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To cite this article: Rustamjon Urinboyev & Abel Polese (2016) Informality currencies: a tale of Misha, his brigada and informal practices among Uzbek labour migrants in Russia, *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, 24:3, 191-206

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0965156X.2016.1261215>



Published online: 11 Dec 2016.



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Informality currencies: a tale of Misha, his brigada and informal practices among Uzbek labour migrants in Russia

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of informality among Uzbek construction workers in Russia. We start from a relationship that is based on economic reward and common interests and go on to explore the non-economic components of this relationship. Economically, the workers entrust their supervisor and agree to work for him for a given amount of money. However, this decision is also embedded in a non-economic dimension. All workers, and their master, come from the same village so that an additional layer of social obligations are involved. First, workers are able to receive a treatment that goes beyond economic relations, with favours or more mild attitudes when needed. Second, they are also able to put pressure on the line manager through their families in case things do not work out the way they expected. We use the case study to propose the existence of a non-monetary currency (or even currencies) that complement formal currencies. Money, its symbolism and the power attached to it still play a major role in the relationships and dependencies analyzed here. These points help us in suggesting that relations encompass a wide range of transactions and rituals that go beyond mere economic interest and that cannot be neglected when understanding informality.

KEYWORDS

Informality; alternative currencies; migration; shadow economy; law and society

Introduction

An estimated two-third of the world's working population is active in the informal sector (Jütting and de Laiglesia 2009). It is not surprising then that informality has been preoccupying scholars (Benjamin and Mbaye 2014; La Porta and Shleifer 2014) and has been on the agenda of international organizations such as the ILO, the World Bank and the UNDP for more than 40 years (Curristine et al. 2007). The initial view that informality would disappear as soon as a country, or region, modernizes (Lewis 1955) seems now to contrast with the fact that a great deal of effort has been and is spent to liquidate, or formalize, informality (Williams and Renooy 2008, 2013; Williams, Round, and Rodgers 2013). This rests on the assumption that, in addition to potentially feeding the criminal underworld, undeclared, unregistered or unrecorded transactions (Feige 1989) have a potential negative impact on taxation, income and the welfare institutions of a country.

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While agreeing on the harmfulness of some aspects of informality, a number of recent works have questioned such universality and the “one size fits all” approach. Initially limited to a number of in-depth case studies (Aliyev 2014; Bruns, Miggelbrink, and Müller 2011; Kovács 2014; Morris 2011, 2012), mostly relegated to area and regional studies and with little connection to worldwide literature, research on informality, and informal employment, is progressively gaining ground. Scholars have explored not only its social significance in a given context, but have also produced attempts to explain its persistence and relevance to governance mechanisms (Ledeneva 2006, 2013; Morris and Polese 2014a, 2014b; Polese et al. 2016; Rekhviashvili 2015, 2017).

Evidence from a number of scholars suggests that informality research has gone well beyond its initial economic framing (Hart 1973; Hann and Hart 2009) to engage with narratives of peasant resistance and rebellion (Scott 1975, 1985), participation in political processes of the excluded (Gupta 1995), to the study of political (Ledeneva 2006; Helmke and Levitsky 2005) and economic institutions (Dixit 2007), and competition between state and non-state actors in a number of key sectors (Davies and Polese 2015; Polese et al. 2014, 2016).

Indeed, in addition to economic perspectives, informality can also be considered a social phenomenon without assuming any modernization teleology leading to its necessary eradication (Morris and Polese 2014a). Critical views, often coming from former socialist spaces, have suggested that informality is intimately related to governance and can actually be seen, at least in some cases, as the cure for an ineffective system rather than the disease (Darden 2008; Ledeneva 2013).

Based on a Granovetterian framework, post-structuralist views on informality see informality as a phenomenon embedded in social relations, but on the boundary between the social and the economic. As Gudeman (2010, 10) puts it: “the market realm revolves about short-term material relationships that are undertaken for the sake of achieving a project or securing a good. In the communal realm, material goods are exchanged through relationships kept for their own sake.”

The above considerations have informed our position in this article, which is intended to contribute to the debates on informality in two distinct ways. Empirically, we present the results of a long ethnographic study among construction workers in Moscow. Our goal is to provide a detailed account of how the personal, the social and the economic are entwined; how private and professional life are embedded in a relationship that is on the boundary between the realms of work and the personal. Indeed, the account of Misha, a workteam leader, and his construction workers gives an insight into three different dimensions of informality. Misha employs some of his fellow villagers from the Uzbek side of the Fergana valley and they are all in a mutual dependence relationship. Misha needs trusted workers and his workers need him to protect and help them, given the illegal status they have in the country. Even more importantly their families are intertwined transnationally. While all goes well in Moscow, Misha’s family back home is well respected and praised for providing economic opportunities to many villagers. However, when things go bad and Misha is not in a position to pay, his family’s position weakens and they come under attack. After the team fails to find a satisfactory solution with Misha, even resorting to street institutions, it is through the Fergana connection that workers can put pressure on Misha in Moscow. Family to family pressure puts Misha’s family in an awkward position. Loss of status and respect by a growing number of people eventually leads Misha to find an arrangement that, although

damaging him financially, saves his and his family reputation, showing the long-term importance of informal credits, or currencies, over money.

Theoretically, we use this “thick” ethnography to suggest the existence of a non-monetary currency (or even currencies) that complements formal currencies. Money, its symbolism and the power attached to it still play a major role in the relationships and dependencies analyzed here. However, they seem to satisfy only one function in a relationship and, more precisely, a short term (and short-sighted) one. This seems to point at the understanding of what we can call “the speed of a currency.” Resting on a tradition of scholarship that sees money, and its use and values, largely depending on context (Parry and Bloch 1989, White 2004), we see money as having an immediate use. Accordingly, a monetary payment may enable an actor to extinguish a debt or provide the counterpart for a favour immediately. In contrast, non-monetary currencies are slower and more embedded in a long term relationship, depending and affecting a variety of factors such as reputation, trust, respect (and respectability). Ultimately, this may recall the distinction between having money available and constructing a capacity to generate money, which is the main function of non-monetary currencies.

We use this argument to contend that informal relations encompass a wide range of transactions and rituals that go beyond mere economic interest and that cannot be neglected when understanding informality. By doing this, this study is an attempt to go beyond the façade of the illegal market and, in particular, the argument that informal practices and mechanisms are a mere coping strategy. In the case of undocumented migrants in Russia they are certainly a way to put up with the hostile Russian migration environment. However, the fashion in which they happen, shows a high degree of embeddedness in social relations and the fact that they are based on long-term logics that mere economic transactions cannot fully explain.

The field and the context

Hosting around 11.6 million foreign-born people on its territory (United Nations Population Division 2015), Russia can be considered the third largest recipient of migrants worldwide after the US and Germany. Despite visa-free regimes with other post-Soviet republics, most migrants have an irregular status, for example, lacking migration registration, residential registration or a work permit (see e.g. Ahmadov 2007; Marat 2009; Reeves 2013). A large proportion of these migrants work in the construction sector (Marat 2009), where there is a high demand for cheap labour, it is possible to work in spite of limited language skills and no particular formal qualification is needed.

The Russian legal environment in general, and the socio-legal context of the Russian migrant labour market in particular, is characterized by the “unrule of law” (Gel’man 2004; Reeves 2015). Under these circumstances migrants come up with tactics and strategies to adapt to the existing environment. This means migrants may produce various “legal orders” that provide an alternative means (to state law) for regulating their working life and seeking redress for their problems. Such normative pluralism is referred to as “legal pluralism” in the legal anthropological scholarship (Merry 1988; Griffiths 2003) and emphasizes the coexistence, and possible clashes of multiple sets of rules that mould people’s social behaviour between moral codes and practical norms of social life (Nuijten and Anders 2007).

Our empirical evidence is informed by a case study of Uzbek construction workers in Moscow, where these processes are especially visible. Indeed, informal employment of migrant workers is widespread and carried out through so-called *po rukam* (“handshake-based”) labour contracts, which involve multiple formal and informal actors with different forms and locations of power: migrant workers, intermediaries, construction firms, Russian police officers, Chechen racketeers, and migrants’ left-behind families and communities (e.g. village residents, local community leaders, Imams). Our study makes use of a single “thick” case study, resting on continuous observation of the evolution of a construction “brigada” in an area near Moscow.

Data for this article were gathered during several stays both in Moscow and the Fergana Valley (Uzbekistan) in the course of 2014 for a total of eight months. In addition to participant observation with migrants in Moscow, interviews and observation were carried out at the migrants’ home village in Uzbekistan. Observation places were: “migration talk hotspots” such as the *guzar* (village meeting space), *choyxona* (teahouse), *gaps* (regular get-togethers) and life-cycle events (e.g. weddings, funerals). Informal interviews with village residents were, in this respect, as useful as the Moscow fieldwork to understand the evolution of dynamics between actors better.

The Russian migrant labour market

Migrants come to Russia primarily from the post-Soviet republics – in particular Central Asia. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have experienced a large increase in labour migration due to deteriorating economic conditions since independence. Uzbeks, Tajiks and Kyrgyz can visit Russia for 90 days without a visa. According to official statistics 40% of officially registered migrant workers work in the construction industry. In reality, taking into account non-registered migrants, the proportion of Uzbek migrants working in the construction sector is larger, as many undocumented migrants work in this sector (Ilkhamov 2013, 276, 277).

Unskilled migrants with limited language competencies are a perfect match and, with city centres saturated, construction sites are now in peripheral areas and thus harder to police. Officially, regardless of their sector, migrants are required to obtain a residence registration (*registrasiya*) and a work permit (*patent*) within 30 days of their arrival if they wish to undertake lucrative activities. If so they can stay and work in Russia for up to one year without a visa. The work permit is harder and more costly to obtain, especially since legislative changes in 2015. Central Asian migrants spend at least 22,000 roubles on a work permit, as well as a 4000 rouble monthly fee (cca. 54 Euro). In addition, they must purchase health insurance, provide proof of medical tests and pass a Russian language, history and law test.

In addition to bureaucratic hindrances, the fact that a large number of Central Asian migrants, especially of rural origin, do not have a sufficient command of Russian pushes them towards informal employment (see e.g. Ahmadov 2007; Marat 2009; Reeves 2013). The construction sector has a proven capacity to absorb unskilled migrants with few language skills, low salary expectations and high insecurity (Marat 2009).

Evidence of the significance of informal work is shown by the efforts of Russian authorities to limit the phenomenon through punitive measures, for example, widening the grounds for issuing re-entry bans to migrants who have violated laws during their previous stay (Maier 2014). This is applied even in the case of minor infractions. In September 2014, the Russian

Federal Migration Service (FMS) announced that nearly 1 million foreigners were banned from re-entry to Russia in 2014 (Bobylov 2015).

There is no evidence that these measures have produced the desired effects (Maier 2014; Reeves 2015). In fact, it is possible that they have simply generated new trends among migrants. First, given the large gap between the theory and practice of rules and laws in Russia and the idiosyncratic nature of the Russian legal system (see e.g. Humphrey and Sneath 2004; Guillory 2013; Ledeneva 2013), a number of state officials have seized this opportunity to increase the value of bribes they demand to issue documents or to turn a blind eye on the (many) firms employing (irregular) foreigners. Second, the risk of not re-entering Russia prompts migrants to limit their returns home and to concentrate on one long stay, during which they try to earn as much as possible, knowing that this might be the only opportunity they have in a long time. This seems to be confirmed by the FMS' 2015 statistics showing that nearly three million foreign nationals in Russia have already violated the legal terms of their stay (Pochuev 2015). Most of these foreigners are citizens of Uzbekistan (40%) and Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (20%) (see Bobylov 2015) who have contributed to a very peculiar and unique shaping of the domestic labour market.

From the migrants' side, this total lack of security prompts them to organize informally, in case someone is sick, needs to send something home or is in need of money. Central Asians like other migrants tend to stick to their own. They often come from the same village or town. This is also a way to make up for formal protection mechanisms by relying on trusted connections. In particular, the fact that their family are from the same place and regularly interact at social events acts as a guarantee that social pressure can be applied onto a family if their member in Moscow is not acting fairly.

The (informal) construction sector

The construction labour market resembles a flat pyramid. Clients (*zakazchik*), general contractors (*genpodryadchik*) and sub-contractors (*subpodryadchiks*) are at the top and a huge army of migrant workers are at the bottom.¹ Migrants tend to carry out all the (strenuous, yet low value) physical work. *Posredniks* (middlemen) mediate between migrants and the client, who tries to minimize expenses and pay as little as possible.

The Client at the top is an organization that receives state, or private, funding for various construction projects. The client usually hires a general contractor for construction, installation and design. The general contractor is fully responsible for the implementation of construction-installation and design work. However, the contractor is not directly involved as they mainly act as a coordinator and intermediary agent, using several sub-contractors for construction work. A sub-contractor is a construction firm (hereinafter "firma") that is supposed to perform construction, installation and design work by finding and employing skilled builders.

The firma's aim is to complete a project with the minimal possible expenditure. If they employ Russians profit will be lower. Migrants do not expect a high salary and they are easy to manipulate and blackmail. However, if found to be hiring migrants illegally a firma may face fines and sanctions. The usual solution is to identify a Russian citizen acting as a middleman between the firma and migrant workers. All transactions are concluded by handshake (*po rukam*), thus liberating the firma from any contractual obligations.

The Russian middleman finds skilled migrant construction workers. However, it is difficult for him to establish trustworthy relations with migrants given language and cultural differences. To minimize risks, the Russian middleman strikes a deal with an Uzbek or Tajik migrant *posrednik*.

A non-Russian can fulfil three possible functions: *posrednik*, *brigadir* and *prorab*. A *posrednik* supplies skilled migrant workers to contractors and retains a *dolya* (share) of between 10 and 15% of each workers' salary. A *prorab* supervises groups of migrants on a daily basis, being responsible for the quality of their work. A *brigadir*, leads a work group (brigade) and contributes to physical work, claiming a higher salary for his dual hat and bigger experience.

Given the absence of formal mechanisms for control, coercion and conflict resolution, trust is crucial. The Russian firm in charge of construction will have the capital and the contacts with the producers of construction material but not with the workers. This is entrusted to a middleman who is usually Russian. The middleman has contacts with the street world of construction and knows some migrant middlemen who enjoys authority among the workers, knows their language and can manage a brigade. Of course, it is not possible to trust everyone and each person has to work out his reputation so personal connections and social capital are crucial to most agreements in the construction sector.

Apart from construction material, other transactions are unrecorded. Migrants are often in an irregular position and are not paid directly. Migrant middlemen receive payment from Russian middlemen and then distribute the money to migrant workers, taking a percentage (*dolya*). Middlemen can try to increase their income by decreasing their workers' salaries or the number of people they hire, which would decrease quality or slow down the construction work. Migrants need someone they can trust and agree to pay a part of their salary to the middleman but they need to be sure that they will be looked after and that the percentage they pay is fair. They also need to trust that they will be paid, which is why they tend to work only with people whom they know already.

The middleman

Misha² is a pioneer 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. He currently works as a *posrednik* (middleman) in the construction sector, acting as an intermediary between migrant workers and Russian employers. As a non-Russian, it would be difficult for him to deal directly with the Russian firma. However, he is well trusted by Russian middlemen who prefer not to deal directly with migrant workers. Before taking up this challenge, Misha used to work as a taxi driver, earning \$500–600 a month. This was where Misha made Russian acquaintances and built up extensive networks that later paved the way for him to become a *posrednik* in the construction sector – the highest rung on the career ladder that many migrant workers strive to reach.

Misha is one of the few middlemen able to combine the three functions of *posrednik*, *prorab* and *brigadir*. He is fluent in Russian and Uzbek and knows how to build and lead a *brigada*. His vast network of contacts secures him many *zakaz* (jobs) per year. His 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 well-skilled and reliable migrant

construction workers who can be trusted to refrain from stealing construction materials and to perform their tasks in accordance with state standards.

Kinship is more important than reputation in this case, but a workers' reputation is also key for being selected into Misha's brigade. When Misha approaches someone who is not from his village, or at least district, they rarely agree to work under him. There are regular fraud cases in Moscow where *posredniki* have cheated on migrants and did not pay their salaries. Coming from the same village creates not only a social bond but also a 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.

Because of this, there is an understanding that failure to comply with the agreement will not only bring consequences on the spot but also in their home village, given the involvement of whole families in these transactions. An important feature is that the way the conflict may be solved depends on the different standpoints. Because there is no formal institution and rule, each party is likely to endorse the set of rules that is more convenient to them, which is the starting point for the need to "advocate new moralities" (Wanner 2005). Mobile or switching moralities are favoured by the fact that they could refer to Russian street rules, Uzbek village rules or anything in between, as will be shown later.

Thanks to this mechanism, Misha's *erkakcha gap* (literally "man's word") is enough for his workers and 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 goes on. Misha, and other middlemen, do not perceive any of this process in terms of a legal-illegal binary. There is a widespread belief that this way of working has nothing to do with the law. He relies on *ko'cha qonunlari* (laws of the street) and *erkakchilik* (lit.: "manliness") rules to get things done.

As other studies have shown, the embeddedness of work and social relationships generate mutual dependence and a long term reciprocity relationship where all parties are happy to continue (Morris 2013; Polese 2015; White 2004). This relationship exists on two levels, the local and the transnational, reinforcing, among migrant families, the relations not only between actors but also between their families in their home village (Yalcin-Heckmann 2013).

Misha's brigada: transnational dependency patterns

At the time of fieldwork Misha's brigada consisted of 12 migrant workers and their main job was to install new windows in mid- and high-rise buildings. On average, the brigada worked 10–12 h per day, without taking any days off. They endured hard working conditions, working on the 17th floor in spite of the freezing cold weather (the outdoor temperature was -25C). They usually could take a day off only in exceptional circumstances, for example when supplies were delayed or in case of an emergency. Misha usually purchased food and the brigada cooked meals for themselves.

This meant every day one migrant, on a rotating basis, would 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 everyday life. Also, there is no clear boundary

between workers and supervisors (Misha), who would take care of their dependants under the assumption that happy workers work better. He could actually do small favours for some of his workers such as buying cigarettes or sending money home on someone's behalf, even if he had to advance his own money. Eventually, this position between older brother and line manager allowed him to have more leverage. His workers knew that they could count on him but he also knew that, should he need extra help, they would be available to provide it.

Almost all members had smartphones with internet access, and regularly used *Odnoklassniki* (a popular social media site in the post-Soviet space). 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, with this resulting in a virtual community that complemented the real one present in both places (cf. Morris 2013).

The brigada members were at the centre of a complex net of entwined relationships. In Moscow they operated under Misha, respected his authority and called him elder brother, regardless of their age difference. On the one hand they had little choice but to trust him, that he would deliver their salaries, would take care of them if they face difficulties and would help them with documents. On the other hand this trust is based on the understanding that, coming from the same place, and their families being in touch, it would be too costly for him to cheat on them. Any monetary advantage would bring only short term benefits and would be matched by retaliation at the village level. Ultimately, money is not everything; in the village and other small communities reputation, prestige and trust count possibly for more.

The Fergana connection

The fieldwork village is in the Fergana region, consisting of 28 *mahalla*, and has around 18,000 inhabitants. Migration is a widespread livelihood strategy, simply a "norm" for young and able-bodied men in Shabboda village.

During the "migration season," mostly elderly people, women and children inhabit the village and most conversations revolve around migration and remittances. At the time, most village residents had sons or close relatives working in Russian cities, predominantly in Moscow but Misha and his brigada's Moscow adventures were at the centre of "village talk." 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 "best 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. However, not all villagers shared this view. Some of the residents said that Misha's *posrednik* work was not compatible with the principles of Islam as he took *dolya* from migrant's salaries without doing any physical work. Some even believed that Misha might be stealing from his co-villagers.

Misha's capacity to provide for his countrymen not only put him in a higher position in Moscow. It also accounted for the enhanced prestige and reputation he and his family enjoyed in their home village. As noted in a number of other empirical studies (Pardo 1996, Zanca 2003) reputation and status actually count. Money may have a major role but only in the short term, in the long term, and in a dependence network, the capacity to generate money in a sustainable way is more important. And this relies upon trust and the capacity

not to let people down (White 2004). This is far from being an isolated case. It has become common among high middle class Iranians to give the waiter one's PIN code when paying by card. Shame for being found stealing is (still) too much of a deterrent and the waiter knows that stealing would compromise them too much to be tempting. This is something present on all sides of the hemisphere, top managers are selected through an informal process that includes a "morality screening." It would be all too easy for them to steal money from the large budgets they managed.

In spite of his improving status, the reputation of people in Misha's position rests on a weak premise. As long as they are perceived as bringing more benefits than troubles they will be supported by their workers and their workers' families, praised for their help and venerated as saviours. However, when this comes into question, or the benefits are not so tangible any longer, any kind of allegations might be used to attack them and negotiate a better deal (or break the current one). At this stage, even if some had suspicions about Misha's correctness, they accepted a small loss, or what was perceived as a loss, for a greater gain – the capacity of each brigada member to make a living and send money home.

Tensions and conflict

In April 2014 tensions within the team grew. The brigada had completed half of the window installation in Moscow but had not been paid since January. Two workers left and others were considering it. The issue was both local, they would need money to eat and survive in Moscow, and transnational, since all their families were expecting money and each of the workers was under pressure to send money home. Misha took a clear stand, insisting that he too was a *musofir* (alien) to the situation, blaming Stas and the firma representative. Initially, the brigada took this argument and displayed empathy, not holding Misha responsible for the lack of payments.

Pressure was also felt by Stas, usually present on the construction site and trying to avoid any contact with the brigada members. When asked, his answer would be that his agreement was with Misha and they should address to him. When the situation became tense, and the brigada started considering harming Stas, Misha had to mediate to avoid any actions, not least because no brigada members had work permits and they had few other options.

The problems in Moscow quickly travelled to Misha's home village. Family members of Misha's workers started putting pressure on Misha's family and demanded that Misha solve the situation quickly, even if he had to pay from his own money. Misha's parents refused to take any responsibility, arguing that whatever was happening in Moscow had to be solved there.

By mid-May, Misha had made a new promise the brigada would be paid by the end of June, which did not happen. Eventually, in July the brigada split and the workers started taking up new jobs. Misha no longer employed anyone and was working alone, moonlighting as a window installer for private clients.

Few, if any, members of the brigada had given up the idea of recovering their money but they were all aware that no legal means could be used. They decided to approach a group of Chechen protection racketeers to recover their money from Misha, offering 20% of the total sum of the money as a payment for their protection service. Frequently Chechen racketeers were known as the *qozi* ("judges") among Central Asian migrants, providing an alternative (to the state) justice and dispute settlement through threats and violence.

Within a few days, Misha received a phone call from the Chechen racketeers asking to meet for a *razborka* (violent showdown). Before the meeting he was warned that, failure to bring 800,000 Russian roubles (11,000 Euro, the estimate of his debt) would put his life in danger. Misha was upset with this decision, but not terrified. He contacted some “friends” working at the Russian paramilitary police (OMON) for help. Misha regularly paid OMON so his friends knew that they should protect him if they wanted to keep receiving extra money.

At the convened time and day Misha, together with five of his “friends” in plain clothes, arrived. The Chechens were late, a thing usually done to scare their victim further, but eventually arrived. They got out of the car, saw the five suspicious Russians, got back into the car without uttering a word and drove away. They never attempted to contact Misha again.

This unexpected turn (for the brigada) generated a further conflict. Misha and his brigada had now a diametrically distinct view on the outcome. Misha’s understanding was that he had a debt towards his fellow villagers and would honour it, even if he had to pay his own money. However, the fact that his brigada employed Chechen racketeers as *qozi* (judges) had changed their relationship. They were no longer brothers in the same pan but brigadir and brigada. The brigada had transferred their credit to a third party (the Chechens) so that he was no longer in debt with them but with the Chechens, with whom everything had now been settled. According to Misha’s version of the street law, he believed that he was no longer obliged to pay the brigada.

However, the members of the brigada had a different view. They were creditors and they wanted to be paid, no matter how. Once the Chechens failed to recover the money there were two possible interpretations. One was that the debt was lost since Misha had had to spend some resources to face the Chechens. Even if he did not pay his Russians directly, he now owed them an extra favour. He would have to pay them more next time or might not be able to ask for a further favour when in a need for it. The brigada was possibly unable to see it this way. For them the initial situation and the final situation were the same. They still had a credit with a given person. From their side, the Chechens agreed to attempt a recovery of the money but there was no discussion of what would happen if they failed. They decided that facing Misha with his OMON friends was too much of a cost and they preferred to give up, losing just the few hours they had spent to organize the meeting and to try to scare Misha.

Delay in payments or small injustices are something that human organizations share all over the world, think of light mobbing in an office or a delayed payment for a business transaction involving an amount that is so small that the creditor judges it not worth passing through legal means. The question is how small the injustice must be before the person takes action. Misha’s situation was similar, a small delay, which he could remedy with his status and reputation, has grown in time to the point that part of his brigada had become willing to challenge him formally. The more time passed by, the more the debt accumulated and the more they lost hope of recovering their money. After a certain threshold, Misha could not pay anymore with social capital, reputation and status, which were challenged by some creditors, some of whom were ready to give up claims on the whole amount as long as they got some. The solution was very similar to one we could see in the “formal world.” If my credit is not paid and I do not want to go through a court I could give my debt to a company specialized in credit recovery. They will, for a commission, attempt to recover my money and pay it to me. The Chechens in this picture play a very similar role, even if they are ready to use more primitive means than a company.

Gossip is stronger than guns

After the failed attempt to recover money through the Chechens, the dispute moved to another territory. The brigada acknowledged Misha's victory "on the street," but they felt that they still had the right to lay a claim on the money. The following statement by one of the members shows how distant Misha and his workers' positions were:

Of course, we lost the game according to the laws of the street. But this doesn't absolve Misha from responsibilities. His actions are not compatible with religious norms. According to Islam, it is haram (sinful) to steal someone's money. It is also haram to take *dolya* from someone's salary. We worked hard even during the cold winter months and fulfilled our work duties, while Misha gave us orders and did not do any physical work. We agreed that he would take at least 15% *dolya* from our salaries, so his main task was to guarantee that we receive money on time. So if he can't get money from Stas or the firma, this is his personal problem, not ours. We shook hands with him, not with the Russians. We don't care whether he pays our salary from his own pocket or gets it from the Russians. He is constantly blaming the Russians, but we don't want to hear anything about his private deals with the Russians. The only thing we care is our *po rukam* agreement with Misha.

Others' opinions were not so elaborate, but also illustrated similar positions. The youngest member of the brigada was convinced that almost all Russian people are honest and never cheat migrants (*Oris aldamaydi*). He thus believed that Misha was just using Stas as an excuse to steal their money. Others suspected that Misha and Stas were accomplices and were "staging the show together" to fool the brigada. The only thing they fully agreed on was that their attempts to recover their money were not exhausted. The next step would be to use informal sanctions: "gossip" about Misha in the village, hoping that it would force him and his family to pay their salary.

Brigada members started intensifying their dispute-related communication with their families, asking them to put more pressure on Misha's family by spreading gossip at *guzar*, *choyxona* and weddings where people gather and conduct the bulk of village information exchange. This added to the initial discontent about his allegedly exploitative behaviour and made many fellow villagers willing to come out and confront him through his family. Misha, many thought, 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 this role if he cannot keep his word. Moods went as far as to accuse Misha of human trafficking. He was held responsible for the brigada's illegal status in Russia and the possibility that they would be banned from re-entering Russia for five years. Religion was also called in. Misha was portrayed as a bad Muslim who earned money through haram means.

The relationship between the families of Misha and the brigada became particularly problematic because they started losing face. The brigada's families regularly visited Misha's house and made scandal on the street, telling neighbours about the situation. They spread gossip at wedding ceremonies where the majority of villagers gather. Moreover, the *oqsoqol* (community 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.

As a last resort, some of the families considered contacting Uzbek law enforcement. They mentioned, however, that they still respected the fact that Misha was a neighbour and using

this strategy would eventually ruin his and his family's lives so they were still reluctant to use this channel.

Misha's family was under huge pressure, facing daily sarcastic remarks on the village streets. Misha's father's situation was particularly bad since he could no longer attend village *guzar* and weddings where most people socialize. Eventually, Misha had to make a decision and prioritized the good of his family over his own welfare, borrowing money to pay the brigada's salary and end the saga.

As Minoo (2017) suggested, gossip may be related with outputs and productivity. There was no formal reason why Misha should have paid off his brigada, at least given that he considered the issue closed. He nevertheless realized that reputation and social ostracism were too harsh to face. In Russian there is a saying: "problems that you can solve through money are not problems." The financial loss that Misha might have faced could not compare to the loss of face for his family in the village. Not only would they have to bear the social stigma and peer pressure for what Misha was supposed to have done. This situation would have also created tensions within Misha's family.

Concluding remarks on street law, kinship, honour and alternative currencies

In the case study described here the balance between monetary and social relationship changes all the time. At first, money is used as a reward for physical work but the relationship between the team leader and his workers goes beyond that, with the team leader acting paternally. When he becomes short of money and payments are delayed, the team leader retreats from his position and slowly his symbolic power dwindles to the point that some Chechens are contacted by his workers in a desperate attempt to recover their credit. This, at least in the team leader's view, downgrades their relationship to a merely commercial one. Once he gets rid of the Chechen racketeers, he thus feels liberated from any obligations he might have towards his brigada. He is no longer a trusted elder brother but someone who has been threatened by the people he was treating as brothers. This is, however, only one side of the story since his workers, and more importantly their family, feel that his obligation was to protect them unconditionally, regardless of the harsh attitudes of his "younger brothers." This idea stems from two entwined reasons. First, some of the brigada members feel that there is some kind of solidarity contract and that Misha, as fellow villager and "elder brother," is obliged to look after them no matter what happens. Second, this is also due to the fact that, regardless of his power position in Moscow, his family is in a weaker position in their home village. Regular pressures and threats from most of his workers families eventually make him prioritize reputation and harmony within his family over money.

The dispute that arose between Misha and his brigada sheds some light on the nature of the informal labour market in Moscow, which, to a large extent, is informal, but has well-functioning regulatory mechanisms. There are a myriad of structures, both formal and informal, that negotiate and regulate the "rules of the game" in the migrant labour market across borders. Construction companies, Russian and migrant middlemen, Chechen racketeers, moonlighting Russian police officers, migrants' left-behind families, village residents, *imom* and *oqsoqol*, and (symbolically) Uzbek law enforcement bodies make the Russian migrant labour market one governed by plural legal orders that interact, often in several places, simultaneously.

Lack of formal rules does not necessarily mean that there are no rules. Informality, thus, may be seen as growing and establishing itself as a governance tool, thereby leaving room for grounded initiatives (Polese et al. 2014, 2016; Davies and Polese 2015). In this sense, it can be stated that informality in the Russian migrant labour market does not qualitatively differ from the accounts of the shadow or second economy that we find in the scholarly literature about post-Soviet societies (see e.g. Ledeneva 1998; Humphrey 2002; Williams and Round 2011; Morris and Polese 2014, 2015).

By emphasizing the existence of non-economic and non-monetary motivations in engagement in informal employment, we have made a further attempt to explore the long-term nature of relationships that generate informal labour and show that this is not all about money but that other means of exchange can be used or even preferred. Other studies have been based on this approach: “alternative currencies” such as respect, prestige, reputation have been suggested by other authors (Zanca 2003; Pardo 1996) and bring informality beyond a mere survival framework. It is a way of life, a means of socialization, creating interdependencies and debts that may not be repaid but are the foundation of a life-long bond (White 2004). As such, one might want to question the utility of economic-based attempts to tackle informality in a given context as compared to other possible solutions that take into account the role of symbolic power and social capital, which may be seen as a surrogate to economic power. Some prefer to earn less but get more prestige or moral and affective support from those around them.

Our intrinsic message is that measures adopted to tackle informal employment should go beyond a merely economic view and that, to convince people to go out of the shadow, a structure replacing not only economic opportunity but social protection and solidarity should be put into place. This stems from a two-fold understanding of money and its function. One responds to the short term logic of earning money to buy what is needed and to provide for one’s close ones. The other, possibly more important, is the capacity to produce money in a sustainable way. If the immediate availability of money allows for paying the bills, another important aspect is the capacity to sustain the relations bringing money in to enable earning in the medium and long run. Personal networks and social capital are needed to allow people to enjoy prestige and to create a fall-back mechanism, particularly in the case of a (totally or partly) absent state.

Note on Transliteration

Throughout the article, Russian and Uzbek words are spelt according the standard literary form. Their use is based on the following two criteria: (1) if an Russian/Uzbek word or phenomenon is central to the study; (2) if an English translation does not fully capture the meaning of the Russian/Uzbek word or phenomenon. Russian and Uzbek words are presented in italics. The principal exceptions are *po rukam*, *posrednik*, *brigada*, *firma*, *harem* and *dolya*, since these words are frequently used or have a central place in the paper.

Notes

1. The construction sector is in its quasi totality male-dominated, which is the reason why we refer to people in this article as “he,” instead of using a more gender-sensitive formula.
2. All names are pseudonyms.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by Vetenskapsrådet [grant number 437-2013-7344].

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