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E-informality: smartphones as a new regulatory space for informal exchange of formal resources

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About the research

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1 Executive summary

Mobile phones and other technologies have transformed the nature and dynamics of informal social networks in Kyrgyzstan. Some scholars argue that new technology (electronisation, digitalisation) helps to prevent corruption and reduce the risk of bribery, informal social networks and bureaucracy. In their view, new technology has the potential to create transparent and efficient ways to access public services. This is usually done by implementing electronic queue systems, online payment platforms, registers and other public services, as well as transparency portals providing access to government data, statistics and state laws and regulations.

Based on our research in Kyrgyzstan, we explore the extent to which smartphones and new technologies are empowering citizens to access public services in Kyrgyzstan through the logistics of informal networking. We observed that this is especially practised among young people both in Kyrgyzstan and in Russia. By using smartphones, young people:

- help each other in times of need (to expedite access to public resources);
- share information about possible reliable networks (*svyazi*);
- recommend reliable networks to each other;
- prioritise these networks over others.

As many international organisations and government agencies are trying to support the fight against corruption and informality through the use of new technology, young people in Kyrgyzstan are finding creative ways of bypassing new technology. At the same time, they are driving the dynamics of informal social networks by using this technology and in particular smartphones.

The generational aspect became unexpectedly important during the research because of striking differences between the experiences and practices of informality between younger and middle-aged generations. Both generations have similar contemporary experiences of insecurity, financial struggles and socio-economic conditions in the post-Soviet context, but these two groups have different experiences with the Soviet times themselves. Several young people pointed out that "informality, even corruption, for us is a normal thing". They perceive informality and bribery as a "normal" feature of daily life with two sides – hindering as well as establishing careers. The middle-aged generation, however, whose background is rooted in the Soviet period, see it in a negative light, even though they still practise informality and bribery in their everyday lives.

The intensive use of smartphones by young people becomes obvious when they try to access public services by means of informal social networks. Middle-aged generations use telephones for logistical tasks and communication with friends and family members, but young people go beyond these merely logistical tasks. They actively use social media (*odnoklassniki* groups - Russian social networking services, like Facebook, that are widely used in Kyrgyzstan and in other post-Soviet countries) and mobile applications (WhatsApp, immo) when they need help by sharing information amongst one another, and their friends and friends of friends. More specifically, young people have created "WhatsApp-based communities for getting things done quickly". These perpetuate the mutual benefit of reciprocity, mainly for issues related to the public sector. Young people are better socially connected and informed about each other's work, receive news (who got which positions), stay in touch with important people on a regular basis (even if they move to another place), learn about important events, and get advice on specific issues.

2 Introduction

2.1 About this paper

The paper is structured in the following way:

- First, we describe the methodology of research and digital ethnography.
- Second, we provide different case studies, including health facilities, kindergarten, jobs and university, quoting answers given by our interviewees.
- Third, we compare our research findings about the younger generation with those of the middle-aged generation and show differences and similarities.
- Lastly, we also provide a new angle to informality in the context of migration.

2.2 Research methodology

This particular research on the role of informal social networks in expediting access to public services is based two months of field work in November 2019 and December 2019 in the small town of Kant in the north of Kyrgyzstan and 12 months of ethnography from 2015 to 2019 in the Shamaldy-Sai community in the south of Kyrgyzstan. The methods of research were:

- participant observation;
- in-depth interviews with 12 young people;
- focus groups, consisting of 16 people;
- an online group page on social media consisting of 312 people.

The generational aspect of practices of informality showed us interesting and contradictory results. It is important to have some background of young people who are in their prime working conditions and are actively engaged in private-sector business. They almost certainly run into government agencies almost every day. The middle-aged generation (born 1962 and onwards) have different occupations, mostly in the public and private sectors.

In this paper we use data that was collected from two generations:

- the younger generation, aged from 25-38 years old;
- middle-aged generation, from 55 and onwards (in Kyrgyzstan they would belong to elderly generation).

The young people were recruited in various ways, for instance by means of snowball sampling, but mostly they were the ones who trusted us. Some follow-up questions were asked by phone, Facebook and WhatsApp, asking specific questions about details of their digital interactions. In addition, three focus groups were held with a total of 16 people, divided by gender and age, so that each group could freely express their opinions without being controlled by elders. The participants in this study came from these two different age groups, the young and the elderly. Another group consisted mainly of female informants and the other group of male informants.

2.3 Digital ethnography

We combined traditional research with digital ethnography. Through this we could show how through the use of online networks, relationships are developed and maintained in the context of new media technology. Web ethnography offers an opportunity to participate in the same settings and to have similar tools for articulation and interaction as participants.

Internet ethnography implies that studying virtual spaces is different from studying the "real" or offline social practices (Kozinets, 2010). In her book on *Virtual ethnography*, a leading anthropologist of online methods Hine (2000) writes about the distinction in terms of an emphasis on flow and connectivity, as opposed to ethnography's prior concentration on location and boundaries. Likewise, O'Reilly conceptualises virtual ethnography which challenges assumptions of "field site", in that "instead of thinking in terms of places or locations, our Internet ethnographer looks to connections between things" (O'Reilly, 2009: 217). In this way, we look at the patterns of how social actors rely on new technology.

2.4 Literature review

The paper lies at the intersection of informality, informal favours, bribery in times of migration, social welfare decline and the emergence of new forms of solidarity in times of digitalisation. The innovative contribution of this paper is to look these practices through prism of inter-generational dynamics:

- observe the backing up of insurance networks, informality, and bribery that are cultivated in times of welfare crisis;
- trace these informal networks;
- better understand how informal access to public resources works along inter-generational dynamics (elderly people, intergenerational solidarity, gendered division of responsibilities and support);
- better understand how it works along lateral support (exchange of services) networks involving groupmates and other social networks.

The conceptual approach in this article was inspired by the work of Baez-Camargo & Ledeneva (2017:1), who identify patterns of informality and argue that "most systematically corrupt countries are considered to be just as corrupt now as they were before the anti-corruption interventions". They focus on unwritten rules, personal favours and reaching an understanding – all of which happen outside the formal law, structures of government, and other formal rule-based system.[1]

According to Ledeneva (2018:1), informality is "the world's open secrets, unwritten rules and hidden practices assembled in this project as 'ways of getting things done'. Informal practices may escape articulation in official discourse, but they capture the 'know-how' of what works in their vernacular representation". Our paper builds on these studies and further develops the insights of the informal system, which should stretch to new technology and social media as well.

Mobile technology plays a crucial role in empowering migrants in many ways by staying in touch with family members (Thompson, 2009) and controlling nannies in Paris by employers (Kim, 2016). It also transforms migration and empowers marginalised migrants, enabling them to be engaged socially,

[1] On informal governance, interviews with A. Ledeneva, Claudia Baez Camargo and Scott Newton, https://informalgovernance.baselgovernance.org

politically and economically (Ruget & Usmanalieva 2019). "Kyrgyz migrants do not use technology to discuss important diaspora issues or the politics of their home country" (Ruget & Usmanalieva 2019: 175), but we would argue that they use technology to access state-related resources.

As a study of mobile phones among Uzbek migrants in Russia shows (Urinboyev, R. 2017), migrants stay connected and informed via smartphones and use them to create a sense of community and solidarity. Urinboyev presents an interesting ethnographic account of the transnational lives of Uzbek migrants in Russia via smartphones. He describes that insecurities in the receiving country, along with poor informational and legal support, urge the Central Asian migrants to cope together:

"...the everyday life of Uzbek as well as Tajik and Kyrgyz migrants in Russia is characterized by a constant sense of insecurity, with the threat of exploitation, deportation, police corruption, racism, physical violence, and even death. This total lack of security compelled Central Asian migrants to create informal networks and structures for coping with the risks and uncertainties of their precarious livelihoods" (2017:126).

In this regard, the role of mobile technology is crucial in the transformation of the informal economy in developing countries (Wamala Larsson & Svensson 2018). By following this argument further by closely aligning with Scott Radnitz (2017), Ledeneva (2018) and Ismailbekova (2018), we argue that informality is not only an instrument of those who do not have access to public resources. It is also fundamental to the functioning of the formal system by proposing incentives to follow and obey the economic or political system's rules. But the experiences of different generations of informality drastically differs mainly because the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 affected the lives of a whole generation and also created a whole new generation with different views. It is time to look the experiences of younger people.

One of the most influential works on the paradoxes of Soviet life from the perspective of the last Soviet generation is a work by Alexei Yurchak (2006). The main puzzle of his book is devoted to the paradoxes of the experience of the Soviet system as stable, although its collapse was not surprising. This book is about the last Soviet generation, whose career began in the late Soviet period but then moved into the post-Soviet context. Our older generation belongs to the last Soviet generation of Yurchak, who used to live outside the system *vne systemy (2006:127).* In our research we focus on intergenerational dynamics, looking at both the Soviet generation and the younger generation.

Our research illustrates the "normalisation" of bribery and informality for the younger generation. This is related to the fact that the younger generation grew up after the collapse of the Soviet Union, i.e. under difficult socio-economic conditions (lack of jobs, deterioration in the level of education (schools, universities), social upheavals, lack of prospects for the future, distrust of the state), while at the same time being able to see the success of job searches through informality and bribery. Therefore, they invested more of their energies in learning how to make contacts, deal with people and find connections.

In this regard, we follow the argument of Diana Ibanez-Tirado's (2015) famous article on "How can I be post-Soviet if I was never Soviet?" where she challenges the existing periodisation "Soviet/post-Soviet" and different experiences of two generations. There are "alternative temporalities" that shape people's perception of informality in different ways. This is mainly because the younger people did not experience the "Soviet times", so their understanding of informality differs enormously from that of the elder generation. By extending this argument further, we will apply it to the case of the younger generation's experience of informality as normalisation can be viewed through the prism of new social media and technologies. At the same time we provide the experiences of the older generation as well in order to

show the dynamics of the intergenerational constellation of views. We also want to contribute to the critical discussion on the existing periodisation "Soviet/post-Soviet" (Ibanez-Tirado (2015)).

It is not surprising that informality has the potential to challenge or support public services by both generations. These things co-exist. Despite criticisms and rejections of informality in Kyrgyzstan, we see its proliferation through new technology and social media. Based on these observations, we propose the concept e-informality by claiming that new technologies, mass media and smartphones create a new, largely self-regulating space for the informal exchange of formal resources.

3 Key findings

3.1 New technology in Kyrgyzstan

According to the State Communications Agency (SCA), a total of 79% of the population has access to the internet and 50% had access to 3G mobile broadband coverage in 2014. As broadband penetration varies significantly across oblasts (province or zone) and regions, mobile coverage is the most affordable means of internet access. Websites and locative applications are generated mainly from Russian-language content providers with some limited options to change a language into Kyrgyz. Patterns of internet use in Kyrgyzstan generally are not different from the global phenomenon and range from recreational and social to professional use.

There are two types of popular platform in Kyrgyzstan. First, Odnoklassniki (meaning "classmates") is a Russian social media platform roughly equivalent to Facebook. Shortened as OK, it has common social media features such as creating profiles and a group page, sending text messages, publishing photos/videos and launching events.

Its most specific and most used section is the multimedia content. OK users can access a wide variety of music and videos uploaded on the website, including full-length pirate versions of box-office movies. The users, who are predominantly over 25, visit the website to stay connected with classmates, make new friends and find people from their childhood. Most people who lived in the Soviet Union and later moved to different countries find OK appealing because they can search for their old friends, former neighbours, teachers, classmates.

Second, WhatsApp has the most users worldwide, followed by Facebook Messenger. Kyrgyzstan is not an exception to this trend. WhatsApp is the most widely used platform in the country both in urban and rural areas. Features like easy download, free audio and video calls, and real-time messages have elevated it over other instant communication technologies. Many businesses in Kyrgyz cities and villages advertise a special WhatsApp number to contact them. Moreover, nowadays many young people not only know the above-mentioned apps but they also spend their time on Instagram, Telegram, Skype, Immo and Zoom. These are also important apps that people actively use to share information about different things (sharing photos, music and videos), including some advice and support.

Needless to say, WhatsApp plays a major role in connecting, supporting, and entertaining people because it is easy to learn, use and practise by different generations. This app also has many different functionalities that make it easy to use for different purposes depending on your needs. It has significant effects on patterns of social relationships and sustains collective coordination. This technology can shed light on particular forms of expression and negotiations of relationships.

In the following sections we will share different experiences of younger and older people regarding informality through new technologies. The first section will focus on the experiences of the younger generation with access to medical services, kindergarten, school, and access to information and networks and their use of technology to rely on informal networks. Later, we will present the older generation's experiences in using technology for their own personal needs. In this way, we will identify similarities and differences in the use of the new technology to meet their needs.

3.2 Younger generations are comfortable with new technology

3.2.1 Health facilities and access to medical services

In the recent project in Kyrgyzstan, we found that users of public health facilities often rely on the support of informal social networks (friends, acquaintances, relatives) due to a lack of trust in medical services. By relying on social acquaintances (*taanysh*), the informants smoothen the process by facilitating access to reliable medical treatment. If someone goes to a doctor without any *taanysh*, the medical personnel would ask them to wait and claim there was a shortage of medicine and a lack of free places (rooms) in the hospital.

In the following we would like to present three case studies of our young informants to illustrate their experiences and the lack of options in such situations:

- Azat's experience with doctors;
- Akai's experience in hospital;
- Medina's solution to her mother-in-law's health problem.

Later we will compare their experiences with the elder generation in order to see the similarities and contrasts.

According to Azat, 33 years old, who works in the bank as a credit specialist and lives in the small town of Kant:

"If you go to hospital, one can see the same doctors on duty (dezhurnyi) prescribing you the same medicaments. It is usually the private pharmaceutical companies that agitate doctors by saying if you sell our medicaments, in return, we will give you gifts for the 8th of March and promise to provide a bonus before the New Year celebrations. Therefore, doctors keep prescribing the same medicaments to everybody. For example, if I take my daughters to hospital, I always search for 'someone' whom I know well (i.e. I usually call or send a message to my elder brother's wife (zhenge)) and trust her by taking her medical prescriptions very seriously, otherwise unknown doctors keep prescribing 'Ibuprofen' even if you have a headache, knee, and other health related problems. They do not try to investigate the reason of the disease and use a particular medicament to treat a particular illness. If you really want to recover from your disease, one should rely only on 'acquaintances' (taanysh). We always search for someone in the city and trust their diagnosis and medical advice. For example: when I had neuritis, I approached my friend's father who prescribed me not-expensive medicaments and vitamins and explained to me everything what to do further.

If I did not approach him, regular doctors in the hospital would keep prescribing me very expensive medicaments, therefore I directly approached whom I really trusted."[2]

Akai, 33 years old, works as a state clerk. His opinion is different from Azat's, but he too stressed the shortage of medicine and lack of free places in the ward.

"Usually we only go to the hospital if we are really sick, what we have lost there, otherwise. In my case, when I first went to the hospital, the nurse told me there was no room in the hospital. I called my friend's father, who helped me find a place, and my friend's father asked me to come tomorrow morning. The next day I called him early, and he asked me to come. As you can see, they also gave us the wrong information. Instead of saying that there would be available rooms soon, in this case, of course, we would have waited, but instead said that there would be no available rooms. Of course, we should have called our friends and asked for a room in the hospital. Maybe the nurse knew there would be available rooms in the hospital, but they did not want to give them to us or share this information with unknown people."[3]

Medina, 31 years old, works as a hairdresser and owns her own beauty salon. She also stressed the importance of relying on informal social networks in hospital.

"Once my client offered me her help since she worked in the hospital. She did it especially in the situation when my mother-in-law got sick and relatives were not aware of her exact health condition and diagnosis, which had been putting the relatives under stress and uncertainty for a long time. Not only my client helped us to provide an exact diagnosis, but she also brought my mother-in-law to different further medical check-ups, therapy and treatment monitoring. In the eyes of my relatives, my authority as a daughter-in-law had increased. Sometimes it was really great if you had 'important people' (zvyazi) and acquaintances (znakomye) in the hospital. They could help us to save time by not waiting in the queue, not running from one cabinet to another, and saving some money. In return, I usually make my services cheaper or better. We keep in touch with her on Facebook and WhatsApp."

For these young people, mistrust towards such health-related public institutions prevails. This can be quite frustrating, but young people find ways to deal with the system. Two important aspects are important to highlight here:

1. Lack of trust towards public medical personnel, because they are not interested in diagnosing patients but are instead busy selling the foreign medicines for their own profit.
2. Lack of information available to patients, meaning that they cannot rely on medical personnel without asking for help from their extended informal social networks. They therefore try to rely on their own networks to have access to hospitals.

3.2.2 Kindergarten and school: bypassing digitalisation

When asked about having access to public kindergarten for children, many of our informants told us that it is difficult to get a place in the kindergarten through formal means. However, they find different ways of getting a place there. In this section we describe in detail how our informants encountered difficulties in finding a kindergarten place:

- Azat's knowledge of the new programme "socially deprived people";

[2] Interview with the focus group members, 15 December, 2019, Kant, Kyrgyzstan
[3] Interview with the focus group members, 18 December, 2019, Kant, Kyrgyzstan

- Sultan's experience with online registration;
- Zhamily's friendship.

Azat, 33 years old, and who has three small children, shared his experiences of getting a place in the kindergarten:

"In order to enroll my children to school initially I had to pay 3000som, only to a special school, but now I cannot get a place in the kindergarten for my youngest child. Now there is an electronic queuing system. Every time I approach a kindergarten administration, they ask me to wait. I remember recently we were on the 80th place, but now we have been removed to the 125th place. The kindergarten administration told us that there was a special needed group (handicapped children, children only with one parent) and their application was taken first into consideration, but I was surprised when I learned my friend's child got a place in the kindergarten with the same age and physical and mental conditions. My friend works for local municipal government and he has a lot of 'acquaintances'. Of course, under the umbrella of a special group such as 'socially needed' ones, my friend's child got a place in the kindergarten. But I remember that the kindergarten administration told me my child was too small 2,5 years old, but I told them that my friend's child had the same age as my child and why you were not taking my child, they explained to me that these kind of circumstances had occurred and asked for my understanding."[4]

Sultan, 33 years old, works as a consultant topographer in a construction company and is a private businessman.

"We also used our 'acquaintances' to get a place in kindergarten without waiting in line because of my mother's best friend, who worked as a director there. We did not pay bribes or advances (called sponsorship). But now the system has changed because of the electronic queue that was installed in every kindergarten. There used to be no such queue, either such a place exists or it doesn't, only the selected people could get it by giving a bribe or using social networks. Getting a place in kindergarten became more difficult because of the electronic queue. However, people find creative ways to get around this rule and online registration. Some people use the above mentioned social programme. The informal network continues to play a crucial role. I do not know about other countries, but in our country it plays a very important role. As you know, if you have informal networks, you are like a tank, without informal networks you are a loser"'[5]

According to Zhamilya, 32 years old, a mother of one child and employed as a hairstylist and cosmetologist in a beauty salon:

"One of my clients is the head of the kindergarten and she usually comes to my salon for makeup and changes her hair before going to the feast (toi). I once told her that I could not enroll my child in kindergarten because I had to wait for the electronic queue, but she offered me to come on Monday with all the necessary documents, a small contribution of 2000 soms (25 EUR) and found a way to enroll my child in the list under the auspices of "socially needed ones". Now I am happy that my child has a place in kindergarten and I can work without worrying about my son."[6]

Several messages can be taken from above interviews. First, they talk about how people find creative ways to bypass the electronic queue and online registration to get kindergarten places. One such way to

[4] Interview with the focus group members, 15 December, 2019, Kant, Kyrgyzstan.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Interview with the focus group members, 18 December, 2019, Kant, Kyrgyzstan.

bypass the electronic queue is to use quotas for socially needed places, which allows kindergarten managers to use this "grey and uncontrolled" area for their own purposes, providing places for those who could either bribe or use social networks.

Furthermore, the notion of relying on informal social networks invokes not only personal relationships and reciprocal obligations at the moment, but also signifies power, security and stability. As mentioned above, "if you have informal networks, you are like a tank, without informal networks you are a loser".

3.2.3 WhatsApp: access to information and networks

The younger generation is well aware of the importance of the new technologies, as they have access to information at all times, so they spend more time actively expanding and investing in their groups, knowing how important they will be in the near future. It is also interactive, but saves them time. So the young people use this technology for their own needs and know the whole end product. All our informants reported that they use WhatsApp to access information and networks, so the technology can be used to extend and support social networks:

Ainura, 32 years old, says that:

"[w]henever I need some help, I always send a message to our WhatsApp group SOS: who has someone in the hospital' and I need to bring my mother to the hospital. Someone would respond to my request from my WhatsApp group friends."

According to Sultan:

"Personally I have several WhatsApp groups like relatives consisting of 25 people, classmates 'klasstashtar', friends 'My schastlivye', 17 people, football team 'Laliga' consisting of 25 people', relatives from my mother's side 'Bololor' 25 people, Brigada 'Abdysh-Ata 2011' consisting 17 people, and depending on the needs I approach to them. I have also friends among state registers, bank officers, tax officer, doctors, and those who work in social fund. It is very hard to get an appointment with a state register, for example, because they have always a long queue of elderly people, sometimes up to 60-70 people per day. They can afford waiting because they have enough time. Therefore I just send a WhatsApp message to our state register friend by sending photos of registration certificate, receipt, and identification code in advance, he would prepare all the necessary documents in advance before I come. He would bring these document outside, so that I do not have to wait for a long time. If you want to wait, they keep sending you from one room to another. It is very hard to go through the elderly people and just to say 'hello' to your friend, they would block your way to the room. That's why I send them a WhatsApp message before I come what document he should prepare, sign, and give a stamp on it."[7]

According to Arman, father of four children, 34 years old:

"I would like to give an example of those who do not rely on social networks. We have State Civil Register Office (ZAGS) in Kant, we get all our documents from ZAGS, such as birth certificate, marriage certificate, death certificate, personal identification numbers, and etc. Those without acquaintances, they usually come at 6.45 in the morning and wait until 15.00 p.m. Of course, one can be stubborn and wait for a long time. Everyday more than 70 people go there. It happens that some people cannot enter the room on the first day and they have to continue waiting again on the second day. They would say that we have been waiting

[7] In-depth interview with Sultan, 7 January, 2020, Kant, Kyrgyzstan.

here since yesterday; they finally manage to get their documents only on the second day. I got the birth certificates of my two daughters without any problem by sending a WhatsApp message to my friend in advance, my friend came out and took the documents from outside. I also gave money, and within two hours I picked the birth certificates up. Personally, I prefer not to do like that but I do not have two days of waiting in the queue. In order to wait for one day, I have to ask permission from my work. Such document related issues are a lot. But I cannot constantly ask for permission. We have only 20 working days, if you keep asking for permission, it would be hard for my work as well."[8]

Young people face considerable challenges in accessing public services – including bureaucracy – which they have described as "they're clearly blowing us off" (*futbolit*). Problems include a lack of time, inability to get permission from employers, long queues, inability of the public service to accommodate needs, and non-transparent information available to young people, which also includes some forms of discrimination. Those who are in Russia cannot be physically in Kyrgyzstan and do not have immediate access to public resources (see more below).

Saving time is important for the younger generation and investment in social networks is crucial, but both are mutually exclusive. Since investing in a social network takes more time and it is therefore difficult to save time, they actively use new technologies in this respect to make both mutually constitutive.

Notably, all of the young people we interviewed are aware of the difficult structural conditions which contextualise their struggles and negotiations. At the same time, they were raised under such systems. They pointed to different hindrances from public state sectors, and, as a result, they cultivate their social networks by being actively involved in various kinds of circles. For many young people, stories of parents with well-paid jobs and support from government remain a fantasy.

3.3 Older generations are less comfortable with technology

The older generation did not feel comfortable with the new technology and social media, especially when it came to asking personal questions, doing favours and solving delicate personal problems. Instead, older people are now using technology to entertain themselves, surf YouTube, watch concerts, read the news and communicate with children and other family members abroad. Technology is an area of the home domain or even private life, not business. They exchange various e-cards, stories, anecdotes, songs and even movies.

In the interviews, the older generation emphasized more personal relationships, contacts and gratitude in accelerating access to public service. They preferred to give back what they had personally benefited from, through direct gifts such as food, an invitation to a foreign café and gifts, with an emphasis on family and regional identity. In other words, the older generation is actively dependent on informal social networks, but prefers to give them moral connotations such as sense of duty, loyalty, reciprocity and the exchange of gifts (food, gratitude) as well as some bribes. However, they prefer to do this physically, without using new technologies or social media. Moreover, their gratitude should be something tangible like food. They can sometimes ask for some favours over the phone, but these favours must be returned or repaid.

Munara, 60 years old, told us how once she used her regional network to get a place in the kindergarten:

[8] Interview with the focus group members, 15 December, 2019, Kant, Kyrgyzstan.

"At the beginning I wanted to take my grandchild to a kindergarten without any informal network, but they responded by saying 'No'. Later I figured out that the head of kindergarten was apparently from Kochkor where my husband came from. I entered her room and said apparently you came from my husband's small village and you became my young sister-in-law. By using this network, I got a place in the kindergarten. Without having any social network, it is almost impossible to take a place in kindergarten. Even if you apply for a state position, it is important to know someone, otherwise, they keep asking for one's regional and kin identity. Sometimes it happens that my surname's resembles with someone's surname, who is quite famous in government, if you respond to this question by saying we have only similar surnames, they start look at you askance 'kosa'. This is our reality."[9]

In addition, Munara compares the current situation with Soviet times and gives her own vision.

"During the Soviet Union, we used to rely on informal networks, but it was hidden. There was still law functioning during the Soviet times, and there were some rules. Nowadays it is rampant and well known. If you go to court, if you have a case or not, the outcomes might be paradoxical. If you are guilty but if you have someone in the court, you come out of court as not guilty. If you are not guilty but if you do not have anyone in the court, you end up being guilty. For example: yesterday there was an accident in Tokmok city. A young man was killed, and his car was burnt down, even though they found the main suspect, but he was released on the basis of him being insane. Apparently this man was not psychologically ill or irresponsible, but he could get a doctor's medical certificate from the hospital because of his strong 'roof' krysha who was working in the White House."

Another story highlights access to higher education and its relation to informal networks and corruption. Klara, 58 years old, told us about her recent reliance on her informal network in solving a corruption-related case:

"My son studied at the National University in the second year with the state-financed scholarship. Apparently the tutor at the university asked my son to buy her a mobile phone, which my son refused, claiming that he could not afford to buy it. Since then, the university tutor has been angry with my son and for a long time only gave him the bad grades. My son didn't tell us about this, otherwise I would have bought her a mobile phone personally instead of seeing my son leave the university. I would have solved this conflict by slaughtering a sheep, but apparently the conflict was at an advanced stage. Now I am helping my son to take a year's academic leave, but to do so, I think we should go back to informal networks. The university requires me to get a medical certificate, so I contacted the director of the hospital R.M. who had helped us to get this medical certificate without any problems. In return, I invited her to dinner at the café and gave her some presents (scarf). Now I am using our relative who works in the government to influence the university management to allow us to take a year off from university. Even if my son is not ill, only this kind of argumentation can be accepted at the university."[10]

Almas, 62 years old, shares his experience of relying on informal networks in career opportunities and promotion:

"When I came home (located in Kant) from my work in Osh for three days, my colleague Ak-Jol told me that he wanted to go with me to Kant. We came home together and he knew that I had a car at home. He stayed with us for one night, and the next morning he asked me to show him the bazaar, which I of course did. He bought a slaughtered sheep in a box and fruit and vegetables. I asked him where he was going to take them,

[9] Focus group discussion 22 December, 2019, Munara.
[10] Ibid.

but he told me that he had planned to take this sheep to Issyk-Kul to his chef Satybaldiev. Apparently, Satybaldiev was on holiday in one of the holiday houses in Issyk-Kul. He asked me if it was okay to take him to Issyk-Kul, since we were colleagues, and so I drew the car. There were two big boxes: one was filled with meat and another with vegetables and fruit. He asked me to stay in the car and wait, and he spoke to Satybaldiev's house. He took both boxes with him and came back in less than 30 minutes. He asked me to drive home. Apparently he came all the way from Osh to Issyk-Kul (12 hours) for less than 30 minutes, saw his cook briefly and left two boxes for him. After his return to Osh, my colleague Ak-Jol was appointed head of the agency, which dealt mainly with foreign investment in road construction in southern Kyrgyzstan."[11]

The case studies above signal the existence of a double standard: subversive and supportive roles, functional and dysfunctional tasks, and sociability and instrumentality (Ledeneva 2018:9). Following Ledeneva, we argue that in the interviews mentioned above, the tension aspect predominates. There is a double standard: the tension between the question why it is acceptable to ask in face-to-face contacts and the question why it is unacceptable to demand personal services using technology; because of the lack of opportunities to deal with informality and various opportunities that they might otherwise take advantage of; because of the lack of trust in their own personal networks and distrust of government agencies. The core of the informality of the older generation lies in this duality. In all these cases the ideals of how things should be according to the rules and regulations prevail, but the results are different, which is not as surprising as Yurchak (2006) says.

3.4 Informal markets in the context of migration: obtaining fake qualifications

One day there was a call from Tahir[12], Gulzat Baialieva's classmate – a Kyrgyz labour migrant in Russia. After a short chat, he threw in his question in a very routine and straightforward manner. "How much would the cheapest university diploma cost? I need it urgently by summer".

He explained that he needs to get a university degree in order to find a better job in Moscow. It was hard to react on the spot although theoretically the informal markets of selling university diplomas, transcripts and certificates of school graduation are nothing new. He got the unwanted response that he'd better apply for the university and that his idea implies corruption. He has never written or called back, but after two years we met him in Kyrgyzstan and took the opportunity to chat with on that matter. Tahir did buy the university degree from one of the provincial universities in Kyrgyzstan and paid 700 USD for that. He sounded routine and confident when he was explaining the details of how he accessed the formally allocated resources (university degree with transcripts) informally.

After his first failed inquiry to get him a university diploma, Tahir phoned our retired school teacher Batma eje, whose son worked as a university teacher in one of the Kyrgyz cities. He knew his son as well and talked to him over the phone about the situation, about safety of the deal, amount to pay and how to pay. As he was in Russia, he was urgently searching for "black" ways to get a formal "white" paper that could grant him the status of a graduate specialist – in whatever specialisation. He got one in economics. We didn't show our discomfort and further developed the conversation on this very intimate topic over a

[11] Focus group discussion 22 December, 2019, Abas.
[12] All the names are anonymous.

shashlik[13] lunch. Tahir explained why he decided to call us and why it is quite "normal" to buy the degree without studying at the university:

"Everyone in the education system is engaged with it because they need to survive and the salary is too low to afford life. They have documents to sell but no money, we have money but no documents. The needs and supply you know....You came to my mind since I saw you active in social media Odnoklassniki which is a very friendly space for migrants. I thought you could understand my situation and help but you live abroad and don't need money I realised. Otherwise, you would also help me, wouldn't you?"

He continued his conversation, telling that he was forced to drop his school although he dreamed of getting proof of higher education. Now due to loyal and strong connections he possessed the desired and required documents: school certificate and university degree.

"Now I have everything. Every barber knows it (Po sekretu vsemu svetu, ne govoryat, no eto vse znayut) that with good connections you can buy everything. I have a school certificate as well. No one suffers and no one loses anything. I dreamed of studying at the university but it was difficult for my mother when my dad died. She took me with her to work in Russia."

Tahir was a good student but didn't finish school because of family hardship and migrated to Russia to help his mother to make money. He worked in different sectors including as a waiter, construction worker and taxi driver in different Russian cities: Saratov, Yekaterinburg and now in Moscow. His mother died from a heart attack. Tahir stays connected with his home community, invests money in repairing his parents' house there and hopes to return forever one day. Sometimes his family stays in the town for winter and summer seasons as the children are still pre-school.

Based on Tahir's open and confident narratives it can be assumed that such informal practices in the educational system are not bizarre and "every barber knows it". Likewise, "the needs and supply" regulate the informal market in the context of migration and new technologies. Yet, it is not an everyday disclosed talk and is shared only among trusted groups. Although Tahir was thousands of kilometres away from these educational institutions and was not eligible for the documents he obtained, his connections mediated via smartphone connected him to the services.

The signature, where needed was signed on his behalf with the help of notarised consent (also informally legalised) and the personal information was provided as a photocopy via WhatsApp. Emails or fax are almost never used by most labour migrants, who would need extra skills to access them. They are also considered insecure, whereas the video and audio functions of WhatsApp and instant messaging give a sense of security and are perceived as a safer way to interact and exchange about private matters.

3.5 Social networks on social networking sites

In 2015, when we set up WhatsApp to stay in touch with the communities, a totally new e-world emerged. From this moment, our digital ethnographic research and observations started. By that time the Kyrgyzstanis had already long been extensively engaged with WhatsApp and with the Russian version of Facebook – Odnoklassniki and VKontakte.

Gulzat Baialieva has since created an online webpage to collect information and engage with the community she was researching closer and virtually. This is a group page on Odnoklassniki, which has a

[13] Local food similar to barbeque, common to have as a fast food in tea-houses in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan.

different aim and is more to (re)construct stories and memories about the town. As it is an open-discussion social media platform, such detailed "secrets" that Tahir shared cannot be traced. Similar inquiries about ties and acquaintances (*svyazi, znakomye*) for renewing passports or getting a Kyrgyz birth certificate for a child born in Russia can, however, be observed in other kinship-based WhatsApp groups.

3.6 A reduction in informality

From observations started in 2015 to the present, we have examined some transformations in informality. It is no longer as straightforward and routine as it was five years ago. There are far fewer online discussions and requests about informal practices and services. We believe this is related to more control over the corrupt mechanisms, stricter regulation of databases and making most of the services electronic and transparent.

However, this doesn't mean that informality has disappeared overnight. There is the innovative (although limited) ways to access informal services which not "every '' but "certain barbers" know now. A careful, trustworthy barber with a strong support in her/his institutionalised setting such as Batma eje.

A former school vice-director, Batma eje, with her authority and diplomacy, justified the system and appreciated that new technologies can serve the migrants. She recognises that it is risky and undesirable to produce the formal documentation informally. However, she doesn't see it as a destructive practice. Unlike other mediators engaged in providing illegal service to migrants at a distance, Batma eje doesn't make money and just connects "people who know" (bilgen kishiler). She said that it has been tightened now and only those who have higher positions and loyal assistants can deal with the informal services. It takes more time, more trust and more money.

Indeed, this has reduced the previously common practices of falsifying documents to assist migrants.

3.7 Obtaining dual citizenship through informal networks

Aside from educational papers, birth certificates are the most commonly requested documents among labour migrants. We interviewed a couple of families with both Russian and Kyrgyz citizenship, although the Kyrgyz Republic forbids dual citizenship. They live in Russia at the moment but envision their future as being in Kyrgyzstan. They also access informal services via mobile phones when they need to update their passports or register a newly born child in Russia in Kyrgyzstan.

Russian citizenship is the first priority among most Kyrgyz migrants and a Kyrgyz child born in Russia is registered there to be eligible for *matkapital*, government money for a mother to stimulate demography growth. However, due to the absence of dual citizenship in Kyrgyzstan, some Kyrgyz families try to keep their Kyrgyz citizenship illegally. They hold onto their old Kyrgyz passports and keep renewing them. When a new family member is born in Russia, they automatically they become a Russian citizen based on their parent's Russian citizenship. At the same time, they wish to hold the Kyrgyz citizenship. Such families obtain a birth certificate informally via networks and transferring money to their hometown. A child is registered as home-born and is added to the database in Kyrgyzstan. Based on the birth certificate, a travel passport is made and family still has legal ties to the country even if this is documented illegally.

3.8 "Informality doesn't destroy a ruined system"

We met Batma eje couple of times over lunch and asked different moral questions. Batma eje was calm, confident and serene. She explained that a "sale" of birth registration, school certificate and university

degree can be justified if you perceive them as just unnecessary bureaucracy. She criticised the collapse of the economy, political corruption and the so-called lost generation that had to migrate.

The teacher concluded that at a time when everyone has to do all they can just to survive, to find bread to eat and to achieve stability, such an exchange of formal resources through informal means doesn't destroy an already ruined system.

4 Conclusion

New technology and mobile phones connect a wide range of networks (family members, friends, relatives, team members, acquaintances) in Kyrgyzstan, and help significantly, especially when it comes to access to public services. But this experience is not equal to different generations because they have contrasting practices and views in relations with new technology and new social media. Younger members of the network exchange information via mobile phones and provide each other with advice, especially to those who have to go to hospital, police, state registers, etc. By this way they economise their time but at the same time do not lose their informal networks. The new technology facilitates two mutually exclusive aspects as mutually constitutive.

In other ways, they facilitate access to information. It does not "go under the table" (*pod stolom*), as our elderly informants, rather it goes everywhere via the internet. This makes easier to facilitate the dynamics of informal practices in relation to access to public services, mainly to easily make appointments, to find important people, and to obtain and send diplomas, certificates and other important documents. In contrast, we see the different dynamics of informal practices that members of middle-aged generation utilise. They prefer that their informal practices remain tangible, personal and moral. They highly stress obligation, loyalty, reciprocity and gift exchange. They want to use this network for socially acceptable needs, despite the fact bribes and favours are involved.

The normalisation of informality could be observed through the prism of new technology and social media by the younger generation compared to the older generation. This is mainly because, as Ibanez-Tirado argues, there are alternative temporalities that shape people's perception of informality. This is mainly because the younger people did not experience the "Soviet times", but their experience was linked to the difficult socio-economic situation in which the creative use of informality can be a way to succeed, thus contributing to the normalisation of informality. The older generation, on the other hand, has a different understanding of informality in the sense of duality (to live according to rules and regulations, but when things don't work, they are not so surprised).

New technology and social media are supporting the dynamics of informal networks and changing their nature and dynamics along with creating new optics of entering public services. Technology goes beyond bureaucracy and government rules; rather, it is an effective way to share information and knowledge about the easiest ways to inform each other about who to contact. This simplifies the communication of those who are involved in informal networks. They have created social groups to help each other, and which serve as an effective way of coping with state irregularities. At the same time, they contribute to the functioning of the state by getting closer to people, giving money and strengthening connections with state authorities.

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