

# Secure and Insecure Spaces for Uzbek Businesspeople in Southern Kyrgyzstan

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## Abstract

Based on fieldwork in southern Kyrgyzstan in October and November 2017, this article explores at a micro-level the security practices undertaken by Uzbek people in Osh. It closely examines the experiences of Uzbek taxi-drivers, traders and businesspeople and thereby seeks to understand how and why local actors have managed to find creative ways to secure their economic activities. The business sector is the sector in which the Uzbek community is dominant, whereas the Kyrgyz community dominates the state structures. Historically, the two ethnic groups have lived side by side and have been in constant contact with each other through this state/business symbiosis. However, the conflict of 2010 drastically changed and destroyed this symbiosis, and with it threatened the Uzbek business sector. The examination of the security-making practices of the Uzbek businesspeople was guided through the prism of the theoretical framework of “securityscapes”.

**Keywords:** Kyrgyzstan, Uzbek, business, security, strategies

## Introduction

The Osh conflict that broke out in southern Kyrgyzstan in summer 2010 was the worst conflict the region had seen in years. The conflict, which involved two ethnic groups, Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, erupted in the city of Osh on 10 June 2010, in the form of intercommunal clashes. It then spread to the region of Jalalabad. As a result of this conflict, more than 470 people were killed and thousands were injured, with some sources claiming that the true figures are much higher. Hundreds of private homes were burned down, and properties were looted. The report of an international inquiry commission stated that Uzbeks made up nearly 75 per cent of the 470 people killed, and that a “disproportionately high number” of Uzbek-owned properties were destroyed. The violence lasted for almost a week (KIC 2011).

In the aftermath of this violence, much attention was given to the causes, to competing narratives (Megoran 2013), different conflict dynamics (Kutmana-

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liev 2015), nationalism (Megoran 2012, Laruelle 2012), peace building, and coping strategies (Ismailbekova 2013, 2015). But recent scholarship on these events in Osh has largely ignored issues concerning local security practices. In the main this is because the focus of attention has been on challenging the broader geo-political security questions and on the “discourse of danger” (Thompson / Heathershaw 2015), as well as because of the methodological difficulties of grasping micro-level security strategies of marginalised and vulnerable groups. Of course, while explanations for the causes of the conflict (Asankanov 2011) and the different dynamics of peacekeeping are important and necessary in Osh and neighbouring towns (Khamidov et al. 2017), we have little knowledge of how people secure their economic activities in everyday life or of the everyday security practices adopted by the Uzbeks living in Osh.

In order to investigate the strategies of Uzbek businesspeople for keeping their businesses running despite constant pressures since 2010, I conducted fieldwork in Osh in October and November 2017. It was important for me to explore the security practices undertaken by Uzbek taxi-drivers, traders and businesspeople in Osh at a micro level, looking to understand how and why they managed to find new ways to secure their economic activities. As the Uzbek community is dominant in the business sector – whereas the Kyrgyz community dominates the state structures – it was an obvious choice to concentrate on this field. Historically, the two ethnic groups have lived side by side, in constant contact with each other through a state/business “symbiosis” (Liu 2012, Megoran 2013). More specifically, the Uzbeks have occupied a niche position in the middle of the economy – typically trading in the bazaar, working as shopkeepers, café owners and drivers – whereas the Kyrgyz traditionally occupy local government structures (Liu 2012, Megoran 2013). However, the conflict of 2010 has drastically changed and destroyed this symbiosis, and with it threatened the Uzbek business sector.

As a Kyrgyz woman myself, conducting research among the Uzbek community was not easy: many informants were suspicious and reluctant to talk about their daily difficulties. Instead many felt the need to mention how good life was in Osh and denied experiencing any problems. Others preferred not to speak openly about their business-related problems or concerns, especially to a Kyrgyz outsider and researcher. However, thanks to one of my key Uzbek informants, I finally succeeded in speaking with several different groups of the Uzbek community. My informant was able to assure other Uzbeks that the project was being conducted for scientific purposes and that their identities would be protected (all interviewees have been given pseudonyms). I was able to conduct a total of 35 interviews with 50 people, organise focus groups and make use of participant observation. In addition, ten Kyrgyz informants from the university, business sector and bazaar were interviewed. Although I tried

to capture the Kyrgyz side as well, the chief focus was on the Uzbek narrative: their subjective experiences, interpretations, perceptions and explanations. This paper thus does not claim to give an overall picture of the whole situation, but clearly centres on the Uzbek perspective.

The examination of the security strategies of the Uzbek businesspeople was guided through the prism of the theoretical framework of “securityscapes”, a notion developed by Marc von Boemcken et al. (2018). According to von Boemcken et al. (2016: 5) “securityscapes can be understood as ‘imagined worlds’ of security and insecurity that goad and structure the lives of people as they go about their daily business”. This perspective builds upon the earlier studies of Appadurai’s “scapes” (1996) and the “everyday practices of security” (Gough et al. 2016). Thus, securityscapes are based on inter-subjectively enacted social practices and emphasise the individual agency of actors in seeking security – which is especially evident if these actors do not and cannot rely on state authorities.

## In the aftermath of 2010

It is clearly evident that nationalism intensified in the country after the deadly clashes in Osh. A common discourse promoting that “Kyrgyzstan is the land of Kyrgyz and the rest, i.e. the ethnic minorities, are guests” remains strong (Abashin 2011) – not only among the youth, but also among the older generation. This belief is so strongly held that it is openly expressed in the street. In the same vein, new statues, mostly of Kyrgyz historical heroes, have emerged in the city as a national signifier that the city of Osh belongs to the Kyrgyz community rather than to the Uzbeks (Wachtel 2013). The importance of knowing the Kyrgyz language and an increase in the number of Kyrgyz language classes at schools highlight the state’s attempts to make Kyrgyzstan a “state of the Kyrgyz”. The number of Uzbek courses has declined in direct comparison to the increasing number of Kyrgyz classes on offer.<sup>1</sup>

The government has not undertaken any serious reconciliation procedures and inter-communal conflict seems to be a closed subject for the state authorities – as if nothing has happened at all. The discussion of such ethnic issues is considered taboo and remains a sensitive topic. There have been some reconciliation and mediation projects between the two ethnic groups funded by international donors, which took place despite their shortcomings (Megoran et al. 2014), but an invisible wall seems to persist between the two groups. Both my Kyrgyz and Uzbek informants agreed that “there is no friendship between

1 Several interviews by author, October and November 2017, Osh; see also Ismailbekova / Karimova 2017.

Uzbeks and Kyrgyz as before; before it was not divided as it is now. The wound has not healed.”<sup>2</sup>

Many Uzbek businesspeople fear that the law does not work properly for them and they are afraid of the state authorities, from law enforcement personnel (police), to the judiciary (judges) and executive bodies (government officials), positions commonly filled by members of the Kyrgyz community:

The state authorities are supposed to play a crucial role in promoting peace between the two ethnic groups; instead, some authorities are the ones who divide them. Some people use this ongoing situation in the city for their own purposes, not least to gain profit from the vulnerable situation of the Uzbeks.<sup>3</sup>

There is a tendency for state authorities to take the side of the Kyrgyz and not to treat Uzbeks as equals under the law (Megoran et al. 2014, KIC 2011). Many Uzbek informants felt that punishment is deemed to work only against them and in general is not handed out to the Kyrgyz community. As a result, they suspect the state authorities of being “corrupt, subjective and greedy”.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to being wary of the state authorities, many interviewed Uzbek businesspeople feared the *köchö baldar* (“street boys”) and the *chernye* (organised criminals), both mainly Kyrgyz. These usually muscular young men, who work as bodyguards or who are unemployed, set out to harass Uzbek businesses and extort money on behalf of imprisoned gang leaders. Sometimes these “street boys” are hired by influential people to solve their problems in an easy, “unofficial” way.<sup>5</sup> Uzbek businesses are also the main target of criminal groups, which “collect” money from them for the favour of “allowing them to make a living”.<sup>6</sup>

Both the state authorities (mostly through the law enforcement bodies) and organised criminal groups specifically target Uzbek businesses, which threatens them either through loss of profit or the use of force and harassment, or other manipulative strategies to steal either money or their business.<sup>7</sup> The seizure of a business is usually conducted by raiders (*raiderskyi zahvat*): they may demand payment of a large amount of money, known as an *otmetka* (for marking), or they might be influential businesspeople who squeeze the Uzbek business owners out of the competition in a process known as *otzhat biznes*. When a business cannot be “squeezed out” in an illegal way or or else legally for not having followed particular rules and regulations, the state might use an administrative resource, such as repeated financial audits and inspections

2 Islom Rustamov, 24 November 2017, Osh.

3 Interview with informants, and Focus Group Discussion in an Uzbek mahalla, 17 October 2017, and on 19 November 2017, Osh.

4 Durдона Makhmudova, 18 October 2017, Osh.

5 Interviews, 3 October 2017, and 5 November 2017, Uzbek mahalla, Osh.

6 Interviews, 5 October 2017, and 6 November 2017, Uzbek mahalla, Osh.

7 The situation in northern Kyrgyzstan is different; there even Kyrgyz businesspeople can be subject to the constant pressure of state and criminal networks (see Surabaldieva 2014).

of the private business with the threat of serious investigations and controls, in order to coerce the business owner into capitulation. Another social sanction implemented is the collection of compromising material (*kompromat*) and framing (*podstava*), which has been used against Uzbek businesspeople.<sup>8</sup>

Many of my informants did not differentiate between government officials and criminals, but rather saw them as often conjoined, with a blurring of the boundaries between them. They stated that some state authorities use criminal networks for their own purposes. Thus, in the case of Kyrgyzstan, criminal networks, big businesses and patronage networks became symbiotically coexistent (Ismailbekova 2017: 184, Radnitz 2010). It should be noted, however, that this overlap of business, state and criminal networks is found not only in Kyrgyzstan, but also in other post-socialist countries as a result of the transformation processes (Humphrey 2012).

## Facing insecurity in the main bazaar

Historically the Uzbeks, considered the sedentary population, and the Kyrgyz, comprising the nomadic population, would meet to trade, rendering them economically interdependent. Trading is embedded in the local culture of Osh, and thus the bazaar plays a crucial role in people's main trading activities. Trading at the bazaar is more than just an exchange of goods and money; all manner of transactions take place, including the exchange of ideas, news and gossip. It is an arena in which the different ethnic groups interact face to face, and come together to exchange stories and experiences. People from different regions of the Osh *oblast* (region) would come to the city's bazaar in order to purchase the goods they needed at a relatively low price and to hear the latest news from the city. During the Osh conflict, the main central Osh bazaar was destroyed, not only by the burning of some of the bazaar buildings, but also by the seizure of the bazaar's trading stalls by the Kyrgyz. Many Uzbek traders were ousted from the bazaar and many left because the Kyrgyz stole their goods.

As a result, many Uzbeks became too frightened to enter the bazaar and for Uzbeks it was soon considered as one of the most dangerous places in Osh. During my visit to the bazaar I observed that many trading stalls remained empty, abandoned or partially destroyed. Furthermore, many of the Uzbek stands at the local bazaar had been taken over by Kyrgyz traders; some trading spots had been sold, but the remaining Uzbek traders were too frightened to come to the bazaar. Many of the traders complained that trade was not as good as it had been before, and many Uzbek shoppers expressed a preference

8 Interviews, 13 October 2017, and 10 November 2017, Uzbek mahalla, Osh.

for buying things in their own *mahallas* (the Uzbek neighbourhoods in Osh) instead of coming to the bazaar.

The former bazaar traders claim that 80 per cent of the bazaar traders are now Kyrgyz; before the conflict Uzbeks mostly dominated trading in the bazaar. The ethnic composition of the bazaar has thus been reversed. For example, sectors within the bazaar for the sale of fruit and vegetables, meat, dry fruits, and Russian lottery tickets previously belonged to the Uzbek traders, but now Kyrgyz traders have replaced them in many of these sectors. For this reason the entire fruit and vegetable sector run by Uzbeks has moved from the bazaar to alternative locations, such as in Uzbek neighbourhoods, and similarly the size of the meat section has shrunk inside the bazaar but has expanded elsewhere.

The bazaar has also become a battle for space: the Kyrgyz community prefers to buy from Kyrgyz traders and the Uzbek community from Uzbek traders. My informant Dilnoza complained of being badly treated by a Kyrgyz woman trader who intentionally inflated the price of a dress when she asked the price, solely because she was an Uzbek woman. When I asked a Kyrgyz trader at the bazaar about my intention to buy some soft leather boots for myself, she instructed me to buy only from Kyrgyz traders and in showing me her section at the bazaar, reminded me that we should buy “only from ourselves and support each other”,<sup>9</sup> meaning the Kyrgyz community. This was also the case among Uzbeks, where my key Uzbek informant similarly suggested I buy only from Uzbek traders.

Another symbol of the indirect battle for space between the Uzbeks and Kyrgyz is expressed through animals. Kyrgyz and Uzbeks make fun of each other at the bazaar through the medium of using the specific animals to make a point. For example: according to my informants, on one occasion a donkey was brought into the bazaar and an Uzbek traditional hat (*dopu*) was put on the donkey’s head and a dressing gown or coat (*chapan*) on the donkey’s back, secured with scotch tape. The message implied was that “Uzbeks are donkeys”. In response, someone brought a dog into the bazaar and put a Kyrgyz traditional hat (*kalpak*) on the dog’s head with the retaliatory message that “Kyrgyz are dogs”. Pepper was then poured on the dog’s bottom, which caused the dog to run around the bazaar frantically, to the delight of the perpetrators.<sup>10</sup> These kinds of messages are intentionally organised and designed to further emphasise that the bazaar is no longer an entirely safe place for either ethnic group.

9 Almagul Kydyrova and Sabyra Tashtanbekova, main bazaar, 16 October 2017.

10 Interview with Uzbek informants, 23 November 2017, and Focus Group Discussion, 1 November 2017, Uzbek mahalla.

## Searching for security I: within the mahalla

Following the clashes in the city, many Uzbek traders moved and opened their own shops within the mahallas. The mahallas have traditionally been micro zones of the Uzbeks, neighbourhoods in which they are deeply rooted (Liu 2012; see also Boboyorov 2013 for Tajikistan, Rasanayagam 2009 for Uzbekistan). The price of goods inside the new mahalla shops was low, as in the bazaar. Not only did new shops proliferate in the mahallas, but also many new structures are evident, having been built within the last two or three years, and many other buildings are under construction. These buildings have been constructed for the purpose of trading in food, construction materials and household goods. Some traders have turned their private houses into stores. Many of them were traders who previously worked at the bazaar, but are now too fearful to return; others simply cannot return as they have lost their trading spots at the bazaar.

Instead, the mahalla fulfils almost every kind of daily need. It provides shops, hairdressing salons, new teahouses (*chai khana*), auto servicing, private hospitals, and even a children's swimming pool. Other interesting buildings and shopping centres have emerged containing a range of sections selling a wide variety of goods including medicines, music cassettes, food, telephone repair facilities, computer equipment, household appliances, and even spare parts for foreign cars. The array of different shops is located in one building, as is the custom in Western shopping malls. In addition, on the third or fourth floors of these malls are venues for organising a variety of lifestyle events, including theatre pieces and concerts. Other mobile trading possibilities have also emerged in the mahallas, such as the direct trading of coal, fruit and vegetables, whilst butcher's shops, known locally as *kasapchy*, have tripled in number inside the mahallas within the last two or three years.

Local mahalla dwellers told me that "they no longer find it necessary to go to the bazaar to buy basic goods as the mahalla now provides everything that people need at a relatively low price".<sup>11</sup> Apparently, there is no discernable price difference between goods bought at the bazaar and goods bought from the mahalla stores; thus the cost of living has improved because people have no need to travel all the way to the bazaar.

Recognising the importance and need for young people and children to spend their leisure time outside of their homes, an Uzbek businessman opened a huge family recreation centre called Ak-Buura, which is located within the Sheit Tupe mahalla. During the summer of 2016 the newly opened centre was completely packed. The centre has several attractions, including a water activity, a swimming pool, buffet, glass labyrinth, 3D cinema, children's swings,

11 Interview with mahalla dwellers, On Adyr Mahalla, 15 November 2017.

rollerblading platform, autodrome, café, photobooth, rowing boats, simulators, and a children's trampoline. Although this centre belongs to an Uzbek businessman, the profit from it is shared with Kyrgyz law enforcement officials; it would not be possible for the business to function without the profit being equally shared with the state authorities in Osh, otherwise the businessman might face various obstacles from criminal networks or state authorities.<sup>12</sup>

Following the rape of an Uzbek girl in the central park in Osh, Uzbeks have been too fearful to go to the park, which has affected the habits of young people, particularly in the evenings. As a result, young Uzbek people no longer venture into the city centre of Osh, preferring to enjoy the entertainment facilities already provided within the mahalla. Apart from the family recreation centre, there are also football pitches, cafés and body building centres where young people can spend their free time. The young people of the mahalla prefer to stay inside the mahalla for security reasons<sup>13</sup> – the mahalla has become the recognised “safe” place for youth to congregate.

Another interesting observation I made was that the pro-governmental banners of President Zheenbekov appeared on the business centres within the mahallas. The Uzbek community voted for Zheenbekov even though they naturally supported the opposition leader, Babanov.<sup>14</sup> It was explained to me that they voted for the pro-government President under duress. However, another alternate reason offered was that the state authorities within Osh are well connected with the Uzbek businesspeople and as the businesspeople did not believe that Babanov would be able to change or replace all the state authority members in Osh with his own people, they opted to vote for those with whom they were already connected (and who were part of their established networks) in order to protect their own businesses.<sup>15</sup> Zheenbekov's banners advertising his candidacy could thus be seen hanging everywhere – but were especially prominently displayed in the Uzbek-owned large stores and malls, perhaps also with an eye to currying favour with the authorities and emphasising loyalty to the Kyrgyz state.

Many Uzbeks living in mixed neighbourhoods moved to the Uzbek mahallas because it became unsafe for them to continue living together with the Kyrgyz community in their previous neighbourhoods. For example almost 60 families moved from the Kyrgyz-dominated neighbourhood of Amanbai to the Uzbek mahallas of Sheit Tupe, Karajygach and On Adyr. The changing atti-

12 Interview with taxi drivers, Cheremushka Mahalla, 18 November 2017.

13 Interview with young mahalla dwellers, Amur Timur Mahalla, 19 November 2017.

14 Presidential elections took place on 15 October 2017 in Kyrgyzstan. Zheenbekov got more than 54 percent of the vote in the presidential elections, while his main rival, Omurbek Babanov, got only 34 percent of the vote. Zheenbekov, 58 years old, a member of the Social Democratic Party, became the country's prime minister. Zheenbekov's strongest opponent, the 47-year-old Babanov, is a young, wealthy entrepreneur and former fuel trader from Talas in northern Kyrgyzstan.

15 Interview with mahalla dwellers, Shahid Tebe, Cheremushka, and On Adyr Mahalla, 15 November 2017.

tudes of many Kyrgyz neighbours towards their local Uzbek communities has forced the Uzbeks to sell their houses at prices equivalent to around 4,000–5,000 EUR, and land for 2,000–3,000 EUR. These prices were relatively low compared with the market price; however, had they refused to sell at these low levels they would have faced the threat of the properties being taken by force. Both during and after the conflict, property, such as cars, was stolen by young Kyrgyz “street boys” (*köchö baldary*). In one particularly unpleasant incident an Uzbek businessman was taken hostage and a ransom of 10,000 EUR was demanded from relatives.<sup>16</sup> Once he was freed, the family relocated to Russia. However, not all was so bleak. The majority of people living in mixed neighbourhoods simply exchanged houses: Kyrgyz people living in Uzbek mahallas exchanged houses with Uzbeks living in Kyrgyz neighbourhoods. The insecurity of living together forced many to move from mixed neighbourhoods to homogeneous neighbourhoods (cf. Ismailbekova 2015).

## Searching for security II: going outside the mahalla

After the recent rape of an Uzbek girl in the central park in Osh,<sup>17</sup> many young people prefer to remain inside their mahalla after 8 pm. If they still go outside, they try to hide their Uzbek identities:

[...] the young people do not wear their traditional hats (*dopu*) and are careful not to explicitly highlight their Uzbekness in public. If a young Uzbek were to wear a dopu in the centre of the city, he would invite comments from Kyrgyz youths [as my informants say, “our relatives” (*tuugandar*), implying Kyrgyz] who would demand that he remove his dopu if he did not want trouble.<sup>18</sup>

Young men therefore wear their traditional hats only inside of the mahalla because they feel safe therein. In contrast, women openly wear their Uzbek-style scarves when they leave the mahalla. But they do not wear their scarves inside their own backyards, only when they go out, again for security reasons and to avoid harassment, even though they might be identified as Uzbeks. The role of the scarves is important in Central Asia; it helps women to secure their bodies from unwanted attention and gives them the freedom to move in public spaces (Boboyorov 2017).

Many young Uzbeks try to speak and communicate with the local Kyrgyz community in the Kyrgyz language; to do otherwise might invite problems and censure from the local Kyrgyz youth. Following instances of Uzbek youths being beaten and robbed when they left their mahalla, Uzbek youths are ad-

16 Interview with Timur, a construction worker, Shahid Tebe Mahalla, 20 November 2017.

17 Interview with a policeman, 10 October 2017.

18 Interview with Uzbek students, Kyrgyz-Uzbek University, 18 October 2017.

vised by their parents to ensure they are home by 8 pm. One of my informants told me that he was beaten for greeting a group of young Kyrgyz men with the word *Assolomaleikum* in Uzbek instead of using the Kyrgyz equivalent, *Salamaleikum*.<sup>19</sup> The security of young Uzbek men is based on hiding their Uzbek identities and avoiding physical contact with young Kyrgyz men in the evenings, and after 8 pm they are mostly to be found concentrated around the mahalla. Parents whose young adult children work in the city until late evening ensure their children's safety by personally picking them up after work. In a similar vein, Hafiz Boboyorov (in this volume, pp. 61–82) observes how in Tajikistan, the Russian-speaking parents constantly maintain surveillance over their children, control their movements, and do not allow them to go beyond a visible distance.

In sum, in the aftermath of the events in Osh the mahalla became a secure space for Uzbek traders and became the safest place for young people as well. Trading and shopping, which were previously based at the bazaar, have for security reasons moved to the mahallas. As a result, economic activities are now concentrated within the mahallas. Not only has the trade moved, but also a variety of leisure activities are now available within, further encouraging people to move into the mahallas, which they view as a safe place to live. The securityscapes of Uzbeks can be characterised as segregation, or drawing lines in public places, on the one hand, and adaptation and hiding when moving outside, on the other hand.

## Mosque, school and hospital – three examples of new businesses

Uzbek businesses comprise very different sizes and sectors, whether small cafés, shops, private schools or hospitals. The Uzbek businesspeople have used different strategies and found creative ways to protect their businesses in Osh from vandalism. In this section, three examples of “unsafe” business sectors will be given and the ways in which they have been transformed into “safe” business sectors will be described.

The first example is a huge new mosque, which has been built in the centre of Nurel Mahalla. It was built on the site of what was previously a large store (constructed during the Soviet times) in which many different kinds of food and goods were sold. After the troubles in Osh the store was looted, and the storeowner (an Uzbek) was pressured by criminals to sell it for a relatively low price. Local Uzbek people asked the Uzbek owner to give this building to the community. He agreed, and the local community then prevented the building

19 Interview with Rustam Asekirov, Shahid Debe Mahalla, 20 October 2017.

from being sold by turning it into a mosque. By doing this, the local people wanted to save their mahalla's business sector. The building has two wings: the mosque is located in the left wing, and the right wing was used to create an indoor football pitch and a gym. Officially the building still belongs to the storeowner; he is therefore able to rent out the gym to young people to play football. The gym is usually booked from 5 pm till 11 pm daily, especially during the winter. The gym is available at a rental fee equivalent to 20 EUR an hour; usually players share the costs among themselves. Just behind the mosque, the owner has a large house, which he built many years ago. Currently the owner has plans to turn his home into a private *madrassa* (Islamic religious school), because both the mosque and football pitch, which are now situated near his house, would be needed by and be available to the *madrassa*. The owner has now applied for state approval for his *madrassa* scheme.

The mosque is considered a "safe" place that members of both the Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities can attend (but it is actually attended only by Uzbeks); therefore no one can touch it, due to its being known locally as a "sacred place" (*yyik zher*). The location of the football pitch and gym in the right wing of the building allows young Uzbek men to gather safely inside the gym every evening. As they have to enter through the mosque's gate they are protected from potential street skirmishes with young men from the Kyrgyz community. Both the mosque and the gym are frequently visited. In this case, turning the store into a mosque seems an effective strategy to save the property from seizure; other commercial places in Osh had already been forcibly sold at a low price or simply appropriated by criminal networks.<sup>20</sup>

In a second example, a newly built private school in the centre of Nurel Mahalla has replaced what was previously the very profitable Nur Café. This café was successful because of its strategic location between the city of Osh and the airport. People coming to Osh would stop there for lunch, as the kitchen of this café was famous throughout the whole region. After the clashes in Osh the Uzbek owner of the café was under constant pressure, both from the state authorities and from the threat of raids or seizure by criminals and street boys. Following such unremitting pressure, it was impossible for the owner to continue. He then turned the café into a private nursery school for small children. It was impossible for the state authorities and criminals to continue to put pressure on the Uzbek owner once the café was turned into a "safe" business in which small children of both the Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities are taught. As with the mosque above, mostly Uzbeks attend the school, but it is theoretically accessible to Kyrgyz as well. At the present time this school is successfully attracting an increasing number of small children who attend the private school on a fee-paying basis.

20 Interview with Uzbek informants, Shahid Debe Mahalla, 14 October 2017.

The third example of such an enterprise is that of a newly built private hospital, which was established in the centre of Nurel Mahalla a year ago. Previously it was the site of a huge car sales and servicing facility. This was located in a strategic spot between the airport and the city of Osh where new arrivals to the city would stop. In 2010 the car service facility was looted and destroyed. The owner decided to build a private hospital on the site, investing in expensive medical equipment from abroad. Many Uzbek doctors lost their jobs at local hospitals after the conflict and the owner immediately invited them to join him at the private hospital. This hospital, with its up-to-date equipment, is now considered to be one of the best hospitals in southern Kyrgyzstan. If this site had remained an auto service facility, the owner would probably have continued to be harassed. The private hospital in which both Kyrgyz and Uzbek people come for treatment (including members of the state authorities, criminals, and other local people) is no longer a target.<sup>21</sup>

In order to protect their sources of income, some Uzbek businesspeople have found very creative ways, as the three examples show. All succeeded in turning a very profitable but “unsafe” business into a still profitable but “safe” business – a store, a café and an auto-service facility were turned into a mosque, a school, and a hospital. All these new businesses are considered “sacred” i.e. “untouchable” places – the mosque for prayer, the school for children and the hospital for its treatment of everyone, including the elders of both communities, who are venerated. These new types of businesses, created under the umbrella of “sacred” places, provide a niche opportunity for businesspeople to earn money successfully and securely.

## Everyday security practices of Uzbek businesspeople

The majority of Uzbek business owners protect their businesses with the help of a video camera. The video camera sign is visible everywhere, from the smallest shop to the large hospitals in the city. In general the majority of businesspeople believe that they can protect themselves from abuses more effectively with a camera because it makes it easy to prove if someone does not pay, and more importantly, people are less likely to violate rules if they see the sign that a video camera is being used in a public place. As a shopowner put it: “when customers see the camera they behave very well and are afraid of the cameras”.<sup>22</sup> Shop and café owners, in particular, deal with “payment refusal” problems regularly; using a video camera helps to resolve this issue. Once the video camera is installed, it is possible to record all the activities in the shop

21 Interview with Uzbek informants, Cheremushka Mahalla, 7 November 2017.

22 Interview with Soodat Karimova, Shahid Debe Mahalla, 8 October 2017.

and to monitor customers. The video cameras are installed in visible places in order to show shop visitors that they are being monitored, which also discourages them from engaging in theft.

Many shopowners consciously employ women to sell their products because the local culture forbids a man to beat a woman, or to vandalise private property in the presence of a woman. If young men sold products, it would not be inconceivable for other young men to be discourteous to the male salesclerks or to threaten them, but they leave women alone. Some Uzbek business owners even place Kyrgyz women workers in their business sectors specifically because Kyrgyz state authorities (those controlling tax, water, electricity, the inspectors and the police) would not attempt to cause trouble in the presence of a Kyrgyz woman. In this way, both video cameras and women are used to protect the business and secure property from vandalism. Indeed, the video surveillance in the shops and cafes protects both the women and businesses alike.

Another important aspect that business owners benefit from is being a member of a social network. Most businesspeople try to establish themselves as a member of a good network, preferably with the members of the state authorities (mostly with tax inspectors, law enforcement authorities and the police) and criminal networks (such as criminal organisations and protection rackets) in order to protect the business. Such protection is known as a *krysha* (lit. “roof” in Russian). Usually the profit is unofficially shared with the state authorities in terms of bribes; life for businesspeople who do not enjoy the patronage of the state authorities would be difficult, if not impossible, because they would be constantly investigated for business violations and subject to random inspection as a means of control.<sup>23</sup> The Uzbeks actually receive some security service in return for paying bribes. If members of the strong state authorities patronise an Uzbek business, no one else will dare find reason to “check” the business, or demand to be given products or food for free. In general, business owners share a portion of their profit not only with the state authorities, but also with criminals who extort money.<sup>24</sup> For the low-level business sectors however, there is no exception to the requirement to share a percentage of their profit with the criminals or “street boys”; they would not otherwise be “allowed” to remain in business.

Besides these three commonly seen practices – video cameras, female shop assistants and social networks – many different, individual ways are found to continue an original or new business. One impressive example was the Uzbek owner of a sauna who previously owned several different small enterprises,

23 Interview with Uzbek informants, Shahid Debe, Amur Timur and Cheremushka Mahallas; Focus Group Discussion with businessmen, 9 November 2017.

24 Interview with Uzbek informants, Shahid Debe, Amur Timur and Cheremushka Mahalla; Focus Group Discussion with businessmen, 9 November 2017.

but was forced to close them due to the huge share of profits he had to distribute to state authorities and criminals, which ultimately rendered his businesses unprofitable. When he finally sold his businesses he kept one for himself but convinced the new (Kyrgyz) owner of the others to officially appear as the holder of this last one as well – thus providing him with protection from further claims for money.

## **Insecure on the roads: Uzbek car and taxi drivers' daily challenges**

In conversation with my Uzbek informants, they told me that the most insecure places for Uzbeks are the roads,<sup>25</sup> but I did not understand what they meant. Once I started investigating transportation, I understood better. This problem relates not only to matters concerning automobile accidents or traffic, but to the broader situation regarding transportation in Osh.

Commonly three makes of car, the Daewoo Matiz, Daewoo Tico, and Honda Jazz, are used as taxis and for goods transportation purposes in Osh. This is because the price of such cars is low and they are economical (typically they require 3–4 litres of fuel per 100 km). Most drivers of such vehicles use them to earn their living. The drivers all try to work within their mahalla, as whenever they drive outside of it the traffic police routinely stop them. According to my Uzbek informants, there are mainly two reasons for this: these brands of car generally belong to Uzbeks, and young people commonly use these kinds of cars when learning to drive.<sup>26</sup> The drivers are stopped for supposed “small” violations of traffic regulations, and often they are stopped for no specific reason at all. In all instances a fine is demanded, especially if a driver is Uzbek.<sup>27</sup> I personally observed the traffic police selectively stopping the Uzbek drivers who were driving cars such as the Matiz and Tico and noted that they completely ignored the drivers of bigger cars such as Nissan, Mercedes and Lexus as well as their violations of traffic regulations. While I observed the traffic, a big Mercedes full of young men made an illegal turn in front of the traffic policeman, but the policeman ignored the violation. In another example a Lexus was being driven by a driver who had a child sitting on his knee – although the policeman saw this, no action was taken.

Both Kyrgyz and Uzbek informants confirmed that drivers of cars such as Mercedes, BMW and Lexus – mostly driven by Kyrgyz drivers – are seldom

25 Interview with Uzbek drivers, Amur Timur Mahalla, 15 November 2017.

26 Interview with Uzbek drivers, Shahid Debe Mahalla, 18 November 2017.

27 Interview with Uzbek drivers, Cheremushka Mahalla, 21 November 2017.

stopped by the traffic police, even if they violate the rules.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, the Uzbek drivers of Matiz and Tico cars routinely have to pay a fine equivalent to at least 2 or 3 EUR. Many owners of Matiz and Tico cars thus only drive their cars within the mahalla, but when they go to the city centre they take the local mini-bus (*marshrutka*). The mini-bus is thus another means of transportation that many Uzbeks use for their own security purposes.

The drivers describe themselves as the traffic policemen's "golden goose" because every time they are stopped money is handed over.<sup>29</sup> Most of the time the drivers of such vehicles are very careful not to violate any traffic rules; Uzbek drivers even fasten their seat belts, which is an unusual practice for drivers in Kyrgyzstan. As they explained however, it is better to pay the 2–3 EUR to the traffic police rather than argue and then be forced to pay a fine of 5–12 EUR or more, or risk being arrested and beaten up.<sup>30</sup> Failure to pay might result in threats and further investigations into all manner of driving requirements: such as whether the driver has a first aid kit, emergency signs, a spare tyre, fire extinguisher or a torch. Additionally, they might decide to fine the driver for having tinted car windows.

It is better not to argue with the traffic police, because one is unlikely to win. As my informants say: *tashtasang jashaising*, *tashtabasang jashabaising* ("in order to live one should bribe, if not, one cannot live"). One informant told me that once he argued with the traffic police, and as a result his driving license was taken away and he was asked to retake his driving test. The policeman had supposedly stopped him for two reasons: the car was old and he was said to be driving too slowly. Apparently, while the policeman stopped his car, another Mercedes drove by very quickly. The Uzbek driver asked him: "Why do you not stop this car?"; the policeman replied that it "was not his business".<sup>31</sup>

The taxi drivers themselves carry sticks in their cars in case something happens to them on a journey. After the events in Osh, it became dangerous for Uzbeks to take unknown passengers because of instances in which the taxi drivers were not paid at the end of the journey or beaten up by young men.<sup>32</sup> The taxi drivers from Uzbek mahallas drive to the city centre in the afternoons, but they are reluctant to go there in the evenings, especially to Kyrgyz-dominated areas such as Zapadnyi, Yugovostok, Frunzenskiy, Oblbolnit-

28 The Uzbek own most businesses and thus have enough money, but they prefer not to show off their wealth otherwise the police might start asking where and how they got the money to buy the car. Of course, not all Kyrgyz work in state positions (with the resultant opportunity to amass wealth) – so there is also a poorer Kyrgyz population who cannot afford the bigger cars. It is important to mention here that the majority of the younger Kyrgyz population work in Russia and send their remittances back to Kyrgyzstan. Interview with Uzbek drivers, 18 November 2017.

29 Interview with Uzbek drivers, 18 November 2017, Karazhygach Mahalla.

30 Interview with Uzbek drivers, Karazhygach Mahalla, 18 November 2017.

31 Interview with Uzbek drivers, Amur Timur Mahalla, 15 November 2017.

32 Interview with Uzbek drivers, Amur Timur Mahalla, 15 November 2017.

sa, Zhapalak and HBK, or to drive to neighbouring towns like Zhalal-Abad, Uzgen and Kara-Suu. They clearly prefer not to go to Kyrgyz neighbourhoods and villages, and try to not to take unknown passengers, especially when these are drunk. Instead they prefer to take passengers from one Uzbek neighbourhood to another and even then only if the passengers are known to them.

Young Uzbek taxi drivers in particular prefer not to go into the city, but the older Uzbek drivers will take Kyrgyz passengers and go to the city centre for two reasons. Firstly, the traffic police are less likely to stop the older taxi drivers because they argue with the police and know their rights much better than the younger generation. Secondly, it is reported that the police do not try to extort money from elders or *aksakal* because they are culturally respected, whereas if a young taxi driver starts to argue with the traffic police, he would be fined immediately. Whenever a “suspicious” passenger, (which may include a drunken Kyrgyz youth) wants to go to a Kyrgyz neighbourhood, the younger Uzbek taxi drivers direct them to an older taxi driver: “We excuse ourselves, saying that we are busy or waiting for someone and suggest an older (*aksakal*) taxi driver by saying that he usually takes clients to the city and know the roads better.”<sup>33</sup>

Usually taxi drivers work from early morning till 6 pm and then stop. However, younger taxi drivers still work in the evening, but they work by taking telephone bookings (*zakaz*) from Uzbek people who are known to them. The telephone numbers of Uzbek drivers are widely shared within the mahalla and the passengers are picked up from their homes by pre-arrangement. This method of obtaining taxis is widely practiced among Uzbeks. They feel more secure with Uzbek drivers, especially on a long journey and they show their solidarity with them.

*Marshrutka* drivers face different kinds of challenges on a daily basis. Uzbek *marshrutka* drivers constantly face discrimination. Some Kyrgyz people abuse them loudly, claim they are not driving properly, and some refuse to pay their fare because the drivers are Uzbek. Routinely 5 to 6 passengers per journey will refuse to pay the fare for the *marshrutka* service into the city. The drivers try to speak Kyrgyz or Russian when asking the passengers for their fare; the Uzbek language is not used as means of communication between drivers and passengers, otherwise it prompts the Kyrgyz passengers to demand that the drivers “speak Kyrgyz because they are living on Kyrgyz land”. *Marshrutka* drivers should work until 9 pm, but Uzbek drivers generally work only until 6 pm to avoid having to deal with drunken people (in the main young Kyrgyz men) who get into the *marshrutka* and then refuse to pay or start threatening the drivers. Generally, it is not safe for Uzbeks to work in the

33 Interview with Uzbek drivers, Amur Timur Mahalla, 15 November 2017.

evening. Instead they go home early and prefer to start work in the early morning instead.

The Uzbek drivers are also vulnerable to a number of different complaints made every day by passengers to department authorities, usually on the basis that they did not stop or did not wait for a passenger; this complaint is sent directly to the transport department. On a daily basis, up to 20 Uzbek *marshrutka* drivers will have to pay “unofficial” fines equivalent to 2–3 EUR to the transport department. The drivers told me that “the transport department intentionally makes the life of Uzbek *marshrutka* drivers difficult so they are so resigned to paying fines or bribes. Some drivers suspect that the transport authorities hire someone to monitor the Uzbek *marshrutka* routes”.<sup>34</sup> One of the *marshrutka* drivers complained that he cannot drive ahead of any Kyrgyz *marshrutka* driver and compete for passengers, or he will face problems because the Kyrgyz drivers are well connected with the state authorities. Those whose vehicles are at the front pick up more passengers: being at the rear means losing many potential passengers. The driver told me that the Uzbek drivers got together and wrote a letter of complaint, but the transport authorities refused to consider their grievances.

## Conclusion

Since the outbreak of violence in 2010 the Uzbek businesspeople have developed their own range of securityscapes. These include providing security through community segregation and boundary making (i.e. concentration of life and businesses in the mahalla), space making and practices of adaptation (turning unsafe businesses into safe businesses), avoidance and concealment of businesses and identity, as well as the usage of video cameras, networking and “invisible” avoidance – avoiding contact with Kyrgyz in a subtle and discreet manner, so as not to give offence. These securityscapes have developed as a reaction to different “imagination of danger”, experienced in reality as physical violence, harassment and the seizure of Uzbek businesses.

Many Uzbeks face a number of challenges on a daily basis. In the main, difficulties affect the economically active, who suffer constant pressure and intimidation from the state authorities and criminals alike. As a result, businesspeople have resorted to finding different kinds of creative strategies to keep their businesses secure. Measures include moving trading from the bazaar to the mahallas, using mobile phones for passenger bookings from the bus station and airport, and avoiding selling to, or serving, potentially “suspicious” clients. The Uzbeks do not openly avoid developing businesses within

34 Interview with a mini-van driver, Osh Mahalla, 23 November 2017.

their economic niche; rather they have tried to turn their existing niche into a safer place by using practices that are not visible to the Kyrgyz community, and in this manner they safeguard their businesses. Some businesses have been turned into “safe” social projects, such as a school, hospital and mosque.

It is important to read the mediating role of the mahalla in securing the elites’ social networks: their access to political and economic resources and manipulation of this institution legitimates their positions (Trevisani / Massicard 2003, Boboyorov 2013, Abashin 2015). Business was previously concentrated outside of the mahalla, mostly in the city centre and oriented towards Kyrgyz customers. Now the mahalla has become the security space of the Uzbek community in Osh: the bazaar, transport, hospitals, shops, schools and people have all moved into the mahallas and life is now concentrated therein. This mahalla zone has been further strengthened and developed. The Uzbeks rearrange life there – like a little city within the larger one, but at the same time the city as a whole has become more segregated. The securitescapes of Uzbeks can be characterised as segregation, or drawing lines in public, on the one hand, and adaptation and hiding when moving outside, on the other hand.

As implied by the local Russian term that Uzbeks frequently use, the mahalla has become the *zona komforta* (“comfort zone”). It represents a safe and comfortable place that is outside the influence of the state and of the criminals who threaten the Uzbeks’ economic and physical wellbeing. It is a place of safety that outsiders cannot enter. Through creative negotiations with state officials and criminals, it is possible for the mahalla to function as a separate, and safe, economic zone.

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