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### ***Together on the Move. Tajik Migrants in Olympic Sochi\****

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Project “Together on the Move” consists of two parts:

1. A traditional qualitative research that sought to identify existing organizing efforts among labor migrants from Tajikistan in Russia for the protection of their rights, and ways in which their efforts could be enhanced, specifically in Sochi. Being the location of the next Winter Olympics in 2014, Sochi is building massive structures within short period of time, with such pressures it is paramount that migrants’ rights are protected. The research covered circular migrants in Dushanbe and Soghd regions as well as active labor migrants in Moscow, Saint-Petersburg, and Sochi.
2. An action research, whose goal was to enhance opportunities for organizing community groups amongst Central Asian labor migrants in Russia, with a focus on citizens of Tajikistan, through the use of photography and graphic design. The project also aimed at developing opportunities where migrants, through using their photographs, could express their views, interests, and needs. The project recruited eight migrants who took photography classes over a course of three weeks, and who were then introduced to a number of non-profit and mass media organizations in order to promote their work.

In Sochi, where there were difficulties in getting access to a larger number of migrants, we interviewed a smaller number of migrants, one of whom is Yusuf,<sup>1</sup> whose story is in many ways representative of issues that many Tajik labor migrants face in Russia and what they go through at a personal level.

Yusuf, a brigade leader who has been working in Sochi for two years (and ten years in Russia), tells me his migration experience as we walk along the river Sochinka. It's an unusually cool day for Sochi in the middle of June. Yusuf is wearing classic jeans and a button-down white shirt which sets him apart from the majority of migrants who choose more colorful and elaborate outfits. A man-bag that he carries with him at all times is one of the traits that indicate that he is a migrant, having to always carry his documents with him. He proudly shows me his passport, registration card, and his "permit" (that allows him to work in Russia).



Yusuf showing his documents (Rut Perez-Studer, Sochi, Russia, 2012)

"I am not afraid anymore," he tells me, "if they stop me in the street I show them my documents and they let me go. Though there are some members of the police who either don't know the new rules about permits or just choose to take me to the police station anyway. Well, they have a right to keep me for three hours ... then they let me go."

Starting in July 2010, migrant workers from countries that have a visa-free system with Russia (including Tajikistan) can legally work for individuals on the basis of a permit. Initially it is issued for 1-3 months, but can be extended for up to one year. Permits also provide the basis for the duration of time that a migrant can reside in Russia, in the absence of which they can only stay for a maximum period of 90 days.

Though permits are relatively new, they have already helped obtain documented work for over one million migrants. Tajik migrants hold the second most number of permits (206,398) followed by Uzbek migrants who hold half of the total permits given out (478,691) since the law took effect in 2010.<sup>2</sup>

I first met Yusuf at the office of a Tajik diaspora organization in the center of Sochi, where he had come to process permits for his fellow migrant workers. Among other services the diaspora association 'Sodeistvie', for a fee, arranges the submission of documentation needed for permits to the local department of the Federal Migration Service (FMS). When I asked Yusuf why he could not do it on his own, he said he could,

but his co-workers could not, either because of language barriers or because they have to be at work during FMS office hours.

The monthly fee for a permit is 1,000 Russian Rubles (about US\$35), whilst the fee charged by various go-betweens (such as the diaspora association and others) is anywhere between 300-1,000 Rubles. The IOM (International Organization for Migration) reports, however, that there is a relatively easy process of applying for and obtaining permits, which has allowed for the majority of them to be issued directly to migrants, thus eliminating the need for go-betweens who, hitherto, had been essential in obtaining work permits in what was a complex process.<sup>3</sup>



An officer is questioning a migrant over his documents (Rut Perez-Studer, Sochi, Russia 2012)

Yusuf is 31 years old, and has spent the last ten years in Russia. He is one of eight children. Although he is not the oldest, he is unofficially the designated leader of his six brothers and sister. He looks much older than his age and has a natural charisma that draws people to him. In Sochi he has also taken on the role of leader/caretaker, whereby he looks after the nine men in his crew. He makes sure they all have jobs, documents, roofs over their heads, and that they save enough money to send home. Yusuf's advantage is that he speaks Russian quite well, which he soon learned after arriving in Moscow. Overall, many migrants learn and understand Russian after spending a few years there, but many are too shy to speak it and are never able to improve their speaking levels to be able to express and defend themselves adequately.

For the past four months, Yusuf has been living with nine co-workers in an unfinished cottage on the outskirts of Sochi, where two out of the four rooms are only just in habitable condition. "It's a bit cramped," he says, "but it's good, we have a kitchen, a shower... it's good. In the mornings, even if each person takes 15-20 minutes, the last person in line has to wait a couple hours for his turn. But we make it work." Three of the guys in his group are his blood relatives.

Six years ago Yusuf married a beautiful traditional Tajik girl; the daughter of a mullah, who is, in Yusuf's words, "very modest and undemanding." They now have two little girls, one and two years of age. They are all back in Tajikistan, and he visits them every winter, where he spends 2-3 months. "I miss the summers of Tajikistan, since 2002 I have only spent one summer there, and that was in 2006. I miss our summer fruits ... I had to miss the births of my two children." He talks to them every other day.

When I ask Yusuf if he could bring them to Sochi, he says it would be very expensive and difficult. “I could of course have my family in one of the rooms in the cottage, and have the rest of the guys in the other, but, then if one of the guys says something to her or looks at her differently, I’d have to beat them both up.” When I challenge that way of thinking and say that it would not be her fault, he responds: “well I know it would not be her fault because she is a very modest women, but that’s how it’s been done, and I would have to do it even if I didn’t want to.”

Just like many others, Yusuf plans to go back to Tajikistan once he saves enough money to buy (or build) a house for his family and a few pieces of construction equipment which he hopes would help generate income back in Tajikistan. He has given himself until he is 35 to achieve these goals. He sends money home on a regular basis. While we are out walking and talking, he quickly pulls out a receipt showing that he had transferred 70, 000 Rubles (over US\$2,000) that very morning. This is the money from his entire crew he tells me. “I send it to my brother in Dushanbe who keeps the majority of the money and gives out what’s needed to their families. This way, when [the migrants] go back home, they have money saved—otherwise their families will spend everything.”



Working on Roof (Rut Perez-Studer, Olympic construction site, Russia, 2012)

These workers are working on top of a six-story building with no tie downs for safety in the event of a fall. We witnessed various safety issues on construction sites.

When asked about some of his most difficult moments in Russia, he tells me the story of when he and his brigade (a different crew at the time) had built an entire four-story house outside Moscow in just six months. He goes on to tell me that, “one day the go-between guy who was from Belarus disappeared, we refused to leave the premises, demanding our earnings ... We went to the owner and he swore that he had

paid the go-between and then called the security guard to kick us out. It was a lot of money, six months' worth of work done by all ten of us... but we were new to Russia, so we had to let it go."

When meeting with diasporas the NGOs providing legal services and the Migration Service of Tajikistan all stated that one of the biggest cases of abuse is to do with unpaid wages, an issue that takes up the majority of their time. The primary reason this occurs is that migrants rarely work based on contracts. Therefore, labor relations are normally governed through verbal agreements. For a set fee, many of these organizations (except for some of the non-profit organizations who may do it for free) work on getting the money owed to migrants in order to make a profit for themselves. They predominantly utilize informal mediation practices where they call the employer/go-between/debtor, introduce themselves, and request payment. Russian legislation prosecutes anyone hiring undocumented migrants, which is why many of the employers, to avoid problems with the Russian Federal Migration Service, pay off their debt after a few calls/meetings.

While I was talking to the head of the diaspora association 'Sodeistvie' in Sochi, Midov Farrukh, two Tajik migrants in their early twenties came in and requested Farrukh's help in getting their unpaid and overdue wages. Farrukh took down the employer's and the migrants' information and promised to call them back. I asked the migrants what the problem was and they told me that their employer (to whom they referred to as the "Serb," as there are many contractors from Serbia active in Sochi) had initially been paying them on a normal basis, but then decided to withhold their last wages for no fault of their own, as they had carried out the work that was agreed upon. Farrukh did not even ask them if they had a contract or any other documents proving their labor agreements, as he already knew they did not. Cases of non-payment of wages are very common in Sochi, and even more so at the Olympic sites. The Russian state-owned company Olympstroy, solely created for the purposes of building and preparing the sites for the Olympics in and around Sochi, is responsible for coordinating the process of construction.



Working in the Rain (Rut Perez-Studer, Sochi, Russia, 2012)

We saw no hand protection for the workers while bending and manipulating the hard re-bar (steel) and concrete walls.

Officially, on its website it has enlisted 42 general contractors for building 400 of the Olympic projects. Each of these contractors has many partners as well as subcontractors, making it nearly impossible or extremely difficult to trace who the responsible party would be if such a labor dispute arose. Each entity starts pointing fingers at another and the case dies.<sup>4</sup> Officially registered organizations (such as diaspora and non-profit organizations) that try to go through official-formal routes take time to retrieve the lost wages (or lost earnings) and sometimes they cannot get them paid. At other times, agencies do not follow through, or even deceive migrants by keeping larger parts of owed payments than originally agreed upon. Those migrant workers who cannot or do not want to wait for help or have been “scarred” by deceit, go to gangs or informal networks, whose gang members, usually from the Caucasus, charge up to 50 percent of the money owed to the migrants. “They are expensive, but they are fast, and guaranteed,” said a migrant worker from Tajikistan. Others, who do not want to pay such a steep fee, organize their own informal networks, where, upon need, they call each other up, and collectively threaten the debtor with destroying the work that has already been done, destroying supplies that still need to be installed, or by taking away their essential documents (passports, or car certificates) or keys, vowing that they will not release them until the migrant or migrants get paid their due wages.

Contracts for migrant workers are hard to come by, for several reasons:

1. Russian legislation sets an annual quota for hiring a foreign workforce. While there are an estimated nine million migrant workers currently in Russia, the annual quota is about 1.7 million, making it difficult for employers and migrant workers alike to obtain legal permits.
2. When having official labor contracts/agreements, employers are obliged to pay taxes (including social security) for each employee they hire. Undocumented migrants become a much cheaper alternative.
3. Job opportunities in the informal sector pay much more than any formal contract positions that may exist.



Living Conditions 1 (Zamira Djabarova at Olympic site, Russia, 2012).

These are shipping containers stacked two high and serve as the living quarters (for winter and summer) of migrants working on some of the Olympic sites. There is only one window at the end of each container.

For example, Iqbol, a migrant worker from the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region of Tajikistan, has been working for the past six months for 100 Rubles an hour at an Olympic site in Sochi. By working ten hours a day, and with hardly any days off, he makes 28-30,000 Rubles a month (about US\$800).



Living Conditions 2 (anonymous, Sochi, Russia, 2012)

These shipping containers are lined with bunk beds, and house at least 10 people. These people often times sleep in shifts; rotating out of the beds for each work/sleep cycle

Prior to that, he had had a work permit and a contract which had been arranged by the company that hired him. However, he had only been paid 50 Rubles an hour. With such pay he would only make US\$400 a month, not enough to send home to his parents, wife, and four children as well as cover his living expenses while working in Russia. Given that people not working documented in Russia can only stay up to 90 days, Iqbol's employer pays for his ticket to Khujand every three months, where he spends a couple of days until the next flight back to Sochi. Even though he has now been in Khujand twice (as the tickets to this destination in Tajikistan from Sochi are the cheapest (US\$150), he has not seen his family for three years. He cannot travel from Khujand to Khorog (the town where his family resides), because it requires both time and money, and his employer wants him back immediately. Tickets to Dushanbe (where he could potentially catch a quick flight to Khorog) are much more expensive, and besides, his employer would not pay, and Iqbol himself cannot afford it.

Flights from Dushanbe to Moscow are the most expensive (compared to all other Tajikistan-Russia destinations), at over US\$500 one way. This is almost twice as expensive as flying from Bishkek to Moscow and at least 30 percent more expensive than flying from Tashkent, both comparable in terms of distance from Moscow. Even in a market where there are about twenty active airlines, Tajikistan manages to dictate the fares. According to a representative of a Russian airline in Dushanbe (who requested to remain anonymous), Tajik airlines set a fare and the Russian airlines always need to be slightly higher. "The only time where we can sell cheaper tickets is when we sell them well in advance, because Tajik airlines can only set their flight times up to a month in advance (due to inability to plan)."<sup>5</sup> Prices for tickets are also set seasonally; in the summer when the traffic is mostly incoming to Russia, the costs of Russia-bound flights are much higher than those incoming to Tajikistan.

Many migrants cannot afford such fares, which has resulted in the setting-up of special microcredit programs in Tajikistan as well as in Russia. These programs provide loans for “migrant expenses.” Interest rates run as high as 20-26 percent. Depending upon the size of the loans, the applicant migrants can be approved in three ways: based on collateral, a collective group guarantee, or a guarantor’s letter. As noted by a representative of a microcredit organization in Saint-Petersburg, Mol Bulak, Tajiks are among the most favored customers as they are disciplined and mostly pay on time. One of the requirements for getting a loan is having a job. Given that the majority of migrants only have informal jobs, the microcredit organization is satisfied with photos of the job site and confirmation (even made verbally) from co-workers and the management. When asked what strategies they have if customers are not able to pay, Rustam, who is also a deputy at the Tajik diaspora association ‘Ajam’ grinned, saying “well, we have collection agencies that will make sure they pay.”

We arrive at the beach, as our interview with Yusuf continues. It’s the high season in Sochi and the rocky beach is full of people. We sit at a café on the beach, and as we watch a group of young men (that appear to be migrants) having fun at the beach, we discuss how here in Sochi, due to a mixed native population, migrants do not stand out as much. The locals are much more open to inter-ethnic relations and coexistence, which is evident during daily encounters. Yusuf confirms that people are much friendlier toward migrants here, especially compared to Moscow where one feels watched all the time.



Playing in the Water (Zamira Djabarova, Sochi, Russia, 2012)

We are almost certain that the group in the water are migrants, realizing that they maintain certain characteristics of migrants at the beach: they are usually in groups of 3-4, never bring any beachwear (suits, towels, etc.), go for a very short swim in their undergarments, dry themselves quickly while standing around on the beach in the sun, then dress and leave.

Yusuf tells us that we should refrain from swimming or going into the sea, but if we must, then we should go to the beaches where there are more waves and that are located further away from downtown Sochi. Apparently, the head of the general contractors on one of the sites Yusuf had worked on told him that



sewage in Sochi has limited treatment and is released deep into the Black Sea. The sewage system in Sochi was built in the 1930s and is a subject of much discussion among locals and tourists who blame it for various infections.<sup>6</sup> Modernization of the sewage system is one of the Olympic infrastructure projects currently underway.

It is getting dark and we ask Yusuf if it is all right for him to be out this late because we have recently learned through the media that, based on the decision of the City Anti-terrorist Committee,<sup>7</sup> migrant workers, after hours, are only allowed to be in groups and accompanied by a so-called leader. A new rule issued in late June 2012 limits migrants' mobility, despite guarantees for freedom of movement given by the Constitution of the Russian Federation. Its enforcement is unclear, there also being confusion over what "after-hours" means exactly and who the "leader" is. Yusuf is not too worried about it, but says that once enforced it could be a serious problem for migrants and an additional source of income for the police and migration services. "Migrants work long hours and finish work late, after hours they can be just on their way home," he says.

On our way out we pass by the entrance of the Park Rivera, the central park of Sochi, where the police are conducting one of their raids, pulling aside all young men that look non-Russian. A few days after arriving in Sochi, we were invited by the Tajik diaspora to join them in a public "meeting" held by the city administration on migration issues. When we arrived in the late afternoon at the plaza, on the opposite side of the street, outside the newest commercial mall, were a dozen "security" units ranging from the regular military and Special Forces, to local police and others. On the other side of the street was a military band tuning their instruments. They began with what appeared to be a rehearsal for an official parade. We looked around for what was to be the public discussion on migration within the plaza, but saw no one. A quarter of an hour later on the southwest corner of the plaza we saw the arrival of a handful of state and media personnel following a group of what appeared to be state officials, as well as police officers of higher rank. Representatives of various diasporas were present as well. These new groups set themselves up with a microphone on the opposite side of the units and began to address the crowd. The chief of police gave a speech about the need for keeping Sochi streets safe from crime, which is especially important given the large numbers of migrant workers in town and therefore the higher crime rates. He then went on to enumerate crimes that had taken place over the past week. It should be noted that none of the named suspects had Central Asian names. When they were finished with their speeches, the captain of the police and deputy Mayor of Sochi asked the forces to follow through with their orders and keep Sochi safe.



Deputy in Meeting (Rut Perez-Studer, Sochi, Russia, 2012).

The deputy Mayor, Nikolai Pelikh, addressing the chief officers as a member of the Tajik diaspora listens on.

The units began their previously rehearsed parade in front of the officials, saluted them, and then went away to conduct their duties in search of migrants. For the rest of our stay in Sochi we were witnesses to the systematic singling out of migrants throughout the city.

As an example, at a park entrance on a Friday evening, we observed that after a brief conversation with three migrants, police officers took their documents and walked toward a booth where the men were left standing outside. After a few moments the officers returned and had them escorted to an unmarked minivan half a block down the street, away from the crowds coming in and out of the park.



Park Raid (Rut Perez-Studer, Sochi, Russia, 2012).

These migrants have had their documents confiscated and are being led away to an unmarked minivan.

We noticed the deputy mayor (who had given a speech on the day of the “public meeting” in the plaza) and the head of the department of cooperation with the law enforcement agencies, Nikolai Pelikh, present at the operation. They were wearing casual khaki pants and a red polo shirt and were speaking to the officers-in-charge.

The next morning, local mass media proudly reported that 200 migrants were recorded as having committed violations of migration law and other legislation during the city raid organized by the city administration.

Yusuf’s story is representative of many of the issues that Tajik migrants face in Sochi and other parts of Russia. Construction of the Olympic sites in Sochi is behind schedule, so more and more migrants are being brought in to speed up the construction process. Yet, these same people are seen as a threat to security, to be expelled from Sochi in time for the opening of the Olympic Games. One could not stop thinking of Sergio Arau’s film *A Day without a Mexican*, in which, one morning, all Mexicans disappear from California, a disaster that threatens the economic, political, and social well-being of the State.

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<sup>1</sup> Some migrants’ names have been changed for protection from possible repercussions to them or their families.

<sup>2</sup> *Praktika izpol'zovaniia patentov na rabotu u chastnykh lits inostrannymi grazhdanami – trudiashchimisia migrantami v rossiiskoi federatsii (rezul'taty issledovaniia)* (Moscow: IOM, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Interviews with experts in Tajikistan and Russia, including representatives of IOM, Migration and Law Center in Moscow, and Trade Union of Labor Migrants in Construction Sector.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with freelance journalist Dmitriy Doe.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that such allegations were denied by the representative of Tajik Air in Saint-Petersburg. Instead he noted that the high prices are due to the high fuel prices (export tariffs imposed by Russia) and airport fees (in Tajikistan).

<sup>6</sup> Discussed in a number of blogs, including: [privetsochi.ru/blog](http://privetsochi.ru/blog), [maksportal.ru](http://maksportal.ru) (July 2012).

<sup>7</sup> "Gastarbaiteram zapretili gulyat' bez starshego," *Sochi 24*, July 3, 2012, <http://sochi-24.ru/obshchestvo/gastrabajteram-zapretili-gulyat-bez-starshego.201273.51545.html>.

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