April 12, 2019

Can Smartphones Empower Labor Migrants

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Can smartphones empower labour migrants? The case of Kyrgyzstani migrants in Russia

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ABSTRACT

In the last two decades, mobile phones and new technologies have transformed migration. Some scholars argue that they help empower migrants, who are otherwise often marginalized in their host country. We discuss the extent to which this is true for Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia, a relatively large diaspora that suffers from multiple levels of disempowerment, ranging from precarious living and working conditions to a lack of legal support and representation from their home government. Relying on fieldwork conducted in Kyrgyzstan in 2017 and 2018, we explore the extent to which smartphones are enabling Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia to be informed about migration rules, help each other abroad, connect as a diaspora, and discuss important diaspora topics. Our findings are relevant beyond academia, as many international and governmental agencies are trying to assist migrants through technology; they also point to several missed opportunities for these organizations.

Introduction

In the last two decades, mobile phones have transformed migration. They facilitate migratory flows and global linkages (Hamel 2009; Molony 2012), enable migrants to cheaply and instantly communicate with family members (Bacigalupe and Cámara 2012), foster transnational outlooks and practices (Vertovec 2004), and enhance collective identity among diasporas (Banerjee and German 2010). Many studies suggest that mobile technology helps empower migrants, for example by enabling them to be better informed and more connected (Brinkerhoff 2012; Dekker and Engbersen 2014; Hunter 2015; Panagakos and Horst 2006; Thompson 2009). In line with this argument, this article examines the extent to which smartphones, beyond facilitating logistical tasks and communication with friends and family, are empowering labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan to Russia. We use the results of semi-structured interviews with 40 migrants and return migrants, expert interviews, and content analysis of posts on migrant social media groups, to assess whether Kyrgyz migrants use technology to access immigration information, help each other abroad, and connect as a diaspora.[1]

This question matters for several reasons. First, despite the size of their remittances (Kyrgyzstan is among the three most remittance-dependent countries in the world), Kyrgyz labour migrants are marginalized abroad and have received very little support from their home government. As we detail below, they face legal insecurity (Reeves 2015; Urinboyev 2017) and difficult living and working conditions (UNDP and EDB 2015). Given the authoritarian nature of the Russian government and widespread xenophobia, foreign labourers are unlikely to mobilize to demand change. Instead, we hypothesized that technology could help them in a difficult environment, for example by making it easier to access critical information, to exercise solidarity with compatriots and to connect with other diaspora members. We also hypothesized that mobile technology could serve as a platform to discuss important diaspora topics, such as investment in the homeland and return. Labour migration from Kyrgyzstan is a seasonal phenomenon (Sagynbekova 2016), and many migrants are expected, and plan to, eventually return home for good (IOM 2016). They therefore have the potential to be a vocal constituency in the homeland, especially considering their overall number and the size of their remittances.

Second, we believe that our findings are relevant beyond academia, as many international and governmental agencies are seeking to reach migrants through social media and mobile applications. Technology is a relatively cheap and effective way to disseminate vital immigration information to a population that is reluctant or unable to visit 'official' locations such as consulates. Technology also facilitates rapid updates of content – which is crucial in Russia, where immigration rules are constantly in flux. As detailed below, both international organizations and governmental agencies working to assist Kyrgyz labour migrants have launched social media applications and established a robust presence online.

Finally, our study contributes to a growing literature on migration and technology by offering a lesser-known case. Russia is one of the top migrant-receiving countries in the world, and Kyrgyzstanis working there are among the small minority (20%) of migrants in the world who move to a regime that is more autocratic than their own (V-Dem 2018); this provides an interesting contrast with migrants to Western countries, who have been more widely covered by the literature on migration and technology.

Our results confirm that mobile phones are as critical to Kyrgyz migrants as they are for other diasporas, enabling them to easily perform a myriad of logistical tasks, stay in touch with family and friends, and receive news about Kyrgyzstan. Regarding our first hypothesis, we found that migrants do rely on their smartphones to connect with diaspora members and help each other abroad. But few use them to access legal advice, and the vast majority are sceptical (or simply unaware) of the official applications and websites created to assist them; this illustrates how little support migrants expect to receive from their government and international organizations. Regarding our second hypothesis, on diaspora engagement, we found that migrants, by and large, do not use technology to discuss public affairs in their homeland or the diaspora's role in the future of Kyrgyzstan. This confirms previous findings regarding the low level of political transnationalism among Kyrgyz migrants (Ruget and Usmanalieva 2011). It also suggests that technology is limited in its ability to spur transnational political practices in certain contexts.

Migrants, technology and empowerment

Relatively inexpensive and portable, mobile phones have become essential to migrants. Their potential to inform, connect and facilitate engagement has inspired scholars to analyse the extent to which they support 'everyday empowerment' (Hunter 2015, 373).

By making information accessible and generally free, technology contributes to a 'democratization of knowledge for migrants' (Dekker and Engbersen 2014, 414). Smartphones in particular facilitate access to both formal and informal information, thus assisting migrants at all phases of their migration experience, including pre-departure planning (Banerjee and German 2010; Dekker and Engbersen 2014; Schaub 2012), travel (Manjoo 2016; Schaub 2012), and return (Hunter 2015). They make it easier to search for jobs and housing (Hamel 2009) and to transfer money home (Scott 2015). The media has also extensively covered the ways in which smartphones have become essential to refugees (Manjoo 2016). In the case of Central Asian migrants, recent studies have established the importance of the internet and mobile communication for everyday survival in destination countries, including obtaining legal documents or information about jobs and salaries (IOM 2016; Sagynbekova 2016; Urinboyev 2017) and sharing crucial information about remittances (Isabaeva 2011).

Further, technology helps foster collective identity among diaspora members abroad (Banerjee and German 2010) by creating 'digital diasporas' (Brinkerhoff 2009) and offering 'new outlets for social interaction and identity' (Panagakos and Horst 2006, 117). Social media groups are often created and joined by migrants sharing common characteristics (place of origin or host city for example) and can thus serve as a platform for solidarity practices. Chikadze and Brednikova (2012) found that Uzbek migrants in Russia have created social media groups for 'Uzbek from Samarkand' or 'Uzbeks who live in St. Petersburg', enabling them to support compatriots and to create a sense of community. Technology also makes it easier for diasporas to discuss their heritage and identity (Gibau 2010; Horst 2010; Oiarzabal 2010) and the 'plight of the homeland' (Brinkerhoff 2009, 51) and to cultivate feelings of belonging (Brinkerhoff 2009). Glukhov (2017) showed that Central Asian migrants used the social media site VKontakte to promote their culture, announce events and holidays, offer legal, logistical, and emotional support, and disseminate news about the homeland.[2]

Finally, an extensive body of research has documented how technology enables migrants to be engaged socially, economically and even politically across borders (Banerjee and German 2010; Dekker and Engbersen 2014; Panagakos and Horst 2006; Ros 2010; Vertovec 2004). By facilitating communication with home (Banerjee and German 2010; Ros 2010), new technologies are 'undoing mobility' (Bernal 2010, 168), 'making it normal for people to think beyond borders' (Castles 2010, 1567). Scholars of Central Asia have shown that technology is indeed supporting transnational attitudes between members of the same family or community. In her study of the Southern Kyrgyz village of Sopu Korgon, Isabaeva (2011) noted that mobile phones enable migrants and their families to entertain 'a sense of everyday connectedness'. Urinboyev (2017, 2018) found that smartphones have enabled Uzbek migrants in Russia to create 'smartphone-based translocal communities' that perpetuate social norms of solidarity and reciprocity from the home community (or *mahalla*). Village norms also continue to pressure migrants, particularly through the fear of gossip (Urinboyev 2018). Some diasporas have used technology

more vigorously to influence public affairs in their home country through fundraising, the sharing of expertise, or by participating in civic debate online (Bernal 2010; Newland 2010). Such active diaspora engagement is the norm only among a very small number of diaspora members (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 2017), and technology supports it by removing 'old constraints' of distance and national boundaries (Newland 2010, 213).

In a nutshell, much of the literature sees technology as a tool that can increase migrants' agency and engagement. Several studies have also noted its limitations. For example, technology has been used to monitor migrants, be it by family (Bacigalupe and Cámara 2012), employers (Kim 2016), or governments – both in the home country, through monitoring of online postings, blogs and newsgroups (Hunter 2015), and in receiving countries eager to control migration (Schaub 2012). Besides, diaspora engagement can be problematic. In extreme cases, the internet can be a recruitment tool for reprehensible political causes, including terrorism, and armed conflicts (Brinkerhoff 2009). In Central Asia, online propaganda plays a key role in recruiting the small but growing number of Central Asian migrants who join Islamist groups (Lemon and Heathershaw 2017), many of whom are return migrants under re-entry bans (USAID and IOM 2016). Though we do not explore these issues in depth in this article, scholars have also raised issues regarding the digital divide and poor media literacy (Dekker and Engbersen 2014), selective connections (Bernal 2010), and misinformation and biases (Chan 2010).

Challenges faced by Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia

Mass labour migration from Central Asia started about 15 years ago, as citizens from the impoverished nations of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan started to seek economic opportunities abroad. In 2014, between 650,000 and 700,000 Kyrgyz nationals migrated for professional reasons, according to official data provided by the Ministry of Labour, Migration and Youth (cited in IOM 2016). Russia remains the country of choice for a large majority of these workers (Kubayeva 2015) because of its declining native workforce, geographic proximity, linguistic and historical ties with Central Asia, and well-established migrant networks (Schmidt and Sagynbekova 2008). Surveys show that Kyrgyz migrants are heavy phone users; almost all (98%) rely on their mobile phones to communicate with family and friends (IZA Life in Kyrgyzstan Survey 2010-2013), and mobile phones and internet plans are among the consumption items most commonly purchased by migrants and return migrants' families (IOM 2012, 2016).

Labour migrants face considerable challenges in Russia – including difficult living and working conditions, lack of proper documentation, and various forms of discrimination – which have been well documented, both in the academic literature and by media sources (for a summary, see UNDP and EDB 2015, 40–43). As argued by Urinboyev (2017, 126), labour migrants in Russia experience a 'constant sense of insecurity'; they live in fear of local authorities (who often demand bribes and threaten expulsion) and of violent groups like skinheads ('Russia: Attack on Migrants' 2016). Diaspora organizations at best offer limited legal protection to migrants abroad, and at worst exploit them, while engaging in criminal activities with ties to the local mafia (Myhre 2012; Sadovskaya 2013). Further, unless they die abroad or lose all their documents, there is very little assistance migrants can expect to receive from their home governments. Vinokurov (2013) found that 81% of Kyrgyz migrants to Russia stated that their main source of logistical and

moral support abroad came from the expatriate community, while only 3% sought help from state agencies. Similarly, only about a third of Kyrgyz migrants register with the Kyrgyz State Migration Service before departure, and less than 1% identify official migration specialists as a source of relevant migration information (IZA Life in Kyrgyzstan Survey 2010-2013).

Kyrgyz labour migrants are also victims of Russia's constantly changing migration legislation (Malakhov 2014), which opens the door to abuses and arbitrary decisions. For years, Russia's immigration policy has oscillated between an economic imperative for foreign workers and strong anti-immigrant sentiments (Schenk 2013), resulting in a 'labyrinth of Russia's laws and bureaucratic procedures' (Davé 2014, 6). In 2015, Kyrgyzstan joined the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, a mostly favourable outcome for migrants (Parkhomchik et al. 2015). Thanks to this membership, Kyrgyz migrants no longer need a work authorization, are exempted from the Russian language, history and civics test, and, compared to other foreign workers in Russia, enjoy less stringent registration requirements. Nevertheless, they continue to face pervasive discrimination, police abuse, petty corruption, and threats of expulsion. This happens primarily today through the 'blacklist' of individuals who are barred from re-entering Russia after breaking (even minor) migration rules. Though it has decreased significantly since their country joined the Eurasian Economic Union, the number of Kyrgyz migrants blacklisted was still over 70,000 in 2018 (Abdrisaev 2018). Our interviews with experts and migrants alike confirm that these re-entry bans are the top concern of foreign workers in Russia.

In response, international, non-profit and, to a lesser extent, governmental organizations are sharing more information online and through mobile applications. But, though intended to offer accessible, updated advice and information, these tools often fall short. For example, as of June 2018, arguably the most important section of the Kyrgyz State Migration Service website, the page with information about the blacklist (re-entry bans), was not up to date, because of 'technical problems', according to a staff member at the Labour Migration Unit at the agency.[3] In January 2017, the Kyrgyz State Migration Service launched Spravochnik Migranta (Справочник Мигранта, Migrant Directory), a phone application developed by the International Organization for Migration. It offers 10 options, in both Kyrgyz and Russian, on topics ranging from human trafficking, employment opportunities, contact information of consulates abroad, and the re-entry ban list. Unfortunately, the information updating the re-entry ban database is sent by Russia only once a month, so it is rarely current.[4] Though the application was apparently popular during the first few days of its launch,[5] it had been downloaded only around 10,000 times by early June 2018, a tiny percentage of the estimated 700,000 Kyrgyz migrants working in Russia. In a visit in May 2018 to the Migration Information Centre in Bishkek, where one of us pretended to be a labour migrant, the application was not mentioned by the office staff as a potential resource.

Russian authorities launched their own application, LexMobile, in 2015, enabling users to access the re-entry ban list and check the validity of their work permit and 'patent' (Kyrgyz migrants no longer need a patent). As of June 2018, it had been downloaded roughly 100,000 times, but it is not possible to know how many of these potential users are from Kyrgyzstan. Finally, several Kyrgyz non-profit organizations have developed their own migrant applications, including Karta Migranta (Insan Leilek 2015), not updated since 2015, and MigrAsia +, both of which mostly replicate Spravochnik Migranta with far less potential reach.

Method

In 2017 and 2018, we conducted semi-structured interviews, lasting on average an hour each, with a total of 40 Kyrgyz migrants and return migrants who had, or were still, working and living in Russia (25 were interviewed in 2017, and a different set of 15 were interviewed in 2018). Respondents were identified through snowball sampling. One-third were interviewed in person in Kyrgyzstan; they were either return migrants (10) or visiting home temporarily. Two-thirds of our respondents were interviewed by phone (usually using the application WhatsApp), as they were in Russia at the time of the interview. Interviewing migrants in Kyrgyzstan or by phone enabled us to have a diverse sample of migrants working in different cities across Russia, as well as to include return migrants. The sample included 23 men and 17 women, with a median age of 36. Migrants were interviewed in Russian or Kyrgyz according to their preference.

Almost half of our respondents worked or had been working in Russia for a decade or more (the median was nine years) at the time of interview; only three had been abroad for less than a year. Most migrants were or had been working in the capital Moscow; four worked in Yekaterinburg, and another three in Krasnoyarsk; other locations mentioned included Saint Petersburg, Rostov-on-Don, Samara, Bratsk, Tyumen, Surgut, Khabarovsk, Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, and Yakutsk. While abroad, our respondents worked primarily in construction and trade, but other professions were represented as well, such as catering, waitressing, cleaning, tailoring, management, security, pharmacy and caretaking. Fourteen (one-third) of our respondents had naturalized in Russia, but most had kept their Kyrgyz citizenship, despite the lack of a dual-citizenship agreement between the two countries.

In the first set of 25 interviews, conducted in 2017, we asked our respondents how they used their phone and social media during their migration experience, including whether it helped them arrange logistics of migration, receive news about Kyrgyzstan, stay in touch with home, connect with diaspora members, learn about Kyrgyz events in their area, transfer remittances, or consult diaspora blogs, websites and news sites. In the second set of 15 interviews, conducted in 2018, we added questions about diaspora building and empowerment. In particular, we asked respondents whether they used technology to access information about Russia's migration rules or diaspora activities and to assist each other abroad. We also inquired whether technology might be a platform for discussing important diaspora issues such as migrants' role in the development of the home country, return, the condition of migrants abroad, or Kyrgyz politics. Since active engagement is usually limited to a small number of migrants, we asked respondents not just whether they themselves had participated in online discussions on these topics but also whether they had come across any. To protect their confidentiality, we do not provide the names of our respondents.

We completed a content analysis of the narratives we collected. Since our sample was relatively small, we do not claim that it is representative of all Kyrgyzstani labour migrants and their complex mix of identities. For example, we did not factor respondents' ethnic background, income or education level, gender, time spent abroad, or place of origin in our analysis, even though these can affect phone and internet usage among migrants. Rather, we sought to identify general trends and to establish preliminary observations about technology use and empowerment.

To find out what migrants share, and are exposed to, on social media, we also joined and monitored several groups on Odnoklassniki (a Russian social network service broadly comparable to Facebook and widely used in Central Asia), including Birge ('Together'), Help to the Citizens of Kyrgyzstan, Unity/Kyrgyz Diaspora in Tyumen, Kyrgyzstanis in Yekaterinburg, and Kyrgyzstanis in Moscow.

Finally, we interviewed a dozen experts, including academics, staff at the International Organization for Migration and the Kyrgyz State Migration Service, and representatives from various non-profit organizations.

Results

Technology use

Kyrgyz migrants now rely on technology extensively while abroad, confirming Vertovec's (2004) and other scholars' assertion that cheap, portable and multimodal technology is transforming migration. One of our respondents, a construction worker in Moscow, observed for instance, 'Communication has become cheap.' By far the most popular applications among our respondents were WhatsApp, Odnoklassniki, and Facebook.[6] Kyrgyz migrants in Russia have also created websites and social media groups to advertise for jobs, services, and items for sale, such as jerdesh.ru, birge.ru, and boorsok.ru.[7] Confirming findings by Chikadze and Brednikova (2012), one of our respondents, a security guard in Yekaterinburg, pointed out that 'Odnoklassniki, Facebook, Vkontakte all have subpages where any group can create pages or chats and people can keep together for any purposes: classmates, Kyrgyzstanis, people from Osh [a southern Kyrgyz city], etc.'

Our interviews confirm that all of our respondents relied heavily on their smartphones, both before leaving Kyrgyzstan and after arriving in Russia, to perform a myriad of logistical tasks. These included looking for jobs and housing, searching for plane tickets, consulting migration rules, advertising for services, filling out administrative forms, watching professional training videos, translating documents, booking medical appointments, and checking maps, exchange rates, and the weather forecast. A trader in Bratsk described using the internet 'for trade, for keeping in touch with home, virtually for everything'. A pharmacist in Moscow further explained, 'In Moscow we fix many things online. We complete primary school enrolment applications for our children, register for medical checkups at the policlinic, and pay utilities.' A construction worker in Moscow stressed how convenient it is for migrants to locate Kyrgyz doctors in Russia on WhatsApp or Odnoklassniki. Finally, a construction worker in Surgut, Siberia, has relied on Viber and VKontakte 'to send samples of our work to our potential clients, such as pictures of apartments we already renovated'.

Interestingly, six of our 2017 respondents (out of a total of 25) had transferred remittances digitally, usually through the application of Zolotaya Korona. One of them said: 'In the past, we used to go to banks physically. It was the Western Union system. … Then the Zolotaya Korona system came out, and it was much cheaper. … I do it in the comfort of my own home.'

Several of our 2017 respondents also mentioned religious applications (such as Muslim Pro) to help keep track of prayer times. A concierge working in Moscow explained:

> I also use a religious application, with its calendar. … I decided to download it, because in Moscow the air is very polluted and even the rain is strange here. The air and sky are very grey, so I cannot see the sky or stars clearly. So the application helps me.

Mobile technology has also greatly simplified communication with family and friends in the homeland. Almost all our respondents shared testimonies of how technology is facilitating connections with home, echoing the literature mentioned above (Bernal 2010; Castles 2010). Remembering when he first arrived in Siberia in the early 2000s, a trader in Krasnoyarsk observed:

> When I left for Russia the first time, there were no mobile applications like today. We only relied on telephone. Calling by phone was very expensive. We would make phone calls only in urgent cases and asked our people to call us back. Text messages were the most common form of communication. Now it is heaven. WhatsApp has made all our connections very easy and worry-free.

Finally, mobile phones help migrants access news from the homeland. Popular social media and news sites mentioned by our 2017 respondents were Zanoza (which was forced to close by the Kyrgyz government in late 2017), Super.kg, Azattyk, Akipress, Sputnik.kg, Kloop, Kabarlar, Maralfm, Knews.kg, Lenta.ru, Rambler.ru, and the national Kyrgyz channel KTRK. A waiter in a Moscow restaurant pointed out that her phone enabled her to receive 'instant information if something happens'.

Accessing legal information

The migrants we talked to obtained information about immigration rules primarily from other diaspora members (word of mouth), at the airport and at border checks. On the other hand, only three of our 15 respondents in 2018 described technology (in this case social media groups) as a source of legal information. A construction worker in Tyumen noted on this topic that 'the leader of the diaspora group in Tyumen has an account on Odnoklassniki. She helps with any legal issues, like deportation or documents'; while another, the security guard in Yekaterinburg, observed that 'WhatsApp and Odnoklassniki groups have pages about migration and deportation.'

Critically, our respondents were not familiar with, and never visited, the websites or social media applications of international and governmental organizations. None of our 40 respondents were familiar with the Spravochnik Migranta application. One respondent mentioned Karta Migranta, the now dated application developed by a non-profit organization. Only one had visited the official website of the Kyrgyz Migration Service. As summarized by a migrant working for a logistics company in Moscow: 'When we have problems abroad, we do not use any formal ways. We use word of mouth. … That is much more practical.'

In contrast, we found a significant amount of legal advice on the Odnoklassniki groups that we monitored. For example, Help to the Citizens of Kyrgyzstan (with 64,918 followers as of June 2018) claims to provides legal support to foreigners in Russia, including assistance in appealing decisions on re-entry bans.[8] Between July 2017 and June 2018, although many posts on the site were frivolous pictures and videos, about every tenth post provided information about migration rules, including the blacklist, how to avoid being listed and how to get delisted. Also frequently shared were excerpts from television programmes related to migration, covering topics like deportation and illegal access to citizenship,

brutal arrests of labour migrants in Moscow, and police corruption. A smaller Odnoklassniki group, Unity/Kyrgyz Diaspora in Tyumen (734 participants as of June 2018) featured many posts of interest to migrants during the one-year period that we monitored it (between April 2016 and July 2017): information about work permits, driving licences, removal from the blacklist, compulsory medical assistance, how to interact with the police, how to navigate the court system, where to find legal advice, and changes in migration legislation. Many were reposted from other Odnoklassniki groups such as Help to the Citizens of Kyrgyzstan or Migrants' Rights.

Solidarity among migrants

Almost all of our 2018 respondents shared stories showing that technology is supporting solidarity practices among diaspora members, as suggested by the following comment:

> It is happening a lot. Someone is ill or died, and he or his relatives write a post or a WhatsApp message, asking for contributions, with a picture of the ill person. They give a bank account and ask you to transfer. Those who care collect any amount of money. I have also given some money, even 500 roubles. (construction worker in different cities across Russia)

Another construction worker pointed out that technology is sometimes used to assist migrants professionally: 'There is a WhatsApp group among Kyrgyz living in Surgut. They use it strictly for such purposes as helping to find a job for someone or if someone is having trouble getting his or her salary from his employer.'

The most-often cited case of solidarity mentioned by our respondents was helping a family cover the cost of repatriating the body of a deceased fellow migrant. There again, technology was a facilitator, confirming research by Urinboyev (2018) which revealed similar practices among Uzbek migrants. As explained by a Saint Petersburg factory worker: 'There are pages within Odnoklassniki or WhatsApp … which announce crowdfunding for compatriots who are in trouble. There are cases of 'cargo 200' [coffins of deceased Kyrgyz returned home].' Similarly, a construction worker in Moscow shared that:

> When 14 Kyrgyz girls died in a factory fire in Moscow, I heard many people collected money and gave to the relatives of the girls, to transport the bodies to the homeland. The collection was organized by activists on WhatsApp.

A final interesting example of solidarity practice was social media posts informing migrants of impending police activity in a specific location. The Surgut construction worker observed: 'When we see a police raid, we inform each other on our WhatsApp group. So that others are aware and do not appear in that area.' Though this specific type of solidarity was mentioned by only three of our respondents, it is notable as it was not suggested by any of our answer prompts; it is also noteworthy for being a passive form of resistance to police oppression.

Connecting as a diaspora and diaspora engagement

Almost half of our 2018 respondents noted that they had seen discussion related to Kyrgyz identity and culture online, confirming findings by Banerjee and German (2010), Brinkerhoff (2009) and Glukhov (2017). But their answers also suggest that these practices

do not go much beyond celebrating holidays and accessing news from home, with the exception of crowdfunding when a tragedy strikes at home. By far the most common example, mentioned by more than half of our 2018 respondents, was the sharing of information around Kyrgyz holidays, cultural performances and nostalgic trade (e.g. where to find Kyrgyz restaurants or goods). In the words of a construction worker in Moscow, 'When they organize something, like holiday celebrations, I get to hear announcements through WhatsApp friends.' On Odnoklassniki, we likewise found frequent posts related to Kyrgyz concerts, films and cultural events. For instance, members of Unity/Kyrgyz Diaspora in Tyumen posted pictures of the parades organized in Tyumen by the Kyrgyz diaspora to celebrate Victory Day (May 9) and the Day of Kyrgyz Culture. Group members also shared congratulatory messages on Nowruz and International Women's Day.

In contrast, our interviews suggest that Kyrgyz migrants, by and large, do not use social media to discuss diaspora topics such as economic investment in, or return to, the homeland. Only three of our 2018 respondents had ever seen discussions on social media regarding the role of the diaspora in helping Kyrgyzstan (for example through investments), and just one had purposefully sought that information. One exception was financial contributions following a tragedy or a crisis in Kyrgyzstan. As noted by a construction worker in various cities in Russia, 'In 2010 during the Osh ethnic conflict, someone organized a collection and we gave money and sent it to our own villages and oblasts.' Another construction worker said, 'We collected money in Surgut City for victims of the Dacha Su airplane crash. The diaspora did it. We raised 100,000 rubles.'

Likewise, only two respondents had come cross online discussions about return to the homeland. Summarizing a commonly expressed thought, the pharmacist in Moscow said: 'I have not seen any platform where this is discussed. Usually people share these thoughts and experiences privately.'

Finally, our respondents did not seek to use technology for more vigorous political engagement. Just three saw technology as a way to discuss the role of the diaspora and its engagement in Kyrgyz politics,[9] and only two thought that it could be a source of empowerment by enabling them to ask for more recognition at home. According to our respondents, the key explanation is migrants' lack of time, interest and political knowledge. In contrast to the Uzbek migrants interviewed by Chikadze and Brednikova (2012), who sometimes refused to be interviewed or were reluctant to discuss politics with researchers, Kyrgyz migrants do not seem afraid to express political views online; they are simply too busy and focused on everyday survival to engage. Asked directly whether migrants might be concerned about posting, sharing or reading political content online, none of our respondents answered affirmatively. 'I do not think anyone is afraid', a restaurant worker observed. 'We just do not have the time to write, and we are not following politics much.' Another, a construction worker in Moscow, keenly noted: 'I think migrants are not afraid, especially since they are outside of Kyrgyzstan.'

We also found very little political content on Odnoklassniki, though some of our fieldwork took place a few months before the 2017 presidential election in Kyrgyzstan. On Birge, between October 2016 and August 2017, we found only a few non-commercial postings, including a fundraiser for victims of the January 2017 plane crash in Kyrgyzstan, a joke about the political elite, and an invitation to attend a political event with the leader of a little-known Kyrgyz opposition political party. Likewise, we came across only one civic post on the Unity (Kyrgyz Diaspora in Tyumen) Odnoklassniki group encouraging migrants

to participate in the upcoming presidential election and explaining the legal requirements to do so. Help to the Citizens of Kyrgyzstan shared a few more political stories, generally news clippings denouncing corruption or the repression of political opposition leaders. We found a lot more political and civic content on the Odnoklassniki page of the organization Mekendeshter [Compatriots], but it is followed by more educated, skilled migrants living predominantly in Western countries.

This lack of political engagement online contrasts with other diasporas, such as the ones studied by Brinkerhoff (2009), Gibau (2010) or Bernal (2010), where the internet has enabled diaspora members to discuss, debate and criticize the politics of their home country. However, our results confirm previous studies that have concluded that Kyrgyz migrants are not politically active, that they find voting too time-consuming and logistically challenging, and that they have a low sense of political efficacy (Authors 2011).

Conclusion

Our findings confirm that smartphones are transforming the daily lives of labour migrants and empowering them, but only to some extent. Thanks to their smartphones, Kyrgyz migrants in Russia are able to be in touch with, and assist, each other. They rely on technology extensively to perform many logistical tasks. However, they do not access official (and presumably more reliable) sources of immigration information, even though being knowledgeable about changing migration rules and their rights is critical to them.

And though smartphones and applications like WhatsApp enable migrants to be in touch with, and receive news from, the homeland, and to fundraise when a tragedy happens in Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz migrants do not use technology to discuss important diaspora issues or the politics of their home country. There also seems to be little discussion online of the diaspora identity and of its role in the development of Kyrgyzstan. Crucially, migrants do not view technology as a tool that could empower them in their home country, for example by enabling them to demand more recognition as diaspora members. These findings challenge the enthusiastic accounts of the power of technology to generate transnational outlooks. As argued by Vertovec (1999, 2001), technology can enhance practices and networks that are already in place, but does not necessarily spur new ones.

Our results are also sobering for international organizations and cast doubt on their ability to disseminate essential information to migrants. They speak to a larger critique of international organizations in the field of migration, which, as argued by Geiger and Pécoud (2014), play a major role in migration policy today, yet are rarely subjected to critical assessment. Our study also underlines how ineffective the Kyrgyz government has been thus far in managing labour migration and in assisting its citizens abroad (Heleniak 2011; International Crisis Group 2010; Liebert 2007). The fact that the International Organization for Migration's migrant app was not mentioned by staff at the Bishkek Migration Information Centre is revealing.

The lack of diaspora engagement online is another missed opportunity for the Kyrgyz government and the international organizations working in the field. In particular, while many sending countries' governments are devising 'diaspora engagement policies' (Gamlen 2006) and encouraging return, the Kyrgyz government has done little to capitalize on migration (Heleniak 2011), despite the formidable contribution that migrants are making to their home country's economy.

Our study has important limitations. First, our sample was small. Additionally, our results cannot be generalized to other migrant populations in Russia, some of whom come from more repressive regimes (e.g., Uzbekistan) or have traditionally benefitted from stronger diaspora networks, as in the case of Tajik migrants (Nasritdinov, Kholmatova, and Sheralieva 2012).

Second, given our sample size, we did not break down our results based on respondents' individual characteristics, such as gender, age, or place of residence, or other factors that can contribute to a digital divide. For example, our older respondents were naturally less comfortable with technology. One of them, a 47-year-old caregiver to the elderly in Moscow, shared with us that, since she is 'not very good at computers and technologies' she only connects on WhatsApp with the help of her son and learns 'all news and important things from him'. In the same vein, diaspora organizations do not always have a robust online, social media presence outside of major cities. A trader in Krasnoyarsk explained to us that diaspora organizations in his city did not have an online presence and that he finds out about diaspora events from other migrants. Another important variable is time spent abroad. In our sample, respondents who had been in Russia longer were much less likely to follow news from Kyrgyzstan, for example. One of them, a trader working in Russia for over 15 years, explained: 'We do not follow [Kyrgyz politics] every day. Only when something is sensational. Like the bombing of the Chinese embassy, the burning of 14 Kyrgyz girls in a Moscow fire, or the earthquake in Uzgen *rayon*.' Finally, we did not examine media literacy and misinformation, including false information shared or posted online. To consider the effect of such variables, a large-*n* survey of migrants would be a logical next step.

Despite these limitations, we believe that our study sheds important light on Kyrgyz migrants' use of smartphones and contributes a lesser-known case study to the literature on technology and migration. It confirms that smartphones are tools that can be effectively used by migrants in their everyday lives to cope with marginalization (Brinkerhoff 2012; Dekker and Engbersen 2014; Hunter 2015; Panagakos and Horst 2006; Thompson 2009). Future research should explore the conditions under which technology could become a tool for a more vigorous diaspora engagement. As argued by Foner (quoted in Vertovec 1999, 456), 'Some groups [and places] are likely to be more transnational than others – and we need research that explores and explains the differences.'

Notes

1. In line with more recent literature, we use the term 'diaspora' as a synonym for labour migrants. For a more rigorous, narrower definition of the term, see Brubaker (2005).
2. Our survey results indicate however that VKontakte is not commonly used by Kyrgyz labour migrants.
3. Interview with a staff member at the Labour Migration Unit, Kyrgyz State Migration Service, Bishkek, 1 June 2018. According to the person we interviewed, negotiations with the Russian government were in process as of June 2018 to remedy this issue.
4. Interview with a staff member at the International Organization for Migration, Bishkek, 22 May 2018. According to the person we interviewed, IOM is also currently developing a regional (i.e. Central Asian) version of MigApp (the global IOM app).
5. According to an international consultant at the International Organization for Migration, signups for the app exceeded the agency's target on the first week. Interview, Bishkek, 16 March 2017.

6. WhatsApp allows users to make voice and video calls as well as to share instant messages, pictures and videos; most of our respondents reported daily connections with family on What-sApp. Odnoklassniki is a social media site comparable to Facebook; our respondents used it to connect with friends and family, access information about the diaspora, read news about Kyrgyzstan, search for jobs, sell or purchase items, or run crowdfunding campaigns.

7. Birge, for example, which means 'together' in Kyrgyz, describes itself as a 'board of announcements for Moscow'. It had 26,962 participants as an Odnoklassniki group in June 2018.

8. The page shares a lot of its content with two larger Odnoklassniki groups relevant to migrants in Russia: 'Removal from re-entry bans' and 'Consultation of the re-entry ban list on the Ministry site'.

9. The two were a pharmacist in Moscow ('Kyrgyz politics is a number-one interest of migrants, since in our hearts we care about what is going on at home') and a Moscow construction worker ('I am very keen on what's going on in Kyrgyzstan in the government').

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