Article

Relations of Debt and Credit Networks in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan, Russia and Kazakhstan

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Abstract
Any relations and practices of debt within credit networks include not only pure economic exchange, such as barter or non-monetary exchange, but diverse kinds of social relations of debt. In this article, we consider case studies embedded in the particular context of early and late post-Soviet economic and political crisis, in which economic informalization was characterised by ‘wild capitalism’ or the absence of cash and livelihoods. We observe the coping strategies and mechanisms of economic survival adopted by ordinary people in response to these crises and to the absence of state social and economic institutions. We portray people’s concrete experiences of debt, solidarity social relations, and economic exchange based on debt relationships in post-Soviet economies. The case studies are drawn from ethnographic material from Uzbekistan, Russia and Kazakhstan. Our case studies reveal that debt relations are not about two individuals who owe money but serve as the basis for debt-based trade, survival, and socializing networks, as well as part of moral economies. The article builds on scholarly works related to informal economies and survival mechanisms in post-Soviet space, to anthropology of debt, as well as discussion of (dis)trust.

Keywords
debt-based economy and trade, survival strategy, debt notebooks, post-Soviet Central Asia, trust, personal networks

Debt in the Post-Soviet Context of Economic Collapse
Debt-based economies and trade began receiving scholarly attention only after the collapse of the Soviet Union particularly the early post-Soviet period marked by economic, political and social collapse. Debt based trade and coping mechanisms developed as a response to economic collapse, hyperinflation, and the introduction
of new national currencies in the newly independent republics. Central Asian economies underwent considerable challenges to become independent states after the collapse of the Soviet Union, owing to an overcentralized and unified economy built on the past principle of economic interdependence of the Soviet republics. The challenges in these regions included not just economic collapse but decaying Soviet infrastructure (as time passed), political turbulence (civil wars, inter-ethnic conflicts), and global insecurities (financial crisis, migration). These political, economic and social insecurities, combined with struggles for power and resource grabbing, created a scenario characterized by scholars as bespredel (Turaeva 2014) and the times of chaos (Nazpary 2002). Bespredel from Russian means ‘without limits’ or ‘lawlessness’ and ‘chaos’, also from Russian, characterized the above outlined situations of early post-Soviet period.

Central Asian states have been unable to provide security and welfare for their populations. The economic situation in most of the post-Soviet republics remains challenging, and the chaotic times of the early post-Soviet years were particularly devastating for basic livelihoods of average and poor people. Debt-based economic exchange and debt-based social relations became increasingly salient as food and money shortages presented a daily challenge. Indeed, debt economies and economic exchange based on barter became the prevailing economic models in the context of absence of money and livelihoods. Newly independent states were not economically prepared to accommodate increased mobilities, new constellations of border disputes, global challenges, and security issues. The informalization of economies and politics was thus one of the visible developments in the region overall (Turaeva 2014; Turaeva and Urinboiyev 2021), as citizens and residents of independent Soviet republics were left to fend for themselves to survive; this also opened opportunities for entrepreneurship and innovation. Specifically, a variety of coping mechanisms developed as survival schemas, including flourishing informal economies and the further strengthening of kinship and other systems of belonging in the context of economic collapse and the absence of a social welfare system. To confront this new socio-economic situation, different strategies were possible, some of which have already been studied. Scholars have documented debt and barter economies of different scales and forms in the transition economies of different post-Soviet countries. For example, Ledeneva and Seabright (2000) and Makarov and Kleiner (1999) shed light on how central economic planning was replaced by large-scale barter, and how ‘inter-enterprise barter’ flourished in the early and mid-1990s in Russia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. Nazpary (2002) provides similar observations about debt chains and relations in Kazakhstan during the period of disorganized capitalism the author describes as times of chaos.

In the context of high unemployment and absurdly low state salaries in the post-Soviet regions, the absence of cash and a lack of trust in banking systems regularly

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1 See some aspects of these processes, for example, in Humphrey 2000a, Humphrey 2000b, Seabright 2000.
forced people to take up any work for cash to pay for basic needs such as food and clothing. A primary example is that of teachers and doctors earning cash as taxi drivers and now even those precarious sources of income from taxi driving taken away by taxi monopolists such as Yandex taxi – the Russian operated taxi giant dominating in Russian speaking countries and not paying taxes to those countries where it makes large portions of income (Olma 2021). Extremely limited incomes gradually led to decreased incentives to seek employment within state agencies, while salaries within security structures and the police were raised to levels incomparable to those of other professions. In Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, for example, a doctor or state university teacher’s salary averaged from $20 to $50, while a regular policeman would receive approximately $100 for the same period, not including the additional benefits for those employed in the security structures. At the time of the fieldwork of the first author in Uzbekistan (2005–2006), a middle-ranking policeman had a net salary of 150,000 UZS, which was an equivalent of $120, whereas a schoolteacher was paid about 60,000 or 70,000 UZS, or else $40–50 excluding taxes. The salaries increased in 2022 up to 300-400 $ but so did also prices. Employment in the security forces does not require special training or schooling, though possession of a diploma of any kind automatically brings the recipient the title of lieutenant. Those who have graduated from philological faculties, particularly with a major in foreign languages, have the potential to be hired directly by the secret police. There, the salaries are high and employees enjoy all kinds of benefits related to health care, accommodation, and food subsidies.

The employment market has dramatically transformed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Industrial production has declined due to a lack of supply, which was previously organized through the vast economic web of the Soviet Union and based on the principle of economic interdependence. As the entirety of the Union-directed industrial production stopped, a vast number of employees lost their jobs. A scarcity of products was another consequence of the same process. As a result, informal trade visibly prospered, especially when the borders opened up developing into so-called bazaar economies (Geertz 1978). The supply of products became more flexible than during Soviet times, when the supply chain was more or less strictly predetermined and planned by the central government. In this context, debt-based systems came to be seen as the only effective tool to bridge days when people could not earn money or even pay for their food. Pitifully small shops and stands with various tiny items, such as cigarettes and food items repacked into smaller portions, became more popular than larger, state-owned stores, due to the flexibility and mobility of traders or entrepreneurs in these smaller establishments who could use the debt-based trade without interest. Shops where one could purchase food on credit without paying interest attracted more clients needing to acquire basic foodstuffs and to make ends meet without immediate cash available. This challenging situation in which people with a shortage of money and income could not afford their basic needs demanded social solidarity and mutual support. In addition, traders themselves practiced debt-based purchases of products for their shops from wholesale traders which became
one of the most practiced and successful business models (debt based-trade and wholesale). This then gave cash-strapped traders more opportunities to widen their trade and even save them from bankruptcy. This system of debt-based trade presented a win-win solution for both the needy and for entrepreneurs (Turaeva 2014).

Debt-based trade in the ‘shadow’, ‘hidden’, or ‘unregulated’ economy was one of the many wide-spread coping strategies adopted by both entrepreneurs and needy customers to meet economic necessities (Ledeneva 1999). The situation of economic necessity was characterized by the absence of market and monetary institutions for mediating financial relationships between individuals and institutions. To be more precise, the post-socialist model of the informal economy came to be associated with a local order of norms for acquiring things and making business deals through personal networks (known as blat in Russian and guanxi in China) using a principle of reciprocity (Hann and Hart 2011,126). In this context, the notion of barter meant not a classical exchange of goods for goods but rather a form of trust relations and trust and solidarity networks which also incorporated non-monetary transactions between large enterprises (see, Clarke 2000, Makarov and Kleiner 1999). Debt chains, trust (Humphrey 2018), informal networks and blat (Ledeneva 1998, 2001) or membership in a certain circle/krug (Turaeva 2016), economy of favours in Central Asia (Turaeva 2022) as well as a wide use of coupons and vouchers (Clarke 2000) and other new forms of patronage and corruption (Hann and Hart 2011,126) were essential to the successful operation of post-Soviet non-monetary, mostly debt-based, economies.

In this article, we offer a detailed portrayal of people’s concrete experiences of debt, solidary social relations, and economic exchanges based on debt relationships in post-Soviet economies. We draw on substantial ethnographic materials presented in three different community-scale financial scenarios from Uzbekistan, Russia, and Kazakhstan. The current article does not analyse ancestral, pre-Soviet practices or other forms of ritual economics in Central Asia (see more in Masato 2008, Alexandrov 2017). Rather, we consider the current forms of debt-based practices as survival and coping mechanisms and as responses to stress and economic insecurities emerging in the 1990s and later. We situate these case studies in relation to scholarly works on informal economies and survival mechanisms in the post-Soviet space, anthropology of debt, and the relationship between debt and (dis)trust. We then present three case studies about rotation savings in Uzbekistan, namely through recourse to a krug/circle, about moral and religious aspects of debt-based trade and dolgovaya tetrad/debt-notebooks in halal shops in Moscow, as well as about debt-based trade in Southern Kazakhstan’s mining city. The case studies will be followed by the discussion of the empirical material embedded in analytical frameworks for understanding debt practices and debt-based economies. This article is based on ethnographic field research conducted by both authors. The first author has been doing ethnographic field research in Central Asia, South Caucasus, and Russia since 2005. The second author has been conducting ethnographic research in Central Asia since 2014.
Anthropological Approaches to Debt

Debt is gaining more and more anthropological interest, building upon groundbreaking works such as Peebles (2010), Graeber (2011), Guerin (2014), Hart (2016). For economists, the phenomenon of debt is conceived as a monetary transfer between two parties considered equal. In the international context, debt is largely seen as an essential instrument for regulating relations between a state and the global economy (Roitman 2004). Beyond its purely material dimension, anthropologists emphasize the ways in which debt stipulates a bond that holds community members together and which is thoroughly embedded in all social relationships and economies. Even societies without money may run on debt (Graeber, 2011). Hart (2016:416) states that ‘debt is everywhere today,’ placing debt into the widest framework of anthropological thinking and world history. For the purposes of this article, we privilege anthropological understandings of debt.

The topic of debt has attracted the attention of anthropologists dealing with a wide range of ethnographic descriptions from different geographies. However, the general consensus within economic anthropology is that the notion of debt itself has different understandings and different contexts. Debt has no universal definition and can be applied to various meanings and understandings depending on its context (Guerin 2014). Within the anthropology of exchange, the classical accounts of debt primarily address the concept of exchange in primitive societies (Malinowski 1922/2002, Mauss 1925/1970, Sahlins 1972). Most of this literature on debt attempts to assess sharing and pooling systems between individuals of pre-monetary economies and the essential role debt has played in social organisation and economic relationships. In this context, debt is associated with the idea of gift (le don) as a non-monetary exchange that shapes a particular system of human relations predicated on hierarchy, solidarity, and various social ties (Mauss 1925/1970). For example, Malinowski (1925/2002) describes the kula ceremonial exchange system of valuables crucial to the economic life of the Trobriand islanders. As we show in our case studies, debts and debt relations comprise such processes as debt making, debt giving, and payment, as well as debt settlements. Debt giving can include such practices as gift giving. Giving is not the same as gift giving and the gesture of allowing a poor person to have one of the products without paying for it involves some of the thinking about gifts as well as notions of charity, although such items need to be repaid. Debt giving or enabling debt making is different from gift and gift giving, in the sense that debt giving and debt making go beyond giving and result in mutual dependencies and negotiation of status system and belonging. In the literature on gifts, there is considerable attention to return of the gift and symbolic character of gifts which also introduces more confusion to the differences between debts and gifts due to the expectation of the gift to be returned and accepting the risks of debts not being returned. Risks for free riding on both situations such as gifts and debts cannot be avoided making those relations dependent on trust. There is a clear difference between the weight and meaning of a gift and debts which is largely associated with negative and positive initial definition of both notions. The result of those
exchanges if gifts are returned and debts are not returned is a different matter related to building trust and trust relations.

The currently dominant anthropological narrative regarding debt states that debt is not about money per se but is always closely tied with social and moral aspects or obligations and culture (Pebbles 2010; Graeber 2011). A number of recent anthropological contributions (Gregory 1982, Pebbles 2010, Graeber 2011, Guerin 2014, Humphrey 2018, Janet 2019) assess the productive impact of debt, conceptualizing debt-taking through the relationships between debt, gender, and kinship (Guérin 2014) and in terms of geographical locations such as large cities, villages, or border areas (see more in the volume edited by Hours and Ahmed 2015). Other contemporary accounts focus on how debt relations involve financial exploitation, dependency, and power relations. For example, Guerin and Venkatasubramanian (2020) elaborate the concept of ‘the socio-economy of debt’ within the Indian context while Villarreal (2014) examines ‘the regimes of value’ in Latin America in relation to power, predominant beliefs and values.

Trust and Debt

Trust is the basis of any relations of debt. Trust might be considered as a cultural phenomenon that has different meanings, including both negative and positive connotations. Notions of trust vary according to particular situations, societies, and countries (Lomnitz and Sheinbaum 2004). Trust is temporary, contextual, and nuanced, as Simmel describes in his influential work Philosophy of Money (1989).

Scholars have conceptualized trust in different ways, ranging from ‘a weak form of inductive knowledge’ and faith (Simmel 1900/2011) to ‘an operation of the will’ (Luhmann 1967/1979, 32), and as ‘the leap of trust: expectation, interpretation and suspension’ (Möllering 2001). Trust has also been considered in relationship to power (Tilly 2005), religious faith and morality (Baier 2004), reflection (Möllering 2001), and human conduct and networking (Lomnitz and Sheinbaum 2004). In essence, trust is a basic element for the construction of personal bonds which impacts individuals’ behaviour within these social webs. It is at the core of such relations as friendship, kinship, as well as within the establishing and maintenance of religious and business ties, including consideration of it in relation to communication, distribution, participation and sharing within established ‘trust networks’ (Tilly 2004, 5).

Within a broad scholarly literature on trust with established theoretical models, one set of accounts tends to characterize trust as ‘a foundation of sociality and morality,’ highlighting the fundamental power and nature of trust (Baier 2004). Another perspective addresses ‘the crisis in public trust’ in contemporary complex societies, mainly in the West (Misztal 2013, 3-5). In the fields of philosophy and sociology, Georg Simmel’s foundational ideas are still reflected in current conceptualizations of trust (see, for example, Möllering 2001). Simmel’s classical formulation tells us that trust can be seen as ‘a hypothesis regarding future behavior, a hypothesis certain enough to serve as a basis for practical conduct’;
Simmel suggests that peoples, eras, and societies vary in the particular combination of knowledge and ignorance sufficient to generate trust (Simmel 1950, 318-19 cited in Möllering 2001, 405).

Trust and trust-based networks are an essential part of informal economies, especially in post-socialist countries, and in many cases, serve as a survival strategy (Lomnitz and Sheinbaum 2004, 2). As Ledeneva (1998) observes, a high level of interpersonal trust (as proposed by Luhmann 1979) compensates for a lack of social welfare and for low levels of trust in official structures in many post-Soviet countries, which inherited a network economy and particular patterns of behaviour from the socialist period. With regard to debt and individual economic strategies, we mostly follow a definition of trust offered by Tilly, who argues that ‘trust consists of placing valued outcomes at risk to others’ malfacance’ (2004, 4). Muldrew (1998) has emphasized the particular importance of ties such as kinship, neighbourhood habitation, and religious affiliation in informal economic activities involving risky transactions. Such ties, and social networks based on interpersonal trust and loyalty, are central to economic and social survival. Several detailed accounts have shown the paramount role of trust in the barter economy (Humphrey 1985, 2000, 259–297, Ledeneva 1998, Lomnitz and Sheinabum 2004, Holzlehner 2018). Scholars agree that phenomena like barter or debt practices and other types of informal economic activities demand high person-to-person trust, especially in small-scale communities where people interact with each other on a regular basis and know who is trustworthy and who is not. In informal economies, trust is essential to the successful operation of reciprocal exchanges of products and services between community members, primarily for resolving issues of daily life and supporting solidary family and friendship relations. Along with family and friendship, kinship is another important social context in which trust-based relationships can be developed between individuals of the same ethnic group. This type of relationship has both a utilitarian and non-utilitarian basis. After a certain amount of social exchange, these relationships turn into various kinds of dependencies and power relations (Turaeva 2016).

Uzbekistan: Debt Chains Through Rotating Cash

Rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs) are widespread largely in the Global South and take different names such as Chit Funds in India, Susu in West Africa, Kye in Korea, Gap in Uzbekistan, and chyornaya kassa in Central Asia (Besley 1994, 701; Turaeva 2016). The classical anthropological studies of these associations are those of Ardener (1964) and Geertz (1962) as cited in Besley (1994, 701). Rotating savings offer an alternative to state banking systems. In countries where banks do not have a high level of trust, alternative methods of savings are practiced, such as investing in property businesses, investing in gold items, and, in the case of larger amounts, investing in other businesses. In the case of small cash savings for necessary household needs such as life cycle events, serious illnesses, house renovations, or financing education, models like rotating savings are used to cope with shortages of money or income.
Rotating savings can be viewed as a positive method for coping with economic insecurities and other hardships related to the absence of state social security and health care provisions. Krugs and Gaps are the local names for rotating savings which we outline above. The Russian word krug means a ‘circle’ and is used by some women’s networks to indicate a group of people who meet on a regular basis or at least socialize together on different occasions. At the same time, however, this model has its pitfalls. As an interview partner said: ‘It is nice to have a bigger amount of cash once in a while to cover debts or buy something big such as a washing machine but to find this money each month to pay into the krug can also be challenging.’ Although the amounts saved can be used for bigger purchases and other household needs, in cases where individuals cannot afford payments, rotating savings can lead to continuous debts or debt chains. Rotating savings can thus only be successfully conducted in the cases when monthly contributions in cash are made from extra money which is not necessarily borrowed.

In Uzbekistan such saving rotations are not only used to ensure extra cash savings but also because participation in such savings rotations defines one’s social status; participation also, at times, serves as an entry into safety networks. There are various types of krugs, or circles, membership in which is organized according to occupation, kinship, common interests, and other criteria. During fieldwork, the first author attended several krugs where she was included as a member in accordance with binding rules and obligations rather than as an observer or a guest. The exchange of information, material things, and other kinds of symbolic exchange within these krugs varies depending on the krug’s principle of organization. The name for rotating savings also varies from region to region and from country to country. In Tashkent, Uzbekistan, terms like Gap are used to indicate the regularly occurring event where certain people gather, both with rotating savings and without. Krugs or gaps are more than a social event, however. Though they do not have to hold meetings on a regular basis, they indicate a particular group of people who are united by various common principles such as kinship, friendship, or a colleague or neighbour relationship.

Membership in any krugs or gaps is gender based. Men and women have separate krugs and gaps. Krugs are differently organized by women than men. Men use the krug to describe a circle of friends with whom they have parties (tashkila girishmak), whereas in addition to socializing within krugs, women’s krugs are based on rotating savings. Most men find collecting money to be ‘women’s business (…) men are too proud to collect money and find it embarrassing and inappropriate.’ Membership in any krugs or gaps is gender based. Men and women have separate krugs and gaps. Krugs are differently organized by women than men. Men use the krug to describe a circle of friends with whom they have parties (tashkila girishmak), whereas in addition to socializing within krugs, women’s krugs are based on rotating savings. Most men find collecting money to be ‘women’s business (…) men are too proud to collect money and find it embarrassing and inappropriate.’

2 Sardor, a Khorezmian man of 45, 28.04.2006.
after the krug is formed, although exceptions can be made. A krug can be initiated by one or several people who share the same values or have close relations in one or another realm of social life.

In some krugs, amounts to be gathered among members can reach $100-200 US dollars per month per member, which returns to the contributor every 6-7 months depending on the number of participants. For example, a member of a krug with seven members, each contributing $100/month, would receive $700 USD every seven months. The principle of collecting money is seen as both negative and positive by members and non-members of such krugs. The accounts of the members indicate that making a monthly payment into the rotating savings association can become challenging and can often lead to debts with or without interest. Such debts also produce various dependencies and conflicts depending on their context. There is a possibility to leave the krug after the end of one round of payments, which is difficult to define; if it is a seven-member krug, one could theoretically leave in the eighth month. However, leaving krugs is not very easy in cases where the krug has social or kinship significance. Kinship and social obligations can also be challenged by cases of debt relations where conflicts arise from failing to pay one’s debts.

Russia: Debt Books in Halal Stores in Mosques in Moscow

Debt-based trade became popular with the proliferation of small neighbourhood shops selling food and small items, as well as clothing shops. The debt-based trade and debt-based economic exchange in these places also required special bookkeeping models for the debt-based payments. Debt notebooks (dolgovaya tetrad, from the Russian for ‘notebooks for debts’) were widely introduced throughout Russia, Central Asia, as well as other post-Soviet countries (for example, Georgia), and remain a popular theme in media.³ Dolgovaya tetrad became one of the most widespread trading and survival models under post-Soviet economic conditions. Some entrepreneurs have even found a niche by offering insurance systems to secure debt repayments or by providing safe debt recording systems, such as online replacements for physical dolgovaya tetrad. Online systems or platforms for entering debts allow debt records to be kept safe from physical threats, such as notebooks getting lost or burnt. Online systems have become a more popular way of tracking [and paying off] one’s debts.⁴ We describe the same phenomenon of debt notebooks maintained in small shops and at the bazaar in Janatas in Southern Kazakhstan later in this article.

³ Produkty v Dolg ili istoria derevenskogo magazina (from Russian “Food for debt or the story of a rural shop”) Article published on August 5, 2019 and available online in Russian: https://zen.yandex.ru/media/delajiteiskie/produkty-v-dolg-ili-istoria-derevenskogo-magazina-5d477e031e8e3f00ad9c4f9 [last accessed 08.07.2020]

⁴ One can use the system of debt in the following debt entry database platform under: https://dolgovaya.ru/ [accessed 08.07.2020]
Today the use of *dolgovaya tetrad* or notebooks for debts is a norm for any small shops, and the practice is becoming increasingly attractive for bigger retailers such as supermarkets in Russia. The halal shops within mosques are not excluded from this kind of debt-based or delayed payment system. The first author visited and talked to shop assistants and owners of the halal shops of two mosques in Moscow, as well as the customers of these shops. Halal shops offer a variety of items but mainly specialize in food items and fresh meat.

The trade for food within the small halal shop of a small mosque the first author studied in Moscow was conducted largely through debts. The shop was located within the territory of the mosque and was largely frequented by Muslims attending the mosque for the Friday prayers, as well as on other days. A personalized approach to trade, services, and communication within the territory of the mosque is ensured through the common knowledge and practice of attending the same mosque by the same people. Trust thus determines the basis of the relationships among customers and administration of the shop as well as suppliers. The appearance of a new face within the territory of the mosque, whether in a mosque building, café, or shop, attracts immediate attention from those who work in these places. This kind of attention and the importance of knowing each other through systematic attendance at the mosque serves as a basis of trust, and also opens access to using the debt-based trade system within the mosque’s shop. ‘Free-riding’ is rare here since religious definitions of debt, charity, and theft serve as the basis of trust and insurance.

Debt is a contested term within local religious discourses, seen as both something positive on the side of the giver and as negative from the side of a taker. It is not generally widely discussed except in the context of the repayment of one’s debts. Dying with outstanding debts is seen as negative, both for those who have to repay the debt for the deceased and also for the deceased person’s chances of entry to paradise.\(^5\)

Charity is an important part of the approach to debt-based trade within halal shops. Charitable actions are frequently taken during Ramadan, when the good deeds are counted as double; debts are often paid by rich Muslims and promoted as a form of exemplary charity during the holy month. Therefore, the possibility for one’s debts to be cancelled during Ramadan is an attractive feature for customers of halal shops. Non-Muslim strangers are often excluded from the debt-based system of payments, as the system works on the basis of trust cultivated by mosque attendance.

\(^5\) Informal conversations with both practicing and not practicing Muslims from Central Asia during the field research of the first author 2016-2018 in Moscow.
Kazakhstan: Debt-based Trade in Janatas

With its 21,444 inhabitants (2016), Janatas is one of 27 single-enterprise towns or monogorod located in a remote area of Southern Kazakhstan. It is a typical mining city created by Socialist planners which followed the typical destiny of most unsuccessful mining cities in the post-Soviet period: from a glorious birth in the 1950s-60s supported by Moscow-led provisioning (known as moskovskoe obespechenie), it became an economically marginalized area in the 1990s. Residents of Soviet-era Janatas used to benefit from a plethora of privileges organized around the town’s single industry, phosphorite. Such privileges included a higher-than-average salary, land for building one’s own house or apartment, newly built residential houses with running water and central heating, and an advanced city infrastructure. The collapse of the USSR brought severe changes to the lives of the town and its residents, turning Janatas into an isolated community of citizens who remain. The residents continue to deal with numerous pressing issues: the complete or partial shutdown of city enterprises, high unemployment resulting in impoverishment and outmigration, de-urbanization, and high levels of insecurity, to name a few. In the context of this multi-layered crisis, the state can also no longer provide sufficient salaries to its employees.

In such a context, ‘the absence of new legal frameworks’ (Ledeneva 2001) produced a space of uncertainty but also new opportunities for entrepreneurship and flexibility. In particular, individuals placed new importance on social relations, family relationships, and personal networks (Hart 2018), rather than continuing to rely on the formerly ubiquitous state. Along with a chaotic street trad, debt and barter practices became widespread survival mechanisms under the crisis-conditions of the 1990s, replacing the old system of state-regulated markets and welfare. In this section, we present concrete stories of some female entrepreneurs involved in the debt-based economy in Janatas. Some of them worked in wholesale trade while others managed small shops where customers can buy basic foodstuffs and other household supplies without having to pay immediately, namely, through debt. All the entrepreneurs’ debt deals are registered manually in special account books better known as debt-notebooks (qaryzga arnalgan dəpterler/kitaptar in Kazakh and dolgovaya tetrad’ in Russian).

I start with Raushan, a Kazakh female in her sixties, who started her business at a local bazaar in the mid-1990s by selling her goods (mainly clothes and footwear from neighbouring Kyrgyzstan) in a small container made by her husband. The contemporary middle-sized bazaar in Janatas is full of such containers of various

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6 The study was a part of a large-scale international project called “Mining Cities of Central Asia and South Caucasus” (2018-2020), initiated and coordinated by Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography based in Leipzig, Germany.

7 Monogorod is a term articulated in both the official and public discourses in Kazakhstan and Russia in relation to the post-Soviet mono-industrial urban areas characterized by a high rate of unemployment, de-urbanization processes, environmental problems, health issues, and so on. See more on this topic in Printsmann 2010, Round and Williams 2010, Saxinger et al. 2016, Nasrifdinov 2015, Trevisani 2018.
forms and sizes; some of them are handmade while others were shipped from Almaty’s bazar (the largest bazaar in Kazakhstan) to local traders. Before selling clothes and Russian gold on debt, Raushan had served for almost forty years as a nurse in the central city hospital of Soviet Janatas. During the interview with Raushan in her container, our conversation was routinely interrupted by local female customers who stopped by to shop and to pay back their debts. For example, a young Kazakh woman who wanted to buy a bathrobe first paid 10,000 KZT in cash to cover the next part of her debt. Raushan quickly made a new entry against her name in one of the debt-notebooks. The woman then tried on a couple of the robes of different colours before deciding to purchase the cheapest one, along with some wool tights, for the total sum of 7,500 KZT, which Raushan immediately wrote down into the same notebook. Another middle-aged female client searched for a gift for the mother of her future daughter-in-law; she was specifically interested in buying a golden ring. In her conversation with Raushan while choosing the gift, the woman mentioned her shift job and her strong acquaintance with Raushan’s sister, who still works in the hospital, in order to access a loan for the chosen ring, priced at 32,000 KZT. The discussion of the details of the business arrangement took around five minutes. Both agreed that the client would give Raushan 12,000 KZT in cash along with her ID card as guarantee, and that the rest of the sum would be paid in the following months. The deal was made.

During our field work in Janatas, we observed a number of arrangements like these both in shops and at the bazaar. They perfectly demonstrate the complexity and ordinariness of the debt-based trade in Janatas which contains the following essential elements: a non-written agreement, individual debt records in debt-notebooks, personal networking or trust networks, income security through, for instance, having a stable job with acceptable cash income, as well as moral capital (in the sense of Wilkins 2015) where all of these elements form the basis of trust. In the current section, I will elaborate in a more detailed manner each of these elements constituting debt relations in Janatas and beyond.

In the late Soviet period, another female trader named Asem, a Kyrgyz woman in her forties, moved from Kyrgyzstan to Janatas to work in a kindergarten, according to the Soviet system of rotation (po raspredeleniyu). At the time of our field research, she sold various items at the bazaar, mostly specializing in textile goods delivered, like Raushan’s, from Bishkek. Asem always gives her goods to clients on credit and has multiple debts of her own at the bazaar and local shops. Another protagonist named Amina, a Kazakh female in her fifties, who owns a middle-sized grocery shop in the downtown area, considers herself as a contemporary businesswoman in Janatas. On a regular basis, she orders food supplies on debt from other larger retailers of her established local trading web based around the bazaar. In addition, she deals with retailers from two neighbouring cities, Taraz and Shymkent, who have adapted to the local system of credit and debt by arranging deals with local businesspeople for short-term debt. Amina also gives
foods on debt to those clients whom ‘she might truly trust and rely on’. Even though she mainly expresses negative attitudes to the local community-based system of debt and credit, Amina actively practices it in her private life by acquiring clothes for herself and children on long-term credit provided by her closest friend.

Above, we have shown how the local debt and credit system in Janatas operates not only between traders and customers but also within the local networks of wholesalers and retailers and between retailers and customers. Debt is largely incorporated into the personal and social lives of locals and into ordinary households’ budgets. Indeed, it would be hard to describe the business and everyday life of Raushan, her colleagues, and other residents without articulating their everyday interactions with debt relationships. For most of them, debt transactions and deals with clients remain an essential part of their working routines, their trade partnerships, and their friendships. For local entrepreneurs, indeed, it is hardly possible to quantify their regular profit due to these everyday debt relationships and the dominant debt trade. The locals frequently assume that this type of ‘endemic’ community-based debt and credit system only survives and effectively operates in places like the phosphate-mining city of Janatas. As Raushan argues, in many cases the local people simply never calculate if they have enough money to take new goods on credit and how they will pay back their debts. In such a system, there is more closeness and exclusivity and no concern for anonymity (Guerin and Venkatasubramanian 2020). The system is organized around the fact that people literally know each other or have a tie to one another, meet regularly, and therefore, are aware of others’ economic conditions and reputation in terms of paying back debts. Community members contribute to collectively establishing and regulating the unwritten rules for social behaviour that are required for the system of debt-based deals to be implemented and followed.

**Debt as a Coping Strategy, a Business Model, and a Form of Trust**

The debt in the scenarios we considered operates as a mutual obligation resulting from economic exchange with absent guarantees that the terms will be fulfilled and are comprised of two essential elements: a high degree of mutual trust (determined by place and personal contacts) and small-scale, informal, individual networks of community members. Debt-based trade in Janatas can sometimes also include the elements of barter arrangements. Following Humphrey (2000a, 2000b), barter is defined, in this context, as a non-monetary exchange of goods and services within an informal established network of local retailers and entrepreneurs. Debt is a trace that creates social bonds within a community and in local networks. More importantly, it brings individuals a sense of belonging to the particular community, whether as members of a particular circle, as part of the remaining residents in Janatas, or as attendees of a religious communities in bigger cities such as Moscow.

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8 Interview with Amina conducted by the author in Janatas, April 2019.
In the context of a lack of adequate salaries or formal wage labour, a lack of property, or precarious employment, using debt to secure food for immediate needs is a way to avoid starving and to cope with poverty. Traders in Janatas call this a ‘trade partnership,’ in which the majority of them practice debt-based trade as a business model based on mutual debt where debt chains are created and maintained, thus affirming personal ties based on mutual trust. Debt as an informal economic solution contributes to shaping certain socio-economic relations between members within a personal circle of remaining city residents. Members of such small-scale communities not only know and trust each other but, more importantly, perceive debt practices and relationships as a measure for common practical purposes, often using it to solve their common everyday problems of economic survival.

The debt system represents a good business deal for traders who can order their goods without having to provide immediate payment and an also offers an alternative business model that can have a number of different impacts. Indeed, economic anthropologists have already considered how rotating savings and credit associations and other forms of debt economy (Ardener 2014; Etang et al. 2011; Guérin and Venkatasubramanian 2020) offer valuable opportunities to invest cash into small-scale businesses in the course of repaying debts. With regard to gender, debt and debt relationships open up space for more flexible power relations, freedoms, and opportunities to innovate in bazaar economies (Hours and Ahmed 2015). This can be specifically observed in the case study of Janatas and its local female entrepreneurs. In these entrepreneurs’ narratives, one can note a strong sense of pride in themselves and their achievements. Most of them started spontaneously trading in the 1990s with a feeling of shame for being a kommersantkami (merchants). Today, however, they position themselves as contemporary, successful businesswomen. Their new status and reputation give these women extra capital and trust which allow them to not only more easily buy larger amounts of products without immediate payment in their local bazaar but also to gain authority in shaping socio-economic relations with their own customers.

**Accounting Debts (dolgovaya tetrad)**

Debt-notebooks are an essential tool for regulating debt-based relationships and trade. In the context of our case studies, the use of debt notebooks operates as an informal, powerful mechanism that allows local entrepreneurs to regulate their debt and credit relations, including controlling or judging certain people as untrustworthy, building mutual trust networks, and solidifying interpersonal loyalties. In Janatas, these tools serve as means to connect or divide members of a small-scale community and to negotiate social boundaries and identities. These processes contribute to what Villarreal (2014) calls a ‘regime of values,’ designating a particular system of categorization and ranking with certain unwritten rules and procedures used to establish authority and configure power relations.
Records are kept of all open and closed transactions, as well as of transactions which have not been closed by a certain date, such as the end of the year. These are kept open until they are paid. The debt books we discussed in our case studies from Russia and Kazakhstan are paper-based notebooks where all debts are recorded manually. The contents of these notebooks are organised differently by each trader. Some traders, like Raushan, prefer to group them for different categories of customers: friends, colleagues, neighbours, or simply ‘reliable’ and ‘unreliable’ clients – the way Amina runs her account books. Other local entrepreneurs order their notes by year, organization, and duration, based on short-term or long-term agreements. In turn, some experienced customers also keep their own notebooks for controlling their debts, which they might owe to a number of different businesses simultaneously. Raushan also showed us her debt-notebooks dated to 2011-2014 during the interview. In her recordings, she preferred to always indicate a mobile number for her customers and forms of guarantee (ID, a bank card, other personal documents). Amina from Janatas shared that residents usually take groceries on debt in shops nearest to their homes, but that they acquire clothes or any other things on debt at the bazaar, where they also have already established good contacts. Based on customer reputation and status, conceived as parts of the moral capital of her clients, Amina developed her own system of categorization by classifying her debt-notebooks into three groups: reliable, unreliable, and blacklisted. In contrast, the debt-notebooks of another trader are mainly divided into two groups: reliable neighbours and the staff members of a local enterprise. She has specific rules for recording histories of her non-monetary transactions; for example, she uses a separate sheet in the notebook for each person.

**Dependencies Based on Debt**

As shown in our case-studies, debts often produced or contributed to various kinds of dependencies and power relations, such as patron-client relations. In those societies where kinship constitutes a particularly significant system of belonging, such as in Central Asia, for instance, patron-client relations were observed not only within kinship groups, but also at other levels of societal relations such as state offices, political circles, and other social relations (Turaeva 2016). According to the social and political context, the debt-maker and the debt-giver often maintain social relations resembling patron-client relationships, based on the dependency stemming from debts. We deliberately use the paired terms of ‘debt-giving’ and ‘debt-making’ to highlight the multifactorial nature of giving and the long process of making debts. Alternative terms such as creditor or debtor are not sufficient for understanding the complexity of these processes of debt-making. Debt-making is not a result of borrowing some item or goods once and immediately becoming a debtor; rather, it involves trust, social relations embedded within diverse networks, and status systems, as well as other cultural and traditional practices which contribute to the whole system of debt-making. Debt-giving also includes some aspects and components of what is described in the anthropological literature as gifts and giving, involving not only objects loaded with symbolic importance but also beliefs, status systems and other social aspects
of gift making. Yet debt-giving and enabling debt-making differ from notions of the gift and gift giving. Debt-giving and debt-making result in mutual dependencies and negotiation of status system and belonging, and thus involve more than giving.

The social relations based on power and dependence are mainly developed as relations between patrons and clients. Discussing patron-client relationships, Eisenstadt and Roninger (1980, 48, 1984) highlight such variables as hierarchy, asymmetry, inequality autonomy, spirituality, power, kinship, and friendship. They state that

\[\text{[t]}\text{he stress on interpersonal relations and exchange became connected in the study of patronage with the upholding of several dimensions of social structure and action, seen as having been neglected both classical functional anthropology and in the structural-functional approaches of sociology, as well as in the then current studies of modernization. The most important dimensions were those of autonomy of power, the flow of resources and the structure of social relations in society, and on such aspects of interpersonal relations as hierarchy, asymmetry and inequality, and the autonomy of some aspects of symbolic dimension of human activity. The latter were seen as closely related in patron-client relations, to such concepts as honor, or spiritual dimensions of such interpersonal relations as friendship and ritual kinship.}\]

Clients have to decide if they want to enter into relations within their trusted networks or to look for other opportunities elsewhere. Such a situation presents a dilemma for an actor who must choose between different offers and attempt to acquire their benefits without falling into the ethnic trap of dependency relations. In times of uncertainty and in the absence of social security values, interests change accordingly. In other words, what is lacking becomes valuable. In such cases, social security is seen as more valuable than opting to obtain more income, which would involve a certain degree of risk. Diminished income but a secure and stable future is an attractive offer in return for the solidarity and loyalty offered by ethnic and kinship networks and groups. Having chosen to use the resources offered by these networks, an actor is constrained to play an ethnic/kinship/religious card.

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9 Ilkhamov (2007) deals with patronage and other informal networks in Uzbekistan mainly focusing on governance structures, also Menon (1995) discusses the same issues focusing on the security provisions and its importance in post-Soviet Central Asia, as well as Koroteyeva and Makarova deal with the similar issues during Soviet and post-Soviet times. See Northrop (2000) on the importance of loyalty during the Soviet period.
Conclusion

The case studies discussed in this article highlight the ways in which debt is an integral part of daily survival and exchange. The empirical realities of daily individual experiences and practices of debt making, debt maintenance (through krugs), solidarity social relations and economic exchange based on debt, give insight into the socio-economic contexts of post-Soviet countries such as Uzbekistan, Russia, and Kazakhstan. This article argues that debt-based mechanisms in the studied communities have developed as survival and coping strategies to deal with economic difficulties and uncertainties of the post-Soviet transition period that emerged in the 1990s and throughout the 2000s. The ethnographic examples of debt relations and debt-based trade show that power, trust, and dependency structure and serve as bases for those complex relations and practices. Our findings confirm examples from other countries with similar economic and social backgrounds (Villarreal 2014; Guérin 2014; Guérin and Venkatasubramanian, 2020). However, our analysis views debt relations and debts through an anthropological lens in order to go beyond approaches predicated on simple exchange, or on binary relations and transaction models. We bring attention to the aspects of social relations implicated by the processes of debt-making and debt-giving themselves, more than the mere fact of the giving. Although the classical anthropological approaches to economic exchange shed important light on the materiality and sociality of relations of exchange and status systems, they cannot fully account for the relations based on debt which we describe in the context of post-Soviet Central Asia.

In this article we have tried to go beyond the dyads of creditor and debtor relations by focusing on trust, networks, and other social aspects of living in close proximity and solidarity. In our analysis, we have shown that debts are an integral part of daily survival models and networks, social relations where power, social status and trust are negotiated on a daily basis. Debts are also an inseparable part of the social webs of local communities, which rely on trust and mutual solidarity. Such spaces are also gendered, as we demonstrate in the examples of rotating saving networks comprised of women. Our case studies in Kazakhstan in particular show that debts and relations based on debt offer opportunities for entrepreneurs to expand their trade without immediately paying for their goods and to buy their goods on debt (credit without interest). These opportunities for local entrepreneurs are more beneficial than bank micro-credit programs where interest rates grow and time plays against borrowers. The traders’ clients also benefit from the possibility of delaying payments for their groceries, which can be crucial to securing even basic food items at moments when money is lacking.

Although the anthropology of debt is a young field, in this article we have discussed an existing body of literature to which we contribute materials from post-Soviet economies. Studies of the latter are largely missing within this literature (Gregory 1982, Peebles 2010, Graeber 2011, Humphrey 2018, Janet 2019). Our contribution offers further confirmation of the productive impact of debt and greater consideration of the relationship between debt and gender (Guérin and Venkatasubramanian 2020), while highlighting the importance of
kinship and variations in locations such as large cities, villages, or border areas (see Hours and Ahmed 2015).

In discussing the primarily anthropological literature on debt throughout this article, we could not decide on a definition of debt relations which could best apply to the examples we present. This dilemma indicates not only that debt and debt relations are not easy to define but also that debt is a complex social phenomenon which is negotiated locally by individual actors. Debt takes on both negative and positive valences and affects different aspects of the social lives of individuals struggling in the context of economic scarcity and inequality. Further research on other forms of both traditional and post-Soviet debt practices (for example, chyornaya kassa as a still-popular form of ROSCA or the new use of toy and gap) and their unique features could contribute to more in-depth understandings of debt-based economies and debt relations within diverse fields of social relations and economic exchange, and particularly, to a greater understanding of post-Soviet countries and economies.

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