PARADOXES OF MIGRATION IN TAJIKISTAN

Locating the good life

Elena Borisova

Paradoxes of Migration in Tajikistan

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UCLPRESS

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All photographs in this book are the author's.

Note on transliteration

The transliteration of Tajik, Uzbek and Russian words follows the Library of Congress Romanization Tables for Slavic alphabets. For Tajik, which is based on Cyrillic script but has additional letters, I used the following:

ё – ё
ӣ – ī
қ – q
ӯ – ū
ҳ – h
ҷ – j
ъ – '

All translations from Russian and Tajik are the author's.

Russian and Tajik are abbreviated as 'Rus.' and 'Taj.', respectively, when translations are given in parentheses.

All the names are pseudonyms, including the name of the fieldsite.

Glossary and abbreviations

Translated from Tajik unless noted otherwise.

aib	shame, disgrace, dishonour
an'ana	tradition
artist (Rus.)	singer, performer
arūs	bride
avlod	kin
azob	suffering
chelovek (Rus.)	person, man
chernyi (Rus.)	black
choikhona	tea house
dastarkhon	a traditional tablecloth, which can be laid either on the ground or on a small short-legged table, or used to wrap baskets with food and gifts that one brings to a celebration
delat' grazhdanstvo (Rus.)	lit., 'to make citizenship', to obtain citizenship
dikii (Rus.)	wild, uncivilised
dokumenty (Rus.)	documents, papers
dom kul'tury	house of culture
domod	groom, son-in-law
druzhba narodov (Rus.)	friendship of peoples
dvoinoe grazhdanstvo (Rus.)	dual citizenship
Evropeiskii (Rus.)	European
fiktivnyi brak (Rus.)	fictive marriage
FMS	abbreviation for *Federal'naia Migratsionnaia Sluzhba*, Federal Migration Service
ganda	bad
gastarbeiter	guest worker
grazhdanstvo (Rus.)	citizenship
hajj	pilgrimage to Mecca
havlī	a traditional mud-brick house with an orchard, comprised of a number of

	residential and agricultural buildings arranged around a courtyard, usually inhabited by several generations and/or nuclear family units. Nowadays, mud-bricks are replaced by modern construction materials, but the spatial organisation remains the same
hurmat	respect
iazyk (Rus.)	language
inson	a truthful human being
jamoat	an administrative unit comprising several rural settlements
jashn	celebration
jeghzanak	(from Taj. *jegh zadan* – to invite, and *zanak* – woman) a bride's first visit to her parental home with her new married status
jivez	dowry
kelin	daughter-in-law
khizmat kardan	to serve, to do a favour
khon-takhta	small, short-legged table
khoroshaia zhizn' (Rus.)	good life
khoroshii chelovek (Rus.)	good person, good man
khub	good
Khudo	God
kolkhoz	collective farm
kollektiv (Rus.)	work collective
kor	work
korkhona	factory
krasnyi passport (Rus.)	red passport, refers to Russian passport
kul'tura (Rus.)	culture
kul'turnyi (Rus.)	cultured
kul'turnyi chelovek	cultured person/man
kūrpa	large cotton-filled duvet
kūrpacha	colourful cotton-filled mattress, usually laid on the floor for sitting or napping
mahalla	neighbourhood, a group of compounds typically inhabited by extended families
mardikor	daily labourer
marshrutka	private minibus
moskovskoe obespechenie	Moscow provisioning

muhojirat, migratsiia (Rus.)	migration
natsional'nost'	ethnicity
Navruz	celebration of the spring equinox
nelegal	an illegal
nigoh kardan	to care, to look after
nikoh	marriage, and Islamic wedding ritual
nomus	honour
non	flatbread, often home-made
obiazannost' (Rus.)	obligation
obrū	reputation, prestige
obychai (Rus.)	custom
odami khub	good person
oshi palov	traditional Central Asian meat and rice dish
otstalyi (Rus.)	backwards
pisar tūi	circumcision feast
poselok (Rus.)	settlement
poselok gorodskogo tipa (Rus.)	urban-type settlement
pozor (Rus.)	shame
propiska (Rus.)	permanent residency registration
pul	money
puldor	rich
pul ëftan	lit. 'to find' money, to earn
qaino	mother-in-law
qalin	brideprice
qarz, dolg (Rus.)	debt
qishloq, kishlak (Rus.)	village
qoida	rule, custom
qudo	term for relations of affinity
rabota (Rus.)	work
rizq	fortune
Rossiia	Russia
Rossiiskii (Rus.)	Russia's or Russian, meaning civic identity
Russkii (Rus.)	ethnically Russian
RVP (Rus.)	abbreviation of *razreshenie na vremennoe prozhivanie*, a temporary residence permit
sabr	patience, endurance
sharoit	living conditions
somoni	Tajikistani currency

sootechestvennik (Rus.)	compatriot
sovremennyi (Rus.)	modern, contemporary
tarbiia	upbringing
tinjī	peace
toqat kardan	to endure
traditsiia (Rus.)	tradition
trudovoi migrant (Rus.)	labour migrant
trudovoi patent (Rus.)	labour licence
tsivilizovannyi (Rus.)	civilised
tūi	celebration of life-cycle rituals: births, circumcisions, weddings
tūikhona	wedding hall
tupoi (Rus.)	dumb
uproshchennyi poriadok (Rus.)	'fast-track' pathway to citizenship
uvazhenie (Rus.)	respect
vaznin	hard, difficult
VNZH (Rus.)	abbreviation for *vid na zhitel'stvo*, a permanent residence permit
ZAGS (Rus.)	abbreviation for *Zapis' Actov Grazhdanskogo Sostoianiia*, registration office where people register their marital status, newborn children, change of names, and death
zakon (Rus.)	law
zapret na v'ezd	entry ban
zindagii khub	good life
ziq	sad, world-weary

Preface

Since I finished my fieldwork in the north of Tajikistan in 2018, a lot has changed in the region and in the world. The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated the fragility of mobility practices and mobility rights for many people. Russia's violent attack on Ukraine in February 2022, which left thousands of people displaced and seeking refuge, continues to produce multiple movements and entrapments across the world, affecting different groups of people. As I am putting the final touches to this book, the images of shocking violence of police raids in Russia targeting Central Asian migrant workers keep coming up. This time, the object of violence is not only 'illegals' (*nelegaly*), but the new Russian citizens of Central Asian origin. The reports say that they are delivered to the military commissariats in the state's attempt to 'remind' them about their civic obligation to 'defend' their new motherland. Such images constitute the content of independent Russian and Tajik media, and further stimulate the discussions about Tajikistan's dependency on Russia. Against this backdrop, it feels almost ethically problematic to write a book about the good life – a book that does not hinge on the spectacle of state violence and the suffering of vulnerable migrant populations. Since paradoxes, contradictions and ambivalences are at the heart of this story about migration, I will start by introducing the following one.

Making predictions remains an important part of the established modes of analysis and writing about migration. Yet, the 'experts' turn out to be constantly wrong in their predictions when it comes to the dynamics of migration in Tajikistan. One might think that the onset of Russia's violent invasion in Ukraine, and the imposition of sanctions on the Russian economy, would reverse or at least put this migration on hold, the risks of being drafted into the Russian army and sent to the front line serving as a serious deterrent for young male migrant workers. However, a year and a half since the beginning of the war, migrant workers keep arriving in Russian cities, and the mass process of acquiring Russian citizenship by Tajik nationals continues. In 2022, the number of Tajikistanis coming to Russia rose significantly and reached more than a million, hitting its highest level since 2015. While Russian men of military age have been fleeing abroad since President Putin declared a

'partial mobilisation' in September 2022, migrant workers from Central Asia are not rushing back 'home'. Despite the spread of media accounts about the police kidnapping migrants in Russian cities and sending them directly to Ukraine, around 174,000 Tajikistanis became Russian citizens in 2022. In 2023, while a few bodies of Tajik mercenaries killed in Ukraine were shipped back to Tajikistan, people continued to become Russian citizens: in the first half of 2023, almost 87,000 Tajikistanis received Russian citizenship.

Every time a major crisis hits, journalists, political analysts and social scientists alike rush to predict a sharp decrease in the number of Central Asian migrant workers coming to Russia. It was the case in 2008 with the global financial crisis, in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and devaluation of the local currency, and in 2021 with the Covid-19 pandemic, worldwide lockdowns and border closures. However, every time, migration flows 'bounced back', and people returned to Russia after a short time spent in their countries of origin, their mobility facilitated by a visa-free migration regime. It seems to be the case with Russia's war in Ukraine too, despite the increase of violence towards migrants inside Russia and new existential risks of holding a Russian passport. The movement of Tajikistanis between their homeland and Russia remains relatively steady.

Given the highly unequal nature of the relationship between Tajikistani migrant workers and the Russian state, this might sound like a paradox. However, it only becomes a paradox if one views migrants as rational subjects, extracted from complex historically grounded relations of interdependence that shape people's social ties, subjectivities and ideas about what constitutes the good life. In this book, I suggest that turning our ethnographic and conceptual gaze to people's imaginaries, subjectivities and ethical struggles is productive for understanding what migration is, and what it does to people and places. Written from the vantage point of the place of origin of migration, rural Tajikistan, this book does not have the spectacle of state and societal violence towards migrants and new citizens in Russia. It rather takes it as an important context in which people navigate multiple dilemmas of how life is to be lived. This book also does not make sensational predictions about the future of migration in the region. Yet, I hope that by sending the reader on the intimate journey of my interlocutors, who struggle to locate the good life between Tajikistan and Russia, this book will spark a different sort of conceptual imagination, going beyond the bounds of political economy and international relations, and shed new light on why, but more importantly how, this ambivalent relationship persists.

Acknowledgements

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***

They say it takes a village to raise a child. During the humbling process of working on this book, I learned that it also takes a (global) village to complete a manuscript.

I warmly thank my colleagues who read parts of my writing and offered their insightful comments, and who encouraged me to persevere: Soumhya Venkatessan, Angela Torresan, Julie McBrien, Juliette Cleuziou, Sergei Abashin, Bruce Grant, Michelle Obeid, Jolynna Sinanan, Constance Smith, William Wheeler, Lawrence Markowitz, Juan M. del Nido, Ekaterina Zheltova, Aksana Ismailbekova, Swetlana Torno, Mariana Irby, Nada Abdulla, Eduard Claudiu Vasile, Anna Balazs and Ivanna Lomakina. I also want to express my gratitude to Till Mostowlansky, who generously read the whole manuscript, and provided encouraging feedback and insightful comments.

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and a half years of my PhD research, and who remains a dear colleague and friend. Her passion for ethnography, her professional guidance and genuine interest in my work, and her endless kindness and generosity have kept me going at times of crisis. She will always remain for me a source of wisdom, inspiration, and faith that academia can be a better place.

This book would not have been possible without my transnational family, who have unconditionally supported my journey: my mum, who stoically puts up with my absence; my dad, who always encourages me to pursue my passions; and my sister, who sets an example of the resilience and strength of spirit it takes to move one's life to another country. I am especially grateful to my grandparents, who taught me to never give up on what I had started, and who, unfortunately, cannot see that I learnt their lesson well enough.

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Introduction

Encountering migration in the field

Marhabo, an English teacher in her early 30s from a mixed Tatar–Uzbek family, took me for a walk around the small town in the Sughd Province of the Republic of Tajikistan in autumn 2017. We had just attended a competition called 'Teacher of the Year' to cheer on one of her colleagues. Approaching the dilapidated 'Russian' cemetery, she sighed, 'Look around, Lena! *Zdes' nichego net*!' (Rus. 'There's nothing here!'). I looked around and saw semi-inhabited Soviet apartment blocks covered with discoloured paint, with many of their windowpanes removed (Figure 0.1). I knew that there was no running water, gas or heating there, but people who could not buy their own plots of land and move to private houses had to find creative ways to work around this infrastructural failure. I also saw brand-new two-storey houses with elaborate balconies and lush apricot trees around them, their shadow providing much needed shelter from the baking sun, which somehow seemed absent from Marhabo's overview of the town's material outlook (Figure 0.2).

What was also absent from her account was a multilayered history of the place constituted by various historical trajectories of people and things. Located in the South-West Fergana Valley along the Syr Darya river, the area became part of the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in 1937. Throughout history, it has seen different political formations, and experienced multiple cultural and linguistic influences. Having been part of pre-Islamic ancient Sogdiana, and an important node on the Silk Road, then part of the Samanid Empire that fell with the invasion of Turks, the area belonged to the Uzbek-ruled Khanate of Kokand prior to the Russian conquest of Central Asia in the nineteenth century. As it became part

Figure 0.1 Soviet apartment blocks and *marshrutka* (private minibuses), Sughd Province, autumn 2017.

Figure 0.2 A migrant house under construction, Sughd Province, summer 2018.

of Russian Turkestan in the 1860s, the colonial administration started to incorporate the region into the global capitalist economy through the construction of railways and irrigation systems financed by the state, and the establishment of cotton plantations. During the Soviet time, the region underwent further significant economic, social and cultural transformations: new industries, new forms of organisation of agricultural production such as collective farms, new forms of cultural expression and leisure, and a new hierarchy of languages with Russian at the top, were established. Late Soviet and early post-Soviet history is highly relevant to the emergence of the place as 'modern', and to my interlocutors' lived experiences, memories and identities, as I discuss in Chapters 1 and 2. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan declared Independence on 9 September 1991. The subsequent turbulent 'transition' to the market economy left many in poverty, and stimulated labour migration to Russia.

Expecting Marhabo to continue a narrative about post-Soviet decay that I had heard many times, I prepared to discuss the processes of deurbanisation, ruination of infrastructure, and lack of economic opportunities to maintain one's livelihood, which were usually listed as the main drivers of migration, both by people themselves and by migration scholars. However, 'nothingness' took on an unexpected meaning in Marhabo's words:

> People are still hoping that the living conditions will improve here. But the life here is like this … people are forced to make these *tūi* (ritual celebrations). It's so much money! For example, I'm throwing a circumcision feast for my son, and my mother must buy a bull, and gift my whole family with new winter clothes! Where can we find such money? They [the government] forbid it [lavish celebrations], but people still do it. That's why people are running away from it (Rus. *liudi begut ot etogo*). In Russia, no one cares. You can do whatever you want! When I was there, I was shocked that everyone just walks by minding their own business. Here you must build a house, you must organise all these *tūi*, you must give birth to children! And in the meantime, your life … it's passing by (Rus. *zhin' prokhodit mimo*)! And then you'll have to take care of your elderly parents, what can you do? We respect their opinions here. In Russia, there're many abandoned old people, right?

Marhabo's own husband had recently bought a ticket to St Petersburg. He would live in his uncle's crowded apartment, together with his other

relatives who were migrant workers, to earn money for his sister's wedding. He had a Russian passport, but the only difference between him and his relatives – migrant workers – was that he could plan the temporal horizons of his stay in Russia with more certainty. Explaining this arrangement, Marhabo sighed:

> What can we do if there are no alternatives? He has already worked in Russia for a year and a half. I'm managing here on my own with the children just fine. When I was getting married, my brothers also left their wives and children behind, and went to work in Russia. Look what life here is like! Only hospitals and schools are open. There's nothing here! What else are our men supposed to do?

Meanwhile, Marhabo had already started to prepare her children for their father's departure. She patiently explained that their favourite auntie needed to get married, and therefore their father had to go to Russia. But it would only be a moment, they would not even notice how soon he would be back, and they would have a big, fun party.

During my fieldwork in 2017–18, I encountered many similar accounts of migration as driven by 'nothingness'. Almost everyone I spoke to about their decision to go to Russia in search of work began their answer with 'there is nothing here', considering it to be self-explanatory. When pushed to elaborate, they usually pointed to some very concrete absences: of jobs, of cash, of land, of infrastructure, of opportunities for business and education and, ultimately, of an understanding about whether the situation is ever going to change.

Although Marhabo's account similarly portrayed migration as an inevitability, an act of despair against the lack of economic opportunities, her 'nothingness' had an extra layer. To understand the multilayered constitution of this 'nothingness', it is necessary to turn to the experiences of living and imagining one's present and future in a place which has been constituted, and is being reconstituted, through different past and present mobile trajectories. 'Nothingness' emerged in the context of postsocialist economic restructuring, the withdrawal of the welfare state, the remaking of past socialities, and the recalibrating of physical space. It was profoundly constituted by the disjuncture between the pressing need to bear the burden of meeting one's life projects under the scrutinising gaze of the community, and the loss of capacity to do so staying in place. Over the past thirty years, labour migration to Russian cities has become a well-trodden path bridging this disjuncture. However, this temporary 'fix' goes beyond the questions of material provisions of livelihoods, and

is intimately related to the moral and imaginative dimensions of this migration.

Marhabo's emphasis on the imperative to engage in major projects steering a normative life course in a full and timely manner – getting married, building a house, giving birth to children, throwing circumcision parties for one's sons, and attending to elderly parents – revealed how crucial they are for one's social becoming, yet how immensely burdensome they have come to be experienced over the past few decades. It is through the successful fulfilment of these projects and participating in community's sociality that one achieves and sustains the status of a good person (Taj. *odami khub*; Rus. *khoroshii chelovek*).[1] By providing an economic opportunity to meet these demands, migration opens up a path to moral personhood; however, it simultaneously causes tensions in local ideas about what it means to be a good person and, ultimately, what it means to have a good life (Taj. *zindagii khub*; Rus. *khoroshaia zhizn'*). On the one hand, Marhabo located migration decisions in the extremely burdensome character of life projects, which need to be made visible for the community through everyday performances of care and respect, and organising expensive ritual events with the distribution of foods and gifts. On the other hand, although she appreciated the greater autonomy one could have in Russia, she was cautious of the possible flipside of this: the statement that 'no one cares in Russia' can be equally interpreted as lack of due care and respect, detrimental to one's personhood.

Attention to the lived experiences of such contradictions, with which people grapple on an everyday basis, allows me to situate analysis of migration in the space between the paradox and the good life. One must go to Russia to become recognised as a good person by one's community, while at the same time going to Russia can undermine the foundations of one's personhood. This is the master paradox that my research revealed. This tragic paradox points to the scope and complexity of my interlocutors' embeddedness within the largely unequal relations of interdependence at difference scales – Russia's and Tajikistan's economies, places, ideas and bodies. The chapters of this book explore ethnographically people's attempts to solve this paradox, which are at the core of the process of what I call 'locating the good life'.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'to locate' has a few distinct meanings: (1) 'to find out where (a person or thing) can be obtained; to source'; (2) 'to set (a scene, film, story, etc.) in a particular location'; and (3) 'to place (an idea, philosophy, artist, etc.) within a particular context'. All of these three meanings are significant for the story this book tells. While trying to figure out where they

could find resources for maintaining their families' and communities' well-being, my interlocutors' ideas of what exactly constituted the good life were placed in a different context within a concrete geographic location. Physically located in a different setting, and locating their ideas and practices in a different social context, pushed them to reflect on differences in value regimes, moral experience and practice in Russia and Tajikistan. This revealed the presence of ongoing moral judgement, reasoning and deliberation – processes which are central for human ethical life manifest in people's strivings for the good (Laidlaw 2014; Lambek 2017). Analysing how my interlocutors are locating the good life across several domains by trying to overcome tensions and moral dilemmas, I explore the complex relationship between migration, the pursuit of the good life, and people's projects of self-fashioning. How are migration decisions in rural Tajikistan bound up with specific categories of person that people are trying to inhabit? What forms of self-fashioning do they engage with? How are their efforts to achieve and sustain a desired personhood conditioned by structural forces of spatial and social transformation of Tajikistan after Independence? What tensions does this produce, and how do people navigate them? Providing some answers to these questions by attending ethnographically to the areas where these tensions play out, I argue that in Tajikistan, migration has become inherent to the very project of becoming a fully fledged person. As such, it is as much a project of navigating moral personhood as it is a quest for economic resources enabling people to enact their ideas about the good life.

Post-Soviet migrations in Tajikistan

The collapse of the USSR, and the subsequent economic and political upheavals in the newly founded nation states, led to the intensification of old, and the emergence of new, international mobilities, and pushed previously sedentary groups to develop mobile ways of life. The mass repatriation of Russian-speaking populations from Central Asian republics to Russia, which began in the early 1980s, was followed by new steady 'waves' of seasonal migration of 'titular' nationalities – Tajiks, Kyrgyz and Uzbeks (Kosmarskaya 2006; Peyrouse 2013). Beginning as early as the mid-1990s, migration from Tajikistan was to a large extent prompted by the ruination of the local economy, the sharp drop in the standard of living and the subsequent Civil War (1992–7). This civil war became one of the most violent conflicts in the post-Soviet

space, with an estimated 23,000 deaths (Mukomel 1999) and 250,000 refugees (Heathershaw 2009, 21).[2] The processes that led to this brutal conflict are complex. They are usually discussed in terms of redistribution of historically consolidated power among regional elites: from the old Soviet elites based in the north to the southerners. This happened against the backdrop of a rapid deterioration in the living standards of a large portion of the rural population caused by economic restructuring, which aggravated competition for scarce resources among various actors (Bushkov and Mikul'skii 1996; Epkenhans 2016; Scarborough 2023b). Although the north of Tajikistan was not directly affected by violence, and received refugees coming from other parts of the country, deterioration of infrastructure, closure of industries, food shortages and poverty put people's life projects on hold and pushed them to look for alternative livelihoods. Out of around 700,000 refugees, 145,000 went to Russia. Ties of kinship and friendship with them facilitated later labour migration, which gained momentum in the early 2000s (Rahmonova-Schwarz 2012).

The onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 prompted the latest trend in mass movements in the region. This time, Russians fled to Central Asian countries to avoid economic sanctions and the risks of being drafted for the war, many also taking a strong anti-war stance. While there are no precise data, some sources indicate that out of between 700,000 and 1.2 million Russians who left the country in 2022, around 400,000 arrived in the four Central Asian republics (Gulina 2023).[3] Their mobility was facilitated by visa-free regimes with these countries, the significant role of the Russian language in the region, and warm welcome from the locals. Tajikistan became mostly the place of transit, as it could not accommodate the newcomers' needs for employment and steady internet connection needed to sustain the regime of distant work. While for some, this move meant 'discovering' a region that they knew nothing about, for others, this mobility hinged on historical ties to Central Asia, and relations of kinship and friendship.

Over the past three decades, labour migration of local populations to Russia has become the main livelihood strategy for many families in the region, with the economies of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan becoming heavily reliant on migrant remittances as the source of poverty reduction and development (Figures 0.3 and 0.4). In 2020, Tajikistan was on the list of the top five most remittance-dependent countries in the world, in relation to gross domestic product (31 per cent; IOM 2020). Not only did migrants' remittances contribute to the reduction of poverty, they also influenced the cultural and social dynamics of migration.

Figure 0.3   Aeroplane ticket office, the geography of destinations includes mostly Russian cities, but also Frankfurt, Dubai and New York, Sughd Province, autumn 2017.

Figure 0.4   An advertisement for a bus ride to Siberian cities, Sughd Province, winter 2018.

Materialised in large-scale building projects and the flourishing of ritual economies, remittances have inflated mobility expectations and made migration a highly desired option for younger generations. Migration has become a normalised part of male social becoming, opening a path to marriage and family life, and reshaping domestic moral economies. Transnational mobility in Central Asia has come to be intricately woven into the fabric of the everyday life of both migrants who have developed a transnational way of living, and the 'left behind', who are collectively striving to reproduce their communities of value. It has influenced gender roles, and ideas about social propriety and respectability, and it has restructured people's experiences of time and place (Borisova 2021a; Ibañez-Tirado 2019; Reeves 2017a).

The question of how many migrants from Central Asia there are on the territory of Russia is far from straightforward for several reasons. First, as in other contexts, the topic of migration is highly politicised in Russia, and manipulating the numbers of migrants is a standard feature of populist discourse. Second, there are some inherent difficulties in documenting populations through the production of statistical data, which serves to make various populations 'seen' by the state, and to distinguish them one from another (Scott 1998). Statistical data on migration both in Russia and Tajikistan are incomplete and problematic in many respects, including the methodological aspect and its availability (Schenk 2023). Different sources of data are based on various answers to the crucial question of 'who counts as a migrant', which creates a number of divergences that open up a vast field for political speculation. The estimates that different bodies provide show that, out of a population of 10.1 million people, there are approximately 1.4 million Tajikistani[4] nationals residing and working on the territory of Russia. These figures are always fluctuating, but there have been no drops of more than 25 per cent in numbers of migrants in recent years, even in times of crisis (Abashin 2020). On the contrary, crisis is likely to stimulate more people to migrate (Chernina 2020). The financial crisis of 2008, the devaluation of the Russian ruble after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 only confirmed this point. After Russia started its war in Ukraine, many journalistic and scholarly accounts pointed to the vulnerable position of migrants, and predicted their mass exodus from Russia.[5] However, more than a year and a half into the war, this prediction has not proved true. On the contrary, in 2022, a record number of migrant workers entered Russia in search of work, compared to the previous six years, which can be partly explained by people's impeded mobility during the Covid-19 pandemic.[6]

Migration in Tajikistan is highly gendered, with men constituting almost 90 per cent, and women accounting for only 10 per cent, of the migration flow; the proportion of people under 30 is around 50 per cent (Chudinovskikh and Denisenko 2020, 75).[7] This falls into the general profile of an average migrant in Russia: a married young man with a completed high-school education, with those from Central Asia usually coming from a rural or small-town background (Abashin 2014b, 12). Although the latest evidence suggests that the number of women migrating independently is slowly increasing, with divorced and widowed women using migration as an opportunity to start their autonomous lives from scratch (Brednikova 2017), migration is still largely a 'male affair', partly due to the specificities of the cultural construction of differentiated mobility. Male and female mobilities are moralised differently: a specific social and spatial organisation of female honour (*nomus*) means that constrained mobility is tied to 'correct' female performance. As a result, while men's long-term migration is celebrated as a fulfilment of filial and conjugal duty, the increase of (especially young) women's mobility raises suspicion about sexual mores, and casts a shadow on a family's reputation (Reeves 2011b).

The move to Russia is usually accompanied by a change in social status: the majority of migrants are pushed to engage in unqualified labour, as their education, skills and qualifications are irrelevant for the Russian labour market. As a result, former teachers, doctors and nurses often work in construction, manufacturing, agriculture, trade and the service sector for an average of 60 hours a week (Mukomel 2017, 74). Satisfying the Russian labour market's need for the cheap labour of 'guest workers', most of them are employed, often informally, in prestige state construction projects and in small businesses (Urinboyev 2017).

Migrant workers are highly mobile in several respects. First, they constantly move between Tajikistan and Russia – long periods of work are usually followed by short home visits (Figure 0.5). These visits allow them to accomplish important life projects, including starting a family, building a house, and maintaining a social presence in their communities. Second, having to adapt to the vicissitudes of the Russian labour market, many migrant workers frequently change jobs, sectors of employment and places of residence. The geography of mobility of my interlocutors included not only the main metropolises attracting the largest share of migrants, but also small towns and villages in Siberia and the Russian Far East. Finally, the mobility of migrant workers is structured by family and generational dynamics – generations of men from one family often replace each

Figure 0.5 Suitcase sale and money transfer office in the background, Sughd Province, autumn 2017.

other in Russia, collectively working towards the completion of family projects (Abashin 2015b).

In the past decade, migration flows from Central Asia have been diversifying. Trends are towards family migration, with a rise in student migration as Russian universities actively recruit Central Asian students, and a growing interest in obtaining permanent residency and citizenship. This does not necessarily put an end to migrancy, but it opens access to better paid positions in the Russian labour market, and it is a valuable resource, allowing for more flexibility in family strategising (see Chapter 5). These trends show the need to break with dichotomous thinking about migration as either a permanent or a temporary move, an epistemological assumption which is still very much a part of Russian-speaking research on migration. Recent trends also challenge the uniform construction of Tajikistanis in Russia as migrant workers – a label that entails ethically and politically problematic consequences (Bahovadinova 2023; see also Chapter 2 in this book).

The majority of accounts concerning the origins of migration from Tajikistan usually employ the standard explanation of it being almost an automatic 'response to the difficult economic situation in the country'

caused by the post-Soviet transition to the market and the devastating effects of the Civil War (Chernina 2020, 225). The growing 'demographic pressure' in a context of high unemployment rates in Tajikistan is usually listed among further obvious push factors.[8] The 'labour excess' created by the steadily growing population in Tajikistan is absorbed by Russia's economy, which experiences a constant need for cheap labour due to the decline in Russia's working age population. In the early 2000s, the agendas of both Russian migration policy and academic studies were shaped by an 'understanding that the labour shortage can only be covered by attracting foreign labour force' (Mukomel 2017, 70).

The Tajikistani state's perception of migration falls into the same narrative frame: it is believed to be an inevitable outcome of the discrepancies between economic and demographic growth. As a high-ranking official from the Tajik Ministry of Labour stated, 'there are 150,000 newcomers[9] to the labor market annually … Whether we want to or not, we need to send a share of our people [abroad] for work' (Bahovadinova and Scarborough 2018, 9). This necessity to 'send people abroad' has been endorsed by the international organisations operating in the region. For instance, the International Organisation for Migration promotes the migration and development paradigm that encourages the export of labour surplus in return for the steady remittance flows, benefiting the global capitalist economy (Kluczewska 2019). International organisations provide 'expert knowledge' about migration to Tajikistan's government. Unequal financial power relations with international organisations and donors of humanitarian aid mean that policymakers are pushed to take such 'expert knowledge' on board. As Karolina Kluczewska and Oleg Korneev (2021) have shown, the interplay between local and global actors has implications for the state's emigration policy. Since 2015, it has been pulled in opposite directions, aiming to reduce migration and to prepare the labour force better for foreign markets at the same time.

Although the mass migration of 'indigenous' populations from Tajikistan to Russia in the late 1990s is usually considered as a distinctly new phenomenon, anthropologists have pointed to the historical continuities in trajectories of labour. Contemporary migration should be understood as 'at once a Soviet and post-Soviet phenomenon' (Bahovadinova and Scarborough 2018, 11; Abashin 2014b). The mobility of labour has historically been connected to the projects for the development of the Tajik Republic. During the late 1980s, attempts were made to export 'labour excess' from the Tajik SSR to other parts of the USSR experiencing a labour deficit through state-designed

programmes of resettlement. Although largely unsuccessful at the time, these programmes prepared the infrastructure for the current migration, which was quickly established with a 'structural turn to the insecurity of post-industrial capitalism' (Bahovadinova and Scarborough 2018, 3). This 'sudden' mass mobility surprised Russian social scientists and politicians, who shared a primordial view of Central Asian populations as inherently 'traditional', attached to their communities, and therefore hopelessly immobile (Poliakov 1992). In Chapter 1, I show how multilayered past trajectories of mobility map on to present-day migration, and define the unique outlook of local places in Tajikistan.

The Russian migration regime: producing precarious subjects

The contemporary Russian migration regime is rooted in the distinction between the permanent resettlement of 'compatriots' (Rus. *sootechest-venniki*) and the temporary mobility of 'labour migrants' (Rus. *trudovye migranty*), both coming mostly from the former Soviet Republics. While the former is encouraged, the latter is subject to strict regulation that differentiates between 'legal' and 'illegal' migrants. Since the majority of Tajikistani nationals come to Russia with the aim of finding work, they fall under the category of temporary labour migrants, who need to secure the 'legality' of their presence in Russia by documenting themselves within a few months of their arrival. However, they have to make decisions about their legal status in the face of the instability of documents, the pervasive presence of intermediaries, and perpetually changing migration rules.

The legal definition of irregularity merges three different legal regimes, in which migration status becomes closely tied to residency registration (*propiska*) and work documents (Abashin 2012).[10] Furthermore, the distinctive political economy of housing and the production of documents means that it is extremely difficult (and expensive) to navigate the space of ambiguity that opens between the legal regulation of migration and real practices. Drawing on the experiences of Kyrgyzstani migrants in Moscow, Madeleine Reeves notes that in a context where document production is highly mediated, documents are 'never entirely knowable and never completely transparent', which produces a feeling of anxiety over whether one's identity will be considered as 'matching' one's documents (Reeves 2013a, 509). Coupled with the historically informed dynamics of racialisation, this raises suspicion towards people whose

bodies do not fall under the category of 'people of Slavic appearance' (Rus. *litso slavianskoi vneshnosti*) (Sahadeo 2019; Woodard 2022). As a result, maintaining one's presence on the territory of Russia becomes conditioned by the ability to establish and sustain informal relationships with landlords, low-level bureaucrats, police officers, employers, and the multiple brokers who often mediate these relationships (Reeves 2016; Urinboyev 2020).

Scholars and migrants' rights activists have drawn attention to the inconsistencies in Russian migration regulations, and the tension between the law and its enforcement. For instance, Caress Schenk (2018) argues that the Russian migration regime is grounded in the scarcity of legal labour, which is produced artificially through a number of mechanisms (for example, quotas), and employed strategically to balance economic needs and public anxieties concerning the increased presence of ethnically marked bodies in Russian cities. Consequently, the gap between legal regulations and practices produces high numbers of illegalised migrants, whose presence satisfies the demands of the labour market, and this is not an anomaly. Rather than signifying an inherent 'unrule of law' in the dysfunctional Russian legal system (Urinboyev 2017), it is a deliberate strategy that speaks to 'a variety of disparate interests across the immigration system' (Schenk 2018, 6). For example, it offers low-level bureaucrats and police officers an opportunity to extort bribes from undocumented migrants and their employers.

Balancing different concerns underlies the constant changes in the sphere of the regulation of migration: primary migration law was changed 85 times in the period between 2002 and 2015 (for a list of migration policy reforms, see Schenk 2018, 19). During my fieldwork in 2017–18, the rules of residency registration changed twice, complicating the already messy process of documenting migrant selves.[11] In 2015, the new system of labour licences (Rus. *trudovoi patent*) was implemented as a measure to allow more migrants to legalise their presence in Russia. Although this avoided the previous system of producing scarcity through the distribution of a quota for the allocation of work permits, it is nonetheless deeply embedded in the economy of document production discussed above, which increases its costs. For instance, although the official *patent* fee was 4,000 rubles (£50)[12] in 2018, my interlocutors told me that it cost them 20–25,000 rubles (£254–318), since every step was mediated and lubricated with informal payments. Having secured an initial *patent*, migrants must pay monthly fees, which vary depending on the region (for example, in Moscow, this was £57 – almost a sixth of an average migrant's monthly salary). Payments for labour *patents*

flow into the regional budgets. In 2017 alone, migrants added 14 billion rubles (approximately £17.8 million) to Moscow's budget, as its mayor, Sergei Sobianin, proudly stated (Sputnik 2017). Struggling to reconcile the realities of exploitative work schedules, the pressing need to remit money home, and the necessity to document themselves, some of my interlocutors made informed decisions to remain undocumented. For them, the financial and emotional costs of being documented overshadowed the possible benefits of having a regularised status.

More often, however, people do not choose to become undocumented, but find themselves increasingly becoming so due to the 'spiral effect of the law' (Kubal 2016). The imbalance between the positive rules and the disproportionally developed techniques of punishment – together with bureaucratic discretion, frequent mistakes and arbitrariness – has meant that every breach of even a small administrative regulation (or sometimes a lost document) has automatically pushed migrants to violate more and more rules simply by staying in Russia. As a result, they join the vast category of 'illegal migrants' (Rus. *nelegaly*) who are subject to removal, often without even knowing it. Since 2012, the Russian migration regime has become increasingly reliant on deportation and deportability as a form of post-entry social control of migrants – a phenomenon that has been referred to as a 'deportation turn' in the European and US contexts (De Genova and Peutz 2010). In Russia, the production of deportability has mostly been realised through the technology of 'surreptitious deportation', which relies on the automated bureaucratic practice of 'blacklisting' (Bahovadinova 2016b; Kubal 2017; Reeves 2017b). Re-entry bans (Rus. *zapret na v'ezd*) for three, five or ten years are issued for migrants whose names appear on the list, without them being notified. In February 2016, the number of non-citizens banned from Russia peaked with around 330,000 Tajikistani citizens 'on the list', leaving many more grappling with uncertainty over their legal status. This technology has had multiple immobilising effects. In Russia, it has effectively caught migrants in the affectively charged state of deportability, which they experience as the constant threat of 'revocability of future horizons' (Reeves 2015, 123). In Tajikistan, it has influenced gender and family dynamics (Zotova and Cohen 2020). Against the backdrop of the legal precariousness and economic uncertainty of migrant life, more and more citizens of Tajikistan are seeking Russian citizenship – a development that I explore in Chapter 5.

As the narratives about 'demographic decline' and 'dying out' (Rus. *vymiranie*) of Russia have come to present a potential threat to

the current political regime,[13] on 3 July 2020, President Putin stated the obvious: 'Russia needs an inflow of new citizens' (Mislivskaia 2020). In this context, active attempts have been made to revitalise the State Programme for Voluntary Resettlement to the Russian Federation of Compatriots Abroad.[14] Depending on the region, the new iteration of the Resettlement Programme offers a number of privileges and compensations. The main invariable benefit lies in the quick (three to six months) access to Russian citizenship, bypassing other residency statuses on the condition that new citizens reside in the region for at least three years. The legal category of 'compatriot' is very broad, and is based on a mixture of pragmatic and symbolic concerns. While a common historical background and an emotional affiliation with Russian culture are required in theory, the main emphasis is on the idea of compatriots as skilled labour able to fill the gap in labour-deficient regions (Myhre 2017; Woodard 2022). In practical terms, it operates so that Russian citizenship is potentially open to almost any working-age person from the post-Soviet space. The resulting 'strategic citizenship' is a two-way relationship: while citizenship seekers are looking to maximise their access to labour markets, mobility and higher standards of living, the Russian state aims to attract new 'labour citizens'. This blurs the boundaries between the categories of migrants, compatriots and citizens, and produces anxieties over the loss of the 'exclusionary' dimension of citizenship.

Another aspect of the strategic nature of Russia's relationship with its new citizens has revealed itself in the light of Russia's invasion in Ukraine. On 15 May 2022, President Putin signed the amendment to the citizenship law, guaranteeing fast-track Russian citizenship to foreigners who voluntarily sign a year-long contract with the Russian military, and, by extension, to their families. Using access to citizenship as an incentive to lure migrant workers into the war with Ukraine, the Russian state at the same time extended the list of criteria for revocability of citizenship.[15] In August 2023, a member of Russia's Human Rights Council claimed that the council was working on a new initiative that would allow naturalised citizens who avoid conscription and refuse to join the military in the case of a mobilisation order to be stripped of their Russian citizenship. Thus, the lightness of receiving a Russian passport for Tajikistanis is now accompanied by the potential risks of being drafted into the army and losing one's life at war. Nevertheless, the strategic relationship between migrant workers turned Russian citizens and the Russian state stands, even though its highly unequal terms are being constantly revised.

Migration as an ethnographic object of study

I set out to study migration from rural Tajikistan to Russia in 2016, as the rapid changes in the Russian migration regime had immobilised a large portion of the population and jeopardised established transnational livelihoods. Equipped with a whole range of theoretical assumptions about the political economy of illegalisation and the workings of deportation regimes in Europe, the UK and the USA, during the first months of my fieldwork, I tirelessly chased returned migrants with questions about their legal statuses and documents, and increasingly became confused and frustrated. I could not find the desperate crowds of migrants banned from Russia that I read about in journalistic accounts and the reports of non-governmental organisations, no matter how hard I looked for them in my emerging networks. As the time was passing by, and I collected more accounts similar to Marhabo's, I started to realise that even if I did talk to the forcefully returned migrants and their families, the issue of legal status did not emerge as a separate concern in our conversations, but was always embedded in their narratives about pressing life projects. People talked about the economic and bureaucratic challenges of documenting themselves only insomuch as it troubled the anticipated temporalities of their social becoming. It was not a tragedy if someone could not get their labour licence on time and technically became 'illegal' in Russia: it was framed as an extra 'expense', as my interlocutors joked. However, it was a big issue for the whole extended family, if, as the result of bearing this extra expense, someone could not get married and produce offspring when all their peers had already done so. This pushed me to rethink my fixation on the legal aspects of migration early in the fieldwork. Instead of being the centrepiece of this book, my engagement with questions surrounding the legal and economic contours of the Russian migration regime allows me to situate the intimate aspects of migration as a project of achieving and sustaining moral personhood within a larger context.

Although I initially planned to identify and focus on families of migrants, as one might expect from an ethnographer of migration, I ended up living with a family whose members were not technically 'migrants' at that time (Chapter 2). Fully participating in the everyday life of my newfound family, I found myself persistently carried away by events and activities such as weddings, social gatherings, or visiting relatives and friends, which brought me a lot of joy, but which made me feel highly inefficient and guilty about not getting the kind of data I

imagined were 'right' for research on migration. I cheered myself up with the idea that I had the whole year ahead of me to 'figure it out'.

Yet, as deeply as I was immersing myself in the field, and building intimate connections with my interlocutors, migration still evaded definitions, classifications, and my attempts to isolate it in separate practices and specific areas of life. In conversations with my colleagues who were writing about migration from sociological and political science perspectives, I struggled to pin down this migration as being seasonal, circular, temporal migration, or as migration out of poverty, immigration or resettlement. Equally, I struggled to establish empirical and analytical boundaries between migrants and non-migrants, and mobile and sedentary populations: the kinds of labels that are expected to capture something significant about different types of movement and the categories of people involved in them. Ironically, even the words 'migration' and 'migrant' were largely absent from the local vocabulary (see Chapter 1).

At the same time, migration was everywhere: in the carcasses of houses under construction, in school bureaucracy, in films and music videos, in the playful code-switching from Tajik to Russian and back, in marital choices and wedding ceremonies, in people's smartphones and bank accounts, in infants' names, in men's, women's and children's outfits, and on their minds. Only at the writing stage, did I realise that these were actual 'lived experiences' of migration that very rarely become the focus of analytic attention in public and academic accounts on migration. For many of my interlocutors, they were probably more intensely lived than those of ambiguous border crossings, intermediaries, documents, waiting, fear of document checks and police raids, and living in cramped apartments – the themes one might expect to be covered in an ethnography of migration which legitimises its object by framing migrants as 'suffering subjects' (Robbins 2013).[16]

Approaching migration as 'an ethnographically contingent object of study' (Elliot 2021, 4), I draw my insights on what migration is and what it does in rural Tajikistan not so much from border crossings, airports and document centres, but from wedding halls, overcrowded classrooms, buzzing bazaars, and the intimacy of people's homes and bodily performances. Following the themes that my field has revealed as 'matters of concern' for my interlocutors (Latour 2004), this book takes the discussion surrounding migration in Tajikistan into the realm of personhood, self and subjectivity, and imaginaries of the good life.

The good life and the migratory life

> 'The world has gone crazy (Rus. *Mir soshel s uma*)! Look, we're going to Russia, while Russians are going to Europe! Lena, tell us where the life is good! In Russia? Germany? England?' I sigh. I have nothing to say. I don't know.

This extract from my fieldnotes captured the reaction of Mahlie, the middle-aged wife of a migrant worker with five children who I met during my earlier fieldwork in Tajikistan in 2014–15, to the news that, after spending some time in Germany, I had moved to the UK to start my doctoral project. Although my own move and the migratory projects of my interlocutors had many divergences in terms of unequal access to privilege and resources that define different horizons of possibility, Mahlie's words point to an important, presumably universal, quality of human migration: its deep entanglement with imaginaries of the good life.

In recent years, the relationship between 'the imaginative', 'the desired', 'the hoped for' and different forms of (im)mobility have attracted significant scholarly attention (Belloni 2019; Elliot 2021; Vigh 2009b). These studies have emerged largely as a response to the prevalence of the economic determinism of push–pull models and the orientation towards the production of policy recommendations in migration research. Showing that the framework of economic dispossession is insufficient to explain the complexity of contemporary migration, researchers have explored how mobility takes on particular meanings. Such meanings go beyond migration as simply a physical move, and become 'the global horizon' of imagination and action for entire communities (Graw and Schielke 2012; Salazar 2011). Consequently, the disjuncture between personal desires and aspirations for mobility and increasingly restrictive mobility regimes has led to a paradoxical situation in some parts of the world, where the lack of mobility itself has come to be perceived as a form of displacement (Chu 2010; Lubkemann 2008). At the same time, the reconfiguration of global capital flows and increased connectivity have inflated the costs of crafting sedentary livelihoods in areas that have been turned into the 'moorings of mobility' (Gaibazzi 2015).

Migration is intimately linked to the 'sense that one is "going somewhere"' – a phenomenon that Ghassan Hage terms 'existential mobility' (Hage 2009, 97). The individual feeling of 'moving well enough' (Jansen 2014) is achieved through the fulfilment of key life projects, based on collectively shared ideas about what constitutes the good life.

The assumption that the pervasiveness of the common imaginary of 'greener pastures' or 'a better life' elsewhere contributes to the actual movements of people needs to be calibrated through ethnographically grounded studies looking at what kinds of lives are being sought through mobility. For example, in post-socialist settings, mobile imaginaries emerge vis-à-vis past experiences of socialism, defining the ideas about the good life – which are often expressed through the idiom of 'normality' (Dzenovska 2018; Jansen 2015). In post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, mobility is connected to people's yearnings for what they refer to as 'normal lives'. 'Normality' is imagined through 'a projected "normal state"', which should provide adequate material conditions and temporal structures for the individual life projects of its citizens (Jansen 2015, 12). In rural Latvia, people pursue 'futures past' through their move to the UK, a place which is imagined as being 'ahead', according to the spatiotemporal hierarchies of Western modernity (Dzenovska 2018).

Research in other contexts also shows how varied the relationship between ideas about the good life and (im)mobility is. Julie Chu (2010) has looked at migration in the Fuzhou countryside as a 'technique of emplacement'. Through the 'spatial-temporal extension' of value, her interlocutors were striving to become a certain type of subject, inhabiting a Chinese modernity rather than a foreign one. In his ethnography of rural permanence in Zambia, Paolo Gaibazzi (2015) has made a similar argument, showing that what mobility made possible was the crafting of sedentary lifestyles and the continuation of agricultural livelihoods. In rural Egypt, migration is a 'conservative aspirational project', driven by the 'dream of stability' understood in terms of material and moral comfort (Schielke 2020, 83). Building upon these studies, my book is informed by the assumption that it is necessary to look at historically and culturally informed notions of the good life in a given context, to be able to unpack a complex relationship between the material, imaginative and moral aspects of migration.

My interlocutors also felt that they needed to move in order to 'make progress' in life. They articulated their grievances in terms of economic need, and some of them also used the late socialist past as a reference point against which evaluations were made of how 'normal' their current lives were. However, as Madeleine Reeves (2017a, 287) argues, 'an account of labour migration from Central Asia in terms of "economic necessity" is only the *start* [emphasis in the original] of an explanation for the scope, speed, and dynamics of this process, rather than its end-point'. *Man majbur budam* (Taj. 'I had to') is the first answer one receives from interlocutors in the region when enquiring about

their decision to migrate. Yet, the more time I spent sharing everyday experiences with my interlocutors, the more evident it became to me that *majburī* (necessity) could not be captured in terms of material hardship only. In this book, I explore people's claims about the 'necessity' of migration in their totality. I show how the sense of urgency of going to Russia is bound up with people's projects of self-fashioning, rooted not necessarily or not only in the desire to craft a material livelihood in the first place, but also in the desire to be recognised as a particular type of subject by their kin and community.

My theoretical approach is informed by treating migration as an 'ethnographically contingent object of study' (Elliot 2021, 4). I draw on the work of Alice Elliot, who has studied how migration transforms life in northern Morocco. Stretching her object of study geographically, and starting her enquiry from the place of origin of migration, she suggests a conceptual reimagination of migration that breaks with the 'conceptual independence between migration and life' (Elliot 2021, 162). Multiple anthropological works on migration, including the ones mentioned above, have refined the simplistic push–pull models revolving around economic disadvantage by adding kinship relations, gender dynamics, moral economies, religious factors, global imagination of mobility and others to the mix. Alice Elliot argues that such an analysis still treats migration as a phenomenon external to social relations that has a clear beginning and an end, and is studied as revealing itself through its causes and effects. She makes an analytical move that reframes the relationship between migration and life 'from one of causation to one of coconstitution', in which the focus of ethnographic and conceptual labour lies in 'tracing how migration emerges through life' (Elliot 2021, 162–3). Her ethnography is a fascinating example of such an analysis. The workings of migration in Morocco penetrate the most intimate spheres in people's everyday lives, recalibrating the notions of gender and personhood, and changing the temporalities of life. As such, migration becomes 'the very foundation upon which forms of social and individual life are built' – a key element of local cosmologies (Elliot 2021, 1).

Pushing the decentring of conceptual imagination of migration further, my aim in this book is to explore the co-constitution of migration and personhood, with a particular focus on migration emerging through people's projects of self-fashioning. Mahlie's question about 'where the life is good' shows that people's active attempts to carve out their own projects of the good life are intimately linked with the imagination of migration. However, it is not just about imaginaries of distant places of generic 'betterness'. The conceptions of the good life are deeply rooted in

moral valuations. In other words, the question of *where* the life is good is inseparable from the question of *how* life is lived. If we take migration as an active force transforming people's everyday lives, and moral projects as 'the product of ongoing processes of socially situated negotiation, continually enacted through the dialectic of everyday social life' (Fischer 2014, 13), then we cannot ignore the fact that migration reveals itself not just in the changing textures of the everyday, as Alice Elliot (2021) shows, but also in people's moral worlds and ethical life.

In recent decades, ethical life has attracted a lot of attention among anthropologists. Following the call that people's moral strivings should be taken seriously, and that we should 'avoid dismissing their ideals as unimportant or worse, as bad-faith alibis for the worlds they actually create' (Robbins 2013, 457), the burgeoning body of literature examining people's ethical strivings in ethnographically grounded ways has become very diverse. In conversation with moral philosophy, anthropologists have developed thematic and theoretical focuses surrounding the questions of values and moral valuations (Heintz 2009; Robbins 2007), the moral and the political (Fassin 2012), intersubjectivity and the nature of moral experience (Zigon and Throop 2014), ethical practice and the everyday (Lambek 2010), virtue ethics (Laidlaw 2014; Mahmood 2005) and its relational aspects (Louw 2022; Mattingly 2014).[17] This list is by no means exhaustive. My goal here is not to delve into the intricacies of theoretically sophisticated discussions on ethics and morality, but to suggest that anthropological enquiries on migration should pay closer attention to the relationship between migratory life and ethical life.

Rich debates on ethical life have produced little traction in research on migration. Apart from the work of scholars inspired by existential and phenomenological anthropology, who provide a close-up of migrants' lived experience (Jackson et al. 2013; Lems 2018; Willen 2014), there are few recent attempts to explicitly engage with the moral and ethical dimensions of migration beyond the questions of the building of individual lifeworlds (Simoni and Voirol 2020). My interlocutors in this book are people who were striving to sustain meaningful lives, and to carve out the version of the mundane that is conducive with their ideas about the good. The current economic structure of opportunities in rural Tajikistan means that the projects of the good life are unattainable for most people in the region without migrating. However, in their everyday attempts to mould themselves according to cultural and social ideals by the means of migration, they did not do so unreflexively. The moments when people were explicitly confronted with decisions about staying or leaving, decisions about documents and citizenship,

about marrying off one's daughter to a migrant worker, about arranging care for one's elderly parents, were essentially ethical moments. They produced a range of reflections, judgements and deliberations. However, more habitual activities bound up with people's practical attempts to fashion themselves as a particular type of 'good' person (*odami khub*) – be it a modern man, a caring son or a generous host – were also essentially ethical. This book traces ethnographically how the contours of migration as an ethnographic object of study emerge through such moral reflections, judgements, experiences and practices, which are part of people's moral making of their worlds.

Living well in Central Asia

In order to set the context for understanding the projects of the good life that my interlocutors were trying to carve out through migration, in this section, I look at the broader set of ideas about living well in Central Asia. For a long time, anthropological studies of people's everyday struggles in the region were set against the established tendency of writing about conflict, division, marginality, and the survival mode in which people found themselves as a result of economic and political restructuring and the 'crisis of meaning' after the dissolution of the USSR. A number of recent ethnographically grounded studies pay attention to the experiences of happiness, joy and pleasure, but also to moral navigation of the right thing to do. They show that conceptions of the good life as a moral or 'balanced life' emerge and are negotiated at the intersection between the material and the transcendental dimensions (Louw 2013). Ideas about the good life are tied to particular places and spaces, such as infrastructural projects, landscapes, nature spots, holy sites and *mahalla* neighbourhoods. The material and imaginative qualities of these spaces foster certain kinds of sociality, and moral orientations and sensibilities (Féaux de la Croix 2016; Laszczkowski 2016; Liu 2012). These moral orientations emerge in relation to different modes of engagement with Islam and its ethic, through the flow of everyday sociality, or new forms of piety associated with scriptural Islam and publicly visible Islamic lifestyles (Louw 2007; McBrien 2017; Rasanayagam 2011; Stephan 2010).

What emerged very strongly in my engagements with my interlocutors' everyday lives is that *zindagii khub* (Taj.) or *khoroshaia zhizn'* (Rus.) implies that material sufficiency is always entwined with ideas about morality and social personhood. All my interlocutors identified as

Muslims. However, their religious, ethnic and cultural identities were merged as a result of Soviet attempts to eradicate religion and impose secularism (McBrien 2017). Publicly visible pious lifestyles began to spread in the region after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet, this 'religious revival', manifest in the emergence of a diverse market of ideas, plurality of voices and intellectual perspectives, was short-lived. The state's attempts to monopolise authority in the religious sphere resulted in the repression of the forms of religious expression that were considered alien to the normative Hanafi-Sunni tradition promoted by the state as 'authentically Tajik', such as women's hijabs and men's beards (Lemon and Thibault 2018). Shahnoza Nozimova and Tim Epkenhams (2019, 133) describe this official conservative version of Islam as rooted in the ideals of 'political conformity, social patriarchy, and limited mystical experience'. As a result, the atmosphere of suspicion and fear inhibited people's displays of piety and discussions of their religious practice, making ethnographic research on these topics in Tajikistan almost impossible.

Prioritising my own and my interlocutors' security and safety, I chose not to explicitly enquire about their religious perspectives and practices in our conversations. Nevertheless, although I did not focus on the forms of religious expression, the ideas of what constitutes the good life are inevitably suffused with Islamic ethic. While some people attended mosques and performed daily five-time prayer (*namoz*) regularly, the majority enacted their identity and inhabited Islamic ethic through their close everyday involvement in life-cycle projects and public displays of generosity and hospitality during life-cycle rituals and religious celebrations. My interlocutors invoked Islam as they discussed relationships with their families, obligations towards their children and parents, the value of *sabr* (patience), and the ideals of kindness, charity and mutual help. Thus, my analysis of what constitutes the good life for my interlocutors is informed by the aspects of living Islam manifest in rituals and occasional discussions of everyday affairs, rather than direct enquiries into the forms of religious expression.

The questions of morality are deeply embedded in the ways in which people in Central Asia order their social relations according to idioms of custom and tradition, but also modernity and 'culturedness' (Beyer and Finke 2019; Mostowlansky 2017). The idiom of tradition is intimately linked to relations of respect and care, deference to authority, collectivity and reciprocity, which are maintained within families and communities, and projected to the level of state leadership. These relations are sustained in a highly performative manner, and their maintenance is crucial

for achieving moral personhood. For example, Kyrgyz elders need to perform moral integrity, wisdom and modesty to inhabit social positions that are appropriate to their age, and to receive due respect (Beyer 2010). In Tajikistan, consolidating a reputation as a caring parent and a 'cultured' person demands elaborate displays of wealth and conspicuous consumption during wedding celebrations (Cleuziou 2019b), while being a fully fledged man or woman implies skilfully timed performances of certain emotions and affective states (Ibañez-Tirado 2013).

The idiom of modernity is also very important for people's attempts to make sense of social change, imagine desired futures and cultivate themselves as a certain type of person. The local idiom of modernity, which I explore in more detail in Chapter 2, is rooted in particular local experiences of socialist modernity, but it is also being transformed in light of increasing global connections. Anthropological scholarship has critically interrogated the concepts of tradition and modernity that have long been key tropes dominating the historical and political imagination of the imperial peripheries, such as Central Asia.[18] Building on Eisenstadt's influential concept of 'multiple modernities', Julie McBrien (2008, 16) has called for an understanding of Central Asia as a region that has 'long been modern'.[19] Till Mostowlansky has argued that modernity in the region should be understood not as multiple, but rather as 'variously entangling'. In this respect, the role of ethnographer is to analyse how people 'integrate, assimilate, and reject particular fragments deriving from various "projects" of modernity' in everyday interactions (Mostowlansky 2017, 22). The 'pieces of "classical" modernisation theory', and local concepts that inform people's everyday use of the category of modernity, are 'entangling and equally important' (Mostowlansky 2013, 49). Thus, rather than using modernity as a category of analysis, paying attention to the 'local methods of modernity' shows how people order their worlds and transform social interactions (Mostowlansky 2013, 32). Drawing from this approach, my ethnography reveals how the complexity of the categories and forms of self-fashioning emerges through the experiences of a local place constituted by the multilayered histories of mobilities (Chapter 1). This is the place where present forms of sociality are informed by spatial and social transformations, and by the past hierarchies that emerged through the Soviet modernisation project. I show that concerns about being recognised as a modern subject emerge alongside the need to be seen as a moral person in people's strivings for the good life.

Mahlie's exclamation that 'the world has gone crazy' captures the experiential dimension of accelerating mobilities in the region.

These new mobilities map on to the old trajectories of movement of people and things, but they acquire a new texture and intensity in the context of the region's rapid incorporation into the global capitalist economy. This change resonates with the broader accounts of heightened mobility becoming the distinct feature of the modern world (Sheller and Urry 2006). In the region, such change has been explored in terms of formation of dense transnational ties (Abashin and Brednikova 2021), 'nomadic lifestyles' (Brednikova and Tkach 2010), and translocal livelihoods (Stephan-Emmrich and Schröder 2018). Phillip Schröder and Manja Stephan-Emmrich (2016) have argued that to understand how mobility becomes the new norm, the focus on the material dimension of livelihoods should be expanded into the realm of social relatedness, cultural expectations and personal aspirations. Although people understood success in material terms in the first place, their income was transformed into other forms of well-being, such as achieving normative male adulthood, maintaining personal autonomy and escaping traditional gender roles, and prompting one's 'religious career'. These themes have been explored in the literature examining the social meaning of remittances in the region (Abashin 2015b; Aitieva 2021; Reeves 2012; Zotova and Cohen 2016). However, they have rarely been explicitly framed in terms of people's moral projects and ethical strivings in the first place.

Ethnographic research in Muslim societies has foregrounded how cultivating oneself as an ethical subject is bound up with religious practice (Mahmood 2005). This book's focus on *zindagii khub* allows me to approach the question of self-fashioning from the position that living well at the level of one's ethical practice and living well in terms of one's material fulfilment are intertwined, and perhaps even co-constitutive. The discussions that run through this book show that the decisions to go to Russia in search of income are driven by the need to be recognised as a certain type of person – a good person (Taj. *odami khub*), a truthful human being (Taj. *inson*), or a 'cultured' man (Rus. *kul'turnyi chelovek*). These categories of person emerge through social relationships. The money made in Russia allowed my interlocutors to claim moral personhood by inhabiting the gendered roles of dutiful and caring parents and children (Chapter 4). It also allowed them to fully participate in the types of sociality signifying one's moral worth as a hospitable and generous member of the community (Chapter 3). Investing in obtaining Russian citizenship facilitated the process of fitting in or carving out one's autonomy in the gender and generational hierarchies in their community (Chapter 5).

However, I do not imply that people are simply pursuing a better standard of what might constitute the good life in their communities back home. Marhabo's words with which I started this introduction reveal that their search for the good life is suffused with indeterminacy and contradiction. In this respect, migration emerges through debate and deliberation about the demands and tensions of living well. Discussing the moral structure and practice in Central Asia, Maria Louw (2022, 319) points out that labour migration is 'characterised by moral problematization, by renewed discussion about, and experiments with, what a good life or a good community is'. As such, it is inseparable from the question of *how* life should be lived. This book offers a new way of thinking about migration, by highlighting the tensions and deliberations accompanying people's ongoing projects of locating the good life. These projects are rooted in the pursuit of the deeply entangled material and ethical dimensions, and they are bound up with deliberations about complex multilayered place/location, with its distinctive histories of mobilities and future imaginaries.

On being strategically situated

This book builds upon data collected during ethnographic fieldwork in the Sughd region of Tajikistan (ten months), in St Petersburg (two months) in 2017–18, and during two weeks in Tajikistan in January 2019. I chose my fieldsite in Tajikistan for both methodological and pragmatic reasons. This particular region in the north of Tajikistan has one of the highest rates of outmigration, and I had already conducted fieldwork there for my previous research, so I had some acquaintances to begin with. While I provide a 'thick' description of the place where I was based during my fieldwork, and address its specificities, which are crucial for my analysis in Chapter 1, here I discuss the architecture of my fieldwork, and reflect on what kinds of data and situated knowledge my choice of being 'strategically situated' (Marcus 1995) rather than 'strategically mobile' (Schneider 2012) have generated.

Anthropology has studied movement as a crucial part of human experience, and has relied on fieldwork as a form of 'travel practice', from the time of Malinowski (Clifford 1997, 8). As mobility has come to be considered as a key feature of modernity, and as an established object of interdisciplinary research (Sheller and Urry 2006), discussions about mobile methods and methodologies have inevitably emerged among anthropologists (Elliot et al. 2017). These discussions mostly

revolve around the tensions between the methodology of multi-sited research, particularly well-established in migration studies, and various modes of following, walking with, and the epistemic value of serendipity (Ingold and Vergunst 2008; Marcus 1995; Rivoal and Salazar 2013). Since it is precisely the quality and dynamics of relationships between an anthropologist and her research participants in the field that usually lead to the most profound insights, anthropologists have alerted us both to the potential shallowness of switching between fieldsites, and to the practical limitations of doing so, such as the physical and emotional costs for the researcher herself (Hage 2005).

'Staying put' while studying mobile people and places has proven to generate fruitful insights in migration research. By inverting the conventional methodologies of migration research, the traditional modes of studying migration can be defamiliarised, and they can displace the theoretical focus on to a whole new 'problem-space' (Dzenovska 2011; Elliot 2021). It was a conscious methodological decision on my part to 'stay put' in a place which was historically enmeshed in the wider contexts of mobility, and to build relationships with people whose lives are intimately linked with experiences of migration. A reliance on participant observation as an embodied relational process, and the use of interviews only as a complementary source of data, enabled me to take people rather than their movements as the starting point for my research. This has informed my theoretical approach to migration as being deeply entangled with imaginaries of the good life, and as being crucial for maintaining personhood.

I spent the majority of my time in Tajikistan living with one particular family – the family of Farhod, as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 2. I also stayed in two other households for a few months in the neighbouring villages, which form one administrative unit (*jamoat*). In particular, I stayed with Aliia Khamidovna, a Russian-language teacher at the local school, who was my entry point to the village and school sociality, and with a young divorced woman I call Albina, with whom I developed a friendship. I also maintained relationships with the interlocutors I had met during my previous research: an Uzbek woman in her 40s I call Sarvinoz, who lived mostly in St Petersburg, and who came to Tajikistan only to finish constructing her house and to marry off her son towards the end of my fieldwork, and Mahlie, who unexpectedly left for Russia halfway through my fieldwork, having been urgently summoned by her husband.[20]

Preparing for my research, and envisaging being emplaced in one or a couple of separate households, I imagined spending long days

doing domestic chores with women, and feeling bored or being trapped in the role of a guest (Adams 1999). However, my choice not to use mobile methodologies did not mean that I was completely immobile. It is misleading to think about stillness as an absolute condition, and what might look like 'empty time' is in fact never accurately so (Gaibazzi 2015; Ibañez-Tirado 2019). Despite the popular imaginary of 'left behind' families of migrants in Tajikistan as being 'lazy' and unproductive, my interlocutors were constantly busy, and often complained about running out of time. They were working, looking for jobs and creative ways to find some income, studying, chasing various documents, going to the nearby bazaar, participating in the community's sociality, gossiping, doing 'kin work', looking for brides for their young male relatives, preparing for weddings, going to the local sorceress (*qiinachi*), making and remaking their building projects, and arguing about how to reconcile all of these activities. I was doing the same alongside and with them, although I did not think about it in terms of a specific methodology, but rather imagined it as crucial for establishing and sustaining relationships. In doing so, I always tried to be attentive to the politics of dress and touch, the use of space encoding relations of authority, linguistic forms and code-switching, and the use of senses – the areas that have proved fruitful in anthropologies of Central Asia more broadly (see, for example, Ibañez-Tirado 2018; Liu 2012; Reeves 2011b). Given the use of domestic space, especially in winter, at times it seemed to me that too much was going on even in one single room, which left me terrified and wondering how it would feel to constantly maintain this split focus, had I chosen a multi-sited methodology instead.

Although my quotidian mobility was conditioned by my positionality in certain ways, which I discuss below, I carved out my own trajectories, independent from my main interlocutors. I regularly went to the local town to learn Tajik with a private tutor, who was also an employee of the local administration, and who had previously worked in Moscow babysitting for middle-class Russian families. Apart from revealing the subtleties of literary and colloquial Tajik to me, she shared her insights on education, migration, documents and local bureaucracy. These short unchaperoned trips to the town gave me a feel for the urban environment, infrastructure and sociality. Each time, I inevitably bumped into some acquaintances in the town centre or in the *marshrutka* (private minibus), or made new ones while shopping at the bazaar. Some of these encounters were more disturbing than exciting, and at times it was difficult to balance my ethnographic imagination and safety concerns. However, being mocked or told off by Farhod for not

avoiding eye contact, for smiling too much, or for being too friendly with strangers when I complained about street harassment, was also painfully revealing, and shaped my embodied understanding of gendered expectations and experiences.

I sustained my links with the wider community through teaching at the local school, which used Russian as one of the languages of instruction. I taught English a couple of days a week, and held some extra lessons for talented students preparing for various competitions. In between my teaching activities, I spent a lot of time in the teachers' room or attending formal and informal (usually one merging into another) meetings, showcases and seminars. I also witnessed many performances, celebrations and competitions, which, although they were mostly imposed by the state and saturated with the concomitant paraphernalia (such as Flag Day, President's Day and Independence Day), usually entailed a lot of joy, creativity and fun for the students. My involvement in the routine of the school allowed me to constantly be aware of the local gossip and to become a part of the *kollektiv* (Rus. 'collective'). I was also witness to the struggles of the administration and teachers with bureaucracy, which was ever-increasing, not least due to migration; the grievances of young women married to migrant workers and juggling paid employment, child rearing, and their daughter-in-law duties; and the future imaginaries of my students growing up in the absence of their parents.

Finally, my research findings are informed by many more relationships and encounters, some of which I have turned into ethnographic Interludes in this book. I frequently crossed the borders between Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, which ceremonially opened its borders on 1 March 2018 after a long period of closure. I usually travelled with local multilingual and always multitasking taxi drivers, whose business proliferated in the absence of a public transportation system in the region, and the high costs of travelling by air from Tajikistan to major Russian cities. In multiple conversations with my co-travellers, coming from all walks of life, but many of them sharing experiences of having been migrant workers in Russia, my own Russian passport often facilitated discussions about mobility and emplacement, and shed some light on the entanglements of documents with the local imaginaries of the good life (Chapter 5). It also made me reflect on my privilege, which was ironically embodied in the document that often rendered me immobile and caused existential anxieties about my own future in 'the West'.

Roles and relationships

Relationships in the field, and my circulation in the particular spaces which conditioned the kind of situated knowledge lying at the core of this book, are inevitably entwined with questions of positionality. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the region became more accessible to Western researchers, who at first tended to conduct research in Russian, and later in local languages. Currently, much of the anthropology of Central Asia is dominated by Western researchers or scholars coming from the region, and often having degrees from European, British and American universities. Being Russian, pursuing a Western degree, and conducting research in a mixture of Russian and Tajik in the region, which has been integrated in a complex unequal relationship with Russia for centuries, positioned me differently. The ways in which people perceived me were shaped by the intersection of my gender, age, ethnicity, citizenship, and specific past and present trajectories of mobility in the region. However, thinking beyond the standard tropes of positionality opening or closing access to certain categories of person and relationships, I consider my positionality central to the theoretical insights that this book offers. Thus, instead of being just a contextual background to my study, explicit engagement with my positionality constitutes a crucial part of the conceptual work that this book does.

The question of modernity is the area where my positionality shaped my theoretical insights the most. My presence facilitated the discussions through which I realised that my interlocutors grappled with their place, and the role of the region, in the global hierarchies of development. These hierarchies are rooted in the histories of the socialist modernisation projects in the region, and in Soviet ideas about progress, culture, nationality and language. The very fact of my stay with Farhod's family was made possible due to the profound imprint that these histories have left on people's ideas about being modern, and on their subjectivities. I felt that Farhod's strong desire to 'speak Russian without an accent', and to be recognised as a 'cultured man', placed me in an uneasy position of a 'big sister' – the frustrating role that I tried to resist throughout my stay (Chapter 2). I do not think that I ever fully succeeded, and I can only hope that the relationship I established with Farhod's family, rooted in shared everyday routines, and mutual care and concern, goes beyond this role, and holds space for shared humanity, respect and affection.

At the same time, being Russian made me a partial insider, revealed in the category of *svoi* or *nashi* (Rus. 'ours' or 'our own people'), which is also grounded in shared history (Yurchak 2005). I came from a periphery

of a different kind myself. The place where I grew up is a post-Soviet provincial Russian town with declining welfare support, no jobs and no future prospects. I also had experiences of migration, and of life in St Petersburg. Some of these experiences were quite similar to those of my interlocutors: for instance, not having a *propiska* (residency registration), living in an overcrowded *kommunalka* (communal apartment), or working in the service sector under exploitative conditions. This sometimes positioned me as a 'fellow traveller across lines of power', equally struggling to improve my own condition in the face of the unequal 'distribution of the ability to lead a "normal life"' (Dzenovska 2014, 272–3). My own mobile trajectory was interpreted along the same lines, and my closest interlocutors related to me not as a 'British' researcher, but as a simple Russian girl, herself trying to locate the good life. Interestingly, there were different levels and modalities of being *svoi*. Sometimes, I was mistaken for a 'local' Russian visiting her kin, or for a Tajik arrogantly switching to Russian after having migrated for too long. In a way, I could 'pass' for anyone, since speaking Tajik with a Russian accent, or not speaking it at all, was not unusual in such a multi-ethnic place (see Chapter 1).

As a woman, I had constantly to be aware of the spatial and social organisation of female honour, which is bound up with constrained mobility and the proper performance of femininity associated with domestic space (Figures 0.6 and 0.7). Developing an understanding of the limits of my mobility became a crucial part of the process of

Figure 0.6 Trying to fit into the local gender displays: teaching outfit, Sughd Province, autumn 2017.

Figure 0.7 Trying to fit into the local gender displays: domestic dress, Sughd Province, summer 2018.

embodied learning during fieldwork.[21] Being incorporated into a family meant voluntarily giving up parts of my mobility, and cutting off access to certain places and people. Although Farhod's family never made it clear whether they were unhappy about my gender performance, they contributed to shaping it indirectly by encouraging certain choices of dress, make-up, and mingling with some people, while avoiding others who they considered 'bad' (Taj. *ganda*) for various reasons.

I could not possibly inhabit the role of a young *kelin* (Taj. 'daughter-in-law'). I was no longer young by local standards – the average age of marriage for women is between 20 and 24, and older women can only count on marrying a divorcee or a widower. I was single, and I never concealed this fact, and I lived in a household which had no elders to pay respect to.[22] My role as a teacher (Taj. *muallima*), and my financial contribution to the domestic economy, made it possible for me not to be bound to everyday 'women's' activities. I was seen as a 'modern' working woman.[23] However, maintaining this image involved always trying to overcome existing historically grounded perceptions of Russian femininity, which are associated with moral laxity and sexual availability. My figure had to convey the knowledgeability and authority of a teacher, but also the modesty and impeccable moral standing of a respectable woman. All of these were evaluated in the context of a constant awareness of transnational polygyny, and the fears of local women that their husbands could abandon them for some Russian blonde for adventure and a Russian passport (Cieślewska 2021). Thus, as my interlocutors were involved in their projects of self-fashioning, the types of bodywork and gendered performances I had to master were related to my project of fashioning myself as a Russian single respectable woman – a combination that sounded almost like an oxymoron to my interlocutors. All this shaped my relationships and roles in the field – from playing a 'mascot' (Adams 1999), who performs tricks in return to favours, or submitting to the role of a wayward relative regularly lectured on the moral wrongs of her lifestyle, to being just a Lenakhon[24] – perhaps a little bit strange but appreciated, respected and loved.

Notes

1   I give both Tajik and Russian equivalents in the text as they appeared during my fieldwork. As I interacted with the native speakers of Tajik, Uzbek and Russian residing in the area of Mehnat, I used a mixture of Russian and Tajik, depending on my interlocutors' preferences and proficiency (on the complexity of the language situation in the area, see Borisova 2023b).

2   These estimates are imprecise, and differ depending on the source. For instance, while a Russian sociologist, Vladimir Mukomel, points to 23,600 deaths (Mukomel 1999), John Heathershaw (2009) talks about 50,000 deaths – a figure that some of my colleagues studying the region commented on as being unrealistic.

3   This migration trend is complex: while some people chose to settle in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, others either continued their travels further to different destinations in the West and Southeast Asia, or went back to Russia. There are no reliable data on how many people returned. This topic is highly politicised, and Russian public political figures tend to understate the amount of people who left and exaggerate the numbers of those returned in their public speeches.

4   Although the project of nationhood in Tajikistan is based on ideas about an ethnic nation state, Tajikistan is a multi-ethnic state, with significant Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and other minorities; thus, I use 'Tajikistani' when I refer to civic identity, and 'Tajik' in the sense that someone identifies themselves as ethnically Tajik. There were many Uzbeks and people from a 'mixed' background among my interlocutors, and they themselves made a distinction between Tajiks (Taj. *Tajikho*; Rus. *Tadzhiki*) and Tajikistanis (Taj. *Tajikistanho*; Rus. *Tadzhikistantsy*). I do not discuss ethnicity in detail because, regardless of their ethnic identity, my interlocutors' experiences of migration to Russia are structured by their belonging to the Tajikistani state, rather than by their ethnicity.

5   See, for instance, Eshalieva (2022) and Cabar (2022).

6   All statistical data about migration and citizenship referenced in this book come from official data published on the website of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, unless stated otherwise. After 2022, this website became unavailable from abroad (it is still available from inside Russia), which is why I have not included URL links in the text.

7   These data are based on the number of permissive documents distributed among Tajikistani nationals in 2014, and thus only cover 'legal' labour migration. However, this gives an approximate idea of gender discrepancies.

8   Tajikistan is a country with a demographic 'youth bulge' (Roche 2014). The population of the country has grown by almost 5 million since 1990, and the median age is 21.8 years (Worldometer n.d.). The official unemployment rate in Tajikistan is only 10 per cent, but Malika Bahovadinova and Isaac Scarborough (2018) suggest 50–60 per cent as a more realistic estimate.

9   This quotation is from Malika Bahovadinova's conversation with her interlocutor (Bahovadinova and Scarborough 2018). Bahovadinova argues that this is an overstatement, and that the real figure might be closer to 40,000, but this does not change the overall argument. This also demonstrates how disjunctive statistical data on migration open up a space for playing with numbers – not only among journalists and politicians, but also among policymakers and bureaucrats.

10 For a more detailed discussion of different legal statuses available to migrants, see Chapter 5.

11 While a similar law passed in 2013 targeted 'rubber apartments', the new rules fought 'rubber offices'. It forbade employers from registering migrants on the territory of their organisations if they could not provide them with accommodation. It also gave landlords the right to 'un-register' migrants without any formal notification (see, for example, Ivashenko 2018).

12 Throughout this book, I provide approximate equivalents of Russian rubles and Tajik somoni in British pounds (GBP). Since the exchange rates fluctuated during the time of my fieldwork (and are still fluctuating), I will give approximate equivalents, as of January 2018.

13 Discourses about the 'demographic crisis' (*demograficheskii crizis*) in Russia have gained force since the early 2000s, when demographers pointed to the inevitability of the growing disjuncture between increasing mortality and decreasing fertility rates (for example, Denisenko 2012; Vishnesky and Bobylev 2009). According to the official prognosis by Rosstat (Federal Service for State Statistics) in 2019, in the worst case scenario, the population of Russia will decrease to 134.3 million people in 2036 (from 146.7 million in 2019), and the in-flow of migrants is unable to remedy the situation (Rosstat 2019). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the government has recently changed its official prognosis, stating that the increase in mortality rates will lead to a population decrease of more than 1.2 million by 2024 (RBK 2020). The situation has only got worse since the onset of Russia's invasion in Ukraine.

14 The full name of the programme is *Gosudarstvennaia programma po okazaniiu sodeistviia dobrovol'nomu pereseleniiu v Rossiiskuiu Federatsiiu sootechestvennikov, prozhivaiushchikh za*

rubezhom. The programme is supervised by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, who took over the Federal Migration Service after it had been dismantled in April 2016.

15 Citizenship in Russia was made revocable in 2017, on the basis of 'a lack of intention to take up one's lawful responsibilities as a citizen' or providing 'counterfeit documents or deliberately false information'. This vague wording already opened up a vast terrain for manipulation, and it potentially allows the Russian state to strip any naturalised citizen of their status.

16 Much of the scholarship on migration feeds into what Joel Robbins coined as 'suffering slot anthropology' (Robbins 2013). Such research aims either to expose the violence of border regimes or to 'give voice to the voiceless' (Rozakou 2019, 79). It tends to document migrants' journeys as full of suffering, exclusion and misery, while reducing their subjectivities to the experience of migration.

17 There is a well-established debate about the terminological uses of morality and ethics, with some scholars insisting that they should be analytically separated, while others make no such distinction (for a summary, see Fassin 2012). In this book, I use these terms interchangeably. For the purposes of the arguments that run through this book, I consider ethical/moral life in a broader sense as referring to 'those aspects of people's actions, as well as their sense of themselves and of other people (and sometimes entities such as gods or animals), that are oriented with reference to values and ends that are not in turn defined as the means to some further ends' (Keane 2016, 4).

18 For an impressive survey of literature addressing social change in Central Asia from the perspectives of traditionalism, modernity, Sovietness and (post)coloniality, see Abashin (2015a, 10–44).

19 She argued that '… by the mid-to late Soviet period, the USSR was not perceived by Central Asians themselves as a colonial endeavour. They were Soviets and they were modern people, even if these identities were built upon seeming contradictions – like an "atheist" Muslim' (McBrien 2009, S131).

20 In Russia, I spent time with Farhod's extended family, meeting his sister and her children's families. This allowed me to trace some tensions in transnational lives. However, I do not draw much on these materials in this book.

21 I find my experiences to be similar to other female researchers' work in the context of gender segregation in the region and beyond (Abu-Lughod 1986; Ibañez-Tirado 2013; Reeves 2014). Discussing her fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan, Madeleine Reeves (2014, 32–5) notes that since her dress, demeanour and manner of communication indexed not only her own honour, but also represented the collective honour of her host family, she decided to give up activities considered indecent for a young woman, such as spending time with border guards drinking beer and playing cards. Diana Ibañez-Tirado (2013, 58–62) describes similar experiences of living with a family in southern Tajikistan. Her ideas about meeting new people in the field by means of 'hanging around' provoked ongoing debates in her adoptive family, and eventually she let them determine her everyday mobility and social connections. Both, however, found that the quality of their work benefited from the deep, intimate relationships with their informants, which would not have been possible had they been more persistent in claiming their autonomy and mobility.

22 Jeanne Féaux de la Croix (2016, 41–4) discusses how she inhabited the role of *kelin* in Kyrgyzstan, and was taught to do domestic work properly, which helped her to establish herself as a 'real person anchored in relationships'. She also mentions that her decision to lie about her married status caused her anxiety about presenting an incomplete persona to her informants.

23 Sergei Abashin (2015a, 161–4, 261–3) describes teachers and medical workers in Soviet Central Asia as a distinct social group with a shared identity and practices, who enjoyed high social status, respect, and positions of power in emerging bureaucratic structures. As they embodied Soviet modernity, educated women working in schools could, in some cases, transgress local gender norms, and enact their 'Europeanness' through wearing 'European' dress, make-up and trendy haircuts, without risking their reputation.

24 *-khon* is an honorific suffix mostly used with Tajik female names. At first, my host family tried to call me by the Tajik name 'Lolakhon' (Taj. 'tulip'), but it did not stick, and I became Lenakhon – a form derived from my Russian name.

Interlude 1: Journeys

Yo'l azobi – go'r azobi
Travelling can inflict death-like suffering on you.

<div align="right">Uzbek saying</div>

Taking a flight is a typical option for those travelling from Tajikistan to Russia and vice versa. However, the range of airlines is limited to a few Russian companies and the Tajik monopolist Somon Air. This means that plane tickets can get extremely expensive, especially during the summer season when many migrant workers return home to spend a few months with their families. In recent years, people have started to take alternative cheaper routes via neighbouring countries – Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Travel through Uzbekistan became possible for those Tajikistanis who do not have a Russian passport after the Tajik–Uzbek border, which had remained shut since the late 1990s, officially opened in March 2018. Most of my interlocutors took a plane from St Petersburg to the city of Osh in the south of Kyrgyzstan, and then embarked on a five-hour taxi ride to the border with Tajikistan, located in the Batken region.[1] Once they had crossed the border on foot, they would take another taxi that would bring them to Isfara – the closest town – or directly to their destinations in the north of Tajikistan. I even met some people who travelled to Dushanbe this way, as the cost of flights from Russia to Dushanbe and Kulob were out of reach.

During my fieldwork in 2017–18, I travelled with my interlocutors or alone across the borders of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Russia. In my multiple travels, I established relationships of mutual trust with a few taxi drivers with the help of my interlocutors, and became a regular customer. Taxi drivers in the region were

a powerful source of up-to-date information about the frequent changes in mobility regimes, weather conditions and flights, while their crowded cars were vibrant hubs of interethnic and interregional sociality. They were also contingent hubs of mutual care, as people travelling together for long hours developed familiarity with each other's stories, and tried to look out for each other at border crossings and airports. Being part of such sociality, I almost never felt unsafe, even though I travelled alone.

Conversations with my co-travellers – coming from all walks of life, but many of them sharing experiences of having been migrant workers in Russia – alerted me to the ways in which local border regimes shape the mobility of differently positioned individuals, how they intersect with the Russian migration regime, and how certain documents become invested with value and imbued with affect. They also alerted me to the high costs of mobility that might seem effortless to an outsider in possession of a more privileged document. By taking complex, long and often physically uncomfortable journeys, my interlocutors frequently exposed themselves to the risks of bribe extortions, border officers' harassment and humiliation. Finally, my travel experiences revealed a fascinating diversity of ethnic identities, lifestyles, personal histories, social distinctions and gender displays coexisting in the region.

September 2017: travelling to the field

Sarvinoz and her family met me at St Petersburg's Pulkovo Airport, and immediately made fun of the three heavy suitcases that I was struggling to drag along. Sarvinoz told me, laughing, that I did not need to pack all my winter clothes, as there were plenty of informal delivery services we could use to ship them to Tajikistan. I was travelling to my field destination – a village in northern Tajikistan – via the city of Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan with Sarvinoz's 17-year-old daughter, Raikhon. She had visited her family in St Petersburg, and was now going back to attend school. Manuchekhr, Sarvinoz's husband, led us to the distant enclosed space in a corner of the airport – 'Look, here are only us, Muslims!' This was the space with counters used specifically for flights to Central Asian countries, and the whole corner was filled with travellers to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. There were a lot of women with young children travelling. All of them were dressed in jeans and jackets, and only a couple of women wore scarves. People were chatting, and helping each other with heavy bags. Many were clearly in a very good mood – they were going home.

Sarvinoz told me, 'Don't worry, everything will be arranged for you while you're on board'. She meant calling 'her' taxi driver and arranging a transfer from Osh to the Tajik border for me and Raikhon: 'You will pay 1,500 rubles each and give him the gifts I prepared [chocolate and a bottle of cognac], and everything will be all right'.

At the check-in, an overweight middle-aged Russian woman with dyed blond hair scrutinised me with her cynical blue eyes. I could not quite pin down her job there. She assisted passengers with all sorts of queries – from paying for overweight luggage to giving tips on their documents. Her tone was patronising: she addressed everyone by '*ty*', an informal pronoun for 'you' in Russian, bantering with men, and praising women for having 'the right documents' in what sounded to me almost like baby-talk. Seeing my three suitcases, she rolled her eyes, 'Oh my God, where are you going?' After learning that I was going to spend a year in Tajikistan, she threw in some unsolicited advice: 'Do not trust Tajiks, they are going to cheat you. I know, I spent my whole childhood there – my uncle was the head of the Ministry of Transport there. They are all married at 22, with two wives and 10 children. Am I right?' She looked at a Kyrgyz woman behind me in the queue. The woman did not understand what she wanted from her, but nodded, just in case. I said I did not have any romantic interest, I was conducting research. But she dismissed this: 'Aha, sure, you'll see, you'll be there for the whole year! So here is my advice to you – do not trust them.'

On board, I sat next to two young guys in military-style trousers. They spoke a mixture of Uzbek and Russian, addressing each other as *brat* (Rus. 'brother'). I opened my laptop and started typing my notes about the experiences I had just had at the airport. After half an hour, one of them finally asked me, smirking, 'Are you writing a book?' I was. These guys were also travelling to the north of Tajikistan, and we killed the rest of the time chatting about their lives in Russia as migrant workers. Unlike most of my middle-aged interlocutors, they were very critical of the Russian government and migration regime, and they told me that they did not trust official media, but only the BBC and Radio Liberty. They had experienced life in many Russian cities, from Yekaterinburg and Tyumen, to Sochi and St Petersburg – they went wherever they were offered a job. They were very curious if there were any opportunities for them to work in Europe. They had heard that the attitude to migrants there was better. I sighed. Shortly before landing, one of them told me in a hushed tone: 'Lena, be careful, don't tell everyone what you're doing here. Do everything through your connections and acquaintances. You never know what strangers are up to.' I felt like a spy.

As I stepped out of the aircraft, a wave of hot, dry air hit me in the face. I looked up and saw a low, dark, starry sky. While we were struggling with my suitcases, the guys had already found 'our' taxi driver. A short, well-built Kyrgyz guy, standing next to his Toyota minivan, was taking several phone calls from different phones, and talking to several people at the same time. We had to wait for about half an hour until his van filled with people. The journey took us around five hours. As we were making our way through the night, along mountainous roads, passengers were busy changing SIM cards, checking their phones, calling their loved ones and listening to music. At some point, we stopped to have a snack. I ate a banana, but I did not know how to dispose of the skin as there were no litter bins around. Seeing my confusion, Raikhon took it from me and threw it on the ground, saying, *'Privykai, u nas bardak'* (Rus. 'Get used to it, it's a mess here'). Everyone laughed.

February 2018: travelling to Russia

Before going to the field, my friend and I, both from the same PhD cohort, decided to celebrate Christmas in Thailand, and we booked our tickets to Bangkok: he from Nepal, I from Bishkek. Ahead of my long journey, one of my interlocutors introduced me to a taxi driver with the nickname 'Shurik' (from Russian Sasha, although his real name was different). Shurik lived on the Kyrgyz side of the border, and he was fluent in Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tajik and Russian.

After my trip to Thailand, I relied on Shurik every time I needed to travel across the Tajik–Kyrgyz border. I would just drop him a message via Viber – a popular smartphone messenger – and he or one of his brothers would meet me, either in Isfara or in Osh. This time, I was travelling to St Petersburg for a close friend's wedding. I took a crowded *marshrutka* to Isfara. In Isfara, I had to wait in the cold car while Shurik was recruiting other passengers.

My first co-traveller soon showed up. It was a local young Tajik woman, Adolat, with a pretty round face, tattooed eyebrows and dyed blonde hair. She wore jeans, and a long jacket with a funny line on the back that read 'Don't bother me'. It was her first time going to Russia, Yekaterinburg, and a crowd of relatives were accompanying her. She had a little daughter, around 4 years old, who was clinging to her. Her friend helped wrap her bag in cellulose tape, which is often used to protect bags and suitcases from damage and theft at airports. Adolat hugged her daughter tightly, and said goodbye to the rest of her relatives.

As they left, she was crying bitterly, and lamenting '*voi Khudo*' (Taj. 'oh God'). But very soon, her mood changed, and she playfully chatted with another co-traveller – a guy who was making his way via Yekaterinburg to Tyumen. They were chatting about their families, about life in Russia, and about the costs of documents in different regions. He showed her pictures of his kids on his phone. Other passengers were an older couple going to Osh to visit their relatives, and a young migrant man going to St Petersburg, but he was not very talkative. They were chatting in a mixture of Uzbek and Tajik, and laughing loudly, while the landscape outside and the weather was changing quickly. The rain turned into snow, and we stopped, as someone needed to use the toilet. I was enjoying the fluffy snowflakes, which I was seeing for the first time in a year and a half. The entire town was covered with snow, which was hanging on the branches of the pine trees as if in a fairy tale.

When we were ready to leave, the taxi driver asked us to change cars. The new car was very uncomfortable and crowded, but he reassured us that we needed it just to make it as far as the border. When we reached the border, we changed to another car, which took us five hundred metres to the next border, where we finally got settled into another one for the long journey to Osh.

The border was crowded this time. There were a lot of trucks passing, and people were lining up (Figure I.1). We waited for about half an hour, and started freezing. Angry people started screaming at the very

Figure I.1 Adolat at the Tajik–Kyrgyz border, Sughd Province, winter 2018.

young border guard, whose only task was to bear his gun with an air of seriousness, and open and close the gates for cars and people to pass. Every time they addressed him '*ei bacha'* (Taj. 'hey, boy'), he turned red. At last, he mumbled 'there's no internet connection', which made the whole crowd laugh and joke about poor border guards being unable to stream their favourite television series.

Finally, the gates opened, and we rushed inside. As we were approaching the counters together with Adolat, she saw my passport and exclaimed, 'Oh, you have the red one!', with a mixture of what I read as surprise and respect. The whole time we had chatted in Russian, but it had never occurred to her that I was a Russian citizen; perhaps she thought I was a local 'Central Asian Russian'. The border officer did not ask me anything, while he asked Adolat about the purpose of her travel to Russia. She smiled, and said she was going to work there, just like everyone. He reproached her paternally, 'Why are you going there to work? You are so young; you can find a job here.' As we passed, she mumbled sarcastically, 'Sure, there are jobs here, for people like him. But where are we supposed to find a job?'

Kyrgyz border guards spoke Russian with Tajik travellers and were rude, projecting the image that they did not care about people missing their flights. This time, I looked around and saw banners all over the place saying, 'Let's fight corruption together', with the offices and phone numbers you could call when facing an attempt to extort a bribe. One of the banners indicated that the border counters were installed with the help of the International Organization for Migration, and funded by the Japanese government under some programme enhancing mobility in the region.

Our flight from Osh was delayed until 4 a.m., so we were forced to spend the night in an empty airport. I found a free spot, and settled there, preparing myself for long hours of waiting. A woman with a little son and a teenage daughter, who wore a long dress and a hijab, sat next to me. She did not tell me her real name, but she mentioned her co-workers in Russia called her Gulia. As we hung around for quite a long time, I got to know her story. Gulia was an Uzbek from Osh. She was married off at the age of 16 to a guy 10 years older, but her husband had 'always given her freedom' – he even paid for her driving licence, and bought her a car. She was 36 now, and had four children. She was travelling with two of them to St Petersburg to visit her husband, having left the other two children with her mother-in-law. But her plans were not set in stone – her daughter mentioned that she wanted to get a Russian passport, enrol at a college in Russia and work there. Her father wanted to marry her off, but she wanted to study – she was very talented; she had even won the local

competition in the Russian language. Unlike her mother, she was 'covered' (Rus. *zakrytaia*), meaning that she wore hijab. She liked reading religious books: 'When I cannot find an answer in the Qur'an, I read even the Bible!' She asked me if I liked religious books too. Gulia shared her concerns about passing border controls in Russia, because of her daughter's hijab. They knew that 'they don't like "covered" women in Russia'.

Finally, check-in was announced. As we approached the border control counters, Gulia's daughter saw my red passport: 'Oh, I thought you were local!' Gulia and her kids went ahead of me. I could not hear what was going on, but it was clear that something had gone wrong. Gulia took out all the documents, and then started calling someone nervously. As I was passing controls, they took her to a small room behind the counters. A few minutes later, Gulia appeared from the room, with her eyes red from crying. She was trembling, and she asked me timidly if I had 1,000 rubles. I gave her the money. She mumbled something about her husband returning me the debt upon arrival. I kept stroking her shoulder, saying that everything was going to be fine. After that, she returned very fast, and we all proceeded to the security check together. Later, she explained that the border officers had picked upon the copy of the letter of attorney to travel with her children that her husband had provided:

> There was a woman, and she told me strictly, 'OK, you are not going anywhere.' I didn't know what to do, because I already spent 37,000 rubles for the tickets. And then she whispered to me, 'OK, I'll help you.' She took me to that room, there was a man sitting there who told me again that they cannot let us pass. Then he said, 'OK, give me 20,000 rubles.' My heart dropped. Where can we find so much money!? Then he said, 'OK, 10,000 then.' I started crying. He told me, 'Woman, don't cry here, go cry there.' My husband usually tells me the same thing, because he knows if I start crying, he will soften up sooner or later and let me have it my way. I explained that I already spent 37,000 and I am going to see my husband. Then he told me, 'Alright, then give me 2,000.' Then he saw you giving me money and said, 'Give me more!' I explained to him that I had to borrow the money from a stranger, but he didn't believe that a stranger would help me just like that.

It took Gulia a while to calm down after this incident. Her hands were still trembling for a few hours as I was trying to distract her with casual conversation. Should I have made a scene, and threatened the officials

with calling one of the numbers on the anti-corruption banner? Should I have waved my Russian passport and UK residence permit in front of their noses, and shamed them for the lack of rule of law in their country? Would any of this have benefited Gulia and her children, or would it just have made things worse?

In Russia, we went straight to the border control. I joined the shortest queue, but it turned out to be a very long wait. At some point, someone tried to jump the queue because he had a Russian passport. Other people immediately reacted: 'I also have a Russian passport'; 'Me too, so what?' As I was waiting, I heard parts of conversations between border officers and migrants. They were asking a number of typical questions, such as 'Where are you going to work?' Gulia told her daughter to say that she was coming to work, and we collectively decided that if they asked for details, she would say that she was going to work as a cook. Having passed the border controls, Gulia waved at me from the other side, smiling. Later, I caught up with her, and her husband returned to me 1,000 rubles with a common Central Asian gesture of gratitude – a small nod, hand placed on heart.

July 2018: a road trip from Russia to Tajikistan

In the evening before our trip to Tajikistan, Lailo, Farhod's youngest sister, and I were repacking our suitcases. Lailo said that she had not bought any chocolate because it would melt in the heat during our trip. Her words made me restless for the whole night. I was lying in bed trying to invent a way to save my gifts. Finally, I decided to wrap them in foil. Meanwhile, everyone had their own concerns – Lailo was stocking up on food for the road, while men were checking the car. I was travelling with Lailo, her husband and her three sons, from St Petersburg to Tajikistan, via Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. We assumed that it would take us between three and five days. Her husband and eldest son took turns at the wheel, and drove non-stop. We did not stop to sleep at hotels because they wanted to save money, and it was too dangerous to sleep in the car on the roadside. The whole journey took us four days. My legs swelled up after the first 24 hours.

St Petersburg – Moscow – Ryazan – Penza – Tolyatti – Samara – Orenburg – Shymkent – Tashkent – Khujand – home. The police stopped our car to check the documents five times, but each time they were unable to find anything to pick upon. Lailo's husband explained: 'They are looking for ignorant migrants who don't speak Russian and don't

know the law, so they offer money to the police themselves.' The last time we were stopped was near the border with Kazakhstan. The police officer quickly returned our passports, and rushed to stop the bus behind us, which was taking migrant workers to the border. Lailo's husband noted sarcastically, 'Of course, there's the whole bus with money!' The closer we approached to the border, the more cars we spotted that were loaded with different household items on top. Lailo explained that migrant workers from Uzbekistan were transporting 'all this cheap crap' to resell back home. As we drove alongside endless sunflower fields, the range of car number plates was becoming more diverse – Russian, Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Kazakh, and even Polish and German. Lailo's son said that it was Tajiks transporting cars from the European Union to sell in Tajikistan.

The first border crossing to Kazakhstan took us around half an hour. The border officers were mostly bored, and suffering from the heat. They did not show any interest in our documents; they just gave us stamps, and let us move on. We had been on the road for two days by that time. Our legs had swelled, and we were suffering from dehydration, and lack of proper food and rest. The whole family were taking pills for headaches, while the drivers drank energy drinks. We did not want to stop because, as rumour had it, the area around Shymkent – a city in the south of Kazakhstan – was notorious for local racketeers. Seeing flocks of coyotes did not add to our desire to take a break at the roadside. Lailo was daydreaming: 'The first thing I do when we arrive, I will take a shower! Yes, we firstly build a shower back home. We already bought all the materials for that. So much to do!'

When the sun started to rise, we had finally passed 'the dangerous area', and we stopped near Aral'sk. The landscape had completely changed, and we found ourselves in a salty desert, with hot wind blowing in our faces. We spotted some camels wandering around and chewing slowly on saksaul bushes, and we had good fun trying to take selfies with them (Figure I.2). As we kept going towards the border, I saw the contours of the famous Baikonur Cosmodrome at a distance – the spaceport from where Yuri Gagarin took his first spaceflight, and from where Russian spaceflights are still launched. Through the torrents of hot air, it looked like a mirage in the desert.

Around 10 p.m., we reached the border with Uzbekistan. It is hard to convey the lively messiness of that place in writing. There was an excess of all sorts of people and activities: traders carrying their heavy loads; smugglers helping them to jump the queue; people exchanging currency, with the whole truck packed with banknotes of Uzbek *som*; pickpockets; police officers; people selling food and cheap goods that

Figure I.2   Camels in the desert near Aral'sk, Kazakhstan, summer 2018.

they had just brought from the other side of the border; and many more. At first, this image looked like cosmic chaos, but as one spent more and more time there, one would see a small multi-sited microcosm organised according to its own rules. Three rows of cars filled with irritated people were waiting in front of the closed gate. There was only one border officer responsible for regulating the flow. He would open the gates, letting in a couple of cars, and then shut it down and disappear for another twenty minutes. A bunch of people were hanging around the gate, waiting for an opportunity to negotiate faster access.

As soon as we joined the line, a couple of young Kazakh women approached us, offering to 'speed up' the process for 2,000 Russian rubles. They were offering their services shamelessly and loudly, as if it were some official procedure. I heard Lailo invoking 'Muslimness', and using the presence of a 10-year-old kid in the car as an argument, but it did not work. She turned to me and said: 'Bloody hell, look how they make money! They do not have to work as hard as we do.' At some point, there was a fight – a bunch of men were yelling at each other masterfully, using all the intricacies of Russian obscene vocabulary. I decided to make myself useful, and I approached the border guard to ask him very gently how long we were supposed to wait. He was rude, and told me that I should have stayed at home if I was not prepared to wait. Lailo saw my anger, and she smiled: 'This is what migrants' life looks like, Lena. Write about it.'

The exit from the border facilities to the Uzbek side reminded me of a prison cell – an iron-barred cage separated people into two flows – incoming and outgoing. Although Lailo was trying to stay cheerful and cracked jokes, I could see that she had not expected this either. She kept saying: 'Our trip shocked me. I am not going anywhere anymore.

I will burn my documents.' In the morning, we reached the border with Tajikistan, and we passed it from the Uzbek side without any troubles. A very polite border officer who I remembered from my previous trips was stamping passports. He asked me if I had dual citizenship, and he scolded Lailo's youngest son for not being fluent in Tajik. As we tried to leave the customs area, we found out that their car was too old, and could not be taken into Tajikistan. President Rahmon had signed a law a month previously, and now all cars manufactured before 2005 were banned from entering the country for not having newer air filters. Lailo lamented, 'Why did we buy this stupid car if we cannot even drive it home?' We dropped the car, and took a taxi home. In a few days, Lailo's son paid a bribe and collected the car. Lailo said to me: 'You see, it is not like that in Russia. Only here you can fix everything with money.'

Note

1 The recent series of violent conflicts at the Tajik–Kyrgyz border have affected the mobility of Tajikistanis. The border is open for both Tajik and Kyrgyz citizens; however, I was told that people prefer to travel to Russia via Tashkent rather than Osh, as they are afraid of potential provocations and humiliation.

1
The mobile place

> Our *poselok* (Rus. 'settlement') used to be different. It was so beautiful, like a true Russian village (Rus. *nastoiashchaia russkaia derevnia*) – gardens, blossoming fruit trees right along the road; it was so good to walk around in the evening! We went to the cinema, to dance at the club; we sang different songs to entertain our elders. Now they have fenced everything off and everyone is just sitting at home.

I was walking through the village with Aliia Khamidovna, a well-known and respected teacher of Russian at the local school with more than thirty years of experience, in whose household I was temporarily based. An ethnic Tatar, she confessed that she knew only a few words of her mother tongue, while, since childhood, Russian had always been her first language of communication. Russian was the language spoken in her household, even though her husband was ethnically Uzbek; proficiency in Russian was one of the main criteria she looked for when choosing her two *kelin* ('daughter-in-law'). Giving me a small tour around the village, she introduced me to the local life of Mehnat[1] – an 'urban-type settlement' (Rus. *poselok gorodskogo tipa*) in the Sughd region of Tajikistan, situated only a few kilometres from the present-day border with Uzbekistan. It was a dynamic, rapidly growing place – new households were spreading far beyond the boundaries imagined by the Soviet planners in the 1950s – and one of the three streets, named after Yuri Gagarin, the Soviet man who was the first human in outer space, was expanding uncontrollably in various directions. As she pointed out the local sights, I could not shake the feeling that Aliia Khamidovna was narrating a happy internationalist history of the place, rather than its immediate present.

As the sweltering temperature dropped in the evening and we could enjoy a relaxed walk, we were making our way towards one of the shops located by the main road, which was not yet there when I had visited Mehnat last time, in 2015. As we were moving through the rows of neat streets, with white-walled houses tucked next to each other, the cars were racing alongside, rising swarms of dust and honking at careless pedestrians. Occasionally, some of them slowed down, the drivers thrust out their heads, greeted Aliia Khamidovna and curiously stared at me, the new face in this place. As I wore a traditional Tajik dress, I could see it was difficult for them to locate me in ethnic terms at first sight.

Aliia Khamidovna was one of the last inhabitants to maintain the practice of evening walks, but she had given up recently, because the increasing traffic made her feel constantly stressed about her grandchildren mischievously playing in the street, happily inattentive. Although her family owned two cars, she sighed: 'There is a car in every family nowadays. Some families even have three cars! *Eto vse Rossiia!*' (It's all [because of] Russia). I could not decipher whether the feeling behind this sigh was nostalgia for the place and the times when there were no cars and there was plenty of space for walking, or the pervasive sense of gratitude for contemporary Russia, a provider of work for local men and women, money for their families, and aspirations for young people. This feeling of merging present and past persisted as Aliia Khamidovna mentioned *kottedzhy* (Rus. 'cottages'). I did not understand at first what she meant: either the housing built to accommodate the many 'Russian' architects, engineers and technicians who came from all over the USSR to take part in an ambitious project for the construction of a major manufacturing industry; or newer houses, which were 'Russian' in the sense that they were built from migrants' money, and which often combined architectural techniques that were atypical for traditional Central Asian houses (for example, several storeys, big windows and balconies) with traditional ornamentation. Sometimes one became transformed into another, quite literally in the case of one 'cottage' by the central road that was allocated to Russian engineers in Soviet times, and that was now inhabited by their daughter, who had married a Tajik man. Although they were Russian citizens, they both led a transnational way of life, returning every summer and renovating their house in the hope of retiring there one day.

We were approaching the former symbolic heart of the village: the remains of the factory occupying a huge territory of more than 10 hectares, and the House of Culture (Rus. *dom kul'tury*; Taj. *qasri farhang*) behind it (Figures 1.1 and 1.2).[2] The modernist concrete building was

Figure 1.1   The House of Culture, Mehnat, autumn 2018.

Figure 1.2   The mosaic, Mehnat, autumn 2018.

decorated with a colourful mosaic depicting a young man and woman dressed in traditional outfits and dancing a traditional dance, with a second man playing the *doira* (a traditional drum). There was a fountain in front of the building and, although it was out of order and could not provide some much-desired coolness on a hot day, there was a group of women gathered near it to share the latest gossip while their children were running around and playing. We greeted them and walked further, and Aliia Khamidovna sighed again:

Everyone had some work in the Soviet times (Rus. *v sovetskoe vremia u vsekh byla rabota*). The last director of the factory was a very intelligent man. He studied in Russia and knew very well what people needed. He built two kindergartens, the House of Culture, the school. There was a big stadium in front of our house, he also built a good public swimming pool.[3] Then his brother bought everything out, and sold it out, piece by piece!

Aliia Khamidovna hinted at the process of rapid privatisation after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which notoriously left a few people owning 'everything'. The new 'owner of everything' in the village, whom people ironically called *nash oligarkh* (Rus. 'our oligarch'), tried to modernise the factory and relaunch the production of oil – at least on a smaller scale – but failed. A line of dilapidated factory buildings still dominated the village landscape: it was the first thing one saw approaching the village from the main road leading to the border crossing point with neighbouring Uzbekistan. Yet, in recent years, the factory land had been divided into plots, and gradually sold off to families establishing their new households, many of them coming from the neighbouring villages.

New, extravagant two-storey houses with golden glitter designs were rising in front of the factory (Figure 1.3). 'Have you already seen our *osobniaki* (Rus. 'mansions')?', Aliia Khamidovna asked proudly. 'These houses are built by our migrants!' Probing the ground, I exclaimed, 'It

Figure 1.3   A migrant 'mansion' next to the factory, Mehnat, summer 2018.

can't be that they are all migrants' houses!' Aliia Khamidovna threw me a dismissive look and repeated, 'All of them.' Then she started to point at each house, indicating how many people from each household were in Russia. Very often it was more than one. As she did so, she also mentioned their occupation, if it was something considered unusual for a migrant's career: 'This one has his own business', 'His children go to a university there', or 'They are Russian citizens'. Her own family was not an exception. Having started with a period of seasonal work in the Russian city of Ufa, Aliia Khamidovna's oldest son now had a Russian passport and lived in Moscow with his wife and three children. Her youngest son had also tried his luck in Russia, but had returned to Tajikistan, while her son-in-law was leaving soon for seasonal work in St Petersburg to earn money for his sister's upcoming wedding.

Migration had clearly reshaped the collective outlook of the village. New businesses seemed constantly to be appearing, despite people's complaints about heavy taxation and omnipresent corruption. Small family grocery shops, a construction materials outlet packed with goods advertised as '*rossiiskie*' (Russian),[4] a petrol station, a car service, and a carwash had appeared in the village since my last visit in 2015. In addition, the fancy new *tūikhona* (Taj. 'wedding hall') (Figure 1.4)

Figure 1.4   The new *tūikhona* (wedding hall), Mehnat, spring 2018.

Figure 1.5 A mosaic on the factory wall, Mehnat, spring 2018.

had been built right in front of the entrance to the factory, which was decorated with a modernist mosaic (Figure 1.5) praising the scientific and industrial achievements of the Soviets, which added to the sense of eclecticism of the place.

The scope and salience of transnational migration from Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries to Russia that started in the 1990s has fascinated researchers' imaginations for almost three decades. From the early 2000s, people in rural Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have been discussing migration with researchers, pointing to the fact that there were hardly any families in their villages that had not been influenced by it (Rahmonova-Schwarz 2012; Reeves 2017a). Undoubtedly, one got the impression that people in Mehnat experienced migration as a powerful force and an inevitable fact of life when they said, like one of the administration's workers, 'migration is our reality, everyone has someone in Russia, otherwise it's impossible to survive here'. In fact, for her, the very possibility of holding a respectable position in the administration was maintained by her husband working in Russia. With labour migration becoming a sustaining element of people's livelihoods in rural Tajikistan, Russia emerged as a place to turn to when one needed to 'find money' (Taj. *pul ëftan*), both in case of an emergency (such as a family member's sudden illness or death) and for long-term family projects – getting married and other life-cycle rituals, building a house, buying a car, and paying for children's education (Aitieva 2015; Ilkhamov 2013; Reeves 2012).

The vital importance of this development was reflected in the use of Russia as a temporal marker: when talking about the period of economic and social turmoil following the dissolution of the USSR, which was marked by a lack of opportunities for 'normal life', people usually referred to the times 'before Russia' (Taj. *pesh az Rossiia*) – 'there was no Russia

back then' (Rus. *Rossii togda eshe ne bylo*). But a simple reference to people's testimonies about the economic benefits of this migration does not shed light on how going to Russia was implicated in the minutiae of daily life, and in the multiplicity of judgements that people made about themselves and others, and their livelihoods. In this chapter, I start to unpack what people mean when they say, *eto vse Rossiia* (Rus. 'this is all [because of] Russia') as a fact of life, as a declaration of gratitude – but also as an expression of deep concern feeding on the moral ambivalence of experiences and the effects of migration.

Place as a constellation of mobile trajectories

Aliia Khamidovna's walking tour through the streets of Mehnat resonates strikingly with the accounts of migration elsewhere: the luxurious multistorey houses built from migrants' money in the Fuzhou countryside, China (Chu 2010), the mosques in the small Moroccan town, the construction of which was supported by migrants residing in Europe (Elliot 2021), the dramatic rise in the number of cars, a frequent investment of migrants' money in Uzbekistan (Abashin 2021), to name a few. These accounts highlight alterations in the physical landscape, with migrants' houses standing out, the fact that these changes are coming into being through many absences, and the fact that social life has been profoundly reconstituted by migration. Material manifestations of migration stand for subtler dimensions of its pervasiveness: migration has come to constantly preoccupy people's minds, becoming a constitutive feature of what Elliot (2021) calls 'imagination of life' in the context of Morocco. As in Morocco, in rural Tajikistan, migration was everywhere – in the material outlook of villages and towns, architectural styles, car number plates, soundscapes, marital choices and conjugal relationships, ritual economies, decisions about education and language choices, and gender and generational hierarchies. Russia had found its way into people's lives, not simply as a destination for work and a source of remittances, but as a constitutive element of their projects, dreams and imaginaries of the good life.

These imaginaries were revealed in the profound transformation the place had undergone, which defined the material outlook of the place and a certain kind of aesthetics in Mehnat. And yet, the kind of transformation that I discuss in this book did not begin with the onset of mass labour migration to Russian cities in the 1990s. The very emergence of Mehnat as a material place on the map was intimately linked with

the Soviet modernisation project, which not only transformed people's livelihoods and material environments, but also 'produced people who believed they were modern' (McBrien 2009, 131). These transformations became possible through the large-scale movements of people and things that the Soviet Union induced: both through its deliberate politics of mobility and emplacement, and as sometimes emerged as its unintended outcomes (Siegelbaum and Moch 2014). In this chapter, I provide a portrait of a distinctly transnational and translocal 'mobile' place, whose 'intense particularity' (Feld and Basso 1996, 11) is constituted by its past and present – obviously unequal – relationship with Russia.

To avoid a statist account of place as simply a mute background to my study, I approach it through highlighting the buzzing threads of mobility, past and present, which, thrown together, define the unique sense of place. The scholarly imagination and media accounts often portray Central Asia focusing on the processes of demodernisation, de-urbanisation and decay, and highlighting the ruptures and discontinuities. These often 'comparative and moralising' accounts aim to (re)evaluate the Soviet past, rather than reflecting on how life is being reconstituted on these ruins (Féaux de la Croix 2016, 176–8). In other words, they are mostly concerned with the 'unmaking of Soviet life' (Humphrey 2002), rather than the making of a new kind of life, which evades being labelled as post-socialist or post-Soviet (Ibañez-Tirado 2015).[5] Approaching the place as being constituted by different threads of mobilities, I provide an account of a 'mobile place' which is not defined primarily by stasis, waiting and absences, but by its bustling everyday sociality. And, as such, this is not an attempt to flag up yet another 'impact' of migration in remittance-dependent Tajikistan, but an account of a place whose material and social outlook is coming into being through and in past and present movements.

In this respect, I found Doreen Massey's (1994; 2005) dynamic approach to place, which considers place as processual, open, multiple and relational, to be a suitable framework for my analysis tying together place, history, and past and present mobilities. Critiquing both the language of the timeless pre-given character of place, and the language of 'flows' in social analysis and the political imagination, she argues that movement is constitutive of place, that place is always 'under construction', and also moving. The '"place-ness" of particular places emerges from the intersection of overlapping human and non-human trajectories' (Reeves 2011a, 309). Each of these trajectories has its own temporalities, but it is not the cumulative 'internalised' history of movement but 'an ever-shifting constellation of trajectories' – the quality Massey calls

'throwntogetherness' – that defines the unique constitution of place (Massey 2005, 151). This approach allows enough flexibility to hold together several important considerations. First, it demonstrates the salience of history for understanding the complexity of present-day lives by bringing sedimented histories of movement into the consideration of place-making. The history I address in this chapter is not in terms of a linear chronology of movements, but a lived history of multilayered overlapping mobilities. This is the history which is constantly being invoked, referenced and reflected upon by ordinary people 'on the ground'.[6] Second, a focus on both human and non-human trajectories allows me to attend to the movement of material things, languages and ideas as important elements of the complexity of the place. As they are moving, they become invested with certain meanings, and trigger particular responses. Third, the recognition of these mobilities as differentiated, constituted by, and constitutive of, 'power geometries' (Massey 1994) is crucial for an understanding of places as contested and emerging through negotiation. Past and present differentiated mobilities are differently evaluated, invested with meaning, and form a morally contested terrain in Mehnat. Finally, an acknowledgement that places have 'multiple identities' opens up a methodological perspective that enables the researcher to include a multiplicity of lived experiences of movement and emplacement in an account of the same place. Excluding the expectations of coherence and univocality, such an approach sits well with the inevitable partiality of people's perspectives (the ethnographer's included) on their place (Candea 2007).

The making of a modern place

Mehnat is located in the southwest of the Fergana Valley in the north of Tajikistan, and is a part of a local administrative unit (*jamoat*) comprising five more settlements of different statuses.[7] In terms of population, this is an average-sized *jamoat*, inhabited by around 14,000 people, but constantly growing despite mass labour migration. The main urban centre of the district is a town with around 55,000 inhabitants. The region borders Uzbekistan, and one of the *jamoat*'s villages bumps into the border crossing point, which remained closed for years from the late 1990s, before its official 'opening' on 1 March 2018 (Figures 1.6 and 1.7). The population of the region is highly mixed: the Fergana Valley has been historically populated by Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz, and a number of smaller ethnic groups displaced during Soviet times, who had dense

Figure 1.6 At the border opening event: preparing to welcome Uzbek guests, Sughd Province, spring 2018.

Figure 1.7 The mayor of the region's town praying with the elders, Sughd Province, spring 2018.

economic and social connections, and who depended on each other in many ways (Abashin 2004). The process of border delimitation along ethnic lines in 1924–36 aimed at overcoming 'a perceived excess of social-spatial complexity', and resulted in the crystallisation of new national identities, and the emergence of a number of enclaves and exclaves (Haugen 2003; Reeves 2014, 67). After Independence, the internal borders between fellow republics were converted into highly securitised international boundaries, with a system of visa controls and customs regulations to limit cross-border movements of people and goods. This complicated travel immensely and disturbed local ways of life: crossing the border, even for short-term family visits, came to be associated with high expenses, uncertainty and humiliation (Reeves 2007).

While Tajikistan has an Uzbek minority of 15–25 per cent, and Uzbek identity was salient in the region under study, the ethnonational Tajikistani state excludes ethnic minorities from access to resources and political power, and inhibits their social mobility (Fumagalli 2007; Hierman 2015). In Mehnat, Uzbek and Tajik were the main languages of communication, and many people were fluent in Russian. However, as one proceeded from the borderland villages, mostly dominated by Uzbek speakers, towards the town (which is just eight kilometres away), the Uzbek population was gradually replaced by Tajiks, with the Tajik language constituting the majority of the town's linguistic landscape. It is a densely populated area, and the almost complete lack of physical boundaries between different villages was compensated for by the generous construction of symbolic boundaries, and every local was highly experienced in this exercise.

Different kinds of settlements were differently positioned on the scale of 'modernity': highly 'modern' cities and towns were followed by less developed 'urban-type settlements' (*poselok gorodskogo tipa*), with villages (*qishloq*) being on the 'backward' end of this continuum. However, the physical markers of this scale were no longer self-evident, and where the outsider saw endless rows of *mahalla* walls painted white, the insider's gaze unhesitatingly distinguished between the 'true *qishloq*' and the 'urban-type settlement'.[8] Many of these evaluations proved to be based not so much on the current material environments, but instead fed on the late Soviet past. Sometimes it seemed to me that the ruins of Soviet infrastructure contributed to the perception by my interlocutors that a place was more 'civilised' than other places.

The landscape of northern Tajikistan was dramatically reshaped by the Soviet modernisation project, at the heart of which was an attempt to develop its 'backward semi-colonial peripheries' (Kalinovsky 2018, 3).

Figure 1.8 At the cotton gin factory, Sughd Province, autumn 2017.

The new industries in the region revolved around cotton farming (Figure 1.8), and agricultural production was reorganised into the system of collective farms (*kolkhoz*) (Hofman 2019; Zanca 2011). In the 1950s, when Central Asia was made a priority in terms of development, and a range of developmental projects were underway, the *jamoat* received a few manufacturing industries, paired with the appropriate material and social infrastructure. Along with other industries in the town (a clothing factory, a canning factory, a milk factory, a car parts factory and a car park were among those nostalgically listed by locals), these industries soon became the main providers of work and welfare for a large part of the local population. The importance of this industrial development was cemented in the use of local toponyms – people still referred to their villages by the names of the associated industries, although those places were renamed several times and now had official, strictly Tajik, names.

The implementation of such an ambitious project dictated the need to mobilise human resources with different kinds of expertise from all 15 Soviet Republics. Since the Russian language functioned as a lingua franca among different ethnic groups, Germans, Ukrainians, Koreans, Tatars and other ethnic groups merged in the collective memory of the locals into the vast category of 'Russians' (*russkie*) or 'Europeans'

(*evropeitsy*). As in other parts of Central Asia, many of the newcomers to Mehnat were qualified specialists and young graduates from different parts of the Soviet Union – engineers, nurses and doctors (Peyrouse 2013). 'Russians' began the construction of the factory in Mehnat in 1950, and it was finished in 1956; the new place that grew out of this infrastructural project was assigned the status of an 'urban-type settlement' and named Mehnat (Taj. *'labour'*), after the idea of culturally and ethnically diverse socialist labour.[9]

The construction of such an industry was not a unique phenomenon – there were other similar places that came into being through specific developmental projects, such as the Pamir Highway and the Nurek Dam (Bahovadinova 2018; Baialieva and Roberts 2021; Kalinovsky 2018; Mostowlansky 2017). The scope of this endeavour partly explains people's imagination of Mehnat as a place of modernity. On the brink of the USSR's dissolution, and in the years following it, the factory was working at full capacity. According to the official narrative, in 1996 (40 years after its official launch) the factory, which had grown and developed the side-production of soap, and had become involved in livestock breeding, provided employment for 2,068 people.[10] Providing work for the majority of the adult population of Mehnat and nearby villages, the factory was highly involved in various local welfare projects, and it reshaped the social and cultural landscape of the place. As a result, apart from 780 family houses in the settlement, there was a four-storey block of apartments, a House of Culture, a library, a comprehensive school, a kindergarten, a hospital, public baths, a tea house, a bakery and a shop.

Becoming mobile

One day, Aliia Khamidovna recalled the feeling of surprise and pride that she experienced when one of her students brought a piece of soap from her school trip to (at that time) Soviet Moscow. It turned out that the soap was produced in their village factory and shipped all the way to Moscow for sale, but Aliia Khamidovna was not aware of this until her student saw it on display in a Moscow kiosk by chance. The fact that her students could unproblematically go on trips to Moscow, and the discovery that her village was already connected to it by supplying goods – things that were no longer possible in 2017 – triggered both pride and a feeling of mourning for the lost potentiality of mobility that entailed such connectivity.

In her ethnography of the social life of borders in the southern Fergana Valley, Madeleine Reeves (2014) has explored the profound transformations in 'lived distance' in sites constituted by the spatialising Soviet state, including planned villages and international mining towns. These 'centres in the periphery' were created through a specific kind of Moscow provisioning (*moskovskoe obespechenie*), opening access to unique quality goods and nurturing a connection with the 'centre' (Reeves 2014, 110–18; Mostowlansky 2017, 36–50; Saxer 2019). Apart from the material infrastructure, this connection manifested in a certain type of 'upbringing', which implied fluency in the Russian language and culture, as well as a 'commitment to internationalism'. Although Mehnat never had an abundance of goods sent directly from Moscow, its commitment to internationalism and its affective connections with other parts of the Soviet Union were effectively sustained through multiple trajectories of people and things.

Mandatory Soviet military service was an important trajectory for mobility, and a source of multiple encounters with cultural difference (see Behzadi 2019; Mostowlansky 2017, 19–20). Many of my male interlocutors recalled that experience as emancipatory and transformative: a period spent in the distant corners and big cities of the Soviet Union often translated into new skills, knowledge of Russian, and male friendships. Gulomboy Amirkhanovich, a former school headmaster, was born in 1969. His Russian mother, who was assigned to teach in Uzbekistan upon her graduation from a pedagogical college in Tatarstan, met his Uzbek father in a small Uzbekistani town on the other side of the border. Together, they moved to the emerging Mehnat, where his father started to work at the factory. After graduation, Gulomboy applied to the Moscow State University, but failed the entrance exams and was conscripted into the military. There, he learned to drive, and he was sent to the Kamchatka Peninsula in the Russian Far East for two years. He recalled his first impressions of the famous natural beauty spots with sparkling eyes: 'I saw the Kliuchevskaia Sopka, I saw the Shiveluch volcano, I saw the ocean! Where would I see the ocean here?' According to him, this experience connected him to people to whom he already felt similar due to his special upbringing:

> I have only good impressions! Because I went to the Russian class and to Russian kindergarten, no one could tell I was from Central Asia![11] I had friends from Moscow, from Ukraine, many people from Donetsk. When they show [on the news] what's going on in Ukraine now, it upsets me so much![12]

Gulomboy's internationalist experiences materialised in the curious trajectories of things he sent to Mehnat, and to their afterlives back home: 'There was so much fish, red fish [salmon], there! They pickled it, and I sent parcels with jars of fish and caviar home. When I came home, there were ten jars of it. No one knew here what caviar was – they opened one jar and fried it! [laughing].' But his mobility did not end there. After his return, he entered the Tajik National University in the capital, Dushanbe. His Russian caviar helped him sustain himself through 'hungry student years' (Rus. *golodnye studencheskie gody*) at the beginning of the Civil War: 'It was a very tough time! I took those jars to Dushanbe, and gradually sold them. That caviar helped me to make it through student life. Imagine how much a litre jar of caviar costs!'

In his work on modernity in the Tajikistani Pamir region, Till Mostowlansky (2017, 48) points to the connection between the emergence of specific forms of belonging and mobility, when 'becoming modern' became tied to particular migration events. However, it is not only the events of movement for work, education, leisure and military service that contributed to the unique identity of Mehnat as a 'civilised' place. The very potentiality of such mobility formed a certain kind of mobile imaginary that connected Mehnat to the broader project of socialist modernity. Foregrounding the relationality of place, Doreen Massey has argued that place is never completed, as there are always 'connections yet to be made, juxtapositions yet to flower into interaction, or not, potential links which may never be established' (Massey 2005, 107). Some such connections defining the dynamics of Mehnat as a specific place came to be materialised in the form of Russian specialists coming to help reshape the local landscape and then leaving in the 1990s, Tajikistani men sent all over the Soviet Union, Tajikistani youth going to Moscow, Dushanbe and Tashkent for study or tourism, and soap and caviar moving to and from Mehnat. Other connections sustaining the continuity of the place's identity as modern in the present materialised through relatively recent trajectories of movement to Russian cities. Stimulated by the ruptures of post-Soviet 'demodernisation', this movement became a normalised part of everyday life in Mehnat – the process I explore in great detail throughout this book.

Unmaking and remaking of the modern place

'It turned out we have already lived our best times in the 1970–80s', sighed Sirojiddin, a man in his early 50s who had served in the Soviet

army, had been employed at the local factory, and had then worked in Russia for almost ten years. 'Everything back then was very good. There were a lot of industries here. Everyone had work. We couldn't even imagine unemployment.'

This same narrative locating the good life in the past was repeated to me on numerous occasions by very different people. While this could be framed as a nostalgic practice of the last Soviet generation manifest in the 'longing for the very real humane values, ethics, friendships, and creative possibilities that the reality of socialism afforded' (Yurchak 2005, 8), recent historical accounts show that in Tajikistan, such claims go beyond 'ethical and aesthetic' domains of life in the late Soviet period, and have some concrete material grounds. Exploring how Tajikistanis experienced the collapse of the USSR, Isaac Scarborough (2023b) has shown that prior to perestroika, Tajikistan's economy was rapidly growing and providing a higher standard of living for the population. This resulted in a sense of 'social satisfaction and optimism' – a feeling that was shared across various regions and social groups. The fact that Tajikistan's development came at a very high cost and yet it remained the poorest republic in the USSR[13] did not cancel the experiential intensity and growing expectations of stable improvement. People made temporal rather than geographic comparisons: instead of comparing their standard of living to other Soviet republics, they saw it in contrast to Tajikistan's own past. As Scarborough notes:

> Today, moreover, numerous Tajikistanis who came of age in the late 1970s and early 1980s recall the period as one of expanding opportunities. Their homes in outlying towns and villages were modernizing, while they were able to study in Dushanbe or Moscow and receive job placements in the republic's hospitals, schools, and many government agencies. (Scarborough 2023b, 20)

Since the post-socialist restructuring did not lead to the promised 'better life', but instead aggravated old, and created new, deep inequalities, many Tajikistanis found themselves in the state of multidimensional poverty (Gevorkyan and Assa, 2021). For Sirojiddin, whose youth corresponded with the period of shared expectation of life getting better, it resulted in unemployment, economic hardship and recurrent labour migration to Russia. Against this backdrop, the temporal comparison with the late Soviet Union was especially poignant.

Dramatic events 'flatten' people's experience and create a mismatch between historical and experiential time, with some events lumped

together and perceived as lasting longer than was actually the case. The aftershocks of perestroika and violence still reverberate in the everyday lives of people, as the contradictions of decades-long economic reorganisation have never been fully resolved (Scarborough 2023a). Turning to the everyday lives of people located far away from the epicentre of the violence of the Civil War, and taking my interlocutors' claims for better material and social well-being in the late Soviet period seriously, in this section, I explore how my interlocutors experienced and narrated the gradual unmaking of the good life through the material transformations of place, cessation of past mobilities and connections, and changing social dynamics of place.

While talking about the unmaking of the good life, residents of Mehnat primarily drew on the absences of work, infrastructure and leisure, which were apparently leading to the absence of people, who were leaving to seek employment in Russian cities. The narrowing sense of locality was indexed in terms of stasis, emplacement, lack of progress, and sometimes a sense of complete standstill. Marhabo's emotional outburst – 'there is nothing here!' (see Introduction) – was a constant refrain that I heard from men and women whose transnational families were trying to navigate the shifting dimensions of the good life. This nothingness stood for different things in different contexts: from work, cash, certain goods, men to marry, gas, water, and infrastructure for family leisure, to avenues for social mobility and certain life prospects, such as decent education, and opportunities for professional and personal growth. An ironic expression, *injo korkhona nest', faqat tūikhona'* (Taj. 'there're no industries here, only wedding halls'), wittily summed up the transnational spatial division of labour and leisure that had emerged in the past few decades after Independence. One of my interlocutors once told me, laughing, that these days only new building supplies stores and wedding showrooms were mushrooming, because migrants needed to spend their money somewhere.

The factory, which used to work three shifts and never stopped – many people stressed this permanence of movement – now stood still, losing its territories to new private households (Figure 1.9). The railway station, which used to be very busy, and which was considered to be a prestigious, well-paid place to work that provided free tickets to any location in the Soviet Union for employees' families once a year, now had trains passing only a couple of times a month. The free circulation of goods and people across the border with Uzbekistan dramatically decreased at first, and then almost stopped with the border closure in the early 2000s. Although there were still old gas pipes all over the village,

gas had stopped being delivered long ago. Similarly, apartment blocks, which were once considered cutting-edge housing with all amenities, now stood half empty, inhabited by those unable to afford their own houses (Figure 1.10).

Figure 1.9   The factory in Mehnat. Its land was gradually sold for new houses and businesses; inside, the old factory buildings and machinery were still standing, summer 2018.

Figure 1.10   The Soviet apartment block and emerging *havlī* (traditional houses) around it, Mehnat, summer 2018.

The remains of decaying infrastructure changed the spatial and social appearance of many cities, towns and urban-type settlements. The lack of basic amenities such as electricity, gas, access to water supply, and a sewage system pushed many people from 'modern' apartment blocks to *havlī* – traditional mud-brick houses, comprised of a number of residential and agricultural buildings arranged around a courtyard, usually inhabited by several generations and/or nuclear family units (Ibañez-Tirado 2015). People in the *poselok* pointed to the abandoned three-storey block of apartments close to the school, narrating their frustrated expectations of modernity promoted by the Soviet state.[14] Without basic amenities provided by the state, this housing was almost uninhabitable, and was thus impossible to sell. Residents had to find various creative ways to arrange *sharoit* (Taj. 'living conditions') for themselves, if they had no option to build their own house, such as installing private water tanks in the attics, connected to their apartments. Perceived as modern by the generation whose subjecthood was formed under late socialism, and who were deeply involved in Soviet developmental projects, this housing no longer addressed the needs of becoming a proper person. The formation of proper persons was imagined as being inseparable from the domestic space of the *havlī*, which constitutes a smaller *mahalla*'s unit, the space of *mahalla* functioning as a form of moral community (Liu 2012). For instance, although my main interlocutor's sister's family had a fully furnished apartment in a multistorey Soviet-era house, when they were marrying off their sons, they organised a wedding celebration and accommodated the new *kelin*[15] in their relative's *havlī* at first. In addition to pragmatic reasons (a lack of space in the apartment), they were guided by the need to adhere to tradition, whereby *kelin* must serve (*khizmat kardan*) the husband's kin, taking over household chores. The space of the *havlī* was perfectly suited for this purpose, accommodating those whom she must serve, and providing a suitable amount of work that she must do before leaving for Russia with her husband, soon after the wedding.

Narratives about decay shaped the process of reimagining what type of personhood and what kind of life were possible vis-à-vis the changing dynamics of place. In these narratives, the perceived transformation of physical space seemed to be synonymous with changes in social practices. If Mehnat had previously been inhabited by cosmopolitan and outward-looking mobile people, the process of building walls around *havlī* stood for traditionalisation. Pointing to the division and fencing off of village space, Aliia Khamidovna talked about the conversion of a once 'modern' Russified place into a proper *mahalla* with specific

social practices, which for her signalled a backlash and a departure from modernity. One day, I was getting ready to attend a wedding, and was putting on some make-up. Trying to avoid looking inappropriate, I was constantly asking Aliia Khamidovna if something was good for a particular occasion or not. She said that young unmarried girls dressed up for weddings too much, because this was the only place where they could be spotted by their prospective matches. Even if a man were not physically present, there was still a big chance he would watch one of the DVD recordings of the occasion, which were constantly circulated between Tajikistan and Russia:

> Our youth has nowhere to go now apart from these weddings. How else can they spot a potential match? There used to be a disco every Saturday in the House of Culture before. We all danced there – both girls and boys, without any separation. Guys from other villages who worked at the factory also came. We regularly went to the cinema; there were different events in the House of Culture. Now everyone sits at home. I don't even teach my students to dance the waltz anymore! They want to learn it, but I forbid them because they would dance close to each other, touch each other. And in the future, her husband will reproach her for dancing with another guy embracing her! (Aliia Khamidovna)

For Aliia, the disappearance of Soviet leisure practices marked an ethnic and gendered dimension of spatial transformation. Cinemas providing venues for the mixed-gender socialising of 'cultured' individuals were replaced by *tūikhona*, spaces for performing and embodying traditional Tajik values of conviviality, hospitality, and the performance of wealth and family honour tied to proper gender displays (see Chapter 3). This transformation took place in the context of larger political and cultural shifts: after the dissolution of the USSR, the new nationalising state adopted the rhetoric of a 'return to tradition', backing it up with the official conservative tradition of Hanafi-Sunni Islam, which had been interrupted by Soviet rule. Promoting the idea of complementary gender roles in society and embedding femininity in motherhood, the state fixed the spatial division between public and private spaces, and claimed control over women's bodies. Thus, women were consistently emplaced in the domestic space, which acted as a site of socio-spatial continuity. As a result, the recalibration of the social and spatial organisation of collective female honour (*nomus*), sustained by the notion of shame, significantly limited women's everyday mobility, and made it impossible

to reproduce old practices such as couples dancing together and mixed gender socialising (Cleuziou and Direnberger 2016; Roche 2016).

Pointing to the absence of 'divisions', Aliia Khamidovna meant not only gender, but also ethnic divisions. My other interlocutors also highlighted the past absence of ethnic and gender boundaries. They would say that 'we were not separated' (Rus. *togda ne razdeliali*), or 'we were all together' (Rus. *byli vse vmeste*). This togetherness and unity was juxtaposed with the current state of alienation and individualisation. As Gulomboy Amirkhanovich put it:

> We lived well, like one big international family ... We had only green fences [instead of tall brick walls] in the *poselok*, and no one locked their doors. We visited each other, celebrated feasts together, but it's not like this anymore – now every man is for himself (Rus. *kazhdyi sam za sebia*).

Such narratives obscure the fact that the 'friendship of peoples' (Rus. *druzhba narodov*) was fraught with inherent tensions caused by power imbalances between centre and periphery entangled with the Soviet nationality policies (Grant 2010; Sahadeo 2019). Yet, they capture the perception of the dynamics of place as shifting from being modern and cosmopolitan to becoming distinctly ethnic and traditional. Reeves (2014, 104) has shown that spatial transformations in southern Fergana caused a sense of acute disconnection as 'sites and categories of person that were imaginatively close are being recalibrated as distant'. Aliia Khamidovna's and Gulomboy Amirkhanovich's accounts reveal that this feeling of disconnectedness can persist not only in relation to distant formerly connected places, but in relation to one's own place and the people living next door.

Three decades later, as I captured it in 2017–18, past connections established through movement of people and things was interrupted by the recalibration of physical and social space after Independence, mapped on to new mobile trajectories. Houses built to accommodate Russian specialists in the 1950s were being transformed into 'Russian' houses as migrants built their two-storey 'cottages', making use of the money and skills they had acquired in Russia doing *evroremont* (Rus. *evrorepair*)[16] for the Russian middle classes. Fluency in Russian triggered pride when graduates of the local school excelled in Russian language, history and law examinations, which migrant workers had to take as an 'integration requirement' to obtain a labour licence (*patent*) in Russia from 2015 (Dolzhikova and Kunovski 2018). The out-migration of Russian-speaking urban residents started in the 1970s, when developmental

programmes were reoriented to other regions. It gradually gained in force, and it peaked in 1994, aggravated by economic decline, political instability, and the spread of narratives about ethnic revival in the newly formed states.[17] Although the state stripped Russian of its status as an official language (Kellner-Heinkele and Landau 2012), and 'Russians' left Mehnat, the Russian language was still present, and it was pragmatically and symbolically important. The popularity of Russian-medium classes at the local school was on the rise (Borisova 2023b). These classes were overcrowded with children, whose parents wanted to prepare them for migration, hoping that proficiency in Russian would help them navigate Russian labour and housing markets, and protect them from discrimination and police harassment. More often, people managed to secure Russian passports according to pathways with simplified criteria of eligibility, such as proficiency in Russian or having kin connections (see Chapter 5). Migrants' remittances contributed to the struggle for becoming 'modern' once again, giving many families the opportunity to pay for their children's education. The number of young people studying in Russian universities was also on the rise, with Russia's own struggle to fulfil its never-ending ambition to 'modernise' in order to be included in the world university rankings by increasing their intake of international students, who often came from the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries. Despite poignant accounts of nothingness and demodernisation, my interlocutors contributed to the reproduction of their place as both modern and moral (see Ibañez-Tirado 2019). Temporalities of social visits, school timetables, husbands' and sons' calls from Russia, and hard domestic work created the unique rhythms of everyday life of Mehnat (Figure 1.11).

Social dynamics of newest migration

> We don't say, 'He's a migrant', we say, *'Vai Rossiiava buraft'* (Taj. 'he's gone to Russia'), and everyone understands that he went there to work. But my husband calls himself a *gastarbeiter* (laughing). He says, 'Who am I? I'm a black-assed *gastarbeiter* (Rus. *ia chernozhopyi gastarbeiter*)'. Especially when someone boasts they had received a Russian passport. He says, 'So what? You have a Russian passport, but you still will be a "black ass" for them forever.'

Mahlie was laughing, as we were sitting around the table and sipping green tea in her beautiful home, which had been renovated in preparation

Figure 1.11   Women's get-together at Navruz (spring equinox celebration). Each had husbands and children working in Russia, while they cared for their grandchildren, Mehnat, spring 2018.

for her daughter's wedding. Mahlie had recently returned from a distant Russian town in Siberia, where she had worked with her husband. Her words brought together some of the widespread ambivalent perceptions of migration, both in sending and receiving societies.

There are words for migration (*muhojirat*) and migrant (*muhojir*) in Tajik, which are used in official discourses on labour migration (*muhojirati mehnatī*). But *muhojir* has historical and religious connotations, and it was never used in everyday conversations. Nor did people use the Russian word *migrant* to talk about their relatives working in Russia, or to refer to their own experiences. They were instead defined by the activity they did there, which was work (Taj. *kor*; Rus. *rabota*). Some of my interlocutors reacted to my question about migration (Rus. *migratsiia*) with a puzzled, 'What is it? Is it when I go to Moscow to work and remit money and then return?' The activity of working has become synonymous with the place (*Rossiia*) and an act of movement (*raftan*) – Russia was imagined as a place suited almost exclusively for hard work; the very act of 'taking' it involved movement. At the same time, other activities were pushed out of the realm of what normally happens there.

As I have shown elsewhere, even schoolchildren imagined Russia primarily through hard work (Borisova 2017a). Despite picturing Russian

cities as vibrant modern places, they saw few opportunities for themselves to legitimately enjoy this side of life in Russia, and instead were prepared to subordinate their desires to the lifestyle of temporary migrant workers.

Some studies have shown that young men perceived migration to Russia as an adventure providing them with an opportunity to enjoy the anonymity and freedom of an urban lifestyle while emancipating themselves from their families and communities (Brednikova 2021; Roche 2014, 152). Yet, for my interlocutors, these two perspectives were not mutually exclusive, and the ideas about men's obligations towards kin and community coexisted with an expectation of more autonomy and adventure. What was emphasised depended on a particular communicative context. While talking to each other, young men described their experiences of life in Russia as partaking in a global youth culture, and they showed off its attributes that they possessed, such as new gadgets and branded clothes. In conversations with seniors, and often with me, they demonstrated willingness to submit to the gendered obligations of care.

The shared understanding of this ambiguity created suspicion and mistrust. Deviations from the pattern of working hard for the sake of one's family while in Russia were considered morally flawed. Stayers often shared their concerns that their migrant family members were taking too many days off from work and 'having fun' in Russia, instead of accumulating and remitting money.[18] Such concerns were fuelled by the information and images that migrants preferred to share with their 'left behind' families. They tended to circulate only good news, and pictures in which they looked happy – wandering around shopping malls and famous tourist sites, or having social gatherings and picnics with their relatives and neighbours who also worked in Russia. As one of my younger interlocutors, a schoolgirl, told me, seeing her family's pictures taken in Russia made her feel that they 'live very well' there (Borisova 2021a).

However, Mahlie's husband captured another dimension of migration. He used a word that reproduces Russian public discourses of exclusion, which labelled migrant workers as *gastarbeiters* (from German 'guest workers'). *Gastarbeiter* points to the short temporal horizon of migrant workers' presence in Russia, and the low status of the work they do. Using this word as self-description showed his recognition of the unattainability of claims for belonging (see Chapter 5). Materialised in extravagant houses, expensive cars, and conspicuous weddings becoming an object of neighbours' envy, for my interlocutors, migration had also become intimately linked with the experiences of overexploitation, precarious working and living conditions, humiliation, ethnoracial harassment, and constant extortion of money by the police

(see Chapter 2). However, the latter constituted a kind of 'public secret'. Although everyone was aware of these hardships, there was always some ambiguity about the topic: as one returned migrant worker put it, 'no one will ever tell you the truth about how they lived there [in Russia]'.

The high level of transnational connectivity meant that migrants and stayers were almost always aware of what was happening in their family members' everyday lives; technology not only made them feel present, but also allowed them to exercise strict control (see Cleuziou 2023; Kasymova 2021; Urinboyev 2018). The temporality of migrants' phone calls defined the routines of people such as Mahlie in a certain way. She had three family members living in two different Russian cities – her husband, her elder daughter (together with her husband), and her son (a student), so her evenings were booked for phone calls. She was also afraid that if she missed a call from her husband, it would cause a family conflict, and he would forbid her to go to work:

> I don't go anywhere, I work six days a week at college, and when I come home, I'm very tired. I close the gate at 4 p.m. and sit at home. I talk only to my closest neighbours. If I go somewhere, someone will see me and report to my husband, he'll start a scandal. I don't need this.

Thus, there were certain expectations from both migrants and their relatives 'back home' that were shared in the community: while the former were expected to subordinate their lives to working and accumulating money in Russia, the latter were expected to spend the remittances wisely, and to behave in ways that preserved their family's reputation. These expectations did not pertain only to 'migrants' wives', but also to their parents and children. For women, this meant limiting their mobility and contact with strangers; for children, there was an expectation of academic performance and good behaviour at school, while elders were expected to provide moral authority, gratefully receiving respect from their migrant children and making it visible to the community (see Chapter 4).

The moral ambivalence of migration

On a cold November afternoon, the head of the local theatre – Firuz – invited me to a film screening. The film titled *Tangno* (Taj. for 'narrow place') was shot by a local film director in 2017 in Panjakent – a picturesque city on the Zeravshan river. Once an ancient town in Sogdiana, it seemed

to be an ideal location for the film, which was saturated with the images of idealised Tajikness, rurality and lost tradition. Firuz explained that the film would be of interest to me, as it spoke to the topic of migration. He added that all their work was influenced by this theme in a certain way, as they tried to convey to their audience the high human cost of migration: 'after all, we are all migrants here'. The title of the film carried the message in itself: *tangno* is not only a narrow place in the mountains where the action takes places; it also points to the sense of claustrophobia and squeeze that one feels under constraining life circumstances (the second meaning of the word *tangno* is 'impasse'). The plot revolved around a small boy, a primary school pupil, whose father had left to work in Russia many years before to earn money for his circumcision feast and had lost contact with his family. As the boy grew older, his peers started to mock him because he had not had his circumcision yet. One day, his mother went to Russia to find her husband and to ask him to return, as his son was suffering. There, she was met by a rude blonde Russian woman who told her to 'go to hell'. As she saw her husband playing with his new half-Russian daughter at a distance, she ran away in the harsh Russian winter, crying and yelling that he did not deserve his son. Frustrated, the boy dropped out of school, and worked hard to pay for his ritual himself. On the day of the ritual, a small miracle happened, and his father suddenly decided to abandon his second family in Russia and return home. The final scene pictured a happily reunited family spending time together, with the arrestingly beautiful landscape of the Zeravshan Valley in the background.

The period of work in Russia is fraught with certain risks, and it can result in both the successful completion of crucial family projects and attaining (and maintaining) male personhood, or in the loss of money, health or even life (Reeves 2013b). Against this backdrop, the symbiotic relationship between Russian cities and Tajik villages was often a topic of heated discussions, as everyone possessed some expert knowledge about it. In these discussions, *Rossiia* sometimes emerged as a forceful entity with its own agency. It was portrayed as capable of closing or opening its borders; granting or withdrawing documents (see Chapter 5); accepting or expelling migrant bodies (see Chapter 2); allowing family members to provide better care for their children and elders, and questioning their ability to care (see Chapter 4); turning young people into fully fledged adults or morally corrupting them; changing people's bodies, appearances and behaviours for better or for worse; facilitating marriages (see Chapter 3) and degrading conjugal relationships. Thus, seen from the perspective of the sending society, *Rossiia* was no less of a reality for

those who lived in rural Tajikistan – people felt its intimate presence in their lives on an everyday basis.

'If it hadn't been for Russia, only God knows what would have become of this place!' This phrase, with some variations, almost always followed my attempts to start a conversation about migration. Very often, it was followed by an expression of gratitude to Russia and President Putin, and the sharing of a common fear that one day Russia might no longer want to receive migrant workers from Tajikistan. The 'positive effects' of migration listed to me usually included measurable parameters, such as an increased standard of living manifested in modern houses, lavish weddings, new businesses, cars purchased, and an increase in the number of children continuing their education after school. At the same time, talking about the 'negative' side of migration, people always pointed to the realm of morality, which 'suffers' (Rus. *moral'naia storona stradaet*) – unattended children, teenage pregnancies, lack of respect for elders, monetisation of kin ties, troubled family relationships, and an increase in divorce rates were among things discursively linked to *Rossiia*'s presence. While not everyone might agree on the negativity or positivity of certain developments, there was a consensus that perceived *Rossiia* as an entity with the capacity to change people, even if they did not come into direct contact with it (cf. Elliot 2021, on perceptions of abroad in Morocco).

There was a widespread belief that since *Rossiia* had appeared on the horizon of possibilities, children no longer wanted to study, because they knew there was always Russia, with its abundance of unqualified work waiting for them. One day, my host sister came home from school and shared that her classmate had fought with a history teacher:

> She [the teacher] got offended that he didn't respect her, and told him not to come to her class anymore. And he said, 'Whatever, I don't care about your useless lessons, I will just graduate, get a school certificate, and go to Russia to work.' He thinks life is easy in Russia, and one can make a lot of money!

Teachers, in turn, scolded their students for their bad performance, and for their idealised perception of *Rossiia* as a place of abundance and an easy life. A teacher at the local college once told me: 'Children think that they don't need a *diplom* (certificate), that they will go to work in Russia anyway. I'm telling them, "Shame on you! Your parents are working there, as God knows what, so that you can have a better life, you're their hope, and what are you doing?"' Nevertheless, everyone agreed that the

number of students enrolled at colleges and universities was increasing due to migrant remittances, and that this was a hard fact.

In a similar vein, in the eyes of my interlocutors, migration influenced marital relationships, leading to a dramatic increase in the number of divorces. Scholars have linked the reconfiguration of family and marital relationships to mass migration to Russia.[19] However, this development was experienced not as the direct result of migration per se, but explained by the looming presence of *Rossiia* in people's everyday lives, which shaped their judgements and decisions in a more subtle way. According to Firuz, men did not contribute to building good relationships with their young wives, because there was an infinite number of lovers they could take in Russia. Similarly, young brides did not try hard enough to make themselves into good daughters-in-law anymore, because they knew that they always had a 'second chance' in Russia after divorce. As marriage is the main institution for accomplishing normative femininity in Tajikistan, there is a social stigma attached to divorced women, which extends to women's natal families. Those who are divorced or widowed are pushed to remarry immediately to restore their normative social status. The migration of divorced women to Russia can be an attempt to 'repair a broken social status', either by looking for another partner in Russia or to escape social pressure at home by putting this issue on hold (Brednikova 2017; see Chapter 4).

If *Rossiia* 'seduced' even those staying in Tajikistan, those who have come in direct contact with it, those who 'have gone to Russia', were always exposed to the probing gaze of the community: every action, or lack of action, inevitably leading to public commentary and moral judgement. No matter how hard they struggled to prove their emotional affiliation with their community through dense transnational practices, they would always be seen as habituated (Taj. *adat kardagi*; Rus. *privykli*) to the other way of being. The community spotted this 'habituatedness' by the subtle changes at the bodily level – their demeanour, which was perceived as more confident or even cheeky, and certain ways of dressing and of talking, such as frequent code-switching between Tajik and Russian. These bodily signs were often perceived as standing for more profound shifts in moral orientations and values. One day, I was talking with Aliia Khamidovna about the shortage of teachers for Russian classes at the Gagarin School. She had been wanting to retire for two years, but she was always asked to continue teaching. She said that since the majority of young teachers were women, their employment was continuously interrupted by maternity and migration. Both of these usually implied absence for a couple of years, but migration brought more uncertainty:

> Those who went to Russia just don't want to return here! Here you come home from work, and you have to take care of your children, do household chores, resolve conflicts. There you come home, lie on a couch, and watch TV as much as you want! Everything is quiet, no one distracts you!

Aliia Khamidovna was pointing to the kind of moral transformation that people underwent when they entered a long-term relationship with Russia. Indeed, migration could sometimes be perceived as a strategy to escape, or, as Marhabo put it, to 'run away' (see Introduction) from suffocating emotionally and materially burdensome social obligations and problematic relationships (see Aitieva 2015).[20] I met several young women who enjoyed the four-thousand-kilometre distance between them and their husbands. They were dreading their husbands' visits, as they knew that those visits implied endless arguments over money, domestic duties and showing proper respect to in-laws, more chores, unwanted intimacy, and sometimes even domestic violence. Their husbands' absence seemed to be the only glue that held such marriages together, offering at least some autonomy to young women, while allowing them to retain the respectful status of a married woman. Relationships perceived as problematic extended far beyond nuclear families. Mahlie had just married off her second daughter, and she was in debt, but she had started to receive proposals for her third daughter, who was studying in Dushanbe. She told me, laughing:

> They [the prospective groom's family] are constantly calling from Dushanbe. I'm telling them I have just given away my daughter, I have no money, but they don't care! They told me, if we can't negotiate by phone, we'll come to you on Navruz [spring equinox celebration]. That's why I want to run away to Russia (Rus. *Poetomu ia khochu ubezhat' v Rossiiu*).

I took her words as a joke. Mahlie had a full-time job at the local college, and two unmarried daughters, one of whom was a high school student and lived with her. Yet, when I decided to pay her a visit a month later, I bumped into the closed gate. Inside was her neighbour tending to her garden, who informed me that Mahlie had packed overnight, and had not told anyone that she was going to Russia.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

In this chapter, I have tried to convey the distinct sense of place by showing how it was historically constituted and reshaped through

multiple mobile trajectories of people and things. Mehnat emerged as a place of socialist modernity tied to industrial production, where a certain type of 'modern' subject was cultivated through socialising in an ethnically and culturally mixed environment. This environment was established though specific leisure practices, the fashioning of Russian as a lingua franca, and the commitment to internationalist aesthetics and moral upbringing. Various strands of mobility of people and things lay at the core of Mehnat's connection to the bigger socialist project. Mobility and connectivity figured very strongly in people's experiences of becoming 'modern', whereas in narrating the processes of 'demodernisation', they employed the metaphors of stasis, lack of movement and disconnection.

In her account of the pragmatics of desire for mobility in Fuzhou Province in China, Julie Chu analyses mobility as a 'qualisign'[21] of capitalist modernity and development. Her interlocutors, 'situated on the mercurial edge between global flows and parochial closures', experienced an inherent sense of displacement, being the type of subjects that did not quite fit into the shifting Chinese visions of modernity, which became tied to the heightened transnational mobility of the elites in the post-Mao era (Chu 2010, 4). Nevertheless, they forged their own trajectories to escape the trap of immobility through participating (sometimes imaginatively) in the circulations of bodies, paperwork, money, social connections and gifts to gods. While Chu's research participants found themselves trapped in the position between peasants and cosmopolitans, people in Mehnat felt dislocation in another sense. They have already been cosmopolitans; however, they have experienced their cosmopolitan and forward-looking place as having migrated from modernity to 'backwardness' in the first few post-Soviet decades.

Given the embeddedness of mobility in the making of a 'modern' place, as people found themselves in the situation of economic and political decline and infrastructural failure, they turned to the same means by which this modernity was constituted in the first place. I do not suggest that by forging new mobile trajectories, people were simply trying to collectively recreate the modernity-in-the-past experience that hinged on the ideals of socialist modernity. However, the very pervasiveness of discourses of modernity in people's everyday lives, which hierarchically organised places and peoples on the scale of 'progressiveness', was perhaps itself the most vivid manifestation of legacies of modernisation projects in the region. Although devoid of some fixed content that could be clearly shoehorned into 'capitalist', 'socialist' or

'Muslim' versions of modernity, these discourses remained the focal point of debates and deliberations about what constitutes the good life in the region. The next chapter interrogates this dynamic on an intimate bodily level, and shows how people are trying to fill the gap in their sense of 'demodernised' self as the relationship between Russia and Tajikistan has been reconfigured.

Notes

1   This is not the settlement's real name. I chose the name Mehnat (Taj. 'labour') because it is a common name for villages, urban-type settlements and towns in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan which emerged during Soviet times, and which were considered ethnically and culturally mixed.

2   Concerning the emancipatory mission of Houses of Culture to convert 'indigenous' and 'traditional' societies into 'modern' Soviet citizens, see Grant (1995), Igmen (2012) and Donahoe and Habeck (2011).

3   Promoting certain leisure activities was important for the making of 'modern' Soviet citizens. However, such a developed leisure infrastructure was quite unusual for rural Central Asia, with a public swimming pool being a rarity for a village.

4   Both adjectives *russkii* and *rossiiskii* are translated as 'Russian' into English, but the former points to ethnicity and means 'ethnically Russian', while the latter designates civic identity. *Rossiiskie* goods were a sign of high quality for my interlocutors, while the opposite – cheap Chinese goods (*kitaiskie*) – were synonymous with poor quality and tacky style.

5   In Central Asia, the main figures that have tended to attract the attention of scholars in the context of migration are the 'left behind' – mostly migrants' wives. The literature has discussed in detail the power dynamics between those who stay and those who go: the impact of men's absence on women's agency (Dushanbieva 2014; Hegland 2010), their mobility (Reeves 2011b), the reconfiguration of family life (Cleuziou 2017), and marital choices and rising polygyny (Cieślewska 2021), as well as experiences of waiting (Ibañez-Tirado 2019). Isabaeva (2011), Reeves (2011b) and Aitieva (2015) have argued that those who 'stay put' can experience their immobility in a variety of ways – both as a predicament and as a privilege – which challenges the tendency of migration studies to exaggerate the pitiful position of stayers.

6   The reason that I highlight the movements which took place in the late Soviet period, and do not touch upon early Soviet or pre-Soviet history of movement, lies in my ethnographic data. Important as they were, earlier movements, forced and voluntary, did not figure in my interlocutors' invocations of the past and evaluations of the present, whereas the memories of the late socialist period, the period when Mehnat appeared on the map, were very present. On the forced sedentarisation of nomadic people and multiple resettlements in the early Soviet period in Central Asia and Tajikistan, see Loy (2006), Ferrando (2011) and Kassymbekova (2016); on the migration flows in the region following the Russian Revolution, see Abdullaev (2009).

7   On the administrative division of Tajikistan, see Cieślewska (2015, 95–123).

8   A *mahalla* is a type of neighbourhood. Physically, a *mahalla* is constituted by a group of compounds typically inhabited by extended families. For a detailed analysis of the organisation of *mahalla* space, and its importance for the social reproduction of the moral community, see Liu (2012). On transforming *mahalla* and using it as a mechanism of governance in Uzbekistan, see Rasanayagam (2009), and for Tajikistan, see Cieślewska (2015).

9   The real name of the place captures a very similar idea of ethnic diversity and internationalism as the pseudonym 'Mehnat', which I chose.

10   The reader might be surprised by these figures. Obviously, the official celebratory Soviet-style narratives about productivity should be taken with a certain degree of scepticism. However, it should be noted that studies in Tajikistan and elsewhere in Central Asia have demonstrated

how 1991, the dividing line between the Soviet and the post-Soviet, is essentially arbitrary in many people's daily lives, failing to capture the complexity of the changes that occurred and that are occurring in the post-Soviet landscape (Ibañez-Tirado 2015; Scarborough 2023a). While Tajikistan in the 1990s was almost exclusively considered through the prism of civil war violence in academic accounts, my ethnography shows that local chronologies of decline (and their subjective perception by differently positioned individuals) may vary significantly. For instance, for many of my interlocutors, it was not the dissolution of the Soviet Union or the Civil War that had led to the loss of their livelihoods, but the closure of the border with Uzbekistan in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

11 Russian classes (Rus. *russkie klassy*) is a vernacular term to refer to Russian-medium education, not to Russian-language lessons.

12 Here, he referred to the conflict in Donbas following the annexation of Crimea and the establishment of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in 2014.

13 For a detailed analysis of Central Asia in the Soviet planned economy, and for the ambivalences of Soviet development in the region, see Scarborough (2021).

14 Analysing alternative temporalities in southern Tajikistan revealed in the narratives of transformations of her research participants' housing, Diana Ibañez-Tirado showed how the decay of urban infrastructure was experienced as a process of 'involution'. Stressing the importance of being 'modern', her interlocutors created specific temporal markers, using villages and *havlī* to index backwardness and stasis, with cities and apartments embodying modernity and progress (Ibañez-Tirado 2015).

15 A new *kelin* (daughter-in-law) has the lowest status in the family hierarchy when she comes to her husband's household. Her main duty is to serve her in-laws, taking on a huge amount of household chores, and demonstrating respect and recognition of their authority. For a more detailed discussion see Tett (1994), Harris (2005) and Reeves (2011b).

16 *Remont* (Rus. 'repair') can be considered a culturally embedded creative practice of engaging with space that aims to achieve a certain 'spatial morality', which, together with construction businesses, has become a main sector in Tajikistan's economy. *Remont* is intimately linked with life-cycle rituals, since it represents the family for the community, and is entwined with ideas about modernity. The word *Evroremont* (Rus. 'Eurorepair') appeared in the early 1990s in Russia, and indicated the use of imported materials that only a few could afford, so it became a marker of social class (Sbignev 2015).

17 Between 2 and 2.5 million people had already left the region in the 1990s (Abashin 2014b). Tajikistan lost more of its Russian population than the other Central Asian republics because of the Civil War. In 2010, its Russian population was estimated as fewer than 50,000 people, the majority of them residing in cities (Peyrouse 2013).

18 Migrant remittances are a classical and well-researched topic in migration studies, which comprises a variety of empirical and theoretical focuses, ranging from development to domestic moral economies. In the Central Asian context, remittances have been researched in relation to ritual economies (Ilkhamov 2013; Reeves 2012; Rubinov 2014), family obligations (Aitieva 2015; 2021; Reeves 2017a), social change (Kikuta 2016; Zotova and Cohen 2016), and issues of status and prestige (Abashin 2021; Zotova 2012). Reflecting on the social and moral aspects of remittances, although interesting and relevant, exceeds the scope of this book. Suffice it to say that in the context of transnational families, remittances are generally perceived as a sign of care, and have been analytically considered a 'substance of relatedness' (Zharkevich 2019). The interruption of remittance flow constitutes a moment of 'moral break-down' (Zigon 2007), and can 'raise moral dilemmas leading to self-reflection and justification, and to the explicit (re)articulation of remittances' meanings and implications' (Simoni and Voirol 2020, 3).

19 Including a focus on the emergence of women-led households and the rise of different forms of polygyny (Cleuziou 2017; Thibault 2017).

20 Studying the normalisation of mobilities in Central Asia, Schröder and Stephan-Emmrich (2016, 437) note that their migrant interlocutors invested their 'ancestral homes' with divergent meanings. On the one hand, home was perceived as a place of intimacy and the source of well-being; on the other, it was intricately linked with 'strong expectations for norm-compliance', while 'migration destinations may promise success and freedom'.

21 Defining this notion, she draws on Nancy Munn's definition of qualisigns as 'certain embodied qualities that are components of a given intersubjective spacetime ... whose positive or

negative value they signify' (cited in Chu 2010, 14). While the relationship between capitalist modernity, mobility and cosmopolitanism has become the object of scrutiny for many scholars, the efficacy of mobility in socialist, and, more precisely, Soviet projects of modernity, and the ways in which these operated in different contexts beyond the punitive practices of deportations and forced resettlement, have not enjoyed the same attention (though see Bahovadinova, 2018).

Interlude 2: Living with Farhod's family

Do we choose our interlocutors, or do they actually choose us? How many of our fieldwork insights do we owe to luck and contingency, rather than to meticulous planning and strategising? Are we 'strategically situated' or, rather, 'randomly emplaced'? My encounter with Farhod, and my subsequent move to his household, was not planned or even anticipated, as he was not the kind of classic migrant subject on which my researcher's imagination was focused at the beginning of my fieldwork. Yet, this encounter was consequential, both for my research and for my sense of self. It conditioned my access to certain spaces, guided me to ask unexpected questions, and determined the kinds of situated knowledge that I produced. More importantly, however, it allowed me to feel wrapped in warmth, acceptance and care, and to practice self-irony as I was grappling with extreme heat and cold, illness, anxieties about my future and outdoor toilets, and occasionally going through various fieldwork-related crises.

Farhod's house had been built by his parents in 1952, and, like every household, it was going through constant transformations – children were growing up, daughters were getting married, sons were bringing in new *kelin*, then separating into new households. Farhod had inherited this house as the youngest son of 11 children, bound to his parents by obligations of care. When I moved in, only Farhod's nuclear family was living there. Zebo, his exceptionally beautiful and very hard-working wife, had always been a housewife. She bitterly regretted that she did not have any official training to help Farhod fulfil the burdensome task of providing for the family. '*Muzhchinam tozhe slozhno*' (Rus. 'Men have it hard, too'), she used to repeat while masterfully handling her (and Farhod's) multiple domestic duties, and

bearing with his emotional outbursts. Gulbahor, their eldest daughter, 19 years old, was a correspondence student of chemistry and ecology in the capital city, Dushanbe. She also worked at the library at the local school, keeping her modest income for herself. Her ringing voice and careless laughter filled the whole house as she sarcastically shared the latest school gossip, until she got married and moved out. Gulrukhsor, their younger and quieter 17-year-old daughter, graduated from high school, failed to enter a university, and, at the end of my fieldwork, got engaged to a man who was a migrant worker in Russia. Their youngest child, a 15-year-old son named Alijon, was studying in Dushanbe, and visited us only during holidays. Farhod's family was on the verge of important new life projects, such as marrying off their daughters and pursuing education, which implied many lengthy family discussions on the planning and distribution of scarce resources. Unexpectedly soon, I became part of these discussions too.

There were three living rooms, a terrace and a guest room in his big house, with one room being used as an easily transformable living space. I was allocated an uninhabited and cold 'granny's room' (Taj. *khonai ocha*), with bright ornaments on the ceiling and wardrobes, mixing traditional patterns with Soviet red stars. Before Gulbahor's wedding in spring 2018, the room underwent a full renovation, and its original look remained as family history, captured only in my pictures. Driven by a desire to improve their household, Farhod and Zebo had been doing a lot of work on the exterior of the house, until they ran out of money and construction materials. Although their house was very functional and did not require any large-scale renovation, Farhod was constantly thinking of improvements to make the space more 'civilised' (Rus. *tsivilizovanno*). As I was spending time with their extended family and got to know his multiple kin, the granny's room was transformed into 'Lena's room' (*khonai Lena*). However, a separate room did not mean more privacy. Farhod deliberately put his daughters in the room with me, so that they could pick up some Russian, and, within a couple of months, we were cheerfully chatting in a mixture of Russian and Tajik at night. Furthermore, constant presence and attending to one's needs is considered to be a sign of care, and Farhod wanted to ensure that I did not feel lonely or sad.

Such proximity determined my routine, and allowed me to have multiple outspoken conversations with Farhod and Zebo, touching upon the domains of Tajik private and public life, which had previously been completely absent from my ethnographer's imagination. We had a lot of joyful moments sitting around a *dastarkhon*,[1] sharing the latest gossip

after a working day, and laughing or engaging in language-learning activities and making fun of each other's awkward attempts to speak Russian or Tajik correctly. I took part in routine family gatherings, festivities and ritual events, and in more formal gatherings designed to impress the eye of a stranger. During my time in the field, they married off Gulbahor, which gave me an opportunity to witness and take part in all parts of the financially and psychologically burdensome wedding ritual, with which I engage in detail in Chapter 3. Since I contributed to the family budget, Farhod included me in discussions about the family's expenditures, as well as desperate attempts to find an alternative source of income in the face of creeping impoverishment. His sardonic sense of humour never abandoned him, and this kept us going, even at times when the family was grappling with material hardship and the burden of responsibility for life-changing decisions. Although Farhod struggled to reconcile his professional ambitions with the everyday work of making ends meet and caring for his family (see Chapter 2), his life philosophy of 'living with appetite' never let us slide into a depressed state. When I became *ziq* (Taj. 'sad'), he would always smile and, after listening to my concerns, would tell me, 'Ah, don't think too much, Lenakhon!'

If place is a contemporaneity of stories so far, then 'arriving in a new place means joining up with, somehow linking into, the collection of interwoven stories of which that place is made' (Massey 2005, 119). It was mostly through joining Farhod's family that my story has joined the stories of my fieldsite, and linked Manchester, St Petersburg and Tajikistan together in a peculiar trajectory. And although, as I am writing this in 2023, Farhod's house is empty and silent because its inhabitants are gone to Russia, it does cheer me up immensely to know that somewhere in a small Tajik village, there is always a room for me – *khonai Lena*.

Note

1 A traditional tablecloth, which can be laid either on the ground or on a small, short-legged table called a *khon-takhta*.

2
From a 'cultured man' to a migrant worker

On one of the first days after my arrival, Aliia Khamidovna happily announced that she had already found a place for me: I would move in not just with an ordinary family, but with the family of an *artist*.[1] His family had a reputation for being wealthy and well known outside their village, in the nearby town. Soon enough, driven by a strong desire to improve his Russian, Farhod – a handsome man in his early 40s with a pleasant voice – appeared on my doorstep. He was accompanied by his nephew, who had graduated from a Russian class. Farhod was sure that his Russian was too bad for me to be able to understand him, and so he could not open his mouth from embarrassment, instead letting his nephew explain his proposition. He wanted me to move in with his family to teach them how to speak 'Russian without an accent'. He then took me to his home and introduced me to his family, my potential students, and showed me their *sharoit* (Taj. 'living conditions'), which promised to be much better than the majority of people in the area could offer. Reluctant to move at first, I decided to give it a chance to get the feel of what it means to be 'the one who does not go to Russia' (Taj. *Rossiiava namerad*) in the community.

On my second day in their house, Farhod introduced me to his performances by showing me the DVD of a large-scale concert he had organised in November 2015. The concert began with musicians playing the *karnai*, a traditional musical instrument which is mostly used during ritual celebrations to signal the start of the event to the public. The players, *karnaichi*, dressed in white trousers and shirts, with black jackets decorated with Tajik embroidery, welcomed the guests. A mixture of patriotic content, upbeat songs about romantic love and the joys of life, and *shashmaqom*-like tear-jerking melodies with lyrics and

videos about his late parents,[2] Farhod's concert seemed to fit visions of Tajik modernity partly premised on concerns about national traditions. The very figure of Farhod on stage accompanied by female dancers (who constantly changed their costumes, moving from traditional to modern ones) illustrated these ideas converging on the figure of a modern man. Good-looking, well-dressed, educated, proficient in the official Tajik language, an entrepreneurial individual who is nevertheless knowledge-able of, and abiding by, national traditions, he embodied a forward-looking orientation to a bright future in a self-sufficient secular state with modern, yet patriotic subjects.

Yet, while projecting the image of a proud bearer of Tajik modernity on stage, in the relaxed atmosphere of his home, Farhod was striving to make sense of the multiple struggles endangering his professional and personal sense of self. He was currently employed at a state institution responsible for providing traditional Tajik music and dancing at public state celebrations. However, his income was not sufficient to provide for the family. The main part of his income came from his performances at different *tūi*, mostly weddings and circumcisions. During his 'high season'[3] in August of the previous year, when he would sometimes perform three times a day, he had earned a huge amount of money compared to his monthly salary at the Department of Culture, which he had then invested in funding his concert.

However, on 23 August 2017, the Tajik state issued a new version of the decade-old law 'On ordering traditions, feasts, and ceremonies in the Republic of Tajikistan',[4] aimed at eliminating concerns related to *tūi*, including the financial burden of hosting different events with food, gifts and entertainment (see Chapter 3). Designed to help people to manage their financial struggles, and to spend less time in Russia as migrant workers, this law had brought new concerns for Farhod.[5] After the law was amended, the number of invitations Farhod received to perform at various events dropped dramatically, reducing his income by more than half.

Farhod was trying to reconcile many contradictions on a daily basis. He was a state-employed singer with an important role in (re)producing state visions of modernity, yet he was on the brink of impoverishment, not least due to the state's attempts to impose this vision on the population by legal means. His role as a singer (Taj. *khonanda*) who performs for the community during celebrations of key life-cycle events was bound up with 'traditional' expectations of service and artisthood, which deeply informed his sense of self. He was well-known as a good entertainer, but he struggled to provide

for his family. His performances at local ritual celebrations were a source of prestige for those who hired him, yet he could barely afford a spectacular display of prestige by throwing an abundant wedding feast for his daughters and securing them a high dowry to please their in-laws (see Chapter 3). He was thinking about turning to Russia in the face of his growing debt, but from his previous experiences he knew that he was not able to stoically go through the excruciating experiences of migrant life. Physically demanding work, the emotional hardship of family separation, the physical and social effort involved in navigating the Russian migration regime, staying documented, and the humiliation entailed by being labelled 'black' (*chernyi*) and not civilised (*netsivilizo-vannyi*) made him dread the very thought of going to Russia again. He did not want to go to Russia, yet he was persistently trying to conquer the Russian declension system and neutralise his accent. All these complex contradictory concerns converged in Farhod's preoccupation with crafting himself as a particular kind of modern subject.

Although Farhod's family history and his profession clearly put him in a specific position in the community, and resulted in certain ways of thinking about his subjectivity, his concerns and his everyday attempts to craft himself as a modern subject were not entirely unique. During my fieldwork, I met many people who were grappling with questions about their place, and the place of their homeland, in a changing world. Their readiness to explore this issue with me was partly facilitated by my positionality as a Russian. I felt that it was very important for them to be recognised as modern subjects by me: in conversations with strangers and fellow travellers, I was expected to publicly acknowledge the fact that Tajikistan is a modern country, and I was often invited to react to a remark that my interlocutors found offensive: 'Russians mistakenly think that Tajikistan is like Afghanistan.'[6] My recognition that Tajik houses are beautiful and spacious, that Tajik cities are clean and modern, and that Tajik culture is rooted in the deep historical presence of the nation on that territory, always made my interlocutors happy. However, in everyday conversations among people at school, at the local bazaar, at family gatherings and at weddings, being/becoming a modern person seemed to emerge as a serious concern for a community that had not questioned its modernity a couple of decades before.[7]

Presenting Farhod's struggles as emblematic for communities living in the rapidly changing economic, social and political context of post-industrial Tajikistan, this chapter explores how people draw on the local idiom of modernity to make sense of their lives in the context of recent mass migration to the former metropole. Following Mostowlansky's

(2013, 32) call to explore the 'local methods of modernity' which order the world and transform social interactions, I analyse how migration projects figure in people's preoccupation with crafting themselves as modern subjects. In doing so, I treat 'modernity' as an ethnographic term operating through a number of local concepts revealed in everyday use. These concepts are rooted in particular local experiences of socialist modernity, but they are constantly being transformed in light of increasing global connections (Stephan-Emmrich and Schröder 2018).

In many places, such an increase in global connectivity has marked a global condition of interdependence between old and emerging metropolitan centres (for example, the Gulf) and their 'suburbs' outside their national territories, throwing entire communities into existence in the 'shine of metropolis', and causing an acute feeling of living at the periphery (Schielke 2020, 101–6). Accounts of (im)mobility in different parts of the world show that migration projects are saturated with images of 'high' consumerist modernity associated with the 'West', which are so powerful that they often obscure real migrant experiences for those who 'stay put' (Graw and Schielke 2012). Against this backdrop, Tajikistanis' migration to Russia presents an intriguing case to analyse what happens in places where, in Julie McBrien's words, people 'see themselves as *having been*, *being* and as in need of *becoming* modern' (McBrien 2009, 141). I explore this through showing how the desire to be recognised as 'modern' is fraught with contradictory experiences and tensions, which people such as Farhod are living through in contemporary Tajikistan, and how these tensions are bound up with imaginaries and experiences of Russia.

On the one hand, the departure of Soviet modernity and the normalisation of labour migration of Tajikistanis to Russia has led to the situation in which migration has become an intrinsic way for people to craft themselves as perceived modern persons. On the other hand, my interlocutors' projects of modern self-fashioning should be considered in the context in which attempts to articulate their modernity are persistently frustrated. While the Tajikistani state imposes a specific, rigid version of modernity and tradition in Tajikistan (see Chapter 3), in Russia, migrants' presence is premised on denying them claims to a certain kind of Russian modernity. This is the modernity the construction of which they have been contributing to with their labour for over twenty years.

In Russia, representations of migrants revolve around a racialised migrant body, which is imagined through the functional application of its labour (Bahovadinova 2023).[8] The denial of humanity to 'homo

laborans' (Nikiforova and Brednikova 2018) is then translated into policy decisions and practices, which dictate the need for migrants to constantly synchronise the 'disjunctive temporal regimes' of work, documenting themselves, and meeting the expectations of their families, and demanding what Madeleine Reeves's Kyrgyzstani interlocutors referred to as 'life in a running mode' (Reeves 2019, 27). Such a mode of life challenges one's ability to make oneself happy and to experience joy, which is arguably an important quality for Tajik personhood (Ibañez-Tirado 2013). Further, such a life is barely compatible with the desire to be recognised as a modern subject, and with the kind of modernity that people such as Farhod are cultivating in Tajikistan.

The local lexicon of modernity

Recent, but already deeply enmeshed within people's everyday lives in Tajikistan, labour migration to Russia constantly pushes people to locate themselves vis-à-vis Russia's own attempts to appear as a modern, migrant-receiving state.[9] As a result, they have to rethink their projects of modernity, incorporating, transforming or rejecting new and already existing elements. The labour they must perform to do so demands intense reflexivity and creativity, but also material resources. In the coming pages, I explore Farhod's projects of crafting himself as a subject defined through the plethora of concepts that are part of the local idiom of modernity. Stressing the importance of these projects for locating the good life, I will highlight the sites of contestation and areas of negotiation in which the tensions of becoming a modern subject play out. First, however, I will examine the vernacular idioms of modernity that I constantly encountered, both in public discussions and in the privacy of Farhod's home.

The local idiom of modernity is comprised of a range of specific adjectives borrowed from Russian and intimately linked with the Soviet modernisation project, which imply not only spectacular industrial but also significant social and cultural transformation: turning peasants into subjects with the capacity to become a new *kul'turnyi chelovek* (cultured man) (Fitzpatrick 2000; Kalinovsky 2018; Volkov 2000). Here, I consider the trio of terms my interlocutors often drew upon in our conversations: *sovremennyi* (modern), *tsivilizovannyi* (civilised) and *kul'turnyi* (cultured). Although two of these have Tajik equivalents, they do not cover the same spectrum of meanings: *bomadaniiat*, a literary variant of *kul'turnyi*, is translated into the Tajik colloquial *khondagī*, a word

for 'educated', while *khondagī* is used to denote a person who has some kind of formal (college or university) training; being *khondagī* is but one quality necessary for becoming a *kul'turnyi chelovek*. Proficiency in foreign languages, especially Russian, is another, which I consider later in relation to Farhod's attempts to craft himself as a *kul'turnyi chelovek*.

Sovremennyi (Taj. *zamonavī*) has two meanings – 'modern' and 'contemporary'. Whereas *kul'turnyi* carries exclusively positive connotations, *sovremennyi* is a socially contested category. When applied to describe a particular kind of people, it can contain overtones of both progress and development, but also of moral degradation and a lack of social propriety. No one would argue against having a *sovremennyi* house or car as a social good, but a remark that someone has a *sovremennaia* wife (*zani zamonavī*) is loaded with irony and fraught with moral ambiguity. The gendering nature of this concept is revealed in its usage towards young migrant workers exposed to the vices of Russian modernity. Becoming *sovremennyi* as a result of migration is associated with positive effects of modernity on men (for example, a change in their appearance, mode of dressing and manner of talking, and subtle changes in behaviour), while young women are often criticised and mocked for becoming too *sovremennye*, which can leave a stain on their reputation and raise questions about their marriageability (Borisova 2017b).

Although these three terms were sometimes used interchangeably as evaluative categories to denote a later stage in an evolutionist view of national development, there were slight differences in their connotations and distribution. While *kul'turnyi* was mostly used as a characteristic of a person, a quality which can be personally aspired to and attained through education and particular ways of cultivation of self, *tsivilizovannyi* emerged as an adjective applicable to places (Chapter 1), ways of being of whole ethnic groups (*tsivilizovannye natsii*), or ways of doing specific things, such as organising a wedding at a restaurant rather than having a domestic celebration (Chapter 3), or behaving 'well' at social get-togethers (Rus. *tsivilizovanno posidet'*) as opposed to making a drunken mess (Rus. *bardak*).[10] To stress a lack of personal culture and a certain kind of *tsivilizovannyi* upbringing, people usually used a Russian adjective – *dikii* (savage) – which was believed to be the lowest formation in the Marxist–Leninist teleological conception of economic and social development (*dikost'*).

As Till Mostowlansky (2017, 20) points out, modernity in Tajikistan is a relational category which can be used to 'distinguish and hierarchize' different places and people 'within time and space'. Early Soviet cultural policy was premised upon a hierarchy of ethnic groups organised around

the degree of their development, where 'European' nationalities were positioned at the top and Central Asians at the opposite end of the continuum, as *otstalye* (backwards), and thus in need of a helping hand from their fellow Russian 'big brother' (Sahadeo 2019; Slezkine 1994). Although these distinctions still seem to be present in Tajikistan, accompanied by the newer ones,[11] towards the end of the period of 'developed socialism' the inhabitants of northern Tajikistan (with its growing economy and functioning welfare system) seemed to have little doubt left about their modernity (Kalinovsky 2018; see also McBrien 2009, 131). They believed that the post-Soviet upheavals and a violent civil war had set back the development of the country for decades.[12] At the same time, large-scale exposure to the violent Russian modernity, made possible through experiences of migration to contemporary Russian cities and the Tajikistani state's attempt to propel its own version of modernity and tradition (Chapter 3), constantly challenges people's understanding of themselves as modern. It is within this specific historical context and shifting economic and social realities, in opposition to temporal and spatial Others, that people are trying to find an answer to the crucial question of whether they are still *sovremennye* or *dikie*.

Speaking Russian without an accent

Farhod's project to overcome his 'backwardness' and transform himself into a *kul'turnyi chelovek* (cultured man) unfolded across several areas: mastering the Russian language and maintaining a certain bodily presence in the community are the examples that I explore in more detail. My choice is partly predetermined by my positionality, which enabled certain modes of witnessing while cutting off others. The very possibility of my presence in Farhod's household spoke to his ideas about being a 'modern' man: having an educated Russian speaker with a cosmopolitan outlook in his home perfectly fitted his project of self-cultivation. He asked me dozens of questions about the different ways of life in the places I had lived – nothing could escape his curiosity. I soon realised that the kind of 'education' with which I was supposed to provide him was not limited to his ambitions in practical language acquisition, but was deeply entangled with many mundane aspects of everyday life.

Although the contemporary Tajik idiom of modernity cannot be reduced to the Soviet modernisation project, it would be unreasonable to deny its impact on people's imagination of what makes a person 'cultured'. During the early Soviet period, culture (*kul'tura*) came to

constitute 'one of the central spiritual values of Soviet civilization', and was perceived as a 'kind of value that could be accumulated, purposefully transferred to and acquired by wider groups of the population' (Volkov 2000, 212–13). This echoes the reified sense of culture that, as Bruce Grant discovered, pervaded the self-perception of his interlocutors in the Russian Far East. Drawn from a shared knowledge of Marxist–Leninist theory, culture was conceived of as 'an object to be constructed, reconstructed, and dismantled at will' (Grant 1995, 160). As a result, one could be seen as 'having' more or less of it, and *kul'turnost'* (culturedness) could be purposefully cultivated. On a personal level, *kul'turnost'* was achieved through the reshaping of certain bodily practices and external features of an individual. These interconnected practices stretched from the private domain to the work life of individuals, and were related to the spheres of dress and appearance, personal hygiene, domestic material environment, manner of speaking, and certain ways of expanding one's horizon (Volkov, 2000; see also Hoffmann 2018).

Farhod invested a lot of hope in my almost year-long stay at his house. He constantly urged his family to speak Russian with me, and even among themselves. To facilitate this process, he developed creative solutions. One day, he brought a selection of DVDs and ordered that his wife and daughters should watch the popular Turkish soap opera *Qara sevgi* (Black Love), which they watched every evening, only in dubbed Russian. When I had my Tajik lessons, Farhod insisted that we should all study together. This turned their living room into a study centred around the *khon-takhta* (low-legged table), and our long boring winter evenings became filled with fun and joy as we exchanged puns, wordplay and jokes. Despite all these efforts, and disregarding the fact that he was very much capable of conducting lengthy conversations and conveying complex ideas in Russian, Farhod was never happy about his progress, and dramatically exclaimed:

> Oh, it's never going to happen! We are such idiots! Every educated (Rus. *intelligentnyi*) person here knows Russian but us! You can't imagine how shameful (Rus. *pozor*) it is for me! We're so uncivilised! I have ten brothers and sisters, and they all can speak Russian very well and I am the last one, that's why I'm an idiot! They mock me all the time. We are so ill-mannered. Lena, educate us please (Rus. *Vospityvaite nas pozhaluista*)!

I was genuinely surprised by his statement that everyone around was more proficient in Russian than he was, as my observations clearly did

not confirm that. Moreover, his requests to 'educate' them made me feel uncomfortable as a citizen of the former coloniser's state, and as a scholar trained in a discipline with an uneasy colonial past. For a while, I tried to deconstruct the value of speaking Russian, and to persuade Farhod that there was nothing wrong with his accent. Yet, his struggle was real: he avoided talking to me on the street when we went to the bazaar together for fear of being overheard by passers-by who, according to him, would make fun of him later.

There were both pragmatic and symbolic reasons for Farhod's obsession with mastering Russian and teaching it to his children. He clearly wanted to prepare for the possibility of future migration to Russia, but, more importantly, he wanted to fit the image of a modern man, and he insisted that 'every educated person must speak Russian'.[13] While the former can be explained by the scope of normalised transnational labour migration, and people's hopes that proficiency in Russian will help them navigate the Russian labour market and protect them from discrimination, the latter needs to be interpreted in the broader social context of northern Tajikistan. Although its internationalist past has long gone, the north of Tajikistan is still a multilingual place, where people sometimes use a form of Russian as a lingua franca. At the same time, knowing Russian stretches far beyond its pragmatic value – it signifies a 'broader involvement in the Soviet project of modernization', and it is associated with cosmopolitan aspirations and the ability to interact outside regional boundaries, as Till Mostowlansky (2017, 21) has shown in the case of Pamir.

Since Independence, foreign loanwords have been purged out of literary Tajik, and it has gradually replaced Russian as the language of higher education. However, Russian is still very much present in universities, especially in the capital. Students use old Russian textbooks, and the language is entangled in the terminology of many disciplines. In northern Tajikistan, everyone I met seemed to ascribe a high pragmatic and symbolic value to the Russian language, which I explore in more detail elsewhere (Borisova 2023b). Its presence could be seen in the urban space, for example, in advertisements in the bazaar, which sometimes used awkward phrasing – revealing that the owner did not fully understand the meaning of all words used. Such advertisements immediately fell prey to someone's exercises in wit and, being mocked, they were interpreted as another sign of the community sliding into 'savagery'.

Farhod was born in 1977, and therefore did not go through the same Soviet institutes of socialisation, unlike his elder brothers who served in

the Soviet army, and went to colleges and universities where Russian was the primary language of communication.[14] He had Russian teachers in kindergarten and at school, but the majority of the Russian-speaking population had left by the time he finished his secondary education, so there were no contexts left where he could practise on a regular basis. His youth corresponded with the Civil War (1992–7), which interrupted his plans of pursuing formal education in the musical academy after graduating from the local technical college with a certificate in carpentry. He had to drop out of the academy halfway through his studies, due to the introduction of fees and the harsh living conditions during the war. The fact that he could not finish his studies and did not manage to complete any degree, coupled with the specific relations of competition in sibling hierarchies (Roche 2014), added to his feelings of inferiority in relation to his siblings, all of whom had attained some kind of professional qualification.

However, his siblings' proficiency in Russian was not necessarily significantly higher than his. Like him, they also forgot words in the middle of the conversation, or mixed Russian with Tajik and Uzbek, and they also had a pronounced accent. Farhod's inability to appreciate his proficiency in Russian stemmed from the fact that, for him, the Russian language was symbolically charged, and embodied his wish to be perceived as educated and 'civilised', and to belong to the 'intelligentsia', rather than just to be able to communicate.[15] This resulted in him putting unreasonably high demands on his learning: his aim of achieving an 'accentless' Russian did not allow him to see his progress, and by the end of my fieldwork, he felt that his family had failed to make the most of their time with me. He was joking that they are so incapable that instead of learning Russian, they had taught me Tajik.

Farhod's bitter complaints about his inability to speak Russian correctly, and his longing to be a *kult'turnyi chelovek*, signified his desire to become a part of the kind of modernity-in-the-past that he never fully experienced. His imagination credited his siblings with better language capabilities because they had been socialised in Soviet schools, universities and workplaces: his siblings looked like an organic part of that modernity to him. Based on an ethnography of one woman's veiling dilemma, Julie McBrien (2017, 109) has shown that modernity can not only be tied to the present state or a desired future, but can also be experienced as a 'longing for a modern past'. Mukaddas, McBrien's interlocutor, from a small Kyrgyz town, was the same age as Farhod, and she considered herself to be educated and modern (although her degree did not have much use in the post-socialist context). Unlike her, Farhod

felt that he had never been fully modern: partly because his plans for education were disrupted by the harsh realities of the Civil War; partly because he had never joined the Soviet army or worked at a Soviet factory like one of his brothers; and partly because he had never enjoyed the 'bohemian' life of a student in a cosmopolitan, Russian-speaking city such as Tashkent or Dushanbe like his eldest brother. Farhod's need to overcome his 'backwardness' had taken on existential overtones.[16] He desperately needed to be modern, and achieving correct Russian was a crucial part of that project. Moreover, his recent experiences of migration to Russia had fuelled his desire to 'improve' his Russian. His attempts to speak Russian with an old Russian lady (*babushka*) when he had worked with his brothers in St Petersburg had become a family joke which produced tears of laughter at many family gatherings. More importantly, his encounters with Russian discourses on migrant workers from Central Asia as rural, uneducated 'dummies' speaking at best 'broken Russian' exacerbated Farhod's wish to avoid such labels and prove himself 'modern'.[17]

Farhod's longing for a modernity that he never had a chance to be a part of (neither in Tajikistan nor in Russia) led him to associate proficiency in Russian with a higher status in the present: the status he aspired to achieve, but which remained unattainable for him because of a lack of alternative avenues for upward social mobility. The following episode sums up his frustrations:

> Once we were sitting with our oligarch, and he said he bought *elitnye semena* (Rus. 'elite seeds') for his orchard. I didn't know what *elitnye* meant, and asked him. The oligarch made fun of me, 'Oh don't you know Russian?' It was so shameful for me!

The fact that a rich reputable man belonging to the local 'elite' (ironically, the word Farhod did not know) pointed to his lack of knowledge was particularly hurtful, as it illuminated his inability to belong to the 'elite'.

Bodily presence in the community

During my yearlong stay at their home, Farhod always asked me a lot of questions about practices of caring for one's body, modes of dressing, modes of behaviour, and etiquette. He asked me what lotions and creams I put on the shelf in the bathroom, and how to use them, how people in Russia and abroad dress when they go to a party, and how they socialise.

His curiosity extended to the intimate domains of life, including spousal relationships. Soon, I realised that his body (and the bodies of his family members) was a site where the constant work of crafting a modern self was being done. A big part of this bodily cultivation was linked to his professional status and his aspiration to belong to the urban educated class. Living under the scrutinising gaze of the community, and striving to cultivate the bodily presence of a successful singer and a modern man, Farhod paid a lot of attention to his and his family's looks, moves, and places where they were to be seen.

In his study of Uzbek neighbourhoods (*mahalla*) in the city of Osh, Morgan Liu (2012, 129) argues that neighbourhoods are places where 'particular sensorial geographies' enable 'mutual involvement and accountability', and nothing is left unnoticed as news and gossip circulate at unimaginable speeds. As a result, individuals can experience the space of the *mahalla* as both a space of harmony, mutual help, care and moral upbringing (*tarbiia*), and as a 'space of sinister panoptic power, where one's every action is seen, reported, and judged by others' (Liu 2012, 120). The awareness that his bodily comportment was constantly scrutinised by his neighbours, colleagues and acquaintances in town, and subjected to public commentary at all times, made Farhod extremely self-conscious. The pressures of the expectations stemming from his family history, professional belonging and aspirations to be modern were visceral.

Every departure from the intimate space of the *havlī* was preceded by a lot of work for the whole family: Zebo would iron his shirt, polish his shoes, and give him a fresh handkerchief; the children would wash his old Mercedes; he would shave, generously apply cologne and hand cream, put on a suit (for work) or jeans and a perfectly ironed shirt and sunglasses; and only then did he feel prepared to subject himself to people's gazes. Farhod's efforts of self-presentation stretched to the bodies of his family members as well: he would not allow his wife or daughters to dress in a tasteless or 'rural' manner, such as wearing a dressing gown in the town. As long as the weather was not too hot, every time we went to the town, the girls wore *kurtai rus* (Taj. 'Russian dress'): a mid-length dress with black or transparent tights, instead of the traditional colourful Tajik dresses (*kurtai tojikī*), consisting of a loose dress and light trousers, and polished shoes instead of domestic slippers. Convenient for the hot weather, the latter was often the norm for local women (domestic, street and even fancy styles were available at the local bazaar), but Farhod insisted that his family could not go to the town dressed in clothes which would be considered appropriate only for the domestic space.

All these manipulations were part of creating an *akkuratnyi* (Rus. 'neat') look, which Farhod said used to be an inseparable part of the professional and everyday life of every Soviet man, but which lost its significance as people lost their jobs when industries shut down.[18]

For Farhod, this connection was further reinforced by the public nature of his occupation. The development of an elaborate ritual economy market (see Chapter 3) made his income contingent on his appearance as a crucial part of a desirable performance. Having a 'neat', youthful look was both a part of his ideas about artisthood, and spoke to the demands of the market. A failure to be invited to perform at weddings would not only reduce Farhod's income, but would also signify a lack of public recognition as a professional entertainer and talented singer who 'serves' (Taj. *khizmat kardan*) people (see Klenke 2019, 107–9). The Tajik expression for 'worker of culture' (*khizmatrasoni san'atkorī*) is derived from the verb 'to serve', and can be literally translated as 'the servant of art'. This is a service which invites remuneration in terms of prestige and the admiration of the audience. Razia Sultanova (2005, 141) highlights the 'archetypical role of wedding singers' as 'the main artistic figures' in Central Asia, whose performances generate 'hundreds of myths, anecdotes and stories … passed from generation to generation'. The role of a wedding singer is an inherently creative one: he must be a performer, a chairman, an entertainer, a producer and an improviser. Although with the spread of synthesised sound and the marketisation of wedding rituals, this 'multitasked' role has significantly changed (Spinetti 2005), Farhod's self-image as an artist was to some extent informed by these 'traditional' ideas about artisthood, including claims for playing a specific role in the community.

Farhod's positioning as a 'cultured person' was also intricately linked with ideas about his bodily presence in different spaces. While some spaces were the natural habitat for 'cultured' people, others were associated with backwardness and *grubye* (Rus. 'rude') people, and were to be avoided. He hated performing at 'uncivilised' weddings held in dusty courtyards, rather than at modern *tūikhona*. The space itself provoked certain embodied responses to ideas about social propriety (Liu 2012), and Farhod claimed that while a 'dusty backyard' invited one to make a 'drunken mess' (Rus. *bardak*), in a restaurant people were likely to behave and *tsivilizovanno posidet'* (Rus. 'have a civilised gathering'). He did not drink alcohol, although it was a normalised part of being a Tajik man belonging to a certain professional group – a 'worker of culture' – which implied a certain corporate identity, rituals and practices, including collective leisure activities (see

Abashin 2015a, 420–4). According to Farhod, drinking alcohol would negate his attempts at cultivating his 'culturedness', as *araq* (vodka) made people lose their humanity/culturedness and start to behave like animals/savages instead.[19] This excluded him from socialising with many of his peers, who he always condemned for behaving like *bomzhy* (Rus. 'homeless'), meaning hanging out on the street without any particular purpose, drunk and untidy, instead of working and actively improving their lives. Being cultured also meant engaging in certain leisure practices. On one occasion, he reacted to my comment that local men preferred to spend a lot of time outside at a teahouse (*choikhona*):

> They don't understand! Spending time with your wife is *rohat* (Taj. 'a pleasure')! I don't want to go anywhere without my wife. My classmates[20] call me every day to join them but I never go there. They sit, drink vodka, and boast about how much money they made in Russia and how many lovers they had there. Every time I waste 50 somoni, I think I could have bought something for the house. Every time I go somewhere, see a new place, or try some food, I wish my family could do it with me!

Farhod always highlighted that his family's way of living belonged to an urban environment, but he was unfortunately bound to this *dikii kishlak* (Rus. 'savage village') as he had inherited his house from his father and could not move away. In Tajikistan, people use the adjective *kishlachnyi* (Rus. 'rural') not as a descriptive characteristic of place, but for indexing certain ways of being that are associated with a rural environment, coded by specific behaviours in public, modes of dressing, demeanour, eating habits and level of education (Mostowlansky 2017, 20). Such modes of being can be transplanted to the city when people move, so it is possible to be a city dweller but to behave like a true villager. In the 1950s, Tajikistan's main cities became centres for education, vibrant cultural and social life, and cosmopolitan lifestyles (Kalinovsky 2018). Studying or working in the city was a transformative experience which dramatically changed the lives of many people from smaller villages. Although after Independence and the Civil War, Tajikistan's cities experienced a collapse of infrastructure and mass outmigration of many educated professionals, they remained important nodes for images of modernity. Against this backdrop, Farhod's attempts to craft himself as a *kul'turnyi chelovek* were aimed at claiming the opposite: for him, it was possible to live in the village, but to have an urban lifestyle, dramatically different from his neighbours and peers.

Attention to people's bodies, especially female ones, has long been at the centre of analyses of power in the region (Cleuziou and Direnberger 2016; Harris 2011; Kudaibergenova 2019; Megoran 1999). Researchers have noted how objectified, gendered bodies become sites for the articulation and contestation of nationalist ideologies (Irby 2018; Suyarkulova 2016), political struggles for power in the region (Boboyorov 2017), and governments' attempts to create brand images of a nation ingrained in the bodies of their citizens (Ibañez-Tirado 2016). These images are gendered: they picture 'modern' men as leaders, and 'traditional' women as mothers, and respectively associate them with the public and domestic domains (Beyer and Kojobekova 2019; Cleuziou and Direnberger 2016; Roche 2016). This reveals the government's ambition to cultivate a certain type of modern citizen – educated, secular and progressive, but also honouring the past and tradition. This is the image that Farhod conveyed during his performance that I described at the beginning of this chapter. A performer's body can become an embodiment of hegemonic ideas about nationhood (Klenke 2019). Performers are expected to look and behave in a certain way, one that is compatible with national cultural values and ideas about moral integrity. As a result, their appearance and demeanour are scrutinised vis-à-vis these ideas, both on stage and in their private life, where they must be careful not to transmit any images of 'moral laxity'. People nevertheless find ways to creatively assemble 'compulsory dress codes, incoming fashion trends, family expectations and personal aesthetics', while demonstrating a willingness to show loyalty to their country as 'living carriers of Tajikistan's traditions and interests' (Ibañez-Tirado 2016, 27, 37). Looking beyond moments of performing on stage and addressing the realm of the everyday, I explored the complexity of Farhod's creative efforts to cultivate himself as a particular kind of modern subject. Operating within the state's discourses, his efforts were informed by historically grounded ideas about *kul'turnost'*, his experiences of socialist modernity, different elements of his social positioning and his personal taste, none of which were mutually exclusive. Farhod's case shows how people's 'bottom-up' modes of self-fashioning go beyond the dichotomy of state-imposed images versus their subversion and resistance in practice.

I can't go to Russia! I have to go

Farhod had been to Russia twice: once in 2002, when he joined his elder brothers to earn money for their new-born son's circumcision;

and in 2010, after his father's long-term illness and death, which left his family in debt. A need to leave at critical moments of sudden emergency (someone's death, a serious health issue of a family member, an urgent need to pay debts) is at the heart of widespread perceptions of migration in Tajikistan. Experiences of uncertainty in everyday life in Tajikistan are mediated by the image of Russia as a place where it is possible to 'find money' (Taj. *pul ëftan*) quickly. However, alongside different contingencies, temporalities of departure are based on the normative life-course construction. Thus, Farhod knew that once his wife gave birth to a boy, they would need to hold a circumcision feast at some point, the sooner the better. Similarly, they started to prepare dowries for their daughters far in advance: every time they had spare money and came across nice things for the household or beautiful golden jewellery, they bought it. Migrants often find themselves caught between different temporalities, marked by the necessity to 'find money' for big life-cycle events, and other crucial life projects such as house construction or car purchases, and emergency situations such as sudden illness or a death (see Chapter 4). Paired with the contingencies of migrant life, many migrant workers get stuck working in Russia for years, remitting their earnings home to cover every emerging need for their families, but they still imagine their transnational living as a temporary stage (Abashin 2015b). Farhod was a rare example of a migrant man who did not get caught up in these perpetual cycles because, first, he earned good seasonal wages for his wedding performances before the Tajikistani state tightened its attempts to regulate ritual consumption (see Chapter 3), and, second, his personality and ambition made it very hard for him to adjust to an abject condition of migrancy in Russia.

However, the maintenance of reputation in Tajikistan was obviously an expensive enterprise for Farhod, as attempts to cultivate himself as a cultured person, a good man and a professional singer needed to be substantiated through significant monetary investments. One day, Farhod asked me if he should buy an iPhone, or a bicycle so that he could cycle to work, with the benefit of saving money on gas and losing some weight. I was about to reply, when his son exclaimed that it was ridiculous for a singer to ride a bicycle, and stressed that they were not some *kolkhozniki*.[21] Farhod mocked him, 'our people are not ashamed to work on construction sites in Russia, why will I think about *obrū* (Taj. 'reputation', 'prestige') here if I can't provide for a family?'[22]

Throughout my stay, Farhod made multiple attempts to plan his budget and look for alternative sources of income: from buying more livestock, building a greenhouse and cultivating lemons or flowers for

sale, to saving money by taking a bus to work instead of driving. He asked his kin, friends and colleagues to gather information on possible options, and he tried to calculate whether they might work. This often implied sitting in a family circle with a calculator and arguing. Gulbahor's wedding significantly added to Farhod's anxieties (see Chapter 3). Obsessed with 'finding money', Farhod often complained about compulsive thoughts, which resulted in bodily reactions and losing his 'taste' for music:

> It lingers in my head. I have to buy food, I have to renovate the house, I have to marry my daughters off … Where will I find money to keep us going for another week? Where should I go, to Isfara [a nearby town], to Khujand, to Russia? I can't memorise my lyrics anymore. I used to memorise three or four a day, and today I have heard this damned song twenty times but then forgot it in half an hour!

In debt after Gulbahor's wedding, he was desperately trying to hold his financial and existential concerns together, but on one August day he told me quietly, 'I think I will go to Russia again. I'm not managing here.'

'Russia is not a resort'

Similarly to the UK and Europe, in Russian public discourse, migration is mostly portrayed as undesirable, as a state security problem and a threat to 'national unity', with migrants either criminalised or victimised, and denied agency. Deemed to be a social problem, migration is discursively linked to a lack of integration, rising crime rates, the proliferation of corruption and informality. A 'typical migrant' is represented as an illiterate, unsophisticated, unskilled young man from rural Central Asia with a poor knowledge of Russian, and who is not flexible enough to adapt to an urban 'civilised' lifestyle (Abashin 2012). In the early 2010s, multiple programmes in 'adaptation and integration' and the promotion of 'ethnic tolerance' (Rus. *etnotolerantnoe otnoshenie*) offered migrants a crash course in the urban lifestyle. These programmes advised migrants not to speak their languages in public places, not to wear traditional clothes, not to cook national food on terraces, and not to squat and spit on the ground. Moreover, they should appreciate 'the great Russian culture', ignore bullying behaviour, and try to make their presence as convenient and invisible as possible for the local populations. Oksana Karpenko (2013) has shown how this division between 'hosts' and

'guests' stems from a specific 'mild' form of cultural racism. This form of racism does not openly claim that some groups – in this case, locals (Rus. *korennoe naselenie*) – are more cultured than the others, and thus entitled to privilege. However, this assumption is implicit in the idiom of 'cultural erosion' caused by the mass inflow of strangers, a concept used to raise concerns about the 'compatibility' of some cultures. Such developments in public discourse normalise the position of migrants as 'homo laborans': a temporal, disposable, cheap labour force (Nikiforova and Brednikova 2018) who can contribute to the creation of Russian modernity, but who can never become a part of it.

An abrupt transition from being a well-known singer in his motherland to a 'black' manual worker in St Petersburg made Farhod deeply unhappy. He felt on the verge of losing his humanity, and he swore that he would never go to Russia again. Among the main reasons that Farhod listed for his unhappiness were exploitative working conditions, the lack of freedom of movement due to constant document checks, cramped living conditions, racism and a constant craving to be with his family. He summarised his experiences in our interview:

> I felt so miserable in Russia! I slept with ten people on the floor in one room! There's a constant queue for the bathroom. Someone had smelly socks. I couldn't sleep at night because of bed bugs' bites and then I had to wake up at five in the morning to go to work. We came back home, and while we were cooking, washing dishes and doing laundry, it already turned twelve at night! Then again, you go to bed, you can't fall asleep, and have to wake up at five. Then you work in a closed space without daylight, without proper ventilation, it's dusty and noisy, they don't provide you with any mask. You get in in the morning and get out at 10 p.m. when it's already dark outside, with a five-minute lunch break. If you take more time, the Russians start to reproach us that we don't work properly, but they sit as long as they want. Then you hardly manage to eat and sleep, and have to go to work again: work–flat–work–flat, all the same every day! You don't feel like a human being. I got so annoyed with such a schedule. I even started to smoke there. I don't want such a life. I know if I go there again, I will live like a *bomzh* (Rus. 'homeless'). I'm a creative man (Rus. *tvorcheskii chelovek*). I want to sing my songs, I want to relax, to walk around. Who will I be there? Just a labourer … That's why when my classmates call me, I'm not interested. I saw how they live there. But here they behave like kings! They build these houses to show off, but who are they? Just *mardikory*,[23] slaves in Russia!

Not willing to fall into the category of 'slave' himself, Farhod tried to maintain his previous way of being: taking advantage of being in the 'cultural capital of Russia', he visited tourist places and went to museums.[24] However, his attempts to act as a *kul'turnyi chelovek* were so much more expensive than in Tajikistan that his family started to question his ability to remit. Soon, his life became subordinated to the gruelling rhythm of his work schedule, and it was reduced to the overcrowded apartment and the closed, dusty room at the factory. It was virtually impossible for him to articulate his *kul'turnost'* under such conditions: being in the midst of Russian modernity, he was constantly denied his own.

To a large extent, Russian discourses on migration contribute to the shaping of public images in Tajikistan. As Malika Bahovadinova (2016a, 185) argues, the figure of the migrant sits uncomfortably with the Tajikistani government's nation-building projects in the context of the Tajik economy's dependence on migrant remittances. On the one hand, migrants are pictured as heroes selflessly contributing to the development of their motherland through their remittances. On the other hand, they provoke the anxieties of the Tajik middle class and elite that migrant workers will be conflated with the rest of the Tajik nation. Being appointed as representatives of the Tajik nation, migrants are burdened with the responsibility of showing its 'proper' face. Should they not fit the category of an ideal migrant (and surely they never can), they are considered to be 'shameful citizens', in need of 'education' in the Russian language, laws and proper modes of behaviour (Bahovadinova 2016a, 179–218). I encountered similar criticisms of migrants in my field: although everyone knew that (in Farhod's words) 'Russia is not a resort' (Rus. *Rossiia ne kurort*), they still criticised migrants for their lifestyle, which left little space for the articulation of their cultured-ness. No wonder that in trying to combat this 'double representative burden' (Bahovadinova 2016a, 182), Farhod was trying hard to reject a migrant identity and to articulate his modernity. However undesired and illegalised, migrants are expected to fit in to shared expectations of what migrants in Russia are for (that is, doing the jobs that locals do not want), and what niches (and spaces) they ought to occupy (see Introduction).

'You must endure'

One hot June morning in 2018, Farhod and Zebo were sitting under a lush apricot tree in their garden sipping green tea for breakfast. They had

just married off Gulbahor, and they hoped to repay their debt in a couple of years, before thinking about Gulrukhsor's wedding. Yet, one family was particularly persistent in proposing to Gulrukhsor that summer, and now Farhod and Zebo were breaking their heads to decide if they should agree, and incur more expenses. Farhod, who was coming up with more and more arguments every day about why he could not go to Russia, said: 'I can't go to Russia. I don't know why, but something goes wrong every time. I know if I go, I won't make any money.' Throughout my yearlong stay in their household, I regularly witnessed such conversations. I knew what would follow: Farhod would throw in yet another argument about why he was not going to Russia, starting from the hardships of a migrant life, and his lack of necessary skills to succeed in Russia, and finishing with his inherent lack of fortune (*rizq*) in life. Zebo would look at him disapprovingly, but would nod in silent agreement. But this time, her annoyance seemed to have outweighed the cultural pressure to show reverence to her husband, and she raised her voice, 'Uh-oh! Because you must endure (Rus. *terpet' nado*).'

On top of his fruitless attempts to maintain a bodily presence of *kul'turnyi chelovek* in Russia, Farhod could barely meet the expectations of his family. His kin judged him for his lack of patience and his inability to endure, which is considered the main prerequisite to succeed in life, especially as a migrant. As I was interviewing one of his nephews who had worked for years at the factory where he helped Farhod get a job, he made fun of Farhod:

> He called home every day and told them he wanted to come back. Zebo told him to work, because they had debts. But he would just mock her, saying, 'You don't need a husband, do you?' [laughing]. He's not patient. We also miss our wives and parents, but what can we do? We have to pay debts. We endure somehow! (Rus. *My zhe kak-to terpim*).

In her ethnographic exploration of everyday life in the south of Tajikistan, Diana Ibañez-Tirado documents very similar experiences of 'losing humanity' and feeling 'like an animal' (Taj. *rangi haivon*) among migrant workers (Ibañez-Tirado 2013, 216–18). Addressing these experiences, her interlocutors used a word designating a culturally specific emotion of being *ziq*. She glosses *ziq* as 'world-weariness', pointing to the ability to make oneself happy (Taj. *khursand*) as a quality inherent to Tajik personhood.[25] If one fails to cope with this feeling, and allows it to persist for a long time, it results in prolonged suffering (Taj. *azob*),

manifested in a complete loss of interest in life and a loss of personhood. Migrant workers coped with such experiences with wit, irony and joking, rather than complaining about their misfortunes. They asserted their moral subjecthood through constructing themselves as being capable of enduring the hardships they faced. Conveyed by the verb *toqat kardan*, the ability to endure is considered to be both an important constitutive of gendered personhood – a skill essential to face the hardships of everyday life – and a religious virtue (*sabr*) (see Cieślewska 2021). As it is a hard task to find a family who were not affected by migration in the region, migration was recognised as a collective but necessary suffering, a sacrifice one made to become a proper member of the community, something which was achieved by submitting to the gendered roles of obedient sons and caring fathers.

Against this backdrop, men 'who do not go to Russia' (*Rossiava namerad*) found themselves in an uneasy situation. Analysing the ways in which migration and masculinity are co-constitutive in the Sokh Valley in Uzbekistan, Madeleine Reeves (2013b) notes an inherent contradiction: migration consolidates one's status as a man, but it also carries 'existential and emotional risks'. Thus, non-migrants'[26] and male returnees' position in the community is ambivalent: on the one hand, they are present to take care of their family (see Chapter 4), but on the other, they can be considered as failed subjects because they could not handle a period of work in Russia, where 'all human needs and desires are subordinated to the uncompromising demands of earning, saving, and keeping out of the way of the local police' (Reeves 2013b, 326). An emphasis on the physical prowess of migrant workers to succeed in the Russian labour market, coupled with the representation of migrants as 'uncivilised', has meant that there was no place in the Russian migration regime where Farhod's personhood of a 'cultured man' carried any value. Living out this tension, Farhod often talked about his presence in Russia as marked by experiences of being *ziq*. His inability to cope with his *ziq*-ness, and his unwillingness to engage in this collective suffering, caused his family's indignation, and was recognised as involving a lack of the qualities inherent to a proper manhood in the region.

Excluded from modernity

During Farhod's first trip to Russia in the early 2000s, he and his brothers sold all the dried apricots they had brought from Tajikistan, and they decided to stay in Russia longer to earn more money. As they did not

have an established social network of kin and neighbours in Russia who would help them find a job, they walked from one construction site to another in search of work:

> I entered their boss's office and I said that we needed work, we could do any kind of work. He asked me if I had any qualifications, and I said that I had studied at the musical academy, and my brothers were musicians. Then he ridiculed us – he called a crane operator and said 'Look, *artisty* came to find a job! Do we need an orchestra under your cranes? No, we don't. Go away guys!'

As people struggle to make sense of their perceived 'modern' past and 'less-modern' present (McBrien 2009), migration to Russia has become not just a means to an (economic) end, but a project of becoming subjects with the capacity to be modern. I have approached modernity as a category constituted through the multitude of creative projects of individual and collective self-fashioning. These projects are not coherent but are rather idiosyncratic, and they simultaneously draw on different, historically grounded lexicons and imaginaries of what it means to be a modern person. Moreover, these projects of modern self-fashioning are inherently 'bodily' in the sense that the labour of striving to be recognised as a 'modern' subject is performed in the flow of everyday life through the cultivation of language abilities, certain types of bodily comportment, practices of caring for one's body, modes of dressing, and positioning one's body vis-à-vis other, less or more 'modern', bodies and places. Yet, these modes of self-fashioning are of little relevance for Russian society, as the Russian migration regime is rooted in the representation of nationals of Central Asian countries as unskilled 'migrant workers' in need of being educated to be 'prepared' for work in Russian cities (Bahovadinova 2023). Their presence on the territory of Russia is contingent on subordinating their aspirations for modernity to the physical prowess and docility needed to construct modern life for the Russian middle class.

I have presented the figure of Farhod and his projects of self-fashioning as a 'cultured man' as emblematic for the community's longing for a specific vernacular version of modernity. In Tajikistan, Farhod experienced tensions in trying to reconcile the multiple concerns of being a caring father, a good citizen and a good community member. He found himself caught between the need to sustain his modern personhood in the community and the state imposing a uniform national identity based on a rigid notion of tradition: the topic I explore

in the next chapter. The urgency of his decision to go to Russia, and his temporary absence, needs to be understood as being mediated by particular relations of indebtedness and care (Chapter 4). In Russia, however, his attempts to craft himself as a modern subject were bound to fail. Suddenly, the proficiency in Russian which he was longing to attain back in Tajikistan in order to be perceived as belonging to the educated urban class was not enough for him to be recognised as part of Russian society. Neither could his modern clean house, his smart clothes, his neat look and impeccable personal hygiene prevent him from falling into the uniform category of 'blacks' 'flooding' Russia and 'polluting Russian culture'.

Thus, Farhod's figure reveals the tragic paradox of contemporary migration in Tajikistan: driven by the economic and social upheavals of the post-Soviet period, it aims to fill a gap not only in family budgets, but also in people's sense of self. But this gap can hardly be closed. The Tajik state promotes its rigid versions of modernity and tradition without providing its citizens with the resources to comply. The Russian state, to which they turn in search for the resources for their projects of self-fashioning, entraps them in the category of disposable labour migrants, and prevents them from articulating their aspirations to be recognised as modern subjects.

Notes

1   The Russian word *artist* is a polysemantic word, which broadly denotes people belonging to the arts community – singers, musicians, actors and dancers. In Soviet times, there was a separate niche of *artisty estrady* – singers who were politically and socially approved, and authorised by the state to perform for a wide audience (see Klenke 2019). Besides being involved in 'state spectacles' (Adams 2010), the majority of *artisty* have always performed at life-cycle events, and there are certain expectations attached to this role in the community (Sultanova 2005).

2   *Shashmaqom* is a Central Asian classical instrumental music genre, associated with the Persian legacy of the region. Drawing on the lyrics of Sufi poems, *shashmaqom* is performed solo, or by a group of singers and an orchestra of lutes, fiddles, frame-drums and flutes. *Shasmaqom* music is on the UNESCO list of intangible heritage. As a classical music genre, *shashmaqom* is invested with high importance in the Tajik nation-building project. During Soviet times, the genre underwent significant transformation due to 'national demarcation' and the creation of national cultures, which resulted in its professionalisation and the creation of state authorised ensembles. On the construction of *shashmaqom* as a Tajik national emblem in Soviet times, and its post-Soviet developments, see Spinetti (2009). For some recorded examples of the genre, see Levin et al. (2016). The web page of the project is https://www.musicofcentralasia.org/Tracks/Chapter/18.

3   Farhod considered summer his 'high' season, peaking in August (excluding during Ramadan, when it falls in summer months). Summer has become the 'wedding season', due to migration flows becoming structured in a certain way: young migrants typically 'wait out' conscription times (autumn and spring) in Russia. Bad conditions and *dedovshina* (Rus. 'ritualised hazing') make two-year conscription highly undesirable for families.

4   Qonuni Jumhurii Tojikiston az 28 avgusti soli 2017, no. 1461 'Dar borai tanzimi an'ana va jashnu marosim dar Jumhurii Tojikiston'.

5   Farhod's summer wages would keep his family going for the entire year before the new version of the law was passed. Although this development jeopardised other singers' and musicians' incomes, some of them had already been working in Russia in winter and spring, returning to Tajikistan only in the summer to perform during 'the season'.

6   Afghanistan serves as a Central Asian 'savage slot' – the embodiment of 'savagery' (*dikost'*), poverty, ignorance and war (Liu 2012, 169; Mostowlansky 2017, 12).

7   As a number of scholars have shown, Soviet modernisation projects successfully transformed people's identities. As Julie McBrien (2009, S131) has pointed out, by the middle Soviet period, Central Asians perceived themselves as modern, even if this experience was based on living through many contradictions and having to reconcile newly produced dichotomies such as Muslim/atheist (see also Abashin 2014a; Grant 1995; Rasanayagam 2009).

8   In her analysis, Malika Bahovadinova draws on the odious brochure for migrant workers depicting migrants as tools (a broom, a palette knife, a paint-roller and a paintbrush) being educated by locals (who are drawn as people) about the rules of behaviour in St Petersburg (see https://www.the-village.ru/city/situation/118264-venik-i-valik).

9   While they are still grappling with making sense of their Soviet past and post-Soviet present (Ibañez-Tirado 2015).

10 This is one connotation of this word. As other researchers have pointed out, this colloquial Russian word has become an emblem of how people talk about post-Soviet upheavals – pointing to the collapsing economy, a lack of rule of law, and general disorientation (Nazpary 2002; see also Liu 2012; McBrien 2017).

11 If Afghanistan can be considered a Central Asian external 'savage slot', then for my interlocutors, southern Tajikistan served as an internal one: a place with remnants of old traditions, but also a wild and violent place with uncultured and savage people, whose very language showed a lack of propriety and respect. On internal distinctions and local hierarchies of ethnic and regional groups in Tajikistan from the perspective of the inhabitants of Pamir, see Mostowlansky (2017, 69–89).

12 One of my interlocutors, a former professor of economics in Dushanbe, made this point in our conversation, using the metaphor of a state as a living organism which is growing and developing over time: 'you know, Soviet and post-Soviet Tajikistan is like the sky and the ground (Rus. *nebo i zemlia*)! This war set us back so much! But gradually everything is developing. How old is our state? 26! So, think about it, what is a 26-year-old person like?'

13 This echoes the words of President Rahmon, who emphasised the value of languages, and said that every educated person in Tajikistan must speak at least three languages: Tajik, Russian and English. This was taken as an instruction at the school where I worked, and the administration were trying to organise extracurricular activities in English as well. Farhod had no interest in English at all, however.

14 His eldest brother studied in the Tashkent conservatory and, at the time of my research, held a high position in the administration of the conservatoire in Dushanbe, which did not translate into a high income, however. Towards the end of my stay, his wife went to Moscow to earn money to support their student children. Another older brother worked at the cotton gin factory in Soviet times, and then spent around ten years working in Russia. They were both very fluent in Russian.

15 Vadim Volkov (2000, 223–5) points to the linguistic aspect of *kul'turnost'* in the making of a 'cultured man' during the early Soviet period. A certain *kul'tura rechi* (Rus. 'culture of speech') manifest in the 'mastery of a correct, literary speech-manner' came to be perceived as being 'inalienable from the personality', thus signifying one's personal level of 'culturedness' more than any external attribute.

16 The new Soviet intelligentsia, sometimes broadly defined as educated professionals, played a crucial role in cultivating and transmitting the value of *kul'tura*. Farhod had never been a part of this new urban intelligentsia, which was born in the cities of Leninobod (the former name of Khujand) and the capital, Stalinobod (Dushanbe) in the 1950s, and his socialisation did not include the same experience of social mobility, exposure to certain aesthetic forms, and a cosmopolitan outlook (Kalinovsky 2018).

17 Purist ideas about the Russian language emphasise the importance of correctness, and equate a lack thereof with a lack of culture. They are very much present in contemporary Russia

among educated urban populations, for whom an ability to speak correctly is an object of pride, and any change in everyday speech practices is perceived negatively. An example of this is the animated public debates that happen every time when some changes in grammatical and phonetic norms are included in the main dictionaries, or never-ending complaints about the use of English loanwords. Very often, Russians shame each other for incorrect pronunciation and mistakes in everyday life, and especially online (which is, perhaps, a global phenomenon).

18 As Vadim Volkov (2000, 219) notes, 'the cultured individual was associated with an efficient worker'. *Kul'turnost'* in one's private life translated into impeccable discipline at the workplace, and a clean-shaven and tidy look became characteristic of a good worker.

19 Although abstinence from alcohol in Central Asia is usually considered in line with narratives about religiosity and the 'religious revival' (Cleuziou 2019b; McBrien 2006), Farhod never used religious rhetoric to explain his choice.

20 In Tajikistan, one's classmates (*hamsinf*) form a peer group with which people maintain a life-long connection. Adult men stick with groups of their ex-classmates for their whole lives, referring to them as 'my classmates', never as 'my former classmates'.

21 *Kolkhoznik* is a Russian word for collective farm workers, which has become a pejorative word to denote uncultured, narrow-minded rural people.

22 There is another native term for reputation, *nomus*, but it points more to the moral dimension, and has been discussed in relation to gendered notions of honour and shame (*nomus* and *aib*) as a mechanism of control over female sexuality (Harris 2005).

23 Translated from Tajik, this literally means daily labourer. In Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, this word is used to designate private unqualified labourers doing manual work for low wages. There are places in towns and villages where they stand and offer their services, called *mardikor bozor*. Since this market is unregulated, *mardikor* are prone to abuse. On the emergence of female *mardikor* in Uzbekistan due to labour migration, see Reeves (2011b). On female *mardikor* in Tajikistan, see the short film by Mahpora Kiromova, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8JGRWsR4bg&ab_channel=MahporaK.

24 St Petersburg is often called the 'cultural capital of Russia', due to the large number of historical sites, museums, theatres and other tourist attractions in the city.

25 Experiences of joy and happiness are associated with parties and get-togethers that involve music, dancing and conviviality (see Féaux de la Croix 2016, 252–89). In this respect an important quality of a singer is their ability to make others happy.

26 Both regional and wider migration literature recognises categorical distinctions between migrants, non-migrants and those 'left-behind' as being problematic (Aitieva 2015; Archambault 2010; Gaibazzi 2015; Isabaeva 2011; Jónsson 2011; Reeves 2011b; Xiang 2007). The degree of normalisation of labour migration in Tajikistan, and the perception of Russia as a place to turn to in search of quick money, means that these categories can be collapsed. Farhod's life history is but one example: he managed not to tie his livelihood solely to work in Russia for the majority of his adult life, and yet he still felt forced to become 'a migrant' at certain critical points in his life-course – the identity he normally tried to avoid at all costs.

Interlude 3: Becoming a fiancée

'No way I get married to this guy!', claimed Gulbahor, when her father told her that someone was going to propose. She had seen him briefly from a distance at the wedding the previous day, and she had immediately discounted him, although when she realised someone was watching her, her eyes got a playful sparkle, and her moves became flowing, and her smile wider. The guy was clumsily shifting from one foot to another at the entrance to the *tūikhona*, and he was smiling stupidly in enchantment. There was something to get enchanted with. Gulbahor was considered to be one of the most beautiful and cheerful girls in the village – we received matchmakers every week, but Farhod was determined to let her finish her studies first. After four hours of family discussion, and several phone calls to multiple relatives and classmates, both Farhod and Gulbahor sounded less determined. Everyone confirmed he was from a good family. His former classmate, Gulbahor's cousin, yelled in the receiver: 'He's educated, he's well-off, he doesn't go to Russia. I don't understand, *tagho* (Taj. 'maternal uncle), what else do you want?!' Indeed, there was not much left to be wanted – the guy was a grandchild of a former head of a *kolkhoz* (collective farm). They had lands, connections and respect in the community.

I found his picture on Facebook. Gulbahor was hesitant to look. She dropped a quick glance. Then another one. 'Lena, don't you think he has stupid eyebrows?' I did not think anything. I was excited to be a part of this ethnographic moment, and I was trying hard to memorise every conversation we had. Four hours later, we decided to give it a go, and Gulbahor's father insisted that she meet the guy the next day. Gulbahor turned red: 'No, no, no!!! Lena tell them! I don't want to see him. What am I going to tell him? Oh my God! *Dado* (Taj. 'Father'), I don't want

to meet him!' Suddenly, Farhod got angry: 'What do you mean, you don't want to see him? Am I selling a cow or marrying off my daughter? You must decide, so that I will not be the one to be blamed afterwards!' Gulbahor smiled, but stuck to her point. Farhod yelled: 'Are you that silly? It's not a joke! *Eto tebe ne Rossiia* ('This is not Russia for you')!' He pointed at me: 'She can marry whoever she wants as many times as she fancies, but if you get divorced here, you're done, you're rubbish! No one will ever want you again!' I felt hurt. Finally, Gulbahor was defeated; she agreed to meet the guy.

The next afternoon, he showed up on our doorstep with his aunt, and we went through an hour of ritualistic mutual flattering. Finally, they said that they wanted to see the girl. I sneaked to the next room, where Gulbahor was rushing to get ready, but she could not find her socks in her panic. I gave her my socks and my perfume. She turned pale, 'Lena! What am I going to tell him? I don't know …' I did not know either. I was thinking about the ethical implications of any advice that I was going to give her. She was desperate, and I needed to say something. I told her that she should discuss plans for the future with him, ask him what he liked, and what kind of family life he imagined. Oh, and how many people were there in their household, because it indicated the amount of work she would have to do. She nodded, and I pushed her out of the room into the cold corridor where the guy was sitting on the chair. Fifty minutes later, the guy and his aunt left, having asked me, for some reason, if I liked the guy.

Gulbahor entered the room – she gasped for some air. She could not talk from excitement. The first thing she did was to make fun of the guy and herself: 'He couldn't look at me! Can you imagine? He was sitting all the time with his head hung and talking to the floor, not me. And he was as red as a tomato!' Her younger sister was all ears. She was impatient to have a bride in the house, and to start preparations for the wedding. Everyone wanted to know every detail, but the most important thing bothering Farhod was whether she liked him or not. Pushed to answer, she smiled, embarrassed, and kept saying, 'I don't know, Daddy! You'd better decide!' Then she added, 'You know he asked me about my plans, and I wanted to say that I firstly want to finish my studies and then get married, but I was so nervous that I confused and said, "I firstly want to get married and then finish my studies."' Everyone burst into laughter. Later on, she reported to me: 'Lena, I told him that I'm not going to wear a scarf, that I like modern clothes, I like making myself beautiful, and I also will not sit at home, I will study and then I will work! He told me he liked it too!'

Everyone in the community was familiar with how it usually goes. The groom's family promise everything, but after the wedding a bride and

her family will not have a say anymore, and can only hope that their new in-laws are decent people and will keep their promises. But more often, they do not. The pressures of married life are hard on a young woman, and she is forced to give up her studies to meet her multiple duties in her new home. She is expected to conceive as soon as possible, and if she has not done so within a year after the wedding, people talk. But even if her new family does not prohibit her from studying, it will not be possible to study and sit exams while having to care for a baby. Nevertheless, we were trying to convince ourselves that everything would be fine.

There is a kitchen psychology theory that you can fall in love in five minutes by asking your potential partner certain questions. They are probably not the questions about how I will wear my scarf as soon as I marry you. In Tajikistan, children's marital arrangements are still mostly made by kin. Although the idea of romantic love keeps penetrating the minds of young people through their exposure to globalised discourses on romance, is it the same romantic love? What does it look like under the strong ban on dating and courtship?

After Gulbahor got engaged, her groom started to take her out to cafes and to buy her gifts at the bazaar. The whole family meticulously counted every *somon* (local currency) that he spent on her, as a sign of his attachment and generosity. At the same time, in the dark of our bedroom, she shared different stories – an indiscreet look, an accidental touch, a couple of selfies taken in dangerous proximity, shared embarrassment… He would call her every night, and although she was deadly tired, she still could not tell him not to call. They would chat for hours, and then we would make fun of her bubbling romance. She would say, 'Ah, I'm annoyed already!' Nevertheless, despite late talks, she began to wake up earlier and earlier every morning to face the duties with which she would be confronted, once she becomes a *kelin*. The groom insisted that she did not go to work anymore. She agreed. Every time he bumped into us at the bazaar, he questioned her afterwards, so that she preventively stopped leaving the house without necessity. Her voluntary seclusion seemed to be an attempt to start converting herself into a proper obedient *kelin*. Was it work that she deliberately invested into cultivating affection and respect for her future husband and being a good wife? In the power hierarchy where young daughters-in-law have the subordinated position, is there space for romantic love? Farhod once told me, 'You should talk to her, give advice'. I replied, 'You know I don't feel I'm in a position to give any advice.' He laughed: 'I understand. Anyway, I'm sure she wouldn't understand you, because she thinks that Russian love is different from the Tajik one.'

3
Negotiating tradition: between custom and law

For Farhod, giving a daughter away (Taj. *dukhtarcha dodan*) became a matter that caused never-ending anxiety over the following months. He was delighted that the proposal came from the 'cultured' and wealthy (Taj. *puldor*) family of the former head of the neighbouring *kolkhoz*. At the same time, the whole process of preparation – finding creditors, renovating the house, chasing dowry items, doing paperwork – and the ceremony itself, generated many different concerns for him. He was terrified of the prospect of jeopardising his reputation by being unable to afford a proper wedding for his daughter, during which he would perform willingness to do everything according to 'tradition' for his in-laws and community (Cleuziou 2019b), but also enact his personal vision of what a modern person's wedding should look like. He was also worried about whether he would be able to secure a proper dowry for Gulbahor to proactively please her in-laws which, in turn, would signify his care and cement his reputation as a dutiful father and a proper head of a family (Abashin 2015a, 588; Zanca 2011, 110).

The new version of the law 'On ordering traditions, rituals, and ceremonies in the Republic of Tajikistan' (*Qonuni Jumhurii Tojikiston 'Dar borai tanzimi an'ana va jashnu marosim dar Jumhurii Tojikiston'*) passed on 23 August 2017 added significantly to Farhod's concerns. In an attempt to cut off ritual expenses and fight 'immoderacy' (*ziëdaravī*), the law prescribed the form and content of the main celebrations, tightened control over compliance, and imposed stricter measures for non-compliance. Introduced 'with consideration to the demands of the development of the society', the law aimed 'to defend the social interests of the people of Tajikistan, to facilitate the decrease in poverty, and to prevent excessive expenditure, which causes serious damage to

economic interests and moral foundations of the lives of citizens' (The Law of the Republic of Tajikistan No 1461, Chapter 1, Article 1:1).[1] In public discourse, the rise of excessive spending on weddings and other rituals was associated with mass migration of Tajik men to Russia, which had led to the inflation of ritual expenses and instigated competition in local communities (cf. Reeves 2012). Usmon, a middle-aged migrant worker, explained the difficulties to me:

> Usmon: Many people go to Russia to earn money for weddings, and then sit completely broke. In Soviet times, it cost just four thousand rubles to give a daughter away, and now those who go to Russia have added [to the dowry] golden jewellery and furniture and other stuff. Who needs this?
>
> Elena: And what do those who don't go to Russia do?
>
> Usmon: Well, they are pushed to take out bank loans and then repay. Because neighbours will be watching and judging. The mother-in-law will inspect what she [new daughter-in-law] brought there. Why do we need this? They aren't willing to educate their daughters – it costs two thousand dollars to enrol in college – but they are willing to pay five to ten thousand dollars for weddings! They want to impress everyone, but it will all be forgotten the next day…

Recent statistics do not necessarily confirm this. For instance, the report by the JICA Research Institute (2019) based on a panel study of migrant households revealed that only around 4 per cent of migrant remittances were spent on ritual events, while the majority covered daily needs – food, medical expenses and education.[2] Yet, establishing the links between conspicuous rituals as the drivers of migration and remittance dependence was the way people in Tajikistan made sense of rapid economic and social change. As a result, migrants were blamed for contributing to the commodification of traditional practices of life-cycle rituals, and scolded for the unproductive use of their time and money (Bahovadinova 2016a, 188). Usmon's criticism of migrants mirrored the logic of international organisations influencing the government's management of migration in the country, such as the World Bank and the International Organisation for Migration, who actively promoted 'the migration and development' framework (Kluczewska 2019; Kluczewska and Korneev 2021). According to this logic, the migration and development nexus can only materialise if remittances are turned into business investments, bank savings accounts or activities supposedly

generating social mobility, such as paying for children's formal education. The declared aims (social and economic development), as well as the means (limiting ritual consumption), of the *tanzim*[3] resonated with this logic. Consequently, many people perceived the law as the President's initiative to help migrants exit the cycle of migration and to stay home.

However, for Farhod, the *tanzim* resulted in the loss of his main income, which he derived from his private performances at ritual events. During the winter of 2017–18, he was constantly short of money, both for everyday family spending and for Gulbahor's wedding, and he was looking for creditors. For him, the developmental logic of the law had been reversed: instead of 'saving' him from going to Russia, it pushed him into the position of a migrant worker – the position he had success-fully been avoiding at all costs (Chapter 2). Apart from this, the law also challenged Farhod's attempts to sustain his reputation as a 'cultured' man and a generous host on a different level. Now, he had to reconcile these attempts with legal limitations on ritual practice, which created many mundane dilemmas during the wedding itself, including who should be invited, how many dishes should be served, whether gifts would be distributed, and so on. Complex experiences of balancing different concerns were marked by intense feelings of confusion, shame, fear and lack of control.

Brought into stark relief by his daughter's wedding, the multi-plicity of Farhod's concerns opens up a window on the complexity of marriage arrangements in contemporary Tajikistan in the context of migration, and in the light of the state's militant attempts to codify and legally regulate tradition. Instead of analysing *tanzim* in terms of extending the authoritarian power of the state – the type of analysis prevalent in the literature – I interpret *tanzim* as a modernisation project which implies the making of a certain kind of modern citizen in the name of the country's development. Framed as an attempt to eliminate the financial burden of costly rituals and, ultimately, to contribute to the country's development, the *tanzim* created yet another conundrum for people who were trying to enact their ideas about the good life. It added a new level of uncertainty to their attempts to craft themselves as proper persons, modern subjects and good citizens. Adopting a rigid notion of tradition, the *tanzim* exacerbated a mismatch between the government's attempts to define the parameters of the traditional and to promote the idea of a certain kind of modern citizen, and people's own understandings of what it means to be both a modern and a moral person honouring tradition. In practice, the *tanzim* inserted itself into the complex processes of negotiating what belongs to the realm of tradition

and should be performed during wedding celebrations, and how new elements might be incorporated. This caused confusion, complicated the process of creating relatedness between families, and threatened people's sense of self.

Weddings in Central Asia

Marriages are contested sites for the (re)production of social relations, ethnic and cultural identities, and gendered subjects constituted by broader political, legal, economic and social contexts (Cleuziou and McBrien 2021). Central Asian ways of getting married consist of three historically intertwined processes: a religious marriage (*nikoh*), state registration (*ZAGS*) and a *tūi* (a party thrown for the community, and perceived as lying in the realm of the traditional) (Figure 3.1). The symbolic and existential value of conducting a proper wedding ritual (*tūi*) in Central Asian societies cannot be exaggerated. As a 'membership fee for the community's acknowledgement' (Ilkhamov 2013, 280), *tūi* marks a family's new status, structures social relations with others, and forms the basis of a person's self-worth (Abashin 2003). Part of everyday sociality in communities, these events are powerful sources of

Figure 3.1   The wedding: leaving home, Sughd Province, winter 2019.

moral experience: it is through 'engaging within a project to marry and settle their children and participate fully within their community' that individuals develop an understanding of a moral self (Rasanayagam 2011, 48). In this respect, weddings are crucial sites for the production of gendered persons. They provide people with a 'stage' upon which they perform their roles of dutiful and caring fathers, husbands, sons and uncles, as well as good mothers, wives, daughters and aunts, and (re)position themselves vis-à-vis each other (see Ibañez-Tirado 2013).

The *tūi* became especially economically burdensome in the late socialist years and during the post-socialist economic and political upheavals (Aitieva 2015; Ilkhamov 2013; Koroteyeva and Makarova 1998; Reeves 2012; Rubinov 2014). The marketisation of ritual economy, the emergence of new consumption patterns, the decline in community support networks, the inflation of ritual expenses, and people's engagement in practices of traditionalisation, all contribute to making marriage an unmanageably expensive endeavour (Cleuziou 2019b; Reeves 2012; Trevisani 2016). Expenditures can vary significantly in different regions, and according to a family's status. It is difficult to find an average estimate: Farhod spent around £6,500 on Gulbahor's wedding, while some of my other interlocutors spent more than £9,500 on their daughters' weddings.[4] With the official average monthly salary of £95 in Tajikistan, taking loans and seeking employment in Russia have become the main means to finance weddings.[5] These rituals become enmeshed in migration cycles and intrinsically linked with (im)mobility, allowing people to enact their imaginations of the good life, but also pushing them into competition over displaying wealth, and causing more people to join the migration flow (Ilkhamov 2013; Reeves 2012; Rubinov 2014). This is precisely the process that the Tajikistani government sought to reverse with the *tanzim*.

Whereas for the Soviet modernist project, lavish wedding rituals in Central Asia embodied inherent traditionalism, which needed to be eradicated on the path to creating modern citizens (Poliakov 1992), the successor states' attempts to distinguish between 'bad' wasteful traditions and good 'authentic' ones have been considered as a sign of growing authoritarian tendencies. For instance, Sophie Roche and Sophie Hohmann have argued that although the *tanzim* draws on discourses of economic rationality, it reflects the state's anxieties about a 'possible loss of control over national cultural production, especially in the religious sphere', and feeds into an attempt to impose a homogeneous, folklorised Tajik cultural identity as 'imagined by state authorities' (Roche and Hohmann 2011, 123). Other scholars mention

the *tanzim* as a part of the government's efforts to further monopolise authority in religious and traditional spheres, such as through the imposition of dress codes (Boboyorov 2017; Ibañez-Tirado 2016), in line with the politics of 'secular extremism' that criminalised certain forms of religious expression in the country (Lemon 2016; Thibault 2018). These studies shed light on the *tanzim* as an instrument in political struggles for power and a mechanism of governance. However, they give a rather 'thin' reading of people's reckoning with it in their everyday lives.[6] They also ignore the complex entanglement of local ritual economies with recent processes of migration and Tajikistan's remittance dependency on Russia. Considering the rhetoric of social justice and economic development as a guise for the state's authoritarian desires solidifies the state–society dichotomy. As a result, people's practices are interpreted in terms of either compliance or resistance, or disguised resistance. This logic is then used to explain why people welcome the law but simultaneously circumvent it, while finding subtle ways to perform conformity. The state's inability to enforce the law, its imprecision and arbitrary enforcement, the historical flexibility of wedding rituals, the importance of 'peace ideology' to avoid open conflict, and the prevalence of people's reputational concerns, are all cited among the reasons for this circumvention (Cleuziou 2019b; Heathershaw 2009; Roche and Hohmann 2011).

With this chapter, I do not aim to examine the law's effectiveness in terms of its declared socio-economic and disguised political goals. I am rather concerned with how ordinary people navigate the space of ambiguity arising out of the mismatch between the state's lexicon of tradition and their own understandings of what constitutes tradition and how to enact the social propriety of wedding performances. My analysis is guided by two important considerations. First, although the government's discourses do reflect an attempt to tighten its control over the population, they are historically grounded and do not fall on 'bare' ground, but resonate with people's concerns about ever-expanding ritual expenses (Koroteyeva and Makarova 1998; Zanca 2011). Looking beyond the questions of struggle for authority reveals that discussions about ritual expenditures throughout the twentieth century resonate with broader questions, and people's attempts to locate their place in a changing world. They are trying to navigate what it means to be a good member of a community in a globalising region, and in the context of heightened mobility (Abashin 2003, 221). Second, while Central Asian states propagate homogeneous national identities backed by discourses on 'authentic' tradition, people engage in their own projects of traditionalisation from the 'bottom up' (Beyer and Finke 2019). These projects

are themselves contested, and involve constant negotiations of what belongs to the realm of the traditional (Cleuziou 2019b). The legal logic of the *tanzim* penetrates these negotiations and opens up an affectively charged space of indeterminacy, which generates multiple practical and ethical dilemmas. Attending to what happens in this space ethnographically pushes us to complicate the narratives about resistance to, or compliance with, authoritarian state power. The necessity to navigate this space of indeterminacy leads to a situation where people discursively welcome the new legal initiative, and find it nearly impossible to comply with it. Reflecting on this gap between discourses and practices of tradition, people draw on the historically grounded idioms of modernity, portraying themselves as needing to become more 'civilised'.

Tanzim: the workings of the law

The *tanzim* was passed in 2007 and, according to government officials, largely benefited ordinary citizens and resulted in a rise in the number of marriages. The new updated version of the *tanzim* passed on 23 August 2017, proposed by the president and unanimously approved by the government, introduced further limitations on the form and content of various celebrations. The law distinguished between official and family celebrations. Official celebrations included both large-scale national events accompanied by 'official spectacles' (Adams 2010), such as Independence Day (*Istiqloliiat*), Nation Unity Day (*Vahdati millī*), *Navruz* (a spring equinox celebration), and formal parties thrown to celebrate appointments to state positions, promotions, state awards, and academic and professional degrees. The law banned the latter ones (The Law of the Republic of Tajikistan No 1461, Chapter 3, Article 7). All other celebrations – birthdays (*zodrūz*), circumcisions (*khatnasur*), weddings (*tūii domodiu arūsī*), funerals (*dafnu azodorī*) and pilgrimages (*hajj*)[7] fell under the category of family events. While some events were curtailed and allocated specific temporal and spatial frameworks, others were simply banned. Perhaps the most widely debated move among my interlocutors was the reduction of the circumcision feast (*pisar tūi*) – which used to be similar to weddings, both in the scope of the performance and in expenditure – to a small family gathering (Abashin 2003; Chylinsky 1991; Ilkhamov 2013).

Many large-scale life-cycle rituals consist of a sequence of smaller ritual events in which different parts of the community participate: for example, Tajik weddings last for several weeks, and involve the

constant movement and circulation of people, items, gifts and food. Transferring a bride and her dowry from her parental home into her new home, incorporating her into her new family, and introducing her to domestic duties, are all accompanied by a number of ritual events. The same ritual has different local forms, with some villages expanding the scope of particular events into separate lavish ceremonies involving gatherings of many people, and the circulation of gifts and food.[8] The new law reduced these events to small family circle gatherings (*dar doirai oila*) without the presence of workers of culture (*be khizmatrasonii san'atkoron*), the slaughter of livestock (*be zabhi chorvo*), and invited guests. The law also forbade ritual exchanges of gifts, usually fabrics and clothes, at these events (Chapter 3, Article 10:2).[9] The central event of the wedding (which the law called *ziëfat* – 'banquet') was now to be held strictly over two days (three hours per event) with a maximum of 150 guests allowed for the wedding itself, and 200 for the preceding party. Pre-wedding parties are thrown by the bride's side for the kin, friends and colleagues who are unable to attend the main celebration, partly due to legal limitations. They are usually held in house courtyards or in wedding halls, and resemble the main wedding celebration both in scope and expenditure.[10]

In addition to imposing new limitations on people's ritual practices, the main 'innovation' of the updated law was the concerted effort at enforcement and the dispersed responsibility for its implementation. Special *tanzim* committees were created to monitor people's ritual lives at the regional, town, village (*komissiiahoi jam'iatī*) and neighbourhood (*komissiiahoi mahallī*) levels. Their main function was to detect lawbreakers by carrying out selective inspections and noting too many guests, too many cars in the wedding cortège, or overly long weddings. Village administrations became responsible for approving people's weddings in advance by signing permissions (*ma'lumotnoma*), and notifying the families about the length of celebrations and the number of guests allowed, as well as sanctions in the event of a breach. The amount of prior paperwork increased: one needed to secure the result of the bride's and groom's medical checks,[11] an approved application for marriage registration at the state office (*ZAGS*), and the local administration's approval of *tūi* in order to conduct an Islamic religious ritual (*nikoh*), and also to sign a contract with a wedding hall and singers. All workers of culture were given a copy of the law, requiring them to ensure the 'legality' of an event before signing a contract. Wedding halls were made responsible for controlling the number of guests and enforcing the three-hour time limit. Religious figures, social scientists,

representatives of civil society, local administrations, schoolteachers and state workers were allocated the task of propagating the benefits of the law and enlightening the wider public. The law was planned to be included in school and university curricula, and made part of other educational activities. Ordinary people learned about the new law from television, newspapers and local gossip. Finally, the law significantly raised the fines for noncompliance: around £2,500 for individuals, £3,200 for state officials (who also risked being fired), and £4,000 for legal persons.[12] The first prosecutions under the *tanzim* were swift, and, according to the head of the Tajikistani Supreme Court, 771 people were fined almost £300,000 in total for weddings that were 'too exuberant' in 2017 (Yuldashev 2017).

The moral dimension of expenditure: producing modern citizens and backwards subjects

One sunny September day at the beginning of my fieldwork, I was sitting in the teachers' room at the school, which was always lively: teachers came and went, and the breaks between lessons were filled with their gossip and laughter, and phone conversations with their migrant husbands. Suddenly, a smiling young woman appeared at the doorstep with a big bundle of a traditional rice dish (*osh*), pastries (*sambusa*) and sweets, and everyone rushed to chat with her. After a quick exchange of formal phrases and small talk with her colleagues, she left, and we laid the tablecloth for this unexpected festive meal. The others explained that she was a colleague who was currently on maternity leave, and she had recently organised a circumcision feast for her son. Normally, she would invite the whole school *kollektiv*, but since the recent law had 'cancelled' *pisar tūi*, she brought festive food to the school. This provoked a discussion among the teachers about the recent version of the *tanzim*. The discussion revolved around practical issues as to what feasts were no longer permitted, how many guests were allowed at a wedding, how many dishes and so on, as well as moral evaluations of the state's efforts to help ordinary people, embodied in the paternal figure of the president. While the majority disapprovingly shook their heads on learning about yet another limitation, one older teacher hesitantly tried to explain the rationale of this law to me, carefully picking her words: 'You see, our country is very … you know … poor', she stumbled. She clearly had an issue with calling Tajikistan 'poor', and was trying to replace it with something else but could not find a substitute. 'That's why the president

wanted to help people save money. They go to Russia, work there for years, and spend it all overnight! This law is good for our people, but our people don't understand it yet – they are used to huge celebrations, and it will take time to change it.'

Over the following months, I witnessed many people's attempts to reason about the *tanzim*, reproducing and contesting the notions of tradition and ideas about economic rationality that it invoked, but also negotiating and retaining illegalised practices. There seemed to be a constant tension between praising the law as a good development for society as a whole, but nevertheless circumventing it in practice (see Cleuziou 2019b). In doing so, people would refer to themselves as rigid, uneducated and dumb subjects (Rus. *nashi liudi tupye*) who resisted any kind of change promoted for their own good. My interlocutors' self-deprecating comments referring to themselves as uncultured (Rus. *nekul'turnyi*), uncivilised (Rus. *netsivilizovannyi*) and backwards (Rus. *otstalyi*) in everyday conversations about the law made me realise that it was not just the pragmatic regulation of ritual expenses that made the *tanzim* a highly contested development. It seemed to feed into people's pre-existing anxieties about tradition and modernity, exacerbated by the post-Soviet experience of economic and political transformation, and encounters with contemporary Russia's version of modernity through migration (Chapter 2). These anxieties were further fuelled by a mismatch between the state's lexicon of tradition and people's own understandings of what it means to be a modern person who honours tradition as a part of their cultural identity.

I interpret *tanzim* as a modernisation project which implies the making of a certain kind of modern citizen in the name of the country's development: one with a twofold orientation to the future and the past.[13] The orientation to the future reveals itself in the embrace of a certain kind of economic rationality, which prompts striving for improvement in all spheres of life for a bright future for the entire nation. This orientation to the future does not, however, negate the necessity of honouring tradition, but is rooted in a specific understanding of tradition: as a modern tradition aligned with economic needs and easily adjustable to developmental projects. The main objectives of the *tanzim* were summarised in the preface to the law:

> the present law orders traditions (*an'ana*), celebrations (*jashn*),
> and customs (*marosim*) with consideration for the demands of
> the development of the society, and aims to defend the authentic
> values of the national culture (*arzishhoi asili farhangi millī*) and

respect for national customs (*ehtirom ba sunnathoi mardumī*), to increase the social and economic standard of living of citizens of the Republic of Tajikistan.

The law made two intertwined sets of claims concerning development and authenticity: that development would be achieved by cutting off ritual expenses, the excessiveness of which contradicted the 'authentic' tradition. Thus, the construction and adherence to the 'right' tradition – one which did not contradict current economic needs – was believed to pave the road to the social and economic development of modern Tajikistan. In a speech marking the tenth anniversary of the *tanzim* in July 2017, the president, Emomali Rahmon, called this law 'national in content and democratic and secular in form'.[14] He made connections between embracing an 'authentic' (*asil*) tradition by fighting immoderacy (*ziëdaravī*), and the promotion of common national goals of economic development and social justice:

> Some customs and traditions have acquired a negative character in the society because of big expenses. They caused wastefulness and did injustice to underprivileged families … Lavish weddings and unreasonable expenses have not yet been eliminated in the country; some individual citizens still use customs and rituals as a means to show off and praise themselves – phenomena which are alien to the nature of our nation and contradicting the spirit of the law … The aim of this law is to raise the culture of holding celebrations, give an accurate picture of the calculation of expenses, and change people's attitude to adhering to such customs. (Rahmon 2017)

In order for society to embrace the idea of economic rationality, which would lead to the reduction of poverty, and to economic development, people needed to understand the 'wastefulness' of their expenses. This new type of individual must be cultivated as one who would give up an orientation based on the immediate benefits of raising one's social status in their local community to a mentality that is rational and future-oriented. By fighting ostentatiousness (*isrofkorī*) and immoderacy (*ziëdaravī*), the law was meant to teach people how to make saving money an ordinary part of their lives, so that they would redirect their resources to investment in future-oriented projects. For example, Article 9:5 of the law advised that parents should open a bank account in their son's name to put aside the money saved by cutting the expenses of

the circumcision feast. Article 10:4 suggested that money saved on food for guests during a wedding could be spent to 'improve the living conditions of the newlyweds' (*ba sharoiti zindagii navkhonadoron sarf mondan*).

According to the president, individual efforts to convert oneself into a rational subject would lead to collective change, and allow not only an increased individual standard of living, but also contribute to the common future and progress of the entire nation. Those who did not comply with the new law were depicted as backwards, immoral and unpatriotic subjects, who were not only ignorant of their own national traditions, but also lacked a 'humanistic attitude' to others and gratitude to the state. The popular trope of migrants wasting their hard-earned money 'overnight', often invoked by my interlocutors, illustrated the logic that needed to be eradicated. Against this background, it is not surprising that migrants were constructed as immoral figures wasting money in an attempt to raise their status, while making life harder for the rest of the population. The law did not make a direct connection between cutting off ritual expenses and reducing migration and remittance dependence. However, some officials emphasised that the law would help the situation of labour migrants, as it was understood that the primary goal of going to Russia was to earn money for weddings (Yuldashev 2017).[15]

State criticism of conspicuous consumption and extravagant ritual expenditures in Central Asia is not unique to post-Soviet Tajikistan. During the Russian imperial period, 'wastefulness' was criticised by Central Asian Muslim reformist authors (the Jadids), while during the Soviet period, it was the state that attempted to reshape wedding rituals (Abashin 2015a; Binns 1980; Roche and Hohmann 2011). For the Bolsheviks, the main objective was to eradicate traditionalism with its 'relics of the past', and to push 'backwards' (Rus. *otstalye*) Central Asian peoples into socialist modernity (Poliakov 1992). With the departure of the Soviet state, newly independent governments replaced Marxist–Leninist doctrine with the ideology of national independence, which was underpinned by a hegemonic discourse on cultural authenticity, allowing governments to mobilise tradition as a tactic of governance (Rasanayagam 2011). Accounts of Tajikistan point to a similar dynamic: in its nation-building efforts, the government invoked tradition to legitimise its authority (Blakkisrud and Nozimova 2010; Hughes 2017; Nourzhanov 2001). The *tanzim* articulated the 'defence of authentic values of national culture and respect to popular customs' as one of its goals. As a tool of 'traditionalist authoritarianism', it rhetorically and legally distinguished between 'good' and 'bad' tradition

(Cleuziou 2019b). However, it utilised a very particular, historically grounded, notion of tradition.

Article 2 of the *tanzim* defined tradition as a 'collection of material and moral values of social and cultural heritage of the society or separate social groups, transmitted from one generation to another'. Such a definition resonates with the objectified and rigid Soviet-era notion of national tradition as based on the collection of 'cultural stuff' collected and 'preserved' by Soviet ethnographers (Grant 1995; Hirsch 2005; McBrien 2009; Pelkmans 2006). A similar understanding of tradition makes it possible to delineate contemporary tradition by listing what belongs (or rather should belong) to it, and to shape it in line with current needs.[16] According to the logic of the Tajikistani state, by teaching oneself to adhere to the 'right' version of tradition – the one compatible with ideas of economic rationality and the bigger goal of the social and economic development of the nation – one would become a modern individual and a good citizen who looks forward to the future and works hard for it to arrive, but who also honours the past and tradition. This understanding of tradition, however, has little to do with the affectively charged lived performances of the traditional 'on the ground'; nor does it necessarily correspond to people's own ideas about what it means to be a modern subject and a recognised community member.

Tradition 'from below'

From early morning on the day of *jeghzanak*, Farhod's *havlī* was filling with his and Zebo's relatives: men and women were coming to contribute their labour to Farhod's preparations for a spectacular display of his hospitality, wealth and 'culturedness' for his new in-laws. *Jeghzanak* (from Taj. *jegh zadan* – to invite, and *zanak* – woman) is a bride's first visit to her parental home with her new married status, and it is also the last event in the long-ritualised process of transferring the bride's dowry to her new house. Although the *tanzim* reduced it to a family circle celebration with no more than 15 people allowed, Farhod's family would still try to outperform the groom's family in hospitality by serving more dishes and decorating the tables more lavishly than the groom's family had several days previously for another event, *domod bururon* – the coming out of the groom after three days of seclusion with his bride. Although Farhod and Zebo were very tired after going through a long round of performances, and were anxious about the upcoming event, the atmosphere in their courtyard was cheerful. Young *kelin* from Zebo's

mother's household were chopping salads and carrots for *osh*, older women were preparing trays with biscuits and chocolates, while men were cooking fat lamb chunks (*jazza*) over an open fire and setting up cauldrons for *halvoitar*, a sweet brown liquid cooked from wheat flour and sugar, eaten with flatbread (Figures 3.2 and 3.3). Those who did not have much work to do were hanging around and engaging in playful conversations and jokes.

'You earn money and spend it on travelling, on education. We earn money and spend it on *barakhlo* (Rus. 'useless, wasteful stuff').[17] That is why you are Russians, and we are Tajiks', said Raiza, Farhod's sister-in-law, in an attempt to pin down the meaning of ritual exchanges to an outsider like me. She seemed to be slightly annoyed by my question about why they needed to invest so many resources in these rituals. I suspected that instead of the curiosity of a naive researcher (as my other interlocutors usually perceived such questions from me), she read into my question an attempt to claim cultural superiority as a modern Russian in comparison to traditionalist Tajiks – the opposition that was solidified by Russian colonisers, and sustained through the Soviet period. When Farhod overheard our conversation, he was less keen to offer justifications for 'wasteful' traditions, and said dramatically, but with a share

Figure 3.2   Preparing for *jeghzanak*: cooking *jazza* (fried goat meat with a lot of fat), Sughd Province, spring 2018.

Figure 3.3 Preparing for *jeghzanak*: making *bargitok* (minced meat wrapped in vine leaves to put on top of celebratory *oshi palov*), Sughd Province, spring 2018.

of irony, '*nashi traditsii nas ubiut*' (Rus. 'our traditions will kill us'). He used this expression on many occasions during Gulbahor's wedding, but the modality of this expression differed depending on the context. Sometimes, it was a bitter declaration of his exhaustion and a statement of his lack of agency, as when he described tradition as existentially burdensome and palpably hard (Taj. *vazbin* – a colloquial form of the literary *vaznin*). It triggered a feeling of *ziq*-ness (world-weariness), and made his 'head ache' from ruminating about where it was possible to 'find money' (*pul ëftan*) for the proper performance of rituals (see Beyer 2016, 146). Anticipating the necessity to eventually go to Russia made him even more anxious about borrowing money for the wedding. Sometimes, as on that day, it sounded more like a slightly critical – yet playful – recognition of the financial burden of tradition as the basis for shared identity and community life. On these occasions, tradition was portrayed as a 'hard' but still a fun thing to do, and weddings were highly anticipated, happy occasions for conviviality. Both of these seemingly contradictory modalities were immediately and uncontestably recognised by whoever Farhod was telling *man dukhtarcha metiiam* (Taj, 'I am giving a daughter away'), be it close kin, work colleagues or random bazaar traders.

Whereas the government portrayed people who engaged in excessive spending as ignorant subjects, people were very well aware of the financial effects on their household economies and, as in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, when they 'destroy money', 'they know very well what they are doing', but they still kept doing it, constantly accompanying their own behaviour with cynical commentary (Beyer 2016, 154). Their collective awareness of the inevitability of 'wastefulness', and the resultant stress, made them constantly reason about their 'unreasonably' expensive weddings, justifying and condemning them simultaneously. Collective lamentations about one's wedding expenses were not considered inappropriate, but, on the contrary, were an inseparable part of wedding performances, and resembled some sort of cultural intimacy – 'the recognition of those aspects of an officially shared identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality' (Herzfeld 2016, 7). However, although this collectively recognised suffering in all its modalities happened in the name of 'tradition', it was not the same rigid version of tradition promoted by the state, to which people referred.

While the Tajikistani state propagated a certain homogeneous identity with a very specific understanding of tradition, people engaged in their own projects of traditionalisation from the 'bottom up'. Discussing how tradition has been understood in the literature on Central Asia, Beyer and Finke (2019, 312) point out that it is necessary to move beyond questions of authenticity and ownership when looking at the traditional, because what has once been invented can become very real experientially, and relevant for people's imaginaries of the good life. Instead, they call for the recognition of tradition as 'affectively powerful', and for a focus on how it 'is done' in everyday life, meaning how it is 'enforced, enacted, and lived'. In order to emphasise its performative aspect, they shift the focus from an abstract and encompassing notion of tradition to 'practices of traditionalization' – practices that are 'communally recognized as traditional'. Raiza's comment on the difference between Russians and Tajiks revealed the performative nature of practices of traditionalisation, and the existential value of such performances: it was not that people did it simply because they were Tajiks and that was what Tajiks do; it was precisely the act of doing it that turned them into who they were. It also showed that people were constantly reflecting on their behaviours in the context of their painful awareness of the existing tension between 'what people do, what they say they do, and what they say they ought to do' (Beyer 2016, 178), and eagerly presented the results of their reflection to

an outsider. Finally, her comment pointed to how people organised their ideas about cultural difference and sameness, and how they normalised such differences. While acknowledging that my presence might have induced people's reflection and elicited certain responses and modes of expression, I nevertheless witnessed how all sorts of people – teachers at school, local officials, workers of culture and ordinary people alike – were preoccupied with the debates about ritual expenses prompted by the recent introduction of the *tanzim*.

The lexicon of tradition

The mismatch between the state and popular understandings of the traditional is reflected in the different vocabularies used to address it. Although the *tanzim* referred to tradition with the Tajik words *an'ana, jashn va marosim*, which can be literally translated as 'tradition, feast and ceremony', no one used these in everyday conversations.[18] While explaining the meaning of certain ritual performances to me, my interlocutors used a number of Russian words: *traditsiia* (tradition), *obychai* (custom) and, to my surprise, *zakon* (law). Complaining about the burdensome nature of these performances, they often shook their heads disapprovingly, or produced an embarrassed smile or laugh (often both at the same time) and said, '*u nas obychai/zakon takoi*' (Rus. 'this is our custom/law'). Sometimes they used a curtailed version, *u nas tak* (Rus.) or *injo hamin hel ast* (Taj.), which is a statement of a hard fact: 'it's like this here'. Yet, when explaining the meaning of some ritual actions and gift exchanges to each other, Farhod and Zebo always used the Tajik word *qoida*, which can be translated as a 'custom' or a 'rule': the same word is used to designate grammatical rules or rules of etiquette. When Farhod snapped at Zebo for asking for more money to buy additional dowry items for Gulbahor, she immediately dismissed her personal responsibility for making these decisions by shrugging her shoulders and saying it was *qoida*. This was enough to wrap up any further discussion.

Witnessing how people talked about and, more importantly, tried to adjust their behaviour by referring to *qoida*, reflects similar issues with the phenomenon of Kyrgyz *salt*, which is translated and discussed in the literature as 'customary law': a principle organising social relations in different domains. Like *salt*, references to *qoida* seemed to 'obviate the need for further explanation because it carries the force of law' (Reeves 2012, 129). Judith Beyer describes *salt* as a form of 'legal

sensibility', a complex phenomenon which is difficult to pin down in one clear definition. It is 'inherently connected to everyday interactions and performed in utterly mundane as well as highly ritualised ways', and it becomes visible only when people explain their behaviour explicitly referring to *salt* (Beyer 2016, 6–7). She explores *salt* as a mechanism of enforcing social conformity, which is inherently performative, as it is always 'being done' in concrete situations. These performances allow people to perpetuate certain cultural templates or models, and to maintain their authority as competent and knowledgeable representatives of their culture. It also allows them to present their relationships as 'harmonious'.

Qoida was usually imagined as a static, historically continuous entity. However, an ethnographic exploration of how it is practised shows that there is a lot of room for fluidity, flexibility and change. In rapidly changing societies, more variation can be expected in terms of interpretations and the acceptance of different practices travelling in and out of tradition (Beyer and Finke 2019). Tajik marriage arrangements have experienced rapid change since the beginning of the twentieth century, reflecting political, economic, religious and social changes, and pointing to the flexibility of weddings in accommodating various societal transformations. The state registration of marriage in civil registry organs (ZAGS) was introduced by the Soviet authorities in the 1920s. Since 2011, in Tajikistan, the state marriage registration must take place before the Islamic ceremony (*nikoh*). The Tajik Civil War (1992–7) left its imprints on the marriage process by reducing the activities surrounding weddings to a minimum, and by lowering the marital age of young men and (more significantly) women (Roche et al. 2020). However, in recent decades, wedding ceremonies have incorporated further new practices, resembling the modernisation of weddings in other contexts, for example, in Korea (Kendall 1996), in Azerbaijan (Yalçin-Heckmann 2001) and in Uzbekistan (Trevisani 2016), to name a few. White bridal dresses and professional make-up, a wedding cortège with decorated cars, photo shoots in botanical gardens and historical sites, dancing to music, serving beautifully decorated salads and nibbles, drinking alcohol, recording videos, and distributing invitation cards for the guests in advance have all become crucial attributes of a contemporary Tajik wedding (Figures 3.4 and 3.5).[19] The high-speed transnational movement of people and objects, coupled with Tajikistanis' increasing participation in social media networks have also meant that globalised wedding practices and images have been circulating between Russia and Tajikistan.

Figure 3.4 A wedding cortège, Sughd Province, spring 2018.

Figure 3.5 Choosing a bridal dress, Sughd Province, spring 2018.

Navigating the changing rules

During one of the first ritual events, *tūibaron* (literally, 'arrival of *tūi*'), which marks the beginning of a wedding, Farhod and Zebo welcomed several men from the groom's family who came to bring *qalin* (brideprice) and to take a share of her dowry to Gulbahor's new home. As with other events, this involved a festive meal and the circulation of flatbread (*non*), sweets (*qand*), fabrics and dowry items (*jivez*). The symbolic meaning of these exchanges was a confirmation of the engagement: in exchange for *qalin* and the gifts the groom's family brought, Farhod's sisters packed a white cloth (*safed*) into *dastarkhons* – baskets filled with bread, sweets and gifts bundled into a tablecloth. This was brought to the groom's house as a sign that the arrangement was still in force, and they could 'officially' start the wedding. As the men were eating, drinking, and enjoying the conversation in the guest room located at the front of the house, the women and Farhod were buzzing around in the backyard preparing food and gifts (Figures 3.6 and 3.7). When the time came to repack and return the groom's *dastarkhons*, Zebo became visibly annoyed, as Farhod's older sisters could not agree on what the proper *qoida* on this occasion was, and were giving her contradictory advice about the content and quantity of necessary items. Zebo found herself in a sensitive position. On the one hand, she wanted to do everything according to *qoida* and really needed advice (Taj. *maslihat*), because she risked bringing shame on to her family in their *qudo*'s eyes (*qudo* is a kinship term designating relationship of affinity) by not following the rules of reciprocity properly. On the other hand, dismissing her in-laws' contradictory advice could be read as a sign of disrespect for those who were higher in the domestic hierarchy. When I asked Farhod and Zebo what happened, they interjected angrily: 'Ah, we're fed up with their advice! One says, "Do this, I did it when I was giving away my daughter!" The other one says, "Do that, my neighbour did that!"' When I discussed this episode with young schoolteachers later, they smirked: 'That's true. Everyone readily gives you their advice, but no one cares about your wallet!'

The tension between the representation of *qoida* as unchanging and unquestionable, and its practical open-endedness and ability to incorporate new elements meant that following *qoida* was less about knowing the details of a particular ritual, and more about figuring it out together. Juliette Cleuziou (2019b, 349) argues that during multiple ceremonies people (she talks mostly about women) engaged in 'staging' the traditional, seeking public approval. Yet, in doing so, they 'collectively reproduce, negotiate and alter the rules of traditional marriage

Figure 3.6   Packing gifts for the groom's party, Sughd Province, spring 2018.

Figure 3.7   Part of the dowry: *kūrpacha* (traditional cotton mattresses) and *kūrpa* (duvets), Sughd Province, spring 2018.

performance'. This mechanism allowed for new elements to become incorporated into tradition, not only according to a temporal dimension, but also to a spatial one: it was not what one's ancestors used to do in the past, but what one's neighbours were doing in the present that became the rule to follow. For example, the amount of dowry was believed to be increasing because migrants constantly 'added' new items to it, thus forcing other people into competition (see also Reeves 2012).[20] Similarly, Judith Beyer (2016, 9) has analysed the process of the gradual incorporation of new elements into tradition, which she calls 'customization', as an inherent characteristic of *salt*. Despite it being always 'in the making', people maintained the rhetoric of continuity by describing *salt* as 'hard', but inextricable from their bodies: something which was in their 'blood' or something which made their bodies 'sick', and thus something which was prior to knowledge and beyond the realm of their agency. She argues that engaging in practices of customisation while maintaining the rhetoric of stability allowed people to use *salt* as a 'reflexive cultural technique', and to frame their world as an 'orderly place'. However, while her study focuses mostly on the successful aspects of her interlocutors' performances, my ethnography shows that the process of figuring out the rules and negotiating what needed to be done was far from straightforward, and was fraught with constant tension.

The understanding of tradition promoted by the *tanzim* was far from how tradition 'was done' on the ground. It was flexible and always in the making as people were trying to make sense of the 'rules' and incorporate new elements, while maintaining the rhetoric of continuity. However, it was also highly contestable, and its negotiation touched upon issues of authority and recognition. Thus, it was not only its political economy, but also the emotionally draining process of negotiation of the 'rules' – which was fraught with ambiguity and loaded with potential for conflict – that made reproducing the tradition especially 'hard'.

Making relatedness, anxiously

Based on the ethnography of a wedding in Dushanbe, Juliette Cleuziou shows how practices of traditionalisation are connected with issues of reputation and prestige. She argues that showing willingness to engage in practices of traditionalisation – as manifested in the ability to 'gather and redistribute wealth, food and entertainment in a short time' – was transformed, through gossip (Taj. *ghaibat*) and public commentary, into the prestige and reputation of her female interlocutor as *zani bo*

farhang/madaniiat – 'a woman with culture', an 'honourable woman who does things properly' (Cleuziou 2019b, 350). Thus, conspicuous consumption has a moral dimension: throwing ostentatious performances becomes a means to claim one's morality and respectability. Organising his daughter's wedding, Farhod was similarly concerned with his reputation, which depended to a significant extent on the successful articulation of his ambition to be a *kul'turnyi chelovek*, entangled with his engagement in traditionalisation practices. However, his ability to appear as a generous host and a cultured man was extremely important for his sense of self in another respect, as demonstrating his willingness to act according to *qoida* would signify his fatherly care (see Abashin 2015a, 588; Zanca 2011, 110). This meant that he had to work hard to forge a peaceful relationship with his in-laws for the sake of his daughter's well-being in her new family, and thus to ensure that her mother-in-law 'wouldn't torture her'.

During pre-marital negotiations, Farhod's would-be *qudo* expressed a wish to organise everything in compliance with the *tanzim*, emphasising that they wanted to do it *be latta* (Taj. 'without fabrics'), meaning that they would not exchange gifts. Farhod was very happy about this arrangement, as it would save him a significant amount of money and time. Three days after the wedding, they were invited to their *qudo*'s house for the first time for the *domod bururon* (groom's walk out): a celebration of the groom,[21] who would proudly appear with his new wife in front of guests for the first time after three days of seclusion, having turned her into a woman. Like every event during the course of a wedding, this performance was about displaying and receiving hospitality as a sign of respect between two families, and involved the distribution and consumption of food. After a lavish dinner, everyone was taken outside to greet the new family. Gulbahor was dressed in one of the glittering traditional dresses she had received as a part of her dowry, a scarf, and with a thin white piece of cloth (*sari*) covering her head, while her husband was wearing a traditional male gown (*chapon*) and a skullcap (*tūppī*). The couple had to demonstrate modesty as men recited the Qur'an and guests approached to greet them, give them a hug or a kiss, and wish them a happy married life.

As we were about to leave, women began to distribute small plastic bags with gifts: scarves, handkerchiefs and fabrics. Gifts were given according to one's status, so while Zebo and Farhod received two big towels, two tablecloths, two prayer rugs, a piece of expensive fabric for a party dress, a scarf and a shirt, his sisters and I received only one piece of fabric, a smaller towel or a tablecloth. On our way home, everyone

seemed to be in an upbeat mood because they had seen that they had made the right choice, as the groom's family seemed to be wealthy and had paid them respect properly. Farhod's sisters were laughing, singing his songs, and gossiping about their new relatives. Nothing escaped their attention as they discussed in detail their new in-laws' *havlī* – the interior of the house, the in-built bathroom, air conditioners, plastic window frames, expensive furniture and new fashionable curtains – and carefully evaluated it vis-à-vis Farhod's house. They also paid attention to how people were dressed, how well their *kelin* served them, how they ate, how well-mannered they were, and how they maintained a conversation. When our conversation turned to the gifts, Farhod's older sister explained the rules of reciprocity to me:

> I've been at their place today, and they gave me something, so I also must give them something the next time, I am indebted. We try to get rid of our debts as soon as possible, so we will invite them to different events. When I open my *sanduk*,[22] I immediately remember who gave me those things, so I know whom to invite.

Although everyone was cheerfully chatting, Farhod looked grumpy and remained silent. We came home very tired, but instead of taking a well-deserved rest, Farhod and Zebo had a heated family discussion about the *jeghzanak* they would host the next day, and the ways in which they could outperform their *qudo*. Making a list of items to be purchased, Farhod felt frustrated and angry because his in-laws had distributed gifts despite their agreement to stick to the law. As a result, he would now also have to give them almost identical, but slightly more expensive or more aesthetically pleasing, gifts the following day. Going on an angry rant about his sisters acting inconsiderately by accepting gifts and not caring about his expenses (although he knew perfectly well that rejecting gifts was not an option), he felt forced to include new items in his shopping list, although it would exceed his budget. On top of this, they decided to prepare far more food than was needed for the 15 people expected to come the next day, because since their in-laws had already broken their promise once, they did not know how many people would show up (Figure 3.8). Not reciprocating gifts and being unable to accommodate, feed and entertain everyone who turned up at their doorstep would bring shame *(aib)* to their family in the eyes of their *qudo*, and increase Farhod's anxieties about his daughter's treatment in her new family.

The *tanzim*, which has forbidden all kinds of gift exchanges, has not necessarily meant that people stopped these practices. Instead of

Figure 3.8 Paying respect during *jeghzanak*, while also competing by serving more dishes than *qudo*, Sughd Province, spring 2018.

eradicating gift exchanges, the introduction of the *tanzim* has only contributed to the already quite messy process of negotiation of mutual expectations and rules. Apart from maintaining one's reputation in the community, marriage also creates and sustains relatedness between two (often) previously unrelated families. Throwing a properly orchestrated wedding ceremony is the first step to building a harmonious relationship between two families, and maintaining relationships with one's own kin, who are always involved in the process at different stages. During wedding performances, families engaged in the 'staging' of relations of reciprocity and mutual help, but also competed through gift exchanges and elaborate displays of hospitality (Cleuziou 2019b). Relationships between in-laws in Tajikistan are highly ritualised: they are established by marriage, and then maintained through 'going and coming' and 'giving and receiving' (see Beyer 2016, 48, 142). Gift exchanges that create mutual indebtedness are interpreted as a sign of paying respect, and are considered to be a contribution to strengthening ties. However, it is not only the idiom of 'amity', as Judith Beyer calls it, that informs relationships between in-laws.

Aib budet! ('It will be shameful') was how Farhod playfully explained to me, in a mixture of Tajik and Russian, the reason why he engaged in

situations and behaviours which caused him more effort and expense than he would like. The Tajik word *aib* can be translated as 'shame', the same emotion that Judith Beyer calls 'shame-anxiety' in the Kyrgyz context (*uiat*) (Beyer 2016, 148). Julie McBrien (2021, 463) conceptualises *uiat* as a quotidian practice that 'affects the body by provoking discomfort', and 'simultaneously maps out and attempts to stabilize ideas of correctness'. As a relational practice, it is embedded and performed within the stratified and hierarchical web of relations, the imaginary of future sanction for a breach in the form of gossip or social exclusion playing an important role. As a result, people's actions are guided by constant awareness of others' expectations. In Tajikistan, weddings are the occasions where concerns about *aib* come into particularly stark relief.

Farhod was very well aware of the need to meet his *qudo*'s expectations for the sake of his reputation and his daughter's well-being. However, the *tanzim* made it difficult to figure out exactly what those expectations were, and thus to be able to negotiate them. He read his *qudo*'s promise to organise everything in compliance with the *tanzim* as a genuine sign of respect for his family, originating from the shared understanding of his financial hardship related to 'giving a daughter away', which notoriously exceeds the costs of marrying a son. Since Farhod had not planned to give Gulbahor away that year, and had rejected every proposal she received, for his *qudo* the rhetoric of reducing costs was a convenient means to lure Farhod into the match. However, as they were wealthier and better connected, and eagerly demonstrated their networks during the process of wedding, they could afford not to fully consider the legal side of the *tanzim*. Once he had agreed to the match, and haunted by the prospect of *aib*, Farhod felt forced to act according to the rules of reciprocity, and to keep up with the competition initiated by his in-laws. This made him feel helpless and angry, because he did not have any leverage to negotiate in the process.

Breaking the mutuality of gift exchanges on the day of *domod bururon* would present a serious threat to his family's reputation, and would jeopardise the emerging relationship with his new kin. Inherent anxiety for Gulbahor's future accompanied Farhod throughout the wedding. Aware of the possible implications of his decisions about his expenses, he explained people's fear of fully complying with the *tanzim* by the constant mistrust present in marriage negotiations:

> If they are decent people, they will say they don't need anything, you can buy furniture and other things later, they just want your daughter. But no one trusts such words. Everyone lies, Lena! That's

why everyone tries to give their daughter as much as possible so that her mother-in-law doesn't pick on her, especially if there are other daughters-in-law in the household, because she will compare what each of them has brought. After the wedding, she will say, 'Oh, we thought your father was rich, but he didn't give you anything! He doesn't care about you!'

This would be a very serious accusation, as caring for one's children, as well as for one's elderly parents, is a moral duty for every mature Tajik man (Chapter 4).

Codifying the uncodifiable?

The law on regulating tradition exemplified the Tajikistani state's attempts to promote a specific vision of a modern citizen by codifying tradition and legally regulating ritual expenses. Discussing the process of incorporating new elements into custom (customisation) in Kyrgyzstan, Judith Beyer (2016, 10) notes that attempts to document and codify custom at a given moment would ruin it because it only maintains its relevance as long as it is flexible. In a similar vein, the *tanzim* can be considered as an attempt to codify what cannot be codified. Wedding performances implied complex negotiations of what belongs to the realm of the traditional and must be performed. Attempting to define the parameters of the traditional, the *tanzim* added a further level of indeterminacy and became another aspect to be figured out. With time, it may gradually become customised and recognised as having always been 'ours', but during my fieldwork, people were clearly struggling to figure out what the new normal would be.

The introduction of the law triggered public debates about the economic rationality of lavish rituals, but it also raised people's concerns about social disruption. While people generally agreed with the government's rhetoric, which portrayed lavish ceremonies as a sign of backwardness and moral degradation, they were still not willing to jeopardise their own reputation. However, instead of analysing these discourses and practices in terms of compliance with, or resistance to, authoritarian power which strove to gain more control over the intimate spheres of society's life, I found that people's reckonings with the traditional 'on the ground' were far from mere manifestations of some 'real' cultural identity, juxtaposed with the homogeneous one imposed by the state (see Roche and Hohmann 2011).

The rigid understanding of tradition that the *tanzim* promoted mapped on to customary mechanisms of collective negotiations of what belonged to the realm of the traditional, and threw another element into the already complicated business of marriage. The space of indeterminacy borne out of the mismatch between the government's lexicon of tradition and its lived performances in ritual practice was affectively charged with feelings of shame, anxiety and mistrust. As wedding performances had a moral dimension, and depended on how skilfully people maintained a subtle balance between different – and sometimes incompatible – concerns, the *tanzim* raised the stakes for individuals such as Farhod who had to navigate the shifting parameters of the modern and the traditional in a context where resources were scarce. During his daughter's wedding, Farhod was trying to act according to the 'rules' to forge good relationships with his in-laws and maintain connections with his own kin, friends and colleagues, which would portray him as a caring father and a loyal community member. At the same time, as I showed in Chapter 2, he tried to maintain a bodily presence as a 'cultured' man, a popular singer and a state 'worker of culture'. Being hospitable, displaying wealth, and being a modern man were all important for his sense of self, but also demanded significant effort and expense. Given the lack of alternative avenues for employment, the *tanzim* radically reduced Farhod's income, and placed his indebted family on the brink of impoverishment. As a result, the logic of the law became inverted for him: whereas it may potentially help some people reduce the time spent working in Russia, it pushed Farhod to consider going to Russia as a migrant worker.

Notes

1 I have worked from the Tajik and Russian texts of the law; all the translations are mine.
2 Given the limitations of a quantitative approach, and the embeddedness of ritual events in everyday relations of mutual indebtedness and care crucial for kinwork, these figures are probably higher. The fact that 15 per cent of remittances was spent on repaying debt may also mean that people took loans to cover special ritual occasions such as weddings.
3 I refer to the law simply as the *tanzim* (literally 'regulation') in the rest of the text for the sake of readability, but also since this is how my interlocutors referred to it in their everyday conversations.
4 In 2017, the media reported that a Tajik *tūi* (excluding costs for dowry and other small-scale events) cost around £4,500, which was unequally divided between the parties involved (Asia-Plus 2017). Cleuziou (2019b) notes that the overall costs of marrying off a daughter in the capital were close to £7,500.
5 This figure is given for 2018, the time of my research. Since then, the average salary has increased to £138, as of May 2023. Yet, the high level of inflation means that the cost of living has increased significantly faster than salaries.

6   The exception is Diana Ibañez-Tirado's (2016) work on the politics of dress, showing how people creatively negotiated the dress codes imposed by the state, but she does not discuss the *tanzim*.

7   My interlocutors used different regionally specific names such as *pisar tūi* or *sunnat toi* (Uzbek), rather than *khatnasur*. Some names and minutiae of rituals were influenced by the region's position on the border with Uzbekistan, and by the mixed ethnic composition of the population.

8   Roche and Hohmann note that after the Civil War (1992–7), the creative potential of wedding rituals dramatically developed, and came to embody not only ethnic but also regional identities, personal ideas about modernity and connectedness with the wider world, and preferences for certain kinds of aesthetics.

9   For the full list of banned events, see The Law of the Republic of Tajikistan No 1461, Chapter 3, Article 10:2. Two events, *domodtalbon* and *arūsbinon* (the events that I discuss in the last section of the chapter under their regional names *domod bururon* and *jeghzanak*) were reduced to family gatherings, with up to 15 people permitted.

10 This practice varied across regions and carried different names (Cleuziou 2019a). In the region where I conducted my research, people referred to it as *khatmi Qur'on* (recitation of Qur'an). Such gatherings were common on different occasions and, in this case, it was used as a 'compensation' for legal restrictions on the number of guests. The law makes no reference to this event in religious terms, but calls it *dodani oshi tūi* – 'distribution of *osh*'.

11 Mandatory health checks before marriage were introduced in 2016, with the idea of ensuring young people's ability to create a healthy family and produce offspring. Roche (2016) analyses how the medicalisation of marriage is linked with the idea of a 'healthy nation'.

12 Article 481 of the Administrative Code of Tajikistan outlines the penalties. It makes a distinction between different categories of legal actors, but it does not distinguish between different breaches.

13 There were other projects to create Tajik subjects who are modern and yet traditional in certain ways, which are inevitably gendered (see, for example, Ibañez-Tirado 2016; Roche 2016; Thibault 2018). My analysis of the official discourse is far from comprehensive. Here, I focus on the interplay between a specific notion of tradition and ideas of what makes a modern citizen.

14 Such phrasing is a remarkable echo of the lexicon of Soviet culture policy, with its attempts to create cultural forms which were 'national in form and socialist in content'.

15 Tajikistan's emigration policy was pulled in two different directions: on the one hand, it recognised the need to reduce labour migration and remittance dependence on Russia; on the other hand, it declared that it was necessary to prepare the workforce for foreign labour markets. This ambivalence could be interpreted as being the result of competing interests and ideas of different state agencies and international actors, who imposed their 'expert knowledge' on migration and development (Kluczewska and Korneev 2021).

16 A similar law in Uzbekistan passed in 1998 aimed not only to defend local traditions from 'harmful foreign influences', but also to 'create new, exemplary traditions' (Abashin 2003).

17 A colloquial Russian word for stuff which is considered useless, bought out of whim, a waste of money. My interlocutors mostly used this term to refer to clothes and fabrics involved in gift exchanges.

18 On the complexity and translatability of the lexicon of tradition in Central Asia, see Beyer and Finke (2019, 313).

19 For some more detailed descriptions from across Central Asia, see McBrien (2006), Ibañez-Tirado (2013), Trevisani (2016) and Cleuziou (2019b). For the transformation of wedding rituals in the twentieth century, see Abashin (2015a, 547–611).

20 The government mentioned migrants as victims to be helped through the *tanzim*, not perpetrators of ritual competitions. However, people themselves are critical of migrants, who they see as 'injectors' of the costs of ritual performances (see Bahovadinova 2016a, 186–8).

21 *Domod* means both 'groom' and 'son-in-law'.

22 A big wooden chest usually decorated with national ornaments, which every woman brings to her new home as a part of her dowry.

Interlude 4: A dutiful son

In winter 2017, as I was actively trying to expand the range of my connections in the field beyond Farhod's extended family, I went to the town's private school, where I met, among others, Qahramon. A grey-haired man in his early 50s with a kind smile, he worked at the school as security. Most of his days he was sitting in a small security station outside the entrance to the school, managing the flow of students and cars. Moments of active engagement with school issues were interspersed with long periods of stillness, filled with boredom and tea. This turned out to be the perfect setting for sharing a short laugh and exchanging news, but also for cherishing long poignant conversations about the hardships of people's lives in Tajikistan. Over the next few months, when I returned to the school time and again, Qahramon invited me to his station, and poured me some green tea, and we talked for hours about his family, his life in Russia and his plans in Tajikistan. I shared my observations from other contexts with him, and it always produced fruitful discussions. At that point in my fieldwork, the questions of care in relation to migration and masculinity had not yet attracted my analytical gaze, and I shared the story of my other interlocutor, who was bound to the place she hated by caring obligations for the elders, without a second thought. Qahramon became quiet for a moment, before coming up with a passionate monologue:

> They say old people are like children, and we have to endure everything from them, we are indebted to them (Rus. *my u nikh v dolgu*). He is ill? But you were also ill when you were a child. He's cranky? But you were also cranky, and your mother put up with it! Recently, I saw a short theatre performance. A son was sitting

with his old father on the terrace, and a sparrow landed on a tree branch outside. The father asked, 'What is this thing, son?' The son answered, 'This is a sparrow.' They continued sitting, the sparrow moved from one branch to another, and the father asked again, 'What is this thing, son?' And the son answered again, 'This is a sparrow.' The third time the sparrow moved from one branch to another, and the father asked again, 'What is this thing, son?' The son turned red, he got furious and yelled at his father, 'How many times did I tell you? This is a spar-row!' The upset father stood up, brought his old diary, opened it and read one entry, 'Today my son asked me 28 times what was that thing, and I answered him 28 times that this was a sparrow.' That is why we [children] are indebted to them [parents]. I hate people who dump their parents in care homes (Rus. *dom prestarelykh*). Who wants to live among strangers? We never had these institutions here, but lately they opened one.

Qahramon's normative statement about the absence of care homes in the past and their emergence in the present as signifying the decay of traditional respect towards the elders is certainly an exaggeration, but it reflects the public discourse very well. I put this unexpected monologue in context later on, when, during our interview, Qahramon stated that the reason why he had left Russia for good after 16 years of living and working there was his mother's old age. She used to live with her youngest son, Qahramon's brother, in the house they had built together with her late husband. However, Qahramon's brother decided to move his whole family to Russia, and their mother was left alone, living in that house unsupervised. This bothered Qahramon, as she was already 80 years old and, in his view, needed a constant caring presence. At first, she did not want to move to his household, because she was too attached to the house in which she had invested so much of her labour and energy over the years. Finally, he managed to persuade her:

I told her, Mum, there are four women in my house, they will take good care of you. She agreed, but on one condition: that I will stay there with her and won't go to Russia again. I agree on all her conditions and do everything she wants, because she is not my biological mother. My biological mother died in labour when I was 2 years old, and this woman married my father because she could not have children and he already had three. She raised us, she gave such things to us … I don't think even a biological mother would

have given us as much as she did. My father was a schoolteacher, and she worked as an accountant. We lived very well. And she heard so much hurtful gossip along the way. When I was little, I heard her female friends telling her many times: 'Why are you doing it? They are not your true kin; they will eventually abandon you.' If something is not to her liking now, she sometimes says this is because I am not your true mother. I tell her, 'Mum, how can you say such things?' I repeat a million times how grateful I am that she raised us.

After coming back to Tajikistan, Qahramon kept his promise. He went back to Russia only once to pack and ship his things, sell his car and say goodbye to his friends. When I asked him about his life in Tajikistan, he sighed: '*Khudova shukr* (Taj. 'Thanks God') we are managing here. I have a wife, I have children, I have a house, food on the table. I don't have any money but so what? [laughing].'

4
Ambivalences of care

Temperatures in the Tajik lowlands plummeted to unexpected lows at the end of January 2018, sometimes reaching –13°C. The real feel was –20°C, when you accounted for the notoriously icy winds blowing down from the mountains. The cold crept up shoulders and ran down arms, it froze limbs and cheeks and battered windowpanes. Even the birds would not sing. A small trip outside, even to use the toilet, required a total concentration of will. Albina and I were sitting cross-legged on traditional colourful cotton mattresses encircling the dining table in a three-metre-square room, sipping green tea. This was one of the heated rooms in the big household, and the stove greedily swallowing smelly coal added substantially to women's domestic workload. During my month-long stay in their household, I spent the majority of the time in this room with Albina (a 31-year-old divorced woman), her 10-year-old daughter, her mother – Manizha (a woman in her late 50s) – and her father – Maksud (a 60-year-old man) – all of them recently returned from Russia to care for his elderly parents (aged 91 and 82). Here we peeled carrots for *osh*, ate our meals, studied, brushed our teeth, washed our faces, did homework, wrote fieldnotes and reviewed student papers, all while the TV played an unending loop of Turkish and Uzbek soap operas in the background.

That evening, both of us felt exhausted, and we were about to start preparations for sleep. Suddenly the door opened, the icy wind from the outside brought in a strong reek of alcohol, and Maksud appeared on the doorstep. Unsteady, with his fur hat tilted, he measured the room with his gaze, plopped down on a cotton mattress, leaned against the wall, and lit a cigarette. He had spent his evening drinking vodka with local men at the village teahouse (*choikhona*). It was the space where, warmed

up by spirits, men competed in bragging about how much money they had made in Russia, what improvements they had made to their households back in Tajikistan, and what sexual adventures they had had in the meantime. Looking at me, Maksud burst out, his voice wobbling:

> Can I be considered a real man? Look, Lena, how we're living! Look at our kitchen, at our toilet! Apparently, I lived just for myself. I was just remitting money and thought everything was fine. I failed to create good conditions for my elders for their old age. I was living for myself while they were suffering! And now I will have made everything in two months, but will they see it? What if they die tomorrow? … Sometimes Albina speaks to me rudely, and I scold her. She tells me, 'Dad, you're only promising.' And actually, she's right, I haven't done anything! That's why I humiliate myself sometimes – I drink. Can I be called a real man now? (Rus. *Razve ia mogu teper' nazyvat'sia nastoiashchim muzhchinoi*?)

The room filled with thick smoke and, as I picked out his face, I could see him trying hard to hold back tears. Maksud had spent twenty years torn between Russia and Tajikistan, driven by the desire to be *odami khub* (a good man): a good son, a good husband and a good father. The head of his extended family, the father of three adult daughters, and a well-known figure in the transnational network of migrant workers from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, how could he allow himself to appear so vulnerable now, talking to a young woman of his daughter's age?

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Tracing Maksud's family's attempts to perform care for his elderly parents at a critical time of their increased frailty and illness, this chapter contributes to a growing body of anthropological literature concerned with the tensions, ambivalences and contradictions of care. I explore these issues by paying attention to the gendered nature of care, its intersections with (im)mobility, and its demands on people's resources, bodies and sense of self. To be always at hand means to reconcile various modes of action, to adjust one's body and mind, to constantly split one's focus of attention, and to stretch one's time and body. This embodied and affective intensity of caring arrangements speaks to crucial questions of presence and separation in the context of migration. Care is inextricably linked to one's personhood and morality. It 'confirms or creates the presence of something or someone in a moral world', but it is also 'a practice which involves the risk of being undone by others in relations

of care' (Louw and Mortensen 2021, 128). Enmeshed in the dynamic of kinship ties and migration cycles, care for elderly parents is perceived as an absolute moral necessity in Tajikistan. This ethical imperative adds to the practical burdens of care, which generates the risks of 'being undone' through relations of care in a context marked by distance and separation. My analysis illuminates the oppressive and conflict-generating potential of care. Care implies a certain degree of control, coercion and sacrifice, which constrains one's agency, and which can result in the feeling of 'being stuck' and unable to progress in life.

Social research places care at the centre of analysis as a social organisation and as an ontological condition of interconnection and interdependency crucial for, and constitutive of, both people's everyday physical survival and their moral worlds (Mattingly 2014; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Thelen 2015a). Recent ethnographies highlight complex entanglements of care with inequalities, control and oppression (Bruckermann 2017; Buch 2018; Garcia 2010; Johnson and Lindquist 2020). They also point to its inherently relational, processual and contingent qualities that make care a fundamentally 'difficult, imperfect, and messy' empirical phenomenon resisting attempts to fit it into evaluative frameworks (Seaman et al. 2019, 8).

Earlier research on transnational care emphasises the continuity, agency and creativity of transnational caring arrangements, rather than contradictions, ruptures and failures. It focuses on the constitutive role of kinship-based transnational care practices, and on the transnational circulation of care between different actors that drive migration projects and hold transnational families together in absentia (Baldassar and Merla 2014). These practices come into being through regular remittances, building projects, brief home visits and mediated forms of communication, and through various manifestations of emotion (Dalakoglou 2010; Sinanan 2019; Svašek 2018; Zharkevich 2019). They create the effect of co-presence, and they allow families to cultivate 'a feeling of collective welfare and unity' across borders (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002, 3). Recently, researchers have started to generate new insights about how transnational care comes into being through complicated family negotiations of conflicting interests and roles, and can be disruptive and oppressive, and have ambivalent outcomes for the well-being of differently positioned family members (Mingot 2020; Yarris 2017).

This chapter brings together the literature on care with my ethnographic material and the debates about culturally contingent ideals and practices of respect and authority in Central Asia. Instead of asking how care circulates, or whether it succeeds or fails, I find it generative

to first analyse what counts as care in a specific ethnographic context (Aulino 2016), and how this is consequential for what Maruška Svašek calls 'the experiential dialectics of proximity and distance' in migratory contexts (Svašek 2008). This analytical move allows me to show that care emerges as a triangular relationship between caregiver, care receiver and the social context from which caring derives its meaning. In Tajikistan, care materialises through affective performances of respect that render care practices visible for the community. These performances are inherently bodily, and they are premised on one's physical presence in the neighbourhood's space. The labour of care is gendered: men's and women's labour complement each other to make affective performances of care successful. Migration as a necessary means of making a living in the region creates distance and separation. This results in the disjuncture between care as a material provision and care as an affective performance of respect. Consequently, migrant men face contradictory demands to be simultaneously present and absent. While migration facilitates men's capacity to provide financial support to their families, it means that they cannot deliver affective performances of care that demand physical presence that are tied to the recognition of their gendered personhood. Migrants' attempts to bridge this disjuncture can keep men 'stuck' in a loop of constant movement between Russia and Tajikistan. This form of mobility is associated with constrained agency, and it puts a strain on migrants' bodies and relationships, and on their sense of self.

Care, migration and the life course

I met Maksud, an entrepreneurial Uzbek-speaking man in his early 60s who had worked in Russia since 2000, when he finally decided to retire and return to Tajikistan to support his elderly parents in autumn 2017. Sharing his experiences of migration and explaining his choices, he, like other migrants, referred to familial obligations in the first place. As the only son and the eldest child in the family, he struggled to find the resources to support his four younger then-unmarried sisters and his parents, who had retired soon after he got married. Cars had always been his passion, and he persuaded his father to let him get a driving licence instead of pursuing higher education in the capital, as his father had intended. He then worked as a taxi and truck driver in the neighbouring town for some time, and, in light of the Soviet Union's creeping dissolution, switched to transporting goods (mostly dried fruit) to Russian cities. This activity provided him with extra income, since

he was able to transport his own goods free of charge and sell them in Russia. However, the growing chaos, increasing criminal activities, and his encounters with racketeers during his long-distance trips to Russia, made him quit this precarious work – rumours of truck drivers caught transporting drugs over the border were the last straw. Staying in St Petersburg was the only imaginable option, and he, like many men of his generation who I met during my fieldwork, talked about his decision to migrate in terms of absolute collective necessity: 'All of us had to leave to provide for our families. Because there's nothing here! No factories, no plants – you couldn't earn a penny here (Rus. *ni kopeiki ne zarabotaesh*)!'

Maksud did not need to pay enormous amounts of money to ensure his legality in Russia in the early 2000s, when Russia's migration regime functioned in an ad hoc manner. He used his savings to buy an old minivan, and he started to transport goods for different private enterprises. In 2002, he became a bus driver at a state-owned bus depot, and he had worked there ever since. He regularly remitted relatively large sums of money (up to 50–60,000 rubles, £636–763, per month) to his parents, hoping that they were investing in improving their living conditions. He returned home to visit annually, during which times he rebuilt and renovated their house. Meanwhile, his extended family members gradually joined him in Russia: he managed to bring his brothers-in-law, his wife and daughters, and their husbands to St Petersburg, find jobs and 'make documents' for all of them. In 2009, he received a Russian passport, which facilitated the logistics of his departures and arrivals. Now, when planning his holidays at home, he did not have to consider the vicissitudes of the Russian migration regime, which was putting increasing pressure on migrant workers. The good relationship that he had fostered with his employers over years of hard work meant that he could 'walk into his bus depot any time' after a long visit home, and start earning money the same day.

When the news reached Maksud that his father's health was rapidly deteriorating, he persuaded Albina (who had joined him in St Petersburg in 2010) to go back and take care of him for a while. In the meantime, he would officially retire in Russia, claim his pension there, and return to Tajikistan to take over. Before 2017, Maksud's parents lived alone, with his extended kin present in Tajikistan checking on them every day. By autumn 2017, Maksud and his wife, his daughter and his granddaughter had returned to Tajikistan from Russia. At the time of my fieldwork, the household consisted of his elderly parents, his nuclear family, and his granddaughter.

Riddled with guilt that he had not been there for his parents for so long, and that he had missed the moment when his father's health

started to deteriorate, Maksud was determined to restore his moral standing by fulfilling his caring obligations as a good son. This time, he planned to stay in Tajikistan with his parents. Yet, his return turned out to be less permanent than was planned: he quickly ran out of savings, could not get access to his Russian pension due to bureaucratic problems, and found it impossible to find an alternative income in Tajikistan. His multiple projects to improve his household came to a standstill. Unable to reconcile the demands of being present and of providing materially, the tension was building, both in his relationship with his family and in his body. Eventually, worn out, he fell ill and had to have his gall bladder removed. Now his wife and daughter had to care both for him and for his parents, while receiving double the amount of guests, and showing them respect and hospitality. Every time someone showed up on their doorstep, Albina dropped everything she was doing and rushed to the kitchen, an annoyed grimace on her face, while her mother sighed and set up the table. The same ritual was repeated many times a day.

In March 2018, Maksud first started thinking of going back to Russia. He had not fully recovered from the surgery, and he spent his days in bed making plans for the nearest future: 'I told my father, "Father, I cannot just sit here without money anymore". He answered, he doesn't mind if I go to Russia and work there until January, save some money and come back. But I am still weak, I have to recover first.' He left in April. In May, his energetic voice on the phone reported to me that the 'work was going well, and money was accumulating'.

Maksud's story falls into the 'typical' biographical narrative of a male migrant trying to fill a gaping hole in the family budget in the aftermath of Tajikistan's transition to the market economy and the deterioration of the Soviet welfare system. Research on migration in Central Asian countries shows that migration is inherently a 'family affair'. Members of extended families pour their collective effort into accumulating money, and distribute responsibilities pertaining to different aspects of a family's livelihood (Reeves 2017a). Households with many children, especially those with sons, usually benefit from such an arrangement, as they can successfully share financial and affective dimensions of caring responsibilities among migrants and stayers. Yet, it has not been explored how families manage to sustain such arrangements in the context of growing absences,[1] and what it means for individual family members and their mobile trajectories. Close to nothing is known about how families that do not fit into such a household model hold together their migration projects and caring duties. Maksud's struggle to care for his elderly parents presents a unique case due to Maksud's structural position as the only

son in the family, who did not have a son himself. Men who were only sons were placed in a difficult position, as they were expected to migrate and be present at the same time (Rahmonova-Schwarz 2012). However, this also reflects wider dynamics of caring arrangements and growing anxieties about eldercare in the context of accelerating migration.

In her work on transnational Kyrgyz families, Medina Aitieva points to the increasing complexity of 'family configurations' and practices. Negotiating commitments, responsibilities and expectations within specific cultural hierarchies of power leads to the reinforcement of family ideologies, along with the growing flexibility of caring arrangements. As a result, migrants' sense of obligation becomes 'overstretched', and they struggle to spread scarce resources between their immediate family and more distant kin (Aitieva 2021, 145). Eldercare is highly important for Central Asian societies, and it is heavily moralised. However, it has not been analysed as part of family projects that structure migration.[2] In this chapter, I explore how the sense of one's time, body and relationships becoming 'overstretched' is bound up with the inherent ambivalences, tensions and contradictions of care in the context of migration. In contrast to narratives that emphasise transnational families' ability to creatively juggle their caring obligations from a distance, Maksud's story illuminates the complex entanglements of care, personhood, movement and presence by focusing more on ruptures than continuities.

Morality of care in Central Asia

In Tajikistan, successful ageing is defined through relations with one's extended family and community. Ideas about care are rooted in the so-called 'generational contract', implying the circulation of care between younger and older generations to ensure social reproduction. Intergenerational reciprocity is perceived in terms of moral debt (*qarz*), mutual obligation (*vazifa*) and responsibility (*javobgarī*): parental obligations to care for children are inverted into children's obligations to care for their elderly parents.

Delivering care is imagined strictly within the domestic domain, and institutional care is considered highly inappropriate. The reliance on informal kinship networks in care arrangements increased with the decline of the Soviet welfare state: the average pension in contemporary Tajikistan (around £30 per month) makes it impossible to survive without kin support. Failure to care for one's parents carries the risk of public commentary and social exclusion. As one of my female interlocutors

who lived in Russia for more than ten years explained: 'If you abandon your parents, the entire *mahalla* will condemn you! No one will help you, no one will invite you to *tūi*!' Care functions as an ethnic and religious marker, and as a boundary: my presence in the field was sometimes interpreted as neglect of my own parents, which, according to my interlocutors, was highly immoral and unacceptable for Tajiks, but somewhat 'typical' for Russians and Europeans.

Normative ideas about care emerge at the intersection of state law, customary law and Islamic ethics. According to the state law, adult able-bodied children must provide material support and care for their elderly parents who are legally recognised as incapable of work or in need of material support. Caring for one's elders is seen as a sacred obligation, and as an important part of living Islam. Despite variations in Islamic practice rooted within historically and locally embedded ideas about what it means to be a Muslim, cultivating respect and deference towards one's parents from a very young age is considered to be a crucial part of proper upbringing (*tarbiia*) (Stephan 2010). Concern for one's upbringing is embedded within formal education. Some school textbooks contain references to the Qur'an and hadiths that place children's responsibility to care for elderly parents, and to treat them with patience, respect and kindness right after obedience to God (Jūraeva and Jūraeva 2016, 35).

Customarily, caring obligations are linked to gender and generational hierarchies, as well as to family roles. Within the domestic division of labour among kin, care for the elderly is the responsibility of the youngest son, whose nuclear family never separates into an independent household, but who takes care of the elderly, and who inherits the parental house after their deaths. The obligation to care is joined by public expectations to conduct a proper funeral ritual (*janoza*) according to Islamic rules, which lasts for days, and which demands displaying hospitality to everyone coming to commemorate the deceased. The position of the eldest son entails responsibility and care obligations towards the entire family, as he takes over his father's status as head of the family. These responsibilities include managing his siblings as he manages his own children, marrying them off, supporting them financially, and displaying generosity in the form of gifts (Roche 2014, 118–19).

Giving and receiving care is inextricably linked with notions of respect (Alber and Drotbohm 2015). Showing respect (*hurmat*) to one's elders, and receiving it from one's juniors, is one of the main principles ordering social relations in Central Asia. Young people are socialised into respecting their elders by embodying specific interactional practices,

and, in return, they expect to enjoy the same respect when they approach old age. However, as Judith Beyer (2010, 84) argues in the context of Kyrgyzstan, the acknowledgement of elders' increased authority should not be considered simply as a function of reaching a certain age. Authority and respect are rather 'the result of co-emergent interactional practices', and should be considered as an accomplishment. As one ages, one must 'work towards becoming an elder', which implies delivering certain embodied performances: 'performing elderness' in socially recognised ways. To present themselves as worthy of respect, elders draw on various sources of knowledge that they have accumulated over time (religious, traditional and professional), demonstrating that they have led a morally committed life by providing care and moral guidance to their children and the community (Beyer 2010, 83–4; see also Ismailbekova 2016).

Such performances, however, demand an audience that willingly submits to elders' moral authority, as the mutual recognition of each other's positions is at the core of respect and care. Exploring ageing in Kyrgyzstan in the absence of family, Maria Louw has shown that to have their moral integrity and authority recognised, lonely Kyrgyz elders establish relations of care with ancestor spirits. Care in this sense is understood more broadly as 'a way of presencing forth something or someone (through affection – emotional stances or attitudes – or more concrete actions); of confirming or creating the presence of something or someone in a moral world' (Louw 2022, 69). Acts of care allow elders to 'patch up' their moral worlds, which become damaged due to the absence of extended family. Thus, it requires some hard work of imagination to 'do "being elders"' in the absence of those who care. An inability to move harmoniously through different positions in the life course points to a lack of recognition as a moral person within the community. In this respect, migration poses a threat to both migrants and their elderly parents, not necessarily in terms of practical arrangements of care, but in terms of achieving and sustaining a moral personhood.

Being abandoned by one's children was a widespread fear among Tajik elders. Many tried to use their authority in the family's decision making to bind their children to the home. While some preferred struggling financially to sending their sons to Russia (especially if they only had one son), others tried to ensure that working in Russia was a temporary condition. They did not allow their sons to obtain Russian citizenship, get involved with local women, or buy property in Russia. At one point, Maksud accumulated enough money to buy a piece of land with a small house in Russia, but his father was against the idea, and Maksud had to respect his decision:

My father didn't give me his permission. Maybe he was afraid that I would abandon him in his old age. I am the youngest son after all – I must [care for parents]. I told him that we could sell it at any point. But what can I do if he forbade it? He said no, and that's it.

Men such as Maksud who were only sons, and who could not share the burden of delivering various aspects of care with their male siblings, were placed in a difficult position. On the one hand, they were pushed to migrate by the necessity to provide for their families materially – an important aspect of the gendered labour of care. On the other hand, they were expected to be present at home to be available to their elderly parents (Rahmonova-Schwarz 2012). This necessity to be simultaneously present and absent bred personal ethical dilemmas around reconciling various aspects of care and meeting public expectations.

Care as performance

Going to Russia allowed Tajik men to meet the expectations of care as material provision, and to achieve masculinity and maturity in the eyes of the community. In this sense, absence was an achievement and an aspiration. However, their absence meant that they could not perform a crucial aspect of care – giving respect – depriving their elders of the 'audience' who witnessed and validated their embodied performances of authority.

The inherent bodily character of care is encoded linguistically: to care (*nigoh kardan*) literally means to 'look after' someone. This metaphoric connection between care and the sense of vision points to the relationship that acknowledges bodily co-presence as its basis. It implies that care is not possible without vigilant attention to another person's needs, achieved through actively 'seeing' the other. It also highlights the practice-oriented aspect of care: one has to 'do' it (*kardan*), just like one has to 'do respect' (*hurmat kardan*). Recent work on distant care has pointed to the importance of 'seeing' as an embodied aspect of care (Marchetti-Mercer et al. 2021). Even if migrants cannot physically deliver practical aspects of care, they rely on kin in their places of origin who function as their 'observing eyes'. Splitting the practical and affective aspects of care between physically present kin and migrants who demonstrate their concern and affection through their virtual presence forms the 'triangle of care' (Kaiser-Grolimund 2018). This 'triangle' is constituted by relationships between care receivers, migrants

exercising care at a distance through transnational practices, and kin present on the spot who perform hands-on aspects of care.

Following Felicity Aulino (2016), I direct my analytical attention to the questions of context, and ask whether we can understand the experience of the caregiver as universal. I will show that the relationship of care can be imagined as triangular in a different sense, if we account for the cultural context in which the caring action acquires its meaning. It has been argued that care needs to be recognised as such by both the caregiver and care receiver in order to be efficacious (Tronto 1993). I suggest that 'doing care' needs to be performed and presented to the 'observing eyes' of the social audience to be fully recognised as care. As such, care is rooted in specific forms of bodily presence. In making this argument, I take inspiration from the literature on the importance of audiences in making social action efficacious. For instance, Danilyn Rutherford (2012), as well as Rebecca Bryant and Mete Hatay (2020), point to the role of international audiences as a crucial element in asserting political sovereignty. More specifically to the Central Asian context, Reeves et al. (2014) highlight how the performance approach rooted in Austin's theory of performative utterances and Goffman's sociology of everyday life can help understand how politics is performed in the region. The success of such performances rests upon the ability to be 'seen', and to have one's claims to visibility validated by the audience. Performativity has also been discussed in the context of everyday life in Central Asian neighbourhoods. Morgan Liu (2012, 117) notes that in Uzbek neighbourhoods in the city of Osh, one becomes recognised as a pious person through everyday performances of religiosity: 'it is not just that one needs to pray, study, or fast but that one generally has to *be seen* [my emphasis] doing so and be known in this way'. Being seen is also important on other occasions, for example, life-cycle rituals where performing wealth and hospitality testifies to one's *obrū* (reputation) (Borisova 2021b; Cleuziou 2019b). My analysis extends this logic to the realm of care: I show that the audience involved in seeing someone 'doing care' is a crucial component of meaningful care practice.

My interview with Maksud fell on a rare afternoon when he was not rushing around frenetically trying to find what else he could improve in his house. We were sitting in the tiny heated room and talking about the past twenty years of Maksud's life, intimately linked with his experiences of Russia. From time to time, our conversation was interrupted by Albina or Manizha turning up on the doorstep with a pot of fresh tea. Maksud promised to tell me everything about his working life in Russia, and to

answer my questions about immigration statuses and documents. Yet, very soon, our conversation slid into the domain of his life that was most important to him – his relationship with his parents and family in Tajikistan. Intense feelings of anger, shame and guilt framed Maksud's narrative about care. As we talked, he smoked one cigarette after another. The thick cloud of smoke was suspended above our heads, and, after a while, both his and my eyes welled with tears. I was struck by his admission of shame and his crying, given that he was addressing a younger woman of his daughter's age:

> When my father turned 90 last year, I came back urgently. He had hernia and we had him operated. Two months after I had left to Russia again, my father completely lost his vision. He could see absolutely nothing, he turned blind. They [the parents] waited on purpose [to tell me] until I would retire, and they hoped that then, maybe, I would return and help them. When I heard this, I applied for a pension and left. I came back urgently. When I saw my father that night, I could not fall asleep. I left my parents in such a state, and went to work in Russia! I was crying. It was very hard for me to even look at them.

Upon returning, Maksud firmly promised himself that he would find a way to restore his father's vision. After three unsuccessful attempts to find a proper doctor, and after being rejected by all major clinics in the area, he finally found a young surgeon who agreed to perform an eye operation. Throughout the tiring process of looking for a doctor, doing tests and preparing for the surgery, his father remained very humble, demonstrating his moral integrity. This only heightened Maksud's desire to help him recover: 'You know, tears came out of my eyes! I looked at him – he was sitting and holding on to his walking stick and telling me, "Son, it's OK if nothing can be done, don't torture yourself, I will somehow manage to live to the end of my days."' Maksud's voice trembled, and he stopped talking for a moment, taking his time to light another cigarette. 'I told him, "No father, this is part of my obligations. I will find a way to make you see again."'

Fortunately, the surgery went well. The very moment his father opened his eyes, Maksud's tears were triggered again, but this time, they were tears of happiness:

> He [father] was in the ward with a separate bathroom. I went there to wash my face so that my father wouldn't see my tears! He hadn't

seen anything for the whole year! [At home] he sat in his place and produced such a prayer (*sdelal duo*),[3] according to our custom. He said the words of gratitude for Allah, 'I am pleased with him [my son], give him health, may he and his entire family be happy and never see any need!' I told him it's my obligation, but he said, 'No! I know many people who kicked their parents away, they don't even feed them, don't look after them, don't visit.'

When they returned to the village, Maksud proudly took his father to the local mosque so that the local men could see and hear from his father that Maksud was taking good care of him. Since that day until his next departure to Russia, Maksud always brought his father to the mosque by car. The distance between their house and the mosque was only about 500 metres, and the old man could still walk without any assistance. He even refused to be taken there by car because physical activity was good for him, but Maksud insisted that he should not walk.

Maksud's efforts to orchestrate care at a distance when his family was living in Russia reads like a classic account of transnational care. He regularly called his parents and his kin to check on his parents' health, remitted money, sent gifts and goods for everyday consumption (for example, large sacks of sugar, flour, rice, oil, onions and potatoes), and managed hands-on care through someone else's presence in their household. When asked how his parents got by alone, he rushed to reassure me that they had never been left alone because he always arranged for someone to stay with them, generously rewarding those who agreed. As he shared proudly, 'I bought a car for my son-in-law, and told him that he can keep it if he stays with my parents and takes good care of them.' These efforts were enough for him to ensure that his parents were taken care of before their health started to deteriorate. Loretta Baldassar (2014) argues that moments of acute crisis (illness, dying or death) make distant forms of care inadequate, because certain embodied aspects of care require proximity. However, she reduces the necessity of co-presence to the delivery of 'hands-on' care and 'intimate emotional support'. Approaching care as embodied performance witnessed and validated by the audience opens a slightly different perspective on the necessity of 'being there'.

In order to be recognised as a caring person, Maksud needed to be seen 'doing care'. The moment of his father's health crisis added to the urgency of care performance in the context of his prolonged absence. With distant care, 'caring for' stands for 'caring about': migrants'

remittances, gifts and phone calls serve as manifestations of their care and affection. Affective performances of care premised upon physical presence blur the boundaries between the ethic and practice of care. 'Caring about' performed under the audience's gaze signified 'caring for', and testified to Maksud's willingness and ability to fulfil his filial duties. These performances involved managing one's emotional displays, affective reactions and bodily responses. In her study of subjectivities in southern Tajikistan, Diana Ibañez-Tirado (2013, 175) points to the importance of emotional acts performed for the social audience in the (re)making of gendered subjects and local notions of personhood: 'the local evaluations of for how long, and in what contexts, to display emotions are closely intermingled with local ideas of what constitutes a person and a human being'. One of her male interlocutors engaged in 'crying and suffering' during the process of his divorce, which would normally be considered a 'female thing', but in the context of divorce, his tears – rather than signifying weakness – rendered him an 'affective and moral person, and also a fully and truthful human being' (Ibañez-Tirado 2013, 191). Similarly, Maksud's affective response to his father's illness indicated his willingness to perform care, and positioned him as a dutiful son. Someone else could have done the practical care work, such as looking for doctors, taking Maksud's father to the hospital, and providing him with daily hands-on care, but it was only Maksud who could experience and display certain bodily reactions (for example, uncontrollable tears, insomnia) when guiding his father through medical procedures.

Maksud's long absence from home made his care invisible, and, as the only son, he was afraid of being labelled as an immoral person who abandoned his parents at a critical moment of illness. He felt the urgency of making his care count to, borrowing from Maria Louw, 'repair' the moral world of himself and his father through acts of care. Both the 'doing' – looking for doctors, buying medicines, accompanying his father, driving him around, taking him to the mosque, receiving guests at home upon his recovery – and displaying certain bodily responses needed to be seen by others in order to be recognised as care, and to affirm his personhood, which had been put into question by his long absence. In a sense, for Maksud, narrating how he cared for his father during our interview served as a retrospective performance of care, which confirmed his status as a moral individual to me, the researcher.

Holding it together: linked lives and the gendered labour of care

The links between migration, masculinity and maturity, both in the region and elsewhere, have long been recognised in migration literature (Osella and Osella 2000; Roche 2014). Yet, the pressure to care in specific gendered ways that go beyond material provision has rarely been part of these accounts. In scholarship on Central Asia, care is still exclusively associated with reproductive work done by women in the domestic domain. At the same time, Muslim manhood is portrayed as rigid, and defined by 'unchanging codes of honor and systems of "patriarchy"' (Marsden 2007, 475). Countering this, in the previous section, I showed that affectivity is an important aspect of men's performances of care that are required for them to be recognised as good sons. The affective labour of care is entangled with perceptions of care as material provision, which forms an important part of expectations of manhood in Central Asia, and in the wider Muslim world.[4] Farha Ghannam (2018) argues that men are expected to 'materialise the notions of care' in specific gendered and classed ways. For working class Egyptian men, this means that work outside the house and material provision is part of an ethics of care, and premised on ideas about connectivity and interdependence, rather than on personal fulfilment and self-realisation. Men are socialised not just to be responsible, respectful and competent, but also actively to seek opportunities to meet their families' needs.

Similarly, in Tajikistan, the gendered expectations of care include the labour of coordinating and synchronising a family's caring effort, and being in charge of its outcome. This implies a whole array of tangible activities that a caring man should perform: solving bureaucratic issues, negotiating medical procedures, finding cheaper and more effective ways to do household-related things, maintaining social relations with a wide circle of friends and classmates to exchange favours, driving family members around, and spending time with his elders (Begim 2018). All of this is done to improve the family's material and social living conditions (*sharoit*). A large part of this effort is manifested in building, rebuilding and adorning houses, and in cultivating harmony and peace (*tinjī*) in the household by keeping everyone's needs satisfied.

Although my focus in this chapter so far has been on the figure of a caring man, 'men's stories are never only about men' (Naguib 2015, 59). In denaturalising care, and liberating it from its association with the private, feminine, domestic and invisible, it is important to recognise that different types of gendered physical and emotional labour are

co-constitutive of a collective caring effort. While men in Tajikistan are expected to deliver care through material provision and organising the family's caring effort, women are involved in care practices through daily activities such as cooking, washing up, cleaning, and serving the guests. Thus, women play a crucial role in making men's performances of care count, and help them meet social obligations of adulthood and manhood.

Living in Maksud's household, I witnessed the everyday routines of different family members. For Manizha and Albina, they were predetermined by the elders' needs, which they took shifts to manage. They were bound to the household. Every time I tried to record an interview with Albina during the daytime, someone would appear at their doorstep, customarily paying respect to the elders with their visit, and she had to rush away and set the table to display hospitality. Maksud's parents occupied a separate compartment in the *havlī*, and had their own heating arrangements and a separate daily routine. They spent most of their time inside, watching television and welcoming guests. Spending time, sharing local gossip and food are important parts of showing concern to an ill person (Torno, in press). As a way of paying respect, everyone in the household had to report to them every time they left the house for a significant amount of time, and upon their return. As a result, Albina and her mother had to adjust their household routines – the amount of cooking and cleaning they had to do was not only doubled; they also had to take account of the separate routines. Albina had to wake up very early in the morning to cook breakfast for the elders, who got up at around 4 a.m.; then she returned to bed, and woke up again around 7 a.m. with the rest of the family. The dishes she cooked were also different, because the elders had very specific preferences. In winter, she had to drop by their house in the middle of the night to add coal to the stove. On top of this, she worked as a librarian at the local school, and was busy in the mornings. Later, she switched to her job as a teacher, which left her a couple of 'free' days a week when she could stay at home, but her paid employment was not an excuse to not perform caring duties.

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The smell of fresh warm bread entered our room and made my mouth water. I was impatiently waiting for Albina and Manizha to finish baking and set the table for dinner. Suddenly, I heard loud voices from outside and Maksud rushed inside, slamming the door, his face red from yelling. Seeing my perplexed look, he tried to explain: 'The elders already asked me to tell them [Manizha and Albina] to bake softer bread. But they make the dough too thick on purpose, so that the elders could not eat

it!' Thick silence filled the room as we were having dinner. Maksud was smoking one cigarette after another, Albina was staring mindlessly at the television screen, while Manizha was sitting in the corner quietly, looking offended and ashamed of the fight I had just witnessed. When everyone went to bed, Albina and I sat in the darkness watching big drops of condensation rolling down the window. In the light of the lantern from outside, Albina's loose, thick black hair was beautifully highlighted. After a long moment of silence, she said:

> These elders drive me crazy! They are so capricious; they are like children – they don't know themselves what they want! … When I came back [from Russia], I was offended by their behaviour because – no matter what I did, I did everything wrong for them! Grandmother wanted me not to work and to stay at home to take care of them full time, but when will I live? They constantly complained to my father that I didn't do anything here, and he yelled at me. I even cried … My aunt tells me, 'Don't pay attention, they are already old, they will pass away soon.' But who knows how soon? Maybe, ten years more … how shall we live in the meantime? I can't breathe in this house! There's no one for me to talk to. Mum is always saying I must find a husband while they are still alive, and dad cares only about himself. He's always only with his elders, he doesn't care about us at all. But we are his family! It hurts me so much, Lena. We have become strangers to each other. He doesn't think who will take care of him in his old age. He drove me to the point where I don't even care anymore if I have a dad or not. I'm not going to care for him, I will only care for my mother … You know I just want to take my daughter and leave this house and this damned village. But I cannot leave my mother with them. They will drive her to death.

While for Maksud, his return to Tajikistan was part of his project of fashioning himself as a good son and a proper man, for Manizha, and especially for Albina, it was a step back. They had a good life in Russia, and had planned to stay there long term. Albina saw more opportunities for herself to claim her autonomy as a young single woman, and for her daughter to have access to better education. Since marriage is the main institution for accomplishing normative femininity, there is a social stigma attached to divorced women in Tajikistan, which extends to women's natal families – who sometimes do not want to accept their daughters back. This pushes women to endure an unhappy marriage, or

to migrate and start from scratch (Brednikova 2017). Albina's parents let her live with them in Russia after her divorce in Tajikistan. The reason may be that Maksud did not have sons who would bring daughters-in-law into the family. Albina was the only young woman in the household, and a great help to her mother, while the presence of her little daughter cheered them all up. However, her status as a divorcee seemed to be another source of tension in their household. Her grandparents tried to control her everyday mobility as if she was a young unmarried girl or a *kelin*, because they did not want their own moral standing to be questioned by the community.

Moreover, her singlehood was a concern for everyone around – her neighbours, colleagues and classmates always tried to set her up with someone. Although done in the name of care, this created the feeling of being surveilled and controlled, and it made her life in Tajikistan unbearable. This feeling was based on experiences of constrained agency, and it pointed to the immobilising potential of care. For Albina, care was immobilising in two ways. First, what her family perceived as expressions of care, she experienced as control and oppression. Second, her return to Tajikistan, prompted by the need to be involved in the collective caring effort for Maksud's parents, was involuntary, and was a lapse on the way to her desired life trajectory. This limited her mobility spatially and temporally – being both a reluctant caregiver and care-receiver, she was bound to the household and 'stuck in the wrong life' (Lems and Moderbacher 2016) – a life not of her own choosing, and a life full of hard work, lack of privacy, conflict and boredom.

The current economic structure of opportunities in rural Tajikistan, where it is nearly impossible to sustain livelihoods without working abroad, means that it is becoming increasingly difficult for differently positioned men to meet social and cultural expectations to deliver care as a material provision and as an affective performance of respect. The former demands absence, while the latter is tightly bound up with bodily presence in the community. If Maksud had brothers and sons, it would have given him more space to manoeuvre in arranging care for his parents, because various aspects of care are usually split between the families of adult sons. It would also have meant that Albina would not have been put in the position of being the only young adult woman in the household, who had to take on a lot of care work (on top of her official employment), which is usually shared among daughters-in-law and unmarried sisters. In this respect, Maksud's position as the only son in his family, and not having a son himself, brings into sharp relief how the burdens of gendered labour of care are linked to

attempts to 'entrain multiple linked lives' in the context of migration (Coe 2015, 199).

From the very start of his return to Tajikistan, Maksud was consumed with frantic activities to improve his household – he wanted to build a new outdoor kitchen, refashion their basic sauna and toilet, install a greenhouse, plant vegetables, and rebuild one of the house's compounds. However, since he was rapidly running out of money, his plans were constantly deferred. No matter how hard he tried to perform care in all its aspects, he could not get rid of intense feelings of guilt and shame, and the sense of the unattainability of his plans to stay in Tajikistan, which caused tension in his family relationships. A successful period of work in Russia can transform a young man into a responsible adult, and give him an opportunity to fulfil the roles of a good son, father and husband, thus confirming one's status as a man (Reeves 2013b). However, as Alice Elliot (2021) reminds us in her ethnography of migration in Morocco, gender is a precarious achievement which must be constantly reiterated and reinstated in certain socially approved ways. Observing the activities of returnees during their visits home, she found that men were pressured to move in certain ways – they had to constantly 'do' something: houses, weddings, babies.[5] Those who failed 'to do' were considered feminised, and relegated to the shameful activity of 'sitting' – an activity that belongs to the domestic domain. In such cases, the only thing that could reassert their ability to 'move like a man' was another departure.

In a similar vein, while upon his return, Maksud was actively involved in 'doing care' for his father, he could not do what he would usually do as a migrant anymore – remit money and renovate his house to improve their living conditions. He also could not maintain peaceful and harmonious relationships in his family. His attempts to perform care at all costs constantly fell short. The contradictory demands of being simultaneously present and absent to care in socially recognised ways came at a high personal cost. They put a profound strain on Maksud's body, his sense of self, and his relationship with his family. As a result, he could not craft a socially recognised form of sedentary manhood, which pushed him to leave for Russia again. My impression is that the sense of relief he felt in Russia after his departure was rooted in the fact that he could temporarily escape the burden of contradictory care demands placed on him by his presence in Tajikistan. After all, his absence enabled him to earn money as a proper man – the task that he mastered best in his twenty years of living between Russia and Tajikistan. However, this temporary solution was not sustainable, and after I left the field, Maksud kept moving back and forth. He has not found a way out of the gendered

care trap that required him to be simultaneously present in two places. Being stuck in this motion long term meant that he could not progress to the next stage of his own life in a timely way – retiring and enjoying respect in his old age – the stage associated with stillness rather than movement.

Migration and the future of care in the region

Migration projects are intimately entwined with relations of indebtedness and care. These relations hinge on the entanglement of moral and economic concerns. Yet, they should not be taken for granted, as different kinds of codependent relationships are constituted and dissolved through care. Recent anthropological scholarship on care has called to 'rescue' the concept of care from idealisation and its association with altruistic feelings (Louw 2022; Thelen 2015a). Following this call, in this chapter, I have examined the tensions, ambivalences and contradictions of care in the context of migration. Ethnographically, I have explored Maksud's attempts to care for his elderly parents at a critical time of frailty and illness, after his protracted absence. While women's and men's labour are co-constitutive in delivering successful care performances, studies of care as gendered labour privilege a focus on women. However, men also face contradictory demands and gendered burdens of care. Theirs is the labour of coordination, synchronisation, and holding together the collective transnational effort to care in the first place, which demands a certain moral orientation, but also resources and networks, and the cultivation of certain skills.

To understand the relationship between care and presence, I have suggested problematising care as a triangular relationship accounting for the caregiver, the care receiver and the cultural context in which a caring action acquires its meaning. Emphasising the importance of care being validated by the observing audience, I have pointed to the practices of 'seeing' and 'being seen' as constitutive elements of affective performances that render care visible. These performances are inherently bodily, and they are premised upon physical presence in the neighbourhood space, which sits uneasily with the project of migration as a means to meet the material aspects of care. Being in a structurally disadvantaged position as the only son in his family, Maksud found himself needing to be simultaneously present and absent in his native village. This put a strain on his relationships, his body and his sense of self. Although he managed to affirm his moral standing as a caring son, he stopped being

a caring father in the eyes of his daughter, who now envisaged a future where there was no place for him. Efforts to find a way out of this trap kept Maksud stuck in a loop of departures and returns, which gradually wore down his body and made him question his gendered personhood.

Although Maksud's situation has important specificities that contributed to his unique struggles – the composition of his household, where he was the only son and the only adult able-bodied man, and his father's health crisis – it is illustrative of broader dynamics in the region. During my fieldwork, almost every middle-aged man who worked in Russia expressed anxieties over reconciling absence with caring for his ageing parents. The intensity of those anxieties seemed to vary depending on their structural positions in their families. The current economic structure of opportunities in rural Tajikistan, where it is nearly impossible to sustain livelihoods without working abroad, means that it is becoming increasingly difficult for men to meet social and cultural expectations of care. Care emerges through affective bodily performances that need to be 'seen' by the audience to be recognised as care. This task is very difficult (although, perhaps, not impossible) to achieve via communication technologies. On the one hand, the very act of migrating can be perceived as an affective performance of care in a context where more and more people build their lives through migration projects. On the other hand, the distance and separation that migration breeds are potentially damaging to elders' moral worlds. As successful ageing in Tajikistan demands an audience, creating such audiences through virtual presence implies elders' knowledge and active use of modern communication technologies, which is not the case at present.

Mass migration to Russia began three decades ago, and it is only now that many Tajikistani families start to encounter dilemmas around arranging care for the elderly. Research in other contexts has shown that social expectations around successful ageing and care tend to change as migration becomes established and normalised as a mass phenomenon (Thelen 2015b). As more and more family members join the migration flow, while those who have established a migration cycle long ago are acquiring properties and citizenship in Russia, it is highly possible that they will develop new 'chronotopic strategies for filling the care slot' (Coe 2015, 200). For instance, at the time of my fieldwork, my interlocutors who had secured Russian citizenship tried to incentivise their ageing parents to apply, and complained about their reluctance. Over the following years, the mass process of obtaining Russian citizenship that I explore in the next chapter spilled over to migrants' parents and other non-migrant family members. For them, a Russian passport not

only facilitated unproblematic travels to visit their children in Russia at any time, but also opened access to Russian pensions and medical care without imposing any serious obligations, such as military service. Receiving this allowance on top of the meagre state provision in Tajikistan became part of new security strategies for successful ageing.[6]

The next chapter takes the conversation about the struggles to fulfil crucial life projects sustaining personhood further by investigating the strategic and affective aspects of citizenship-seeking. It shows how dual citizenship can become a means both to meet the normative expectations of fitting into gender and generational hierarchies in Tajikistan and to carve out more autonomy for women such as Albina, unable or unwilling to fit into such hierarchies.

Notes

1 During my fieldwork, I encountered the perception of migration as constantly accelerating: I was often told that, if before it had been enough to have one member of the family working in Russia to sustain the household materially, now it took at least two to meet growing financial demands.

2 Medina Aitieva's ethnography foregrounds care for children. She does not engage with the issues of caring for one's ageing parents in depth, apart from stipulating how the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren could be conceived of as one of mutual caring (Aitieva 2015, 167–92).

3 Maksud mixed a Russian verb 'to do' with the Tajik word for a prayer – *duo*.

4 This mirrors the argument of feminist scholars that money and affection are intimately entangled (Zelizer 2005).

5 Similarly, in Tajikistan, men are expected to be *shustryi*. This is a word borrowed from Russian, and its meaning is bound up with the sense of movement, speed and hustling. The direct translation is 'mobile', 'fast' and 'street-smart'.

6 However, in January 2023, Russia left the pension agreement with the CIS countries. This caught many elders halfway in the process of securing a Russian passport that has now lost its value in their eyes.

Interlude 5: An 'illegal' citizen

Said, a tall handsome Tajik man in his late 30s, with a pleasant, calm voice, travelled from Kaluga (a small town close to Moscow) to St Petersburg for a couple of days, with the sole purpose to meet me and share his story. I felt well prepared for this conversation because I had already met almost all his kin in Tajikistan, and some in Russia. His parents welcomed me in their house at any time; his two sons had arrived in Tajikistan for the summer just before I departed to Russia; his father-in-law had taught me Tajik, and I had met his wife in their apartment in St Petersburg a couple of days before.

Having lost hope that his college degree in accountancy, and his job at the cotton gin factory, would secure him the status of a man who was capable of taking care of his family, Said came to Russia for the first time in April 2005. He pictured this decision as a matter of necessity, but there was also a sense of the curiosity of a man observing his friends leaving en masse and returning with money:

> I wanted to go to Russia even before, because my good friend has always gone to Samara. I was begging him to take me with him since my salary at the factory at that point was already not enough for the family. But he would tell me all the time, 'Don't even dream about Russia – life is tough there. You see our pictures and think that everything is ideal, but it's really very hard there'. And he never took me with him, so I decided to join my father and my uncle already working in St Petersburg.

Said worked with his father and uncle at the naval military base for six months, mastering the skills of plastering, painting and decoration.

Neither he nor his friends thought about the 'legality' of their residence and work in Russia at that point. The first time the issue of papers crossed his mind was in 2007, when the Russian state made its first attempts to control 'foreign workers', and introduced mandatory work permits:

> I started to think about citizenship in 2007, because from the 1st of January 2007 on, we had to apply for work permits. I read *Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas a couple of years ago. In one chapter, he writes that after the dissolution of every state, there will be either revolution or 15–20 years of total mess (*bespredel'shchina*), lack of rule of law, everyone does what they want. And then gradually the state normalises different laws, right? So, I remembered it, and it occurred to me that from now on it [being 'legal' in Russia] will be getting only harder and harder and harder. And I decided to start saving money from 2007 on. They offered me to go for a fictive marriage, but I thought my wife wouldn't understand me, and I didn't even discuss it with her … Now she tells me, 'Why hadn't you done it? At the end of the day, we're not getting divorced for real! It is just for the sake of papers.'

Having saved a sufficient amount of money for the application and other paperwork, Said sought help from his relatives. He asked his cousin to help him with a residency registration (*propiska*) as a first step, at which many migrants stumble. His cousin had already progressed in her migrant career, and had acquired Russian citizenship and some property in the provincial town by that time:

> I told them I'd rather pay my 80 thousand to you than to some strangers. But either they didn't believe me, or they felt uncomfortable to take money from their kin, so they were postponing it all the time. Eventually, they found some dubious intermediaries for us (her own father joined me), part of whom were located in Tajikistan, in the local branch of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, and part in Russia. We were supposed to pay 70 thousand each in Tajikistan, and the remaining half in Russia upon getting a passport. So, in two months, I came to Ryazan with my new travel pass. We dropped by Migration Service, took a picture, gave it to them, and in half an hour we received our passports … Without any application, without *RVP* [temporary residence permit], without anything! As they explained to us, the Russian Consulate in Khujand granted

this citizenship. I started to have doubts if this passport was real. It turned out they took clear official blanks from safe deposit, wrote our names on them, and gave us the passports. That's it. We were not in the database. We were told at the very beginning, if you lose your passports, you wouldn't be able to retrieve them. Of course, it was suspicious, and I started to ask questions. Then he said, 'People are queuing for these passports, you jumped the queue, you got it and now you're being ungrateful!' Then, to avoid further questions, he just threw us out of his car halfway. I got officially employed with this passport in St Petersburg since 2008. I even obtained a yearly registration with this passport. It was real, by the way. Apparently, at that time, the database was not nationwide, and they couldn't check our passports for the registration.

Bearing in mind his doubts, Said made limited use of his new passport – he did not cross borders with it, although his cousin's father did, and nothing happened. He stayed in possession of this dubious document for four years between 2008 and 2012, until his cousin's father went to obtain a new *propiska*, and was told that his passport was 'different' and must be replaced. Said asked his cousin's husband to take him to the local Migration Service branch for a consultation:

They didn't say it was fake (*fal'shivka*), but 'passport was issued with violations', not fake, but the process wasn't completed – there was no application, no file, nothing! They just gave us this filled out blank. This is how I was left without passport in 2012. My other cousin's husband also got his passport like me, they got married and my cousin got a passport 'through' him. His passport was withdrawn, but hers turned out to be real! Her husband was left with nothing. Utter comedy!

By that time, Said had already brought his wife and children to Russia. He felt pressured to be present in Russia despite all the legal barriers to support his family, as his wife was working 12 hours a day with no days off, and could not take care of their children. The Ryazan FMS branch (Federal Migration Service) told him that he had to start the whole process from scratch, and advised him that he should apply for an *RVP*. However, since he had to stay in Russia 'legally' in the meantime, he obtained a labour licence (*patent*). This covered him in encounters with the police, but he concealed this fact from the factory's administration and kept working there 'semi-legally' (Rus. *polulegal'no*), as he

himself framed it, until 2017, as if he were a Russian citizen. Although he experienced new documentary difficulties between 2012 and 2015, and drifted to the 'illegal' pole of the legal–illegal status continuum, his employers never discovered this fact. Having worked for two years with a *patent*, Said crossed the border:

> They told me in St Petersburg's FMS that as long as I pay for my labour licence, they automatically prolong my registration. In 2013, I was leaving via Rostov because tickets were cheap, and, at the border, they told me that I must have got registered every month. I tried to prove them wrong, as I didn't make it up, that's what they told me in St Petersburg! They said I got smart, and took my passport. They returned it in twenty minutes and didn't tell me anything, so I thought they just checked it and let me go. I left and returned to Russia with my kids within 28 days. It turned out they gave me an entry ban in Rostov. But since their database updates only once in a month, or every three months, I managed to return to St Petersburg, and two days after that, I was given a ban. I applied for a *patent* as usual, paid money, and in a month, when I was supposed to receive it, they told me I've got an entry ban to the Russian Federation. Then they told me to go to the other counter, where there was a queue of around a hundred people, and all of them were leaving with grumpy faces because they were given a paper ordering them to leave Russia in three days, all with entry bans for three or five years. I didn't go there. I came to the FMS branch at Fontanka 78 with a lawyer, where they said that the absolute maximum I could stay in Russia was three months if I didn't get a leave order, because it counts as if I didn't know. I said, OK, I would leave in three months, walked out, and stayed in St Petersburg for three years.

After that, Said was looking for opportunities to legalise his status, staying away from the police, moving around the city by car, choosing 'police-free' routes, and bribing himself free, paying large amounts of money every time he was stopped. He eventually managed to get rid of his ban on 25 April 2017, when President Putin issued an amnesty for 'illegal' migrants. His documentary struggles, which brought him to Kaluga, where his friend managed to get him a quota for citizenship, are so complex that neither he nor I were able to make any sense of the Kafkaesque migration management decisions that micro-level bureaucrats and the automated system of blacklisting made. In fear for his family's future, Said 'clung to every straw' to get his entry ban

lifted. His relatives put him in touch with the next intermediary, a Ukrainian man, Vasilii, who offered his services for 35,000 rubles:

> I gave him money and my documents and, in a week, a girl approached me in a similar cafe and gave me a paper confirming that my entry ban was lifted, and that I could apply for a work permit or a labour licence again. I asked Vasilii to help, and he suggested I get an *RVP*, because citizenship is better than just a *patent*. I paid 65,000, went through a medical check, and they arranged a real residence permit for me. Again, without any application, nothing! I don't know who and how they made it, but obviously some FMS inspector had a share in it. But I had to go for it, since at least I could somehow move around the city with this document, otherwise they could have put me in detention jail. And I still have this permit. Because of it, I couldn't apply for a new one in Kaluga. It is still valid, but *propiska* on it is fake. Such a mess. After I got my residence permit, they asked me to submit my finger-prints, and they told me that after some time I was given a new entry ban. First, they lifted the previous one, gave me a residence permit, and then gave another entry ban.
>
> Elena: But how is it possible to get a ban if you already have your residence permit?
> Said: I don't know either. Everything was happening without me being notified. And now this permit is down my throat.
> Elena: What happened with this new entry ban? Is this the one which was amnestied?
> Said: Probably they resumed the old ban. Or they actually never lifted it …
> Elena: But if they never lifted it, how did they arrange you a residence permit?
> Said: This is also a mystery for me. They told me in Kaluga that I must withdraw my old residence permit in St Petersburg. I came to St Petersburg, but an FMS inspector told me my permit was … they wanted to find a file, but there's no file, nothing!
> Elena: Is it fake?
> Said: No, it's not fake! When I was applying for a new one in Kaluga, the previous one popped out in the database. I thought it didn't exist! But when I came, they told me, 'Do you know you have a valid residence permit in St Petersburg?' I answered it was not valid for a long time already, but they said, no, it is valid.

Said left his stable job at the factory in St Petersburg in 2017 to come to Kaluga to apply for a quota for a residence permit that would eventually lead him to citizenship. It was impossible to obtain it in bigger cities, as they were all 'sold out' to intermediaries, and cost a fortune. He applied for a quota, and he received it in six months. Then he immediately applied for a new residence permit, but failed to obtain it because his old one was still valid. This quota was valid for one year; he would be able to reapply when his old permit expired. Said chose the strategy of waiting it out. He was bound to stay in Kaluga in the meantime, because he obtained a *patent* for work there, and he was not allowed to stay in other regions for more than three days. His wife and children were in St Petersburg. Kaluga is a small town, with low wages and expensive labour licences. Said did different jobs for his friend, worked as a taxi driver, and waited:

> Elena: Why didn't you try to withdraw your old residence permit?
> Said: Well, since the attitude to migrants is not very good here, they can ask uncomfortable questions. I can't find this Vasilii anymore, and I don't know who did it and how. So, I was advised that I keep working peacefully in Kaluga and wait, because no one knows what kind of person this inspector will be!

Said's documentary struggle was unfolding alongside his crucial life projects: children were born; a house was being constructed; his younger brother was getting married; his father was going to *Hajj*; money was regularly remitted, and carefully preserved by his mother. Having worked in Russia for the first five years, Said decided to invite his wife and children to join him:

> Five years without my wife was a nightmare! I was so naive, I thought I'd work for one year, do something, for example, open a shop or buy a car and start to live. A year and then another one. And just as I was going to start to live, I lost five years! I was about to start to live, but life was already passing! I was already 30. After 30, I got stressed, I think everyone experiences this after 30. What have I done? Nothing! I was only about to start to live, but it turned out I already was living! Many think so: I will work a bit, and then will start to live. But no! One needs to live in the present. Think about the future, but live in the present!

Trying to compensate for his insecure legal status, Said decided to acquire property in Russia, so that, in case he got deported, his family

could still have a roof over their heads. When I visited Said's mother's home in Tajikistan for the first time, a large pile of red bricks stacked in their courtyard attracted my eye. She explained that they wanted to renovate their house this year, but then her children had got a mortgage to buy out a second room in the St Petersburg apartment that they rented, so they had to postpone renovation till better times. According to Said, it is thanks to his mother that things kept running. She supervised his house construction, and she kept working in their apricot gardens when all the men were in Russia. This provided his parents with a small income, and it allowed Said and his brother to accumulate money to buy land in Tajikistan and property in Russia. Maybe for this reason, trying to make sense of his long-term struggles, Said concluded: 'Sometimes I think [smiling] that God himself doesn't want me to get citizenship, so that I don't stay in Russia and abandon my parents. But I'm still progressing slowly. I don't know if I'll ever manage to get it, we'll see.'

5
Chasing the red passport

> Now everyone wants Russian citizenship! Many years ago, someone offered to help me with it when it was easier, but I thought, why do I need foreign citizenship? I am Tajik and I will die Tajik [Rus. *Ia tadzhik, tadzhikom i umru*]. But it turned out that having another citizenship just in case [Rus. *na vsiakii sluchai*] won't hurt.
>
> Farhod's brother

One summer's day in 2018, I was sitting with a group of women in Farhod's house. We were peeling carrots in the warm living room, preparing to welcome guests for an engagement party (*nonshikanon*)[1] for Gulrukhsor's wedding celebration, and talking about the burden of Tajik traditions (see Chapter 3). I enquired who had lent the money for her wedding. It turned out that it was her maternal uncle (*tagho*), who had worked in Russia for many years. He had promised a large amount of money six months earlier to contribute to Gulrukhsor's sister's wedding, but he had failed to keep his promise due to the need to pay for his labour licence. This turned our conversation to the challenges of contemporary migrants' lives in Russia compared to the recent past, and Gulrukhsor's grandmother sighed: '*puli Rossiia ado shusos*' (Russia's money is coming to an end).

During my fieldwork, I heard many similar accounts driven by a poignant feeling of the shrinking opportunities for work in Russia. Tightening migration rules after 2012 have made a temporary move to Russia a costly enterprise. Paired with the practice of 'surreptitious deportations' (Kubal 2017; see also Introduction), it has led my inter- locutors and their families to feel that 'Russia is shutting down' and may no longer be an option for those seeking to earn 'quick' money for

pressing life-cycle projects. The 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia that summer added to migrants' concerns, and the feeling of drastically declining opportunities. While simplifying entry for football fans, the Russian state introduced a stricter regime of residency registration for migrant workers; now they had to obtain this within three days of arrival. Moreover, the police intensified routine practices of document checks, and there were rumours in the community about mass deportations before the football tournament. That summer, the Tajik Ministry of Labour, Migration and Employment had recommended that Tajik nationals should refrain from trips to certain Russian cities. Indeed, some of my interlocutors preferred to 'wait it out' (Rus. *perezhdat'*) at home, and planned to return to Russia in the autumn. In the context of unemployment and endemic corruption, individual fears of cessation of transnational lifestyles and a loss of the main livelihood strategy were joined by public fears of a loss of social cohesion and peace in Tajikistan. As Farhod's brother-in-law put it: 'Our state is so corrupt! If Russia closes its doors for us, we will all bite each other to death here!' At the same time, people felt a fragile hope that 'Russia will not abandon us' (Rus. *Rossiia nas ne brosit*). Appealing to the common imperial and Soviet past, and to residual imaginary of Russia as a 'big brother', they reasoned about the mutual dependencies of Russia's and Tajikistan's economies: labour shortages and the declining population in contemporary Russia meant that no matter how undesirable migrant workers might be, they would always be needed to fill the gaps and take over jobs that Russians did not want (see Introduction).

Against this backdrop, fears of collective entrapment and loss of opportunity to maintain transnational livelihoods, coupled with an awareness of their asymmetrical relationship with the Russian migration regime, have contributed to Tajik nationals' growing aspirations to acquire Russian citizenship. The majority of my interlocutors and their kin either aimed to become Russian citizens or were already on their way to doing so, while those who had missed the opportunity in the past deeply regretted it now. The hunt for a Russian passport appeared to have become a major concern for the community. The possession of a Russian passport did not go unnoticed in the village. Even schoolchildren knew exactly who was lucky enough to be a Russian citizen among their classmates, because it meant that their 'citizenship capital' (Kalm 2020) could be transformed into opportunities for further education abroad and better life prospects. The scope of this collective craving for a Russian passport was manifest in people chasing multiple documents transnationally, standing in long queues at the Russian Consulate in the

nearby city of Khujand, or trying to apply for citizenship as their first step upon arrival in Russia. Sometimes this evoked a sense of moral panic – local media even reported fights among applicants queueing in front of Russian consulates in Khujand and Dushanbe. People employed their Soviet past privileges, Russian language proficiency, kinship connections, or higher-level qualifications to show that they were eligible for a 'fast-track' pathway to citizenship. According to the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, around 35,700 Tajikistani citizens were granted Russian citizenship between January and September 2018.[2] Russia has an agreement concerning dual citizenship (*dvoinoe grazhdanstvo*) with Tajikistan which came into force in 1997, mostly to help ethnic Russians repatriate during and after the Civil War, but today it also benefits non-Russians from Tajikistan. It allows them to keep their Tajik passports, rather than being confronted with the dilemma of losing rights in their country of origin.

The widespread acquisition of Russian citizenship has not, however, translated into a mass permanent resettlement of Tajiks to Russia. In this sense, a Russian passport did not signify belonging to a political or territorial entity, but rather embodied people's desire to secure a certain set of opportunities against the backdrop of increasing legal and economic uncertainty. This points to the emergence of so-called 'strategic citizenship', a phenomenon defined by a plethora of terms that have gained wide traction in the recent literature on international mobility and migration. This scholarship draws attention to the fact that the normative idea of liberal citizenship based on the principle of 'genuine links' between people and the country of citizenship – understood as a legal status matching one's identity (Bauböck 2019) – does not correspond to the reality of the fluid globalising world in which millions of people are leading their lives in transnational spaces rather than nation-state containers (Amelina and Faist 2012; Glick Schiller et al. 1995). In her ethnographic study of the transnational mobility of elite Chinese subjects, Aihwa Ong analyses their practices of accumulating multiple passports as a strategy to 'respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions', resulting in the development of a 'flexible notion of citizenship' (Ong 1999, 6). Referring to cases of citizenship by investment, external citizenship (when citizens do not reside in the country whose citizenship they hold) and EU citizenship, with its access to free mobility rights, political sociologist Christian Joppke points to the emergence of 'instrumental citizenship' – a citizenship without identity, as opposed to the 'sacred and nationalist' ideal (Joppke 2019, 860). Sociologists Yossi Harpaz and

Pablo Mateos (2019) have called for the analysis of strategic citizenship as a set of bottom-up practices and conceptions to account for the complexity of new citizenship acquisition strategies, practical uses, and understandings of citizenship at the intersection of a global hierarchy of nationalities and tightening mobility controls.

Extending this debate, this chapter nuances and qualifies the notion of strategic citizenship from a non-Western and non-elite perspective. Connecting to the book's broader theme, it shows how decisions about citizenship are bound up with struggles for the good life. Unlike elite non-Western subjects seeking more powerful 'top-tier' passports to maximise their mobility and profits (Harpaz 2019), my interlocutors were people struggling to navigate the 'unequal distribution of the ability to lead a normal life' (Dzenovska 2014, 273) in the transnational space between Tajikistan and Russia, marked by legal indeterminacy and economic precarity. The mass pursuit of Russian citizenship by Tajik nationals is shaped by a particular conjuncture of routinised transnational migration in Tajikistan and recent developments in the Russian migration regime. As such, it can be understood as a pragmatic response to increasing economic and legal uncertainty.

Bringing together conversations about affective interactions of people with their documents and strategic citizenship, I suggest a more nuanced approach, attentive to the ways in which passports attained for strategic purposes become deeply embedded within imaginaries about future possibilities and imbued with affect. An affective component in people's engagements with their passports, bound up with ideas about opportunities for meaningful life and future imaginaries, defines people's strategies for obtaining and using certain documents. Furthermore, the decisions and practices of citizenship acquisition need to be situated in family configurations and analysed vis-à-vis their collective attempts to negotiate the indeterminacy of migrant lives. These practices are embedded in local gender and generational hierarchies, and are not necessarily linked to the project of migration. Russian passports allow Tajiks to negotiate the extreme uncertainty their families live through, and to craft themselves as good gendered persons for their communities, rather than for the receiving state.

To understand how citizenship takes a particular form in the life projects of people, I consider the category of citizenship to be relational and dynamic, and render it open rather than having some predefined content (Lazar 2013). For my interlocutors, the act of taking Russian citizenship is an outcome of a constantly shifting relationship between the Russian state (in the guise of different agencies competing for

resources, see Schenk 2018) and (im)mobile subjects. At the same time, it sets in motion a myriad of other relationships in their lives: between people, places, documents, borders, values and imaginaries. Each of these shifting relationalities provokes certain affective responses in people who are struggling to navigate and strategise in a constantly changing transnational field.

Being immersed in the minutiae of people's everyday life has illuminated the pervasive presence and importance of documents far away from border crossings and checkpoints, or other places usually associated with documents, for example, embassies and consulates (Jansen 2009). The need to 'make documents', and the desire to get a Russian passport, came up in casual conversations in school, at the local bazaars, at family gatherings and wedding feasts. Attempts to apply for citizenship punctuated my interlocutors' everyday routines and temporalities, and pushed them to travel short and long distances to obtain missing documents. My own 'red passport' was often an object of reverence and jokes about me entering a fictive marriage to help a good friend obtain Russian citizenship, facilitating discussions about its value. This pushed me to think about documents which 'penetrate into the lives' of their holders not as 'reifying abstractions', but as concrete material artefacts enabled by specific historical and political contexts (Kelly 2006, 90). As material artefacts 'they are perceived or experienced as affectively charged phenomena when produced and transacted in specific contexts of social relation' (Navaro-Yashin 2007, 81). Paying attention to documents as material forms, which emerge as important loci of social relations, in this chapter, I look at what desires my interlocutors attached to their documents, how they made decisions about their documents, and how they talked and felt about them.

'Man grazhdanstvo megiram': making documents and new citizens

The Russian migration regime differentiates between different kinds of foreigners based on their country of origin and their purpose for coming to Russia. There are various legal statuses which imply certain temporalities of stay in Russia, and which are linked to particular opportunities and limitations. The visa-free border regime made travel to Russia relatively unproblematic for citizens of Tajikistan, but the real boundaries reveal themselves upon arrival. After arrival, migrants must obtain a *propiska* (residence registration), a Soviet-era institution initially introduced to

bind labour resources to place and limit rural populations' outmigration to the capital (Light 2010).[3] Furthermore, to secure 'legality' at work, migrants need to obtain a labour licence (*trudovoi patent*), which is a challenge in itself, and to pay monthly fees to renew it. The list of necessary documents includes a health certificate based on a medical check, private medical insurance, and a certificate of knowledge of Russian language, history and law. Fees vary depending on the region – in St Petersburg, the fee was 3,800 rubles (around £48) in 2018. Designed as a 'liberal' measure to replace the system of work permits based on quotas, the patent system, apart from 'eating away' a large share of a migrant's income, effectively binds a migrant to a particular region and type of work. To make a patent count as 'legal', migrants also need to sign a work contract – something that the majority of employers are reluctant to do to avoid taxation. All these procedures have strict temporal regulations, and if someone fails to secure their documentation within three months (seven days for residence registration), they have to leave and are not allowed to re-enter Russia for three months. Rapid changes in migration legislation, coupled with a distinctive economy of document production and housing (see Introduction), leave migrant workers to navigate their way through a legal and social environment in which it is 'often difficult for migrants, policemen, employers, and analysts alike to tell whose actions and documentary statuses are "legal" and whose "illegal" according to classificatory register of the state' (Reeves 2013a, 511). Shifting migration rules, the pervasiveness of bureaucratic mistakes, the omnipresence of intermediaries at different levels, and notoriously widespread informal payments can result in people experiencing the process of documenting themselves as ultimately arbitrary. Against this backdrop, migrants come to consider obtaining Russian citizenship as the only working strategy to overcome the ambiguity of legal statuses available for migrant workers, to reduce the financial and existential costs of staying documented, to secure much desired 'legality', and to minimise the risk of forced removal.

Although there is a special word for citizenship in contemporary Tajik language, *shahrvandī*, people never used it in everyday conversations, opting instead for the Russian word *grazhdanstvo*. Talking about the process of its acquisition, they usually said '*man grazhdanstvo megiram*' (Taj.), which translates as 'I (will) take citizenship'. They could also 'give' or 'pass' (Taj. *dodan*) it on to their children or close kin. The same applied to a Russian passport, which often appeared as a *krasnyi* (red) *passport* in conversation. Thus, citizenship was imagined mainly through its material form (passports), as a valuable object that

could be taken, given or passed on. Since it was Russia which served as the main source of work, remittances, goods and hope for a better life, people never specified what citizenship or passport they were obtaining: it was taken for granted that it was Russian. Emphasis on action (Rus. *delat' grazhdanstvo* – to make citizenship) implied that one must put significant effort into the gruelling application process: finding information, contacting intermediaries, finding money, doing paperwork, taking language exams, and dealing with bureaucratic mistakes. This placed a high demand on applicants' material resources, emotional and time investments, and, coupled with the contingencies of migrant life, it set many people back for years in their attempts to move towards a 'red passport' through the system of different statuses, materialised in a particular sequence of documents.

According to the standard procedure, a migrant must have lived and worked legally in Russia and passed through a number of statuses before becoming eligible for citizenship. The first step on the bumpy road to citizenship was a temporary residence permit (*razreshenie na vremennoe prozhivanie*, or simply *RVP*) which allowed one to stay in Russia for three years without the need to pay for a labour *patent* and prolong one's residence registration every month. A foreign citizen (*inostrannyi grazhdanin*) had to be fully accountable to the state and provide information about one's residency (one could not move between different regions freely), work, income and orderliness. While reducing expenses on labour *patents*, this status did not prevent a migrant worker from being deported, as it could be revoked based on a long list of minor and major law violations, including: absence from the territory of the Russian Federation for more than 180 days a year; working in a different region than the one where the document was issued; failure to submit an annual notification to confirm the status, which required confirmation of income; two or more administrative violations a year; a criminal offence; and taking part in terrorist activities.[4] Once revoked, a migrant worker was retrospectively considered to have violated residency rules, and became subject to removal and imposition of an entry ban for five years. The desirability of this status for Tajik migrant workers lay in the fact that it freed them from the burden of constantly rising costs for remaining documented, and allowed them to redirect money flows to the other crucial projects. Farhod's sister, for instance, spoke approvingly of her niece's husband's life progress, as he had recently obtained his temporary residence permit via a fictive marriage:

> Before they introduced the *patent*, we had paid 20,000 rubles (£254) for work permits. Now we have to pay 25,000 (£318) for

the *patent* itself, and then 3,500 (£45) every month. I pay 70,000 rubles (£890) a year! Look at Zafar! He got divorced [on paper] a year after his wedding, got married to a Russian and received his *RVP*. He managed to do so much in these three years! They bought two rooms in an apartment; they also bought a car, instead of giving away his money for nothing!

Materially, the *RVP* is a stamp in a foreign citizen's travel passport, or sometimes a separate document. The temporality of its acquisition differed significantly depending on the procedure. The *obshchii poriadok* (standard procedure) meant that one was not eligible for multiple 'fast track' pathways (*uproshchennyi poriadok*) and had to obtain one of a specified quota first. The precise quota was defined by the Russian government every year, and it varied across different regions. For example, the overall quota for RVPs in 2018 was 90,360, but the government cut it to 83,480 in 2019, with only 6,480 in the north-western region of Russia (including St Petersburg as the main metropolis).[5] The scarcity of quotas meant that this route was considered the worst and the longest one by my interlocutors. One would usually need to find an intermediary who would 'sell' them a quota that they 'bought out' from the Migration Service in advance.

After possessing a temporary residence permit for a year, one could move on to applying for a permanent residence permit (*vid na zhitel'stvo*). Its material manifestation, a 'blue passport', potentially provided a foreign citizen with the full set of rights enjoyed by citizens, apart from eligibility for public office and the right to vote in federal elections, but it did not impose obligations such as conscription. It could be prolonged any number of times, and it opened the path to full citizenship. Its main benefit was that it provided more mobility – residents could freely move between any region of Russia with no limitations on the type of work they could do – and access to all state services. However, it was also revocable on the same basis as the temporary residence permit, as outlined above. This encouraged people to seek various 'fast-track' options to full citizenship, which gave them the right to apply for a Russian passport more quickly, thus 'jumping' the previous statuses.

Judging by the official statistics of the Russian Ministry of Interior Affairs, there was a significant mismatch in the number of quotas for *RVP* and how many people were granted residence permits and citizenship. This meant that the majority of applicants turned out to be somehow eligible for the simplified 'fast-track' procedure (*uproshchennyi poriadok*), and did not need to obtain a quota first.[6] There

was a long list of eligibility criteria for 'fast-track' citizenship: having a spouse or parent who was a Russian citizen; having been born on the territory of Russia and previously holding USSR citizenship; having been recognised as a 'native speaker' of Russian (*nositel' russkogo iazyka*);[7] taking part in the Resettlement Programme; having a business on the territory of Russia; investing in the Russian economy; or being a 'highly qualified specialist'. Some of these criteria made one eligible to apply at Russian consulates abroad (kinship connection), while others required the applicant's presence in Russia (spousal connection). Some of these pathways implied the renunciation of Tajik citizenship, while others allowed dual citizenship.[8] The only limitation officially imposed on Russian citizens in Tajikistan from 2017 was that they could not occupy high-ranking positions in the state sector.[9] The growing uncertainty of migrant lives meant that the majority of my interlocutors pursued the fastest and the most available path, very often without giving much consideration to the details. At the time of my fieldwork, kinship connections and fictive marriages with a Russian citizen (who might well be their former compatriot who had previously received a Russian passport) were the most widespread routes to citizenship, and a few people were starting to explore the possibilities of Russia's Resettlement Programme for Compatriots (Myhre 2017; Woodard 2022).

Many of my interlocutors were not aware of all the subtleties involved in the process of becoming a Russian citizen, and navigated the complicated system of statuses through the material qualities of their papers, such as shape and colour. This navigation also depended on sharing the information and contacts of 'the right person'. This sometimes led to confusion, as people could not always distinguish between a residence permit and a passport because they both looked like a small book. However, they knew which threads of social relations needed to be set in motion in attempts to acquire any of these statuses. For instance, they knew that a fictive marriage resulted in a 'blue passport' within a year, while finding a kin connection could guide them to a 'red passport' directly, sometimes even without the need to go to Russia. They also knew that they could bargain more effectively with border guards in the region if they had a 'red passport' in their pocket, but that the 'blue' one did not carry the same authority. They also assumed that having a 'red passport' would increase their attractiveness on the local marital market (see Rahmonova-Schwarz 2012 on the Kyrgyz context). Finally, they often knew whom they needed to approach to facilitate and expedite the process.

Against the backdrop of Russia's restrictive and inconsistent migration policy, the country's comparatively liberal politics of citizenship

allowed migrants from Tajikistan to become Russian citizens relatively quickly, and to use their citizenship to remain legally legible to the Russian state. However, since migration is embedded in family cycles, and enmeshed in the local system of values, considering the search for Russian citizenship to be a purely pragmatic and rational individual enterprise would be insufficient. The remainder of this chapter looks at how people strove to acquire a red passport and related to their *grazhdanstvo* locally and transnationally.

'Don't change your surname': kinship and the economy of migratory knowledge

As an ethnographer trying to understand how the process of citizenship acquisition worked in practice, and how it played out in people's lives, I soon found myself in the same position as my interlocutors, who were trying to navigate the process but for different reasons. Many of them were not sure what certain documents and actions meant, relying on their networks for advice. However, this did not mean that they lacked knowledge or easily fell victim to predatory intermediaries – a discourse popular among bureaucrats working in the sphere of migration, both in Russia and Tajikistan (Bahovadinova 2016a). On the contrary, many of my interlocutors accumulated all sorts of knowledge about different types of documents and bureaucratic procedures. However, in light of the instability of documentary forms, and the lack of transparency in bureaucratic procedures (Reeves 2013a), this knowledge did not necessarily result in the successful acquisition of citizenship. Having asked my interlocutors about the criteria, the sequence of actions, and the list of documents needed to apply for Russian citizenship, a feeling of constant confusion followed my attempts to figure out 'how it really works'. Each time the process seemed to have worked differently. Although a Russian passport was associated with stability compared to other statuses, the very process of its acquisition was highly unpredictable. Going through the same procedure, one could strictly follow the letter of the law and get nowhere, while others received their documents relatively quickly and easily.

Quests for citizenship turned out to be a highly transnational and translocal enterprise, in which different bureaucracies became entangled in unexpected ways. Certain categories of people were eligible to apply at the Russian consulates in Tajikistan.[10] Having both options at hand, some people deliberately chose to apply in Tajikistan because they believed it

was cheaper and faster than applying in Russia. I saw my interlocutors commuting between their village and Khujand regularly to bring some missing pieces of paper to the consulate, or to consult some intermediary who was 'helping' them to prepare their documents. Applying in Tajikistan via a kinship connection, applicants needed to bring the originals of their relatives' passports to the consulate as proof of their connection, along with a 'consent' paper (*soglasie*) signed by them. The fact that their relatives were physically in Russia did not bother officials. As a result, documents, real or ambiguous, were in constant circulation between different places in Russia and Tajikistan, with incredible speed. Every time I travelled to and from Russia, I was asked to bring passports and other papers to my interlocutors' kin, friends or neighbours.

Adjustments of one's actual status and reality to the documentary one, or vice versa, were made rapidly. Often, the list or quality of documents that applicants submitted, or the criteria on which they were applying, did not match the official information I found in federal law and other sources. For instance, many people had spelling mistakes in their documents due to the transition to Tajik as the official language. Although all three languages (Russian, Tajik and Uzbek) that were officially used in the region in the Soviet time were based on the Cyrillic script, there were some specific sounds designated by different letters that caused confusion. Initially, Albina, who I introduced in Chapter 4, wanted to apply on the basis of her father's citizenship, but the way his name was spelled in his documents did not match the way her patronymic was spelled in her passport:

> Albina: One letter didn't match. His name is spelled Maksudjon with a 'j' (ж) in his passport, and in my passport I am Maksuddzhonovna [patronymic] with 'dzh' (дж).
> Elena: Is this in your Tajik passport?
> Albina: Yes, they advised me to change my passport. But if I changed my passport, I would have to change all my other documents too. It costs money. I would have to change my college diploma, birth certificate, everything! That's why I decided to wait until my mother got her citizenship.
> Elena: Oh, it's so complicated!
> Albina (grinning): yeah, we all have this problem here.
> Elena: Is it because of mistakes they make in your documents here, in Tajikistan?
> Albina: Yes, people are struggling. Everyone who makes documents finds mistakes. I, too ... 'Albina' is spelled with the soft sign (ь),

which comes after 'l'. But there's no soft sign (Rus. *miagkii znak*) in the Tajik language.[11] I told them, 'write my name with the soft sign!' But they didn't, and I had to change my birth certificate a couple of times because of this!

Elena: Where did you have to go to change it?

Albina: To ZAGS [state registration office]. I forced them to put that soft sign there! I told them, 'Write it as it's written in my passport!'

Elena: Did you do it specifically to be able to apply for citizenship?

Albina: Yes. They [the consulate] wouldn't accept my documents because of that one letter. It's considered a mistake. So now everywhere I go, I tell them, 'Write the soft sign!' They [the bureaucrats in ZAGS] told me, 'according to the rules, names are not translated'. I said, 'I don't care about your alphabet! (Rus. *mne plevat' na vash alfavit*)! Write the soft sign!' I am fighting with people because of the soft sign all the time! (laughing)

Elena: Is it official or did you have to pay them informally?

Albina: It's all official! They give you an invoice, and you go and pay at the bank.

However, some applicants managed to have their documents accepted despite mistakes and inconsistencies, sometimes for an unknown reason, while others were set back for years trying to make the letters in their names match across all their Tajik documents. A change in one document inevitably led to further changes in the whole cascade of documents, and made applicants work hard to mobilise their time, money and connections. On top of this, it quickly became clear to me that the ever-present intermediaries and ambiguous schemes which enormously complicated one's path to 'legality' in Russia were actually transnational and firmly established their presence in Tajikistan. Almost all my interlocutors used the services of intermediaries (Figure 5.1). Very often, they could not distinguish between private and state agents. When I asked Albina if the 'firm' (Rus. *firma*) mediating her communication with the Russian consulate was an intermediary, she struggled to locate it on the official/unofficial continuum. She did not sign any kind of contract, but she paid around £170 for their services (the overall amount of money she paid throughout the process was around £800) after she had submitted her application to the consulate. At the same time, she insisted that everything was 'clean and official' there. Unfortunately, I did not manage to obtain any more information on what exactly that arrangement was, but, from what I heard and witnessed myself during my brief visit, it resembled a typical 'visa centre'. Occupying a small office space in a brand-new empty office

Figure 5.1 The sign on the building close to the Russian consulate in Khujand. The sign reads: 'Paperwork agency: signing up for Russian test (issuing certificates), paperwork preparation'. The saliency of Russian insignia contributes to the blurring of boundaries of official/unofficial. Khujand, winter 2018.

centre near the Russian consulate, two Russian-speaking women acted as consultants for applicants in person and by phone, and checked their documents. They did not forward them to the consulate – applicants had to apply in person. However, they seemed to have access to the consulate: they could arrange appointments for applicants and speed up the process, a task which was almost impossible for individual applicants. Every time my interlocutors called the consulate, the line was busy – they suspected that someone just 'bought out' (Rus. *vykupil*) all the slots in the queue to resell them to applicants later.

The constant sense of confusion that my interlocutors communicated to me, and the substantial sense of arbitrariness in the process of application, contributed to the emergence of a peculiar 'economy of migratory knowledge' (Alpes 2012), in relation both to the process of Russian passport acquisition and to the benefits it could bring to its holders. In Russia, migrants from Central Asian countries often rely on informal networks more than on official institutions as sources of information, documents, employment and housing (Urinboyev and Polese 2016). As one criterion of eligibility was an applicant's kin connection to a Russian citizen, kinship imaginaries played an important role in the process of knowledge transmission, and influenced how certain information was interpreted and (dis)trusted.

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One warm summer evening in 2018, I was sitting outside with Farhod's family under an apricot tree. As the day's scorching heat subsided and gave way to the long-awaited evening freshness, we were sipping tea and daydreaming about Gulrukhsor's wedding. The family had just accepted a marriage proposal from a migrant worker who was to receive a Russian passport very soon, and we were excited to discuss the match's advantages and shortcomings. Farhod turned to Gulrukhsor, and said playfully, 'Don't change your surname after the wedding! We will all then receive citizenship through you.' She smiled, having suddenly realised her importance and ability to help her family, instead of just causing new expenditures. When I rushed to notice that the ascending kinship line did not make them eligible for citizenship – the information I had found in the text of the law[12] – they looked puzzled. Obviously, legal and local understandings of kinship did not coincide, and the fact that the law privileged some kinship lines while cutting off others seemed to them quite arbitrary. The bureaucratically approved 'same surname' that was materialised in passports, birth certificates and other documents, appeared to be the ultimate manifestation of sufficient connection for many of my interlocutors. Coupled with the actual arbitrariness of citizenship acquisition procedures, it produced a common misconception that having the same surname as some migrant kin in possession of citizenship could guarantee access to a Russian passport.

The other factor contributing to such an understanding was rooted in specific bureaucratic practices in Tajikistan that emerged as a reaction to the Russian deportation regime (see Introduction). The lucrative business of document production in Tajikistan benefited from large-scale deportations and the Russian politics of forced immobilisation through imposing re-entry bans on migrants. As the official narrative had it, 'banned' migrants could not enter Russia: if they attempted to travel to Russia, their names would pop up in the database upon arrival, and they would be denied entry (Bahovadinova 2016b; Reeves 2017b). However, driven by the fear of unemployment and impoverishment, many immobilised migrants quickly found an escape route to Russia by taking new names and changing their identity documents (Figure 5.2). Changing one's name allowed one to 'cheat' the database and enter Russia without difficulty. Nevertheless, such migrants were unable to obtain labour *patents*, since the procedure included fingerprinting. Should they try, their fingerprints would match the ones stored in the database, and they would be reported for falsifying documents, which was considered a criminal offence. However, since it was possible for migrants to find paid work outside of legal employment, they did not even try to obtain

Figure 5.2   The 'queue' outside the local branch of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, where people applied for new Tajik passports (both national IDs and travel passports), and where I had to obtain my residence registration within three days of my arrival in Tajikistan. Sughd Province, autumn 2017.

such documents once they made it to Russia under their new names. Such a frequent change of identity documents – apart from producing confusion – brought generous profits to the state agencies dealing with documents, such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the state registration office (ZAGS), where fees for official services were topped up by informal payments to expedite the process.

The speed with which migrants constantly changed their names (despite heavy costs) became the subject of multiple jokes, both in Tajikistan and in Russia. In Tajikistan, people playfully chose their new names on their way to the registration office. One man, familiar with orientalising cultural tropes, asked his wife if she wanted to be 'Zukhra' or 'Gulchatai'. He was referring to the famous Soviet comedy film *White Sun of the Desert,* which tells the story of a Red Army officer fighting the *Basmachi* guerrilla movement in Central Asia in the 1920s, while also liberating women from its powerful leader's harem. In Russia, one of the staff at St Petersburg Pulkovo Airport told me that they had witnessed one Tajikistani man being deported three times, but every time he returned within a month and continued offering his services (wrapping

baggage with adhesive tape for protection) to migrant workers returning home. Airport staff had no idea what his new name was this time, so they just ironically (and somewhat dismissively) referred to him as 'cap man' (*kepka*), because he always wore the same distinctive cap.

The apparent lightness of changing one's name 'officially', and the playful attitude to it, created a particular understanding of the connection between material and documentary reality, which could be adjusted to each other if needed. Such an understanding pervaded people's future imaginaries in Tajikistan. One day, I was sitting in front of the old desktop computer with a former school headmaster and his students, who wanted to apply to Russian universities. One of them dreamed of enrolling in a military school in Russia, and he became very upset for a moment when he found out that they only accepted Russian citizens. However, a minute later, he lit up and exclaimed that he knew the solution, as his maternal uncle had a Russian passport. I enquired how he imagined it could be 'passed' to him, and he firmly stated, 'I just need to change my surname and then my uncle will adopt me.' Although his uncle was already his kin (*avlod*), which entailed expectations of support and care obligations, these documentary manipulations would create a new bureaucratically authorised kinship line and produce his eligibility. I do not know if he eventually tried this, but I can easily imagine that he might have succeeded if he did.

'One passport per family is enough': citizenship in family projects

One day we were discussing the economy of fictive marriages with Farhod's family. I was interested in its bureaucratic side, that is, how eligibility was produced for a Tajik spouse whom a migrant had to divorce to marry a Russian 'just for papers'. At some point in the middle of my speculations, Farhod stopped me and said that people do not really think in such long-term categories, because 'one passport per family is enough'. The pervasiveness of contingency in migrants' lives meant that acquiring a Russian passport became a timely attempt to manage legal and economic indeterminacy. However, it was also bound up with expectations about a family's future trajectories, which did not necessarily imply physical mobility or resettlement. At the same time, the acquisition of citizenship was dependent on multiple contingencies, making it a difficult task for families to ground their strategic decisions in multiple and constantly shifting relationalities.

When I met Sarvinoz, in summer 2014, she was in her early 40s and had worked in St Petersburg for almost ten years with her husband, Manuchekhr, and her adolescent sons, Mannon and Makhram. Her school-age children, Mavlud and Raikhon, were circulating between their aunts' households in Tajikistan, moving homes and schools regularly. Later on, following his graduation from high school, Mavlud joined his parents and brothers in Russia. Along with her family, Sarvinoz worked as a street cleaner, and occasionally received supplementary income from unofficial side jobs. She also collaborated with migrant rights activists in St Petersburg, and helped migrants fix a variety of documentary issues and claim unpaid wages, and sometimes provided newcomers with a temporary place to stay. I followed Sarvinoz and Manuchekhr to Tajikistan that summer, and I found out that they felt they had made little progress towards their goals: building an extravagant house and marrying off their sons. Despite many years of work in Russia, they had only managed to build a two-bedroom compound, which was constantly under construction and big enough only for one family unit, and to buy a 'Nexia' car that Manuchekhr had insisted on getting to keep up with his classmates. As she told me her life history, Sarvinoz explained that their work had constantly been set back by family conflict, as their in-laws had demanded more money, and had cheated them during the house construction process. Although they were struggling at present – Sarvinoz was exhausted and was suffering

Figure 5.3 Sarvinoz's house in 2014, Sughd Province, summer 2014.

from regular migraines, which she ascribed to her 'nerves being tired' (Rus. *moi nervy ustali*) – she was constantly planning activities based on specific future imaginaries. Every morning, sitting outside their unfinished house (Figure 5.3) drinking green tea, Sarvinoz mentioned yet another goal that they hoped to achieve soon: with some more work they could marry off their sons; another two years of work, and they would build two more rooms; another year, and she would return and stay home to take a well-deserved rest, as her new daughters-in-law would do all the household work. Although the temporal horizon was changing every day, her plans were very detailed: she and her husband fantasised about current fashions in house construction, new opportunities to create *sharoit* (Taj. 'living conditions'), and possible venues for their sons' weddings. They showed me pictures of other people's weddings and houses, stored in Manuchekhr's smartphone for future reference. His eyes were sparkling as he was showing me yet another picture, 'Look, Lena, I will cover the courtyard with tiles and install the gate like this one!' (Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4   Sarvinoz's house in 2018, Sughd Province, summer 2018.

However, rapid changes in Russian migration regulations jeopardised Sarvinoz's plans for returning to Tajikistan. While previously she had to obtain work permits for herself, her husband and her sons once a year, from 2015 onwards she had to bear the ever-increasing monthly costs of labour *patents* for five people, as her youngest son had joined them. This ate into their collective efforts to accumulate wealth, and delayed their plans repeatedly. They wanted to organise their first son's wedding in January 2018, but had to postpone their plans again due to a more urgent need to 'make documents' (Rus. *sdelat' dokumenty'*). In our phone conversation, she lamented:

> I need to make documents again; this is 72,000 rubles (£915)! It's such a shame you're [Elena] not in Russia now! We would have made *fiktivnyi brak* [a fictive marriage]: Manuchekhr would get married to you, and I'd get a passport through him in a couple of years. We also need to find some girl to make ZAGS (*sdelat' ZAGS*)[13] with Mavlud [the youngest son]. It would make it so much easier! Now I pay 15,000 rubles (£190) for *patents* every month, 16,000 (£204) for rent, and we cannot save anything!

Despite her close engagement with migrants' documents, Sarvinoz had never considered applying for a Russian passport herself before the new migration regulations came into force and restructured her family budget. For Sarvinoz, obtaining Russian citizenship was a family strategy to maintain the same level of income to accumulate wealth with a short-term perspective. In this sense, it did not matter to her which family member obtained citizenship first. In this respect, 'one passport per family' was indeed enough, as it would reduce the costs of labour migration for the family as a whole, and produce eligibility for other kin if they wanted to apply in future. The short-term perspective implied urgency: it was not only a matter of becoming a Russian citizen, but of acquiring a passport 'here and now'. As Manuchekhr put it, 'How on earth do I know where I will be in three years?'; he added that he still needed to finish the house construction, marry off his children, and pay for his daughter's college education.

At the same time, Sarvinoz's desire to obtain a Russian passport was obviously driven by a collective fear of entrapment and a longing for some sense of security. On a practical level, having a Russian passport provided an 'insurance' against forced removal from Russia. However, it did not save migrants from anxieties about their futures, because the fear of immobilisation – which meant the inability to work in Russia anymore – had an additional layer, which cannot be fully captured

through the analysis of economic and political factors. This involved not only a fear of the loss of work, money or physical mobility, but rather involved a fear of losing 'existential mobility' (Hage 2005) – a feeling that one is progressing in life, 'moving well enough' (Jansen 2014) towards a desired future. For Sarvinoz, the desired future was imagined as a respectable return to Tajikistan and acquiring the status of a proper gendered person in the community, which Russian citizenship could paradoxically facilitate.

Sarvinoz felt under great pressure as the mother of a daughter approaching marriage age, but who had not yet married off her older sons. Submitting to the gendered roles of a dutiful mother and father is crucial for Tajik personhood. Parental care, including arranging marriages and extravagant wedding celebrations for one's children, who are married off according to seniority, is one of the main drivers for migration (Chapter 3). Receiving a daughter-in-law (*kelin*) into the family home is also a landmark in a woman's social becoming, as she moves forward in the generational hierarchy from the status of being a daughter-in-law to being a mother-in-law (*qaino*) herself. As she joins the group of mothers-in-law, rather than having to pay respect to her in-laws, she becomes a recipient of respect and a recognised source of authority for younger women in the community (Beyer 2010). However, to be able to arrange a marriage, one first needs to provide appropriate living conditions for a young couple, which usually means extending one's house. The pressure that Sarvinoz experienced resulted from her being caught up in constantly shifting relationalities. Changing migration rules and regulations, which were jeopardising her stay in Russia, mapped on to multiple acts of balancing her position within family and community hierarchies, and renegotiating temporal horizons of their migration and return.

In this sense, a Russian passport in Tajikistan did not function merely as a valuable status object pointing to someone's transnational connections (cf. De Bree et al. 2010). It was its practical value that would allow Sarvinoz to restore her ability to accumulate wealth for life-cycle projects, crucial for the maintenance of her personhood back home. Thus, the Russian passport embodied a double temporal and spatial orientation: whereas in Russia it reduced the immediate anxieties and pressures of undocumented life, and served as a means of ensuring one's ability to work 'legally' and earn a higher income, in Tajikistan it was linked to a long-term project of becoming a recognised person in one's community of value.

The affective dimension of useful passports

On an unusually cold day in February 2018, Albina returned from the Russian consulate in Khujand. Her nose was red from the cold, but she was beaming: 'That's it! On the 22nd of February, I'll become Miss Russian.' Unlike Sarvinoz, for whom getting a Russian passport was a pressing issue, Albina was applying for Russian citizenship 'just in case', without specific plans for migration. After her return to Tajikistan, she still had savings from her wages in Russia, and she had decided to invest them in obtaining Russian citizenship. In our numerous conversations, she confessed how suffocating her life was as a young divorcee in a Tajik village. She often felt trapped: her caring obligations significantly limited her everyday mobility, her father was pressuring her to remarry, her every move and look was subjected to public commentary, and her neighbours were asking when she was going to remarry (see Chapter 4).

That day, she was going to make her final trip to deliver some missing papers to the Russian consulate. She had started the procedure more than a year earlier and, after easily passing the language test, there had been repeated delays: some papers were expiring, others did not match, and she had to make a significant effort to bring the reality of her everyday life and the documentary one together. Earlier that day, she had discovered that some of her documents contained different surnames, because her ex-husband had been deported from Russia and had changed his name several years ago to enable him to return to Russia:

> My daughter's birth certificate is for Rakhimova, my divorce certificate is for Makhmudova, but in reality I am Saidova! They [the Russian consulate] might have rejected my documents for this reason. When she [the intermediary] told me this, I felt really bad. At that moment I started to think, OK, now it is Friday, so today I will not manage to submit. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday I give lessons, so I will be able to go there only next Thursday. I got so scared!

She decided to give it a try, and spent three hours freezing in the queue in front of the consulate:

> There were around 15 people ahead of me, standing and waiting to be let in, and there was one nasty old man who fought with the

guard. He wanted to smoke, which is forbidden, and he also tried to jump the queue because he is old and demands respect. The guard started to yell that if we behave like this, they would deport us all! Everyone got scared and tried to reason with the old man. Such a farce, Lena! I wish I had recorded a video.

Eventually, she made it inside, after hours of waiting. She told me: 'There was a man, very nice and polite. He greeted me, and told me to stand under the camera and read the oath loudly.[14] I prepared and started to declaim (Rus. *chitat' s vyrazheniem*).' Albina was obviously mocking the moment when she was supposed to feel awed, using a Russian expression which is usually used to teach school children how to properly recite poetry. She did not remember the exact wording of the oath:

> There was something like 'I swear to respect Russian history and culture, obey the law…' It was a tiny text. When I finished, he told me, 'OK, now you're a Russian citizen. Congratulations!' They didn't even check my papers! I was really afraid they would, but it was already lunchtime, and they were in a rush. They just took the copies and returned the originals. Then I paid the fees for a passport, and that's it. When I got out of there, I felt so good!

Since Albina's parents had worked in St Petersburg for many years, and had already secured Russian passports, it made her eligible for one of the 'fast-track' pathways to citizenship, and the whole procedure was relatively quick. It took her a year to achieve the status of a Russian citizen, even though there were some delays, and she proudly showed me her new passport, which was carefully wrapped in a transparent cover and stored in a safe place.

I saw Albina's Russian passport for the first time when I was travelling to Uzbekistan with Albina and her relatives to attend a wedding, and to renew kin connections after a long period of border closure. After the border was opened, there was a short period of an 'open door' policy, as Uzbekistan allowed Tajikistani citizens to enter with their national passports. Nevertheless, Albina carried all three of her passports, all in different colours: a Tajik national passport (brown), a Tajik travel passport (blue) and a red Russian passport, which she had recently received. She playfully posed for a picture I took of her holding all her passports (Figure 5.5). When we approached the border crossing counter, she gave her Tajik national passport to a border officer. I asked why she had chosen that one and she rolled her eyes, 'Pfff, I don't want them to

Figure 5.5 Albina at the border crossing with Uzbekistan, holding her passports (from left to right: her Russian passport, Tajik travel pass and Tajik national pass), Sughd Province, spring 2018.

spoil my new passport with their stamps.' Very soon, her colleagues and students at school found out that she had received her Russian passport, and were surprised that she did not share the good news. Flaunting her achievement, she smiled, 'The headmaster approached me and asked when we were celebrating! Why would I celebrate my passport?' She obviously knew why, but she was ironic in talking about the headmaster's question. She also became a source of practical information and authority for her colleagues who wanted to apply for citizenship too. Very often they asked her advice on logistical and documentary issues. However, as I was leaving Tajikistan in August 2018, she had still not made any direct use of it: she was working as a Russian language teacher at the local school, doing work she did not like, but which was the only available work for her in the village, and taking care of her elders.

Previous research on migrants from Central Asia acquiring Russian passports has indicated that migrants have 'a pragmatic approach to citizenship', defined in terms of 'concrete, short-term benefits … without attaching much affective meaning to it' (Ruget and Usmanalieva 2010, 445). The distinction between 'genuine links' and 'useful passports' (Bauböck 2019) is usually made in the domain of affectivities, and speaks to a 'thick' and 'thin' sense of citizenship. While the

former implies an emotional bond to legal status as a citizen, the latter stands for a legal status 'devoid of emotional attachment', and signifies an 'instrumental orientation' towards one's citizenship (Yanasmayan 2015, 787). These two aspects are often presented as mutually exclusive. Some studies of transnational migration have shown that obtaining legal status as a citizen of a receiving country does not necessarily put an end to migrancy. On the contrary, this might facilitate the intensification of transnational mobility and, eventually, migrants' return to their countries of origin (Gilbertson and Singer 2003). However, there still seems to be an implicit assumption stemming from some sort of 'citizenship traditionalism' (Joppke 1999) that changing one's legal status inevitably leads (or should lead) to some change of emotional affiliation, against which migrants' integration 'success' is measured. This results in the prevailing normative idea that some predetermined content of citizenship 'has been overturned by migrants' misconduct', should they display no emotional affiliation with their new status (Finotelli et al. 2018, 2335). Maintaining divergence between legal and emotional selves at the centre the of analysis of citizenship, there is a risk of reducing citizenship-seeking to the economically driven logic of push–pull models, and of overlooking the complex relationships that people may have with their passports.

Albina's engagement with her new passport sheds light on the affective dimension of citizenship acquired for strategic purposes. However, affect emerged not from an emotional bond with her legal status as a Russian citizen signifying her belonging, but from the intersection of people's interaction with bureaucratic practices, future imaginaries, and the specific desires they attach to their documents. Analysing the affective dimension of 'useful passports', I draw on Yael Navaro-Yashin's argument that documents are never just material artefacts certified by the complex web of social relations they embody, but 'are experienced as affectively charged phenomena when produced and transacted in specific contexts of social relations' (Navaro-Yashin 2007, 81). For Albina, her 'red passport' was imbued with affects quite different from those prescribed by normative assumptions about affective claims around citizenship. Instead of pride, recognition, permanence and a sense of 'arrival', it was saturated with irony and playfulness, but also a sense of potentiality and hope vis-à-vis fears of 'stuckedness' and entrapment in the narrow sense of locality (Hage 2009; Jansen 2009). Deeply rooted in material documentary forms, the acquisition of citizenship implies a recognised degree of performativity, which is implicated in citizenship ceremonies through which the state

produces both desired citizens and itself as desirable (Byrne 2014; Fortier 2013; Merolli 2016). At the same time, this performativity goes hand in hand with ambiguous bureaucratic practices resulting in the inherent uncertainty of this process, which imposes high demands on applicants' financial, emotional and temporal resources, but which has an unpredictable outcome.

Experiencing the thrill of approaching the Russian consulate, feeling fear that something might go wrong, feeling happy and relieved after being declared a Russian citizen, and treating her new passport with reverence afterwards, meant that she recognised this passport as a valuable resource (Jansen 2009). So did the wider community: Albina's colleagues wished to celebrate her new passport in a manner compared to celebrating the purchase of a car or a house, and her students' awe showed that they recognised it as an asset, and respected her efforts in success-fully navigating confusing bureaucratic procedures. However, her ironic remarks imply that being 'Miss Russian' did not suggest that she could make certain claims of belonging and count on more respect in Russia: even the fact that she used this expression in English rather than Russian points to a degree of alienation from her new status. The Russian state, embodied in the figure of a security guard on the doorstep of the Russian consulate in Tajikistan absurdly threatening to deport (sic!) applicants for citizenship for misbehaving in the queue, also recognised the strategic nature of this unequal relationship. In the context of Russian big cities, acquiring the legal status of a citizen does not protect one from exclusion. Being aware of the asymmetrical nature of their relationship with the Russian state, many of my interlocutors knew that they were likely to be treated as second-class citizens in Russia, and cynically told me that 'You will never become Russian, even if you have a Russian passport.' Nevertheless, they were ready to stand in long queues in the cold and bear the condescending attitude of Russian bureaucrats to obtain this document.

Albina was not hoping that her passport would help her to 'arrive' and be properly included in the Russian nation, even if she were to migrate again. Nevertheless, her 'red passport' became in some sense a 'repository of hope' (Kleinst 2019), as it connected to her imaginary of a meaningful future. This future could be attained through mobilising her passport to keep her options open, and to manage her everyday experiences of inde-terminacy as she struggled to insert herself into the local gendered and generational hierarchies. In Tajikistan, personhood is highly gendered: normative femininity is achieved through the roles of dutiful wives and mothers, and singlehood is associated with prostitution (Cleuziou and Direnberger 2016; Roche 2016). That is the reason why many divorced

women choose migration to Russia to avoid stigma and to get a 'second chance' for a decent life (Brednikova 2017). After Albina's return from Russia, her status as a divorcee became a subject for public commentary in the whole community. She experienced her bodily presence in her village not as being in a space of mutual assistance and care, but as being stuck in a space of 'monitoring, accountability, and control' (Liu 2012, 120):

> You can't imagine how much I want to leave this place as soon as possible! I can't stay, there is no room for me here, there's no air to breathe. Everyone cares, everyone pokes their noses into my life. Our neighbour comes and asks me when I will get married. When I say I do not know, she raises her eyebrow 'Oh, have you already bought a return ticket to Russia then?' That's why I don't talk to anyone here, I can't say anything to anyone. I hate this damned village!

On particularly difficult days, Albina used to cultivate her capacity to endure by reminding herself about her open options for future mobility embodied in her new passport: 'I have a Russian passport, I won't stay here anyway!' In this respect, instead of just carrying the practical value of allowing more mobility, a Russian passport embodied the potentiality of such movement. It became a material manifestation of hope, and the means to mitigate the emotional hardships of current life. The pride that Albina felt in possessing her new document did not point to her sense of belonging to Russia – her passport rather signified an achievement. She took pride in the fact that she had successfully navigated the gruelling application process, and had travelled alone to the consulate many times, and that she could afford to pay for it herself to secure a certain set of potential opportunities for herself and her daughter.

Locating the good life through the acts of 'taking citizenship'

People's strivings for the good life in Tajikistan were deeply bound up with the decisions around citizenship. Citizenship shaped their opportunities to pursue crucial life projects, conditioned their access to economic resources and international mobility, and thus constituted their ability to cultivate themselves as a certain type of subject in their communities. This has recently led to Tajikistani nationals acquiring Russian citizenship en masse. This process has been shaped by a particular conjuncture of routinised trans-national migration in Tajikistan and recent developments in the Russian

migration regime. However, rendering the category of citizenship open, and looking at what desires people attach to their documents, I have analysed this process from a 'bottom-up' perspective. I have critically engaged with the concept of strategic citizenship. This concept indicates that people's concerns with seeking second passports can be divorced from issues of identity and belonging, and lie outside of citizenship as a state project.

People pursue second passports for a wide range of reasons detached from the sense of emotional affiliation with a certain country, such as bypassing mobility restrictions (Harpaz 2019), increasing opportunities for employment and education (Balta and Altan-Olcay 2016), and getting by in hostile legal environments (Aptekar 2016). However, most existing studies are based on empirical cases of non-Western privileged subjects acquiring European and North American passports, and focus on people's motivations. Little is known about how such motivations are connected with the ways in which people engage with documents certifying their new status.

In rural Tajikistan, Russian citizenship was perceived through its material embodiment – the 'red passport' – and treated as a valuable object that can be taken, given, and passed on to other people. In the context of constantly shifting Russian migration policies, and its growing reliance on deportation as a means of migration control, having a 'red passport' has become an insurance policy against one's forced removal and the cancellation of future plans. The sense of urgency with which my interlocutors explored the fastest pathways to Russian citizenship was driven by the collective fear of entrapment.

Acts of 'taking citizenship' are affectively charged and grounded in particular family projects, gender and generational hierarchies, and local systems of value. The contours of strategic citizenship are relational to, and contingent on, not only an individual's position within a 'global system of inequality premised on citizenship' (Harpaz and Mateos 2019, 853), but also people's future imaginaries and ideas about the good life. Affects bound up with the project of citizenship acquisition do not necessarily point to people's emotional affiliation with their new legal status in terms of national and political belonging, which is reflected in their ironic, playful or sometimes cynical attitude to the whole process. Rather, it is individual and collective fears of entrapment and loss of opportunities to maintain viable livelihoods that underlie citizenship seeking. Having two passports becomes a part of people's future imaginaries, as it enables one not necessarily to resettle to another country, but to keep one's options open and to preserve hope for a better future, with more opportunities to negotiate indeterminacy.

Obtaining a Russian passport was intimately linked with gendered practices of social recognition crucial for my interlocutors' projects of locating the good life. Paradoxically, rather than becoming involved with citizenship as a state project aimed at creating a certain type of Russian citizen, taking *grazhdanstvo* was a way for my interlocutors to craft themselves as particular types of people. For Sarvinoz, it facilitated the process of fitting into the local gender and generational hierarchies by fulfilling normative life-cycle projects in a timely manner, and moving from the status of daughter-in-law to being a mother-in-law herself. For Albina, on the contrary, her decision to obtain a Russian passport became a strategy to negotiate these very same hierarchies, and to carve out more autonomy in making decisions about her future. It allowed both women to mitigate the feeling of being 'stuck', and not progressing in their lives.

Like Aihwa Ong's elite Chinese subjects striving to accumulate capital and power by acquiring multiple passports, people in Tajikistan also tried to 'plot and manoeuvre' (Ong 1999, 6). However, they did so under conditions of extreme uncertainty and instability of labour markets, mobility regulations and documentary regimes, and lack of resources, which made calculative action nearly impossible. In this respect, acts of taking citizenship as a means of forging pathways to the good life are better understood in terms of 'social navigation' rather than strategising. They imply not 'merely a prefigured actualization of a plot or strategy', but constant 'attunement to change and movement' (Vigh 2009a, 433). Driven by frustrated attempts to attune to constantly shifting environments, acts of taking citizenship emerged as affective responses of people who were trying to figure out what was the 'rational' thing to do, with affects being distributed not only in persons and their relations, but also in and around documents.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, however, highlighted the vulnerability of strategic citizenship as an 'insurance' for migrant workers. As I have shown in this chapter, my interlocutors mostly perceived Russian citizenship through the rights and opportunities it offered, while ignoring the obligations it imposed, such as military service. Putin's partial military mobilisation (Rus. *mobilizatsiia*) in September 2022 put Russian men of military age at risk of being drafted into the army and sent to the front line. Furthermore, Russian politicians highlighted the benefits of luring migrant workers and new Russian citizens into the contracted army, either by offering them fast-track citizenship or by threatening to revoke it (Borisova 2022). Although the legal framing and practice of such measures has not yet been fully developed, the risks

of having Russian citizenship for Tajik nationals has increased signifi-
cantly. They now have to carefully assess the risks that the 'red passport'
embodies, and find the strategies to mitigate them.

Notes

1   Literally 'breaking of bread'. If the parties have agreed, they break a flatbread (*non*) and each
    take part of it; then it is passed to the bride and groom, who have a bite of it. The *tanzim*
    forbade this ritual (see Chapter 3), which is why only a groom's mother and his aunt were
    invited.
2   415,615 people were given a different status, opening a pathway to Russian citizenship; 95.3
    per cent of new Russian citizens come from CIS countries.
3   *Propiska* is usually compared to the Chinese *hukou* system, which is an important part of
    Chinese citizenship (Barabantseva 2021).
4   The full list can be found at https://migrantmedia.ru (2017).
5   See https://www.migranto.ru (2018).
6   While the number of quotas in 2018 was 90,360, between January and September 2018,
    192,270 people were granted citizenship, 196,417 were given a temporary residence permit,
    137,009 were given a permanent residence permit, and a further 82,189 came through the
    Resettlement Programme for Compatriots (see Introduction), and would therefore also
    receive their passports soon.
7   The status of a 'native speaker of Russian' (*nositel' russkogo iazyka*) was a tool to simplify the
    procedure for those foreign citizens who were fluent in Russian and could prove their 'cultural
    affiliation', such as proof of ancestors' residence on the territory of Russia, the USSR, or within
    the boundaries of the Russian Empire. Although it opened a path to 'fast-track' citizenship,
    applicants were required to give up their current citizenship. That is why this option was not
    very appealing to my interlocutors. Fluency in Russian was certified by a special commission
    examining an applicant.
8   Such a long list of eligibility criteria led to the 'unprecedented' practice of granting 'fast-
    track' Russian citizenship to around 98 per cent of applicants, and caused anxieties among
    local 'experts'. For example, the Russian economist and demographer Olga Chudinovskikh
    has warned that the current practice of mass 'fast-track' granting of Russian citizenship,
    shortening the time between migration and naturalisation to less than two years, could cause
    conflicts between 'old' and 'new' citizens based on the assumed lack of integration of the
    latter. Moreover, widespread opportunities to acquire Russian citizenship status for people
    permanently residing outside Russia meant that growing numbers of external citizens received
    access to the whole range of Russian social services, for instance, pension and maternal
    benefits. According to Chudinovskikh, these two tendencies have led to the institution of
    Russian citizenship losing its 'exclusionary function', and could cause 'geopolitical tensions'
    (Chudinovskikh 2014).
9   Zakon Respubliki Tadzhikistan (The Law of the Republic of Tajikistan) No 1405, from 24
    February 2017.
10 Russian Consulate branches are located in the capital, Dushanbe, and in Khujand, in northern
    Tajikistan. Khujand was the nearest option for my interlocutors: located around 70 km from
    Mehnat, it was about an hour away by car.
11 The Russian spelling is Альбина, while the Tajik is Албина. The soft sign was excluded from
    the Tajik alphabet in the 1990s as a result of the implementation of a new language policy
    (Borisova 2023).
12 According to the law, only caring obligations for a disabled adult child who was a Russian
    citizen would make parents eligible for the fast-track citizenship procedure. This has changed,
    and the newest version of the law allows granting citizenship on the basis of having an adult
    child who is a Russian citizen (O Grazhdanstve Rossiiskoi Federatsii N138-FZ 2023, Chapter
    14, Paragraph 2).
13 ZAGS is an abbreviation for the Russian *Zapis' Aktov Grazhdanskogo Sostoianiia.* It refers to
    a registration office where people register their marital status, newborn children, change of

names, and death. Pointing to fictive marriage as one possible way of gaining eligibility for the 'fast-track' citizenship procedure, my interlocutors often used the phrase *ZAGS kardan*, which literally means 'to make ZAGS' (Borisova 2021c).

14 Unlike in other countries (for example, Byrne 2014), oath reciting as a means of the state to produce itself as desirable (Fortier 2013) is a very recent development in Russian citizenship law. It was only introduced in 2017, alongside the new regulations concerning the revocability of citizenship for 'failed' citizens.

Conclusion

Migration as an object of study permeates multiple scholarly accounts in different regional contexts.[1] Despite all the attention that the topic of migration regularly receives in public and academic debates, as Alice Elliot notes, 'understanding what migration actually is and is imagined to be for those involved in the national and transnational movements that shape it' is usually not a priority. Focusing on the causes, effects, risks and costs of migration, the common assumption is that 'the researcher, the researched, and the reader share an understanding of what migration means, experientially and conceptually, in the first place' (Elliot 2021, 4). A similar epistemological assumption emerges in migration studies when it comes to the questions of the good life. Foregrounding the universal 'suffering subject' in migration research (Robbins 2013; Rozakou 2019) has resulted in the prevalence of the 'analytics of desperation' (Elliot 2020). Assuming that people in the Global South can travel only out of poverty, desperation and fear, migration research often glosses over the fact that strivings for the good, meaningful life is precisely what keeps people going, despite punitive migration regimes, state violence and xenophobia. Approached through the 'analytics of desperation', the good life becomes reduced to the universalist standard of generic economic well-being modelled after the ideals of late capitalism.

I started writing this book with the assumption that notions of living well are extremely varied across different cultural contexts, and we should not assume that we know exactly what kind of 'good life' is being sought when people migrate. The questions that migration research has always asked – why people move (or stay), how they move (or stay), and what place movement (or stasis) comes to occupy in their cosmologies – are inevitably entwined with their ideas about the good

in their lives. This book has revealed how migration emerges as an object of study when the ethnographic and analytical focus is placed on people's strivings not to become better consumers, but to become '*odami khub*' – a good person, in the first place. Carving out a focus on the good life became possible in my research due to my methodological choices: instead of 'following' people, I chose to 'follow' how migration becomes a mode of deliberation, debate and moral navigation in the place of its origin. In Tajikistan, not all people might 'do' migration, but the absolute majority of them think and reason with it.

In this book, I have argued that 'the good life' needs to be understood in terms of the deep entanglement of material sufficiency and ideas about morality and social personhood. The sense of urgency of going to Russia is bound up with people's projects of self-fashioning, rooted in the desire to be recognised as a particular type of person by the community – a good person (Taj. *odami khub*), a truthful human being (Taj. *inson*) or a 'cultured' man (Rus. *kul'turnyi chelovek*). Yet, this book does more than just adding another 'motivation' for migration by expanding the notion of livelihood to encompass the social and the moral. Engaging with the relationship between migration and the pursuit of the good life, it foregrounds its essentially processual nature. By embarking on migratory journeys, people are trying to 'locate the good life', meaning to find out where life is good or better.

However, as my ethnography showed, the good life is not something that can be defined easily in terms of material and moral values that can be firmly 'located' in certain geographical places, and attained simply by moving to those places. Migration opens up a path to moral personhood by providing people with an opportunity to position themselves as good members of the community. However, it simultaneously causes tensions in people's projects of self-fashioning, ideas about what it means to be a good person and, ultimately, what it means to have a good life. The process of locating oneself in a particular place is also a process of placing one's ideas about what constitutes the good within a particular context.

Approaching the process of 'locating the good life' in a double sense, whereby moving between concrete geographical places is a process of placing one's ideas of the good in various contexts, allowed me to expose how tensions and contradictions of migration enter the domain of moral deliberation, debate and reasoning in Tajikistan. Through fine-grained ethnography, this book has demonstrated how the question of *where* life is good essentially becomes a question of *how* life is to be lived. How this question plays out across several domains, and how people are trying to reconcile this tension, was the object of my analysis

in the individual chapters. I have explored how the difficult choices of going to Russia, or staying put and accumulating debt are entwined with the demands of being a generous host, a caring father and a lawful citizen (Chapter 3). I have also examined how the process of locating oneself in a particular place is bound up with efforts to bridge the gap between the material and affective demands of care. The contradictory demands that migrants face of being both present and absent at the same time mean that the attempts to locate oneself in a particular place result in constant movement between Russia and Tajikistan: a form of mobility which might be associated with constrained agency and a lack of choice (Chapter 4). I have shown how having two passports becomes a part of people's future imaginaries, as it enables one not necessarily to relocate, but to keep one's options in the current location open, with more opportunities to negotiate uncertainty. Rather than becoming involved with citizenship as a state project aimed at creating a certain type of Russian citizen, acquiring Russian citizenship was a way for my interlocutors to craft themselves as a particular type of person in their communities in Tajikistan (Chapter 5).

Finally, the location of this story itself – the area around post-industrial Mehnat – is crucial for understanding how the complexity of the categories and forms of self-fashioning that people pursue through migration emerge through their experiences of place. In a place such as Mehnat, constituted by the multilayered histories of mobilities, present forms of sociality are informed by spatial and social transformations brought about by the Soviet modernisation project. In this context, concerns about being recognised as a modern subject emerge alongside the need to be seen as a good person (Chapter 2).[2] People's striving for the good life strongly resonates (although in complex and contradictory ways) with historically grounded ideas about modernity and culturedness promoted through Soviet modernisation projects, and their experiences of the late Soviet welfare state. As people struggle to make sense of their 'modern' past and 'less modern' present, they turn to migration to Russia to fill the gap, both in their budgets and in their sense of self.

The future of the good life: from migration to resettlement?

> You know, historically, people have always moved, and different groups replaced each other. We are going to Russia, and occupy the places of those Russians who moved forward to the West.

> People from Ura-Tiube [a smaller town in the north of Tajikistan] are coming to take our place in Khujand, in Ura-Tiube their place will be taken by someone from the nearby villages. And so it goes, you cannot stop it.
>
> <div align="right">A businessman from Khujand</div>

In August 2023, I returned to the Sughd region very briefly to meet a few interlocutors remaining in the village, while collecting some new data for a small project. In between attending weddings and intense socialising with Farhod's kin, one morning I managed to carve out some time to visit Sirojiddin, a middle-aged man I had interviewed five years previously. Back in 2018, he was very critical of the Russian migration regime after spending ten years in Russia working and remitting money back home. It seemed to me that he had firmly decided that he would not go there again. In August 2023, however, I caught him back home in his native village for a short seasonal visit, before embarking on another period of work in St Petersburg, where he had lived with his daughter's family and his adult son since 2019. He asked me about the progress of my research. When I answered that I had written a book based on what they had shown and told me five years before, he grinned: 'But many things have changed. Back then, there was no war, there were no raids, back then they [the police] did not humiliate us that badly. You know, you will have to write the second volume.' After reading this book, I imagine the reader will inevitably be left with similar thoughts. While I have no intention to follow my interlocutor's suggestion to write a 'sequel', and I cannot provide any analytical conclusions grounded in new ethnographic data, I will map out several tendencies that I identified as I revisited people and places that I had become intimately acquainted with five years earlier.

I started this book with the ethnographic description of a walk with Marhabo, during which she outlined the hardships of forging the project of the good life in post-industrial Tajikistan, with its lack of opportunities for employment and self-realisation, faulty infrastructure, and the absence of state support. Yet, she and other people repeatedly told me that they were still hoping for a better future, and that conditions for 'normal' life in Tajikistan would improve. Many believed that this would reverse the migration flow, and their family members, classmates and neighbours would return to contribute to the restoration of this normality. While this book has not engaged with questions of hope theoretically, I think that people's projects of carving out the good life in Tajikistan have always been bound up with their ability to collectively cultivate hopefulness and some sort of optimism. In this context, maintaining material and social

presence in their native villages through yearly visits, throwing feasts, building houses and contributing to communal projects of infrastructural improvement can also be considered as tactics of maintaining hope for some kind of common future for the place and people.

The impression I got in 2023 was quite different: answering my innocent question about how life has been here, almost everyone I spoke with stated firmly: 'It's only been getting worse and worse. We lost all hope.' In place of hope, people articulated deep concern and fear for the future of their families, communities and sometimes the entire country. They expressed the subjective feeling of migration as accelerating abruptly, with people who usually would not go to Russia joining the flow, and the gradual process of migrants' reorientation from transnational movements to resettlement. If in 2018 there was 'nothing' (*hech chi nest*) there, in 2023, there was 'no one' (*hech ki nest*). People were leaving their often half-built houses behind, and moving to Russia for good with their families. As I was leaving Sirojiddin's house, his family walked me to the gate, according to the standard etiquette for receiving guests. We stood on the street exchanging goodbyes, when he looked around, opened his hands as if taking in the whole street, and sighed: 'This street used to be so lively, there were always a lot of children playing around. Now, it is quiet. People built all these houses, invested so much labour. You see, if no one lives in the house, it starts to decay very fast…'. Sirojiddin himself was tasked with taking care of his neighbour's house. He went there every now and then, and watered the garden. His wife would continue doing this when he departed to St Petersburg. Not everyone was so lucky as to have neighbours or available kin who could take good care of their houses marked by absence, because sometimes there were simply no people left living nearby. Migrant houses as the material forms that used to index the family's success in shaping their projects of the good life now came to signify wasted effort, and served as an eerie reminder of the unattainability of the good life in one's place of origin.

The processes of emptying that I noticed were perhaps less striking and not as encompassing as what Dace Dzenovska (2011) has described in the context of the Latvian countryside. There were still students at school, despite ever increasing shortages of qualified teachers; there were still elders taking care of their grandchildren; shops and businesses were still open; there were still minibuses running between villages and the town; and luxurious weddings were still being organised during the summer season. In fact, the number of wedding halls in the area had even increased from 8 to 25 in the past few years. However, there was

a shared sense of life shrinking: my interlocutors saw the departure of remaining groups – the school kids, the teachers, the newlyweds and even the elders – as only a matter of time. In fact, I could meet neither Marhabo, nor other schoolteachers from the Gagarin School that I used to know quite well, because they had all gone to Russia. Farhod's extended family had also seen a few departures of people that I would least expect to migrate.

In my interlocutors' eyes, the future now lay elsewhere, and people's concerns had shifted from maintaining hope to maintaining everyday life in a place with which they no longer felt they had a shared future. My impression is that this dynamic could be described in terms of Mehnat and the neighbouring villages turning into the 'mooring' of mobility (Hannam et al. 2006) – a place of social reproduction, but not a place where an imagination of future life is located. This dynamic became a point of concern for Tajik academics and the media, who recently reiterated conversations about emptying in terms of brain drain, as medical doctors, teachers and IT specialists were moving to Russia in huge numbers through its resettlement programme (Asia-Plus 2023). As people tried to interpret this sudden attention to the question of migration, rumours spread that the government might put barriers in place to prevent citizens from leaving Tajikistan. This contributed to a sense of momentum, adding to the fear of new entrapments, rooted in people's experiences of border closures during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Decades of moving and living their lives between Tajikistan and Russia, coupled with the visa-free regime and easy access to Russian citizenship, meant that Russia remained the place where people relocated their projects of the good life in the first place. If before, *grazhdanstvo* was considered to be an achievement, as I showed in Chapter 5, for my interlocutors who had only recently moved to Russia, or were planning to do so, acquiring citizenship became a precondition for the move. Reorientation of long-term futures to Russia was often positioned as an act of hopelessness: people pointed to the lack of viable alternatives, and drew on comparisons between the Tajik and Russian states, justifying their choice of the lesser of two evils. Regardless of how logically imperfect the grounds for such a comparative exercise might be, as Pelkmans and Walker (2023, 16) have pointed out, practices of comparison 'play a navigational role, allowing individuals to carve a space for themselves and to chart forward trajectories'. Having access to Russia's labour market and welfare system, and in light of the government's constant reassurances of an even better future to come, these

comparisons were certainly not in favour of the Tajik state, whose presence mostly revealed itself in punitive acts towards those who voiced their contention. As one of my interlocutors yelled out, reacting to my poorly concealed scepticism: 'You Russians do not appreciate what you have. You are only complaining all the time. There are so many opportunities available to you that we here cannot even imagine!'

My interlocutors' reorientation to Russia was not manifest merely in the fact of citizenship acquisition, but rather bound up with purchasing properties and accumulating debt. Obtaining residency registration played an important role in this process. It was not a Russian passport per se but permanent residency registration (*propiska*) that opened access to the welfare system and full citizenship. If before, the main function of passports acquired for strategic purposes was to avoid mobility restrictions in the context of the Russian deportation regime, as people moved their families and children, they started to place more emphasis on accessing Russia's welfare system. The costs and difficulties to secure *propiska*, a stamp in one's national passport to be precise, for all family members often pushed people into taking mortgages to buy property, which firmly emplaced them in Russia for the foreseeable future. As one of my interlocutors noted about our common acquaintance: 'He doesn't want to stay there, but you will see once he gets a Russian passport, he will get a mortgage and buy an apartment, and then he won't escape anywhere (Rus. *nikuda ne denetsia*), he will be stuck in Russia for years, like all of us.' Although people still highlighted the forced nature of this arrangement, the shift in people's orientation to Russia also meant that owning property aligned with their visions of future. Anticipating being 'stuck' in Russia for years, they referred to caring obligations towards children, and framed this move as a sacrifice. If their generation had lost all hope of carving out projects of the good life in Tajikistan, by shifting their imaginaries of the future to Russia, they attempted to create hope for their children – the dynamic described by Francine Pine (2014) as 'hoping through one's children', in the context of migration from post-socialist Poland.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this book, Russia's invasion and its manipulative citizenship policies did not prevent most Tajikistanis from staying in Russia and trying to secure Russian passports. This is reflected in the recent available statistics: around 261,000 Tajikistanis acquired citizenship in 2022 and the first half of 2023. As I showed in Chapter 5, securing a Russian passport has never been straightforward, and people had to navigate their pathways to citizenship in the context of the instability of documentary forms, bureaucratic discretion and

rapidly changing rules. Over the years, they cultivated the ability to find creative solutions to their problems, bypassing difficulties and making decisions under circumstances of profound uncertainty and constant change. The current risk of being dragged into the war in Ukraine was not an exception: people were constantly vigilant about the latest developments, and were coming up with new strategies to mitigate the risks of drafting. A few brief conversations with my interlocutors left the impression that despite increased levels of anxiety, people perceived uncertainty as productive. One might or might not be drafted into the army if one stayed in Russia. According to the little information from different sources available to them, ranging from the personal experience of their social networks, Russian and Tajik social media, and unconfirmed rumours, the odds were not too high. However, they would certainly have no means to sustain their livelihoods if they went back to Tajikistan. In fact, some young Tajik men initially returned to Tajikistan when Putin declared the military mobilisation in September 2022. Yet, after a few months, they realised that very few could afford the period of 'waiting it out' at home, in a place with Moscow-like prices and Tajik salaries. Staying in Russia, on the contrary, opened better opportunities if one was willing to take the risk – several people prided themselves that they had received higher positions, replacing Russians who had fled the country. A few of my interlocutors were exploring opportunities to find jobs in the occupied territories in Ukraine, as wages were high enough to cover their newly accumulated debt in Russia.

While my interlocutors in general agreed that they would be happy to explore other destinations for migration, such as Europe, the UK and the US, they were very aware that their level of privilege prevented them from doing so. Finding their way to those countries meant huge investments and unclear prospects for further residency, assessed against the uncertainty of the whole endeavour. In the meantime, they continued to build their lives in Russia, habitually putting in their bids in the green card lottery, and shaking their heads disapprovingly at the stories about the few brave or stupid ones who crossed the US border with Mexico and applied for asylum. As of now, highly unequal and fraught with contradictions, tensions and ambivalences, the relationship with Russia remains central to my interlocutors' projects of the good life.

Notes

1   Although the countries of the Global South receive the majority of migrants and refugees, the majority of studies of migration are still focused on migration to Europe, the UK and the USA.

2   Scholars of Central Asia have highlighted a need to move beyond accounts of the region defined
    by its Soviet legacy and post-Soviet predicament (Beyer 2016; Ibañez-Tirado 2015). While I
    agree with this, I think that there is a risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Instead,
    I advocate for a more nuanced approach that accounts for the particularities of the place and the
    forms of sociality emerging from it.

Epilogue

One sunny day in December 2017, Farhod, Zebo and I were sitting in the living room. As usual, Farhod was lamenting that they had not made much progress in learning Russian. He said that they had to use this opportunity while I was still there, because when I left, there would be no one to teach them. Our conversation took a sentimental turn when Farhod told me, 'You won't miss us immediately, only after three to five years will you remember how you lived in Tajikistan, how you spoke Tajik.' Zebo disagreed: 'No, it takes only one year to start missing the place!' Farhod maintained that: 'You only miss those places and times in which you had fun. I don't miss Russia at all, because it was so hard there.'

The lives of my interlocutors have significantly changed since then. Maksud's father died in 2021. A few months before her grandfather's death Albina finally made it to Russia, having left her daughter with her mother back in Tajikistan. She is still adamant that she does not want to remarry, and she is working in a small grocery shop on the outskirts of Moscow. Her daughter is still a brilliant student, and she told Albina that she wants to learn English so that she can read my book. Maksud is still moving back and forth between Tajikistan and Russia. His dream of retiring in peace in his native village remains unfulfilled.

Sarvinoz finished the construction of her dream house and married her first son off in August 2018, while I was still in Tajikistan. Since then, she has married off all her three remaining children – two sons and a daughter – and has become a grandmother to six children. All of them are gradually obtaining Russian citizenship. The last time I was in touch with her, in 2023, she shared a video of her sons throwing her a huge surprise party on her 50th birthday in a St Petersburg restaurant. In the video, she

was dancing, while each of them gifted her an identical bouquet of red roses. Overwhelmed with happiness, she was hugging them and crying.

I heard that Marhabo left Tajikistan and joined her husband in Tatarstan, Russia, with their two children. The last I heard, she was trying to obtain Russian citizenship. Said's quest for citizenship finally came to fruition in 2021. Since then, he has 'made' citizenship for his wife, his children and his parents, who are in their 60s. His sons are excellent students in Russia. One is showing a particular interest in humanities, and is fluent in Spanish. Said dreams that one day he might move to Spain and take the family with him. After years of trying to conceive, Said's wife gave birth to a beautiful baby girl in 2022.

Farhod's family have also lived through many changes. Half a year after I left Tajikistan, Gulbahor gave birth to a cheerful girl, and three years later to another one. As the youngest *kelin* in the house, she was still grappling with her domestic duties, but Farhod reassured me that she had 'found an approach' to her new family, and lived well. In January 2019, Gulrukhsor got married to an amiable young man who had been a migrant worker in Russia for many years. During her wedding, she shared with me how excited she was at the prospect of finally going to St Petersburg with him. The last time I saw her was in St Petersburg during summer 2019, when she spent most of her time in the rented apartment because she did not have her residency registration and was worried about being stopped by the police, thus causing more expense for her husband. Eight months later, she gave birth to twin girls in Tajikistan. Unable to repay their debts (and finding themselves bored, being left alone in their big house), Farhod and Zebo migrated to St Petersburg, where they have been working since September 2019, changing jobs and accommodation. After an unsuccessful attempt to get a Russian passport, which caused them a lot of expense and stress, Farhod finally managed to 'jump on a citizenship ladder' in 2022, and he obtained his first temporary residence permit, with the expectation to get a passport within the next year or so. Their son Alijon, enrolled at university in a central Russian town to study some oil-related discipline, and received a tuition fee waiver. After graduation, he can apply for a 'fast-track' Russian passport. He wants to stay in Russia and get a mortgage.

Both Farhod and Zebo were wrong in their estimates about the temporality of longing. I began to miss them almost immediately after my return to the UK in 2018. On especially hard days, when the disjuncture between English and Tajik sociality became unbearable, and my own project of pursuing the good life felt like it was cracking, the words that

Farhod repeated to me when I felt low during fieldwork rang in my head: '*Lenakhon, nado vse terpet*' (Rus. 'you must endure everything'). Throughout the writing process, this book was driven by my attempts to convert into words the collective (and personal) sense of urgency to figure out how life should be lived. As I was writing this book, Farhod, Zebo and the others felt very present in my life, but now it is time to let them go, at least on paper. My hope is that this account will be read as I intended it: as a testimony to people's strength and creativity in the face of structural adversity.

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'In this vivid and poignant ethnography, grounded in an intimate portrait of life in northern Tajikistan, Borisova shows how migration is much more than a response to economic necessity. ...Taking us from homes and wedding halls to passport offices and border posts, Borisova illuminates migration as an ethical project inseparable from the search for a good life – an argument of profound relevance for scholars of migration, as well as for students of anthropology.'

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'This deeply researched account of the lived experience of migration between Tajikistan and Russia is a must-read for all those interested in Central Asia and the migratory experience more generally. This remarkable book is a testament to anthropology's relevance for understanding some of the most pressing issues and sensitive world regions of the present era.'

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Paradoxes of Migration in Tajikistan is the first ethnographic monograph on migration in Tajikistan, one of the most remittance-dependent countries in the world. Moving beyond economistic push-pull narratives about post-Soviet migration, it foregrounds the experiences of those who 'stay put' in the sending society and struggle to reproduce their moral communities. Elena Borisova examines the role of mobility in historical and cultural ideas about the good life and how it becomes entwined with people's efforts to become good, moral and modern subjects. Addressing the complex relationship between the economic, imaginative and moral aspects of (im)mobility, she shows that mass migration from Tajikistan is as much a project of navigating ethical personhood as it is a quest for economic resources.

This book reveals how transnational regimes and structures of mobility, citizenship and histories map out in the intimate spheres of the body, the person and the family. It is a contribution to contemporary migration research, which is mostly centred on Europe and North America, and to the field of Central Asian studies. It will be of interest to researchers of migration, (im)mobility and citizenship, and to scholars of all disciplines working on Central Asia.

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