

## Uzbek Migrants' Everyday Encounters with Employers and Middlemen

Drawing from the ethnographic study of Uzbek migrant construction workers' everyday encounters with Russian employers and middlemen, this chapter examines how migrants in Russia organize their daily lives and navigate labor market uncertainties under the conditions of an extensive shadow economy. As discussed in previous chapters, shadow economy employment is a way of life for many migrants in Russia. This pattern is common not only among Central Asian migrants but also among migrants from Azerbaijan, Armenia, Moldova, and Ukraine who predominate in informal employment. This reality led to a widespread assumption in both the Russian political and media discourses that migrants choose to work in the shadow economy for tax avoidance purposes (Kuznetsova 2017). But informal work is not a choice made freely by migrant workers; instead, it is primarily driven by the employers' motivations to reduce labor costs. Even if migrants possess all of the required immigration papers, employers often refuse to formally employ them, not wanting to pay the necessary taxes and contribute to social security.<sup>1</sup> As a result, migrants are forced to work without any employment contract. As Williams, Round, and Rodgers (2013) have demonstrated, this also stands true for many ethnic Russians unable to operate in full compliance with the formal labor market owing to employers' practices. Therefore, informal employment remains unavoidable for both Russian citizens and migrants. Given these realities, it is no surprise that Gimpelson and Kapeliushnikov (2014) concluded that the proportion of the informal labor market in Russia in 2013 stood at between one-fifth and one-third of all employment.

Another contributing factor lies in the complicated and expensive legalization procedures that compel many migrants to reside and work without residence registration and work-permit papers (Reeves 2015; Kuznetsova and Round 2018). According to Russian legislation, the employment of foreign citizens must take

place on the basis of a work permit and a written contract, implying that the absence of these documents violates immigration and labor laws. Such an absence may lead to the issuance of an entry ban or deportation. Since the majority of migrants remain undocumented and work without any employment contract, Russian employers and middlemen have a strong incentive to exploit migrants and withhold or delay their salaries. Ultimately, Russian employers remain confident that migrants will not seek redress from state institutions given their undocumented status. In addition to bureaucratic barriers, the fact that many Central Asian migrants, particularly those from rural regions, do not have a sufficient command of the Russian language and laws pushes them toward informal employment (Laruelle 2007; Marat 2009). The construction sector has a proven capacity to absorb undocumented migrants with few language skills, low salary expectations, and high insecurity (Urinboyev and Polese 2016). The role of various intermediaries (*posredniks*) is pivotal to negotiating and channeling migrants' access to shadow economy employment. These intermediaries possess a wide range of networks and information about employment, accommodation, and immigration documents.

Accordingly, the everyday lives of migrants in Russia are characterized by a constant sense of insecurity and precarity. Reporters and human rights activists have extensively documented the difficult living and working conditions of labor migrants in Russia (Human Rights Watch 2009; Súilleabháin 2013; Umidbek 2015). With the exception of a few ethnographic studies (Reeves 2013, 2015; Urinboyev 2018a), the prevailing research also describes migrant workers in Russia as helpless victims subject to numerous human rights abuses, such as exploitation, discrimination, unsafe working conditions, wage theft, physical violence, police corruption, arbitrary detention, and deportation (Alexseev 2015; Kubal 2016a; Round and Kuznetsova 2016; Zabyelina 2016; Kondakov 2017; Malakhov and Simon 2017; Kuznetsova and Round 2018; Schenk 2018).

This chapter situates itself within these scholarly debates, demonstrating how migrants navigate the labor market risks and uncertainties through informal rules and transnational practices. More specifically, it will show how Uzbek migrants, as an antidote to the risks and uncertainties of the shadow economy, have created an informal adaptation infrastructure, based on its own economy, legal order, trust, and mutual aid networks. The existence of such an informal infrastructure allows migrants to devise specific integration and “legalization” strategies, create an informal job market, and establish informal social safety nets to share the livelihood risks and deal with precarious conditions. These processes are particularly visible in the construction sector in Moscow, where the informal employment of migrant workers is widespread and carried out through so-called *po rukam* (handshake-based) labor contracts. Such contracts involve multiple formal and informal actors with different kinds and loci of power: construction companies, middlemen, migrant

workers, Russian police officers, Chechen racketeers, and migrants' left-behind families and communities. This chapter, through a transnational ethnographic study of Uzbek migrant workers in Russia and their home village in Uzbekistan, aims to show how the interaction between the aforementioned actors across borders (via smartphones and social media) produces "informal legal orders" that regulate and enforce the "rules of the game" in the informal migrant labor market in Moscow. In doing so, I show how the informally produced legal order serves as an alternative (to the state law) to organizing migrants' daily lives and adapting under the conditions of an extensive shadow economy. Furthermore, I demonstrate how the informally produced legal order impacts the outcomes of many practices that Uzbek migrants (and other actors) adopt in Moscow. Thus, I use this case as a lens to pursue broader questions—that is, to offer a legally pluralistic framework for the study of migrant legal adaptation in a weak rule-of-law context.

The data for this chapter were gathered during the first period of my fieldwork in Moscow and the Fergana Valley (Uzbekistan) in 2014 over eight months. In addition to participant observation with migrants in Moscow, interviews and observations were conducted in the migrants' home village in Uzbekistan. Observations took place at "gossip hotspots," such as the *guzar* (village meeting space), *choyxona* (teahouse), *gaps* (regular get-togethers), and at life-cycle events (e.g., weddings and funerals). Informal interviews with village residents were, in this respect, as useful as the Moscow fieldwork in allowing me to better understand the evolution of the dynamics between actors.

#### THE (INFORMAL) CONSTRUCTION SECTOR IN MOSCOW

The use of undocumented migrant labor remains quite common in the construction sector, particularly in residential and road construction projects (Malakhov 2014). The overconcentration of undocumented migrants in this sector is not accidental, since many construction companies and large wholesale markets are informally owned by the *siloviki*—that is, high-level (retired) officials of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB). Even those construction companies not owned by *siloviki* cooperate closely with them by regularly paying a "protection fee" (*dan' za kryshovanie*).<sup>2</sup> This renders the construction sector one of the most corrupt sectors in the Russian economy, where the interests of large businesses and high-level state officials overlap and where the use of undocumented migrants is commonplace and tolerated.

The construction sector resembles a flat pyramid. Clients (*zakazchik*), general contractors (*genpodryadchik*), and subcontractors (*subpodryadchik*) occupy the top tier, while a huge army of migrant workers lies at the bottom.<sup>3</sup> Migrants tend to carry out all of the (strenuous, yet low-value) physical work. *Posredniks* (middlemen) mediate between migrants and the client, who seeks to minimize expenses and pay as little as possible.

The client at the top is typically an organization receiving state or private funding for various construction projects. The client typically hires a general contractor for construction, installation, and design. The general contractor is completely responsible for the implementation of construction, installation, and design work. The contractor is not directly involved, however, since he primarily acts as coordinator and intermediary agent, using several subcontractors for the actual construction work. A subcontractor is typically a construction company responsible for constructing, installing, and designing work by finding and employing skilled laborers.

The construction companies aim to complete projects with minimal possible expenditures. If they employ Russian citizens, their profits will fall. Migrants do not expect a high salary and are easy to manipulate and blackmail. Even so, if a company is found to hire migrants illegally, it faces a fine of 800,000 rubles (US\$12,000) per illegally hired migrant worker. The usual solution involves identifying a Russian citizen to act as a middleman between the company and the migrant workers. All transactions are conducted by a handshake (*po rukam*), thus liberating the company from any contractual obligations. But, regardless, the construction company regularly pays a protection fee to a high-level FSB official as insurance in case something happens.

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

A migrant *posrednik* can fulfill three possible functions: *posrednik*, *brigadir*, and *prorab*. A *posrednik* supplies skilled migrant workers to contractors and retains a *dolya* (share) of between 10 percent and 15 percent of each worker's salary. A *prorab* supervises groups of migrants on a daily basis and is responsible for the quality of their work. A *brigadir* leads a work group (brigade or *brigada*) and contributes to the physical work, claiming a higher salary for his dual roles and more extensive experience.

Given the absence of formal mechanisms for control, coercion, and conflict resolution, trust is crucial. The Russian company responsible for construction will have the capital and contacts with the producers of construction materials but not with the workers. This is entrusted to a middleman, normally a Russian. The middleman has contacts with the street world of construction and knows some migrant middlemen who enjoy authority among workers, know their language, and can manage a *brigada*. Of course, it is not possible to trust everyone, and each person must establish his reputation such that personal connections and social capital are crucial to most agreements in the construction sector.

Apart from the construction materials, other transactions go unrecorded. Migrants often occupy an irregular position and are not paid directly. Migrant middlemen receive payment from Russian middlemen and then distribute the money to the migrant workers, taking a percentage (*dolya*). Middlemen can try

to increase their income by decreasing their workers' salaries or the number of people they hire, possibly decreasing the quality or slowing down the construction work. Migrants need someone they can trust, and they agree to pay a portion of their salary to the middleman; however, they need to be certain that they will be looked after and that the percentage they pay is fair. They also need to trust that they will be paid, which is why they tend to work only with people whom they already know.

#### FIRST FIELDWORK VISIT TO MOSCOW: LEARNING THE VOCABULARY OF THE LEGALLY PLURALISTIC MIGRANT LABOR MARKET

In search of empirical clues, on January 23, 2014, I traveled to Moscow, Russia, to conduct ethnographic field research. The afternoon flight from Copenhagen to Moscow on Aeroflot took just under three hours, and I arrived at Moscow's Sheremetyevo International Airport in the evening. After passing through customs and passport control, I walked toward the airport forecourt, where Misha, an Uzbek migrant worker, was waiting for me in his car.<sup>4</sup> Because Misha and I hail from the same district in Fergana, Uzbekistan, I was excited to meet my *zemlyak* (fellow countryman) for both personal and academic reasons. Misha welcomed me with a smile; we shook hands and hugged each other, since we had not seen each other for seven years. I then placed my belongings in the boot of his car, and we quickly headed to the northeast of Moscow city, where my hotel was located.

Sheremetyevo International Airport is not far from the Moscow city center; it takes 25 to 30 minutes to drive to the center during off-peak hours. But because I arrived in the evening, when traffic congestion on the Moscow Ring Road (MKAD), is at its highest, our trip lasted more than two hours. Nonetheless, the traffic jam provided a good opportunity for us to catch up on what had happened since we had last seen one another. I briefly explained to Misha my migration research and asked him if he could help me collect data about Uzbek migrant workers' everyday lives and experiences in Moscow. Misha seemed interested in my work and promised that he would put me in touch with migrant workers. Misha is one of the pioneer migrants, having brought many of his covillagers and acquaintances (roughly 200 migrants) to Moscow. He arrived in Moscow in 2002, when labor migration was still a new phenomenon in Uzbekistan. At the time of my fieldwork he worked as a *posrednik* in the construction sector, acting as an intermediary between migrant workers and Russian construction firms. As a non-Russian, it would be difficult for him to deal directly with Russian construction companies. He was well-trusted by Russian middlemen, however, who preferred not to deal directly with migrant workers. Before taking up this challenge, Misha worked as a taxi driver, earning US\$500 to US\$600 per month. It was as a taxi driver that Misha made Russian acquaintances and developed an extensive network that

later paved the way for him to become a *posrednik* in the construction sector, the highest rung on the career ladder many migrant workers strive to reach. He apparently enjoyed his work greatly and believed that his role as a *posrednik* was pivotal in the migrant labor market.

I was truly intrigued by Misha's success story and, subsequently, wanted to learn more about his work. Misha is one of the few middlemen who successfully combine the three roles of *posrednik*, *prorab*, and *brigadir*. This results from his fluency in Russian and Uzbek, and his ability to build and lead a construction *brigada*. His vast network of contacts secures him many *zakaz* (jobs) per year. The work of a middleman in the Russian construction sector remains largely informal, meaning that Misha's work lies well beyond state law and bureaucracy; hence, no written (formal) contracts regulate his working relationships with different parties. Rather, Misha concludes *po rukam* (handshake) style agreements with migrant workers, Russian *posredniks*, and construction firms. An amount is agreed on and paid periodically as the construction progresses. As a *posrednik*, Misha's primary role focuses on finding well-skilled migrant construction workers, taking full responsibility for the quality of the construction work, and addressing migrants' daily concerns (e.g., accommodation and food) and legal problems (e.g., police problems). For his service as a *posrednik*, he typically takes a *dolya* (share), whereby each migrant laborer gives 10 percent to 15 percent of his salary to Misha.

Finding skilled and reliable migrant construction workers who can be trusted not to steal construction materials and to perform their tasks in accordance with state standards is difficult. Kinship and a common village origin are quite important in this regard. Given this social proximity, Misha's *erkakcha gap* (literally, "man's word") is sufficient for his workers. When Misha approaches someone not from his village—or at least his district—they rarely agree to work under him. Fraud cases are common in Moscow, whereby *posredniks* cheat migrants and do not pay their salaries. Coming from the same village establishes not only a social bond but also a social responsibility in the workers' minds. Both the family of the *posrednik* and the workers share a territory and interact daily to such a degree that noncompliance with the agreed-on obligations from either side would trigger a chain reaction with the workers' families. This would put direct pressure on the *posrednik's* family in the village, pressure that might not happen if the two men's families lived far from one another.

Because of this, all those involved understand that a failure to comply with an agreement not only brings immediate consequences but also results in consequences in their home village, given the involvement of entire families in these transactions. An important feature lies in how a conflict may be resolved, which depends on the different standpoints. Because no formal institution or rule exists, each party is likely to endorse a set of rules more convenient to them, thereby indicating the existence of "parallel legal orders" in the Russian migrant labor market. Here, parties may refer to *ko'cha qonunlari* (laws of the street), *erkakchilik*

(literally, “manliness”) rules, Uzbek village rules, Sharia law, state law, or anything in between. I discuss these in further detail below.

This spontaneous conversation with Misha provided an excellent introduction to the migrant labor market in Moscow, enabling me to obtain my first insights into how Uzbek migrants cope with and gain access to the labor market in the restrictive Russian legal environment. By referring to *po rukam*, Misha was actually talking about the highly informal nature of the migrant labor market. This marked the first time I learned about the informal contracts between migrant workers, migrant middlemen, and Russian construction firms, whereby migrants could gain access to the labor market without any work permits or Russian-language skills. Hence, *po rukam*-style construction work appeared sophisticated, representing a highly efficient system benefiting all parties involved. But Misha’s story was not complete, since he did not discuss those cases in which one of the parties (the migrant, the Russian *posrednik*, or the construction firm) fails to comply with the *po rukam* contract. Given the highly informal nature of the migrant labor market in Moscow, I wondered how the *po rukam* contract worked in practice and whether any extant regulatory structures were capable of resolving disputes when one of the parties does not fulfill its contractual obligations.

Misha, recognizing my interest in his work, invited me to visit his workplace in Solnechnogorsk (Moscow province) so that I could acquaint myself with his construction team (hereafter, *brigada*). This invitation offered an ideal opportunity for me to see and experience migrant workers’ everyday lives. Thus, I accepted the invitation with great enthusiasm. Before leaving me at the hotel, Misha told me that he would pick me up from my hotel the next morning at 8 a.m. I thanked him, and we parted.

#### MISHA AND HIS *BRIGADA*: COMMON VILLAGE ORIGIN AND ENFORCEABLE TRUST

As planned, on the following day, Misha picked me up from my hotel, and we headed to Solnechnogorsk. For Misha it was just a typical workday, although this trip was a very special experience for me. We arrived at the construction site at about 10 a.m., at which time all of the *brigada* members were working on the 17th floor despite the freezing cold weather (the outdoor temperature was –25 degrees Celsius). Since the *brigada* was busy working, I tried to carry out some observations on the construction site and gathered information about *brigada* members and their living and working conditions. Misha’s *brigada* consisted of 12 migrant workers, and their main job was to install new windows in mid- and high-rise buildings. On average the *brigada* works 10 to 12 hours each day, without any days off. They are allowed to take a day off only in exceptional circumstances, for example, if there is a lack of materials (e.g., silicone caulking or nails) needed to complete the window installations. Misha purchases the necessary food items



(bread, vegetables, rice, pasta, cooking oil, etc.), and members of the *brigada* make meals for themselves. This means that each day one migrant, on a rotating basis, is assigned the task of preparing lunch and dinner for everyone. There is no clear boundary between work and nonwork activities in the *brigada*'s everyday operations. The same construction site serves as both workplace and accommodation. The *brigada*'s accommodation during my fieldwork was located on the fourth floor of the building and consisted of two rooms: one narrow, cramped room full of rudimentary bunk beds with old mattresses, blankets, and old clothes used as pillows; and one slightly bigger room for handwashing, cooking, and eating that fell short of even basic hygiene standards. The indoor temperature was around 20 degrees Celsius thanks to two electric heaters. The *brigada* could access an outdoor toilet, but no indoor or proper bathroom facility was available for their use.

The *brigada* returned to their room at about 1 p.m. to have lunch. Almost all members have smartphones with internet access. They regularly used Odnoklassniki (a popular social media site in the post-Soviet space) to check the latest news, view photos, and send instant messages to their families and friends in Uzbekistan. Some migrants made phone calls to their family, telling them that they were fine and would send money home as soon as they received their salary. Mansur, today's "chef on duty," prepared *osh* (a festive Uzbek rice dish), and all members of the *brigada* looked satisfied and happy. The *osh* was served in a large bowl and shared by everyone sitting at the table. While eating *osh*, they primarily discussed how to avoid errors in installing windows and perform tasks in accordance with state standards. As the *brigada* leader, Misha gave instructions, distributed tasks, and told members to be more industrious. The *brigada* members attentively and obediently listened to his instructions and orders, treating him as a boss. Those migrants who smoked asked Misha to bring Winston cigarettes the following day, while others requested that he top up their mobile phones. One of the migrants asked Misha to send money to his family, since his father needed money for urgent medical treatment. Although Misha had not yet received payment from Stas (the Russian *posrednik*), he tried to fulfill all of the requests from his *brigada* using his personal savings to do so. Misha also tried to meet the bathing needs of the *brigada*. He explained that on that day he would take three *brigada* members to his apartment in Moscow city so that they could take a shower and get some rest. As an observer, I thought that Misha not only acted as a *posrednik* but also exhibited paternalistic leadership characteristics by treating his *brigada* in a fatherly manner and providing for their needs on a rotating basis. The roles and relationships between Misha and his *brigada* seemed well-organized and balanced, giving me the impression that a *po rukam*-style contract does indeed work.

Accordingly, Misha and his *brigada* members lay at the center of a complex net of intertwining relationships. In Moscow, *brigada* members operated under Misha, respected his authority, and called him "elder brother," regardless of their age difference. On the one hand, *brigada* members had little choice but to trust him to deliver





FIGURE 5. Misha and his worker prepare lunch for brigada members. January 2014, Solnechnogorsk, Moscow province, Russia. Photo by author.

their salaries, to take care of them if they faced difficulties, and to help them with documents. On the other hand, this trust relied on the understanding that, because they came from the same place and their families were in touch with one another, it would be too costly for Misha to cheat them. Any monetary advantage would bring

only short-term benefits and would be matched by retaliation at the village level. Ultimately, money is not everything; in the village and other small communities, reputation, prestige, and trust account for much more. Misha's capacity to provide for his countrymen also placed him and his family in a higher social position in Shabboda. As noted in a number of other empirical studies (Pardo 1996; Zanca 2003), reputation and status actually matter. Money may play a major role but only in the short-term. In the long-term and in a dependence-based network, the capacity to generate money in a sustainable way is more important. This ability relies on trust and the capacity to not let others down (White 1994). Despite his high social status and solid reputation, however, Misha's position rested on a weak premise. As long as he is perceived as bringing more benefits than troubles, he will be supported and praised by his workers and their families. But when this perception is questioned or the benefits become intangible, any allegations might be used to attack him and negotiate a better deal (or break the current one).

After visiting the construction site on a daily basis, I was able to develop a close relationship with all of the members of the *brigada*. Because the workers and I hail from the same district, almost all of them knew or had heard about me, which led to my being accepted as *svoi* (our own)—that is, an “insider” with whom both work and nonwork issues can be discussed. In turn, I also tried to remain open-minded and briefly explained my research to them, introducing myself as a migration researcher writing about Uzbek migrant workers in Russia. Accordingly, my first fieldwork visit (January 23–29, 2014) allowed me to establish a close relationship with migrant communities and enhanced my understanding of Uzbek migrants' everyday working lives and experiences in Moscow.

#### FIELDWORK VISIT TO FERGANA (UZBEKISTAN): TRANSNATIONAL DEPENDENCY PATTERNS

A second research aim that spontaneously emerged during the course of my fieldwork related to exploring the processes of everyday material, emotional, social, and symbolic exchanges between Misha's *brigada* members and their left-behind families and communities in Uzbekistan. I assumed that technological developments would produce a simultaneousness of events and instantaneous interactions between migrant-sending and -receiving societies, possibly leading to the emergence of transnational ties and networks. Since all *brigada* members used smartphones and social media, I inferred that there must be a daily exchange of information between the *brigada* and their sending community. I was particularly interested in investigating whether it was possible to glean the patterns of transnationalism among Misha's *brigada* and their left-behind families and communities. Furthermore, if this was possible, I wanted to examine how these transnational interactions impact the outcomes of practices that Misha and his *brigada* (and other actors) adopt in Moscow.

Armed with these research questions, I traveled to the Fergana region of Uzbekistan for two weeks of fieldwork between January 31 and February 15, 2014. Shabboda, where the families of Misha and his *brigada* live, is a village in the Fergana region, consisting of 28 *mahalla*, with a population of more than 18,000 individuals. Likewise, migration is a widespread livelihood strategy, simply a “norm” for young and able-bodied men in Shabboda. As I expected, villagers were well-informed about the living and working conditions of Misha and his *brigada* members. This resulted largely from technological developments that reduced the importance of distance and created an everyday information exchange between Shabboda and Moscow. Wherever I went and with whomever I spoke, the central topics of conversation were migration and remittances. Misha and his *brigada*’s Moscow adventures lay at the center of “village talk.” Given that Misha provided many village residents with jobs in Moscow, his family members enjoyed a high social status and much prestige in the village. Therefore, when invited to weddings, Misha’s father was always offered the “best table” and was served more quickly than others. Misha was specifically praised by the parents of his *brigada* members for employing and taking care of their sons. But not all villagers shared this view. Some residents I encountered argued that Misha’s *posrednik* work was incompatible with the principles of Islam and Sharia law since he took *dolya* from migrants’ salaries without doing any physical work. Some even believed that Misha “eats a lot” and covertly steals from his covillagers. But even if some villagers questioned the correctness of Misha’s work from a religious perspective, many refrained from applying religious labels and made a small exception for a greater gain—that is, each *brigada* member’s ability to make a living and send money home. In her study of the role of *posredniks* in the market for accommodation in Moscow, Madeleine Reeves (2016) also found that *posredniks* held ambiguous reputations within the migrant community. On the one hand, they were praised as “diplomats” who provided access to accommodation, work, and documents; on the other hand, they were vilified as “con-artists” who made money from other migrants’ economic vulnerability and unfamiliarity with the city.

#### TENSIONS WITHIN THE BRIGADA

Following a two-month break, I returned to Moscow for a follow-up fieldwork visit, from April 5 through 15, 2014. Like my previous trip, I visited Misha’s *brigada* in Solnechnogorsk on a regular basis. But this time things were different. Although the *brigada* had already completed half of the window installation work, they had not been paid for their work since January. I also learned that two migrants had already quit the *brigada* in response to payment delays, and other members were also considering leaving. In general, the *brigada*’s daily conversations revolved primarily around questions regarding why they were experiencing

payment problems and what measures they could take to receive payment for their work. Simultaneously, they were under heavy pressure to send money home, since their left-behind families depended on such remittances to meet their basic needs. Misha's situation was particularly delicate, because he had actually failed to secure the migrants' salaries. But he insisted that he was also a *musofir* (alien) in Russia, just like everyone else, and blamed Stas (the Russian *posrednik*) and the construction company for the payment problems. The *brigada* seemed empathetic toward Misha and did not hold him responsible for the payment delays.

Despite being present on the construction site on a daily basis, Stas continued avoiding any possible contact with *brigada* members, completely refusing to discuss financial issues with them. He often stated that his agreement was with Misha, not with the *brigada*, so he discussed all matters only with Misha. This situation eventually led to hostility and frustration, since *brigada* members felt ignored and voiceless even though they had completed all of the hard work. As a result, the *brigada* questioned Stas's honesty and discussed several options for how to retaliate if they did not receive the promised salary. Several migrants suggested that they should either break all of the installed windows or steal construction materials. Others suggested that they should physically or materially harm Stas, by, for instance, burning his car or physically beating him. But given his personal responsibility for the *brigada*'s actions, Misha asked the *brigada* to remain patient and refrain from taking any collective measures; otherwise, they would risk their salary and safety further. In Misha's view the only realistic solution was to continue working with Stas, given that the *brigada* members were working without any legal work permits. Even if they worked legally and filed a complaint with the Russian Federal Migration Service or courts, the migrants' chances of success were near zero, since Stas and the construction company could easily win the case by bribing state officials. Misha argued that migrants are nobodies in Russia, and thus warned the *brigada* that they might easily end up in prison if they harmed Stas materially or physically. Fearing the consequences of their plans, the *brigada* obeyed Misha and decided not to take any retaliatory measures against Stas. They were reluctant, however, to complete any further work, demanding that Stas pay at least one-third of their salary. As a *brigada* leader, Misha had to keep things going and convinced the *brigada* that he would secure their salary by the end of April if they completed the window installation work. The *brigada* continued to work in April, believing that Misha would keep his word.

Thus, the situation within the *brigada* was developing in completely different ways from that which I observed during my first fieldwork visit. Feelings of helplessness and anger were clearly visible in the *brigada*'s daily conversations. Despite the payment delays, most *brigada* members appeared to trust and accept Misha's leadership. Two members, however, did not trust Misha and decided to quit the *brigada*. These events signaled that something serious was developing or taking

place within the *brigada* of which I was probably unaware given my “outsider” status. In this regard I looked to the left-behind families and communities of the *brigada* as an alternative source of information.

To further understand the situation, I traveled to Fergana for additional field research between April 27 and May 21, 2014. After arriving in Shabboda, I visited Misha’s and the *brigada*’s families in order to determine what was actually happening in the *brigada*’s life. The first thing I noticed was that the *brigada*’s Moscow disputes and problems were gradually emerging in the village. Family members were well-informed about the latest developments in Moscow. From my conversations I learned that Misha had failed to live up to his promises and did not secure the *brigada*’s salary by the end of April. These developments eventually led to the *brigada* disbanding, and, subsequently, a dispute arose between Misha and the *brigada* over money. Simultaneously, the *brigada*’s families began pressuring Misha’s family and demanded that either Misha or his parents must take responsibility for their sons’ salaries. Misha’s parents refused to take any responsibility, however, arguing that the dispute should be discussed and resolved in Moscow, where it was taking place, not in the village. In mid-May I learned that Misha had made a new promise, stating that he would get the money from the Russians by the end of June. Thereafter, all of the *brigada* members would be paid for their work. Their family members decided to wait one more month, hoping that Misha would keep his word this time. Subsequently, the dispute ceased and remained muted in the village. Most people I met at the village’s “gossip hotspots” such as the *guzar* (village meeting space), *choyxona* (teahouse), and at weddings remained unaware of these developments.

#### “STREET LAW,” CHECHENS, AND THE POLICE IN MIGRANT MOSCOW

When I returned to Moscow in the summer of 2014 (July 29–August 6, 2014), I learned that the *brigada* had completely disbanded and the migrants were working in different places. Most had found new jobs at a construction site in Balashikha, a city in the Moscow province, while others were working at a bazaar or meat warehouse. Misha no longer had employees and was working alone, carrying out *haltura* (daily labor) for individual (private) persons. Misha and the *brigada* members were in open confrontation, since Misha had again failed to fulfill his promise. Since the *brigada* worked informally, they knew that they could not resort to legal measures to address their grievances. Not wanting to lose their money, however, the *brigada* instead approached a group of Chechen protection racketeers, asking them to recover their money from Misha and offered 20 percent of the total sum of money owed to them as payment for their protection services. I learned that Chechen racketeers were known as *qozi* (judges) among Central Asian migrants,

providing an alternative (to the state) justice system and means of settling disputes through threats and violence. However, the *brigada*'s appeal to the racketeers was futile, since Misha had stronger connections with the Russian paramilitary police (OMON). When I asked Misha about the details of the incident, he talked excitedly about his triumph over the Chechens:

I tried to explain to the *brigada* why the payment was delayed, but they didn't want to hear me. Things are simply beyond my control. Although we are all covillagers, they didn't show any mercy and shamelessly used Chechen racketeers against me. I was willing to pay them, but after what they did to me, they wouldn't get anything from me. This incident happened in mid-July. They called me, demanding that I must pay their salary immediately. I told the *brigada* that I would give them money as soon as I received payment from Stas. Afterwards, the tone of the conversation suddenly changed and they started to threaten me, saying that they would give me to the Chechen racketeers. Many migrants get terrified when they hear the word Chechen, because Chechens are violent and rule street life in Moscow. So, the *brigada* thought that I would also be scared to death and surrender immediately.

Seemingly, the *brigada* underestimated me. I have been living in Moscow since 2002, so I have also lots of powerful connections on the street. I told the *brigada* that they can give me to any Chechen racketeer. At the same time, I informed them that if they used racketeers against me, we—all sides—must abide by the "laws of the street." According to street laws, if the *brigada* decide to use Chechen racketeers as the *qozi*, they must fully waive their claims against me, because they are transferring the case to the racketeers. In other words, they quit the game automatically. In that case, I owe money to the Chechen racketeers, not to the *brigada*. This means that the *brigada* demands money from the Chechens, since they take full responsibility for recovering the money from me. If the Chechens don't succeed, the *brigada* loses all the money, and I no longer owe anything to the *brigada*. Hence, I told the *brigada* that they must be men and abide by the street rules if they use racketeers. They accepted these conditions, and we agreed that our relationship would end there.

Within a few days I received a phone call from the Chechen racketeers asking to meet for a *razborka* (violent showdown) in Moscow's Bibirevo district on July 17, 2014, at around 10 p.m. Before the meeting, I was warned that I owed them 800,000 Russian rubles (US\$12,000) and that I must bring this amount to the *razborka*; otherwise, my life would be in danger. But I told them that they wouldn't get a single ruble from me and that they could do with me whatever they wanted. I knew that the *razborka* would be violent since I refused to pay. Therefore, I contacted my friends who work at OMON, asking them to protect me during the *razborka*. They are always eager to protect me, because I regularly pay them with *ko'ki* [Uzbek metaphor for US dollars].

At the agreed-upon time and day, I, together with five of my "friends" in plain clothes, arrived. The Chechens were late, usually a tactic intended to scare their victim further. But they eventually arrived. They got out of the car, saw the five suspicious Russians, got back into the car without uttering a word, and drove away. They never attempted to contact me again.



This unexpected turn (for the *brigada*) generated a further conflict. Misha and his *brigada* now had diametrically opposing views of the outcome. Misha's understanding was that he was indebted to his fellow villagers and would honor it, even if he had to pay with his own money. But the fact that his *brigada* employed Chechen racketeers as *qozi* had changed their relationship. They were no longer brothers in the same pan, but were now *brigadir* and *brigada*. The *brigada* had transferred their credit to a third party (the Chechens), such that Misha was no longer in debt to them but to the Chechens, with whom everything had now been settled. Referring to street laws, Misha believed that he was no longer obliged to pay the *brigada*. Thus, for Misha, this marked the end of the dispute.

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

During this fieldwork visit I invited all 12 *brigada* members for dinner at an Uzbek café in order to understand “the other side of the coin.” From my conversation with them I learned that they were still determined to continue “the battle.” While acknowledging Misha's victory “on the street,” they still insisted that Misha must pay the *brigada*'s members' salaries, regardless of the circumstances. One member in particular, Baha, openly expressed his views:

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



Bek, the youngest member of the *brigada*, argued that “almost all Russian people are honest and never cheat migrants [*O’ris aldamaydi*].” He believed that Misha was just using Stas as an excuse to steal their money. In contrast, Nodir, another migrant, held the opinion that Misha and Stas were accomplices and were “staging the show together” to fool the *brigada*. While listening to their conversation, I noticed that they were considering various options to recover their money from Misha. When I asked what measures they were most likely to take, they replied that they would spread gossip about Misha in the village, hoping that would force him and his family to pay their salary.

### THE QUIET POWER OF GOSSIP

Accordingly, the dispute again moved to Shabboda, so I immediately booked my flight and traveled to Fergana on August 6, 2014, to follow the latest developments in the village. As expected, *brigada* members were constantly calling their families in the village, asking them to put additional pressure on Misha’s family by spreading gossip at the *guzar*, *choyxona*, and at weddings, places where people gather and conduct the bulk of village information exchanges. When I visited these social spaces, I observed that most village residents already knew about how “Misha exploited and ‘ate’ his fellow villagers’ money.” Most residents held the opinion that Misha was responsible for securing the *brigada*’s salary irrespective of the circumstances, since the *brigada* trusted him and worked hard during the cold winter months. They argued that a person must never assume this role if he cannot keep his word. Some villagers even accused Misha of human trafficking and exploitation, criminal acts according to Uzbek legislation. Moreover, the villagers held Misha responsible for the *brigada*’s legal problems, since the migrants did not have the money to obtain work permits because of the payment delays. Thus, they were banned from reentering Russia for five years. The villagers also invoked religion to interpret Misha’s actions, arguing that according to Sharia law, it is unacceptable to take *dolya* from someone’s salary. In this way Misha was viewed as a bad Muslim who earns money through *haram* means.

The relationship between Misha’s family and the families of the *brigada* was especially problematic. The *brigada*’s families regularly visited Misha’s house and created scandals on the street, telling all of the neighbors about the money conflict. They also spread gossip at wedding ceremonies, where the majority of villagers gathered. Moreover, the *oqsoqol* (community leader) and *imam* (leader of the mosque) intervened, warning Misha’s parents that the details of the dispute would be made public during the Friday prayers at the mosque if Misha refused to pay his fellow villagers’ salaries. The *brigada*’s families were also considering using legal measures as a last resort if the situation persisted:



FIGURE 6. Villagers conducting daily information exchanges. August 2014. Photo by author.

We are currently spreading gossip about Misha in the village. We hope this shaming strategy will yield some sort of result. If Misha's parents continue to ignore us, we will contact Uzbek law-enforcement bodies, for example, *uchastkovoy* (local police), *prokuratura* (a public prosecutor), or SNB (National Security Service). But, we won't rush to resort to these measures. Misha is our neighbor, and we don't want to ruin

his life. So, we want to give him one more chance before officially reporting him to the law-enforcement bodies.

Misha's family was thus under huge village pressure. Most villagers began to look at them as bad Muslims who did not hesitate to eat *haram* food. From my observations I noticed that life was no longer bearable for Misha's family, since they had to face daily taunts and sarcastic remarks on the village streets. Misha's father's situation was particularly bad. Because of the widespread gossip and rumors about his son, he could no longer attend the village *guzar* and weddings where most people socialize. When I asked Misha's father how he would solve this problem, he explained that he would call Misha in the coming days and ask him to pay his debts immediately. Thus, that village pressure was slowly changing the course of developments.

Immediately following my Fergana fieldwork visit, I headed to Moscow (September 2–30, 2014) to determine if village events had any impact on Misha and the *brigada*'s actions in Moscow. As I expected, Misha was well-informed about the latest village news. He was quite frustrated and angry at the *brigada*, but at the same he was pragmatic and knew that he needed to do something to settle the dispute once and for all. Otherwise, his family would continue to suffer from village pressure. When I asked him how he would settle the matter, he said that he had already borrowed money from his friends and that he would pay the *brigada*'s salary within a few days. After a few days I invited all of the *brigada* members for lunch at an Uzbek café located in Moscow's Babushkinskaya district. From our conversation I learned that Misha had indeed paid them, so all of them appeared satisfied. Hence, the extension of village-level social norms and sanctions across borders proved effective as an enforcement mechanism, ultimately determining the outcome of this specific dispute. While Misha was able to stand up to Chechen racketeers, village pressure eventually forced him to prioritize his family's reputation and harmony within his family over money.

#### PLURALISTIC LEGAL ORDERS, THE SHADOW ECONOMY, AND MIGRANT'S LEGAL ADAPTATION

This chapter demonstrates that the use of a large-scale migrant labor force under shadow economic conditions led to the emergence of a "parallel world of migrants," a world in which it is possible to observe the patterns of informal governance and plural legal orders. The lack of formal rules does not necessarily mean that no rules exist. The dispute that arose between Misha and his *brigada* sheds some light on the nature of the informal labor market in Moscow, which remains informal, to a large extent, but consists of well-functioning regulatory mechanisms. In the (informal) construction sector in Moscow, as the case study of Misha and his *brigada* illustrates, multiple legal orders are negotiated and serve to regulate the

“rules of the game.” Negotiators range from local (Moscow-based) actors such as construction companies, Russian *posrednik*, migrant *posrednik*, migrant workers, moonlighting Russian police officers, and Chechen racketeers, to transnational (Uzbekistan-based) actors such as migrants’ left-behind families, village residents, and community religious leaders (the *imam* and *oqsoqol*). Informality, as this case study shows, thus, may represent a “parallel legal order” that regulates the “rules of the game” in the shadow economy.

Based on the empirical material presented in this chapter, I believe that we need to go beyond “law-first” perspectives emphasizing the legal environment and migrant legalization strategies as key factors to understanding migrant legal adaptation. We must broaden our analytical lens to include “informal legal orders” that provide alternatives (to the state law) regulations and adaptations within migration regimes where the rule of law remains weak and informal governance prevails. As empirical data show, owing to the inability or unwillingness of the Russian legal system to regulate the migrant labor market, another parallel legal order has emerged as a governance tool. The existence of such an informal infrastructure allows migrants to devise specific adaptation and “legalization” strategies, create an informal job market, and establish informal social safety nets and rules to share the livelihood risks and deal with uncertainties. At first glance these informal practices come across as spontaneous responses; however, considering their magnitude and intensity through smartphones, they emerge as a more or less institutionalized custom in migrants’ daily lives. Thus, the study of migrants’ legal adaptation in weak rule-of-law contexts should look beyond the facade of the formal system and immigration laws and instead retrain the focus on migrants’ agency and actual coping strategies under the conditions of informal employment.