GENDERED MOBILITY: SMALL-SCALE CROSS-BORDER TRADERS AND LABOR MIGRANTS IN GLOBALIZING KYRGYZSTAN

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ABSTRACT

Mobility is a critical condition of economic survival in Kyrgyzstan. The two prevalent forms of mobility as a livelihood strategy are small-scale cross-border trade and labor migration. Bazaar traders travel far distances to purchase merchandise in supplier countries such as China, Turkey, South and Southeast Asia, and Africa. Labor migrants mostly commute between Russia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Traders, just like workers depend on trans-border price differentials in goods and labor. For both groups the changing legal regulations of movement between countries are essential. Fieldwork in the space in and in-between Russia and Kyrgyzstan, following and interviewing mobile traders and laborers in a train and on the market, allowed me to uncover a multiplicity of pull and push factors for engaging in mobility as a livelihood strategy. Taking mobility regimes as an analytical lens reveals the salience of history, spatiality, gender, generation, and ethnicity as factors that are "placing" the actors in a particular opportunity grid. Scrutinizing the different regulatory levels of mobility regimes (international, local, personal) shows that 'objective" constraints and individual strategies are mutually constitutive for the making, unmaking and remaking of these regimes. From this transtemporal and multi-level approach, I show how actors on the ground are struggling, challenging, and shaping the constantly transforming regulations on mobility, but also their intransigent limits.

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Table of contents

List of Figures

Introduction

In 1991 one gigantic border broke down – and countless new ones emerged. The Soviet Union was the largest national territory in the world, stretching from North Asia to Eastern Europe, and reaching even into the Middle East. After the demise of the Soviet Empire and in the state building processes of then 15 independent Republics, borders, mobility and regulatory regimes underwent fundamental geopolitical, ideological and social transformations. Globalization dynamics spurred on mobility and led to an exponential growth of goods, movement and ideas, while simultaneously fostering social inequality on the ground. Studying the motivations, directions and history of mobility and translocality[1] over time and space provides important insights into larger processes of subjective coping and sense-making within the conditions of a globalizing world.

In states and societies in the making such as the Central Asian Republics[2], social change has an powerful impact on individual life courses. Women and men in in these young independent nations have been exposed to a very specific combination of Soviet legacy blended with the renewed emphasis on Islamic and traditional values (Buckley 1997). Since the early 90's various reforms and deregulations failed to stabilize these countries economically (Cieslewska 2014). The dismantling of industrial production (Abazov 1999) and the dissolution of the welfare structures have further hampered social and economic conditions (Kuehnast 1998). Among these countries, Kyrgyzstan is considered one of the poorest post-Soviet Republics

[1] I use the term translocality to highlight the attempt to understanding global phenomena from within the social world 'from below'. Conceptually I follow the definition, given by Freitag and von Oppen who contrast the discussions on globalization, "which emphasizes mobility, flows and the transgression of boundaries" to translocality, as focusing on "the attempts to cope with transgression and with the need for localizing some kind of order" (Freitag and von Oppen 2010, 8).

[2] Consisting of the former Soviet Republics, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan Tajikistan and Turkmenistan

(World Bank 2018), with highly corrupt political and economic elites and simmering ethnic conflicts with neighboring countries (Karrar 2017b; Reeves 2014).

In the face of rampant unemployment, there are two economic strategies that became critical for Kyrgyz citizens - small-scale cross-border trade and labor migration. Due to its "open-door" (Özcan 2010) market policies and its geopolitical position between the Chinese and the Eastern European markets, large-scale open-air marketplaces emerged all over the country. The Dordoi Bazaar in Bishkek, eventually, turned into Central Asia's biggest hub of wholesale and retail business (Karrar 2018; 2006; Alff 2016; Özcan 2010). Cross-border traders commute between countries in Central Asia, but also to China, Turkey, South and Southeast Asia and Africa to purchase merchandize (Karrar 2017b; Fehlings 2018; Marsden 2016; Özcan 2006). Labor migrants seek work, mostly in Russia, and more recently also in Kazakhstan.(Ruget and Usmanalieva 2011). Thus, in Kyrgyzstan, mobility and the crossing of international borders is essential for generating income. While from a total population of about six million people almost a fifth is on the move for seasonal or long-term labor (Ryazantsev 2016; Reeves 2013a; Ruget and Usmanalieva 2011) more than 300.000 people work on the country's main bazaars at Dordoi and Kara-Suu in South-East Kyrgyzstan (Nasritdinov and Kozhoeva 2017).

Mobility is an essential requirement to be profitable in these economic activities. In 2015, however, when Kyrgyzstan entered the Eurasian Economic Union, new border and migration regulations where established. Increasing tariffs with non-member countries overrode the previously established free-trade zones with China, which massively reduced trade turnover at the bazaar (Karrar 2017a). For labor migrants, however, the legal and financial situation has been improving because of simplified procedures of work and residence permit (Nasritdinov and Kozhoeva 2017).

Against this background I ask the following: How do small-scale cross-border traders and labor migrants negotiate mobility as a livelihood strategy? How has the regime of mobility been made and remade and how is it shaped by different actors and at different scales?

Labor migration and cross-border trade requires different types of mobilities. Internal migration is used by people from rural areas who seek work in the country's capital Bishkek. Those who work in Russia or Kazakhstan, travel in seasonal, long-term and permanent mode. For bazaar traders, the movement between different supply countries is essential, but the back and forth movement is on a short-term basis. This is one of the reasons why the trading sector has a significantly gendered dimension (other reasons are elaborated in Chapter 2.2). Women comprise about 80 per cent of the of those involved in it in Kyrgyzstan (Kaminski and Mitra 2010). Being away only sporadically allows them to maintain tighter family bounds than those working abroad. The gender segregation in the sphere of trade and labor migration leads me to another focus question of this research: How does the necessity of mobility impact on women's practices and ways of dealing with professional activities that require engagement in moving lives?

Given the importance of translocal mobility in regard to the increasing necessity of spatial permeability in a globalizing Kyrgyzstan, I will focus on the making, the maintenance and the transformation of the underlaying mobility regimes (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013; R. Koslowski 2011). I see mobility regimes as part of a broader regulatory rationality to which different types of regimes can be linked, such as international, border, and gender regimes. Stephen Krasner (1983) is one of the most frequently cited scholars when it comes to a theoretical discussion of international regimes. According to him, regimes can be defined as "sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given area of international relations." (Krasner 1983,

2). What is missing from this definition is the inherent power structure of regimes, and the notion that regimes are procedural and constantly transforming frameworks, instead of stable entities of state authority. I therefore expand on Krasner's definition and claim that regimes are a set of practices, relations and hierarchies, held together by specific rationalities and negotiated on and between the international, the national, the local, and the personal level

I argue that a multiple actor approach has the potential to uncover the intersecting push and pull factors that determine the underlying power relations of regimes and how they are challenged by ordinary actors on the ground. People's practices, strategies of livelihood, and biographical imaginaries are part and parcel of how mobility regimes are made, remade and unmade.

In order to delve into these different dimensions, I employed a phenomenologically informed fieldwork practice by following the actors during their mobile practices. The Dordoi Bazaar and a train route from Russia to Bishkek and back, were the main ethnographic locations chosen for this empirical exploration. Gathering information from travelling labor migrants and traders allowed me to reveal the interconnections between the mobile and the immobile sides of the actor's lives, and also get a sense of regime rationalities on my own

I embarked on the train from Moscow to Bishkek in April 2018. The trip took about 4 days, which gave me enough time to conduct a series of semi-structured interviews and to do a participant observation, especially focusing on the border crossing procedure. The following two weeks I spent in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek and conducted a fieldwork at the Dordoi Bazaar. During this time I talked to countless traders, customers and other bazaar-related people, like porters and drivers. Furthermore, I could arrange five semi-structured interviews with female traders at the market. By the end of the month I took another train back to Russia

to achieve a double-edged perspective on the entry and exit points of border crossings and increase the scope of informants.

During the analysis of the fieldwork material I used mobility, border and gender regimes as a theoretical lens to investigate especially the most recent regime changes, which are impacting on the everyday experiences of traders and migrants, alike. While the most important event in this regard is Kyrgyz accession to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the country's position within the Chinese Silk Road project is also significant.

In the analytical process I had to rely on my extensive fieldnotes. The interactions usually had a very spontaneous nature and were more like information exchange than classical interviews. Recording turned out to be a conversation killer, also if the informants generally agreed that I may use their accounts for my research. Yet, I did make notes during the talks and all quotes in this thesis are from the immediately jotted down comments.

Working with interview and fieldnotes needs to be particularly sensitive, reflective and relational, because it poses a risk of spurious generalizations and the application of imposed concepts. But most importantly, it imposes a power relation which is present on many levels. I am aware that my positionality as a German woman has significantly influenced the mode of interactions in the field. Travelling alone on this route provoked a variety of situations of which not all have been pleasant. They ranged from unduly high bribery and masculine advances to privileged treatment in the face of other travelers who have just been discriminated by border officials because of their nationalities.

However, inequalities existed not only in regard to gender dynamics and the performance of power by state representatives, but are an inherent feature of the relation between the researcher and the informants, too. My perspectives and interpretations of the fieldwork material are informed by partial and embedded knowledge which doesn't always comply with the ways the

informants would like to be framed. In this research I applied a series of strategies to counteract these inequalities. First, I clearly informed the interlocutors about the aim of my research and openly answered to questions as long as they didn't violate my own limits. The second consequence concerns the analytical engagement with the material. Following Joan Sangster's (1994) materialist feminist's approach, I read "the interviews on many levels" and looked for "more than one discourse theme and for multiple relations of power based on age, class, race and culture as well as gender" (1994, 14) including the resistance to those relations. Furthermore, and in order to prevent the misuse of narrative insights, I clearly indicate who is the voice that is speaking. My own interpretations and opinions are a constitutive part of this analysis, but instead of using the narrations to underpin my own assumptions, I aim to engage in a reflexive dialogue with the interview and fieldwork material and the discourses that are related to the research inquiry.

Despite my effort to capture as many dimensions of the very inspiring and often refreshingly contradictive fieldwork material, I was not able to address all the issues that were mentioned by my informants. Important aspects, such as the perspectives of those who are staying back, while their mothers, fathers and husbands are abroad, couldn't be covered. Furthermore, due to the limited time for the fieldwork and the small scope of this thesis I couldn't develop a more comparative paradigm of the intersection of gender, ethnicity and class between traders and labor migrants. However, I still tried to address these dimensions to the greatest possible extend. Due to the limited amount of research that has been done on the topic[3] and the rapidly

[3] From an anthropological perspective, the question of mobility and well-being of translocal livelihoods in Central Asia has been addressed by Phillip Schröder and Manja Stephan-Emmrich (Schröder and Stephan-Emmrich 2016). The recent effects of declining bazaar turnover and it's possible effects on market traders is explored in an recent research project of Hassan Karrar (Karrar 2017a). Henryk Alff studied the strategies of Kyrgyz traders to deal with Chinese trade and transport policies, which he locates between anti-Chinese sentiments and business pragmatism (Alff 2016).

changing conditions in the region, I highlighted aspects which would need further research throughout the thesis.

The first chapter begins with an analysis of the historical and geopolitical context. Contrasting the interests of the main international geopolitical stakeholders, Russia and China reveals that Russia, despite its crisis-driven economic performance, is the more powerful actor in dictating the regime rationalities for transnational mobility of goods and people in Kyrgyzstan at the moment.

In the second chapter I zoom in on the everyday realities of bazaar actors. Based on interviews with (mainly female) traders of different age, religious affiliation, and nationality, I show the ways how these actors negotiate mobility in the bazaar business. Due to the massive decline of trading turnover since Kyrgyzstan accession to the Eurasian Economic Union, I focus on the sense-making and adaptation mechanism of bazaar retailers.

In the last chapter I move to the second ethnographic site and introduce a variety of actors from the train. In relation to three cases, I exemplify different types of mobility – 'forced', 'normalized' and 'social'. In this way, I can show a wide range of socio-economic aspects of labor migration, and demonstrate the increasing convergence of trading and migratory mobility, or rather, how migration might take over, in the face of declining trade.

In the concluding remarks, I synthesize the different levels of mobility regimes and summarize the prevalent push and pull factors of engaging and maintaining in a translocal livelihood strategy.

Chapter 1 – The Making, Remaking and Unmaking of Mobility Regimes

1.1 The Emergence of Transnational Mobility in Kyrgyzstan

For more and more people all around the globe economic survival depends on transnational mobility strategies (Koslowski 2011). The modern world is distinguished by "an accumulation of movement that is analogous to the accumulation of capital – repetitive movement or circulation made possible by diverse, interdependent mobility systems." (Urry 2007, 13). Also in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan the crossing of international borders has become critical for the generation of income. However, the movement across the relatively recently drawn borders in Central Asia, has been normalized as a form of domestic mobility already in Soviet times. In order to understand current forms of mobility it is important to scrutinize the movement of goods and people also in regard to its 'transtemporal' dimension (Light 2018).

Internal migration for reasons of work, study and inter-ethnic marriage in multiple directions, but also state-forced resettlement, were common practices of the Soviet regime, however, they were strictly coordinated by bureaucratic regulations (Light 2012). I, therefore, agree with Rahmonova-Schwarz, who argues that the current "migration patterns […] have their roots in the policies of the Soviet state on mobility and labor [and] labor-induced migration as seen on the post-Soviet territory had begun prior to the dissolution of the USSR" (Rahmonova-Schwarz 2010, 1–2). Patterns of mobility show that Kyrgyzstan had been both a sending and a receiving country for transnational labor migration (Schuler 2007). After the demise of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian countries and especially Kyrgyzstan, were places of ethnic plurality, with Kyrgyz mounting up to 52.4 per cent, Russians 21.5, Uzbeks 12.9 and Germans 2.4 among others (Fumagalli 2007, 574). This multi-ethnic composition in the country dissolved after 1991, when the first emigration wave began. Economic instability mobilized mainly the ethnic

Russians and Germans to return to their country of origin. For the same reasons, but only some years later ethnic Kyrgyzstani massively started leaving the country to seek work in other, more prosperous post-Soviet labor markets. What has changed is the orientation of mobility from a multi-directional and thus, multi-ethnic movement in Soviet times, to a one-sided move to the north, driven by the need of economic survival. In this sense contemporary Kyrgyzstan undergoes its own '*Age of Migration'* (Castles, *et*.al 2014) with the bygone Soviet regime still influencing the mode of translocal mobility regimes nowadays.

Since the early 2010's, up to one fourth (Dolotkeldieva 2013, 190) of the economically active Kyrgyz population uses migration as a livelihood strategy, with an increasing trend. Other tens of thousands engaged in cross-border trade as a means to make ends meet. For both groups, translocal mobility is essentially motivated by economic exchange. There are a range of destinations which are more or less likely to be considered. As Marlene Laruelle (2013) points out, the question where to go is influenced by various factors, such as proximity to the family, profitability, regularity of the trips, and accessibility. My ethnographic inquiry on trains from Russia to Kyrgyzstan and back, and at the Dordoi Bazaar in Bishkek, however, revealed the salience of even more multiple and hybrid migratory practices. Talking with labor migrants and traders I learnt that the directions and modes of moving are strongly influenced by subjective spatial imaginaries. More particularly, I refer to politically, socially and emotionally motivated discourses about spatial signifiers, like the "Soviet Union", the "Silk Road", "economic corridors", or a "Customs Union". The meaning ascribed to these geographical notions is based on social relations, and stems from ideologized and affective perceptions of bounded spaces like, borders and routes (Schröder and Stephan-Emmrich 2016; Velde and Naerssen 2016, 3). I argue that the perception of space is deeply embedded in a system of values, which eventually channels the direction and the modes of everyday mobilities. The

actors make their circumstances more self-selected, by following a subjective mapping of space, which in itself becomes a dimension of traders' and laborers' mobility regimes.

1.2 Kyrgyzstan in the Spotlight of Diverging International Stakeholders

Regimes, however, are negotiated on multiple levels and by a variety of actors. Before I zoom in on the ground level of everyday practices (see Chapter 2 and 3), it is necessary to uncover the intersecting push and pull factors that determine the geopolitical power relations in the making and unmaking of mobility and border regulations. Different international stakeholders have significantly impacted on Kyrgyzstan's political, economic and social development, especially since the demise of the Soviet Union.

Influenced by US-sent liberal market experts, the country's new leaders decided to follow the IMF recommendation and in expectation of a market-led development they put into effect far reaching neo-liberal reforms such as price liberalization, deregulation and privatization.[4] These measures largely ignored the country's previous orientation towards the Soviet production chain. Till 1991, about a third of the population was employed in the industrial production, a sector that was uncompetitive and couldn't be integrated into the world market. More than 60 percent of Kyrgyz worked in the state-owned agricultural sector which was equally inefficient and unable to even satisfy the needs on the national level (Abazov 1999).

The promises of the IMF that the country, after a short recession, would soon be back on its feet didn't come true, though. In 1996 the Kyrgyz' GDP reached only 53.5 per cent of the 1990 level (Abazov 1999, 2013) and till today the national economy hasn't recovered from the macroeconomic destabilization of the 1990's (World Bank 2018). The economic failure of the

[4] For more details of price liberalization see IMF Economic Review on the Kyrgyz Republic (1993, 32 quoted from Abazov 1999, 17)

country has led to social upheaval, mass exodus and depletion of the social, the cultural and the economic stock of capitals. Kyrgyzstan's transformation process has been an unsuccessful attempt to make the country fit for the globalizing world and, eventually, consigned the country in a state of dependency of stronger geopolitical stakeholders.

The three most influential actors have been the USA, China and Russia. America, however, largely resigned from its geopolitical (military presence close to Afghanistan) and ideological ambitions (fostering democratic and free market institutions) in Kyrgyzstan (Toktomushev 2016, 2004–5). In 2013 they had to withdraw from their military base in the country, since the Kyrgyz parliament didn't approve an extension of the contract. This decision is directly related to the resurgence of Russian influence in the region[5]. Since the early 2010's two ambitious projects have come to represent the increasing interest in Central Asia by the two economic powers, China and Russia. The first's Silk Road Economic Belt (in short BRI for Belt and Road Initiative) mainly aims at building a worldwide infrastructure network to foster the global export of Chinese products and to secure the domestic demand of natural resources (Horák 2014). Russia, on the other side, endeavors to expand the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) all across the previous borders of the Southern peripheries of the Soviet Union (Kaczmarski 2017). As Kaczmarski points out, both initiatives go beyond economic calculation and "function as major foreign policy concepts"(Kaczmarski 2017, 1027). Moreover the pursue to reshape the geopolitical power balance is also reflected in the notion of 'Eurasian integration' which promotes the spread of territorial imaginations like 'trade corridors', 'crossroads' and 'near abroad' used by both expansive stakeholders, alike (Rastogi and Arvis 2014). The process of the making of these spaces includes a set of shifting regulations of inclusion and exclusion to these economic, geopolitical, ideologic, but also physical boundaries. For the sovereign Kyrgyz

[5] https://thediplomat.com/2014/06/the-united-states-just-closed-its-last-base-in-central-asia/ last access: 10.06.2019

Republic it's not a question of choice, though (Nasritdinov and Kozhoeva 2017). The economically instable country can only try to leverage the best possible conditions within the EEU and OBOR, but it can't afford to hazard economic isolation.

1.2.1 Chinese - Kyrgyz Relations: The Silk Road Economic Belt

Kyrgyzstan nowadays, does not only depend on remittances from labor migrants and cheap products from China, but also on large-scale foreign investment.

With a budget of $ 40 billion for the realization of the Belt and Road initiative, (Fallon 2015, 140), the Kyrgyz government has been inclined to cooperate with the South-Eastern economic super power. But even before instrumentalizing the Silk Road discourse, Central Asia has been of paramount importance for Chinese economic expansion projects. China envisioned Central Asia, and especially Kyrgyzstan with its liberal trade legislations and dismantled industrial sector as a profitable ground for channeling Chinese exports products into the Russian and further towards the Central European markets. The imbalanced character of Sino-Kyrgyz relations has long been an issue of concerns and is also reflected in wide-spread aversion against Chinese business practices including corruption the violation of environmental standards and a flood of cheap Chinese consumer goods (Alff 2016, 2)

On the other side, the implementation of special economic zones with "exemption from several taxes, duties and payments; simplified customs procedures; and direct access to utility suppliers" (IBP 2013, 71) have transformed the otherwise landlocked country into a hub of re-exports from China (Alff 2016; Karrar 2018; Peyrouse 2015). Due to the virtually inexistent customs tariffs for Chinese commodities and the duty-free channels in Kyrgyzstan the movement of goods and people across these borders and further on towards Russia has

constantly increased since 2001 (Alff 2016). As Michael Clarke argues, China's interest in the region is not only driven by geopolitical interests but also by security concerns (2009). Facilitating trade and fostering economic growth are supposed to prevent the rise of a Muslim opposition in Xinjiang and secure borders shall impede the solidarization between Muslim minorities in China (mainly Uighurs) with radicalized Muslims from Central Asian countries (Clarke 2009, 179–80; Sébastien Peyrouse, *et.* al 2010). The massive investment in the region of Xinjiang has paid back in as far as the neighboring Central Asian states have become the main consumers of the local production sector. The fostering of trade routes between Xinjiang and Kyrgyz bazaars are the main reason why Dordoi could turn into a central hub for the retail business (Horák 2014).

However, despite massive investment fund for infrastructural projects, resource allocation and soft power institutions, like educational and student exchange programs, large parts of the Kyrgyz population fear Chinese predominance in the region and Sinophobia is a wide-spread phenomenon with growing tendency.

1.2.2 Russian – Kyrgyz Relations: The Eurasian Economic Union

Russia, on the contrary enjoys a high approval rate in the Central Asian Republic, however, it is a much less generous donor. The inclination of a majority of the Kyrgyz population towards Russia was an important pushing factor during the negotiations of the country's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union[6]. The main reasons for this positioning are (I) the fear against Chinese expansion, (II) the strong dependency on remittances from Russia, and (III) the hope for a revived Soviet-like welfare system (Nasritdinov and Kozhoeva 2017, 6).

[6] Other founding members are Belarus and Kazakhstan. In line with Kyrgyzstan, also Armenia entered the Union in 2015.

As Stefanie Ortmann argues, the resent 'rise of geopolitics', which tends to frame Kyrgyzstan as a territory subdue to claims of different international stakeholders, such as the US, China and Russia doesn't capture "Russian influence in the region or the particular context in which it is perpetuated." (Ortmann 2018, 405). The incorporation of Central Asia into the Tsarist lands and later into the Soviet Union has an impact on the geographical and cultural identification in Kyrgyzstan that should not be underestimated.

The power relations that come along with these legacies, however, go beyond the hierarchical picture of Russia re-claiming control over a historically defined territory. "Instead, this is power at a distance, 'seductive power' that works to produce particular political subjectivities and is effective precisely because it draws on mutually constitutive understandings of state and space." (2018, 406). Russia's initiative in reconstructing an alliance of post-Soviet republics operationalizes the wide-spread nostalgia associated with the 'holy days' of Soviet past. The main argument for integration, however, were the legal advantages for the army of Kyrgyz labor migrants in Russia and the promise of low tariffs for the re-export of products from Kyrgyzstan to other member countries.

For the labor migrants, these improvements include the recognition of official degrees, working contracts based on civic and not only on labor regulations, access to medical care, acquisition of pension, and extension of the registration period (Nasritdinov and Kozhoeva 2017, 4). In a first attempt to estimate the effects of the new migration regulation, a study by Enikeeva Zalina (2016, 32) shows that from 2015 to 2016 remittances sent to Kyrgyzstan increased by 18.6 per cent with indications for an upward trend.

For the retailing business with about 150.000 people involved only at Dordoi (2016, 31), the predictions about negative consequences of accession did come true. According to the trade union leader at Dordoi, Damira Doolotaliyeva, the turnover at the market decreased around

80%, already in the first months after the accession in 2015 (IHS Markit 2018, 5). With EEU tariffs almost twice as high as the price for import goods before the accession (goods were counted in kilos not in value), bazaar trade has shrunk significantly. Increasing import tariffs (Nasritdinov and Kozhoeva 2017, 41), in line with the financial crisis which devaluated Kazakh's and Russia's currencies (Enikeeva 2016, 35) are the main reasons why the hope of increasing exports to member countries didn't materialized, yet.

Nonetheless, in the face of the public fear against Chinese expansion, Kyrgyzstan had little choice but to side with the Russian-led EEU. As Nasritdinov (2017) points out, also the bazaar traders see the lack of alternatives, because Kazakhstan was about to close its transport routes for Kyrgyz products if the country doesn't join the Customs Union. The consequence of this scenario would have been even more destructive since the majority of merchandise sold at Dordoi is exported to or through Kazakhstan.

In order to understand the prevailing importance of translocal mobility for traders and labor migrants nowadays, it is necessary to illustrate the mutual entanglement and the contradictions of different parties involved in the making, the remaking and unmaking of mobility and border regimes. Regimes of mobility don't always correspond with the increasing necessity of movement; official regulations often fail to match with the conditions on the ground (Gavrilis 2011). These regimes, moreover, don't only condition the rationalities of mobility and borders, they also impact on the ideological and economical meaning-making of the actors. The actors in turn, influence the rationalities of these regimes by the very practice of mobility and border crossing, or the circumvention of the top-down imposed regulations; a relation, which will be scrutinized in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 - A Marketplace of Change

2.1 Setting Foot on the Ground

When I first arrived at the market, which is located in the north-western outskirts of the country's capital Bishkek, I had no idea about the dimensions of this gigantic bazaar. I was warned to use GPS, because I'm likely to get lost in the never ending rows of double-stacked shipping containers re-used as sales outlets. Indeed, it took me a couple of days until I was able to recognize the sections and deliberately move from 'Europe' to 'China', as different areas are named, after the origin of the products available there.

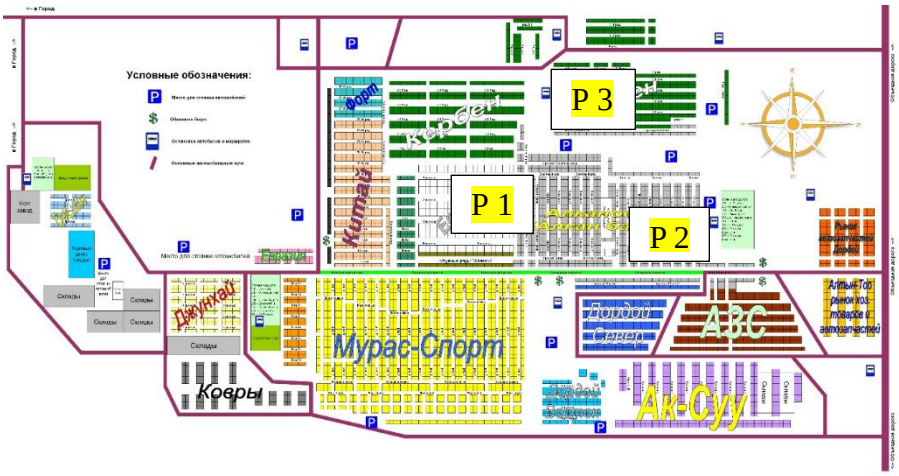

Figure 1. Schema of Dordoi Bazaar in Bishkek

Figure 4. Luxury container in 'Europe' (P1)

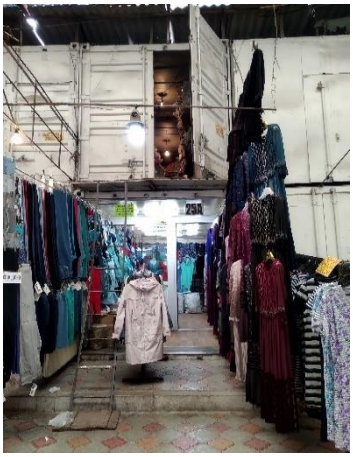

Figure2.Double-stacked container (P2)

Figure 3. Container in 'China' (P3)

The market sprawls over 250 hectares but since the recent decline in bazaar trade not the entire space is used for retail business anymore. Many containers are closed and advertised for sale or rent, while in other sections trade seems to go on like ever before. Especially 'Europe', with the lion's share in Turkish textiles is bustling with shouting food hawkers, goods being packed and hastily transported by porters. After being carried through the crowds with dangerously overloaded carts the goods reach packing stations next to the bus and marshruka stops. There the goods are rammed into bales, piled up in larger bags and wrapped into several centimeters thick parcel tape to be send to their destinations. A plethora of canteens, money exchange booths and women predicting future from cards or hands completes this crossroads of everyday economies. Asking the driver about a schedule for departures, I was told that business determines the timetable. They run when fully loaded. All trading processes at Dordoi are based on complex organization which is negotiated on different levels and implemented by actors on the ground in order to create stability and structure (Spector 2017). Despite the chaotic impression of the entire process, people told me several times how well everything is organized there. They have never missed a single piece during deliveries.

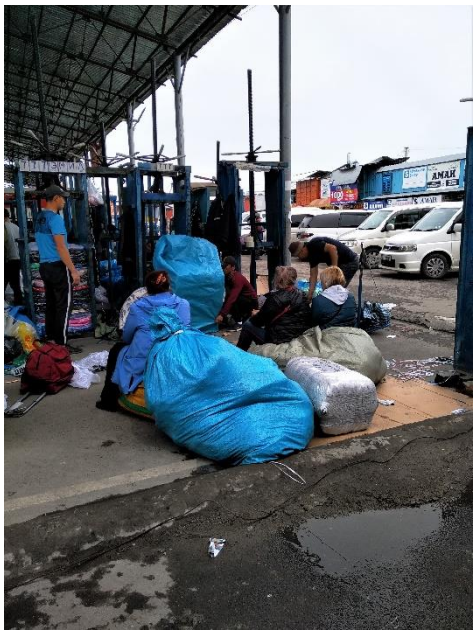

Figure 5. Packing station at Dordoi[7]

[7] All photos in this thesis are made by the author during the fieldtrip in April 2019

I have spent most of the time in the textile, shoes and bags sections, but the assortment at the market was virtually unlimited. Customers are on the prowl for kitchen appliances, electronic devices, artificial jewelry, ornaments and decorations, toys, and automobile paraphernalia. I talked to around 25-30 women and men, working in different positions at the market. I tried to find people of different ethnicity, age, and religious belonging. While the majority of female traders reacted positively to my inquiries, the interactions with male market personnel wasn't always easy. Male retailers were more reluctant to talk to me and my attempts to get information from the drivers and packers frequently resulted in unpleasant advances.

I decided that my interpretations can only be grounded, if there is some context available. In this sense, in the following chapter I mostly rely on the information given in conversations that had enough time to unfold. During these semi-structured interviews, topics ranged from the reasons for starting the trading business, entrepreneurial strategies, family background, the economic and social situation in Kyrgyzstan, and the impact of the country's entry to the Eurasian Economic Union. It was not only me who asked questions, though. There was a general interest in my person and the project I was doing, the living conditions and migration to Germany, how long it takes to learn the language and especially if Germans are selling their Diesel cars now. As Clifford Geertz remarked, knowing where and how to get the information one lacks and protection of one's information is "the name of the game" in bazaar economy (1978, 29). In short, the market is a place where not only goods and money circulate but also information.

Grounded in my fieldwork, this Chapter investigates three central aspects of the changes and the contemporary conditions of trading at the Dordoi Bazaar in Bishkek I begin with the emergence of trade as a livelihood strategy in the post-Soviet space chosen mainly by women. I tackle the reasons for female predominance in the business and the intersectionality of gender,

ethnicity and class at the market. In the second step, I explore what determines the trading mobility of retailers in Kyrgyzstan, and how far this mobility is gendered. In the last part of this chapter I focus on the recent decline in the trading sector. Changing regulations and financial crises have significantly weakened the business. From the ethnographic insights the questions emerged, - can a market like Dordoi die? And if yes, what economic alternatives are available for traders in the present condition of the Kyrgyz state?

2.2 The Gender and Multi-Ethnicity of Marketplaces

When strolling the bazaar, the high share of women among traders and their ethnic diversity are striking. I've been talking to people from Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Armenia, Ukraine, but also from China, Vietnam and Cambodia. Irrespective of their ethnic background the relative predominance of women among the retailers and customers sticks out. Thanks to this, I enjoy the luxury of being largely ignored by others, despite of my foreign appearance and the fact that I am walking alone. The transnational exchange at the market produces a sort of Russian-Turkic Esperanto between the Central Asian traders but the prevailing communicative language is Russian.

Irina, a female trader in her mid-fifties tells me that she never learnt to speak Kyrgyz. She was born to a Russian family, but they had been living in the country for two generations. It was not necessary for her, as everybody was speaking Russian. However, since the Soviet times life has been changing. Besides complaints about corruption and economic instability in the country, she feels very uncomfortable about raising religious and fundamentalist practices. What was unimaginable in Soviet times is recently being revived, e.g. women veiled in Muslim fashion and bride stealing. "Thank God for democracy!" - She adds sarcastically.

Before the demise of the Soviet Union she had been working in the State Institute for Quality Control - a well-respected position with a good salary, two children and a husband. Later she and her husband lost their jobs. They tried to live in Russia for a while but suffered from not being perceived as 'proper' (nastoyashchiye) Russians in Russia. Despite the economic insecurity, they decided to move back to Bishkek but not without a plan. Inspired by mushrooming open-air markets in Russia, she knew that she would do the same - traveling to Turkey or China, purchasing merchandise and retailing it back in Kyrgyzstan. I ask her if she started the business with her husband then, but she just waved aside "for him, all this was speculation[8]. Only when I bought a flat for our son, he started to understand that I was really making money here."

Irina's story is not an untypical one. Due to raging unemployment and unpaid salaries after the demise of the Soviet Union, many were forced to invent alternative means of livelihood. The most wildly used strategy of women was small-scale cross-border trade, also called 'shuttle' or 'suitcase' trade. The lifting of travel restrictions and the simplification of visa procedures, together with the distortions and inefficiencies in the supply system gave rise to a brisk traffic of goods, predominantly from China, Turkey or Poland to the post-Soviet space and back (Mandel and Humphrey 2002; Billé, Delaplace, and Humphrey 2012; Morris 2013; Mukhina 2014). Small-scale cross-border trade rapidly became a mass practice and a major means of individual and societal supply of goods and hard currency with an estimated volume of 20 billion dollar in 1998 in Russia (Yakovlev and Eder 2003, 4). The most intriguing social features of this peddling activity, however, is not the trading volume or the large number of people involved[9], but its conspicuous gender characteristics (Mukhina 2014; Bloch 2011;

[8] Speculation in Soviet times was socially proscribed and considered an inferior occupation, especially in contrast to the highly valued intellectual professions (Mandel and Humphrey 2002)

[9] The total number of people involved, however, is hard to estimate. For Russia the figures range from 10 million in 1994 (Yakovlev and Eder 2003, 4) to 30 million at its peak in 1996 (Mukhina 2014, 50) with numbers steadily growing from 1991-1998, and significantly declining after the financial crisis in 1998. In Central Asia and

Mandel and Humphrey 2002; Sasunkevich 2015). Approximately 80% of the practitioners from Russia (Mukhina 2014, 5) and Central Asia (Kaminski and Mitra 2010) are women.

In a previous research project on the gender of trade[10] and during my present fieldwork at the Dordoi Bazaar, I was given multiple explanations for this phenomenon by the actors themselves. Some stated that it were the many-sided obligations women learnt to cope with in Soviet times (housework, childcare, voluntary and full-time work[11]). This made them more flexible to adapt to a changing environment. Others referred to the sense for aesthetics, which made them better picking fashionable cloths. Other explanations were female rhetorical skills and gender capital when it comes to tariff and price negotiations. What seemed to be the most commonsensical notion, however, was that women are the strong sex, especially when things go astray. They wouldn't let their family break down, even if it was on the cost of their health or safety.

During state socialism in the Soviet countries individual retail business was officially forbidden and socially proscribed. Thus, even after the demise of the Soviet Union it was regarded shameful to undertake private businesses, and especially small-scale trading was considered something "akin to cheating or stealing or an act of extreme desperation similar to begging." (Mukhina 2014, 46). The stigmatization of open-market activity strongly influenced the moral and emotional regimes co-determined the meaning women attributed to the practice of trading. The economic crisis and the dismantling of the welfare structure challenged these moralities on a level of survival. For the first generation of traders in the 1990's this clash of ideologies,

especially in Kyrgyzstan, however, the number of people involved has been constantly increasing since the early 1990's (Kaminski and Mitra 2010).

[10] The research was based on 11 life-history interviews with women in Russia in 2018. All these women had been working as shuttle traders in the 1990's, but gave up the business some time ago. The main finding of this project was that female petty entrepreneurs in post-Soviet Russia often traversed an emotional transgression from shame to pride in regard to their commercial activity.

[11] More in-depth investigation of the so-called 'double burden' can be found in Sarah, Ashwin, *Gender, State, and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*, (New York, Routledge 2000), and Mary Buckley, *Post-Soviet Women*, (Cambridge, Cambride University Press 1997)

the loss of status[12], and the moralized public gaze were the main reasons for the feeling of shame or shamefulness in regard to shuttle trade. But at some point the feeling of indignity changed. As one of my female informants remembers the hardship after the demise of the Soviet Union, the criminal assaults on the trading routes, racketeering at the market and the hiding under the stalls, she suddenly paused and says: "But you know, when I finally managed to buy this container, I was so proud because it was me, and me alone who achieved this!"

Owning a container is a source of self-affirmation. From the moment when material returns started to pay back for the experienced hardship and women started to professionalize their businesses, the moral regime at the market changed. Bazaar trading in Kyrgyzstan turned into a serious chance for economic well-being. While the rest of the country remined in a weak economic position, bazaar entrepreneurs profited from the open-market policies in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. The successful performance in the business in turn, stimulated more positive emotions and, eventually led to a sense of pride among the (mainly female) traders. The main motivation, however, as many told me, was to provide for a good education for their children. In this sense, female predominance in the field can also be seen as a continuation of the women's self-image of the care-worker. Thus, a common way to evaluate their success in the business was to highlight their capacity to provide for the well-being of the family and children's education.

The often-expressed feelings of shame and a lack of alternatives are important aspects to understand the challenges female petty entrepreneurs experience. Those who stayed in the business over time had to maneuver between different and prevailing ideological systems, strategically adapt to changing market conditions and face various challenges when purchasing

[12] In many accounts the loss of status is not only related to the negative public attitude towards traders as spekulators, but also due to the often high level of education among the actors. For studies on the traders as a "social group", see Yadova, Yekaterina 'Chelnochestvo Kak Social'nyj Resurs Transformacionnogo Perioda' (Institute sociologii RAN, Moscow 2009).

the goods. Considering the economic instability of most households in Kyrgyzstan, the trading activity of women became a means of survival. Trading exposes them to the neoliberal realities, where ongoing dispossession and exploitation are normalized. Yet, within their experience of 'regimes of mobility' (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013) they get access to various capitals, such as profits from financial incentives, firsthand knowledge of other places, networks and entrepreneurial skills. On the other hand, these assets often have a high price since the traders are exposed to manifold challenges such as corrupt border controls, arbitrary taxation, ethnic discrimination, and sexual harassment (Turaeva 2010). Hence, this chapter aims at shedding light on the scope of agency and the multiple ways traders managed to adapt, to respond and to make them more self-selected conditions.

2.3 Trading Mobility

2.3.1 Gender and Border Regimes as (Im-)Mobilizing Factors

In order to explore the different aspects of mobility and how they influence trade it is necessary to think about mobility beyond the mere movement of goods and bodies. It refers to the rationalities that determine or facilitate mobility. In chapter one I have shown the stakes of international actors in the making and re-making of border and mobility regimes. But it would be fundamentally wrong to picture Kyrgyzstan, and Central Asia at large, as mere puppet countries of powerful geopolitical stakeholders. On the local level a multitude of actors are actively charting the country's political landscape, economic development and social identity, while simultaneously promoting globalization on the ground. In this subchapter, I will therefore zoom in on the practices of people in their everyday lives to understand the interaction of these different levels.

Mobility is dependent on several factors which are negotiated on the international, the local and the personal level. On the micro scale this often depends on the moral economy of

households (Thompson 1992), which, in turn, is part of the gender regime and as such another set of norms and values that directly influence the mobility of actors. Morality here refers to questions of gender roles and socially accepted economic practices for men and women. The economy of households may challenge cultural values attributed to traditional gender responsibilities with a single male breadwinner and women staying in the domestic sphere of child bearing and chores. For many, often extended family units, within the economically instable environment in Kyrgyzstan, the fiscal contribution of women is an existential necessity.

Another central aspect of trading mobility is the crossing of international borders. In the early nineties, small-scale cross-border traders travelled from Central Eastern Europe and Eurasia to Poland, Turkey, China, the Emirates and other places to buy products (Sik and Wallace 1999; Mandel and Humphrey 2002; Mukhina 2014; Karrar 2018). The products were channeled back in a rather unrestricted fashion, usually carried in bags by the traders themselves. The transformation of this commercial activity into a mass phenomenon facilitated the emergence of subsectors, like delivery services. Nowadays, the traders use to travel back without heavy bags, since the merchandize is usually sent via cargo-companies to their destined place. These delivery services have significantly alleviated the physical strains and lessened the unpredictability of cross-border procedures. The problems of arbitrary and changing regulations for tariffs at the borders is now faced mainly by cargo-companies. This, however, doesn't mean that border regimes don't directly impact on the practices of trader entrepreneurs or prevent them from travelling to the supplier countries. The three main negative influences of border regulations for wholesale traders at Dordoi are

1. Increasing tariffs for products from non-EEU states
2. The arbitrary obstruction of customs clearances, as it happened at the Kazakh Kyrgyz border[13]
3. The vicissitudes of changing visa regulations

The majority of my informants sold textiles or shoes which were purchased in China and Turkey, while some also mentioned trading connections to India, South Korea, Iran and the Emirates. Wholesale customers mainly come from other Central Asian countries and Russia. Retailers from Kazakhstan and Russia hold the biggest share, which is also obvious when investigating the destinations of the local cargo companies. In order to keep this global circulation of goods and people in the loop, the permeability of borders and the tariff regulations for import products are of upmost importance.

But border and mobility regimes sometimes change without warning. Apart from the aforementioned problems, the visa requirements for China became more stringent or as some say "discriminatory". None of the traders seemed to know why these obstacles existed. Furthermore, the non-entry politics don't fit to the rationality of free economic zones, propagated and implemented by the Chinese government. One Kyrgyz newspaper claims that the visa restrictions are due to a "growth in terror activity".[14] This danger led to a tightening of requirements for visa applications, including finger prints and special invitations from authorized entities in China. People, however, complain that the procedure is not transparent. Even if they comply with all the official guidelines, surrender is not guaranteed. Today, everybody knows that it became almost impossible to obtain a Chinese visa

[13] This was mainly the case in 2011-2013, but also in 2017 there were regular transit stops for Kyrgyz products at the Kazakh border (Enikeeva 2016).
[14] https://24.kg/english/52189_China_tightens_visa_policy_Kyrgyzstan_looking_for_solutions/ last access: 10.06.2019

Despite the wide-spread acknowledgement about the problems to enter China, I also met a woman who wasn't afraid of giving it a try and switch from her previous supplier country, Korea, to Chinese products. But unable to obtain a visa, she organizes the order via a friend who was more lucky. It was just in the moment when we had our conversation that she parallelly coordinated her order via WhatsApp. When I understood the reason for her business with the phone, I took leave, deeply surprised about her openness to talk to me, despite the importance of the business deal she was handing simultaneously. Her case reveals, how the digitalization of trade allows to circumvent immobilizing regulations. Yet, it is unlikely that the online order will eliminate the need to be mobile.

2.3.2 Digitalization of Trade – Advantages and Limitations

The bazaar business has not been unaffected by the digital turn and electronical devices have changed the market environment, just like any other sphere of everyday life. Virtual network application is also promoted by the market administration who offers free Wi-Fi for traders and customers alike. Traders have been swift in applying online communication providers like WhatsApp not only to stay in contact with family and friends, but also to conduct business deals. Irrespective of the actor's age, the majority confirmed that they were using social media, at least for replenishment delivery.

The case of Gulniza, a young trader of 26 years, however, illustrates the limitations of this procedure. According to her, the paramount criteria for business success is to be "after the latest fashion". This is impossible without comparing different styles, touching the quality of the textiles and interacting on personal terms with the suppliers. She has been working at Dordoi for seven years, and she and her husband own a container retailing mostly Moslem fashion purchased at Laleli, the gigantic bazaar with shop-floor production directly located in the heart

of old-town Istanbul. They travel there 5-6 times a year while her extended family is taking care of their three children.

Those trips are one of the reasons why she enjoys the trading business - they give her the opportunity to visit places she wouldn't see otherwise. Besides, she likes to demonstrate the dresses and styles of veiling effectively on her own. People buy what they see on her, so she feels like actively taking part in the spread of Muslim self-identification. "Kyrgyzstan has always been a religious country. I bet that many elderly women told you how much they regret the end of the Soviet Union. I think differently. In Soviet times our Muslim culture was suppressed and only now we are rediscovering our religious roots." The business with religiously oriented fashion was booming until 2015. After the country's accession to the Customs Union, however, the recession also reached their store. Her evaluation about the negative consequences, however, goes beyond the pure economic calculation. She criticizes the country's orientation towards Russia and says that Central Asia has a different cultural heritage. In her opinion the Muslim countries should create an economic Union based on the values of the Koran.

Her case is interesting in several ways. First, it shows that, despite the increasing use of online communication, traveling is still a requirement in the business. The reasons she gives - keeping up with the latest fashion trends, maintaining on good terms with business contacts and negotiating of prices on the spot- were also mentioned by other informants. Second, this mobility offers pleasure, because it allows the her to visit distant places. Third, the products she sells resonate with her personal preferences but also a growing local demand. Thus, even if they don't sell wholesale, their returns are sufficient. Also, her business mobility is facilitated by the cooperation with her husband and an extended family who is taking care of the children. And last but not least, her religious belonging does influence the direction of her mobility and

her spatial imagination based on the idea to find a political economy with the Koran as the symbolic boundary for a transnational market.

In conclusion, the digital turn in the bazaar business offers the traders useful tools to circumvent border restrictions temporarily and order supply products. The reason why traders travel less often is rather a sign of ill-functioning of the whole economic cycle in the retail business. Thus, it is clear that digitalization does not immobilize traders, but rather the impediments to the flow of goods and people. What remains doubtful, however, is the survival capacity of Dordoi in the long term. Both traders and official figures predict a rather bleak future for the market.

2.3 The End of Trade at Dordoi or Just a Never-Ending Crisis?

In line with the predicted negative consequences for the trading business in the run-up to Kyrgyz integration into the Customs Union the business has indeed become very slack since 2014-2015. During my visit in April 2019, large areas of the market gave the impression of a container graveyard, rather than the biggest hub for bazaar business in Central Asia. Surprisingly, when the informants complained about the slump, barely anyone referred to the increased tariffs with non EEU-countries. Instead, I could extract four reasons that were prevalent among my interlocutors.

First, the absence of Russians and Kazakh wholesale clients. The strong explanatory power of this reason might be influenced by the experience of the lingering crises in the neighboring countries, already before the entry to the Union. Kazakhstan reacted to the increasing amount of cheap and tariff-free imported goods from Kyrgyzstan with stricter border controls and import stops, whereupon many traders went bankrupt (Nasritdinov and Kozhoeva 2017). Furthermore, the devaluation of the Ruble and the Tenge in 2014-2016 reduced the purchasing power of Kazakh and Russian buyers. Several retailers told me about their long-time

established trading networks with customers form these countries and that the discontinuation of contact was also sad on a personal level. Thus, it is possible that for some traders the absence of 'dear' (dorogiye) business partners, are more weighty than increasing prices of import goods.

The second reasons was an image of a rather unbound world-wide financial crisis. In the context of the talks, traders draw this extended conclusion, based on the absence of customers from Russia and Kazakhstan, where economic recession is indeed rampant. Several times they would make remarks like "you are from Germany, you must know about it", or directly saying "from what I know Germany, was also hit badly". It would be very interesting to further explore what exactly determines the perception of the 'global' and in how far the trader's own translocal experiences are shaping this space of crisis. This, however, will have to be done in a research yet to come.

Another often stated reason where the visa problems with China, as mentioned in the previous section. And the fourth argument was a competing gigantic retail market for Chinese products at the Kazakh-Chinese border. Indeed, in the cause of China's Silk Belt and Road initiative massive investment projects are step by step being realized. Besides this free trade zone in the region of Khorgos with special visa regulations and the world's biggest 'dry port', also other vast infrastructural plans are put into practice, such as a train connection from Khorgos to Urumqi and the China-to-Europe highway.[15] Despite being part of the same Union like Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan can act much more self-determined than the economically fragile neighbor state. While Kyrgyz trade is rapidly declining due to the import tariffs for the Customs Union, Kazakhstan can make its own deals with the China.

[15] https://www.theguardian.com/cities/ng-interactive/2018/jul/30/follow-new-silk-road-china-belt last access: 10.06.2019

Overall it can be said that with the decline of trade turnover at the bazaar in recent years, actors engaged in this commercial activity became less mobile. Besides the mentioned reasons there is yet another factor, and maybe the most positive that can be found in the current economic conditions: a new domestic production industry has been booming recently – textiles 'Made in Kyrgyzstan'.

2.4 Is the Garment Industry Taking over?

Figure 6. Row of 'samoposhiv' container

One day, I was guided through the market by a young Kyrgyz woman. She wanted to show me the most expansive part of the market, but when we reached it, I thought we only arrived at another abandoned row of containers. Suddenly, however, someone left from one of them and the immediately approaching porter obviously knew where to make good money. They carried out bags and bags from the container and only when the third porter left to the cargo station with a fully loaded cart, the purchased trade volume was exhausted. Coming closer, I saw that some of the containers were protected with curtains, while others were completely hidden. My guide told me that behind these walls the *Samoposhiv* - the Kyrgyz garment industry - designs and produces the latest fashions, which is the reason that they were so cautiously sealed off. Production espionage and heated competition at the market motivate this secrecy.

The local textile production is the only industrial sector in Kyrgyzstan which has been growing in recent years and thousands of small and medium-size apparel shops produce garments for export, mainly to Russia (Botoeva and Spector 2013; Nasritdinov 2016). The sales volume in the apparel industry reached $ 127.7 million in 2010 and, thus, more than doubled within five years, with Russia importing about 95 per cent (ADB 2013, 14). Qualified textile workers are of high demand in the country and their income meanwhile supersedes the country's average income of around $ 490 per month (Jenish 2014, 10; quoted in Alff 2016, 15).

Many informants mentioned the increase in the local garment production and in the face of increasing tariffs for products from non-EEU countries more and more traders switch to garments 'Made in Kyrgyzstan". Albeit, as some mentioned, the local production is usually retailed directly from the manufacture to the Russian market. It is less profitable to deal with MIK at Dordoi as it has been with Chinese and Turkish products, because of the small price range between purchasing and retailing. The production sector, however is flourishing, and many contrasted the dying retail business, with the rapidly growing apparel production. "This might actually be good for the country and especially for the young female generation", one elderly woman argues, but "it is a very bad thing for old traders like me". For her it might be too late to become a professional sewer. With a dying business and a pension of about 1000 Som[16] she will be dependent on the remittances send by her son who is working in Russia.

Many others, however as Spector (2018) points out, who started in bazaar trade have meanwhile changed to the apparel manufacturing. As Nasritdinov, (2017, 41), however, highlights, there is a tendency for sewing workshops to move to Russia, too. The Russian market is the main purchaser of Kyrgyz apparel production, which allows those who produce there, to significantly save in transportation costs. The growing demand of 'Made in

[16] About 12 EUR / $ 14

Kyrgyzstan' might attract more and more practitioners to migrate, especially with the incentives that were implemented after Kyrgyz' accession to the EEU e.g. the integration into the pension scheme in the country of work and the general prospect of a higher wage and career opportunities.

Chapter 3 – Moving Subjects – the Rise of Labor Migration

Figure 7. Train route from Moscow to Bishkek[17]

3.1 Multidimensional Mobility of Labor Migrants

"You ask, if there are labor migrants or shuttle traders from Kyrgyzstan travelling in this train?" The sturdy looking woman with pinafore and kerchief looks me over from head to toe. "Of course there are!", she finally responds, "how else could I run this restaurant? But why would you want to know that?". She is the head of the sparsely equipped and at 11 am completely deserted dining car on the train from Moscow to Bishkek. When I tell her about my research and that I was looking for informants in the train she becomes more sociable. "You know," she

[17] Photo downloaded from: http://www.rupoezd.ru/poezd-zhaisan_tyuratam-raspisanie-i-otzyvy-cena-i-stoimost-bileta-marshrut-i-ostanovki/ last access: 12.06.2019

said, “there used to be a lot of Kyrgyz migrants on the train, the traders, however, I don’t know. It’s not like in the 90’s anymore, when they would carry their load to the train, and you could recognize them immediately. Things have changed, the traders send their stuff with cargo companies and the migrants have more money and less time, so they take a plane. The Kyrgyz workers in Russia really make good money now. Those migrants you still find here, they mostly come from Tajikistan.” “How come?”, I ask, and she patiently explains, “the train to Dushanbe only runs one time per month and the flights are expensive. Tajik migrants therefore jump on this train and go until the Kazakh-Uzbek border where they move on with busses. The Kyrgyz migrants have flight connections from Moscow and even Siberia to Bishkek every day. Maybe it’s not so cheap, but if they count how much they spend on food and drinks for a 4-day long train trip, and how much time they waste, you can imagine what they decide for.” I ask her why the Tajik workers don’t do the same? After all isn’t it equally expensive and time consuming for them? “Yes, of cause” she agrees, “but you will see that many of them are gone when you wake up tomorrow. They will get off at the Kazakh border and take the morning train back to Russia. It’s because they have to leave the country to get a new residence permit every few months.” “And the Kyrgyz workers don’t need to do that?”. “No, not any more. Since we are in the Customs Union our people can stay and work in Russia for much longer.”

She gets back to the small kitchenette and I see that for now I won’t get to know more. But then her face appears again through a crack in the door and she asks winkingly, “Are you sure, you don’t want a beer or cognac?” I, thankfully, declined her offer, finishing my tea and taking my leave. Only later I find out that going to the dining car is a commonly understood euphemism for having a drink.

Much of the information I got from the manager of the restaurant car was confirmed by my further inquiries on the train. Indeed, and against my assumption when I prepared the

ethnographic practice of this research, there were not many Kyrgyz labor migrants on the train any more. The majority of passengers where families on their ways to visit relatives, or Tajik migrants who got off the train at the Kazakh border. Just as the restaurant car lady told me, on the second morning they were all gone. Instead, however, I met some Russian women who were on their way to Dordoi to buy supplies for their shops. Their stories resembled the case of Irina from the previous chapter. They have been in the business since the early 1990's, but lately they have been struggling to survive in the midst of the financial crisis in Russia. They even assumed that it might be one of their last trips to Bishkek.

Altogether, I have been talking to a wide range of people, such as migrants of different ages, gender and nationalities, to the compartment conductors, to the stuff in the restaurant car and passengers with all kinds of purposes for travelling. Thanks to those insights, it became clear that for labor migrants the issue of mobility is even more multilayered than for the bazaar traders. In order to capture some of the prevalent forms of mobility in regard to labor migration I will introduce three ethnographic moments in this chapter. Two of them happened on the train from Moscow to Bishkek and one at the Dordoi Bazaar. These cases represent different typologies such as 'forced mobility', 'restricted mobility' and 'social mobility' for different generations, gender, and nationalities. Yet, by classifying mobilities, I don't want to oversimplify the complexities of each case, nor do I suggest that they follow a linear trajectory, based on the same development over time. The narration of an elderly women from Kyrgyzstan, her discussion with a female travel guide from Tajikistan and my conversation with a young male student at Dordoi, provide insights into the wide range of possibilities and parallel occurring features of labor migration. I discuss the different dimensions of mobility in regard to three guiding questions. (I) How is labor mobility negotiated in regard to the family and household? (II) How are decisions made about where to go, seasonal or long-term stay, or permanent migration? (III) How do they deal with legal regulations in the country of

destination. Our conversations showed that these factors are deeply entangled with each other and closely related to the different levels of prevalent mobility, border and gender regimes.

3.2 Forced Mobility – the Case of Galina

From a 'mobilities' perspective (Urry 2007) the reasons, practicalities and consequences of mobility impact not only those who are mobile, but also those who are 'staying put' (Reeves 2011). In the case of Galina, a 55-year-old Kyrgyz woman, it meant leaving three children (4, 12 and 16 at that time) behind. It was important for her to stress that she would never have left if it wasn't for reasons of survival (yedinstvennyy sposob vyzhit') and that it was 'forced migration' (vynuzhdena migratsiya), which reveals that she felt deprived of her decision-making capacity.

She and her family enjoyed a life of working-class elite back in the Soviet Union. Together with her husband she worked in a factory. They had a house, children and a vivid social life. When the factory was closed in the reform period of the early 1990's they decided to sell their property and tried to establish a small kiosk, but the venture failed. They were highly indebted when her husband decided to head to Russia in search of work. Some years later she lost her smallest son, a tragic incident which was followed by her husband's demise, who died from a heart attack directly after the birth of her fourth child. This sequence of traumatic experiences was accompanied with existential poverty. Galina's didn't have any relatives to support her and most of her acquaintances had already left for Russia. They live in a town, close to the Kazakh border that didn't offer any means of subsistence. When she couldn't buy even the most basic things for her children anymore, like shoes for school, she decided to move to

Moscow. At that time, her youngest son was three years old and it was the two older brothers who brought him up.

The reason for her to move to Russia, instead of engaging in the trading business are manifold. First, all her personal contacts had migrated, so it is a much more familiar livelihood strategy for her. Through this network, she was offered a job in the domestic elderly care sector. Second, it was incomprehensible for her how to get the business started, e.g. from where to take the budget to travel abroad, purchase merchandize, find a place in Bishkek and rent a Container at Dordoi. And last but not least, she feared the risk of entrepreneurial activity after the traumatizing experience with the kiosk.

Against this background it becomes clear how bitter her experience of labor mobility was and the price of these life decisions is hard to imagine. “Now”, she says, “my youngest son is 16 and he doesn’t need my love anymore, and my three grandchildren don’t recognize me, when I come for a visit”. Staying put in this sense, can also mean that absent labor migrants are left behind from the development of their families. The dream of coming back for retirement to enjoy the fruits of a live lived for others may turn out to be an illusion. More studies are needed on the issue of returning migrants in Kyrgyzstan, especially in the case of women.

3.2.1 Nationalism and Discrimination

Galina has been working in the elderly care in Moscow for eleven years. Still, she considers Russia the place of working and her house in the small Kyrgyz town the place of living. She is a great supporter of Stalin and Putin and “if he only would” Galina would be happy to see Kyrgyzstan integrated into a new Russian empire, also to protect the country against the Chinese “invasion”. She fears the growing presence of Chinese people and Chinese investment in Kyrgyzstan. Her image of what constitutes the “Chinese way of life” is filled with

Orientalizing notions, such as rapid reproduction, an ant-like army of workers, and the consumption of all the things civilized people wouldn't accept on their plates.

Just a moment before, we had been talking about her experiences with discrimination in Russia. Once she worked for an old lady who accused her of taking away jobs from Russians. She used to call her a "black" (tchernyi) that should go back from wherever she came from and not destroying Russian ethnic purity. Her reaction to the accusation is interesting, though. It is informed by the collective memory of the Great War and the Soviet propaganda of the brotherhood of all Soviet people. She argues "In the Second World War we have been fighting side by side and it were the Kyrgyz who saved Moscow from fascist seizure of power. Afterwards we build communism together and despite all cultural differences we grew as one folk. How could she treat me as if I was an undesired intruder, after all our people have been going through together?"

Against the background of her own experience of ethnic discrimination her resentments against the Chinese minority in Kyrgyzstan becomes even more meaningful. Our talk took place on second late afternoon on the train and for as long as there was daylight, we passed nothing but the seemingly endless monotony of the Kazakh desert. "Here they could settle", Galina adds, "it's enough space and no one would care if they assimilate, or not. In Kyrgyzstan, however, we want that people respect our traditions, our environment and our language. I haven't met a single Chinese who tried to learn Kyrgyz, they just stick to each other and conduct their dubious businesses, exploiting our resources". In her opinion it is the responsibility of Russia to protect Kyrgyzstan against the "Chinese invasion". Just like Putin defended Crimea against Ukrainian nationalists.

Galina double-edged story of ethnic distancing reveals how her imagined geographical mind-map is still informed by the extensions of the Soviet borders. The positive associations she has

with the Soviet past and the current ambitions of Russian geopolitical expansion appears to be representative for the absolute approval rate towards Russia within the wider Kyrgyz society (Nasritdinov and Kozhoeva 2017, 6). In her case it certainly influenced her decision about the direction of mobility. Since she was forced to leave anyway, she decided to go to Moscow, the heart of what she considers a representative example of a longed-for Russian grandeur. The price to achieve this position was high, but it also gives her a sort of satisfaction. A sense of superiority towards the Tajik migrants with which we shared our train compartment became obvious during the communicative trip through the endless Kazakh step.

3.3 Post-Soviet Globalism in the Train – Normalized Mobility

It is around midnight and it snows when the train leaves Moscow Kazanskaya station. The railway is a relic from the past and, as the compartment conductor bluntly points out, I have a ticket for the most run-down car. Generally, there are two types of carriages in these long-distance trains. The first consists of a series of quardruple compartments with four bunks (2 lower and 2 upper). The second is a so-called platskart carriage consisting of 54 bunks, arranged in bays of 4 on one side and bays of 2 on the other. And as the Russian railway website warns, "there is no privacy in such type of carriage and it is rather noisy there, so travelling [with platskart] is a choice of those who value economy more than comfort."[18] Obviously not too many make this choice and our compartment is freezing cold, not only because the heaters don't work, but also because of remaining almost empty. Except for me, there is only Galina and a stone-drunk Russian guy.

The next morning, when the man is sober, he turns out to be very talkative and Galina hangs on his every word. The victory day that commemorates the surrender of Nazi Germany in 1945 is about to come and together they are indulging in memories of Soviet Imperial power. Having

[18] https://www.russiantrain.com/carriage_classes last access: 12.06.2019

a German around makes the topic spicy. However, before the conversation can go wrong, the self-proclaimed protector of Russian women and children leaves the train. This gives me time to conduct a biographical interview with Galina, who agrees to tell me her story, despite the fact that we don't concur on the issue of Stalin's alleged infallibility.

Only later that day when we arrive in Samara, a city in southwestern Russia with around one million habitants, does the carriage fill up. Apart from some elderly people and Russian families, a group of about 15 Tajiks passengers occupies the rear part of the car. It turns out that the group is guided by a woman, who organizes this trip. She herself is Tajik, with Cossack roots, has a Russian husband and can therefore freely move between the countries. The absence of a more frequent connection (the train from Samara to Dushanbe runs only once a month) and the high price for plane tickets make a profitable business niche for her. She organizes the entire transportation from the place of work of the laborers to the door of their houses in Tajikistan. This job makes her a real authority among the migrants, and it is fascinating to see how she coordinates the journey, i.g. calling from three different cell phones, organizing the necessary amount of Mashrutkas[19] for the continuation of the trip from the Kazakh-Uzbek border station and planning the routs to each person's home place without even having a map.

Figure 8. Train stop on the second day in Kazakhstan

At some point the she joins Galina and the two of them start talking about the situation of labor migrants in Russia and how it is different for Kyrgyz laborers since the country's accession to the Customs Union. This conversation

[19] Privately run sort of collective taxi

draws a clear picture of the Tajik's precarious working conditions. As the guide explains, the majority of the group in this train works and lives on the construction site. Official regulations in Russia are such that citizens from Central Asian Republics can enter without visa, however, they have to register within seven days after arrival. Without this residence permit (*propiska*) one is considered an illegal migrant, a status hold by a majority of workers from Central Asia (Laruelle 2013). Frequent and racially motivated police controls on the streets lead to a "routinization of racial discrimination in contemporary Russia" (Reeves 2013b, 520) and a fear of the public space for those who lack proper documentation. A study by Saodat Olimova (2013) reveals that about 70 per cent of Tajik labor migrants in Russia do not leave their workplaces at all, sometimes also on prohibition of their employers. The obstacles to obtain a legal employment status are enormous, e.g. refusal of employers to pay taxes (Laruelle 2013), costs of police bribery and discrimination by the Federal Migration Service (Nasritdinov 2016). In addition, the simple availability of fake documents produces a space of "administrative ambiguity" (Reeves 2013b, 520). This "regime of documentation"[20] regulates the right to the public space for labor migrants and the arbitrariness of these boundaries reinforces the vulnerability of illegal migrants.

Until 2015 the migration regulations were the same for citizens form all Central Asian countries. As outlined in Chapter one, the situation has changed for Kyrgyzstan after the country's entry to the EEU. According to Galina, these changes have significantly improved the status of Kyrgyz people in Russia. "We don't need to pay for the work permit (*patent*), and when I tell the police that I'm from Kyrgyzstan, they don't check my documents any more". The Tajik woman seems surprised and agrees that the police controls and the payment for the work permit are the most burdening regulations for Tajik migrants. "Our people pay 4.000

[20] Quoted from Dolotkeldiev (2013, 199), who refers to a study by Madeleine Reeves (2013b), who labels the Russian system of controlling migrants as a regime of "documentation".

Ruble[21] every month". A significant amount of money, especially considering the fact that migrants are regularly cheated on their salary. "The Armenians are especially untrustworthy", the Tajik woman explains, "with Russians it's a bit better. They at least pay something, usually".

Galina asks her why the Tajik government didn't try harder to also join the Customs Union. A question to which the woman has no answer. "Maybe we were accepted because we still speak good Russian", speculates Galina, "in any case, Kyrgyzstani in Russia are much better off now than they were before. Also, the Russians respect us more."

The conversation between the two women hints towards a process of stratification between different migrant groups. This constructed social cleavage materialize through the regulation of mobility. The legal status of Kyrgyz labor migrants allows them to move as free citizens, while the majority of Tajik and Uzbek labor migrants remains in fear of police harassment. Nasritdinov (2017, 27–28) points out in a study based on interviews with 23 Kyrgyz labor migrants, that the overall assessment about the accession to the EEU are rather positive. Even if there still remain a lot of concerns, for instances in regard to discrimination and violation of labor rights, the position of Kyrgyz migrants has significantly improved, especially if compared to the situation of workers form Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

3.4 Social Mobility – the Case of Dinara and her Son

Different forms of mobility or immobility have been outlined, so far, but one basic category has not been mentioned, yet – social mobility. In the classical sociological definition of the term, social mobility refers "to the process by which individuals move from one position to another in society – positions which by general consent have been given specific values"

[21] About 50 EUR / $ 60

(Lipset and Bendix 1962, 1–2). Lipset and Bendix identify "education [as a] principal avenue for upward mobility" (1962, 91), an assumption that has been reaffirmed by various scholars over time. The social fabric in Kyrgyzstan provides little opportunity for socio-economic mobility within the society, which has led to massive human capital flight in recent years. Many studies have pointed out the dangers of a "brain-drain" effect for the country (Thieme 2014; Vinokurov 2013; Abazov 1999). But so far, there are little signs that the Kyrgyz government manages to keep the skilled laborers in the country, or that it would be able to achieve a sort of 'brain-gain' by offering incentives for skilled migrants to return. In this last chapter I introduce a Kyrgyz family from whom I learnt volumes about the complexity of social mobility in the convoluted context of the economically failed post-Soviet Republic. In addition, their story also accounts of the inevitable interlacement of the country's two main livelihood strategies – trade and labor migration.

As many times before, when I approached sellers at the Dordoi market, the first skeptical question is, if I'm a journalist. When I clarify the motivation for my inquiries the reaction is mostly positive. This is also the case when I get to know Dinara and her family's story. For her education is the only way out of what she calls the "hopeless" (beznadezhnyy) state of the country. Not necessarily because education could help to rebuild an economically robust society, but because then young people can find better-paid positions abroad. We are just talking about her struggles to offer her sons a good education, when the elder, Asan, passes by at the container to visit his mother.

She introduces us and tells proudly that he is about to finish his master's in Food Engineering at the Turkish-Kyrgyz Manas University. "Talk to her in English" she asked him, and in an unpretentious and eloquent way, he tells me about his studies and his affection for his family. Without switching back to Russian, so as his mother would have understood what he says, he

explains to me, “my parents have struggled all their lives to give us a good education and a comfortable home, now it’s time for me to pay it back.” I ask him about his plans, and he answers in Russian that he would like to stay and that the problem is not about finding a job in his profession, but about the bad salary. In Bishkek he wouldn’t earn even half of what he can get for the same position in Russia. But he is also thinking about Turkey and has some contacts in Qatar. In the end, he will go where the payment is best.

Dinara agrees and adds that it be the worst for her, if her son had also engaged in the trading business. “Some years ago, you could still make good money here, but now it’s barely enough to survive.” In Soviet times Dinara worked as a Math’s teacher. For her retailing at the bazaar has always been a sacrifice to provide for a better future of her children. Both, mother and son express anxieties about nationalist sentiments in Russian society. However, as Asan remembers, the last time when he was in Russia and showed his passport, he was simply nodded through all kinds of security controls, while other Central Asian citizens were checked rigorously. He hopes that the legal acknowledgement might change the negative attitude towards Kyrgyz migrants in Russian society at large. With EEU’s incentivizes to attract skilled labor from member countries, they think that the stereotypical downgrading of migrant’s labor qualification might also improve. The full recognition of academic certificates across all Union countries is an important step, eventually, providing access to high skilled professions for migrants.

The question of what constitutes social mobility in the context of a post-Soviet developing country is one that can’t be sufficiently answered in this analysis. Still, I use the term to highlight three important aspects. First, thanks to the turnover in the more prosperous years of bazaar trading many families could provide for a good educated of their children. The question of inter-class mobility, however, is more complex due to the general pauperization of Kyrgyz

society since the 1990's. Second, social mobility is meant to project a possible revalorization of the recognition of the migrant's human capital in the countries of destination. This could significantly enhance their status in the receiving society. And last but not least, it may lead to segregation, not within Kyrgyzstan, but in the receiving country. For instances, if Kyrgyz migration to Russia grows as steadily, as it is forecasted and if some start holding more positions in high skilled jobs than an intra-ethnic stratification process among high and low skilled Kyrgyz labor migrants is likely to take place. Finally, for Asan to materialize a form of social mobility and to provide for the everyday needs of his family, he has to leave the country.

Conclusion

In my thesis, I scrutinized the negotiation of mobility as a livelihood strategy among Kyrgyz traders and labor migrants. Taking mobility regimes as an approach to explore how the movement of people and goods is regulated over time and space and on a micro and the macro level, allowed me to extrapolate a multiplicity of push and pull factors that determine and facilitate the mobile ways of making economic ends meet. Comparing the stakes of international actors in the making, unmaking, and remaking of mobility regimes in Central Asia revealed that the geopolitical aspirations of Russia and China significantly impact on the everyday mobilities of traders and labor migrants since these are the two most frequently accessed countries. By regulating transnational movement in favor of mobile actors, such as labor migrants (EEU) and traders (tariff-free customs clearance at the Chinese-Kyrgyz border) the two unequal international stakeholders want to expand their preeminence in the territory between them. In the Chinese case, these aspirations become manifest in the Silk Road Economic Belt initiative. Though, crossing through Central Asia, this project goes far beyond and targets at connecting the Chinese market to goods transfer points all over the world. (Fallon 2015). In the Russian case, however, the Eurasian Economic Union rather aims to revive the boundaries of the Soviet Union (Peyrouse 2015).

These foreign policy concepts are one level of influence in the making, unmaking and remaking of mobility regimes. People's ways of applying mobility as a livelihood strategy another. The modes and directions of mobile practices, in turn are again shaped by a variety of factors. Apart from the obvious economically driven engagement, there are more nuanced aspects that impact on the mode of mobility. The analysis of the ethnographic fieldwork revealed, that e.g. spatial imaginaries and emotional geographies influence the mobile practices of traders and labor migrants. These subjective mapping of space is charged by nostalgia, intercultural experiences,

and economic practices e.g. prospective spatial relationships (the Muslim political economy of Gulniza), or past arrangements, such as the Soviet Union (many, mostly elderly women at the market and most outspokenly Galina). Historical, imagined, aspired and lost spaces, thus influence the mode and the direction of mobility, just as they shape and are shaped by regime regulations (high public approval rates for Kyrgyz accession to the EEU on the one hand, and growing Sinophobia on the other).

My ethnographic inquiry with traders at the Dordoi Bazaar allowed me to get insights into the multiplicity of strategies of adaptation and sense-making and ways of dealing with constantly changing regime regulations and constraints to mobility. Modes of adaptation materialized on different forms, such as the application of digital technologies, or switching from Chinese or Turkish products, to garments 'Made in Kyrgyzstan', or even re-professionalize and engage in the rapidly growing apparel industry. The way of sense-making is strongly influenced by the global connectivity of the traders. Many perceived the current regime changes (increasing tariffs with non-EEU members) and the negative effects it has on their business, as part of a larger, or even global crisis. The most feasible effect of negative turnovers is the decrease in trading mobility. As many said, "immobility is the end of trade, as all commercial exchange depends on the circulation of goods and people". In the absence of a social welfare system in Kyrgyzstan, traders who cease to be mobile for economic, but also for reasons of age or physical restrictions, often depend on the financial support of other family members (in most cases children).

Having invested in their children's education, in times when bazaar trade was more profitable, now has to pay back. As the story of Asan and his mother Dinara teach us, skilled laborers are wanted in Kyrgyzstan, but they are not paid sufficiently to support a larger family. Encouraged by EEU regulations and the prospect of a better salary, more and more Kyrgyz migrants go to

Russia. The favorable conditions as a Union member, however, go beyond mere economic and legal advantages, they also promote feelings of superiority, which might foster an effect of segregation among ethnically different labor migrants in Russia.

Gender is another important dimension when it comes to the negotiation of mobility as a livelihood strategy. Women traders and the female labor migrant (Galina) unambiguously related their mobile practices to the need for economic survival and to the necessity to provide for their children's well-being and education. An important difference that I found in the narrations from both groups is that for the first, the children were a source of pride and compensation for the experienced hardship. For the second, however, the economic strategy came with the price of estrangement from her children. Now, she grieves, not only because she didn't see her youngest son growing up, but also because she feels deprived of his love when she comes on one of her rare visits.

More research would be needed on the long-term effects of mobility and the situation of returning male and female migrants. How do family members and the broader social environment receive the returnees, and how do they themselves deal with the realities in what for long has only been a projected home? Another important direction of study will be the development at the once biggest bazaars in Central Asia. If Khorgos in Kyrgyzstan becomes the prime address for retail business with Chinese goods, what will the Kyrgyz traders do? Some might migrate, but what about those, who don't want to go, or those who simply cannot? And what if the Russian economic performance further weakens? These and many other questions appear when investigating the current transformation of livelihoods within regimes of mobility. It has been a fruitful approach that allowed me to connect the historical legacies and the various actors on the international, the local and the personal level to get a sense of the stakes and motivations of these different parties. Crucially, it provided a relational perspective

that binds these levels together and, thus analyzes the processes of movement without losing sight of their relevance for the everyday and emotional experience of those who apply mobility as a livelihood strategy.

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