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Mobile entrepreneurs in post-Soviet Central Asia



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ABSTRACT

In this paper I present an analysis of a mobile entrepreneur and his transnational economic activities in post-Soviet space. I argue that the space of informal economic activities of mobile entrepreneurs are structured by trust-networks in the sense Tilly (2005) uses it. In this context the concept of *tirikchilik* (an Uzbek term for 'muddling through' or survival) which defines the space of informal economic activities is important to decipher. *Tirikchilik* unifies various economic activities which vary from trade, service delivery, middleman services, administration and any kind of activity that generates some cash.

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1. Introduction

'At the end of July, Moscow police opened a massive campaign in Russia's capital against irregular migrants, sweeping through street markets and other places where many migrants gather, and detaining people based on their non-Slavic appearance. According to media reports, over 4000 people have been taken into custody, including nationals of Vietnam, Syria, Afghanistan, Egypt, Morocco, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.' (Human Rights Watch August 9, 2013) <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/08/russia-mass-detention-migrants>.

The Newspapers that described the events of summer 2013 reported inhumane actions towards migrants in Russia performed by the Russian government and security services. These reports of human rights violations on a mass level continued until the end of August 2013. The raids on migrants happened mainly in the capital city of Moscow and St. Petersburg. In other parts of Russia there were one or two reports of informal raids of markets by youth gangs and other groupings of ethnic Russians against migrants. This sudden splash of violence was not expected, at least not in the form it took last summer (2013) in Moscow where thousands of migrants have been detained in temporary camps without electricity, no communications, appalling sanitation conditions, inadequate food, and lack of access to potable water. The reports bluntly called these camps concentration camps where crowds of people were herded without any correlation between the number of detainees, sizes of tents and number of beds available.

These events, initially taking place in Moscow and St. Petersburg, have produced chain reaction effect which continued in other big cities of Russia. They have marked a major turn in migration policy of Russia, reflecting certain attitudes towards migrants and migration on the side of both the government and the local population. It also escalated the already existing xenophobic attitudes and Nazi movements among the Russians. There is still large portions of migrants residing in the suburban regions of Russia who, most probably, do not face such a direct violence on a mass scale. Nevertheless, those migrants who work in bigger cities and face violence still need to redefine their strategies and either change their locations, moving to suburban regions of Russia, or just to return home. Now there are more restrictions on general mobility within the country, particularly on entrance into the country. However, it will take more time to figure out directions for migrants' strategies and regulations needed to implement political changes. Therefore, at this point it is difficult to say whether these changes have already influenced the patterns of survival strategies described here. The practices detailed in this paper have been established over a long period of time after a crash of the Soviet Union and its social security system, which marked the

point of reconfigurations of survival strategies. The above described events might affected the immediate configurations of migrants-entrepreneurs' operations and establishment of new routes and spaces for their practices of informal economic activities. What those events failed to do is to formalise/legalise these informal activities, which could be done through more open migration policies and creation of a more favourable environment for migrants in Russia. Recent violence against migrants does not help a migrant who exists and operates in the shadow economic and legal systems, but rather pushes him or her to darkness of more violence, lawlessness, uncertainty and despair.

The independence of the Central Asian states in 1991 was almost immediately followed by internal economic crises which left many people without hope for survival inside their own countries. Soviet welfare system ceased to exist and employment market became less attractive, since the average state salaries dropped below the subsistence minimum. Provision of the citizens was taken up by kinship and friendship networks of support. Consequently, citizens put more values and efforts to reciprocate those networks of support and avoided the state and its structures. Security became a number one preoccupation of ordinary people which they themselves called *tirikchilik* (an Uzbek term for 'muddling through',¹ 'making ends meet'). The term *tirikchilik* refers to economic activities of any person who is not on *davlat ishinda* ('state employment') which includes private businesses of any kind, formal and informal.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union able-bodied people have set into motion for search of employment and moved out of their homes. Russia was one of the most developed states and was also a visa free zone for the citizens of the former Soviet Union which made it attractive for most of the labour migrants from Central Asia. The only barrier for those migrants was/is the *propiska* regime (local registration) – a heritage of the Soviet state (Lyubarskiy, 1994). *Propiska* entitles its holder to social welfare and other benefits, while its absence throws a person out of the realm of state provisions and welfare support, in other words this person becomes illegal (Turaeva, 2012).² This applies often to mobile entrepreneurs who end up operating 'illegally' without a registration at their new place of residence. These circumstances, coupled with new economic challenges, contribute to the formation of informal economic niches and economic networks of trust.

The paper aims to decipher practices of informal economic activity which is locally known as *tirikchilik*.³ By putting the concept of *tirikchilik* at the centre, I consciously transcend the boundaries between the "first" and "second" or "formal" and "informal" economies (Cassel and Cichy, 1986; Tanzi, 1980; Tokman, 1992; Tripp, 1997; Paciotti and Mulder, 2004; Lindley, 2005; Little, 2003; Reno, 2000; Duffield, 2001; Roitman, 2004; Meagher, 2010; Lund, 2007). Rasanayagam (2002) has already argued that in post-Soviet Uzbekistan economic activities of any kind that generate income cannot be categorised with simple dichotomies such as formal and informal. Rasanayagam (2011:681) states that post-Soviet period was characterised by 'general informalisation of state, society and lifeworlds following the collapse of the Soviet Union' and 'informal economic activity is just one expression of' it. Informal economic activities cannot be understood in relation to a formal economy as it 'does not emerge from and exist in relation to formal political and economic structures' (Rasanayagam, 2011:682).

I argue that informal economic activities of mobile entrepreneurs constitute an order locally known under the term of *tirikchilik*. Focusing on the constitution of this space I consciously avoid the trap of finding boundaries between formal and informal economies or definition of what is legal and what is illegal. Instead I reconstruct trust networks (Tilly, 2004) within which mobile entrepreneurs establish, what I call, micro-orders of *tirikchilik*. Mobile entrepreneurs negotiate between the limits of legal and illegal and operate within and across formal and informal fields of local and transnational economies. The *tirikchilik* orders are defined by their own norms and social order which go beyond the national boundaries of a single country. These norms and forms of order are influenced by kinship, friendship and other relations of power and dependence. The authority to regulate this space derives from the status held within these trust networks and the rules are enforced by means of obligations, duties, dependencies and other shared beliefs.

The data used for this paper was mainly collected from all Central Asian states excluding Tajikistan, while based in Uzbekistan during 2005–2006. Informal conversations during a short stay in Moscow as well as interviews in Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Kirgizstan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) with mobile entrepreneurs who had visited not only Russia but also Kirgizstan and Kazakhstan complemented the material used for this article. Most of the interviewed were ethnic Uzbeks who

¹ I have not initially referred to Lindblom's theory of 'muddling through' when describing the practices of *tirikchilik*. 'Muddling through' was more a translation of the emic term rather than analysis in terms of 'muddling through' theory of Lindblom (1959). However, after studying Lindblom's model of decision making processes with 'muddling through' approach, these are in fact similar principles which mobile entrepreneurs follow when making their decisions. The basic rule of 'muddling through,' according to Lindblom (*ibid*), is to make choices not according to the designated rules but rather pragmatically compare the means and desirable ends, not necessarily the outcome. The strategies employed during this kind of decision making are always adapted to the current context and environment and not necessarily to prescribed rules. The term used by Lindblom 'muddle through' refers to the incremental character of the choices taken by public administrators. In the eyes of those who have to find somehow their ways in making right choices, in this particular case, economic choices, the entrepreneurs whom I describe in this paper call it as a way to survive under the current conditions.

² Hill 2004; Mansoor and Quillin 2006; Kursad 2008; Isabaeva 2011 studied Central Asian migration in Russia. Russia is now the number two among all migrant receiving countries in the world, and Central Asia is one of the regions which economy depends increasingly on remittances sent from abroad (IOM, 2005:397).

³ Different terms are though used by non-Uzbeks with the similar meaning which varies from nation to nation. For example the most frequent term used by Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Uzbeks from Turkmenistan, with the similar meaning was *biznes* (which I have at least encountered during my informal enquiries about the occupation and sources of income from those who were relatively mobile and did not have a permanent working place 'at home').

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