada's families regularly visited Misha's house and told neighbours about the situation. Moreover, the *oqsoqol* (mahalla leader) and *imom* (leader of the mosque) interfered and warned Misha's parents that the details of the dispute would be made public during Friday prayers if Misha refused to pay his fellow villagers' salaries. Misha's family was under siege, facing daily barb on the village streets. Misha's father's situation was particularly bad since he could no longer attend *guzar*, *choyxona*, and other social events. Eventually, mahalla pressure forced Misha to make a decision and prioritise the well-being of his family over his personal situation. He borrowed money to pay the brigada's salaries. Thus, the extension of village-level norms and sanctions across borders proved to be an enforcement mechanism of the informal labour relations in Moscow's constructions sector.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

This chapter examined the specificities of the formation of transnational legal spaces for labour migrants in Russia from the gendered perspective. In so doing, we explored the divergent experiences of migrants' legal transnationalism in the daily lives of female and male migrants. As we have shown in our empirical case studies, the "legal baggage" that migrants brought with them to their host country have an identifiable impact on the outcomes of many practices that migrants engage with.

As we have discussed earlier, transnationalism studies scholars maintain that migrants remain connected to several places simultaneously. These connections are carried out through ideas, values and practices amongst others. In this regard, migrants—both male and female—carry their values and understandings of traditions from the home society to the host society. As Kubal (2013b, p. 68) notes, migrants respond to the legal environment of a host society in a plurality of ways, reflecting differences in values and attitudes towards law, different understandings and interpretations of it and, finally, different patterns of behaviour vis-à-vis law at the level of their respective societies.

Our study contributes to these transnational migration and legal culture debates by providing empirical insights on the gendered experiences of migrant legal transnationalism. In the case of female migrants, we found that female migrants' pre-migratory legal culture did not serve as a resource in their host society but rather became a hindrance to their adaptation and further exacerbated their unequal position. For instance, the reader may not understand why Farida chose to keep her child when she became pregnant despite she was an underage person. Islam importantly influences women's and men's decisions related to multiple aspects of reproductive, as well as maternal and child health, in the Uzbek context (Barrett, 2009). Given that Islam prohibits abortions, it is quite possible that religious norms might have played a rather important role (whilst not ignoring the combination of other factors known only to Farida and her mother) when she decided to continue her pregnancy. Our empirical findings are somewhat understandable, given the prevailing gender and social hierarchies in female migrants' home country that was further extended to Moscow.

In the case of male migrants, migrants' pre-migratory cultural and normative repertoires served as an alternative means of enforcement and dispute settlement. Male migrants, despite being physically located in Russia, continue to be influenced by collective expectations and norms of their village. On the other hand, villagers are "socially located" in Russia due to their increased engagement in migrants' everyday life and socio-economic relations. Due to the inability of the Russian and Uzbek authorities to adequately regulate the migrant-labour market, the village-level norms and sanctions emerged as a transnational enforcement mechanism resolving the dispute that occurred in the territory of Russia. These findings indicate that pre-migratory legal culture had empowering effects in the case of male migrants, whereas they limited the agency of female migrants. Thus, based on the empirical material presented in this chapter, we highlight the need for the gender-sensitive analysis of migrant legal transnationalism which may provide more nuanced insights into the transnational lives and diverse experiences of migrants.

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