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# Ethnicity, Migration, and Digital Labor: Mobile Phone Technology Use Among Uzbek Migrants

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## Summary

Smartphones and social media have become inextricable parts of our daily lives. The everyday lives and communication practices of migrant workers are particularly affected by these global technological developments. Such global developmental trends are especially visible within the growing body of scholarly literature on migrant transnationalism and technology, where mobile phones are examined as central drivers of migrant transnationalism. However, the bulk of the existing literature on “migration and mobile phone technology” focuses on the case studies of immigrant communities living in Western democracies (e.g., the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Australia). Given the sociopolitical and cultural differences between Western and post-Soviet contexts, we cannot assume that theoretical insights and tools developed in Western contexts are fully applicable in the Russian context.

The Russian context provides intriguing insights to “migration and mobile phone technology” debates given its undemocratic regime, xenophobic environment, corrupt legal system, and draconian immigration laws and policies that leave little room for migrant transnational activism and collective mobilization. Notwithstanding these structural barriers, migrants in Russia are resilient actors and have developed alternative coping strategies by producing smartphone-mediated transnational communities and identities, usually centered around migrants who hail from the same village and community. Accordingly, within the Russian context, smartphones and social media serve not merely to maintain daily transnational communication (i.e., being “here” and “there”), but, more importantly, represent tools for building a tight-knit community and are crucial to migrants’ daily survival and livelihoods in a repressive and xenophobic environment. These processes not only encompass coping strategies and communicative practices that take place within the migrant labor market (“outside world”) but also touch upon the lives of migrants serving prison sentences in Russia’s penal institutions (“inside world”). In this sense, smartphones provide a virtual platform for various risk-stretching activities and establishing social safety nets otherwise unavailable from the migrants’ home and host countries.

**Keywords:** digital labor, migration and technology, race and ethnicity communication, Russian migration regime, smartphones, social media, Uzbek migrants

**Subjects:** Race, Ethnicity, and Communication

## Introduction

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Smartphones and social media have become inextricable components of our daily lives. The everyday lives and communication practices of migrant workers are particularly affected by these global technological developments. Furthermore, the rapid proliferation of smartphones has significantly shaped migrants' communication practices, enabling them to maintain daily cross-border connections more affordably and more intensively than ever before (Alencar et al., 2019; Awad & Tossell, 2021; Gillespie et al., 2018). Equipped with smartphones and social media applications, migrants are "simultaneously situated" in multiple geographically, culturally, and legally distinct worlds, thereby blurring the line between "here" and "there" (Aricat, 2015; Madianou, 2012; Nedelcu, 2012).

These global trends are particularly visible within the growing body of scholarly literature on migrant transnationalism and technology, where mobile phones are examined as central drivers of migrant transnationalism (Aricat, 2015; Licoppe, 2004; Nedelcu, 2012; Vertovec, 2004). Studies have not only explored the role of mobile phones in increasing the frequency and intensity of migrants' transnational communication practices (Bacigalupe & Cámara, 2012; Perkins & Neumayer, 2013), but they have also investigated their empowering effects in terms of providing new possibilities for maintaining emotional bonds within transnational families (Benítez, 2012), long-distance relationships (Aguila, 2009), and "mobile-phone parenting" (Madianou, 2012). However, critical views, often from the fields of anthropology and cultural studies, have also shown that the availability of mobile phones can accentuate social pressures on migrants by left-behind family members as well as exert control from home-country governments. Examples include the extensive surveillance of migrants by their home-country governments through the monitoring of their online postings, blogs, and newsgroups (Bozzini, 2015); family tensions and conflicts between migrants and their left-behind family members (Baldassar, 2008); increasing financial pressure on migrants (Hunter, 2015); and jealousy within transnational couples (Hannaford, 2015) triggering high levels of emotional strain on relationships (Wilding, 2006).

This article, situating itself within the "mobile phone technology and migrant transnationalism" literature, intends to contribute to these scholarly debates by providing novel empirical and theoretical insights on the use of mobile phone technology by migrants in the context of authoritarian regimes. More specifically, it will explore the daily smartphone-mediated communication practices of Uzbek migrant workers in Russia, the largest migrant community in Russia. It places specific emphasis on understanding the role of smartphones in shaping migrants' transnational identities and practices, daily coping strategies, and risk-sharing practices. The central thesis of the article is that, within the Russian context, smartphones and social media serve not merely to maintain daily transnational communication (i.e., being "here" and "there"), but, more importantly, represent tools for building a tight-knit community and are crucial to migrants' daily survival and livelihoods in a repressive and xenophobic environment. These processes encompass not only coping strategies and communicative practices that take place within the migrant labor market ("outside world") but also touch upon the lives of migrants serving prison sentences in Russia's penal institutions ("inside world"). In this sense, smartphones provide a virtual platform for various risk-stretching activities and establishing

social safety nets otherwise unavailable from the migrants' home and host countries. In presenting this argument, the article contributes to "mobile phone technology and migrant transnationalism" scholarship in two distinct ways.

First, the article presents novel empirical material on the use of mobile phone technology by Uzbek migrants in Russia. Although Russia has become one of the five largest recipients of migrants worldwide over the last two decades (The United Nations Population Division, UNPD, 2017), with the exception of few studies (e.g., Ruget & Usmanalieva, 2019; Urinboyev, 2017, 2018, 2021), not much has been said about the interconnections between mobile phone technology and migrants' transnational livelihoods and communication practices in the Russian context. The bulk of the existing literature on "migration and mobile phone technology" focuses on the case studies of immigrant communities living in Western democracies (e.g., the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Australia). Given the sociopolitical and cultural differences between Western and post-Soviet contexts, we cannot assume that theoretical insights and tools developed in Western contexts are fully applicable in the Russian context. In this regard, the Russian context provides intriguing insights given its undemocratic regime, xenophobic environment, corrupt legal system, and draconian immigration laws and policies that leave little room for migrant transnational activism and collective mobilization (Matusevich, 2015). Notwithstanding these structural barriers, migrants in Russia are resilient actors and have developed alternative coping strategies by producing smartphone-mediated transnational communities and identities, usually centered around migrants who hail from the same village and community.

Second, migrants' aforesaid smartphone-mediated communicative practices also extend to Russia's penal institutions, where a large number of Central Asian citizens/migrants serve prison sentences. Legally, the use of smartphones and internet by prisoners are strictly forbidden. But, given that corruption is commonplace in many Russian penal institutions, prisoners can obtain smartphones through various informal channels. This implies that migrants/prisoners, equipped with smartphones and social media applications, are part of the daily life and power relations inside the prison, while simultaneously participating in daily processes outside the prison walls, thereby making outside and inside worlds a single arena for social action. As a result, the conventional understanding of the prison as a "total institution" (Goffman, 1961) is not applicable in the Russian penal space, where the physical boundaries between "inside" and "outside" worlds (Hammersley, 2015) are blurred due to the availability of mobile phone technology. Accordingly, the exploration of these processes contributes new insights not only to "mobile phone technology and migration" scholarship by showing how mobile phones enable migrants to be simultaneously situated in multiple worlds, but it also has conceptual implications for debates in penal sociology about the relations between "inside" and "outside" worlds (Hammersley, 2015; Moran, 2013; Tucker et al., 2019; Turner, 2016)

The aforesaid issues are examined through the ethnographic study of Uzbek migrant workers in Russia and their daily smartphone-mediated transnational ties and interactions within "outside" (migrants working in the Russian labor market) and "inside" (migrants serving sentences in Russian prisons) environments. The article is based on extensive multisite ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Moscow, Russia, and the Fergana Valley of Uzbekistan

between January 2014 and September 2020, which involved ethnographic interviews with (a) Uzbek migrants working in Moscow and (b) Uzbek migrant ex-prisoners who served prison sentences in Russian penal institutions.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. First, it presents the sociopolitical and legal context of the migrant labor market in Russia, allowing for an understanding of the nuances of the Russian migration regime as well as the basic characteristics of the case study group—that is, Uzbek migrants. It then describes the fieldwork context and presents the ethnographic material and analysis, outlining the implications of the ethnographic material for migration and technology debates, and, more broadly, for migration studies. Finally, the study's theoretical and empirical contributions are highlighted.

## Uzbek Migrant Workers in Russia

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Russia has become one of the main migration hubs globally following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The vast majority of migrant workers come to Russia from three Central Asian countries—Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Because the economies of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have no extractive sectors, Kyrgyz and Tajik migrants arrived in Russia earlier (i.e., the late 1990s and early 2000s) than inhabitants from resource-rich Uzbekistan, where labor migration gained significant traction only in the middle of the first decade of the 21st century (Abashin, 2014). According to statistics from June 2019, nearly 2.2 million Uzbek citizens were present within the territory of the Russian Federation (The Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, RANEP, 2019). Uzbek migrants are dispersed across various regions of Russia, from Kaliningrad and Moscow to Vladivostok. The vast majority of Uzbek migrants 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 & Polese, 2016).

Uzbek migrants work primarily in the construction sector, retail trade, and service industry, as well as in agriculture, industrial sector, and transportation. *Koiko mesto* (a mattress-sized sleeping space) in a shared apartment represents the most common accommodation among migrants. Typically, migrants share an apartment with up to 20 other people they met only after their arrival in Moscow (Demintseva, 2017). Owing to the high cost of accommodation and precarious working conditions, migrants rarely bring their spouses to Russia; instead, women remain alone with their children and in-laws in their home country 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).

Because Russia maintains a visa-free regime with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), almost all migrants from Uzbekistan (and other post-Soviet republics) enter Russia legally. However, despite this visa-free regime, Uzbek migrants must obtain residence registration and a work permit in order to legally work in Russia. Precious few individuals comply with these requirements given their low salaries, language test requirements, and the prohibitively expensive work permit fees (Reeves, 2015). This situation is further exacerbated by the notoriously corrupt Russian legal environment (Ledeneva, 2013), making it nearly impossible for Uzbek migrants to be “fully legal,” or documented, in Russia (Eraliev & Urinboyev, 2020). Even those migrants in possession of all of the necessary paperwork are not exempt from experiencing problems when they interact with law enforcement institutions (Dave, 2014; Round & Kuznetsova, 2016). Under such circumstances, the status of “legal” or “illegal” hinges upon migrants’ knowledge of “street life” and their ability to adapt to the weak rule of law (Urinboyev, 2020). Therefore, millions of migrants are compelled to work in the shadow economy, where they can survive without immigration documents (Turaeva & Urinboyev, 2021).

However, shadow economy employment often places migrants in a disadvantaged and precarious position, forcing them to pay bribes to Russian police officers as well as to experiencing fraud and deceit from employers and intermediaries. Consequently, a constant sense of insecurity associated with the fear of discrimination, injustice, exploitation, abuse, and illegality follows many Central Asian migrants in their everyday lives. Because of these daily insecurities and hardships, some Central Asian migrants experience multiple forms of abuse and injustices and may even end up in Russian penal institutions due to (often fabricated) criminal charges. Thus, there are large numbers of Central Asian citizens serving sentences in Russian prison colonies and correctional institutions. According to Russian media reports, which draw from official data from the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service (FSIN), as of July 1, 2017, Tajik migrants constituted the largest number of foreign prisoners in Russia, with 8,002 Tajik citizens serving sentences in Russian prisons. Uzbek migrants occupied second place, with 6,362 Uzbek citizens found in Russian penal institutions. Citizens of Ukraine (4,671 Ukrainian prisoners) and Azerbaijan (2,350 Azerbaijanis) occupied the third and fourth places.<sup>1</sup>

Another challenge faced by Uzbek migrants in Russia is the racism they experience in everyday situations across all social settings, including their interactions with government officials, police officers, and border guards. Expressing antimigrant sentiments have been normalized in the public discourse in contemporary Russia. The prevalence of such hostility is exemplified by the depiction of Central Asian migrants as “*cherniy*” (black), “*churka*” (dumb) or “illegals” or *gastarbaitery* (an adaptation of the German word for “guest worker,” carrying a negative connotation in the Russian context). These racist terms are widely used in the Russian media as well as amongst ordinary Russian citizens. However, it should be noted that the anti-migrant discourses and sentiments are not the outcome of post-Soviet developments in Russia. Sahadeo (2007, 2016) argues that even during the Soviet period, despite the highly propagated discourse of “*druzhba narodov*” (people’s friendship), Central Asians who worked on construction sites (*limitchiki*) in Moscow and Leningrad were perceived as *cherniy* and faced discrimination. But, as Sahadeo (2019) notes, pejorative terms such as *cherniy* (black) or *churka* (dumb) were not purely biological. Rather, the language of racism was a mixture of the categories of ethnicity, culture,



and social status, which resulted in a situation whereby the racist terms *cherniy* and *churka* were not specifically applied to a certain ethnic group and were perceived differently by different groups of migrants. For instance, migrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia who worked in informal and low-skilled jobs felt racism and discrimination more frequently than those non-Russians who occupied higher social status and who were less affected.

Accordingly, given their semilegal status and various risks emanating from their involvement in the shadow economy, Uzbek migrants maintain a low profile and do not congregate in public places. Today, anyone walking on the streets of Moscow can easily spot police officers checking the documents of migrants. Uzbek migrants try to make themselves as invisible as possible in order to avoid the attention of hungry police officers who often look for reasons to extort money from them (Urinboyev, 2017). As a result, despite their large presence in the Russian migrant labor market, Uzbek migrant workers are weakly organized, avoid the public gaze, and remain reluctant to express their ethnic and transnational identities in public places.

However, despite these challenges, rapid developments in communications technologies (i.e., smartphones and social media) have enabled Uzbek migrants to create forms of smartphone-based transnational identities, communities, and activities in Russia. These typically involve migrants from the same *mahalla* (neighborhood community), village, or town in Uzbekistan. Moreover, these transnational practices are distinct in the sense that they are conducted exclusively in a virtual environment, without involving frequent physical, face-to-face interactions amongst migrants. That is, Uzbek migrants' daily transnational place-making and communication practices occur via smartphones and social media. Such smartphone-based transnational communication practices are crucial to migrants' survival and provide alternative avenues facilitating adaptation in an otherwise-repressive sociopolitical environment, by, amongst other things, devising specific survival strategies, creating intragroup solidarity, distributing information about jobs, and building an informal social safety net to share livelihood risks and deal with emergency situations, such as organizing medical treatment, meeting urgent needs for cash to solve problems, or repatriating a deceased individual to their home country. Thus, an important feature of Uzbek migrants' everyday lives in Russia is the presence of a smartphone-based transnational environment with its own economy, legal order, and welfare infrastructure.

## The Field and the Context: Uzbek Migrants' Digital Labor in "Outside" and "Inside" Worlds

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Two case studies focus on the everyday life and smartphone-mediated communication practices of Uzbek migrants in Russia. The Uzbek migrants included in this article's research originate from the village of "Shabboda" (village name changed), located in the Fergana Valley region of Uzbekistan. Shabboda is one of the most densely populated villages in the region, with approximately 18,000 inhabitants. Many village residents rely on agriculture and bazaar trade to meet their livelihood needs. But, for the past 10 years, remittances sent from Russia have become the primary source of income for many households. Hence, most village residents have sons or close relatives working in Russia. Daily conversations in Shabboda revolve around the adventures



of village migrants in Russia, remittances, deportations, and entry bans. Most villagers owned smartphones with internet access, enabling them to exchange daily news with co-villagers working in Russia. In this way, absent migrants were “present” in the village through smartphone-mediated daily information exchanges between Shabboda and Russia. During my fieldwork, someone was always leaving for Russia, where someone else was always waiting to receive that person, and someone was always returning to the village to attend a wedding or funeral ceremony.

Viewed from the macro-level perspective, these migratory processes represent the manifestation of broader social changes taking place in Uzbek society. Since the Uzbek state is unable to provide employment opportunities, today in both urban and rural Uzbekistan migration has become a widely accepted livelihood strategy used by millions of households to secure their basic needs. Given the “absent state,” villagers frequently rely on social safety nets and mutual aid practices that take place within the realm of their family, kinship group, and *mahalla*. Villagers meet one another on a daily basis to discuss and arrange mutual aid practices, which, in turn, produce reciprocity, affection, shared responsibilities, and obligations amongst villagers. These reciprocal relationships produce economic and social interdependency between villagers, generating an expectation that villagers should help and support one another, particularly when they are in vulnerable situations. Thus, social pressure and sanctions can be applied to village members or their families and kinship groups if they are not acting fairly or not helping neighbors or village members who face a difficult situation. In an effort to avoid social pressures, villagers often try to help members of their family, kinship group, or *mahalla*.<sup>2</sup>

These village-level norms, identities, and mutual aid practices continue to shape the villagers’ life trajectories and choices even when they are in Russia. When talking to Shabboda migrants, it became apparent that their decision to migrate to Russia not only stems from economic considerations, but also connects to kinship relationships between migrants, return migrants, and nonmigrants. Villagers believe that going to Moscow means joining *mahalla* and village acquaintances there. Once they arrive at Moscow’s Domodedovo or Vnukovo airport, they are quickly picked up by fellow villagers. Thus, villagers imagine their future migrant life as integrated into their *mahalla* and village networks, which already extend to Moscow. More interestingly, the aforementioned communication practices and risk-sharing activities not only are observed in Uzbek migrants’ daily life and experiences (“outside”), but also extend to the Russian penal institutions (“inside”), where some Uzbek migrants have served or are currently serving prison sentences. These processes are mediated by smartphones and social media, an innovative digital practice enabling migrants to navigate the restrictive legal landscape and organize their precarious livelihoods. This article will illustrate the “thick description” of these digital communication practices, relying on ethnographic material that describes Uzbek migrants’ everyday lives and coping strategies within the “outside” (labor market) and “inside” (prison) contexts.

## Uzbek Migrants' Use of Smartphones in an "Outside" World

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The use of smartphones is quite common amongst migrants in Russia (Urinboyev, 2021). The majority of Uzbek migrants I encountered in Moscow possessed smartphones (e.g., Huawei, Samsung, or iPhone) with internet access, enabling them to use social media applications to exchange daily news with migrants residing in Moscow as well as with their left-behind families and communities in Uzbekistan. Telegram Messenger, WhatsApp, and IMO are the most popular and widely used social media applications amongst Uzbek migrants in Russia. Migrants hailing from the same community, village, or town in Uzbekistan usually create their own social media-based groups (i.e., Telegram or IMO groups), in which they share various news items, videos, and photos, as well as update one another with Moscow and village news and spread gossip and rumors when someone acts unfairly towards other migrants.

Like other migrant communities in Russia, Shabboda migrants—the migrant community I studied in Moscow—also had their own social media groups, groups in which they reproduced their village-based identities and practices. Although most Shabboda migrants did not share communal living spaces or worked in different places in Moscow, their daily lives were closely intertwined due to the frequency and intensity of their social interactions. Using smartphones and social media, they remained in touch with one another in Moscow and made video calls to their families and village networks in Shabboda. These daily digital communications not only enabled Shabboda migrants to be “here” and “there,” but also served as an alternative social safety net under the conditions of a shadow economy and legal uncertainty. Thus, the state was “absent” not only in Shabboda, where villagers used community-driven solidarity to create alternative public goods and services, but also in Moscow, where solidarity with and support from village networks compensated for the complete lack of security from Russian state institutions.

Given their precarious livelihoods in Moscow, Shabboda migrants “exported” many of their village-level mutual aid practices to Moscow in order to tackle the challenges of legal insecurity and shadow economy employment, such as the nonpayment of salaries, police corruption, exploitation and forced labor, street brawls and extortion, and many other informal practices that occur beyond the law. Smartphones and social media applications served as platforms for carrying out such activities. For example, Shabboda migrants quickly informed one another and mobilized resources when someone fell ill, was caught by the police, needed to send something home, or desperately needed money.

One incident I observed at the Russian–Ukrainian border illustrates how mobile phones enable Uzbek migrants to cope with the uncertainties and risks stemming from Russia’s restrictive migration laws. At the time of my fieldwork, thousands of migrant workers travelled to the Pogor border checkpoint via a shared taxi once a year to get a new exit–entry stamp in their passport. This is a standard legal requirement in Russia, which migrants must fulfill in order to extend their work permit. Pogor is a small town situated on the Russian–Ukrainian border, situated 505 kilometers from Moscow, or at least an eight-hour drive.

In late May 2014, Baha (29, male), a migrant from Shabboda, traveled to Pogar via a shared taxi, arriving at the border at about 8 in the morning. Baha and the other three migrants performed the standard legal ritual and exited the territory of Russia. But, when re-entering Russia, Baha was informed by the border control official that he had an entry ban, meaning he was not allowed to enter Russia. This created a catch-22 situation, since Baha was neither allowed to enter Russia because of the entry ban nor allowed to enter Ukraine given the tensions between Russia and Ukraine over events in Crimea. Baha had no option but to enter Russia, even if this was a criminal act. Not wanting to get stuck in the neutral zone, Baha approached the Ukrainian border official and asked him whether he could help him enter Russia. The Ukrainian border official answered that he could help Baha if he gave him 10,000 rubles (~US\$160). The Ukrainian official said that he could help Baha enter Russia through illegal, roundabout ways for 7,000 rubles (~US\$110).

Baha did not have 10,000 rubles with him, but he had a mobile phone which he could use to reach out to his co-villagers in Moscow. Baha quickly contacted his co-villager Misha in Moscow, asking him to come to Pogar and lend him money so that he could return to Russia. Eight hours later, his friend Misha arrived at the border checkpoint with the money and contacted the Russian border guards to pass the money to Baha, who waited on the other side of the border. In response, the border officials offered two options: (a) Misha himself could cross the border officially; or (b) he would give the money to taxi drivers with Russian citizenship (there were taxi drivers nearby who worked for the Russian border officials), and those drivers would give the money to Baha. Since Misha also had an entry ban, he could not consider the first option. Misha quickly made a deal with a taxi driver for 5000 rubles (~US\$80) as payment for his service and gave him 10,000 rubles to deliver to Baha. Misha knew that Baha might need more money, so he hid another 10,000 rubles inside the bread that the driver was also delivering to Baha. He hid this money because the taxi driver could have raised the fee if he knew that he was carrying that much money. This strategy worked well; Baha received 20,000 rubles (~US\$325) and bread to sustain him. After receiving the money, Baha passed 7,000 rubles to the Ukrainian border official. The Ukrainian border guard kept his word and guided him to where he could enter Russia illegally. This strategy was quite risky: if the Russian border guards caught him, he could have been either shot or faced a prison sentence. Baha was lucky, however; he crossed the border safely and immediately returned to Moscow with Misha.

This incident is one of the many examples showing how mobile phones shape migrants' life trajectories in crisis situations. Mobile phones are especially crucial in migrants' daily encounters with law enforcement agencies. Take the following example, revolving around being stopped by corrupt Russian police officers, as explained by Abduvali (38, male), a construction worker from Shabboda:

We usually avoid public places because there are hundreds of police officers on the streets, looking to extort money from us (migrants). Instead, we use smartphones and social media to resolve problems, socialize with our co-villagers in Moscow as well as to maintain daily contact with our families, *mahalla*, and village friends in Shabboda. It is Moscow, and things are unpredictable here; we rely on our village connections when we get into trouble. We are all migrants here, so we cannot turn our backs when our fellow villagers are in trouble. But, in order to reach your co-villagers, 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 a police station. Normally, police officers keep you in the cell for a few hours and check your documents very carefully, a thing usually done to further scare migrants. After finishing the check, police officers give you two options: (a) you can pay a bribe immediately and go home or (b) if you have no money, 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 co-villagers for help. Therefore, you must always have your mobile phone with you. A police officer might allow you to use their mobile phone to contact your co-villagers, 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 transfer your case to court for deportation.

The repatriation of a deceased migrant from Russia to Uzbekistan provides yet another relevant example of the digital labor migrants perform in their daily lives. Shabboda migrants, like other Central Asian migrants (Reeves, 2015; Round & Kuznetsova, 2016), experience difficult living and working conditions in Moscow, including discrimination, hazardous working conditions, and physical violence. They are, therefore, aware that the threat of death is ever-present in their daily lives in Moscow. As one Shabboda migrant said, "Death can be the fate of any migrant in Russia, since we are working in a *bespredel* [limitlessness or lawless] country where anything can happen." Cognizant of their own precarious livelihoods, migrants voluntarily contribute to repatriation expenses if someone from their *mahalla* or village dies from a work-related accident, disease, or attack from a neo-Nazi skinhead. Given these risks, Shabboda migrants tend to capitalize on their *mahalla* traditions (such as norms of reciprocity and solidarity, as well as good neighborliness) as a means to cope with the challenges of being a foreigner in Russia. When someone was killed, news spread swiftly amongst villagers as migrants immediately contacted their village networks via smartphones and social media. Because the threat of death was ever-present in migrants' lives, news of a death deeply affected everyone, and many migrants stepped forward to assist with the repatriation expenses. There was no standard amount for contributions, and migrants determined how much to contribute based on their financial situation and income level. As such, Shabboda migrants viewed their contribution to body repatriation as a form of insurance in the case of their own death, as illustrated in the following:

I always make a contribution towards body repatriation, because I know my co-villagers would do the same for me if I were to suddenly die from a work-related accident or disease. Body repatriation is a *hashar*—a collective, mutual-aid project to which everyone is expected to contribute. If you are greedy and do not contribute, there is a high likelihood that your body will not be taken care of if you die. Nobody wants his body to remain in Russia. We all want to be buried in our homeland. (Nodir, 26, male, migrant worker from Shabboda)

Accordingly, smartphones and social media serve as the everyday technologies for maintaining village-level identities, social norms, and relationships across distances. Other studies have similarly shown that mobile phones do not “fracture” localities, but extend and reproduce them in migrant-receiving societies (McKay, 2006; Velayutham & Wise, 2005; Vertovec, 2004). However, the literature on migration and mobile phones tends to focus on their transnational role, primarily exploring how the availability of mobile phones increases the frequency and magnitude of transnational interactions, blurring the distinction between “here” and “there.” The case of Shabboda demonstrates that smartphones and social media not only facilitate the intensity of everyday exchanges between Moscow and Shabboda, but also, and more importantly, reproduce a digital Uzbek village that regulates the daily mutual aid practices and behavior of village residents both locally and transnationally. Shabboda migrants’ smartphone-based mutual aid practices remind us of Turaeva’s (2018) work on “Imagined mosque communities in Russia,” where she shows the emergence of a variety of networks, groups, and institutions within and around mosques despite the existence of real mosque communities in Russia.

The role of these smartphone-based mutual aid practices proved especially pivotal during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021, which had dramatic and unprecedented effects on migrants’ everyday lives in Russia and beyond. As the number of coronavirus cases drastically increased, Russia, along with many other countries around the world, introduced strict lockdown measures to prevent the spread of the virus. While Russian regions had some degree of autonomy in defining the level of COVID-related restrictions, in Moscow, where the majority of Shabboda migrants worked, the city government introduced strict lockdown measures. As a result, a considerable number of Shabboda migrants, particularly those working in the service industry, factories, and bazaars, lost their jobs. This led to a catch-22 situation, whereby migrants neither had the savings necessary to cover their living expenses nor the possibility of returning to their home country due to travel restrictions introduced by the Russian government on March 18, 2020. Despite the COVID-related restrictions, some sectors of the Russian economy—notably, the construction sector—continued to operate. Since the majority of Shabboda migrants worked in the construction sector, they quickly assisted their unemployed co-villagers, providing them with temporary jobs and accommodation at construction sites. In cases when it was impossible to find jobs, villagers collected money, pooled their resources, and provided food products to community members who needed it. These mutual aid practices were possible owing to the extension of village-level social norms, expectations, and obligations that create a strong intragroup solidarity amongst migrants.

Similar mutual aid practices also existed during the Soviet times. As Sahadeo (2019) describes in his book *Voices from the Soviet Edge: Southern Migrants in Leningrad and Moscow*, Central Asians who worked in the informal economies of Moscow and Leningrad had their own networks of support and reciprocity (based on kinship, shared ethnic identity, or origin), invented various informal and illegal strategies to comply with the documentation requirements, made their own life choices, and used different practices and strategies of adaptation. Even though Central Asians were Soviet citizens from a legal standpoint, in practice they did not feel like they were working in their country's capital cities; rather, they associated themselves more closely with the home they left. Thus, the current situation and experiences of Central Asian migrants in Russia do not differ significantly from Soviet times, a historical continuity that Sergey Abashin (2021) convincingly illustrated in his recent review of two monographs on Central Asian migrants' experiences in Russia during the Soviet (Sahadeo, 2019) and post-Soviet periods (Urinboyev, 2020).

As will be shown in the section Uzbek Migrants' Use of Smartphones in an "Inside" World, migrants' mutual aid patterns and coping strategies have also been extended to Russian penal institutions ("inside") via smartphones. As noted in previous sections, millions of Central Asian migrants in Russia remain undocumented and are, therefore, compelled to work in the shadow economy, where they can survive without immigration documents (TASS, 2021). Given the precarities and uncertainties stemming from shadow economy employment, some Central Asian migrants either commit crimes or become victims of fabricated criminal charges initiated by Russian police officers under pressure from their superiors to produce a certain number of criminal cases each month. As a result, some Central Asian migrants land in Russian prisons, where they experience a new sociolegal environment with very different rules of conduct and social behavior.

## Uzbek Migrants' Use of Smartphones in an "Inside" World

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This section provides relevant empirical examples from fieldwork data, resulting from 29 ethnographic interviews with Uzbek transnational prisoners who served prison sentences in various penal institutions in Russia. Primary emphasis is placed on Uzbek migrants' use of mobile phones in the prison context and how that use affected their life trajectories and choices. In doing so, I rely on the case of Aziz (identified using a pseudonym), an Uzbek migrant ex-prisoner from Shabboda, who served a sentence at correctional colony "X" in the Moscow province between 2012 and 2018.<sup>3</sup> Using the case of Aziz, I aim to demonstrate the role of mobile phones in establishing a connection between the "outside" and "inside" contexts and how these digital communications identifiably impact the life trajectories and practices of Shabboda migrants in Russia.

Aziz (male, 32 years old) is from Shabboda in the Fergana Valley of Uzbekistan. After finishing vocational college, Aziz, like many of his co-villagers, arrived in Moscow as a migrant worker in 2010. Several villagers worked as middlemen in Moscow's construction sector, serving as gatekeepers to villagers seeking access to the Russian migrant labor market. Thanks to existing village networks, Aziz easily integrated into the local labor market in the Moscow province and joined the construction brigade led by the team leader (*brigadir*) Misha, who also hailed from



Aziz's home village of Shabboda. Although Aziz was physically located in Moscow, mentally and socially, he continued to live and work within the boundaries of his home village of Shabboda, since nearly all members of the construction brigade were his co-villagers. Aziz's main task was to install new windows in mid- and high-rise buildings, earning 30,000 rubles (US\$900 at the 2010 exchange rate) per month, an income considered relatively decent based on living standards in Uzbekistan.

However, Aziz's stable migrant life changed in 2012 due to his involvement in a bar brawl in the Moscow province, which led to criminal charges and a prison sentence. In February 2012, after finishing his daily work responsibilities, Aziz along with two Dagestani friends went to a local bar in order to socialize and have some fun. While Aziz and his friends were enjoying their vodka, a group of Russian youngsters (consisting of 7–8 individuals) sitting at a nearby table demanded that Aziz and his friends leave the bar immediately, calling them "*churka*," a typical racist slur that Russians use in relation to Central Asian migrants. This aggressive and racist attitude enraged Aziz and his friends, who had already drunk two bottles of vodka, and a violent brawl ensued between Aziz's team and the Russian youngsters. As a result of the incident, four of the Russians sustained broken bones include to the neck and arms, while Aziz's team were uninjured. Police arrived at the bar quickly, arrested Aziz and his friends, and then took them to a nearby police station. Later, they were all transferred to remand prison (a jail or pretrial detention center). After being held in remand for eight months, Aziz was transferred to colony X in the Moscow province in late 2012, and served his sentence until 2018.

In the post-Soviet space, both prisoners and ordinary people use the word *zona* to refer to prisons. Colony X is a strict-regime correctional colony, or *zona*, for men serving prison sentences for the first time (known in Russian as a colony for *pervokhody*). In the words of Aziz, colony X was a black *zona* (*chernaya zona*), where *blatnye*—informal power hierarchies represented by members of the Russian criminal world (thieves-in-law)—colloquially known as *polozhenets* or *smotriashiy* (representatives of the thief) and *barashnik* (head of the barrack) played decisive roles in determining "the rules of the game." The formal prison management structures, such as the *nachalnik* (head of the prison) and *menty* (a Russian colloquial nickname for police officers), had a limited impact on regulating prisoners' everyday lives and routines. Cigarettes and tea served as the main currencies in prisoners' daily transactions and relations. Each night, prisoners played cards (*qimor*) and generated income for the *obshak*, a mutual assistance fund amongst prisoners. But, prison management and power relations are different in so-called red *zonas* (*krasnaya zona*). In red *zonas*, formal prison management structures (i.e., reds) exercise full control, while prisoners must comply with the colony regime rules and work on a daily basis.

Because colony X was a black *zona*, prisoners enjoyed mobility inside the prison walls including access to mobile phones and the internet. Although mobile phone use was illegal in the *zona*, prisoners could use it at almost any time of day. However, due to the higher probability of *shmon* (police checks) during the day, many prisoners preferred to use their mobile phones at night, between 8:00 p.m. and 5:00 a.m. Furthermore, because mobile phone use was illegal, prisoners typically kept their mobile phones and other forbidden items in a *gashnik* (a secret hole or hidden place), which exists inside each barrack. Mobile phones entered the *zona* through two primary channels: (a) *menty* secretly carried mobile phones to the prison, hiding them in their jacket or



anus, and then sold them to prisoners through a *baryga* (reseller); or (b) mobile phones arrived through *perekid* or *bros* (throwing), whereby someone standing outside the prison walls threw the phone onto the prison territory. Given these tricky routes, smartphones remained prohibitively expensive inside the prison. For example, if a basic Nokia mobile phone cost 5,000 rubles (US\$125) in a store, a *baryga* sold it to prisoners for 15,000 rubles (US\$230). Smartphones were even more expensive. If the cheapest Chinese Huawei smartphone costs 13,000 rubles (US\$200) outside prison, it costs 30,000 rubles (US\$450) inside. The price of an iPhone could reach up to 150,000 rubles (US\$2,500).

Despite Aziz being locked up in a Russian prison, he continued to be a part of his village networks and social processes through mobile phone contact. Aziz had three SIM cards and used each for a specific purpose. One SIM card was used to make phone calls to his co-villagers and friends in Moscow. The second SIM card was designated for international phone calls, whereby Aziz used it to make phone calls to his family members in Uzbekistan. The third SIM card had a specific function, linked to Aziz's mobile wallet (*mobilniy koshelyok*), an electronic payment system in Russia allowing people to make payments and money transfers using mobile devices. Thanks to the existence of his mobile phone, Aziz maintained regular contact with both his co-villagers in Moscow and left-behind family members and community in Uzbekistan. Aziz also had access to the internet and enjoyed online life by updating his social media accounts (i.e., Facebook, Odnoklassniki, and VKontakte) and by watching porn when bored.

In black *zonas*, when a new prisoner arrives, he can choose between three main pathways in terms of determining his daily routines, barrack (living or dormitory blocks), and status in the prison. First, he can choose to work during his sentence and live in a "working barrack" (*rabochiy barak*) together with other working prisoners (*muzhiki rabotyagi*). Second, he can choose not to work and, thus, live in a nonworking barrack (*nerabochiy barak*), in which prisoners with an interest in a "thieves' world" (*zainteresovannyye muzhiki*) are held. Third, he can choose to cooperate with the prison's formal management and, thus, live in a "red's barrack" (*krasniy barak*) together with other prisoners who occupy the lowest position in the informal prison hierarchies given their cooperation with prison management. Prisoners who opt for the first two categories (working prisoners and prisoners with an interest in the thieves' world) were considered decent men (*poryadochnyye muzhiki*) according to informal prison norms (thieves' law).

After arriving in the *zona*, Aziz went through some tough challenges. Despite light torture and pressure from the formal prison management, Aziz did not give in and made it clear that he would not collaborate with the prison management. As a result, he was sent to a nonworking barrack, in which decent men and criminal authorities lived. Being part of such informal power structures, Aziz gained a deep understanding (*ponyatka*) of the thieves' law as well as established solid relationships with the *polozhenets* (the main power broker in the *zona*), a Muslim from Chechnya. Thanks to a shared religious identity, Aziz and many other Muslim prisoners approached the Chechen *polozhenets* with various requests.

However, being a decent man also implied that Aziz must follow the basic principles of the thieves' world. According to the thieves' law, prisoners with some status as decent men were expected to make a monthly contribution to the *obshak*. Many prisoners worked in *promzona* (a

prison's industrial zone) and received a salary each month, allowing them to make a monthly contribution to the *obshak*. This rule also applied to prisoners who lived in a nonworking barrack even if they had no stable source of income. Alternatively, they were expected to engage in some useful activities (*dvizheniya*) that would bring monetary and/or nonmonetary benefits to the *obshak*.

Despite Aziz living in a nonworking barrack, he was still expected to engage in some useful activity and bring some kind of benefit to the *obshak*. Aziz came up with an innovative idea: salary recovery, an activity that benefited both the *obshak* and himself. Being in the circle of *blatnye*, Aziz learned that the Chechen *polozhenets* were influential not only inside (prison), but also outside (on the street), often acting as a *qozi* (street judge) and enforcing unfulfilled promises or contracts when someone cheats others and acts unfairly. Aziz knew that many of his co-villagers working in Moscow often experienced problems receiving payment for their work. Since many Shabboda migrants worked in the shadow economy, they could not seek redress from formal legal institutions in cases of salary nonpayment. Therefore, alternative means of recovering their salary through street-level institutions and prison-based criminal authorities were the most viable options under the conditions of shadow economy employment.

The need for salary recovery was particularly high in the construction sector, an industry with a high concentration of undocumented migrants, and where many Shabboda migrants worked. Equipped with a mobile phone and three SIM cards, Aziz remained in regular contact with his co-villagers and other Shabboda migrants who worked on various construction sites in Moscow. Aziz's first case was with a group of six Shabboda migrants who worked on a construction site in Balashikha (a small town in the Moscow province). Their boss was a *posrednik* (middleman) from Uzbekistan, who, in turn, worked for a Russian construction firm. The employment relationship between all parties—Shabboda migrants, the *posrednik*, and the Russian construction firm—was based on a handshake agreement, implying that these transactions were informal and took place beyond labor and tax regulations. Shabboda migrants worked for the *posrednik* for five months, but they were not paid for their last two months of work, an amount totaling 360,000 rubles (about US\$5,500) collectively. When migrants asked the *posrednik* whether he was willing to pay their two-month back salary, the *posrednik* stated that the Russian construction firm was delaying payment, not him. They waited for two more months, hoping that the *posrednik* would pay their salary. But, he continued telling the same story. Thus, it became apparent that the *posrednik* was unwilling to pay the remaining salary, which led Shabboda migrants to call their co-villager Aziz with a salary recovery request.

After receiving his co-villagers' request, Aziz explained the situation to Chechen *polozhenets*, recounting all of the problems his co-villagers had experienced and politely asked the *polozhenets* whether he could help them recover their salary from the *posrednik*. In turn, the *polozhenets*, before taking on this challenge, asked Aziz whether his co-villagers would be able to stand by their story during the *razborka* (dispute settlement process) and whether they were ready to pay 20% of the disputed money recovered. After Aziz confirmed, the *polozhenets* asked him to provide the *posrednik*'s full name and phone number, the name of the construction firm, the exact amount of the salary in question, and the phone number of his co-villager who could speak on behalf of all of the affected migrants.

The next day, the Shabboda migrants received a phone call from the *polozhenets*, a conference call during which the migrants, the *polozhenets*, and the *posrednik* were all on the line simultaneously. Before starting the investigation, the *polozhenets* warned both the migrants and the *posrednik* to be honest and that they would be severely punished if they attempted to bend the truth. First, the *polozhenets* asked the migrants to describe what had happened and what claim they had in relation to the *posrednik*. Then, the *posrednik* was given the chance to respond to the migrants' complaint. The *posrednik* blamed the construction firm, stating that he also did not receive his own salary from the Russians. The *polozhenets* immediately interrupted the *posrednik*, stating that the migrants made an agreement with him, not with the Russians, whereby he was responsible for securing the migrants' salary regardless of other circumstances. The *polozhenets* did not continue the conversation any further, and quickly moved to the final settlement and ended the *razborka*.

As a result of the *razborka*, the *posrednik* was given a maximum of three days to pay the migrants' salary. In addition, the *posrednik* was also ordered to deposit 36,000 rubles (US\$550) to the *polozhenets*' phone number. The *polozhenets* made clear to the *posrednik* that his life would be in danger if these two payments were not made by the deadline. The Shabboda migrants were also reminded that once they received their salary from the *posrednik*, they must also deposit 20% of the salary recovered—that is, 72,000 rubles (US\$1,100)—to the *polozhenets*' phone number so that he could pass it on to the *obshak*. Not wanting to risk his life, the *posrednik* quickly paid the migrants' salaries and deposited the stated amount to *polozhenets*' phone number. The migrants also deposited money to the *polozhenets*' number that same day.

This incident granted Aziz the nickname “Aziz *reshala*” (Aziz the problem-solver) amongst his village network in Moscow. Since salary nonpayment was common amongst Shabboda migrants (as well as amongst other migrant communities in Russia), the demand for Aziz's assistance was quite high. Furthermore, given his solid relationship with the *polozhenets*, Aziz often helped his co-villagers when they experienced problems getting paid for their work. In return, his co-villagers deposited money into Aziz's mobile wallet on a monthly basis, thereby allowing Aziz to enjoy a relatively decent life in the *zona*.

Accordingly, Aziz and his co-villagers were situated at the center of a complex network of intertwining relationships. In Moscow's shadow economy, Shabboda migrants secured their salary through Aziz's connections with the criminal world, admired Aziz's *ponyatka* (knowledge of thieves' law), and referred to Aziz as *aka* (“elder brother”) regardless of their age difference. Aziz's capacity to solve problems for his co-villagers also allowed him and his family to occupy a higher social position in Shabboda. All of the social interactions described in this article, occurring both within the inside and outside worlds, were possible thanks to the use of mobile phones and the internet, which allowed migrants to cope with the legal uncertainties and multiple risks replete across precarious migration contexts.

## Discussion and Conclusions

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This article aimed to explore the role of mobile phones in shaping the life trajectories and livelihood strategies of Uzbek migrant workers in Russia. Empirically, the article relied on the case study of Uzbek migrant workers who (a) worked in Moscow's shadow economy and (b) served sentences in Russian penal institutions. Specific emphasis was placed on understanding how mobile phone-mediated interactions within both "outside" and "inside" environments shape the outcomes of practices Uzbek migrants engage in when in Russia. Hence, the article demonstrated that although Uzbek migrants avoid public places and try to make themselves as invisible as possible, they actively shape their host society through their innovative use of digital technologies, a phenomenon referred to in this article as a reproduction of a digital Uzbek village in Russia. The existence of such a mobile phone-based transnational environment helps migrants cope with the challenges of *musofirchilik* (being alien) and avoid or maneuver around structural constraints, social exclusion, racism, and the lack of social security.

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## Notes

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1. These official statistics indicate that foreigners make up roughly 3–4% (21,385 from a total prison population of 618,490) of prisoners in Russian penal institutions. FSIN does not regularly provide data on the number of foreign (noncitizen) prisoners in Russian penal institutions. The official data presented here are rather dated, and it is quite challenging to obtain up-to-date statistics on the number of foreign prisoners in Russian penal institutions. However, drawing from interviews with 29 Uzbek ex-prisoners, this article is an attempt to construct a rough overview of the ethnic and religious composition in different penal institutions. According to the interviewees, the proportion of foreign citizens in Russian penal institutions ranges between 20% and 40% depending on the region, with Tajiks and Uzbeks constituting the largest group of foreign prisoners.
2. Similar processes were also observed by Isabaeva (2011) in her study of labor migration and remittances amongst the people of Sopu Korgon, a village in southern Kyrgyzstan.
3. The number of the correctional colony is not indicated here in order to protect the anonymity of the interviewee.

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