2 Driving in the shadows

Rural–urban labour migrants as informal taxi drivers in post-socialist Tashkent

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the Soviet Union's dissolution, Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, underwent an abrupt demographic shift driven by two parallel and interrelated, yet opposing, migratory flows. The collapse of the republic's industrial and agricultural sectors and a scarcity of arable land led to unprecedented levels of impoverishment and unemployment in rural areas, forcing large parts of the local population to migrate to urban centres, with Tashkent receiving the lion's share of this influx. In turn, the arrival of these 'new poor' (Ilkhamov 2001) intensified the discomfort Tashkent's multi-ethnic Russian-speaking old-timers experienced as a result of the 'nationalizing nationalism' (Brubaker 1996: 4) of the Karimov administration and prompted thousands to emigrate to their titular countries, even if they had never set foot there before. Whilst the mass 'exodus' (Buckley 1996) of Russian speakers from Tashkent dwindled in the early 2000s, the flow of predominantly Uzbek-speaking rural–urban labour migrants into the city remains strong to this day given stagnant unemployment and low salaries in the provinces. But the integration of these individuals into Tashkent's socio-economic life and job market is hindered by their low qualifications, limited knowledge of Russian and stereotypes that follow them, as well as by the strict civil registration mechanism in place in Uzbekistan, known as *propiska*. The *propiska* system seldom allows the poor surplus population to officially register in the capital and, hence, rural–urban labour migrants cannot obtain a legal residence status and/or work permits in Tashkent. Inevitably, their everyday lives are characterised by precariousness and uncertainty and they themselves become illegalised and deprived of basic citizenship rights (Turaeva 2016).

Whilst from the mid-2000s onwards women also began to join these migration flows (Hashimova 2008; Maksakova 2006), rural–urban labour migration in Uzbekistan remains dominated by young men. These men move to Tashkent impermanently with the aim of supporting their families, covering expenses related to life-cycle events (e.g., weddings) or earning enough money to build a house in their hometowns and villages. To that end, most resort to labour-intensive, low-paid and insecure temporary or odd jobs in the 'informal economy' (Hart 1973)—that is, as construction workers, loaders and vegetable

sorters—which they find either through kin- and locality-based networks or in the informal labour markets known as *mardikor bozorlari*. Yet, as this chapter will show, those labour migrants who either own a car or manage—via various channels—to obtain access to one gain the opportunity to join the ranks of Tashkent’s private car drivers who generate income by offering paid rides to their fellow residents. Most of the drivers involved in this practice, locally known as ‘taxiing’ (in Russian, *taksovanie*), pick up passengers occasionally—when, for example, on their way to and from work—provided that the passenger’s destination is more or less along their route. However, unfavourable socioeconomic conditions have forced a considerable portion of Tashkent’s male population to take up taxiing either part-time as a source of secondary income or full-time as their primary occupation. The majority of the rural–urban labour migrants who become informal taxi drivers belong to the latter category.

Taxiing is, thus, a quintessentially informal activity in the sense that it is not only a precarious profession practised outside the institutional and legal boundaries of the Uzbek state and its agencies but is itself informed by multiple modalities of informality that permeate the subjectivities and the everyday lives of the drivers involved in it. From acquiring a car to finding their way around the city to escaping regulatory pressure, informal taxi drivers continually navigate a wide array of informal processes, negotiate power relations, adjust to market forces and manoeuvre through various legal frameworks. The involvement of rural–urban labour migrants in taxiing further exacerbates this informality due to the informal character of most of the actions and activities pertaining to these individuals’ settlement and employment in Tashkent. In this sense, the informal taxi becomes an index of how and where two seemingly independent mobility paradigms—rural–urban labour migration and informal urban transportation—converge. Simultaneously, it also provides a lens through which we can examine the various informal processes and everyday livelihood strategies that rural–urban labour migrants employ in their attempts to deal with the uncertainty and precariousness accompanying their relocation to Tashkent.

It is in this context that this chapter examines the practices and experiences of the rural–urban labour migrants who become informal taxi drivers. To do so, it draws on a total of 11 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted amongst Tashkent’s informal taxi drivers between May 2014 and February 2015 and during a follow-up two-month spell in autumn 2016. The chapter touches upon the limited employment opportunities available to labour migrants from the provinces in Tashkent’s formal sector and the taut relationship with the state that their subsequent informality results in. Hence, it contributes to a broader understanding of migration-related informal practices in urban post-Soviet Central Asia. Just as importantly, it provides empirical evidence regarding the ways in which internal migration has given new momentum to taxiing, an informal urban mobility practice eradicated in most major post-Soviet cities. Thereby, it offers a glimpse beyond migratory flows and of an understudied type of informal urban transport that has remained rather peripheral to scholarly work on postsocialism (but, see

Karjanen 2014; Kovács et al. 2017; Morris 2016; Polese 2014; Urinboyev et al. 2018).

Entering Tashkent's informal taxi industry

The practice of offering paid rides in one's private car existed as a relatively popular means of generating extra income in large Soviet cities already during the socialist era (Siegelbaum 2009). Yet, it was in the early 1990s that it evolved into a fundamental 'survival strategy' (Johnson, Kaufmann and Ustenko 1998), employed by people across the former Soviet Union in order to cope with the adverse socioeconomic conditions accompanying the transition to market economy. In recent years, decisive state-led offensives against the practice as well as the emergence of taxi aggregators and ride-sharing applications offering safer and more reliable services led to the marginalisation or even eradication of the once-ubiquitous informal taxis in most large post-Soviet cities. Nevertheless, in Tashkent, taxiing remains widespread thanks to the ambivalent stance of the local authorities towards the practice. This stance is a product of the authorities' realisation that taxiing provides much needed employment to thousands of rural–urban labour migrants. Amongst these individuals, taxiing is widely considered one of the more dignified jobs available in the informal sector. Compared to the physically demanding and low-paid odd jobs offered in *mardikor bozorlari*, taxiing provides better working conditions, a higher income, a sense of stability and a larger degree of freedom and autonomy. Yet, since access to a car is necessary for entry into Tashkent's informal taxi industry, the fact that only a few labour migrants own a car and even fewer are in a position to purchase one allows only individuals with a certain amount of financial or social capital to take up the practice.

Taxiing in Tashkent is not the first engagement with this type of economic activity for all of the labour migrants who arrive in the city, since many have previously worked as informal taxi drivers in their home provinces. However, the working conditions in the provinces are quite different, as low salaries and high fares have rendered taxis—formal and informal alike—rather unpopular with local populations for short and medium distances. Thus, most drivers work on long-distance routes, connecting localities otherwise poorly connected to one another. Whilst new railway connections have recently been established between Tashkent and large provincial centres such as Samarkand, Bukhara and Andijon, the number of train services remains limited and ticket prices are relatively high. Therefore, people travel via the much cheaper shared taxis that depart throughout the day. In Tashkent, these taxis depart from and arrive at informal taxi stations situated outside the large markets scattered around the outskirts, which means that drivers who work on long-distance routes seldom enter the city. Yet, for some of them, such as Abbas, a 27-year-old informal taxi driver originally from the city of Fergana, bringing passengers from the provinces to Tashkent constitutes their first contact with the capital and, by extension, with its informal taxi industry:

Before coming here [to Tashkent], I worked as a taxi driver in the [Fergana] Valley, carrying people from Fergana to Namangan, from Fergana to Andijon and so on. ... But the distances are long, people are poor and fuel is expensive. So, at the end of each day, I made very little money. ... One day, I took a group of men from Fergana to Tashkent. ... They asked me to take them back to Fergana the next day. I slept at a cousin's in Tashkent and the next day I drove them back. ... [It was then that] I saw that I could easily become a taxi driver in Tashkent. In an hour, I could make the same amount of money that I made in half a day at home. ... I returned to Fergana, and then came back to Tashkent a few weeks later. There are many passengers here, I can work more hours if I want to and so I make more money.

Whilst Abbas came to Tashkent in his own car, many other potential informal taxi drivers arrive in the city with little more than a suitcase. Therefore, one of their main goals, second only to securing accommodation, is gaining access to a car. Those with relatives or acquaintances already living in Tashkent are often allowed to drive their cars for a few weeks, a concession quite illustrative of the importance of social networks and 'reciprocal ties based on mutual help and exchange' (Kandiyoti 1998: 561–562; Wegerich 2006). Such an offer does not always come for free, for even relatives are usually expected to contribute to the car owner's household either in kind or in the form of a portion of their daily income. Nevertheless, such arrangements are paramount to the prompt entry of newly arrived labour migrants into Tashkent's informal taxi industry, for they grant them the opportunity to begin earning an income immediately, to familiarise themselves with the city and to understand the industry's structure and workings.

Access to a relative's or acquaintance's car becomes all the more important in light of the difficulties that labour migrants encounter in purchasing a car. The Uzbek state's monopoly on the production of cars and the prohibitive import tariffs protecting the national car industry habitually hinder the access of the poorer segments of the population to cars (Olma 2020). Not only is the new-car market characterised by systematic shortages, high prices and long waiting periods for the more popular models, but the prices for used cars can be very high as well, as the shortages offer plenty of room for speculation. Nevertheless, the fact that used cars, unlike new ones, are immediately available makes them more popular amongst labour migrants. Accordingly, many inaugurate their stay in Tashkent by visiting the Sergeli car market, located in the eponymous district in the southern part of the city, where they can purchase a used car in cash or, if they do not possess the entire amount, they may 'rent' (in Russian, *arendovat'*) it. Renting involves leasing a car from a company or a private car owner for a predefined period—usually up to three years—with the expectation that by the end of this period the car will belong to the lessee. The final price depends on the size of the deposit, the frequency and size of instalments and the duration of the lease, often resulting in the car costing twice as much as if bought in cash. Nevertheless, despite this drawback, renting remains the preferred method to obtaining a car

amongst labour migrants, since it does not require them to have—or, if they do have, spend—any savings.

Naturally, the cheaper the car, the easier it is to pay it back, which is why most labour migrants choose to buy or rent the locally produced Chevrolet Matiz. This affordable and fuel-efficient small car, depending on the politico-economic climate, can be bought at the used car market for anywhere between US\$4000 and US\$7000 in cash, but can cost up to US\$10,000 when rented. The popularity of the Matiz amongst informal taxi drivers has led many Tashkent residents to sarcastically call Tashkent ‘the city of Matizes’ (in Russian, *gorod Matizov*), but it has also generated a maintenance service structured around this particular car model, offering a wide line of auxiliary products, affordable spare parts and skilled mechanics. Despite the fuel efficiency of the Matiz, many drivers choose to convert their gasoline-powered models to compressed natural gas (CNG) in order to further save on fuel, the price of which has been steadily rising in recent years. Whilst such a conversion can cost them several million *so‘m*, it eventually saves them between 40% and 60% on their fuel costs, especially since informal taxis by definition rack up a high kilometre count. It also ensures that drivers can work unaffected by the frequent fuel shortages that Uzbekistan experiences.

The way in which labour migrants obtain access to a car is defined by—and, in turn, itself largely defines—the length of their stay in Tashkent. Labour migrants arriving in Tashkent in their own cars are not bound to the city in any way other than their need to generate an income. Accordingly, free of the pressure exerted by the need to pay the car’s monthly instalments and free to choose themselves how much they work on any given day, car-owning migrants often travel to their hometowns throughout their spell in Tashkent and return home permanently once they have earned and saved the amount of money they had initially aimed at. Similarly, carless labour migrants who arrive in Tashkent with the aim of earning a certain amount of money before returning to their respective hometowns shortly thereafter do not buy or rent a car, but rather use the car of a relative or acquaintance, even if it means paying a daily fee to the car owner. Thus, it is primarily rural–urban migrants who permanently move to Tashkent or who decide to stay in the city for an extended period of time who buy or rent a car. Whilst such an arrangement binds them to the city for as long as the duration of the lease and forces them to taxi for this entire period in order to pay the instalments, it also provides them with a car that they can then take back to their home provinces. In the car-based society that is contemporary Uzbekistan, this is perceived as of paramount importance, for, in addition to the practical advantages that car ownership offers, it is also regarded as an index of the migrants’ success in the big city.

Competition and friction

Most of the labour migrants that I encountered during their early days in Tashkent viewed managing to obtain access to a car as the end of all their troubles, labouring under the impression that income levels in Tashkent were so high that

within a few months they would manage to save enough money to allow them to buy or build a house in their hometowns and start a family. However, whilst Tashkent salaries are indeed two to three times the national average, the situation newly arriving informal taxi drivers encounter is somewhat different from what most envisioned. Given the large volume of informal taxis—some estimates put the number at 30,000—drivers fiercely compete with each other, which, in turn, has led to fares so low that, on occasion, informal taxis are cheaper than public transportation. This is because fare allocation is ad hoc, whereby the cost of each ride results entirely from a negotiation between driver and passenger, even if most parties involved know, more or less, how much each ride costs by taking into account a series of variables.

The most important amongst these variables is distance—that is, the further the destination, the higher the fare—but the remoteness of the destination—or, put differently, the likelihood that the driver will find another passenger at the destination willing to pay for the return journey back to the city centre—is something that drivers take into account as well. Additionally, a series of secondary variables, such as car model, weather conditions or time of day, can also affect the fare. Drivers with larger cars, such as the Chevrolet Lacetti, charge more than their colleagues driving a smaller Chevrolet Matiz because a ride in a more spacious and luxurious car is viewed as an upscale service. Fares increase by as much as 50% on rainy days, since drivers take advantage of the higher demand for taxis. Snow or ice on the streets during the winter months can increase the fare by approximately 30%, given that driving on slippery surfaces is considered risky due to the higher probability of a car accident. During rush hour, the additional competition from occasional drivers travelling to or from work pushes fares down, whereas late at night the low supply and unavailability of public transportation increase fares by up to 100%. The number of passengers also plays a role: in a company of two or more, each extra passenger increases the fare by approximately 30%, since drivers claim that the extra weight results in higher fuel consumption and increases their costs. Simultaneously, two or more passengers make it unlikely for the driver to take other passengers along the way, and the extra charge compensates for this loss. Finally, asking the driver to drop a passenger in front of their apartment building also adds to the fare: since residential districts (in Russian, *mikroraiony*) are essentially mazes that are difficult and time-consuming to navigate, drivers charge extra to enter them, which is why most passengers prefer to be dropped off at the main street closest to their building and continue on foot.

These pricing strategies became clear to me in the early hours of a rainy Saturday night in October 2014, when I stopped an informal taxi to take me back to the residential building where I lived, less than five minutes by car from where I was. I had taken the same route by taxi several times before and, thus, I knew that the usual fare was 2000 *so'm*. Yet, the driver refused my offer and asked instead for 4000 *so'm*, which I had to accept since there were no other cars on the street. After I sat in the car, the driver, a 23-year-old labour migrant from the Navoi province in northern Uzbekistan, admitted that he was unfamiliar with that

particular part of the city and asked me to give him directions on how to reach my destination. Surprised, I inquired why he had asked for twice the usual fare if he did not know where my destination was. He replied that, at that time of day and given the weather, 4000 *so'm* seemed like a reasonable price. Furthermore, since my initial offer had been 2000 *so'm*, he assumed that my destination was not too far.

In addition to illustrating how specific temporal and weather conditions can affect the fare, this ethnographic vignette is also quite illuminating regarding the fact that many labour migrants working as informal taxi drivers are unfamiliar with Tashkent's physical layout. This does not necessarily hinder their ability to find their way around the city, since it is not uncommon for passengers to explain to drivers how to reach their final destination. Yet, it does affect their ability to charge accordingly for any given ride and, thus, substantially impacts their capacity to generate income, since inexperienced drivers who do not know the city well habitually agree to take every passenger they come across for whatever fare offered. Only after the destination has been reached do they ask the passenger for additional money, usually an extra 30%, claiming that the fare they had initially agreed upon was hardly enough to pay for the fuel. Nevertheless, in most cases, such pleas remain unheeded, since passengers appear unwilling to pay more than the fare the two parties initially negotiated.

Low fares mean that labour migrants working as informal taxi drivers without another occupation beyond taxiing are forced to work 10 to 14 hours a day, six or seven days a week. Such long working hours physically exhaust them and increase their chances of being involved in a car accident. They also leave little time for leisure or community life, thus alienating labour migrants and hindering their integration into Tashkent's social life. Their socialisation is further inhibited by the fierce competition amongst them, which often results in friction and leaves no room for a sense of camaraderie. This friction is most evident in the way in which drivers try to overtake each other by speeding and performing dangerous manoeuvres in order to first reach a potential passenger standing on the curb. Yet, even when they are not the first to reach a potential passenger, it is not uncommon for one or two cars to queue behind the first to stop in case its driver and the passenger do not reach an agreement on the fare. This practice benefits the passenger, since it offers the latter a potential alternative and strengthens their bargaining position, thereby placing drivers under pressure to accept whatever fare the passenger offers in order not to lose a ride. In this sense, the drivers' elasticity and their capacity to momentarily adjust to the expectations of their potential passengers are, in fact, a token of their precariousness, since their need to generate income places them in a position where they have no choice but to accept the passengers' perception of a fair fare.

The lack of comradeship and the dangerous driving style of labour migrants working as informal taxi drivers are often employed by their counterparts native to Tashkent in order to establish themselves as urban and to differentiate themselves from rural newcomers, routinely regarded across Central Asia as primitive, uncultured, uneducated and unfit to live in an urban environment (see Flynn

and Kosmarskaya 2012). In order to further distance themselves from such stereotypes, most informal taxi drivers originating from Tashkent seldom admit that taxiing is their primary occupation, instead claiming that they only pick up passengers whose destination is along their route. Unsurprisingly, many labour migrants have adopted this strategy as well, presenting themselves as Tashkent natives, even when their knowledge of the city is inadequate for them to successfully find their way around it without assistance from the passenger. Central to such identity micropolitics is experience, understood here as the drivers' familiarity with the flows of passengers and the practices of the population, which is acquired over months or years of taxiing in Tashkent. Outside rush hour, Tashkent drivers prefer to wait for potential passengers in central locations across the city, such as at markets or metro stations. However, migrants not yet familiar with the rhythms of urban life are constantly on the move, eagerly searching for passengers. This practice increases their operating costs and identifies them as outsiders, since, as Jahongir, an experienced informal taxi driver in his forties who claims to be a Tashkent native, put it:

You can tell who is new and who is old [in the profession] simply by looking at where one taxis. If it is rush hour and you look for passengers in Sergeli [Tashkent's southernmost district, far from the city centre], it means that you are a *kharyp* who has a lot to learn. ... Same with those who drive around on Sundays. ... There are fewer passengers on Sundays, so it's better to wait at [the] Chor Su [market] or [the] Alaiskii [market] for one to show up rather than drive in circles burning fuel.

Familiarity with the mobility patterns of Tashkent's population, thus, establishes the experienced informal taxi driver as an insider and, more importantly, as a Tashkenter (in Russian, *Tashkentets*). Contrariwise, migrant drivers are relegated to the status of a *kharyp*, a popular derogatory epithet used by non-Uzbeks, but also by ethnically Uzbek Russian speakers to refer to rural–urban migrants. This formulation is quite telling of the way in which migrant drivers—who often speak little or no Russian—are treated by both their colleagues and their passengers. Simultaneously, it highlights the obstacles and stereotypes they must overcome in their attempts to master their occupation and successfully generate income.

Informal taxi drivers' taut relationships with the Uzbek state

Although low fares force drivers to work day and night in order to earn enough to make a profit, they also render informal taxis quite popular amongst the local population, thereby guaranteeing a stable flow of both passengers and income. The majority of passengers are middle-class individuals who take informal taxis on a daily basis, although lower-income individuals also use their services, especially for destinations that are either quite close or quite far. As a result, in addition to competing with each other, informal taxis are in a constant state of competition with public transportation, as well as with their licensed

counterparts. In fact, the preference that Tashkent's residents show to informal taxis has led to the abrupt decrease of the number of licensed taxis from 2664 in 2015 (Anhor.uz 2015) to 2507 in 2017 to 2212 in 2018 (Spot.uz 2018). It is also detrimental to both the state and the city budgets, since, according to some estimates, the Uzbek state annually loses 99.2 billion *so'm* through tax evasion and 25.4 billion *so'm* due to informal taxi drivers' failing to obtain an annual taxi licence (ibid.). Recent years, therefore, have witnessed an offensive against informal taxis carried out by Uzbekistan's law enforcement agencies, as part of which informal taxis have been discursively illegalised, with official documents and the media alike habitually referring to them as 'illegal taxis' (in Russian, *nelegal'nye/nezakonnye taksi*).

In the early days of this offensive, drivers suspected of offering paid rides to their fellow citizens were supposed to be stopped and fined by inspectors from the State Tax Committee (GNK) in cooperation with traffic police officers. However, widespread street-level corruption and the difficulty in legally proving that a passenger in a private car indeed paid for the ride resulted in a situation whereby most checks were resolved by means of a firm handshake between the parties involved (see also Urinboyev et al. 2018). Consequently, in 2011, a joint task force consisting of plain clothes law enforcement officers from the Road Safety Directorate (UBDD), the Uzbek Agency of Automobile Transport (UzAvtoTrans), as well as the GNK assembled with the objective of conducting sting operations against perpetrators. Since then, drivers caught providing unlicensed transport to passengers are levied quite high fines—ranging from 20 to 100 times the minimum monthly wage—which, for most drivers, can be financially devastating. Yet, whilst the threat of fines has somewhat demotivated occasional and part-time informal taxi drivers with alternate means of generating an income, it has had little influence on labour migrants who are financially dependent on taxiing and, hence, have no choice other than to continue the practice despite the risks.

Similarly unsuccessful in this regard has been another measure adopted by the authorities involving the suspension of the driving licences of repeat offenders. This measure has failed simply because many labour migrants do not have a licence, as its high costs—3 million *so'm* in 2018—habitually keep them away from driving schools. Until the early 2010s, it was quite common amongst potential drivers to skip classes and to pass an exam organised by the UBDD by paying a bribe (RFE/RL 2011). However, in an attempt to allegedly improve road safety, in 2011, the government ordered the closing of all private driving schools across Uzbekistan, as it was rendered that the school owners' inability—or unwillingness—to enforce mandatory attendance to driving lessons and their facilitation of bribery and other illicit practices resulted in poor skills amongst drivers and an increase in traffic accidents. Accordingly, since 2011, the training, retraining and examination of drivers have been carried out within a stricter framework, leaving less room for bribery and, thus, further affecting the number of labour migrants willing to sit the exam.

All this is quite telling of the fact that rural–urban migration and the determination of labour migrants for whom taxiing is a vital source of income have

rendered state measures against informal taxis largely unsuccessful. In turn, this has prompted Uzbek authorities to adopt a more lenient stance towards Tashkent's informal taxis, since they have come to realise that additional regulatory pressure would result not in the formalisation but in the eradication of informal taxis. Such a development would increase real unemployment and would gravely impact the everyday lives and income levels of a significant portion of Tashkent's population. In fact, as my research suggests, many informal taxi drivers are not against formalisation per se and agree that, under certain circumstances, they would consider it, but excessive red tape, taxi company regulations, limited privileges and the high costs involved all hinder this transition. As it stands, formalisation is a rather complex endeavour, requiring the interested party, first, to obtain a taxi licence and, second, to join a taxi company. Yet, because the majority of labour migrants working as informal taxi drivers do not have a Tashkent *propiska*, they are neither eligible for a taxi licence in Tashkent nor allowed to officially work for a Tashkent-based taxi company.

However, those who have managed to register in Tashkent also face various structural obstacles imposed upon them by taxi companies. Legally, in order to be eligible for a taxi licence, a driver must be over 21 years of age, already have a category B driving licence and have at least three years of driving experience. Fully owning a car is not a legal prerequisite, and owners of rented cars can qualify as well, provided that the lessor accepts the modification of the car into a taxi. Unofficially, however, taxi companies prefer older drivers—individuals aged 30–45—fluent in both Russian and Uzbek with substantial driving experience. In addition, taxi companies seldom accept drivers with cars older than five years or rented, because they prefer to avoid potential problems stemming from a car's ambiguous ownership status. All these considerations make it rather unlikely that labour migrants will be hired by taxi companies, since, in addition to the lack of a *propiska* and/or a driving licence, many do not speak Russian, cannot document that they have been driving for the required number of years and drive old second-hand cars, which, as suggested already, are most often rented.

Even if taxi companies did accept rented cars, however, many informal taxi drivers would still be unwilling to modify the private cars that they drive into taxis, since formalisation is a costly undertaking requiring the driver to invest a considerable amount of money before beginning to work. Expenses include the purchase and installation of taxi-related equipment (e.g., taxi sign, taximeter and cash register), various fees and licences (e.g., annual taxi licence and the registration of a cash register), several types of insurance (e.g., car insurance and carrier's liability insurance) as well as the quintessential repainting of the car, all of which can set interested parties back by several million *so'm*. In addition to the direct costs involved, modifying one's car into a taxi is considered counterproductive by most drivers, because in Uzbekistan a private car is widely seen as a financial asset, which can be bought and then sold in order to finance the purchase of a new vehicle (Olma 2020). Thus, drivers are unwilling to modify their private cars into taxis, since this would compromise their resale and decrease the car's market value by as much as 50%. Similar considerations also apply to rented cars, as, in

some cases, the lessors themselves prohibit the lessees from modifying the car in order to retain the latter's market value in case the lessee fails to pay it back.

In the shadows

Requirements like those mentioned above essentially hinder the formalisation of informal taxi drivers and restrict many labour migrants to precarious labour in the informal economy. Yet, various socioeconomic parameters and the subjective views of the drivers themselves also impact their willingness to formalise. Licensed taxi drivers are employed in accordance with labour law provisions, meaning that they accrue seniority and are eligible for sick leave, paid days off and a pension upon retirement. Such long-term benefits are not viewed as important by most labour migrants, who either cannot appreciate them or urgently need employment and an immediate source of income. Other labour migrants choose to stay 'in the shadows' (in Russian, *v teni*) because the idea of formalising and working for a licensed taxi company seems unappealing. This is because licensed drivers are expected to hand over to the taxi company they work for a hefty portion of what they make each day, in the form of either a flat fee or a percentage of their earnings. Additionally, as Nozim, an informal taxi driver from Bukhara, told the popular news website Sputnik (2016):

When you work for a taxi company, someone else regulates where you go, how many hours you work, how much you charge. ... You no longer belong to yourself and you work for someone else [in Russian, *rabotaesh' na diadiu*].

Literally meaning 'to work for the uncle', the expression *rabotat' na diadiu* Nozim used is a figurative colloquialism employed by informal taxi drivers to refer to wage labour, denoting a socioeconomic relationship between employer and employee that many view as nothing short of slavery. By contrast, 'to work for oneself' (in Russian, *rabotat' na sebia*) is perceived by informal taxi drivers as a token of freedom, and more specifically of 'freedom from' bosses and the 'freedom to' work whenever and wherever they please (see also Sopranzetti 2017). As already mentioned, this also allows them to travel back to their home regions whenever the need or desire arises. In this sense, similar to Bangkok's motorcycle taxi drivers, Tashkent's labour migrants view taxiing as 'a synonym of freedom' (ibid., 75), but also as their sole road to success, not least because a popular conviction amongst youth across the post-Soviet space is that only by working for oneself can one get rich. It is in this context that many labour migrants working as informal taxi drivers often juxtapose taxiing with other informal jobs labour migrants are habitually forced to take up. As Alisher, an informal taxi driver in his mid-thirties coming from the Surkhandarya province, told me when I asked him why he had chosen to taxi:

Most other men from my village work as construction workers, either in Tashkent or in Russia. ... Last year, I was planning to join a team of

construction workers from my village who worked here in Tashkent, but a week before I left to join them, a cousin told me that the person in charge did not pay the workers the entire amount they had agreed upon. I had already planned my departure and needed a job, so I asked my father's cousin who lives here to help me find a job. He offered to sell me his old car, which I rented on good terms, and now I make money by taxiing. [Unlike construction workers], I sleep in a finished building, I have a bed and a toilet, I choose the times I work, I sit comfortably in my car and I get paid any amount I want to get paid in a day. Nobody can cheat me and not pay me the salary I have worked for.

In addition to freedom, then, taxiing provides labour migrants with autonomy both from neoliberal production regimes (see Morris 2016) and the whims of employers, not only ensuring that they will receive the money they have worked for but also offering them a higher income and better working conditions. Whilst most labour migrants find the income from taxiing adequate, at least compared to the wages earned in other informal jobs, they are nevertheless on the lookout for new ways to increase their earnings. For example, in recent years, many labour migrants working as informal taxi drivers have attempted to earn extra money by taking advantage of Yandex.Taxi's entry into the Tashkent taxi market. Yandex.Taxi is a ride-sharing service owned and operated by the Russian multinational corporation Yandex, which specialises in internet-related products and services and is known across the post-Soviet space for its eponymous search engine. Given that in Uzbekistan only registered taxi companies are allowed to offer taxi services, Yandex.Taxi's operations in the republic are officially limited to that of a taxi aggregator, whereby the company connects users with nearby taxi drivers, all of whom are, Yandex.Taxi maintains, licensed drivers working for registered taxi companies. Nevertheless, as both users and the media have reported, dozens of Tashkent's informal taxi drivers have managed to connect to the service as well, thanks to the elasticity of employees working in shops acting as Yandex.Taxi's focal points in Tashkent (Ozodlik 2018).

Since fares through Yandex.Taxi are lower than those of licensed taxis but higher than those of informal taxis, informally connecting to the platform has offered informal taxi drivers the opportunity to increase their daily income by benefiting from the popularity of the application amongst passengers willing to pay a higher fare. At the same time, it has also broken them free of accepting passengers' perceptions of a fair fare, for, unlike informal taxi drivers who find themselves under pressure to accept whatever fare a passenger offers, Yandex.Taxi calculates the fare for each ride and communicates it to the passenger a priori, leaving no room for negotiation. In other words, before they even enter the car, the passenger has already accepted the fare indicated on the screen of their smartphone. This function works in favour of Yandex.Taxi drivers, because it guarantees them that, at the end of the ride, they will receive a fare that not only is higher but also is calculated on the basis of more or less objective criteria. In this sense, whilst ride-sharing applications, especially Uber, have been rightly criticised

for disembedding state-enforced labour regulations in the Global North and for retaining the informality of labour relations in the Global South (Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev 2020), in Tashkent, such applications could potentially increase the income of drivers, whilst allowing them to establish a somewhat more formal relationship with the Uzbek state.

Conclusions

Either because they buy cheaper cars already in disrepair or because the financial uncertainty that characterises taxiing does not allow them to service their cars properly, labour migrants working as informal taxi drivers typically drive poorly maintained cars. Accordingly, it is rather common for informal taxis to sport, among other, untrustworthy tyres, cracked windshields, inoperable safety belts and potentially dangerous CNG tanks. Combined with the fact that many drivers do not have driving licences and do not follow road rules, the poor state of their cars habitually leads to—often lethal—traffic accidents. As a result, Tashkent’s informal taxi industry has largely become synonymous with the epithets that Tashkent’s Russian-speaking old-timers have bestowed upon labour migrants at large—that is, rural, backward and premodern. Hence, despite the fact that informal taxis essentially facilitate urban mobility by covering gaps in Tashkent’s transportation infrastructure, the state-led offensive against them is viewed by old-timers and the media alike as nothing short of a modernising campaign, aimed at disposing those aspects of urban life that fail to fit with the image of a modern city. Such views have affected the livelihoods of labour migrants involved in taxiing by limiting their formalisation opportunities, which, together with the state’s ambivalent stance towards them, forces many even deeper ‘into the shadows’, thus reproducing this informal practice.

Notwithstanding whether they pick up passengers off the street or through online applications, labour migrants who work as informal taxi drivers remain largely marginal to urban life in Tashkent. Long working hours, low socioeconomic capital and negative stereotypes that follow them result in limited socialisation opportunities and, subsequently, hinder their integration. Simultaneously, even those working for a semi-legitimate scheme like Yandex. Taxi are not guaranteed a stable income or an institutional safety net in the form of social security or insurance that would protect them in case of illness, car trouble or an accident. Finally, their lack of a *propiska*, a work permit or even a driving licence exposes them to state-orchestrated raids against individuals staying or working in Tashkent ‘illegally’. All this is quite telling of how the practices and everyday lives of labour migrants working as informal taxi drivers remain characterised by informality, precariousness and uncertainty. Yet, as this chapter has shown, the barriers to the socioeconomic integration of these individuals are not merely formal, but also informal and even subjective, suggesting that the informality of labour migrants, apart from a condition inflicted by regulatory frameworks or socioeconomic conditions, may also represent a choice.

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