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Debt-Based Trade, Social Norms, and Informality in Uzbekistan: Case Study of Rassiychilar in Rural Fergana

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Abstract

Debt-based trade and economic exchanges are becoming more and more widespread in the context of post-Soviet Central Asian societies. In the absence of viable state economic support, a functional banking system, and an effective legal system, trust-based economic exchanges serve as an alternative means for conducting micro-level businesses in Central Asia. The phenomenon of “rassiychilar,” which is the central focus of this article, is one of the intriguing examples of debt-based trade in rural Fergana, Uzbekistan. This debt-based trade involves a myriad of informal economic exchanges among various actors, locally and transnationally. The article argues that trust-based economic networks and debt-based trade serve as an alternative means of doing business in rural post-socialist contexts characterized by legal uncertainty, rampant corruption, and an inefficient economic and banking system.

KEYWORDS debt-based trade, informality, Uzbekistan, law and society, sociology of law

INTRODUCTION

After gaining independence in 1991, the political leadership of Uzbekistan, like in other post-Soviet states, made bold statements that the country would adhere to the principles of the rule

of law and a market economy in its development. At the same time, Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan's first president who ruled the country with an iron fist until September 2016, asserted that the transition to a market economy would proceed gradually and step-by-step rather than through the shock therapy approach. While this gradualist approach to market reform allowed Uzbekistan to bypass a steep rise in unemployment and prevent political instability in the 1990s, it proved counterproductive in the longer term, leading to inefficient resource allocation and widespread corruption (Ruziev 2021). The state's interference in all sectors of society and the bureaucratic rapacity of corrupt officials stagnated the economy (Ruziev, Ghosh, and Dow 2007). These processes eventually led to a high unemployment rate and impoverishment of large segments of the population in the 2000s (Ilkhamov 2001). Rather than securing the basic needs of citizens, Uzbek authorities gradually intensified state surveillance and cracked down on dissent, human rights activists, and Western-style civil society initiatives (Fumagalli 2006). As a result, the absence of viable livelihood opportunities created serious social problems, thereby compelling ordinary people to look for alternative survival strategies (Kandiyoti 1998).

Following the election of Shavkat Mirziyoyev as the new president of Uzbekistan in December 2016, the Uzbek government launched an ambitious reform program. However, the analysis of post-Karimov developments in Uzbekistan indicates that the reform initiatives were mainly limited to economic policies, akin to authoritarian modernization attempts, while many features and the legacy of the Karimov-era political and administrative system remain intact (Anceschi 2019). Despite the reform initiatives, Uzbekistan remains one of the least economically and financially developed countries in the post-communist world (Ruziev 2021). Social inequality further increased in the post-Karimov period, with wealth increasing among kleptocratic elites and business actors well connected to high-level state officials, while poverty and social inequality grew among the population in general, particularly in rural areas (Lasslett 2019).

Another contributing factor is the lack of access to formal finance and credit. Uzbekistan's banking sector continues to remain one of the least reformed and inaccessible sectors of the economy (Ruziev 2021). Often, bank loans are primarily offered to state-owned enterprises and joint ventures at preferential rates, while a large proportion of small and medium-size enterprises and individual entrepreneurs have little or no access to bank credits with lower interest rates (Holzhacker 2018). As the World Bank's (2023) firm-level enterprise survey data show, in Uzbekistan, only a small portion of enterprises have access to bank credit. In this

respect, a study by Ruziev and Midmore (2014) indicates that limited access to formal finance and high interest rates led to the emergence of informal credit institutions, namely urban money lenders in Uzbekistan, which mostly rely on social networks and informal practices.

Consequently, the government's failure to promote the rule of law, partial economic reforms, and the private sector's limited access to formal finance further exacerbated the social and economic inequality, thereby leaving the population with two main alternative livelihood strategies: either migrate to Russia, Kazakhstan, or Turkey as a migrant worker or resort to informal employment and extra-legal income-earning strategies. These processes led to a disjuncture between the state and society. Given that the state failed to provide formal income-earning opportunities, people reacted to these changes by devising "outside the law" coping strategies. When observing everyday life in Uzbekistan, particularly in rural areas, one may quickly notice that people increasingly rely on informal economic practices to make ends meet (Trevisani 2022). Thus, informality has become such an omnipresent phenomenon in Uzbekistan that, in a sense, it is all that there is (Rasanayagam 2011).

In light of these developments, debt-based economic relations and informal exchanges have become part and parcel of everyday life in Uzbekistan. Due to the absence of viable state economic support, a functional banking system, and an effective legal system, debt-based economic exchanges have become alternative means for conducting micro-level trade and businesses. The phenomenon of "rassiychi" (rural entrepreneurs/traders who export Uzbek agricultural products to Russia), which is the central focus of this article, is one of the intriguing examples of debt-based trade in rural Fergana, Uzbekistan. Even though rassiychilar (plural form of "rassiychi") operate in the rural context, their debt-based trade has a transnational dimension and involves a myriad of informal economic exchanges among various actors, namely entrepreneurs, intermediaries, local farmers, truck owners and drivers, and bazaar owners and racketeers in Russia. The lines of exchanges and power among various actors involved in this agricultural debt-based trade, from crop production to the market in which they are situated, are defined by uncertainty and risk.

At first glance, one would expect such an extended debt-based economy to be held together either by formal legal institutions (e.g., via legally binding agreements among different parties) or by cold hard cash (i.e., payment in cash is made at every step of the exchange). However, this important area of Uzbekistan's agricultural export (largely to Russia) is rooted in a series

of complex informal relationships rather than economic exchanges anchored in formal institutional rules. This implies that these debt-based exchanges are informal and conducted without signing a legally binding contract or cash payments. The analysis of these processes thus begs questions of how such an extended set of debt-based economic exchanges is sustained in a context without government monitoring; how it is maintained, negotiated, and enforced by parties involved in these exchanges; and what empirical and theoretical implications it has for the scholarly literature on debt-based trade and debt economies, particularly to those concerned with the Central Asian context. This study seeks to address these questions.

The central argument of the article is that what coordinate and sustain the aforesaid economic exchanges are not formal legal institutions or cold hard cash but are social norms and personal relationships that emerge in the flow of everyday life and social relations. In other words, rather than drawing a legally binding contract, all parties involved in this debt-based trade rely on a verbal agreement and handshake when setting the price of agricultural products, acquiring products from local farmers, renting trucks from wealthy businessmen, negotiating customs issues with the state officials, and selling products in Russian bazaars through the assistance of protection racketeers. Hence, the absence of legally binding relationships does not automatically imply that *rassiychilar*'s debt-based trade is unregulated and relies on the goodwill of parties involved in these practices. As Nordstrom (2000) argues, informal/shadow economic activities and networks are not a haphazard collection of people in ad hoc groupings. Rather, they are a complex chain of transactions that are highly coordinated and routinized, with hierarchies of deference of power, and are governed by rules of exchanges and codes of conduct. Seen in this light, *rassiychilar*'s debt-based trade can be viewed as an institutionalized and routinized system with its own economy and rule enforcement mechanism, which relies on social norms, trust, religion, and moral codes. These "informal legal orders" shape the conduct of all parties involved in the transaction as much as, or possibly more than, the state law.

This article is based on two periods of ethnographic field research between 2021 and 2022 in one of the villages in the Fergana region of Uzbekistan. The field site was chosen based on contacts and social networks available to the authors. The methods applied for data collection were semi-structured interviews, informal interviews, and participant observation. Interview questions focused on issues such as the exchanges of agricultural products for debt, the importance of trust, social norms, the perceived role of the state in everyday life, and the role of unwritten laws of society. During our first field research in July-August 2021, we

familiarized ourselves with the field sites and the prevailing social norms and traditions through daily observations and conversations with the villagers. We frequently visited the village’s “gossip hotspots” (e.g., *choykhona* [teahouse], *guzar* [village gathering place]) and *baza* (rassiychilar’s headquarters) where all parties involved in debt-based trade come together and conduct economic exchanges. These data collection strategies enabled us to directly observe the daily meetings and dealings of rassiychilar with brokers, as well as conduct in-depth (semi-structured) interviews with nine rassiychilar, three brokers, two *dehqonlar* (local farmers), and two truck drivers. During the second period of the fieldwork, from December 2021 until February 2022 (locally, this period is called “end season” or “distribution of profit/loss”), we conducted eight follow-up interviews with rassiychilar, brokers, local farmers, and truck drivers.¹ Although the empirical material presented in this article focuses largely on a debt-based trade at a single village and its relationships up to the exported market, social and economic processes revolving around the case study have a transnational nature. As will be shown in the next sections, the informal relationships and social norms elucidated in the empirical material are not limited to Uzbekistan or to Central Asia, but they are found in all post-socialist economies where economic uncertainty/scarcity and weak/absent institutional rules have taken hold.

The rest of the article is organized in this order: The following section presents a brief review of the literature on informal debt, credit relations, and trust networks in post-Soviet societies, which is crucial in locating the case of rassiychilar within broader scholarly debates. The next section provides the theoretical framework of the study, which will be used to analyze the case of rassiychilar. Then we present the results of our ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2021 and 2022 in rural Fergana, Uzbekistan. The last section draws out the implications of the ethnographic material for relevant scholarly debates and highlights the most important findings of the article.

INFORMAL TRADE, DEBT, CREDIT, AND TRUST-BASED NETWORKS IN POST-SOVIET SOCIETIES

¹ For this specific article, we have chosen to present key findings from our interviews and some examples of the most relevant observations. Hence, this article focuses on a small segment of the empirical data collected within the larger project on debt-based trade, business environment, and informality in Uzbekistan. To protect the anonymity of our informants, their names and locations have been changed.

The scholarly interest in debt-based economies and informal debt and credit networks began to increase following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a period characterized by dramatic economic, political, and social transformations in many post-Soviet societies (Turaeva 2022). Due to economic turbulences, high unemployment, and the dismantling of the Soviet-era welfare system, ordinary people in post-Soviet countries frantically searched for alternative livelihood strategies, which resulted in the proliferation of numerous informal and non-legal practices, such as debt-based trade and economic exchanges (Koroteyeva and Makarova 1998), barter economies (Ledeneva and Seabright 2000), informalization of economies and exchange (Rasanayagam 2011), informal networks and *blat* (Ledeneva 1998), informal credit institutions (Ruziev and Midmore 2014), debt chains (Nazpary 2002), an informal system of welfare provision (Polese et al. 2014), and economies of trust (Turaeva 2014; Holzlehner 2018). In this regard, given the state's inability to secure the basic needs of its citizens, ordinary people have become increasingly dependent on informal income-earning practices and survival strategies.

In the Central Asian context, analysis has been in terms of how post-Soviet transformations led to the proliferation of corruption, rent-seeking, and kleptocratic practices among multiple state and non-state actors operating at the central, regional, and local levels (Markowitz 2008, 2013; Engvall 2016; Spector 2017; Trevisani 2022). This literature has pointed to how the weak rule of law and the lack of economic liberalization in Central Asia enabled local political and business elites to divest the state of its resources through informal and extra-legal arrangements and practices. At the same time, there is extensive literature examining how post-Soviet economic decline, unemployment, and the collapse of the protective welfare state resulted in the impoverishment of the masses and made many people look for income-earning opportunities in the realm of the informal economy (Ilkhamov 2001; Rasanayagam 2011; Ismailbekova 2015; McMann 2015). One idea common to these studies is the need to distinguish between the informal practices of kleptocratic elites, which have nothing to do with “survival,” and the informal coping (“getting things done”) strategies of ordinary citizens and low-level officials.

The proliferation of debt-based trade and economic exchanges is one of the intriguing examples of these post-Soviet coping strategies (Turaeva 2022). Despite the rapid growth of debt-based trade and debt economies globally, in both the Global South and the Global North (Peebles 2010; Martin 2012; Barker 2016; Hart 2016), as Turaeva (2022) maintains, these debt-based social relations have not yet been studied systematically in the context of Central Asia,

especially from an anthropological perspective. The most recent study of debt-based trade and debt economies is a special issue, “Measuring Humans through Money: Anthropology of Debt in Post-Soviet Economies” (Turaeva 2022), in the *Journal of Extreme Anthropology*. This volume includes case studies stretching from Central Asia and the Caucasus to Eastern Europe, showing how economic deterioration and the lack of formal income-earning opportunities produced debt-based social relations, which are characterized by unequal power relations and dependencies.

The above considerations have informed our position in this article, which is intended to contribute new empirical evidence and theoretical insights to the scholarly literature on debt-based trade and debt economies, particularly to those concerned with debt-based and business, informal debt, credit, and trust networks in the Central Asian context. More specifically, we will present the case study of rassiychilar, a group of micro-level entrepreneurs in rural Fergana. Before presenting the ethnographic material on rassiychilar, we will present the theoretical framework, which will enable us to understand and analyze the case study of rassiychilar, a debt-based trade in rural Fergana with its informal forms of normative ordering.

Conceptualizing Informal Debt-Based Economic Exchanges

As mentioned in the previous section, rassiychilar represents a highly informal debt-based trade in rural Fergana. However, despite its informal nature, the behavior and actions of all parties involved in this debt-based trade are influenced by multiple, alternative (to the state law), and often conflicting normative/legal orders. Such normative pluralism is referred to as ‘legal pluralism’ in the field of legal anthropology and socio-legal studies (Griffiths 1986, Merry 1988). According to the legal pluralism perspective, there are multiple sets of rules that mold people’s social behavior: the nation-state law, indigenous customary rules, social norms, religious decrees, moral codes, and practical norms of social life. From this point of view, state law is just one among many other normative orders in society. Accordingly, when analyzing debt-based trade and economic exchanges in legally plural social contexts like Uzbekistan, there is a need to consider the role of society’s informal norms (social norms, religion, moral codes) and “non-monetary currencies” such as trust, prestige, reputation, and respect (Zanca 2003; Urinboyev and Polese 2016) that serve as an alternative means of doing business when the state fails to valorize its institutions and laws.

There is strong support for the legal pluralism framework in the field of law and economics, where Robert C. Ellickson (1991) argued that large segments of social life are located and shaped beyond the reach of law and that his concept of “order without law” provides useful insights for understanding how and why people cooperate, establish order, and regulate daily social and economic relations in the absence of the state law. Ellickson contends the commonly held view that the state and its legal system are the only source of law and order. Rather, order arises spontaneously, and one may observe in everyday life situations many patterns of non-hierarchical and informal processes of making laws and keeping order. Based on his empirical observations of how Shasta County, California, neighbors apply informal norms, rather than formal legal rules, to resolve most of the issues that arise among them, Ellickson argues that there is a multitude of informal norms and informal social-control mechanisms in society that enable people to achieve order without law. Ellickson, in this sense, stresses the importance of considering informal forms of normative ordering when examining the everyday experiences of rasiychilar in rural Fergana, an empirically relevant example showing how people in this region established an “order without law” in regulating their informal debt-based economic exchanges.

Thus, equipped with the legal pluralism framework and the “order without law” perspective, it could be inferred that we cannot satisfactorily explore the nuances of debt-based trade and economic exchanges in rural Fergana, Uzbekistan, without considering the role of society’s informal norms and non-monetary currencies.

Transnational Trade Connections between the Fergana Valley and Russia

The Fergana Valley is an intermountain depression located in Uzbekistan and surrounded by the Tien-Shan mountains in Kyrgyzstan in the north and the Gissar-Alai mountains in Tajikistan in the south. Fergana is not a valley in the strict sense but rather a large flatland surrounded by five mountains from all sides. It is the most densely populated area of Central Asia. The Fergana Valley is famous for having fertile land compared to other regions in the country. Agriculture plays a vital role in the economy of Fergana, and it provides more than 27% of the GDP of the population. Therefore, agriculture has been practiced for many centuries. This is one of the main reasons why people in this region engage in agriculture-related businesses.

According to the State Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan, Uzbekistan exported 1.1 million tons of fruits and vegetables in nine months in 2022. Among the countries where Uzbekistan exported the most fruits and vegetables, Russia ranked first with a 33.1% share, and Fergana was the region with the most exports (Stat.uz 2023). Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, the direct delivery of fruits and vegetables to the Russian Federation increased by 42% in the first four months of 2020 (Stat.uz 2023). However, these statistics include only the products directly delivered to Russia. Fruits and vegetables of Uzbekistan exported to Russia through transit from third countries (e.g., Kazakhstan) are not always reflected in Russian import statistics as “imported from Uzbekistan.” Moreover, our research shows that most of the exports by *rassiychilar* are not included in official statistics as they export their products in an informal way.

It should be noted that the aforesaid export of agricultural products from Fergana to Russia (exemplified by the case of *rassiychilar* in this article) can be viewed as a debt-based trade with a largely transnational or transregional dimension. Of course, one may be tempted to assume that this kind of medium-distance trade is an outcome of processes of globalization or has its origins in the Soviet system, whereas, historically, one can discern high mobility in the Eurasian space for much longer. There is a growing body of literature that challenges the taken-for-granted regional divisions and narrow geographical categories largely borne out of the Cold War context (Levi 2002; Sood 2012; Ahmed 2015; Green 2019; Marsden and Henig 2019; Ziad 2021). These debates highlighted the importance of reckoning with historical patterns and transregional categories, such as “the Balkans-to-Bengal complex” (Ahmed 2015), “Islamicate Eurasia” (Sood 2012), “West Asia” (Marsden and Mostowlansky 2019), “Persianate World” (Green 2019), and “Turko-Persia” (Djalili, Monsutti, and Neubauer 2008) when referring to political, economic, political, religious, military, social, and legal connections that exist within multiple settings across the Middle East, South Asia, Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Balkans and Eastern Europe. In particular, the concept of “West Asia” proposed by Marsden and Henig (2019) focuses our attention on continuities and transformations in historically durable patterns of connections and networks between South and Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. Based on these considerations, we argue that the case of *rassiychilar*—traders conducting transnational trade between Central Asia and Russia—is one of the vivid examples bearing the imprint of historical and transregional dynamics, revealing iterations of older patterns of connectivity in the Eurasian context. The fact that these transnational economic exchanges are

regulated by informal relationships, social norms, and trust networks gives us a clue to the existence of historically-established transregional connections and networks.

Debt-Based Trade and Rassiychilar

The case of rassiychilar is an intriguing example of a debt-based trade with both local and transnational elements. Rassiychilar is a group of micro-level entrepreneurs in rural Fergana who buy/borrow agricultural products from local mini-farmers/home-based farmers on a *nasiiia* (deferred payment/debt-based) basis and export them to Russian markets. To become a rassiychi and start a debt-based trade, one does not need to have a government registration or legal document. In the words of one of our informants, one needs to possess “two main things: money and the courage to take a risk.”

There are also other actors involved in this process to facilitate rassiychilar’s business. Rassiychilar cannot accumulate a large stock of fruits and vegetables (e.g., 50 tonnes of grapes) in a short period of time, so they need to rely on the service of a broker (intermediary/middleman) who can collect the harvest (fruits and vegetables) from local farmers. Brokers’ main duty is to make a *nasiiia* (deferred payment/debt-based) deal with local farmers, collect the harvest from farmers’ land, and then give/transport the collected products to rassiychilar. Brokers get products from local farmers in the form of deferred payment/debt for two to four weeks or until they receive money from rassiychilar. If brokers successfully get their promised money from rassiychilar, then they will give due money to those local farmers. The most interesting part is that there is no written contract or legal document during these transactions between rassiychilar and brokers and between brokers and local farmers, even if they do not know each other personally. Handshake between them is sufficient, and they only exchange phone numbers.

There are usually three or four people in each group of brokers. Each group member of rassiychilar/brokers has a different task depending on their ability and skills. One member serves as an accountant whose tasks include dealing with money and writing down all income, outcomes, and daily expenses; another member’s task is to find workers, typically women and schoolchildren, to collect fruits and vegetables from farmers’ land and package them for sale in Russia; while the third member of the brokers’ team deals with rassiychilar and finds good-quality fruits and vegetables from local farmers in villages.

Another key actor in this debt-based trade is *dehqonlar* (local farmers), who produce agricultural products on their land and then lend them to brokers. Farmers typically own a small family farm, a plot of land within their house and grow and sell agricultural products. In the eyes of the government, these local farmers are considered small businesses and private entrepreneurs and are exempted from paying taxes.

After receiving ready/properly packaged products from brokers, *rassiychilar* export them to Russian bazaars (markets), a process that involves renting large trucks and the transit through Kazakhstan given the fact that Uzbekistan has no border with Russia. In this process, *rassiychilar* need to rent large trucks from wealthy businessmen, known locally as “*fura arendatorlari*” (truck owners). Truck owners rent their large trucks to *rassiychilar* for approximately two weeks. Rental price differs depending on the season and product. For example, during spring it costs \$3,500–4,000 to rent a truck for cherry export, while during the summer it costs \$2,000–2,500 for the transportation of grapes and other products to Russian bazaars. These stated rental prices usually include the fee/payment to the driver (\$500) who drives large trucks from Fergana Valley to Russia and then back to Fergana. If anything happens to products on the way to Russia, truck owners and driver will be responsible.

Fieldwork Context: Mevazor Village

Mevazor² is a village (*qishloq*) in the Fergana Valley, where we conducted our fieldwork. Mevazor consists of 30 *mahallas* (neighborhood communities), each mahalla contains from 150 to 250 households (*oilalar*), and the village has a population of more than 25,000. Mevazor village has long been known for its unique grape production, and this is the main income-generating activity, along with cucumber and cabbage production, cattle breeding, and daily manual labor. In addition to agricultural production, villagers are heavily dependent on migrant remittances, and many male members of the village work in Russia’s construction sector, while female members work in Turkey, where there is more demand for female migrants in the domestic work and textile sectors. Trying to make ends meet, farmers use any space they own sparingly. Even if the household has a space of 3 square meters, they use it to produce grapes or other agricultural products.

² Village’s name has been changed to protect the anonymity of informants.

During our visits to the village's "gossip hotspots," such as *choykhona* (teahouse) and *guzar* (village gathering place), we noticed that the lack of state support and formal income-earning opportunities eroded people's trust in post-Karimov reform initiatives. Villagers frequently discussed economic problems, corrupt politicians, and difficult living conditions in Uzbekistan. Ahror, a 26-year-old, complains:

Life is becoming more difficult day by day. During the Karimov times, we had political problems, but now we have economic problems. Everything has become expensive. Only those who work in high positions at government jobs are living their life and enjoy spending the budget (money). This year, I produced 1.5 tons of grapes and lent (sold) it to one of the rasiychi through brokers, but I still didn't get my money from them. It has been three months now. There is no one to complain about. I pray to God that I can get my money this year. Otherwise, I need to go to Russia for work to finish the construction at my house.

Farmers in Mevazor village did not have any other options but to sell their products to rasiychilar. As Uzbekistan is a double landlocked country with limited trade routes and connection to the outside world, Russia and Kazakhstan are the two main options for exporting Uzbek agricultural products. So, there were no other alternatives for farmers in Mevazor. Prices in the domestic market were very low. No rasiychi we encountered considered exporting their products to Europe or other parts of Asia due to bureaucratic, legal, and logistics reasons. When we asked rasiychilar why they did not consider exporting products to Europe, they listed the following barriers that lead to high transaction and operating costs: difficulty to get products to Europe, requirement to get a certificate for products, difficulty to bend laws and bribe border and customs service officials in Europe, and lack of high-quality trucks and refrigerators for keeping and delivering fruits for four seasons. Given these barriers, rasiychilar preferred to export products to the Russian market, as they were familiar with the unwritten laws of Russia and could use various informal ways to overcome bureaucratic and legal procedures when doing business. This means that the only hope of local farmers was that the Russian economy would stay stable and that rasiychilar would do well in their business.

During the harvest season, brokers go from one house to another, looking for good-quality products and negotiating the prices of the products with farmers. After agreeing on a price, brokers borrow (*nasii*) the products from farmers with the promise/verbal agreement that they

will pay farmers when they receive the money from rassiychilar. In turn, brokers collect the harvest from farmers' land by using daily manual workers. Brokers mainly hire women and schoolchildren in order to collect/harvest fruits and vegetables and pack them for transportation and export to Russia. Thus, this debt-based trade not only provides income to farmers and brokers, but also generates seasonal jobs for many unemployed women and children from low-income families who need money to buy clothes and books for school. Sherali, a leader of a brokers' team, describes how they started their broker business:

As a group of four people, we started the business with 1,000\$ each in the spring of 2020 when cherries were ready to sell. This collected money is not used to pay local farmers for their products, but we use this money to pay and hire women and school children as well as for the transportation of the packed products to rassiychilar's baza (headquarters). Every morning, we bring three-four women manual workers from "mardikor bozor" (a place where daily laborers are hired), depending on how many boxes of fruits we need to prepare on this day. These women's daily payment is about 150,000 sums [about US\$15]. Also, we hire school children because schools are on holiday during the summer, and we pay about 60,000 sums [about US\$6] a day. Our business dealing is simple, we buy a kilo of grapes from farmers for 5,000 sums and sell them to rassiychi for 6,500 or 7,000 sums. The main task required from us is to deliver products to rassiychilar well-packaged and sorted in boxes.

Once all fruits are gathered and packed, the next step for brokers is to give (lend) the packaged products to rassiychilar. Rassiychilar receive ready-packed fruits from brokers, and interestingly, their exchanges and transactions are done by notebook, pen, and calculator. Brokers bring boxes of fruits to rassiychilar's baza (headquarters), then they are weighed, the price is calculated, and the total price is written on a piece of paper, and that piece of paper is given to the broker as evidence. This means there is no legally binding contract, and this debt-based trade is conducted informally without any link to a formal legal system. Brokers' main role is to serve as intermediaries between local farmers and rassiychilar.

Next, rassiychilar rent trucks from truck owners and then export products to Russia's bazaars, a process that involves the use of numerous informal and extra-legal methods such as informal payments to customs officials, as well as to protection racketeers and bazaar owners in Russia.

As shown above, during the harvest season, the entire Mevazor village and its residents are entwined in transnational debt-based trade. One noteworthy feature of these transnational economic exchanges is that they are rooted in a series of complex informal relationships rather than economic exchanges anchored in formal institutional rules. In the next section, we show how these informal relationships and social norms enable various actors to enforce contracts and collect debts in a transnational economy.

“Order without Law”: Social Status, Reputation, Honor, and Respect in Mevazor Village

Due to the highly informal, precarious, and uncertain nature of this debt-based trade, farmers, brokers, and *rassiychilar* understand that mutual trust is the only way to run this business. Therefore, asking for a contract or any written agreement is considered a sign of distrust, and parties rely on a handshake instead of a contract. Given these realities, farmers, *rassiychilar*, and brokers were all entwined in a relationship of mutual dependence. They had no other option but to trust each other, hoping that each party would fulfill their obligations and promises.

It should, however, be noted that trust is not sufficient to produce an “order without law” in Mevazor village. Rather, “non-monetary currencies” such as social status (*maqom*), reputation (*obrū*), respect (*hurmat*), and honor (*nomus*) play a crucial role in regulating contractual relations among different parties involved in debt-based trade. While observing villagers’ daily conversations at *choyxhona* and *guzar*, we learned a great deal about the role of social norms and “non-monetary currencies” in shaping people’s social behavior and decisions. This was visible in villagers’ frequent use of various folk sayings that emphasized the importance of reputation, status, respect, and honor. Villagers often referred to the following folk sayings in daily life situations:

Pul ketsa-ketsin obrū, or-nomus ketmasin. [Better to lose wealth than reputation and honor.]

Uiat—ūlimdan qattiq. [Shame is larger than death.]

Nomussiz yurmoqdan nomusli ūlmoq yaxshishi. [It is better to die with honor than to live without it.]

Zhoningni fido qilsang qil, nomusingni fido qilma. [Better to sacrifice your life rather than your honor.]

Igitning moli бўлгунча, ori бўлсин. [A man should rather have his honor than the wealth.]

Lafz—puldan qimmat. [Keeping one's word/promise is more valuable than having money.]

Mol talashma, or talash. [Seek for honor, not wealth.]

In addition to folk sayings, life-cycle events such as weddings (*nikoh toi*) provide numerous ritual symbols through which it is possible to articulate the role of social status and reputation. In rural Fergana, wedding feasts are attended by, on average, approximately 500–1,000 guests, involving not only the family/household members but also the entire community (*mahalla*). Given these collective features, status contestations and social hierarchies are clearly visible during the wedding celebration, particularly in how guests with different socioeconomic statuses are treated. When *obrūli odamlar* (people with high social status and reputation) such as local government officials, police, highly educated people, and *rassiychilar* arrive at the wedding site (*toykhona*), the wedding host and villagers greet them in a special way: first, they stand up to welcome them, use both hands when shaking their hand, and then put their right hand on their chest to display their respect. These patterns are also reflected in the placement of guests: Luxurious and cozy tables are often reserved for *obrūli odamlar*, whereas guests with lower status and reputation are offered more modest tables. If *obrūli odamlar* dance during the wedding party, one can observe that the crowd of people hurriedly line up to give money to a dancing person. However, if the dancing person does not belong to the category of *obrūli odamlar*, very few people approach the dancing person with money. This is the most central aspect of the wedding that articulates social status and hierarchies in Uzbek society. Similar patterns can also be observed in other Central Asian countries. In her study of traditionalization in Tajikistan, Cleuziou (2020) showed that weddings were instrumentally used by women to enhance their households' social status and reputation, which involved conspicuous ritual expenditures and gift-giving practices. In the context of Kyrgyzstan, the tradition was used by certain actors such as *aksakals* (community leader) as a means to reassert their power and status in the community (Beyer and Kojobekova 2020), while it limited the mobility of women due to the collective regulation of female honor (Reeves 2011).

Given the aforesaid privileges and normative expectations, through our observations in Mevazor village, we noticed that many villagers were very concerned about upholding and elevating their social status, reputation, and honor. Of course, becoming a successful

entrepreneur or holding a high position within government institutions helped one to elevate their social status in the village. But this is not the only factor that produces social status and reputation. In addition to economic success or political influence, one needs to gain the wider community's (mahalla) recognition, trust, and respect by acting in accordance with the prevailing social norms, religious values, and moral codes. This means that one can gain, maintain, and elevate their social status and reputation by keeping their word/promise, being honest and *halal* (not stealing other people's share or belonging), being generous, and sharing their wealth with the wider community, giving *sadaqa* (alms) and *zakat* (donation/wealth tax) to needy families, following the principles of Islam (distinguishing between halal and haram) in doing business, respecting elders and following community's norms, and contributing to the community's life-cycle events and religious rituals, and being a good neighbor and helping community members when they are in need of assistance. Individuals who follow such norms and moral codes often enjoy high social status and reputation in Mevazor village.

Accordingly, these social norms and expectations created strong moral and affective bonds within the realm of family, mahalla, and village life. Villagers regularly attended most of the socializing events together and had a relationship of mutual dependence. The fact that villagers met one another on a daily basis and regularly interacted at social events acted as a guarantee that social pressure and sanctions could be applied to an individual or their family or their entire extended family if they were not acting fairly or broke social norms. Villagers who ignored or failed to comply with social norms faced social sanctions, such as gossip, ridicule, loss of respect and reputation, humiliation, and even exclusion from life-cycle rituals. Among these social sanctions, gossip was the most commonly used instrument, where villagers spread negative information about the residents.

These heavy social interactions served as an enforcement mechanism of rassiychilar's debt-based trade in Mevazor village. Since there was no written contract between the parties, farmers tried to lend their products to someone they knew. This was because, in the end, the broker/rassiychilar would return the agreed amount of money due to a feeling of obligation stemming from shared village/mahalla origin. If brokers or rassiychilar disappeared or did not give the money on time, local farmers could visit brokers' homes and demand their money. Since farmers and brokers often lived in the same village and/or mahalla, brokers did not want to lose their honor and reputation in front of their neighbors and friends. Due to heavy social interactions, information about dishonest and unreliable rassiychilar and brokers quickly

spread in the village. In fact, no farmer would agree to lend their products to rassiychilar or brokers with a bad reputation. Afraid of such consequences, both rassiychilar and brokers tried to uphold their social status and reputation at any cost. Thus, having a decent reputation and status and gaining a wider community's recognition and trust were crucial to the long-term economic success of rassiychilar's debt-based business.

Debt-Based Trade – Risk-Based Trade: The Role of Social Norms and Non-Monetary Currencies

As shown in the previous section, social norms and non-monetary currencies serve as an enforcement mechanism in case rassiychilar or brokers fail to follow the terms and conditions of debt-based trade. These social pressures, in turn, increase the risk burden on rassiychilar and brokers. In the words of many rassiychilar we encountered, debt-based trade is almost synonymous with risk-based trade. They always take high risks and start their business without planning or even thinking about the end. No one knows what the outcome of their started business will be at the end of the agricultural season. For example, Sulton, who had many years of experience as a rassiychi and knew the ups and downs of this business, stated that one could never be fully confident that they would make a profit at the beginning of the season (April-May annually) due to various risks. Most of the time, rassiychilar had to sell their properties or cars to pay off their debt, and this was what happened with Sulton, as he explains below:

Thank God, it has been 11 years since we started this business, and we are still in it. This business is always based on risk; all you have to do is take a risk and start. Sometimes, we make a huge profit, and sometimes, we lose money. For example, there was a year with a US\$80,000 loss. There were four people in our group at that time, and we divided the loss according to our share and paid all our debt. My share was US\$20,000, and I sold my car and my apartment to pay off my debt. Thank God I had an extra apartment. Otherwise, it would be difficult to walk freely on the streets of Mevazor. Thankfully, my partners in the group were trustworthy and God-fearing people, and they also had paid off their debts. If they left the country without paying their debts, I would have to pay all debts by myself.

Not succeeding in this business creates many difficulties for rassiychilar, especially when a person is a newcomer or lacks experience. Many people become rassiychi when they want to change their lives or when they need more money to build a house, cover wedding expenses,

or some other expenses beyond their financial capacity. In this sense, one should have serious reasons to take such a risk. We interviewed several rassiychilar who entered this business for such reasons, but they did not succeed at the end of the season. Our informant Sobir also became a rassiychi in order to earn more money to cover his son's wedding expenses, but he was not successful and had to sell his small plot of land to get rid of his debt. He explained his situation as follows:

This year, I needed to start building a house and arrange a wedding for my son. Because of these expenses, I decided to join my friend's group of rassiychilar to try my luck. We borrowed products from local farmers with the assistance of brokers and promised to pay them back for no more than three months. At the beginning of the season, we made a good profit from cherry export. We did not divide the benefit. Instead, we continued with grape export. Every time our grapes arrived in Russia, the price dropped, and in the end, we did not benefit from grape export. At that time, we stopped exporting and divided the loss equally among our members. I had a share in half of the profit, and I had to pay US\$ 6,500 to local farmers. I had a small extra piece of land on the outskirts of the village, but I had to sell it to pay off my debt to farmers.

Brokers also share the burden in case rassiychilar go bankrupt. If rassiychilar experience a huge loss, it may take a long time, sometimes years, for brokers to get money from rassiychilar and then return it to farmers. Local farmers also share the same destiny and sometimes have to wait for several years before they receive payment for their harvest. Nargiza (a 45-year-old female), a farmer from Mevazor village, said that farmers don't have other alternatives but to hope and pray for the success and good conscience of rassiychilar and brokers:

I do not know how to pack products, and I don't have my own car to deliver 50–60 boxes to rassiychilar. That's why I prefer to give it to brokers; they are good intermediaries between us and rassiychilar. Gayrat is the broker to whom I give my products every year. Most of my neighbors choose the brokers who offer the highest price for their products. But I prefer to give my apples and grapes to Gayrat because he takes my products every year and hasn't cheated me until now. You will have confidence in those who have been a broker for ten years like him. In our village, everyone speaks well of him; he

has a good character and integrity, and he is a religious guy. This is another reason why I sell my products to him. I trusted him for a long time, and I didn't have any other choice except to trust him.

As our fieldwork findings indicate, one of the main reasons why farmers prefer to give their products to someone they know is that, in case of delay or non-payment, it is possible to go to their house and demand payment. Very often, not wanting to lose their honor and reputation, brokers and rassiychilar pay for products from their own pocket. Farmers usually ask around whether rassiychilar who want to buy their product have something to sell in case they go bankrupt.

“Car culture” is a crucial element in this respect because the car is considered a symbol of social status throughout all regions of Uzbekistan. If a person owns an expensive car with many imported features, people assume that this particular person is rich and has a high status in society, and these car owners need to be well-treated and respected. On the contrary, people’s treatment will be completely different if someone has an inexpensive car. Each type of car, its size, price, and model, has a varying reputation attached to it, and people buy cars depending on how people will treat them. Because of this reason, rassiychilar also drive expensive cars to gain people’s trust and show themselves as rich and successful businesspeople. The following interviewee tells how one of his close friends runs his business and has to keep his reputation high in people's eyes.

I know for a fact that Olim, a rassiychi, has a debt of 180 million Uzbek sums [roughly US\$16,000], and his business is at the edge of falling. Despite having debts, he continued to receive and export products. He bought a secondhand Chevrolet Malibu car from nowhere. He bought this car for US\$32,000 from car sellers with the condition of paying in installments over three years. But some months later, the car was taken away from him for not paying anything. After that, he drove a Chevrolet Captiva for a while; this car also disappeared after some time. He drives expensive cars and eats in luxurious restaurants to look rich so people can see that his business is going well, but unfortunately, his business has already collapsed.

The use of force as a contract enforcement strategy is very rare in Mevazor village. On many occasions, farmers rely on social norms and non-monetary currencies as a means to enforce verbal/handshake contracts. These village-level norms and practices were obvious when we talked with people at choykhona, guzar, and mosque, three key social arenas in Mevazor where “the village’s law and order emerged” through sarcasm, rumors, and gossip. There, villagers discussed everyday life and shared the news on the successes and failures of rassiychilar in Moscow’s Food City bazaar. Typically, it was possible to find at least 12 to 15 male residents sitting and socializing at choykhona and guzar, regardless of whether it was the morning, afternoon, or evening. Rassiychilar or brokers who failed to pay farmers often faced social sanctions, such as gossip, ridicule, loss of respect and reputation, humiliation, and even exclusion from community events. In this respect, the case of Hokimnazar and Muhammad (both names are pseudonyms), two economically successful individuals who headed the group of rassiychilar, is a relevant example. As these two individuals were the most successful and powerful entrepreneurs in the village, we closely followed daily conversations, stories, gossip, and rumors centered around these two individuals and their rassiychi group.

At the time of our fieldwork, Hokimnazar was the most economically powerful rassiychi, possessing political influence and connections with state officials in the higher echelons of the government in both Uzbekistan and Russia, whereas Muhammad was also a successful rassiychi but hardly comparable to Hokimnazar in terms of wealth and political influence. However, in everyday village life and daily conversations, Hokimnazar, in spite of possessing such wealth and political influence, did not have a decent reputation and was often condemned by villagers we encountered as a *reket* (racketeer), the term that carries negative meaning and is used in relation to individuals who use threat, violence, and various illegal schemes to extort money from the ordinary people. This was due to the fact that Hokimnazar, owing to his enormous economic and political influence, acted as a standard-setter and determined the export price of agricultural products in both rural Fergana and bazaars in several cities in Russia where villagers’ products were sold. He even set and controlled the price of rental trucks and refrigerated containers that belonged to the Uzbek state-owned railway company. In order to increase the margin of profit and establish a monopoly, Hokimnazar tried to set the export price of agricultural products as low as possible, as well as increase the rental price of trucks and containers so that other rassiychilar could not compete with him. Hokimnazar often delayed the payment to brokers and farmers, knowing that farmers had to cooperate with him due to limited options. In cases when other groups of rassiychilar disobeyed Hokimnazar and paid a

higher price for farmers' agricultural products, the retaliation took place in Russia, where Hokimnazar was well connected with bazaar owners and racketeers who controlled the entry and sale of products. In other words, going against Hokimnazar's decision meant significant financial losses for rasiychilar, a situation that led to the bankruptcy of many rasiychilar in Mevazor village.

On the other hand, Muhammad, a rasiychi, was a "man of respect" and enjoyed a very high social status and reputation in Mevazor village. Unlike Hokimnazar, who was focused on generating wealth in a short period of time, Muhammad was a devout Muslim and tried to uphold his and his family's social status, reputation, and honor while doing business. In fact, this approach meant that Muhammad had to go against Hokimnazar's decision and pay a higher price for farmers' agricultural products. In order to circumvent the monopoly and influence of Hokimnazar in both Uzbekistan and Russia, Muhammad leased trucks from other regions of Uzbekistan, as well as exported agricultural products to bazaars located in regions and cities of Russia where Hokimnazar did not have influence. Thanks to these strategies, Muhammad had more leverage than other rasiychilar and did not have to follow the rules dictated by Hokimnazar. As a result, Muhammad offered better rates to local farmers and paid brokers and farmers without delay, often within two to three weeks after the acquisition of products. When we asked villagers what they thought about Muhammad, they replied, "Muhammad is a good Muslim and keeps his ego low [*kibrsiz*] despite his wealth. He does a *halal* [pure] business and never eats others' share [*birovni haqqini iemaidi*]. He keeps his word [*lafzida turadi*], pays on time to farmers' and does not harm others [*birovni norozi qilmaid*]. Therefore, he is respected by everyone in the village." Given his courage to challenge Hokimnazar and receptiveness to villagers' needs and concerns, Muhammad became known as "General"—a title that is locally used to address individuals who overcome challenges and reach the zenith in their area of activity. Therefore, when invited to weddings and other life-cycle events and rituals, Muhammad was offered a "best table" and served more quickly than the others, a sign of high status and reputation.

Of course, farmers, rasiychilar, and brokers could not exert legal or political pressure on Hokimnazar due to his connections with high-level state officials. But given the fact that nearly all village residents were, in fact, farmers and thereby constituted the absolute majority in the village, they decided to apply both economic and social sanctions onto Hokimnazar, which included, economically, not lending any agricultural products to brokers who worked for

Hokimnazar's rassiychilar group, and socially, spreading stories, gossips and rumors about Hokimnazar's dishonest and haram (sinful) business. In July 2023, the last time we visited Mevazor village, we learned that Hokimnazar was no longer resident in the village and had permanently moved to Chelyabinsk, Russia, a life trajectory change that possibly resulted from social sanctions.

As shown above, given the harsh social sanctions and economic consequences, rassiychilar and brokers tried to pay off their debts even by selling their cars or property in order to preserve their belonging to the community. Thus, money was not everything in Mevazor: upholding one's honor, respect, prestige, and reputation was equally important. Hence, village-level norms and social sanctions constituted an enforcement mechanism of debt-based trade and economic exchanges in Mevazor village.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we explored the specifics of the informal economy in Uzbekistan, showing how debt-based trade turned into an alternative means of doing business in Fergana Valley. In order to explore these processes, we conducted fieldwork in Mevazor village in Fergana Valley through the use of a bottom-up, ethnographic approach. We empirically demonstrated that debt-based trade involves a myriad of informal economic exchanges among various actors, locally and transnationally, who face risk and uncertainty to varying degrees. Our observations and empirical findings show that social norms and non-monetary currencies serve as an alternative enforcement mechanism of these informal debt-based economic exchanges. Empirical material shows that informality, social norms, and trust are the three core components of this debt-based trade and play an important role in securing the livelihood needs of people in rural Uzbekistan.

Our study also provided additional empirical evidence to the scholarly literature on debt-based trade and informality from an ethnographic perspective. By using the legal pluralism framework and Ellickson's "order without law" perspective, we also attempted to conceptualize and analyze debt-based economic exchanges from socio-legal and anthropological lenses. We illustrated how rassiychilar organized and carried out informal economic exchanges outside the state law, establishing a parallel legal order (alongside the formal legal system) with its own enforcement mechanism and economic logic. This implies that the study of the business environment in contexts like Uzbekistan should also account for

micro-level business practices, which become the nitty-gritty of everyday life given the inability of the state to valorize its institutions, policies, and laws.

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