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Mapping the post-Soviet Market in Crisis.

Subjective Geographies of Traders in Odessa and Bishkek



Container Bazaars in Crisis. Photos by they author.

One of the many impacts of SARS-CoV-2 is the necessity to invent ever more flexible livelihood strategies and swift adaptation to digital working processes. Thus far, I have developed a dissertation project in which I aimed to trace and compare subjective geopolitical imaginaries of small-scale cross-border traders at two of the biggest retail hubs in the post-Soviet space, the Seven Kilometer Market (Sed'moi) in Odessa, and the Dordoi Bazaar in Bishkek. Given the ongoing state of crises, my research focus is likely to change, and focus on what is the most inevitable challenge

in the lives of my informants: how to cope with the pandemic crisis?

Ethnographic research strategies often need to be reconsidered and adapted to unpredictable circumstances. In a similar vein the focus group of my project – market traders at the two gigantic post-Soviet container markets in Odessa, Ukraine, and Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan – are prone to constantly changing conditions that limit and facilitate the profitability of their businesses. Yet, the current global health and economic crisis is posing unprecedented challenges to each of our respective scope of action.

For the traders one of the existential features of everyday economies have been interrupted: the circulation of goods, people, and capital. For me, as an anthropologist without fieldwork, the foundations of professional practice are at stake. Whether we like it or not, it's time to develop new methods to stay 'on the books', and, eventually, consider non-face-to-face strategies for ethnographic research.

Contextual background

Post-Soviet markets are particular in various ways, e.g. they only emerged when privatized factories shut down in the 1990s, workers put down their tools for the last time and many, especially women, resorted to bazaar trade as the last available means of subsistence. The markets in Odessa and Bishkek are located in borderland countries of the former Soviet Union, and hence integrate different ideological and socioeconomic zones. With governments oscillating between larger geopolitical and economic powers (mainly Russia, China and the European Union), market traders are subject to and profiteers of constantly changing regulations on trade and mobility regimes. Large scale expansionist politics such as the Chinese Silk Road Initiative (SERB), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and the European Union (EU), as well

as international political, economic, and health crises directly impact on the livelihood strategies of post-Soviet market merchants. Officially imposed ideological spaces, however, don't necessarily comply with the everyday practices of traders who produce their own spaces through the movement of goods, people, and ideas. The merchants' livelihoods depend on trans-border price differentials in goods and labor, and transnational commercial and social networks. Physio-spatial, material and epistemic permeability alongside official, unofficial and digital infrastructures are therefore of fundamental importance for the generation of trading profits. Hence, the merchants' subjective geographies are intrinsically tied to questions of accessibility, profitability, and safety. Yet, based on previous ethnographic research I argue that spatial imaginaries are also shaped by personal associations with bygone, desired, or imagined spaces and places.

The specific socioeconomic features of post-Soviet bazaars already produced an inspiring body of literature (see for instances, Humphrey, 2002; Kovács, 2015; Leshkowich, 2014; Mandel and Humphrey, 2002; Nasritdinov, 2006; Sik and Wallace, 1999). Many have highlighted the diversity of social and ethnic groups at these markets (Billé, Delaplace, and Humphrey 2012; Karrar 2017b; Marsden 2016a; Nasritdinov and O'Connor 2009), the extra-legal dimension of market exchange (Fehlings 2018; Morris 2012; Polese 2016; Sasunkevich 2015), and the role of kin, clan, or commercial networks (Fehlings 2020; Ibañez Tirado 2018; Marsden 2016b). There has been relatively little research, however, on how merchants at post-socialist markets locate themselves within their changing geopolitical, and socioeconomic environment. More specifically I am interested in the ways in which the everyday production of space and place among market traders confirms, contests, or transcends top-down demarcations of spatial cohesion such as the nation-state, economic Unions or other physically, ideologically or economically bounded territories.

I argue that an ethnographic study of subjective views on space and place, as well as

the ways in which these views are enacted in daily life at the market, can offer a particularly productive magnifying glass of post-Cold War geopolitical and economic processes.

Methodologically, I wanted to tackle this question by applying a multi-sited approach, visiting various places alongside the larger supply and retail networks (e.g. markets and production sites in Turkey, China, and Russia). Traveling with the traders to the purchasing destinations I hoped to elicit e.g. memories of previous trips and reflections on how they have changed over time. Participant observation at the Dordoi Bazaar in Bishkek and biographical narrative interviews should complete the triangulation of data collection.

The Space and Time of Crisis

Since the beginning of the global pandemic in February 2020 and the subsequent restrictions on cross-border mobility, I have been trying to adapt my project to the new challenges posed to both, my potential interlocutors and my own ethnographic fieldwork. Inevitably, a part of this work will engage with the most recent dramatic changes of what we, against all odds, considered to be a status quo. As a consequence, I will take the current condition as a matter of fact and focus on a term that has experienced surprisingly little attention in anthropology (Roitman 2014) – I am referring to 'crisis' as a vernacular concept.

The notion of 'crisis', though, has been a vital descriptor for the condition of trade, already in my earlier market-based ethnographic research[1]. Talking about crisis can by no means be reduced to experiences of hardship and conflict. Crisis is a foundational condition for the market business (after all markets in post-Soviet countries were born from the collapse of their surrounding socioeconomic and political environment) and traders have a complex understanding of its personal and

economic assets and drawbacks.

In previous fieldwork, I encountered traders that identified the crisis as a living condition since the demise of the Soviet Union, or others who complained that a raging 'global crisis' (*mirovoy krizis*) forces them to constantly invent new business strategies. Crisis does not only unfold in place, but it is also salient in its temporal dimension. Talking to traders in different post-Soviet countries, I realized how biographical narrations are often organized alongside periods of plight and times of prosperity (even if they would usually coincide to some extend).

The time when post-Soviet bazaars allowed for accessible and profitable engagement in market trading have ended already before pandemic. Economic crises (e.g. 1998, 2008, 2014, 2020), political and social instability (revolutions in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, 2010, and ongoing since October 2020, and in Ukraine in 2004-5 and 2014), and border conflicts (Kyrgyz-Tajik-Uzbek border, Kazakh-Kyrgyz border, inner Ukrainian separation of the Donetsk People's Republic) are just some examples of larger processes that create a hazard for market traders. The sudden standstill of international mobility in the face of SARS-CoV-2, thus, accelerates a decline, that had already been looming (see also Alff, 2016; Eggart, 2019a; Karrar, 2017b). But 'Do Bazaars Dye?', as the anthropologist Hassan Karrar (2017a) provocatively asked in a study of the condition of trade at Dordoi. It remains an open and urging question of how traders can cope with the present economic conditions and whether the flexibility they acquired during past crises will come in handy to develop new strategies for the current situation.
It is possible as bazaar trade is hardy to crises, and has shown remarkable persistence over time. Both, Dordoi and Sed'moi market are nodes, where global forces materialize in everyday activities of men and women with different ethnic, national, and religious backgrounds. They are places where the accelerated mobility of people, goods, and ideas symbolize a mode or language of globalization that takes place on the ground, or 'from below' (Mathews, Ribeiro, and Vega 2012; Rudaz 2020).

If we want to understand the challenge that the pandemic poses to market traders whose livelihoods depend on the cross-border mobility of goods and people, we need to ask how the current crisis is perceived to be different or similar to previous ones.

Methodological challenges

Given the institutional restrictions on face-to-face research (that may last for an unpredictable period of time), I will not be able to travel to my field sites in the foreseeable future or to conduct classic ethnography and participant observation on the ground. Therefore, I am thinking about switching to an online-based mode of data collection. Finding participants would then rely on a strategy that I already applied during previous fieldwork in Russia. There, I advertised my project in an open Facebook group (for supply and demand for all possible kinds of goods and information). The resonance to this call was striking and I was not even able to personally meet all the people that offered their participation. Both markets in Odessa and Bishkek have their own social media sites, which I could use for a similar call. This technique would naturally limit the scope of insights and the possibility to develop closer relationships with key informants. It would pose a series of ethical and practical questions (e.g. if the participants should be paid because of the remote type of interaction, and how a closer collaboration with local actors could look without meeting in person). And it would require to conceptualize the epistemological implications of digital ethnography.

From what I know, however, many traders at the market have reacted to the digital turn much swifter than I and already turned into professional online providers. Maybe the traders' easiness in using digital communication will enable us to develop a more collaborative framework for the collection and exchange of data, information, skills, and knowledge.

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I am **Claudia Eggart**, a PhD researcher in Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester, where I work under the supervision of Madeleine Reeves. I have a background in Literature, Slavonic Studies, (BA, University of Vienna), Sociology (MA, Free University Berlin) and Social Anthropology (MA, Central European University, Budapest). In previous work, I studied the emotional aspects of professional reorientation among female shuttle traders in the early 1990s in Russia. After that, I engaged in the study of post-Soviet mobilities, comparing different types of mobilities and livelihood strategies among traders and labor migrants in Kyrgyzstan. For my current PhD project, I have come a long way to conceptualize a study that combines my interest in the making, unmaking, and remaking of biographies of post-Soviet market traders, social and geographical mobilities, and spatial imaginaries.

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Footnote

[1] I conducted ethnographic research with active and former market traders in Russia (2018), Hungary (2019), and Kyrgyzstan (2019), see Eggart (2019b, 2019a).

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