Uzbek Migrant Workers in Russia

A Case Study

Uzbekistan became an independent state in 1991 following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Like other newly independent post-Soviet states, Uzbekistan faced the complex task of building a new nation-state. Following on the heels of global (Western) good governance discourses, the political leadership of Uzbekistan made multiple bold claims about its strong commitment to the ideals of democracy, market economy, human rights, and the rule of law as well as its intention to dismantle Soviet-style governance (see Perlman and Gleason 2007). Simultaneously, Uzbek authorities made clear that the governance system, while adhering to global standards, would also employ Uzbekistan's ancient traditions, rich Islamic heritage, and centuries-old administrative traditions in its nation-building project (Karimov 1993). Many international organizations, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), promptly geared their development programs toward Uzbek authorities' reform agenda, thereby financing and initiating numerous good governance, market economy, and human rights projects.

But the complex and multidimensional nature of the challenges to political stability that Uzbekistan faced in the 1990s, for various reasons, rendered the government skeptical of genuine democratization and market reforms. The need to prioritize political stability over reforms was justified by the unstable political situation in Central Asia during that time. This included ethnic clashes between Uzbeks and Meskhetian Turks in 1989, ethnic conflicts between Uzbek and Kyrgyz people in southern Kyrgyzstan in 1990, and the civil war in neighboring Tajikistan between 1992 and 1997 (Warikoo and Norbu 1992; Fane 1996; Megoran 2017). Consequently, Uzbek authorities made it clear from the beginning that the "big bang" or shock therapy approach to transition would not suit Uzbekistan (Ruziev,

Ghosh, and Dow 2007). Instead, Uzbekistan adopted a gradualist approach, maintaining Soviet-era welfare policies and centralized control over the priority sectors of the economy (Spoor 1995). Thus, Uzbekistan continued to depend on imported consumer goods, currency controls, and the exploitation of rural labor. Authorities understood that a rapid transformation of the economy would affect the lives of millions, likely leading to social unrest. Hence, the Uzbek model of transition clearly reflected concerns regarding political stability and the peculiarities of the postplanned economy. In general, preserving economic stability and social and political order became the overarching rationale for rejecting all manner of economic and political reforms recommended by international institutions and for developing a strict border regime (Fumagalli 2007).

Notably, during the early years of its transition Uzbekistan achieved small yet positive and persistent economic growth because of its favorable economic conditions. These included the dominance of agricultural production, a low level of initial industrialization, and a rich natural resource base (Zettelmeyer 1998). Uzbekistan suffered less from the transition-associated depression than its Central Asian neighbor-states and was among the first to report positive output growth for the first time in 1996 (Spechler 2002). Interestingly, the cumulative decline in GDP between 1989 and 1996 remained lowest in Uzbekistan among all former Soviet republics. Uzbekistan did fairly well in terms of providing a social safety net, alleviating poverty, and limiting spending cuts in education and health care, particularly during the mid-1990s (Pomfret 2000; Johnson 2007). Soviet-style centralized economic management and strong social protection measures appeared successful during the transition period, since they prevented a large decline in outputs and served to maintain a reasonable standard of living. Furthermore, the agricultural sector prevented an increase in unemployment by providing job opportunities in rural areas. In this respect, during the early years of the transition, Uzbekistan maintained Soviet-era welfare policies and centralized control over the priority sectors of the economy, since these policies contributed considerably to its political stability and security.

But the gradual reform strategy appeared to serve as a short-term remedy. Although the gradualist approach to transition helped prevent a sharp loss to output and a consequential rise in unemployment and social unrest during the early years of the transition, by 2000 it had become clear that the economy had stagnated (Ruziev, Ghosh, and Dow 2007). This largely resulted from an active government intervention creating significant administrative barriers and a high tax burden, thereby causing high transaction costs for national businesses and fueling the informal economy (Ergashev et al. 2006). As Kandiyoti (2007, 44) maintains, the partial market reforms the government implemented in pursuit of stability resulted paradoxically in the inefficient allocation of resources and widespread corruption, requiring increased recourse to coercion. The centralized

management methods negatively affected the agricultural sector in particular, evidenced by the government's intervention in the cotton sector by redistributing income from agriculture. This redistribution served to develop industries that produced substitutes to imports. Since agriculture traditionally formed the main shock-absorbing structure in rural areas, the reallocation of resources from agriculture to other industries negatively affected the rural population's standard of living (World Bank 1999; Ilkhamov 2004). Simultaneously, the government took a series of severe measures to liquidate—or formalize—informal economic activities (bazaars and petty cross-border trade), providing alternative means of survival for hundreds of thousands of people (Ilkhamov 2013). This left little room for informal income-earning strategies. While the Uzbek economy was categorized as experiencing above-average growth rates (about 7 to 8 percent) since 2004 (IMF 2012), these indicators hardly reflected everyday life in Uzbekistan, where many people, especially in rural areas, struggled to make ends meet (Ruziev, Ghosh, and Dow 2007; Ilkhamov 2013). Eventually, such developments compelled millions of Uzbek people to resort to labor migration as their primary livelihood strategy.

Russia stands as the primary destination for Uzbek migrant workers because of its visa-free regime, its relatively better wages, and the high demand for foreign labor (Laruelle 2007; Urinboyev 2016). Because the economies of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have no extractive sectors, Kyrgyz and Tajik migrants arrived in Russia earlier (late 1990s and early 2000s) than the inhabitants of resource-rich Uzbekistan, where labor migration gained massive traction only in the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century (Abashin 2014). Despite its relatively late arrival, Uzbekistan is normally ranked first among the post-Soviet countries in terms of remittances sent from Russia. According to statistics from June 2019, nearly 2.2 million Uzbek citizens were present within the territory of the Russian Federation (RANEPA 2019b). Currently, Uzbek migrants are dispersed across various regions of Russia, from Kaliningrad and Moscow to Vladivostok (Tolipov 2016). The great majority of Uzbek migrant workers are young, low-skilled men with a secondary school education. The majority of migrants originate from the densely populated and impoverished Fergana Valley, where the unemployment rate remains high (Laruelle 2007). As a result of this male-specific out-migration, many villages in Uzbekistan are nearly empty during the migration season (from April to November), inhabited primarily by women, elders, and children dependent on remittances sent from Russia (Urinboyev 2016). Uzbek migrants work primarily in the construction sector (23 percent), retail trade (18 percent), and service industry (19 percent), as well as in agriculture, industry, and transportation (Chikadze and Brednikova 2012). *Koiko mesto* (a mattress-sized sleeping space) in a shared apartment stands as the most common accommodation among migrants. Typically, migrants share an apartment with up to 20 people they only met after their arrival to Moscow (Demintseva 2017). Owing to high accommodation costs and precarious working conditions, migrants rarely bring their spouses to Russia;

instead, women remain alone with their children and in-laws and assume responsibility for many duties previously fulfilled by men (Reeves 2011). In turn, migrants send their earnings to their left-behind family on a monthly basis, typically covering their living expenses and securing other substantial needs, such as building a new house or buying a car, or to pay for life-cycle rituals, medical treatment, or education (Ilkhamov 2013).

Accordingly, these post-Soviet migratory trends reflect the social changes currently taking place in both Central Asia and Russia (Ruget and Usmanalieva 2008; Schmidt and Sagynbekova 2008; Hiwatari 2016; Urinboyev 2018a). 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 also become meeting places for migrants during important social events and holidays. These migratory flows also carry important implications for migrant-sending communities in Uzbekistan as millions of Uzbeks (primarily men) 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 modernization policies (Levi 2007). But we can no longer divide the Central Asian nations into settled and nomadic categories. Today, in both urban and rural areas of Uzbekistan labor migration has become rather normal—that is, it is a widely accepted livelihood strategy used by households to secure their basic needs and to generate resources for life-cycle events, construction, and entrepreneurial projects. 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.

The initial flow of Uzbek labor migration to Russia (in the late 1990s and early 2000s) was dominated by migrants with a good knowledge of the Russian language and a shared Soviet experience. By the late 2000s, however, migration flows became massive and changed in terms of the age composition and cultural background, bringing primarily a younger generation of migrants with no Soviet experience and a poor knowledge of both the Russian language and cultural norms (Nikiforova and Brednikova 2018). This new generation of migrants can be called the "children of the 1990s or post-Soviet era," since they have a

considerably different mentality and ideas than earlier migrants who experienced Soviet times. This young migrant labor force sought primarily to earn as much money as possible in the short-term and then return home. Hence, the majority of Uzbek migrants did not seek to secure permanent residence nor to integrate into Russian society (see also Streltsova 2014). Even those migrants who received a permanent residence permit in Russia viewed their situation as "temporary" and maintained daily contact with their family and *mahalla* (local community) through smartphones and social media (Abashin 2014). Thus, "permanent temporariness" emerged as a lifestyle for Uzbek migrants and their left-behind families and communities.

Uzbek migrants do not have their own social infrastructure, such as special districts, shops, cafés, bazaars, or any other public places where they can meet and socialize in their free time. Naturally, hundreds of cafés offer Uzbek food in large Russian cities, and we can assume that these sites provide a platform by which Uzbek migrants may establish their own social infrastructure. But these cafés are scattered widely across cities and are not tied to specific areas, meaning migrants use these venues only for special occasions, such as to celebrate holidays, weddings, or birthdays (Demintseva 2017). Migrants usually work long hours without any days off in different parts of the city, which leaves little or no time for physical meetings with their village and *mahalla* networks. Another factor contributing to the absence of migrant social infrastructure is the corrupt policing practices that compel migrants to avoid public places. Given that the majority of Uzbek migrants remain undocumented or in a semilegal status and work in the shadow economy without formal employment contracts, Russian police officers can easily extort money from them. Even if migrants possess all of the documents required by the law, they are often asked for bribes when stopped by the police on the street or in the metro. Because of these experiences, Uzbek migrants do not organize in public places and try to make themselves as invisible as possible and avoid interactions with state institutions.

Despite the lack of social infrastructure and physical meetings, however, Uzbek migrants have their own virtual communities and engage in transnational activities using smartphone-based social media applications such as Telegram Messenger and IMO. Accordingly, owing to the rapid improvements in communication technologies, Uzbek migrants have created permanent, smartphone-based transnational communities in Russia, which typically include migrants originating from the same neighborhood, village, or town in Uzbekistan. This implies that Uzbek migrant communities do not arise based on their ethnicity but rather based on the area of origin, which may include both Uzbeks and Tajiks from the same city, district, or village in Uzbekistan (Varshaver and Rocheva 2014). That is, norms, lifestyles, and relationships embedded in the specific village or neighborhood community from where migrants originate are reproduced and maintained in the context of Russia. Hence, Uzbek migrant communities usually include migrants

hailing from the same neighborhood, village, or town, which provides a fertile ground for establishing a high degree of social control, solidarity, and enforceable trust among migrants. Through these smartphone-mediated connections and networks migrants look for jobs and accommodations, receive assistance from their kinship and village networks, learn about the ways to maneuver around restrictions and corrupt police officers, and cope with the uncertainties of migrant life.

UNDERSTANDING UZBEK MIGRANTS' LEGAL CULTURE: PREMIGRATORY CULTURAL CODES AND EVERYDAY TRANSNATIONAL PRACTICES

Having existed under the Soviet planning system for more than 70 years, Uzbekistan embodies a peculiar blend of traditionalism and modernity. The ruling political elite remains quite secular and Westernized (in this case, Russified) given Uzbekistan's Soviet past, while a large portion of Uzbek society strongly adheres to religion, traditions, collectivism, and family and kinship norms (Poliakov 1992; Pashkun 2003). The everyday social order in traditional Uzbek society—including social positions, familial gender roles and hierarchies, kinship groups, and community—stems largely from patriarchal and collective values and norms, whereby an elder man decides the most important family and community affairs (Kandiyoti and Azimova 2004). The prevalence of traditionalism most likely results from the fact that Uzbekistan features a Muslim majority (nearly 90 percent 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. As we shift focus from macro-level understandings of Uzbek legal culture toward ethnographic analyses of everyday life and social processes, it becomes more apparent that the behavioral imperatives, expectations, and social sanctions emanating from religious and traditional structures and values shape the basic parameters of everyday life and social relationships (Urinboyev and Svensson 2017). This implies that many features of the "collectivistic culture," such as the collective identity, emotional dependence, in-group solidarity, harmony, duties, and obligations (Triandis 2018), can also be found within Uzbek culture. These processes become particularly visible when observing daily social interactions in the realm of the *mahalla*—a centuries-old traditional self-governance institution in Uzbekistan deserving special attention when examining Uzbek migrants' legal culture.

The term *mahalla* enjoys common use in Uzbekistan, referring to a community built around common traditions, language, customs, moral values, and the reciprocal exchange of money, material goods, and services (Urinboyev 2013). Most Uzbeks identify themselves through their *mahalla*. For example, if a native is asked where s/he lives, that person typically responds, "I live in *mahalla* X" (Noori 2006). Thus, the *mahalla* includes all of the people living in the same neighborhood regardless of their familial or kinship ties. In other words, in Uzbek

society, relationships stem not only from family and kinship norms, but they also rely on the informal norms and expectations generated by neighborhood proximity. In total, about 12,000 *mahallas* exist in Uzbekistan, and each *mahalla* contains 150 to 1,500 households (Urinboyev 2018b). *Mahallas* are led by an *oqsoqol* (leader) elected by residents. Because the state in contemporary Uzbekistan can no longer secure the basic needs of its population, *mahallas* now exist as informal welfare structures providing alternative access to public goods, services, and social protection measures (Urinboyev 2014). The cooperative behavior of *mahalla* residents relies on social norms that create order and increase group solidarity (Sievers 2002). Any failure to comply with *mahalla*-level norms might lead to informal sanctions, such as gossip, ridicule, humiliation, or even exclusion (Urinboyev and Polese 2016). Therefore, every resident attempts to conform to the social norms established within the *mahalla*.

Guzar (village meeting spaces), *masjid* (mosques), *choyxona* (teahouses), *gaps* (regular get-togethers), and life-cycle events serve as the key social and administrative spaces in the *mahalla*, where people meet on a daily basis and conduct the bulk of information exchanges (Rasanayagam 2002; Kandiyoti and Azimova 2004; Urinboyev and Svensson 2017). Typically, at least 12 to 15 residents can be found sitting in a *guzar*, regardless of the time of day. Since the *guzar* is a male-only place, women typically socialize either on the streets or inside households. Wedding ceremonies (*nikoh toi*) form another important social site at which all Uzbek people come together. In contemporary Uzbekistan most weddings share similar features: they are open to all *mahalla* residents, and 400 to 500 guests on average attend them. To turn down an invitation to a wedding is considered impolite. Each household in the *mahalla* is expected to take part in weddings and other ceremonies. The wedding ceremony in particular concerns the entire community, since it is arranged with the support of and resources from all *mahalla* residents. By arranging or attending a wedding, residents confirm their *mahalla* membership and engage in reciprocal transactions, since the wedding involves a great deal of exchange and reciprocity vis-à-vis money and material goods within kinship and friendship networks. Consequently, such a large number of transactions during weddings solidifies ties related to obligations and expectations within kinship and friendship networks, blending the moral aspects of social relationships with their material aspects. Therefore, weddings serve to illustrate key features of the social norms and hierarchies in Uzbek society: men and women sit separately at different guest tables, and the "best tables" are often reserved for people of influence, such as state officials, the police, highly educated people, successful businessmen, and wealthy relatives and friends. By carefully observing the placement and treatment of guests, we can easily compare one's social status and reputation to that of others.

Furthermore, life-cycle ceremonies not only constitute communal occasions but also activate networks of kin and neighbors enmeshed in ties of mutual obligation and reciprocity (Rasanayagam 2002; Urinboyev and Svensson 2013a).

These reciprocal relationships and obligations, activated and maintained through life-cycle ceremonies, ensure that neighbors and relatives can be relied on to help when *mahalla* residents experience hardships both "here" (in the village in Uzbekistan) and "there" (in Russia). Since *mahalla* residents regularly (typically daily) meet in these social spaces and attend most socializing events together, they have a mutually dependent relationship. These heavy social interactions produce a general expectation that each individual will help his/her family, kin, or *mahalla* members whenever necessary. Individuals who ignore or fail to comply with *mahalla* norms and collective expectations face social sanctions, such as gossip, ridicule, loss of respect and reputation, humiliation, and even exclusion from life-cycle rituals. Since people meet each other on a daily basis and interact regularly at social events, such interactions serve as a guarantee that social pressure and sanctions can be applied to an individual or his/her family or kinship group if they do not act fairly or do not help their neighbor or *mahalla* member. Thus, life-cycle ceremonies serve as key social arenas, where the "everyday legal order" is established, negotiated, and reshaped through reciprocal practices, social obligations, rumors, and gossip.

At the time of my fieldwork, from 2014 through 2018, in rural Fergana in Uzbekistan, I noticed that public confidence in the government had already evaporated owing to corruption, unemployment, and growing inequality. A widespread belief among Uzbek people held that the economy would improve in the post-Soviet period, as the wealth of the Uzbek people would no longer be sent to Moscow but would be retained locally and used for the welfare of the people. But very few Uzbeks reaped the rewards of independence. Because of a high unemployment rate and the absence of viable income-earning opportunities, millions of Uzbek families relied heavily on migrant remittances and felt compelled to send their male family members (husbands or sons) to Russia as migrant workers. Instead of continuing their education at the university, on graduation from secondary school or vocational college many young people choose to seek employment opportunities in Russia. Furthermore, the proportion of women migrating to Russia also increased. Daily conversations in Uzbekistan's rural areas revolved around the adventures of migrants in Russia, the amount of remittances, deportations, and entry bans. Most villagers use Telegram or IMO, enabling them to exchange daily news with village members working in Russia. In this way absent migrants remain "present" in their village through social media. While observing everyday life during my fieldwork, I also felt as though someone was always leaving for Russia, someone was waiting in Russia to receive them, and someone was returning home to attend a wedding or funeral. Hence, migration seemingly became a widespread livelihood strategy—that is, a norm for young and able-bodied men in Uzbek society.

Simultaneously, while I was observing daily social and economic relations in rural Fergana, it seemed as though state law remained nearly nonexistent. Rather,

people's daily interactions and social behavior appeared regulated by informal *mahalla*-based norms promoting an alternative version of how they should behave. While the state in Uzbekistan appears omnipotent as a result of its infrastructural and coercive capacity, it carries very little meaning in everyday life at the *mahalla* level. When observing how people get things done and interact with the state officials, it is difficult to experience the state or its laws as a coherent entity. What we observe instead is an enormous degree of informal exchange and reciprocity involving money, material goods, and services all carried out through noncodified but socially reproduced informal rules. Hence, the normative values enshrined in the state legal system has not been internalized and remains external to the everyday legal culture in Uzbek society. Consequently, the state (and its legal system) rarely constitutes the only actor in society, while *mahalla*-based norms largely shape the basic parameters of everyday social behavior. This indicates that if we aim to better understand Uzbek legal culture, we must delve deeper into understanding the *mahalla* norms and practices that determine the rights and wrongs regarding everyday social behavior. These *mahalla*-level norms, identities, reciprocal relations, and social sanctions continue to shape Uzbek migrants' lives even when they move to Russia. This means village and *mahalla*-based trust and reciprocity networks remain crucial both locally (in Uzbekistan) and transnationally (in Russia). Thus, Uzbek migrants import and adapt their premigratory cultural and normative repertoires to Russia, especially when they work and live under the conditions of a shadow economy requiring alternative forms of law and order. I describe these processes in the next section.

UZBEK MIGRANTS' STRATEGIES TO ADAPT TO A NEW LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

The state remains "absent" not only in Uzbekistan, where people employ *mahalla*-driven solidarity to create alternative public goods and services, but also in Russia, where the media frequently portrays Uzbek migrants as potential criminals and carriers of alien sociocultural and religious identities leading to widespread antimigrant sentiments in Russian society. Owing to these ever-expanding antimigrant sentiments in Russian society, Uzbek migrants live largely isolated lives with few opportunities to interact with the host society. Migrants' poor command of Russian language further exacerbates this isolation. Thus, migrants interact in the Uzbek language even in their workplaces, given the existence of migrant mediators who facilitate daily communication between Russian employers and migrant workers. Therefore, rather than integrating into the host society, migrants rely on alternative paths to adaptation, employing networks based on kinship, shared village origins, ethnicity, or religion (Urinboyev and Polese 2016; Turaeva 2018).

Many of the Uzbek migrants with whom I spoke were completely unaware of the existence of Uzbek diasporic organizations. This is not surprising given the

fact that Uzbek migrants are poorly organized and lack leadership. Some leaders of Uzbek diasporic organizations were suspected of being connected to organized crime or of being involved in preparing fake documents for migrants[1] (see also Fergananews.com 2016; Ozodlik Radiosi 2016). Uzbek migrants typically form a small social network, consisting of 50 to 100 people who all hail from the same district, village, or *mahalla*. Uzbek migrants often complained about the reluctance of Uzbekistan's embassy in Moscow to hear and address their grievances. Unlike the governments of neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which have attempted to establish legal mechanisms to protect their citizens in Russia, Uzbek authorities typically provide little or no support to migrants who experience problems with dishonest employers or corrupt police officers. Consequently, the Uzbek state's unwillingness to fend for its citizens has further contributed to the "illegality" of Uzbek migrants in Russia, compelling them to look for alternative avenues of legal adaptation and navigation. Since most of the Uzbek migrants I encountered worked in the shadow economy, they could not approach Russian state institutions because of their undocumented status. Even the migrants' terminology clearly reflected their precarious livelihood in Russia. That is, Uzbek migrants rarely used the word *migrant* to refer to their noncitizen status in Russia; instead, they used the term *musofir*, which provides a more contextualized definition of what it means to be a migrant worker in Russia. Unlike the more neutral "migrant worker," *musofir* refers to a person who works in a foreign country and experiences risks, hardships, and challenges on a daily basis. As one Uzbek migrant I interviewed summarized, "We are not living in Moscow, but we are struggling to survive here (*Biz bu yerda yashamayapmiz, vizhivat qilishga harakat qilyapmiz*)." Hence, Uzbek migrants cannot rely on institutions in the host country, diasporic organizations, nor their home country's government.

The situation presented above should not, however, be understood as an attempt to depict Uzbek migrants as passive pawns constrained by structural conditions. Rather, Uzbek migrants have agency and can navigate around the restrictive legal environment in Russia. Owing to the complete lack of security, Uzbek migrants have created a diverse set of informal practices and structures that provide alternative (to state law) means to regulate their working lives, to cope with various risks and uncertainties associated with informal employment, and through which to seek redress for their grievances. As we will see in chapter 5, the emergence of informal, "street-based legal orders" serves as one relevant example.

The informal-document market provided another street-based informal channel enabling migrants to adapt to the restrictive legal environment through the production of "clean fake" Russian passports, residency documents, and work permits (see, e.g., Reeves 2013). Given the difficulties with obtaining authentic residence registration and work-permit documents, it has become quite normal for migrants to obtain various immigration and "legalization" documents from intermediaries operating in areas near railway and metro stations. Moscow's

Kazansky railway station stands as the most popular "legalization" site among migrants, where it is possible to buy numerous immigration documents, including a fake Russian passport. Consequently, the emergence of these "street-based informal adaptation channels" in the Russian migrant labor market results not simply from poorly implemented laws and dysfunctional institutions but also from the existence of a parallel world of migrants in Russia based on its own economy, legal order, and adaptation mechanisms (Urinboyev 2016; Urinboyev and Polese 2016). These examples allow me to argue that the legal adaptation of migrants in weak rule-of-law regimes such as Russia must be understood not only through migrants' knowledge of existing laws, legal status, and engagement with formal institutions but also in terms of their knowledge of the street law and informal rules, connections to street institutions, and their ability to adapt to a corrupt environment.

In addition to "street-based legal adaptation" channels, Uzbek migrants also rely heavily on their village and *mahalla*-based trust and reciprocity networks. Migration under the conditions of legal uncertainty and precarity requires the reproduction and maintenance of transnational identities and relationships that act as forms of social safety nets when migrants face hardships. Accordingly, Uzbek migrants reproduced most of their village-level mutual aid activities in Moscow to compensate for the absence of formal protective mechanisms. Thus, among prospective migrants, traveling to Russia equates with joining their *mahalla* and village acquaintances there. Many villagers who were considering a "migrant career" in Russia (whom I met during my fieldwork in rural Fergana) imagined their future migrant life as integrating with their *mahalla* networks, which already extended to various Russian cities. Halil (45, male), an Uzbek migrant who worked in Moscow at the time of my fieldwork (2015), clearly described this:

> Even if we move to Russia, a foreign country, and stay there for five to six years, we continue to follow our old *urf-odat* [social norms], habits, religion, and way of life. If one of us gets into trouble, we quickly inform our mahallas and village members both here (in Russia) and there (in Uzbekistan) via Telegram [a smartphone application] or through an ordinary phone call. We, migrants in Moscow, quickly collect money and try to help our mahalla members. If you turn away and do not help your mahalla members, information about your egoistic behavior will quickly spread among migrants and also travel to your mahalla via the internet.

Smartphones and social media serve as means of reproducing and maintaining village-level identities, obligations, social norms, and relationships across distances. Uzbek migrants, for example, quickly informed each other and mobilized resources when someone fell ill, was caught by the police, needed to send something home, or desperately needed money. These smartphone-based translocal interactions proved crucial to migrants' survival and served as an alternative social safety net. Abduvali (38, male), an Uzbek construction worker in Moscow, explained how this worked:

We usually avoid public places, because there are hundreds of police officers on the streets, seeking to "milk us" [extort money from migrants]. Instead, we use smartphones and social media to resolve problems and socialize with our co-villagers in Moscow as well as to maintain daily contact with our families, mahalla, and village friends in Uzbekistan. It is Moscow, and things are unpredictable here; we rely on our mahalla and village connections when we get into trouble. We are all migrants here, so we cannot turn our backs when our fellow mahalla members are in trouble. But, in order to reach your mahalla members, you must always have a mobile phone with you, and you must memorize their phone numbers. For example, let's assume that you are a migrant worker who is caught by a police officer and brought to the police station. Normally, police officers keep you in a cell for a few hours and check your documents very carefully, a tactic used to further scare migrants. After finishing the check, police officers give you two options: (1) you can pay a bribe immediately and go home, or (2) if you have no money, the police officers allow you to phone your friends so that they can bring money and secure your release. The second scenario is more common, and you need to call your mahalla members for help. Therefore, you must always have your mobile phone with you. In some cases a police officer might allow you to use their mobile phone to contact your networks, but not all police officers are nice. If you do not have a phone with you and are caught by the police, there is a high risk that the police officers will refer your case to court for deportation.

Islam, the religion of a great majority of Uzbek and Central Asian migrants, also serves as an alternative system of belonging and adaptation to the hostile and xenophobic Russian environment (Aitamurto 2016; Yusupova and Ponarin 2016; Eraliev 2018; Turaeva 2018). Turaeva, in her recent publication on "imagined mosque communities in Russia" (2018), argues that Muslims in Russia view themselves as all belonging to one community since they identify themselves as Muslims, attend services at mosques, eat halal food, celebrate Eid, and share the same values. A large diversity of Islamic infrastructures can be found, such as mosques, alternative medical care, halal cafés, and networks of trust, assistance, and solidarity; here, migrants can also find refuge from daily racism and police abuse, and they can network to find employment and opportunities for education, health care, and other forms of social support (Turaeva 2018). Moreover, religion also offers consolation and comfort when migrants experience racism, as illustrated in the words of Muhammadsoli (33, male), an Uzbek mechanic in Moscow:

I was not religious before and regularly drank vodka. You know here in Russia vodka is cheaper than bread. Vodka offered me some kind of relief when I faced daily discrimination on the streets and in my workplace. But, after I started reading *namaz* (i.e., praying and becoming religious), my approach to life changed. I usually ignore when Russians call me "churka" [dumb] or "cherniy" [black] because I know that Allah is with me and I feel morally superior to these racist people.

Turning to the role of civil society, we see that the unionization rate among Uzbek migrants remains exceptionally low. This low rate most likely stems either from a

lack of knowledge among migrants about the existence of trade unions or from the low level of trust among migrant workers regarding the effectiveness of trade unions. Only 2 percent to 3 percent of Central Asian migrants are aware of the existence of the Trade Union of Migrant Workers (*Profsoyuz Migrantov*).[2] Another contributing factor lies in the absence of a trade union culture in the migrants' home countries, which affects their legal adaptation strategies in Russia. Interestingly, Uzbek migrants can more easily adapt to the corrupt environment in Russia and negotiate the bribe rate with police officers than make legal claims through trade unions and migrant-rights organizations. This legal behavior is unsurprising given that Uzbek migrants are socialized into the Uzbek legal environment, in which police corruption is commonplace (Urinboyev and Svensson 2013b). Hence, Uzbek migrants' premigratory cultural codes and experiences play a crucial role in their legal adaptation strategies once in Russia. Many of the Uzbek migrants with whom I spoke have experienced corrupt policing practices in Uzbekistan, meaning that they arrived in Russia with similar "legal baggage" given what they must deal with vis-à-vis corrupt Russian police officers. In other words Uzbek migrants already possessed the "street skills" necessary to negotiate the "rules of the game" when they come into contact with Russian police officers. Markovska, Serdyuk, and Sokurenko (2019) reported a similar observation in their study of Ukrainian migrant workers in Russia.

Being undocumented represents a way of life for many Uzbek migrants. Because Russian immigration laws are complex and constantly changing, it is nearly impossible for migrants to remain documented and follow the latest legal developments. This problem is further exacerbated by the arbitrary actions of Russian police officers, immigration officials, and border guards who view migrants as a source of *kormushka* (feeding troughs). Police officers understand that migrants carry fake or "clean fake" residence registrations given that they do not live at the address where they are registered. Police officers, then, use this as a means to extort bribes from migrants they stop by demanding to see their residence registrations and work permits. Even those migrants who possess all of the required documents are afraid of or reluctant to demand their rights (*kachat' prava*) when stopped by the police. Whereas Kyrgyz and Tajik migrants frequently challenge Russian police officers, Uzbek migrants tend to offer bribes to police rather than make legal claims. To some extent, these behavioral patterns are connected with the widespread police corruption in Uzbekistan where paying bribes to police for minor infractions has become something of a norm. Instead of demanding their rights, people in Uzbekistan solve their problems with the police by offering them informal payments (Urinboyev and Svensson 2013b). Subsequently, Uzbek migrants have drawn from their premigratory experiences and cultural repertoires when interacting with corrupt Russian police officers, who always look for reasons to extort money from migrants. Commenting on Uzbek migrants' legal culture,

Dima (32, male, police officer in Moscow), sarcastically explained how much easier it is to find a "common language" with Uzbek migrants:

> It is not so easy to extort money from Kyrgyz migrants, even if their documents are not clean. They demand their rights and resist until the end. Tajik migrants are also tough. If I stop them and then take them to the local police department [*otdel politsii*] for an additional check, at least 10 Tajik migrants come to the department to secure the release of their fellow countryman. They do so even when their countrymen are undocumented. But things are a lot easier with Uzbek migrants. I catch Uzbek migrants and their documents are in order. But, interestingly, Uzbeks immediately get 500 rubles from their pocket and give it to me. Therefore, an Uzbek passport is a joy for many police officers.

Thus, informality remains part and parcel of Uzbek migrants' daily life in Russia. On the one hand, Uzbek migrants carry their premigratory cultural and normative repertoires to Russia and draw on them as an adaptation strategy when dealing with the uncertainties and precarity of shadow economy employment. On the other hand, the Russian governance system, including the institutions and actors charged with enforcing immigration laws and policies, is corrupt and arbitrary, creating a space for various informal and illegal strategies. The combination of these two features—that is, migrants' legal culture and the host country's legal environment—produces a peculiar legal adaptation strategy that empowers and grants agency among migrants to navigate the system. Thus, I argue that in weak rule-of-law migration regimes such as Russia, migrants are not passive entities but have agency and display capacity to negotiate the "rules of the game." In turn, migrants use that agency, as well as the opportunities provided by the weak rule of law and the corrupt political system, to negotiate with informal channels to gain employment and other opportunities that are limited (to those with a legal status) or hard to obtain in the current legal framework of the host country. The "thick" description of these processes will be provided in the next chapters.