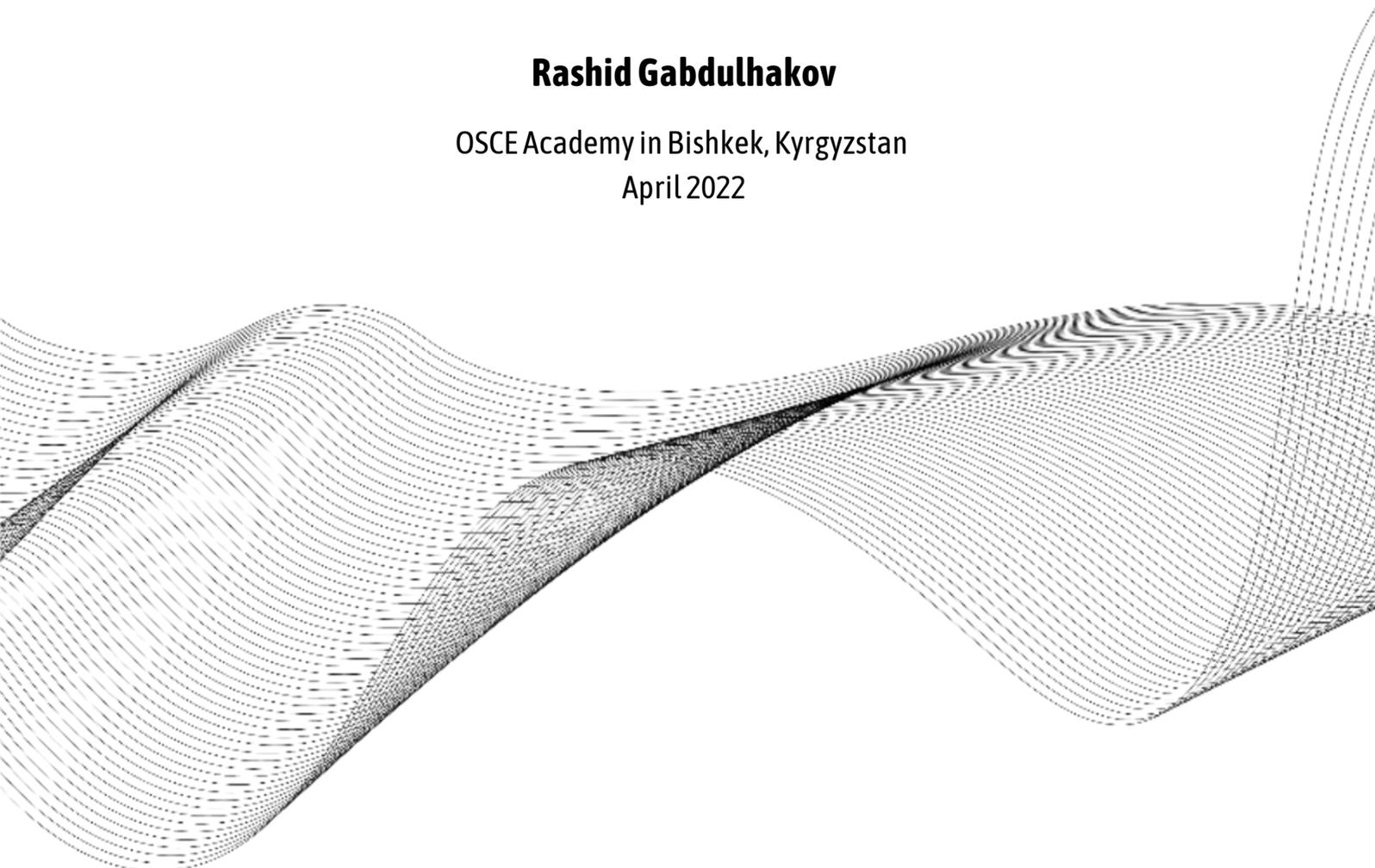


# 'I Saw It on the Internet!' COVID-19 Narratives Across the Online Social Milieux of Uzbek Labour Migrants to Russia

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# 'I Saw It on the Internet!'<sup>1</sup> COVID-19 Narratives Across the Online Social Milieux of Uzbek Labour Migrants to Russia

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## Abstract

Although important incidents of misleading information related to the global COVID-19 pandemic have been examined by both journalists and academics, the various sources of such information and the magnitude of its impact have yet to be fully comprehended. Additionally, there are cases and contexts that are underrepresented in current studies. To address this gap, this article examines the online social milieux of labour migrants from Uzbekistan to Russia as potential source of misleading information related to COVID-19. Specifically, this article looks at discussions and posts shared on thematic groups across social media platforms such as Odnoklassniki, VKontakte, Facebook, and Telegram through a netnographic lens, identifying five COVID-19-related narrative clusters: 'the remedy,' 'practical information,' 'the news,' 'asking for help,' and 'conspiracies and religion.' As all these narrative clusters have been found to contain misleading information, the article initiates a discussion on the role that thematic social media groups can play in (dis)informing labour migrants.

**Keywords:** labour migrants, Uzbekistan, Russia, social media, COVID-19, information precarity, netnography

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<sup>1</sup> Author's note: Between February and May 2020, I visited my parents in Namangan, Uzbekistan. Their *mahalla* (neighbourhood), located in the northern part of the city, is home to people regularly seeking employment abroad, predominantly in Russia. It is a common practice in the mahalla for the neighbours to come out to the street in the evening and share some news of the day. As COVID-19 began to spread across the planet, the virus became a central theme in such conversations. Digitally savvy dwellers of the *mahalla* would share what they had read online, usually supporting their statements with the phrase 'I saw it on the Internet!' to emphasise the perceived reliability of the 'facts.'

## Introduction

Since the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, policymakers and fact-checking activists have been alarmed by the magnitude of misleading information surrounding the virus globally.<sup>2</sup> Dangerous narratives have been present across socio-political contexts, ranging from conspiracy theories,<sup>3</sup> to expressions of anti-Asian sentiment<sup>4</sup> and hostility toward individuals and nations in the blame game over who sparked the pandemic, to ‘*covidiotism*,’<sup>5</sup> denial, and deaths caused by the wrong (or no) medication<sup>6</sup> – the spectrum is wide.

Central Asian states have also experienced a range of issues related to misleading information shared online amid the pandemic. Among the many potentially impacted actors are labour migrants who seek employment opportunities abroad, predominantly in the Russian Federation. This article specifically focuses on the case of Uzbekistan. It is both the country with the largest population in post-Soviet Central Asia<sup>7</sup> and the largest supplier of labour migrants to Russia.<sup>8</sup>

As the pandemic hit Russia, labour migrants who were already in a vulnerable legal position due to informal employment relations with their employers<sup>9</sup> were among the first to lose their jobs. By July 2020, more than 50% of labour migrants to Russia claimed to have lost 'all sources of

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Jones, 'More than 100 fact-checkers from 45 countries in 15 languages have joined forces to cover the coronavirus. Meet the journalist pulling them together,' *Poynter*, 18 March, 2020: <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2020/more-than-100-fact-checkers-from-45-countries-in-15-languages-have-joined-forces-to-cover-the-coronavirus-meet-the-journalist-pulling-them-together/> (accessed 13 March, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Karen M. Douglas, 'Covid-19 Conspiracy Theories,' *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 24, no. 2 (2021): 270–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220982068>.

<sup>4</sup> 'Covid-19 Fueling Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia Worldwide,' Human Rights Watch, 28 October, 2020: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide> (accessed 10 August, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> 'In recent media reports, a ‘covidiot’ is used as a derogatory expression to describe those people who, intentionally or otherwise, fail to adhere to social distancing requirements and flout (or, paradoxically, over-enforce) interactional rituals.' See: Daniel Trottier, Qian Huang, and Rashid Gabdulhakov, 'Covidiotism as Global Acceleration of Local Surveillance Practices,' *Surveillance & Society* 19, no. 1 (May 2021): pp. 109-113, <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v19i1.14546>; Dániel Z Kádár and Juliane House, 'Interactional Rituals: Covidiotism,' *FifteenEightyFour* and Cambridge University Press, 17 June, 2020:

<http://www.cambridgeblog.org/2020/06/interactional-rituals-covidiotism/> (accessed 13 May, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Cases include poisoning as a result of drinking pure alcohol after reading online that it helps counter the virus. See for instance: 'Iran: Over 700 Dead After Drinking Alcohol to Cure Coronavirus,' *Al Jazeera*, 27 April, 2020: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/4/27/iran-over-700-dead-after-drinking-alcohol-to-cure-coronavirus> (accessed 28 March, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Over 34 million people according to the World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=UZ>. (accessed 28 January, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> While the real data are hard to estimate, Russia's Ministry of Internal Affairs suggests 2 million people: Zulfia Raissova, 'Trends in Modern Labor Migration in Central Asia,' *CABAR.asia*, 16 February, 2020: [https://cabar.asia/en/trends-in-modern-labor-migration-in-central-asia#\\_ftn1](https://cabar.asia/en/trends-in-modern-labor-migration-in-central-asia#_ftn1) (accessed 10 August, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Rustamjon Urinboyev, 'Migration and transnational informality in post-Soviet societies: Ethnographic study of po rukam ('handshake') experiences of Uzbek migrant workers in Moscow,' in Heusala, Anna-Liisa, and Kaarina Aitamurto, eds. *Migrant Workers in Russia: Global Challenges of the Shadow Economy in Societal Transformation*, Routledge Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe Series, 72 (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017).

income.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, labour migrants from Uzbekistan sought ways of returning home. According to the Deputy Minister of Employment and Labour Relations of Uzbekistan, Yerkin Mukhitdinov, by the end of May 2020, as many as 500 thousand labour migrants had returned home from Russia.<sup>11</sup> The journey was marked by numerous struggles, most notably being stuck at borders on their way home. For example, in October 2020, after having watched misleading YouTube videos that claimed that the land borders were open, some 200 Uzbek citizens were stuck at the Russian-Kazakh border.<sup>12</sup>

As the first wave of the virus calmed, some labour migrants decided to return to Russia for work, but were once again faced with issues at border crossings. For instance, in December 2020, as many as 500 Uzbek labour migrants were denied entry into Russia at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport. However, because Russia at the time was permitting entry for those seeking medical treatment, some labour migrants from Uzbekistan attempted to enter the country using fake medical certificates.<sup>13</sup> Such 'alternative' methods of re-entering Russia were evidently offered for purchase via social media.<sup>14</sup>

Clearly, misleading information can have a significant impact on labour migrants. With this in mind, the main objective of this article is to evaluate the role of the online social milieu of labour migrants from Uzbekistan to Russia as a potential source of misleading information related to COVID-19. Specifically, this article looks at discussions and posts shared on thematic groups across social media platforms such as Odnoklassniki, VKontakte, Facebook, and Telegram through a netnographic lens, identifying five COVID-19-related narrative clusters: 'the remedy,' 'practical information,' 'the news,' 'asking for help,' and 'conspiracies and religion.' All these narrative clusters have been found to contain misleading information.

From the societal viewpoint, which the author views as inseparable from potential scientific contributions, this article aims to contribute to a better understanding of the online dimension of migrant communities and its role in (dis)informing their members. The findings can be relevant to actors responsible for constructing and maintaining reliable information channels for labour migrants. While some of these actors might represent state authorities, it is important to stress that in some political contexts even the official COVID-19-related information cannot be perceived as

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<sup>10</sup> Максим Рубченко, 'Кризис ударил по мигрантам сильнее, чем по россиянам [Crisis Hit Migrants Harder than Russians],' *Vedomosti*, 7 July, 2020: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/economics/articles/2020/07/08/834152-krizis-udaril> (accessed 22 August, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> 'В Узбекистан из-за пандемии вернулись почти 500 тыс. граждан [Nearly 500 Thousand Citizens Returned to Uzbekistan Because of the Pandemic],' *Izvestiya*, May 29, 2020: <https://iz.ru/1017393/2020-05-29/v-uzbekistan-iz-za-pandemii-vernulis-pochti-500-tys-grazhdan> (accessed 20 June, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Муса Казаков, 'Несколько сот мигрантов из Узбекистана застряли на российско-казахстанской границе [Several Hundred Migrants from Uzbekistan are Stuck at the Russian-Kazakh Border],' *Currenttime TV*, 22 October, 2020: <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/migrants-in-astrakhan/30905277.html> (accessed 28 June, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> 'В Шереметьево остановили более 500 граждан Узбекистана, пытавшихся незаконно попасть в Россию по поддельным документам [More than 500 Uzbek Citizens Who Tried to Illegally Enter Russia Using Forged Documents Stopped at Sheremetyevo],' *Nuz.uz*, 31 December, 2020: <https://nuz.uz/o-migracii/1183593-v-sheremetevostanovili-bolee-500-grazhdan-uzbekistana-pytavshihnya-nezakonno-popast-v-rossiyu-po-poddelnym-dokumentam.html> (accessed 18 June, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> 'Агентство миграции объяснило, почему узбекистанцы не могут попасть в Россию [Migration Agency Explained Why Uzbek Citizens Cannot Enter Russia],' *Repost.uz*, 2 January, 2021: <https://repost.uz/chut-chut-podojdite> (accessed 18 June, 2021).

precarity-proof.<sup>15</sup> In this case, civil society in the form of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and informal leaders can play a vital role in information dissemination.

The article first elaborates on its methodology. It then offers an overview of Melissa Wall, Madeline Otis Campbell, and Dana Janbek's theoretical conceptualisation of 'information precarity'<sup>16</sup> and applies it to the case of Uzbek labour migrants to Russia. The presentation of the results is followed by a discussion, then concluding remarks with suggestions for future research.

## Research Methodology

This article relies on netnography,<sup>17</sup> a methodological approach comprised of various tools and practices that help in understanding social media affordances for online communities, in this case, labour migrants from Uzbekistan to Russia. First developed by Robert Kozinets in the 1990s, netnography has undergone a conceptual evolution in reaction to the ever-changing realities of online environments and digital tools. In the most recent methodological guide, Kozinets describes netnography as 'a set of general instructions relating to a specific way to conduct qualitative social media research using a combination of 25 different research practices grouped into three distinct categories of data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation 'movements'.'<sup>18</sup>

Particular aspects of the netnographic approach that were applied in this article include covert observations made across thematic groups designed for Uzbek labour migrants to Russia, combined with content analysis of information shared in these groups. To adhere to ethical standards, the author opted to work exclusively with public groups in which anyone can become a member without approval from a group administrator ('admin'). The thematic groups which were examined were in four different social media platforms – Odnoklassniki, VKontakte, Facebook, and Instagram<sup>19</sup> – as well as in Telegram, the most prevalent messaging app in Uzbekistan.<sup>20</sup> Note that although YouTube was not explicitly included in the data collection phase, videos shared on this platform were nevertheless analysed. This occurred due to cross-posting of YouTube videos into the platforms that were the main focus of the research.

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<sup>15</sup> This is especially concerning amid the official claims coming from Russia's Defence Ministry accusing Ukraine of the biolab development of 'plague, anthrax, tularemia, cholera and other deadly diseases.' See: Александр Бойко, 'Украина занималась разработкой биологического оружия [Ukraine Was Engaged in the Development of Biological Weapons],' Кр.ру, 6 March, 2022: <https://www.kp.ru/daily/27373/4555096/> (accessed 10 March, 2022).

<sup>16</sup> Melissa Wall, Madeline Otis Campbell, and Dana Janbek, 'Syrian Refugees and Information Precarity,' *New Media & Society* 19, no. 2 (September 2016): pp. 240-254, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815591967>.

<sup>17</sup> Robert V. Kozinets, *Netnography: The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research* (London etc.: Sage, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Kozinets, 'Netnography': 7.

<sup>19</sup> The majority of migration-related groups on Instagram display Kyrgyz flags in their description – a potentially interesting phenomenon for further exploration in terms of platform preferences among different migrant communities. However, given the article's focus on labour migrants from Uzbekistan, content shared on these groups was not analysed at this time.

<sup>20</sup> Khikmatilla Ubaydullaev, 'Opening Our Eyes, We Open Telegram: The Success Story of the Messenger in Uzbekistan,' *Medium*, 22 April, 2020: <https://medium.com/@Ubaydullaev.kh/opening-our-eyes-we-open-telegram-the-success-story-of-the-messenger-in-uzbekistan-f7d21bf0ed46> (accessed 10 March, 2022).

Thematic groups were found by using the following keywords in Russian and Uzbek, using both Cyrillic and Latin characters: ‘Uzbeki’/‘Узбеки’/‘Uzbeklar’/‘Узбеклар’ (‘Uzbeks’ in various languages), ‘migrant’/‘мигрант’ (‘migrant’), ‘musofir’/‘мусофир’ (‘wanderer’<sup>21</sup>). Search results were narrowed based on thematic relevance, groups size, and discussion liveliness. Groups that were not explicitly designed for labour migrants from Uzbekistan to Russia, as well as groups with outdated<sup>22</sup> and infrequent posts, or lack of COVID-19-related discussions altogether, were not considered.

The majority of thematic groups used by Uzbek labour migrants are present on Russia’s Odnoklassniki platform. A keyword search resulted in 892 thematic groups, with membership ranging from one person to tens of thousands.<sup>23</sup> Group descriptions likewise vary widely in focus, be it on job advertisements, tax help, Uzbek migrant communities in specific cities (i.e. Uzbek migrants in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Novosibirsk, etc.), etc. Data were collected from the five most popular and active open groups on Odnoklassniki that held COVID-19-related discussions. Two groups on VKontakte, one on Facebook, and one on Telegram<sup>24</sup> fitting the same criteria were also selected for study.

Groups on Odnoklassniki, VKontakte and Telegram made it explicit, either directly or indirectly, that they were intended for people from Uzbekistan. One frequent signifier in this respect was the use of the Uzbek language in the groups’ titles and descriptions. Meanwhile, the selected Facebook group appeared to have been aimed at a broader demographic of migrants, with Russian dominating as the language of communication. Content shared in this group was nevertheless analysed due to the Uzbek language being used in some posts related to COVID-19.

Data were sought by entering a set of keywords in the search window of each group’s newsfeed. Keywords included: ‘covid’/‘ковид’,<sup>25</sup> ‘coronavirus’/‘koronavirus’/‘коронавирус’,<sup>26</sup> ‘пандемия’ (pandemic), ‘карантин’ (‘quarantine/lockdown’), ‘PCR’/‘ПЦР’ (polymerase chain reaction), and ‘вакцина’ (vaccine). The search results were collected in the form of screenshots and converted into PDF files. With the help of the Atlas.ti qualitative content analysis software, data were processed via open, axial and selective coding, per Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin.<sup>27</sup> The open coding process involved the initial step of giving conceptual labels to elements observed in the vast pool of data. In the process of axial coding, these initial labels were grouped into various subcategories. These subcategories were subsequently grouped into selective codes and resulted in the development of the five narrative clusters presented in the article; namely, ‘the remedy,’ ‘practical information,’ ‘the news,’ ‘asking for help,’ and ‘conspiracies and religion.’

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<sup>21</sup> Originally an Urdu word and an Islamic term for ‘wanderer’, it is used by Uzbeks living abroad to describe themselves. In some cases, the term ‘*musofir*’ was used both in the thematic groups’ titles and descriptions.

<sup>22</sup> Determined by whether the post came from before January 2020, and also whether it concerned the novel coronavirus.

<sup>23</sup> Data from October 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Curious to note that, in the months of data collection and analysis within the current study, membership of the thematic Telegram group designed for migrants in Moscow grew dramatically, increasing almost twofold between August and October 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Including variations on capitalisation and sentence case, with and without ‘19’.

<sup>26</sup> Including shortened versions such as just ‘korona’/‘corona,’ and just ‘virus.’ Keyword search entries did not include any potential misspellings such as ‘krona’, etc.

<sup>27</sup> Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (London: SAGE Publications, 1991).

While researching open-data sources, such as public online groups, it is important to keep in mind that the authors of those posts that go on to serve as artefacts for a study did not intend to become subjects of research. This raises the issue of consent. However, as collecting consent forms from post authors is not plausible, steps to protect their identity have been taken: findings are presented in broad terms, and any direct quotes are paraphrased to prevent back-tracking to the source. Because a keyword analysis can potentially reveal the thematic groups that were analysed, naming these groups, listing information on membership and providing links are intentionally avoided as an extra layer of privacy protection.<sup>28</sup>

## **'Information Precarity' and Uzbek Labour Migrants to Russia**

While solid conceptualisations of 'fake news' typology, dissemination motivations, and strategies do exist,<sup>29</sup> they are often focused on the Western (predominantly the United States) context and consequently may be inapplicable to non-Western realities, such as those of labour migrants to Russia. To address this problem, this article relies on the concept of 'information precarity' developed by Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek in their study of Syrian refugees living in a camp in Jordan.<sup>30</sup> According to them, information precarity is a multilevel phenomenon entailing the following phenomena: (1) difficulties with gaining reliable technological and social access to information coupled with (2) the prevalence of irrelevant and sometimes dangerous information in the tri-fold context of a (3) lack of image control by the demographic group in question, (4) surveillance by a state,<sup>31</sup> and (5) disrupted social support.<sup>32</sup> These phenomena align with the experiences of Uzbek labour migrants to Russia.

If anything, the situation of Uzbek labour migrants in Russia – not to mention Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek's original case study of Syrian refugees in Jordan – invites asking whether information precarity has additional characteristics, such as being vulnerable in terms of their cultural status and legal rights both at home and in their host state. While labour migrants and refugees fall under different definitional categories of people forced to leave their homes, there are certain para-definitional similarities between the two groups that justify the comparison. For instance, labour migration can be perceived to be a choice, yet this notion is challenged in situations wherein leaving home for work is the only path to survival. Other examples: in the same way as refugees can be the target of resent in certain contexts,<sup>33</sup> Uzbek labour migrants to Russia also face

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<sup>28</sup> This is especially important amid the new waves of repressive legislation governing online speech in Russia.

<sup>29</sup> See for instance: Claire Wardle, 'Fake News. It's Complicated.', *First Draft*, 16 February, 2017: <https://firstdraftnews.org/articles/fake-news-complicated/> (accessed 17 May, 2021).

<sup>30</sup> Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek, 'Syrian Refugees.'

<sup>31</sup> State surveillance whether in their home and/or host society.

<sup>32</sup> Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek, 'Syrian Refugees': 241.

<sup>33</sup> Consider, for instance, the rightist-nativist response to 2015-2016 'refugee crisis' across Europe.

xenophobic and nationalist biases,<sup>34</sup> and even their return home is sometimes viewed as a potential security threat by the home state.<sup>35</sup>

Information precarity is key to understanding the informational situation of Uzbek labour migrants to Russia because the active social media users among them can share, produce, and propagate content accessible to thousands of other online community members across thematic groups. Having joined such thematic groups for practical reasons, i.e., to gain information that they cannot obtain otherwise, an Uzbek labour migrant is subjected to a wide variety of information flows, including misleading and disinforming narratives. Hence, information precarity drives labour migrants into such groups, and then makes them susceptible to dangerous information circulating in these same groups.

Furthermore, Uzbek labour migrants participating in such groups can be subjected to algorithmic biases that increase their exposure to tailored and, therefore, thematically limited online content (a phenomenon known as 'filter bubbles'<sup>36</sup>). However, the linkage between information precarity and misleading information is not only a technological problem. Group admins and active members can also 'surpass or complement' these algorithmic biases,<sup>37</sup> creating the 'echo chamber' effect.<sup>38</sup>

In what now follows, the five definitional components of 'information precarity' laid out by Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek<sup>39</sup> will be unpacked and applied to the experiences of Uzbek labour migrants to Russia.

### ***1.1. Access to information***

Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek find that access to information is challenging for refugees at both technological and social levels. In this case, the studied refugees were in need of access to expensive electronic devices and a stable network for connectivity. Age, gender and class played a role in access to technology, as young females had fewer opportunities to use smartphones for communication purposes.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, refugees adapted using various tactics, such as switching SIM cards as a connectivity and security measure.<sup>41</sup>

As a component of information precarity among Uzbek labour migrants to Russia, access is a challenge not only for them, but for the entire population of Uzbekistan. Here too, gendered inequalities come into play. Among the 29 states in Central/Eastern Europe and Central Asia,

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<sup>34</sup> 'Xenophobia Is Still on the Rise in Russia – Poll,' *The Moscow Times*, 18 September, 2019: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/09/18/xenophobia-is-still-on-the-rise-in-russia-poll-a67326> (accessed 12 August, 2021).

<sup>35</sup> 'Uzbekistan Looks to Diversify Labour Migration,' *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, 22 January, 2021: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/uzbekistan-looks-diversify-labour-migration> (accessed 12 August, 2021).

<sup>36</sup> Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You* (London: Penguin, 2012).

<sup>37</sup> Rashid Gabdulhakov and Daniel Trottier, 'Between 'Filter Bubbles' and Community Leaders: An Exploratory Study of Facebook Groups for Russophones/Russians in the Netherlands,' *Journal of Global Diaspora* 1, no. 1 (January 2020): pp. 89-105, [https://doi.org/10.1386/gdm\\_00006\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/gdm_00006_1).

<sup>38</sup> Gilat Levy and Ronny Razin, *Immigration into Prejudiced Societies: Segregation and Echo Chambers Effects* (London: Centre for Economic Policy Research, 2018).

<sup>39</sup> Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek, 'Syrian Refugees.'

<sup>40</sup> Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek, 'Syrian Refugees': 246.

<sup>41</sup> Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek, 'Syrian Refugees': 246.

Uzbekistan is in the lowest position when it comes to women owning cell phones, with a rate of 76.5 percent.<sup>42</sup> Among neighbouring states, the proportion of women who own cell phones ranges from 94.9 percent in Turkmenistan, to 99 percent in Tajikistan and 100 percent in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, a striking 68 percent of young women and girls between the ages of 14 and 30 in Uzbekistan have never used the internet.<sup>44</sup>

Additionally, possessing a phone does not automatically translate into obtaining full access to information. As Malika Toqmadi and Natalia Zakharchenko demonstrate in their study,<sup>45</sup> privacy in Central Asia has gendered tendencies, such that when a device is owned by a man, it is a 'personal gadget,' but when it is owned by a woman, it is a 'family commodity.' One may infer from this that women's access to different types of information and meaningful engagement with it is constrained.<sup>46</sup>

## ***1.2. Misleading/dangerous information***

Refugees interviewed by Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek expressed concerns with both the frequency of coverage of the Syrian civil war and with the quality of the available information, expressing distrust in the 'rumours spread on Facebook.'<sup>47</sup> Although interviewees developed methods for verifying questionable information, they nevertheless still relied on their close interpersonal connections (family and friends) as sources of information, considering them legitimate in this regard.<sup>48</sup>

With respect to the case of Uzbek migrant labourers to Russia, of particular interest are the linguistic nuances of spreading information in the Uzbek or Russian languages. The role of group admins is central, as they have the authority to (dis)approve posts and otherwise moderate content.<sup>49</sup> Migrants are not just passive recipients of information; like any other social media user, they can actively generate and spread content online. In the early days of the pandemic, migrants engaged in 'reporting from the field,' in some cases taking on the roles of informal journalists. Social media affordances can thus empower a user to become a source of information that is widely shared and perceived as legitimate.

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<sup>42</sup> 'Узбекистан признан аутсайдером среди стран региона по охвату мобильной связью женщин [Uzbekistan Recognised as an Outsider among the Countries of the Region in Terms of Coverage of Women with Mobile Communications], *Fergana News Agency*, 25 October, 2021: <https://fergana.site/news/123535/> (accessed 18 November 2021).

<sup>43</sup> 'Узбекистан признан аутсайдером среди стран региона по охвату мобильной связью женщин [Uzbekistan Is Recognized as an Outsider among the Countries of the Region in Terms of Coverage of Women with Mobile Communications], *Fergana News Agency*, 25 October, 2021: <https://fergana.site/news/123535/> (accessed 18 November 2021).

<sup>44</sup> 'ЮНИСЕФ: в Узбекистане почти 70% девушек не использовали интернет [UNICEF: in Uzbekistan, Almost 70% of Girls Have Not Used the Internet], *Repost.uz*, 11 October, 2021: <https://repost.uz/yasha-ozbekiston> (accessed 18 November 2021).

<sup>45</sup> Malika Toqmadi and Natalia Zakharchenko, 'I Agree to the Terms and Conditions: Negotiating Privacy Online in Central Asia,' *JeDEM - EJournal of EDemocracy and Open Government* 13, no. 1 (2021): 81, <https://doi.org/10.29379/jedem.v13i1.633>.

<sup>46</sup> An important question remains as to whether these access challenges and inequalities in technology use translate into the on-the-ground realities of migrants in Russia, and whether migration has an impact on breaching this gap.

<sup>47</sup> Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek, 'Syrian Refugees': 248.

<sup>48</sup> Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek, 'Syrian Refugees': 247-248.

<sup>49</sup> Gabdulhakov and Trotter, 'Between 'Filter Bubbles' and Community Leaders.'

Of course, the role of platforms themselves in content moderation is also key. Theoretically, both algorithms and human content cleaners can detect and remove potentially dangerous and misleading information. However, in practice, these 'cleaning' measures can be used for subjective silencing of certain voices.

### 1.3. *Lack of image control*

When it comes to a demographic group's image in the media, Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek point to the literature covering the 'blatant dehumanisation' of Muslim refugees that has led to their rejection throughout much of Europe.<sup>50</sup> The authors found further evidence buttressing the claims of these other studies in their own research, as Syrian refugees in Jordan expressed to them belief that they had been 'forgotten' by the outside world.<sup>51</sup> As a reaction to this, some refugees took on the effort of generating alternative narratives on social media.<sup>52</sup>

Uzbek labour migrants to Russia have likewise been subjected to negative framing in the host state media, dehumanised and portrayed as the 'Muslim migrant' other.<sup>53</sup> Any alternative narratives usually concern cases of migrants helping locals in road traffic accidents.<sup>54</sup> Once a case goes viral, it can be picked up by mainstream media in both the host and home states.<sup>55</sup>

Curiously, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia has acknowledged the negative portrayal of migrants in the media as a problem. However, the Head of the Main Directorate for Migration Issues, Valentina Kazakova, has also falsely claimed that it is the liberal 'foreign agent' media that spread these negative narratives.<sup>56</sup>

### 1.4. *State surveillance*

While smartphones afford migrants unprecedented opportunities, allowing them to store important documents, navigate via online maps, use instant translation apps, and document memories,<sup>57</sup> they

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<sup>50</sup> Emile Bruneau, Nour Kteily, and Lasse Laustsen, 'The Unique Effects of Blatant Dehumanization on Attitudes and Behavior towards Muslim Refugees during the European 'Refugee Crisis' across Four Countries,' *European Journal of Social Psychology* 48, no. 5 (September 2018): pp. 645-662, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2357>.

<sup>51</sup> Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek, 'Syrian Refugees': 249.

<sup>52</sup> Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek, 'Syrian Refugees': 250.

<sup>53</sup> Vera Tolz, 'From a Threatening 'Muslim Migrant' Back to the Conspiring 'West:' Race, Religion, and Nationhood on Russian Television during Putin's Third Presidency,' *Nationalities Papers* 45, no. 5 (2017): pp. 742-757, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2017.1282449>.

<sup>54</sup> 'Все ехали мимо, а он помог: узбек спас женщин в ДТП, но пострадал сам [Everyone Was Driving Past, and He Helped: An Uzbek Man Saved Women in Accident but Suffered Himself],' *Sputnik Таджикистан*, 31 May, 2021: <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/20180531/saint-petersburg-migrant-spas-uzbekistan-1025729639.html> (accessed 14 October, 2021).

<sup>55</sup> Note that positive narratives about migrants are also not unproblematic, as the framing may inadvertently suggest or reinforce the idea that this demographic group would not normally behave well.

<sup>56</sup> 'МВД заявило, что образ мигранта в России пытаются криминализировать [The Ministry of Internal Affairs Stated That Someone Is Trying to Criminalise the Image of a Migrant in Russia],' *TASS*, 29 September, 2021: <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/12537503> (accessed 3 November 2021).

<sup>57</sup> Amanda Alencar, Katerina Kondova, and Wannes Ribbens, 'The Smartphone as a Lifeline: An Exploration of Refugees' Use of Mobile Communication Technologies during Their Flight,' *Media, Culture & Society* 41, no. 6 (2018): pp. 828-844, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443718813486>.

can also have harmful effects on this demographic. Per Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek, fear of surveillance and undesired visibility make some refugees conscious of what they post on social media and who they interact with online. This is because smartphones can be used by autocratic regimes as 'an instrument to aid in oppression,' as has been the case with the Syrian government.<sup>58</sup>

State surveillance is also a fact of life for Uzbek labour migrants to Russia, as they live and work under the watchful gaze of police officers who can take advantage of their vulnerable position. For instance, police officers have recently been detaining migrants on misdemeanour charges. While in custody, the migrants receive messages from strangers on their phones. When the police officers check their devices, the migrants are 'revealed' to have received extremist content, thereby prompting terrorism charges against them.<sup>59</sup>

Abuse and false accusations of extremism/terrorism against migrants happens not only in Russia, but also in their homeland. Under Uzbekistan's first president, Islam Karimov, for instance, migrants were perceived of as 'lazy opportunists'<sup>60</sup> and were also subjected to maltreatment by law enforcement and national security forces.<sup>61</sup>

Surveillance comes not only from the host and home states, but also from within the migrant community. When this happens, racial, gender and other biases from home can be reincarnated within the host state. An example of such intra-community surveillance comes not from Uzbek labour migrants, but their Kyrgyz fellow travellers. Male Kyrgyz labour migrants have targeted Kyrgyz women in Russia for being seen in public with non-Kyrgyz men.<sup>62</sup>

### ***1.5. Disrupted social support***

Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek explore how the loss of family support impacts Syrian refugees in Jordan. Separated family members report having to rely on smartphones to stay connected and to update each other on their wellbeing. Furthermore, in some cases, owning a phone afforded refugees, especially women, a feeling of relative safety given that they could call someone should an emergency occur.<sup>63</sup> Life at the refugee camp also impacted gender roles and social norms, as women who may not have worked back home suddenly needed to transform into the sole providers

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<sup>58</sup> Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek, 'Syrian Refugees': 251.

<sup>59</sup> "No One Catches Terrorists like That' Novaya Gazeta Reveals Alleged Police Scheme Aimed at Fabricating Felony Cases against Migrants in Moscow,' *Meduza*, 22 October, 2021: <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2021/10/22/no-one-catches-terrorists-like-that> (accessed 3 November, 2021).

<sup>60</sup> Alisher Sidikov and Deana Kjukan, 'Karimov: Uzbek Migrants Are 'Lazy,' Beggars Don't Exist,' *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 26 June, 2013: <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-karimov-beggars-migrants-remittances/25028531.html> (accessed 10 November, 2021).

<sup>61</sup> Mansur Mirovalev, 'Uzbekistan Arrests 200 Alleged ISIL 'Sympathisers',' *Al Jazeera*, 16 November, 2015: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/11/16/uzbekistan-arrests-200-alleged-isil-sympathisers/> (accessed 1 February, 2022).

<sup>62</sup> Rashid Gabdulhakov, 'In the Bullseye of Vigilantes: Mediated Vulnerabilities of Kyrgyz Labour Migrants in Russia,' *Media and Communication* 7, no. 2 (2019): pp. 230-241, <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v7i2.1927>.

<sup>63</sup> Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek, 'Syrian Refugees': 252

for the family. Relying on the work of Cecilia Uy-Tioco,<sup>64</sup> Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek frame this phenomenon as the ‘masculinization’ of transnational women.<sup>65</sup>

At present, the existing if scarce literature into this question about Uzbek labour migrants to Russia indicates that smartphones assist them to 'manoeuvre around structural constraints such as complicated residence registration and work permit rules, social exclusion, racism and the lack of social security.'<sup>66</sup> However, this is not invariably the case. Kyrgyz labour migrants to Russia rely on smartphones to be connected with each other and with their home state of Kyrgyzstan, but they do not necessarily use this technology to discuss political issues related to the Kyrgyz diaspora, their identities as migrants, or, surprisingly, to access official information concerning immigration rules.<sup>67</sup> The aforementioned problem of female Kyrgyz labour migrants falling prey to men in the diaspora<sup>68</sup> also raises the question of whether smartphones are in any way alleviating deeper intra-community problems of gendered inequalities and vulnerabilities.

## Findings

Content analysis resulted in the identification of the following thematic narrative clusters: 'the remedy,' 'practical information,' 'the news,'<sup>69</sup> 'asking for help,' and 'conspiracies and religion.' Some of these clusters appeared in discussions held across platforms, while others were limited to specific platforms. Odnoklassniki is the only platform in which all five narrative clusters were present. VKontakte, Facebook, and Telegram each featured at least two clusters, viz., 'practical information' and 'the news.'

### 2.1. *The remedy*

As a source of COVID-19-related information, thematic Odnoklassniki groups for labour migrants from Uzbekistan to Russia cover the widest spectrum of themes and attitudes towards the novel coronavirus in comparison to other platforms. From a sarcastic video featuring a person smoking hookah, coughing and claiming that he has caught the virus, to warning posts with messages containing statements to the effect of 'if you or your relatives do not have the virus, it does not mean that it does not exist.'

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<sup>64</sup> Cecilia Uy-Tioco, 'Overseas Filipino Workers and Text Messaging: Reinventing Transnational Mothering,' *Continuum* 21, no. 2 (August 2007): pp. 253-265, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304310701269081>.  
*Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 21(2): 253–265.

<sup>65</sup> Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek, 'Syrian Refugees': 252

<sup>66</sup> Rano Turaeva and Rustamjon Urinboyev, *Labour, Mobility and Informal Practices in Russia, Central Asia and Eastern Europe: Power, Institutions and Mobile Actors in Transnational Space* (London: Routledge, 2021): 30.

<sup>67</sup> Vanessa Ruget and Burul Usmanalieva, 'Can Smartphones Empower Labour Migrants? the Case of Kyrgyzstani Migrants in Russia,' *Central Asian Survey* 38, no. 2 (March 2019): pp. 165-180, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2019.1594170>.

<sup>68</sup> Rashid Gabdulhakov, 'In the Bullseye of Vigilantes.'

<sup>69</sup> Global, host state-related, and home state-related.

On two of the largest groups for Uzbek labour migrants, one of the earliest COVID-19-related discussions and suggestions for virus-countering remedies began on 13 March 2020. A post made in the Uzbek language featured a story told by 'a Russian specialist' who was sent to Wuhan, China to study the new virus. The extensive and detailed post featured potentially misleading information. It suggested, for instance, that the COVID-19 virus dies at 26-27 degrees Celsius and that it is therefore important to drink boiling water and stand in the sun as a preventative measure. It also advised readers to drink water every 15 minutes, supposedly because water will wash the virus down into the stomach where acids will kill it. The post concluded by inviting users to share it with friends and family for the sake of everyone's safety.

The remedy theme continuously appeared throughout discussion boards in Odnoklassniki groups. Note that sometimes these posts were supported with religious content such as a list of 'prayers for forgiveness,' which community members were invited to repeat as a counter-measure against the virus. This caused an overlap with the 'religion and conspiracy' cluster.

## ***2.2. Practical information***

A dominant theme across groups and platforms was 'practical information.' This was a wide cluster that included content such as job advertisements, travel tickets, information on where and how to get vaccinated or tested, etc. One such post on Odnoklassniki concerned the nuances of the QR code requirements in Moscow. It was made in Uzbek and led to a lively discussion totalling 50 comments, with practical questions and answers. Such popular reactions indicate the attraction and significance of the 'practical information' topic amid uncertainty and lack of official information.

Although 50 comments in groups with such large memberships may appear marginal, this actually stood out in comparison to a general passivity characterising group memberships. For instance, on 18 April 2020, a group admin shared a Russian text of a presidential decree in Russia that would permit, under certain circumstances, foreigners to remain in the country without a visa or registration and to work without a permit. Despite being seemingly significant in terms of its message, the post received zero shares, zero comments and zero 'likes.'

While vaccination can be classified under practical information, in some cases search results on this topic were more suitable for 'the news' category. For instance, one VKontakte group only referred to vaccination in Uzbekistan (and not in Russia), with respective updates and links to Uzbek news sources. The second VKontakte group had zero discussions of vaccines or the vaccination process. A keyword search for vaccines and vaccination also did not bear any results in the Telegram group. The Facebook group contained posts reporting on official updates related to the conditions for entering Russia as a student and the process of vaccinating labour migrants. Out of five results for 'vaccine' and variations in the Facebook group, four posts were made by an admin in Russian and one was made in Uzbek by a group member. On Odnoklassniki, members across thematic groups engaged in active discussions over specific requirements for jobs advertised on the platform, and vaccination came up in this context. Job advertisements emphasised whether vaccination was compulsory or not, leading members to react with question-and-answer discussions of where one could get vaccinated and how much this would cost.

A large volume of posts and discussions in the 'practical information' cluster were related to travel options. Aeroplane ticket advertisements concerned both travel from Russia to Uzbekistan during the period of March-June 2020, as well as promoted options for travelling back to Russia in the latter days of the pandemic. Some of the posts offered unusually expensive options with one-way tickets costing as much as 800 USD.<sup>70</sup> The authenticity of such offers was periodically challenged by group members who questioned the availability of flights to begin with.

None of the Odnoklassniki posts offering tickets elaborated on any respective entry requirements for Russia or Uzbekistan. Some of the advertised flights were between Tajik cities and Russia, but shared in the Odnoklassniki group for Uzbek migrants in Moscow. The possible motive for this may have been that the sources of the posts were more interested in sheer volume of exposure rather than thematic fit.

Noteworthy, in the early months of the pandemic, one post made in Uzbek on Odnoklassniki called on compatriots not to travel back to Uzbekistan. The post claimed that there existed tough conditions in the quarantine camp in which all incoming travellers would have to spend at least 14 days.

### ***2.3. The news***

Although present across groups and platforms, 'news' content was dominant on Odnoklassniki in terms of volume and variety. Note that this cluster incorporated the three sub-categories of (a) global COVID-19 updates, (b) updates for Russia, and (c) updates for Uzbekistan, each in turn encompassing statistical data, stories of success and failure, vaccine development updates, etc.

Posts predominantly featured content from Russia's federal broadcasters, although Uzbekistan's traditional media outlets also penetrated in the form of YouTube videos. In some instances, the original sources of information were not available on Odnoklassniki and data were presented in posts by admins. Interestingly, some content focused on debunking fake news and countering rumours. One example was a reaction to the news that all the dwellers in Tajikistan's Sughd region had perished due to COVID-19. The post centred around a user-made video of professional quality that called on the audience to question such rumours and check the facts.

Posts in VKontakte featured news coming predominantly from Russian sources. On Facebook, the majority of COVID-19-related news-sharing posts were made by admins and in the Russian language, offering a comparatively more complex analysis of the global and local impacts of the pandemic. Posts often featured expert opinions related to the economic consequences of the pandemic and their potential impact on labour migrants. All told, the thematic group on Facebook appears to be more sophisticated in terms of analytical discussions, while also requiring proficiency in Russian.

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<sup>70</sup> It is challenging to track average airfares for a one-way ticket for destinations between Russia and Uzbekistan as it all depends on such nuances as the airline company, date, time, city of origin and destination. Nevertheless, consultations with an employee of a ticket office revealed that an average price for a one-way flight between Moscow and Tashkent could cost around 200 USD in 2019.

## 2.4. *Asking for help*

Asking community members for help was a recurring theme across groups in Odnoklassniki and were not found on VKontakte, Facebook or Telegram. Sometimes the same person would repeatedly make the same post asking for help, everyday across groups. Popular stories included migrants who had lost their jobs and were in subsequent need of financial assistance. Such posts contained banking information to which community members could transfer money.

Asking for help was also linked to the home state, including its ruling elites and political apparatus. Some posts featured the COVID-19-related activities of Uzbekistan's 'first lady' Ziorat Mirziyoyeva and her charity fund Zamin. Other posts reported on the COVID-19-related activities of the Uzbek embassy and consulates in Russia, including the initiative to offer financial support to compatriots in need amid the pandemic.

When addressing fellow group members, some users would begin with 'assalomu aleykum okalar' ('hello dear brothers'). This has the effect of primarily targeting religious male group members. Other ways of addressing group members were also used that likewise implied a religious connotation, but with less gender restriction, such as 'greetings to all Muslims,' 'dear brothers and sisters,' or a more general, inclusive and perhaps even secular 'fellow compatriots.' Inclusive addresses of group members and use of pronouns with religious connotations often came in combination with calls for help, i.e. 'dear compatriots, blessed be the name of Allah' and 'thank you for your help, which will be rewarded in heaven.'

## 2.5. *Conspiracies and religion*

An intricate combination of religion and conspiracies was found with sufficient frequency so as to suggest a pattern in COVID-19-related videos shared on Odnoklassniki. Although the sources of conspiracy-inspired videos were diverse, professionally made videos in the Russian language dominate. As for the specificities of the religious content, most of the videos were recordings of Islamic leaders addressing the public in Uzbekistan. These videos also tended to offer an explanation for the origin of the novel coronavirus, with theories ranging from it being a Chinese biological weapon, to a secret plan of the United States, to divine wrath.

Some video content shared across groups was marked as deleted or unavailable. Unavailable videos were also deleted in the source channels on YouTube. Such content was likely removed due to measures taken to counter misleading information enacted by social media platforms.<sup>71</sup> Importantly, while some YouTube videos were removed, their descriptions remained in the newsfeeds on Odnoklassniki and served as indicators of the type of content that had been deleted. These descriptions contained words such as 'COVID-19,' 'virus' and 'doctors.' Some video descriptions hinted at anti-Chinese sentiments. A no longer available video shared several times described COVID-19 as 'Allah's punishment.'

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<sup>71</sup> Neal Mohan, 'YouTube Official Blog,' *YouTube Official Blog* (blog), 25 August, 2021: <https://blog.youtube/inside-youtube/tackling-misinfo/> (accessed 3 October, 2021).

Yet, not every platform had the same moderation strategies or effectiveness. For instance, while YouTube appears to have removed some video material, the same content uploaded directly to Odnoklassniki remained freely available at the time of this study. Many of these videos made the case for COVID-19 being the result of divine wrath in response to a sinful humanity. One such video, which was freely available on Odnoklassniki at the time of this study, made the case that COVID-19 was a biological weapon designed by the United States for the purpose of attacking China, Russia, and Italy.

## Discussion

Odnoklassniki hosts the largest number of thematic groups for Uzbek labour migrants to Russia, and these groups also have the largest relative membership in comparison to their counterparts on other platforms. Content analysis of discussions in the Odnoklassniki groups further revealed the highest diversity in themes related to COVID-19, to the point that all clusters were present within it. Nevertheless, while some themes such as 'the remedy,' 'asking for help,' and 'conspiracies and religion' were present exclusively on Odnoklassniki, this platform did not have a complete thematic monopoly; other themes, such as 'practical information' and 'the news', were present across platforms. Content shared in the Uzbek language dominated some Odnoklassniki groups, while Russian was predominantly used on VKontakte, Facebook, and Telegram. These findings indicate the significant role that Odnoklassniki and its thematic groups played in content production and dissemination targeting Uzbek labour migrants to Russia.

Indeed, search results for COVID-19-related keywords on VKontakte were rather scarce. Despite a relatively significant rate of membership, thematic VKontakte groups for Uzbek labour migrants to Russia were largely passive in terms of shares, 'likes' and comments. Furthermore, there was a lack of a sense of community in the scant comments that existed. For instance, instead of focusing on the content and engaging in a question-and-answer flow, as is the case on Odnoklassniki, members demonstrated opportunistic behaviour by leaving advertisements in comments and offering personal services unrelated to the original content.

The Facebook group for migrants to Russia selected for the study appears to have two admins and two moderators. At the time of this study, admins dominated in terms of authorship of posts, which they wrote in Russian. Content shared on Facebook tended to be more sophisticated in terms of the analysis of the economic impacts of the pandemic. Despite the prevalence of the Russian language, shared news sources were predominantly Western. Content shared on Facebook tended to be framed as information relevant to migrants from Central Asia generally, with no exclusive focus on any specific country. Nevertheless, at the time of this study, all non-Russian language posts in this group related to COVID-19 were made in Uzbek.

The Telegram group was the most active of groups on all platforms in terms of the volume of shared messages. Being a messaging rather than a social media platform, Telegram is more suitable for ad-hoc information flow. There was no ability for group members to leave 'likes' or comments in the group selected for the study as it was not a Telegram channel (which enables such features)

but a genuine chat space. Practical information dominated this group. Posts critical of the Uzbek leadership also penetrated the flow on Telegram, but the accounts of the authors of such posts appeared to have been deleted. Note that the earliest posts found in this group at the time of this study appeared in November 2020, meaning that discussions related to COVID-19 were somewhat dated in relation to the beginning of the pandemic. This raises the possibility that content shared at the earlier stages of the pandemic may have been removed by group admins.

Of the practical information published in this group, job and flight advertisements were the most prominent. Both kinds of advertisements often included details concerning COVID-19 requirements, where to get PCR tests, how to get employed with or without vaccination, how and where to purchase flight tickets, etc. The admins played a key role in determining the character of the information, as they were empowered to approve or remove content at their discretion, and in general became *de facto* community leaders, at least in the online social milieu of migrants. Yet, sometimes admins were themselves the source of misleading information.

News stories originating from both the home and host state dominated the feeds in some groups, facilitating a convergence<sup>72</sup> of traditional and social media. Content that was previously available exclusively on television or in the newspapers now penetrates the digital domain. It is important to note that even the official sources of information can also be misleading and unreliable. At the same time, amateur videos with high-quality image resolution and sound can also wrongfully influence perceptions of content legitimacy and truthfulness.

This article groups religion in the same cluster as conspiracies due to the thematic link in explaining the origin of the virus. However, references to Islam were woven into other themes as well, be it offering remedy recipes or calling on compatriots and fellow Muslims for help.

While the identified COVID-19-related narratives constructed in the framework of the Muslim identity appear to be dangerously misleading, religious authorities could in theory be recruited as facilitators of quality information, given their authority and influence. However, this would necessitate state intervention and communication control, which in-itself threatens information quality and reliability.

In terms of 'information precarity,' Uzbek labour migrants to Russia could often be the sources of what Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek refer to as 'irrelevant' and 'sometimes dangerous information.'<sup>73</sup> This finding thus confirms that 'technological and social access to information'<sup>74</sup> is indeed a complex and multidimensional practice in which both access to thematic content and the ability of individual users to produce, share and otherwise disseminate information should be considered.

When it comes to their own image control, content produced by and for labour migrants across thematic groups on social media is limited in audience types, as these milieux are thematically (and sometimes linguistically) exclusive. Meanwhile, the penetration of 'the state' – be it home or

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<sup>72</sup> Henry Jenkins, 'The Cultural Logic of Media Convergence,' *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (2004): pp. 33-43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877904040603>.

<sup>73</sup> Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek, 'Syrian Refugees': 241.

<sup>74</sup> Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek, 'Syrian Refugees': 241.

host country authorities – is difficult to detect beyond the official news sources and statements tracked in the discussion flows. It is not clear whether group admins maintain any contact with state authorities on either side. While some content appears to have been removed, it is not always clear whether this removal was a result of state surveillance, platform policies, or individual moderation decisions of group admins.

The role of smartphones amid 'disrupted social support'<sup>75</sup> took on a new meaning with the introduction of digital tools in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic. Among these tools were COVID-19 apps, QR codes and the so-called 'vaccination passports.' While there were reports of fraudulent purchases of vaccine certificates,<sup>76</sup> at the time of this writing, it is yet not clear whether or in what volume labour migrants fell prey to such malpractices. At the same time, the attempted border crossings with fake medical certificates are indicative of the supply and demand for such dubious products and services.

## Conclusion

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns, and travel restrictions, labour migrants from Uzbekistan to Russia found themselves in double jeopardy: a sudden dismissal from employment due to business closures, and the inability to return to their home state due to border closures. When employment opportunities became available again, the problem reversed itself as labour migrants found it challenging to travel back to the host state due to new health regulations, as well as the limited availability and costliness of flights. In both cases, untrue information that was at least partially gained online led to situations in which labour migrants embarked on journeys between the home and host state in either direction only to find themselves stuck at the border.

By applying netnography, this article sought to leverage the experiences of Uzbek labour migrants to gain deeper insight into the interplay between information precarity and the spread and reception of misleading information, particularly with respect to COVID-19. This article analysed online social media thematic group sizes and descriptions, as well as content comments, 'likes,' shares, linguistic and other nuances of online information exchange. Through qualitative content analysis of the information shared in the migrants' online social milieu, this article has identified five thematic COVID-19-related narrative clusters, and has confirmed that overall, the COVID-19-related information spread among this demographic group during the time of this study appears to have been dangerously misleading.

An obvious suggestion for actors in the home or host state responsible for communicative strategies aimed at reaching labour migrants with reliable and up-to-date information is to instrumentalise the affordances of thematic social media groups. Even while proposing this,

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<sup>75</sup> Wall, Otis Campbell, and Janbek, 'Syrian Refugees': 241.

<sup>76</sup> 'Russians Who Bought Fake Vaccine Certificates Targeted in Data Leak – Kommersant,' *The Moscow Times*, 12 November, 2021: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/11/12/russians-who-bought-fake-vaccine-certificates-targeted-in-data-leak-kommersant-a75541> (accessed 3 November, 2021).

however, there are reasons to be concerned about the intent of the state and the quality of even the official information targeting Uzbek labour migrants, either while they are in Uzbekistan or when they are en route to or in Russia. Therefore, non-state actors could step in as intermediaries. Additionally, the combination of religious narratives with conspiracy theories revealed in the study indicates a potential role for informal actors, such as religious leaders and group admins in disseminating accurate information and influencing public opinion within their demographic group.

All that being said, the online observations and content analysis performed in this study have certain methodological limitations and, therefore, could benefit from further research. For instance, a quantitative study involving a survey of labour migrants on their use of smartphones and social media could shed light on important nuances of information production and consumption on social media. Furthermore, in-depth interviews could offer details about the value and persuasive power of information that labour migrants are exposed to across thematic social media platforms. Future research could also offer broader perspectives by comparing platform affordances and preferences across migrant communities, viz., Uzbek versus Kyrgyz versus Tajik. Assessment of the gendered aspects of access to and use of technology among Central Asian labour migrants to Russia is also urgently needed. These studies could investigate whether migration has an impact on breaching the digital divide or whether gender roles and biases in the home state reincarnate in the host state.

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