

SPECIAL FEATURE

# Rise of the Surplus Population? Land Decollectivization, Class Stratification, and Labor Precarization in Uzbekistan

Franco Galdini 

The University of Manchester, Manchester, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland  
Corresponding author: [franco.galdini@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:franco.galdini@manchester.ac.uk)

## Abstract

This article identifies decollectivization as one of the central policies through which the so-called “Uzbek model” mediated independent Uzbekistan’s incorporation into the global economy as a cotton exporter. As such, it problematizes the way in which the dominant literature on transition framed the country’s independent history since 1991 as a “paradox” of no transition and transformation. Since it theorizes the former as the application of privatization, liberalization, and macroeconomic stabilization, the literature cannot explain why, absent this standard reform package, Uzbekistan still underwent a momentous transformation from full employment and low migration to mass informalization of economic activity and rural outmigration. Instead, I contend, decollectivization entailed a process of mass expropriation of the rural population from the land—primitive accumulation in Marxian terminology—in order to put it to production for capital accumulation. As such, land use was shifted from the collective reproduction of the rural population during Soviet times to the rent-subsidization of capital accumulation after independence, particularly via import-substitution industrialization. The result has been the class stratification of Uzbek society, most evident in the rise of a vast relative surplus population of landless peasants struggling in the precarious informal economy, including as daily workers and labor migrants.

## Introduction

For three decades, the literature on transition has dominated the academic debate on the transformation of the independent republics that emerged from the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991. While vast and diverse, at its most fundamental, this body of scholarly work agrees that a standard reform package of privatization, (price and trade) liberalization, and macroeconomic stabilization represented the only way for these republics to “transition” from the failed Soviet command economy to free market capitalism.<sup>1</sup> Since it never questioned the efficacy of the reform package, when reality in the former Soviet Union (FSU) defied the literature’s expectations—yielding large scale de-industrialization and the pauperization

of the working class, rather than development and rising living standards—the latter ascribed this failure to the lack of, or the partial and incomplete, application of otherwise sound reforms (the “transition” package), particularly due to the vested interests of corrupt elites and crony capitalists.<sup>2</sup> As such, the literature appears to be stuck with the “paradox” of no transition *and* radical transformation in the FSU,<sup>3</sup> unable to explain the latter due to its theorization of the former.

In this regard, Uzbekistan is no exception. Since, against the grain of the standard reform package, the government of Uzbekistan (GoU) maintained price distortions and state ownership of the land via the so-called “Uzbek model,” the country was framed as having preserved “the Soviet command economy and governance structures ... with only perfunctory nods in the direction of market” reforms.<sup>4</sup> The result was a “unique phenomenon” of “some sort of hybrid between market and command system.”<sup>5</sup> As a consequence, Uzbekistan presented “the paradox of a reform that avoided introducing any substantial features of a market economy and liberalization, but nevertheless caused important changes in agricultural production relations and the agrarian structure,” evident in the switch from full employment and low rural outmigration during Soviet times to mass informality and largely seasonal migration after independence.<sup>6</sup> Again, the transition literature in Uzbekistan seems to be also stuck with the “paradox” of no transition *and* transformation.

This is the starting point of this contribution, which identifies land decollectivization as one of the crucial policies through which the Uzbek model mediated the country’s integration into the global economy as a cotton exporter. While legally land remained state-owned, decollectivization allowed the state to privatize access to the land and commons and, simultaneously, redirect the bulk of the cotton rents from the Soviet welfare system to the subsidization of capital accumulation, mostly in the form of import-substitution industrialization (ISI). In other words, decollectivization demolished the Soviet social contract based on cotton production in exchange for the collective reproduction of the rural population via full employment, welfare, and infrastructure provisions, along with access to the land and commons. As a result, the majority of the rural population was thrown into the ranks of a vast surplus population of landless peasants, whose precarious labor has become a feature of independent Uzbekistan most evident in their struggle to survive in the informal economy, including in subsistence agriculture and as daily and migrant workers. As such, not only do the informalization and precarization of economic activity go hand in hand in Uzbekistan, but the profound transformation of Uzbek society via class stratification occurred precisely *because of* (the mediation of) the Uzbek model, revealing there being no “paradox.”

Before proceeding with the analysis, a few provisos are in order. The article critiques the specific lack of a convincing explanation for change in Uzbekistan found in the dominant literature on transition, as summarized in the “paradox” of no transition *and* transformation.<sup>7</sup> This does not mean that all or even most literature would frame this as a “paradox,” although some of the authors cited/referenced here certainly do. It simply means that, instead of accounting for what happened in Uzbekistan and why, the transition literature assumed what should happen post 1991 and then proceeded to explain why its expectations were disappointed, leaving one to wonder why post-independence Uzbekistan underwent such a deep

transformation given that, per the literature, it allegedly failed to reform. As such, the paper's original contribution lies in accounting precisely for this transformation, namely the rise of a vast surplus population that labors in precarious conditions—the theme of this Special Issue—at home and abroad, starting from how the Uzbek state mediated the country's integration into the global economy as a cotton exporter.

In this regard, although some original material from a small sample of representative interviews and fieldwork observations conducted in Uzbekistan in 2018 and 2019 is introduced, the article mostly relies on the extant literature for empirical data, particularly the seminal anthropological studies by Kandiyoti and Trevisani mostly from the decades of the 1990s and the 2000s. Instead of reviewing this literature in a separate section, the paper reinterprets its conclusions in light of the alternative framework espoused here. In other words, the aim here is not to reproduce a descriptive chronicle of thirty years of rural change in Uzbekistan, which the literature has amply documented; rather, it is to provide a cogent explanation for one of the crucial and lasting characteristics of this change, namely the rise of a vast surplus population that works informally and migrates seasonally by the millions. Therefore, reference to more recent developments also focuses on illustrating the endurance of this feature, rather than presenting an up-to-date picture of specific changes since the late 2000s.

The article is organized as follows. Section 1 introduces the main institutions of collective agriculture in the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (UzSSR), which guaranteed the collective reproduction of the rural population via cotton production in exchange for full employment, welfare, and infrastructure provisions, as well as collective access to the land and commons. Section 2 explores how land decollectivization in independent Uzbekistan demolished the Soviet social contract, leading to the class stratification of Uzbek rural society between a minority of private farmers next to a large majority of landless peasants. As section 3 argues, this relative surplus population of landless peasants struggles in the precarious informal economy, as evident in the rise of the post-independence phenomena of daily workers' bazaars and mass labor migration, especially to Russia and Kazakhstan. The conclusion summarizes the article's main findings.

### Collective Agriculture in Soviet Uzbekistan

In the UzSSR, life largely revolved around the land. More than half of the population resided in rural areas, a figure that, while estimates vary, remains largely true to this day.<sup>8</sup> In this context, the institutions of collective agriculture—namely collective and state farms, or *kolkhozy* and *sovkhozy*, respectively—had come not only to regulate economic activity, particularly the growing of the cotton crop for the industries of the Soviet Union's European republics or for export to hard currency markets, but also to organize rural communities as a whole. In general, *sovkhozy* differed from *kolkhozy* in a number of ways, including in that they provided higher wages for workers and were the recipient of larger capital investments, such as inputs and machinery.<sup>9</sup> However, both “state and collective farms were much more than a production unit,” as they “comprised a rural community”<sup>10</sup> and “were social institutions, embracing practically all aspects of social and economic life.”<sup>11</sup> Specifically, *kolkhozy* and *sovkhozy* provided electricity, gas, and water delivery and infrastructure maintenance,

including for the huge canal irrigation system to grow cotton, as well as kindergartens, schools, clinics, and hospitals, along with collective land usufruct rights for food production and livestock rearing, for farm workers and their families.<sup>12</sup>

This was at the heart of the Soviet social contract that guaranteed the collective reproduction of the working class and, particularly in the UzSSR, of the rural population. Put differently, within the Union-wide conditions of industrial mass production and collective agriculture, the UzSSR grew cotton in exchange for the provision of full employment, social infrastructures, and welfare services,<sup>13</sup> along with access to the land and commons. Net direct and indirect budget transfers from Moscow sustained this “all-round caretaker” state in the UzSSR,<sup>14</sup> including via the systematic use of price incentives for cotton, which, while varying, entailed payments for the crop at procurement prices higher than international prices during decades.<sup>15</sup> The net result was that, by the 1970s, the UzSSR exhibited “a much higher material standard of living ... than in most of its Asian neighbours.” Indicators in health and education were equally remarkable, as “[b]y the early 1960s virtually universal literacy was achieved for both males and females (compared to 20 per cent in the Indian subcontinent) and there were seven times as many doctors per person as the average for Asia.”<sup>16</sup> This included “the development of an extensive network of medical and health care which covered the entire territory of the country.”<sup>17</sup>

Given the significant social wage accrued in the collectives, “an individual occupied in the agricultural or service sectors [could] often earn a higher income and sustain a higher standard of living in [Soviet] Uzbekistan than his industrial or urban counterpart,”<sup>18</sup> explaining low rural outmigration in the UzSSR, as well as Soviet Central Asia’s having one of the lowest migration rates in the USSR.<sup>19</sup> Thus, despite rapid development, including some industrialization linked to the cotton sector, as in tractor and mechanical harvester manufacturing, as well as in the textile and chemical industries, indigenous nationalities such as Uzbeks and Tajiks continued to prioritize employment in agriculture and services, while Russian immigrants came to dominate higher-skilled industrial and technical jobs especially in the cities.<sup>20</sup>

Even during the precipitating crisis in production and social reproduction of the perestroika years, *kolkhozy* and *sovkhozy* in the UzSSR continued the overall provision of social wages, while collective access to the land and commons cushioned the fallout from increasing unemployment in the industrial, construction, and transport sectors. As people moved back to rural areas in order to “share[] work with the existing labour force” or engage in subsistence agriculture,<sup>21</sup> this resulted in a process of reagrarianization that fueled the growth in “hidden unemployment” in the countryside in the 1980s.<sup>22</sup> These phenomena would accelerate after independence in 1991, due to the radically changing material conditions of production and reproduction in newly-independent Uzbekistan as a cotton producer for export, to which I now turn.

### Land Decollectivization and Class Stratification: Private Farmers vs. Landless Peasants

During the decade of the 1990s, the Uzbek model mediated the transformation of *sovkhozy* into *kolkhozy* and, gradually, into shareholding cooperatives named *shirkats*, “with the aim of reducing the government’s financial responsibility” for

collective farms and “reliev[ing] the state budget from expenditures.”<sup>23</sup> By 1994, sovkhozy had all but been eliminated.<sup>24</sup> The result was progressive labor retrenchment in the context of initial rounds of labor shedding that left part of the workforce “unemployed and landless,” giving rise to the “casualization of agricultural labour.”<sup>25</sup> In shirkats, as workers turned into shareholders of the collective, this effectively “did away with the obligation of the republican budget for wage payments,”<sup>26</sup> which instead became the responsibility of management. Amid economic crisis and insolvency following the collapse of the USSR, wage arrears or outright nonpayment became the norm,<sup>27</sup> in parallel to the overall retrenchment of labor across the Uzbek economy, as evident in the dramatic reduction in real wages (underemployment), as well as pension and welfare payment arrears, nonpayment, or payment in kind.<sup>28</sup>

As a result, the rural population was increasingly being left to fend for themselves. For this reason, in parallel to the gradual transformation of collective farms, since the first years of independence many rural households were allotted plots for their private use. While the practice of awarding smallholdings had been introduced during the final years of the Soviet Union,<sup>29</sup> their size increased “from 110,000 ha before independence to 630,000 ha in 1994”<sup>30</sup> to comprise about three million plots on 10 percent of total arable land.<sup>31</sup> Again, the objective was for the state to reduce welfare provisions significantly, if not end them outright, in order to redirect the bulk of cotton rents to subsidize ISI. As President Karimov candidly opined, “[e]ndowing people with land played a truly revolutionary role, as it eliminated each individual’s dependence on the state” (emphasis added).<sup>32</sup> However, while becoming “a safety-valve for the rural residents” in view of the production slump that followed the collapse of the USSR,<sup>33</sup> these smallholdings have been far “too small and insecure to provide a reliable basis” for subsistence, particularly for larger households,<sup>34</sup> whose members were pushed to engage in multiple informal jobs at home and abroad to guarantee their reproduction (next section).

The *hokim* (i.e., governor) was one of the central figures in this process of transformation of collective agriculture. As one interviewee put it,

when everything broke down, we were left with cotton. [The] over-centralization of power [in the hands of the] hokims in the rural areas was necessary. The hokim was really the master who had to provide all the conditions: give water, give fertilizer, give tractors, give gas so that people could work.<sup>35</sup>

Appointed by the president, hokims secured the provision of subsidized inputs such as fuel and fertilizers in order to guarantee the continuation of cotton production for export. In turn, however, the central government purchased the whole harvest at below-market prices to resell it at international prices on the world market and pocket the difference; that is, cotton rents that went to subsidize capital accumulation in the form of ISI.<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, from day one of the transition, transformation revolved around the appropriation of cotton rents. As explained, during Soviet times the UzSSR was the recipient of net direct and indirect budget transfers from Moscow, including via the systematic use of price incentives for cotton, which guaranteed employment, welfare, and infrastructures in exchange for cotton production, in the context of

collective access to the land and commons. This radically changed following independence, as, rather than substitute for these transfers, cotton rents largely went to expand old industrial enterprises such as the textile and chemical industry, and, crucially, to develop new manufacturing sectors such as the automotive and electronics industry.

The Uzbek model mediated this process via specific policies that appropriated and channeled cotton rents to ISI. For example, as the state exercised monopsony power over the cotton harvest, the Ministry of Finance purchased the crop at below-market prices to resell it at international prices in the world market via government-affiliated trading companies. The Central Bank and National Bank would then allocate the cotton rents thus accrued to priority industrial projects via the provision of credit at low or even negative interest rates, including through commercial banks. Moreover, these manufacturing industries could acquire hard currency at preferential exchange rates for the tariff-free import of parts, components, and machinery.<sup>37</sup> Following the rise in commodity prices including cotton, particularly from the 2000s onward, these rent-subsidized benefits were systematically extended to small and medium enterprises (SMEs), as well as to small capitalist farmers entering the horticulture sector.<sup>38</sup>

Still, while during the first half of the 1990s, the Uzbek model “undoubtedly unleashed forces of inequality in rural society,” at the same time “the *guaranteed access to land* ... almost certainly limited these disequalizing forces. ... Work sharing was widely distributed among the labour force, the great majority of whom were toiling within an overall framework of cooperative agriculture” (emphasis added).<sup>39</sup> Along with organizing production of cotton and wheat according to state orders,<sup>40</sup> shirkats continued providing and maintaining at least part of the rural infrastructure and services so indispensable for the reproduction of the rural population, including grazing rights and forage on the collective land as well as inputs (e.g., tractors, fertilizers) for private production on household plots.<sup>41</sup> Succinctly put, cooperatives still “bound” a considerable part of [the] rural labour force” together.<sup>42</sup>

The introduction of the 1998 Land Law and a series of other pieces of legislation would radically change that.<sup>43</sup> The crux of the law entailed the gradual dismantlement of kolkhozy and shirkats in order to create private commercial farms responsible for cotton, wheat, and other agricultural produce on the basis of long-term leases varying from ten to up to fifty years.<sup>44</sup> Again, hokims played a crucial role in the implementation of this process, including in the allocation of the newly-created farms via specially organized district commissions.<sup>45</sup> While reform was uneven in terms of timing and geographical catchment area,<sup>46</sup> it demolished the foundation of collective agriculture, including collective access to and use of the land and commons for the reproduction of the rural population, turning the majority of the latter into landless peasants.<sup>47</sup> In the poignant words of one of those peasants, “without [land], what do I do? Can’t you see that the [private] farmers have fenced off their land? It looks like a jail. There is no other land available. When this was a kolkhoz, it was different. There were no fences, there was land available.”<sup>48</sup>

This “newly commodified context of a land lease market”<sup>49</sup> spurred “a process of emerging class formation, as a small elite of medium-size f[a]rmers controls most of the arable land, while farm-workers-cum-dekhan-peasants comprise the poor.”<sup>50</sup> Following decollectivization, the former (*fermery*) accounted for 5–10 percent of

total rural households, while occupying about 85 percent of the sown area and concentrating most assets and income. The latter consisted instead of the overwhelming majority of the rural population, divided in approximately four million small peasant (*dekhan*) holdings on 10–12 percent of the sown area.<sup>51</sup> These millions of landless peasants form what, with Marx, I define as a relative surplus population “only partially employed or wholly unemployed”<sup>52</sup> that struggles to reproduce itself amid precarity and informality at home and abroad (next section).

Since land ownership and monopsony power allowed the state to purchase most of the cotton harvest and a significant percentage of the wheat harvest at below-market prices, private farmers struggled to profit from these state-order crops. This explains the ongoing conflict “between farmer[y] and district authorities ... around factors that determine the profitability of agriculture.”<sup>53</sup> With the introduction of the profit motive and the “acquired monopoly on large-scale agricultural production,” however, fermery became “the sole gatekeepers” for landless peasants “to a variety of income possibilities including agricultural wage labour, cotton stalks and grazing areas.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, private farmers could squeeze this vast relative surplus population “freed” from the land and limit the cost of inputs in order to establish several alternative avenues of accumulation.<sup>55</sup>

Multiple cropping is a case in point. So, for example, “winter wheat was preferred by farmers as it offered space for follow-up cultivation of high-value crops such as maize, rice, vegetables, and potatoes after the wheat harvest in early summer,” including via subletting the land to dekhans in exchange for part of the harvest, money, or a combination of both.<sup>56</sup> In 2018, for instance, the going rate to sublet an hectare of land in the Fergana Valley after the winter wheat harvest was \$200 USD.<sup>57</sup> Fruit and vegetable production for export became particularly profitable following the introduction of several pieces of legislation promoting it from the 2000s onward.<sup>58</sup> Likewise, farmers could divert finance and inputs meant for state-order crops to these alternative cash crops.<sup>59</sup> Finally, as access to the commons was privatized and land use changes resulted in the area for feed declining “by two thirds to 9% during 1991–2004,”<sup>60</sup> formerly free and available cotton stalks and cereal straws for use as fuel or feed for livestock became precious commodities to be sold, particularly during winter.<sup>61</sup>

As the transition literature avers that “real land privatization in Uzbekistan was never intended,”<sup>62</sup> it cannot explain why, despite this lack of “real” reforms, the country underwent a radical process of rural stratification evident in the rise of a class of small capitalist farmers in parallel to the precarization of most of the rural population, while, simultaneously, cotton rents went to subsidize capital accumulation in the form of ISI. In effect, by focusing on the *legal form* of land ownership, which remained in the hands of the state, the literature misses the very real “expropriation of the mass of the people from the soil”<sup>63</sup> (primitive accumulation) introduced with decollectivization and the ensuing privatization of *access to* land enforced via land leases. For the majority of the rural population, this meant landlessness and mass precarization.

The available empirical data are unequivocal about the link between decollectivization, landlessness, and the growth of the informal economy. In 2003, for example, “only 7.2% of those workers who became unemployed due to the reorganization of

178 shirkats found jobs in non-agricultural enterprises and organizations.”<sup>64</sup> Overall, according to the GoU’s own estimates, private farms could provide employment to “no more than 25% of the former shirkat workers.”<sup>65</sup> Despite the GoU’s increase in subsidization for industrialization including SME expansion, particularly at times of high commodity prices from the 2000s onward, the sheer scale of labor shedding due to decollectivization was such that it overwhelmed the country’s job creation capacity. As a result, in the 2001–2005 period, in parallel to the acceleration in the dismantlement of shirkats,<sup>66</sup> “employment in the informal sector grew by 31%, or by 1,340,000 people” while “the number of temporary, casual and seasonal [read: precarious] workers rose by 50%,” reaching a staggering 5,657,600 in 2006.<sup>67</sup>

Simultaneously, the dismantlement of the institutions of collective agriculture led to the collapse in the social services such as health and education they had established and run for decades, further deepening the precarization of this vast relative surplus population. For example, inpatient and specialized care became less accessible especially in rural areas. “[B]etween 1997 and 2003, overall bed capacity was reduced by 50%, with a reduction of the number of hospitals in rural areas by 50%.”<sup>68</sup> Equally, the number of kindergartens in rural areas plummeted from 6,474 in 1991 to 2,073 in 2013, with coverage reaching a mere 8 percent of children aged 1–6 in the same year.<sup>69</sup>

Successive changes to farm sizes in the decades following decollectivization never reverted the overall expropriation of the rural population from the land. Instead, the general trend has been one of land concentration and the ongoing precarization of the vast majority of the rural workforce. For example, different phases of land “optimization” in the late 2000s and 2010s to increase farm hectareage and achieve economies of scale for cotton and wheat, as well as to diversify into the production of fruits and vegetables, left overall employment in agriculture largely concentrated in the informal economy. As a 2022 World Bank report states, “at about 27 percent of employment in 2020, the agricultural share has remained unchanged since at least 2010, and more than half of agricultural workers are subsistence [read: informal and precarious dekhan] farmers.”<sup>70</sup>

The next section offers evidence of the various forms in which this vast surplus population labors in the informal economy, including as daily workers and labor migrants.

### A Precarious Surplus Population: Dekhan Peasants, Daily Workers, Labor Migrants

Next to the category of commercial farming, with the 1998 Land Law household plots were renamed dekhan farms.<sup>71</sup> By referring to “the pre-collectivized term” dekhan, the GoU was emphasizing rural households’ “ability and need to sustain themselves,”<sup>72</sup> in the context of decollectivization and the ensuing drawdown of the welfare state. In general, dekhan farms consist of a garden plot adjacent to the house (*tamorka*), including a shed with privately owned livestock and, when funds are available, a small greenhouse, as well as a subsidiary plot, with their combined size normally not exceeding 0.25 hectares, though varying according to land availability, with the smallest being as little as 0.06 ha.<sup>73</sup> Despite occupying a small percentage of



the arable land, these farms have played “an important role in agricultural production, in terms of both subsistence farming for individual households and the cultivation of fruit, vegetables and livestock for the market,” peaking at 75 percent of total food output in the country by the mid-2000s, with women contributing a significant share of this agricultural labor.<sup>74</sup> More recent figures estimate that dekhkan farms continue supplying a remarkable 60 percent and 92 percent of total horticulture and livestock output, respectively, for the domestic market and also for export.<sup>75</sup>

As such, since with decollectivization agriculture was transformed into a livelihood strategy for most of the rural population, peasants have engaged in intensive small-scale farming in order to provide for their families, including by selling their surplus produce on the myriad dekhkan markets throughout the country’s towns and cities. This is especially the case of women dekhkans, who “primarily sell their products in local markets and are generally disconnected from retailers and exporters. Higher-value activities, such as trade, transport, and marketing, are [instead] the domain of male farmers and specialized firms.”<sup>76</sup> However, while supplying “more than a quarter of the food consumption of rural households,”<sup>77</sup> dekhkan farms continue spending only “part of their time in agriculture, being forced by [the] small size of their land plots ... to look for additional off-[dekhkan] farm jobs.”<sup>78</sup>

In other words, the privatization of access to the land and the mass shedding of millions of workers from collectives and cooperatives was only very partially offset by the granting of small plots to rural households. Instead, this vast relative surplus population of landless peasants created by decollectivization has struggled to secure its reproduction via a combination of casual, daily, and seasonal jobs in the large informal economy, whether in the agricultural, service, or industrial sector, at home and abroad. As Cornia put it in the mid-2000s, “[m]ost of the people made redundant [by decollectivization] depend upon casual work, have fallen back on household production using small plots or have migrated under distress to the daily labour market of Tashkent or to Russia or Kazakhstan.”<sup>79</sup> As such, informal work, including migrant and daily labor and work in subsistence agriculture, lies at the heart of labor precarization in the country. Finally, despite the significant changes to private farms organization in the past two decades, according to the same 2022 World Bank report cited above, “most work” in Uzbekistan continues to be “informal,”<sup>80</sup> hence very often precarious.

This explains why the late-Soviet phenomenon of *mardikor* (“daily worker”) bazaars, formerly a way for, e.g., rural students to complement their stipends, has become an enduring feature in rural areas, towns, and cities across Uzbekistan.<sup>81</sup> *Mardikory* often hail from “households where labour resources far outstrip their access to land and where opportunities for alternative earnings are severely limited.”<sup>82</sup> While mostly a male domain during Soviet times, given the extent of precarity women *mardikor* bazaars have now become common throughout the country.<sup>83</sup> As recently as 2019, I could observe potential workers stand for hours at major road intersections, often next to main markets, waiting to be informally employed at a negotiated price mostly for unskilled work. Often, *mardikor* bazaars were organized along gender lines, with men and women waiting at different, albeit close, places, such as at two different sides of the same road junction.<sup>84</sup>

In parallel, landlessness and joblessness spawned huge migratory flows from rural Uzbekistan to the cities and to third countries, due to the growing gap in living standards between rural and urban areas, a radical reversal of the situation obtaining during Soviet times.<sup>85</sup> Despite the lack of precise statistics, the available data suggest that at least hundreds of thousands of people have been moving between rural areas and towns and cities across the country, especially the capital Tashkent. Due to stringent registration (*propiska*) rules, however, internal migrants have preferred to find accommodation on the outskirts of Tashkent and in its satellite cities, where accommodation is also more affordable and whence a veritable sea of commuters descend on the capital on a daily basis.<sup>86</sup> While the *propiska* has linked a host of social services such as healthcare provision and pensions to a citizen's official place of residence since Soviet times, its enforcement has become much stricter after independence<sup>87</sup> for the specific purpose of the "administrative geographical containment of ['freed'] labor in rural areas,"<sup>88</sup> replicating the countryside's precarity in the cities. For instance, figures from the late 2000s indicated that "87% of domestic migrants have never been registered, while 79% never acquired a temporary right for residence,"<sup>89</sup> making them vulnerable to harassment and bribery from the police. Interviews conducted in Uzbekistan in 2018 and 2019 confirmed that these trends largely persist.<sup>90</sup>

Moreover, in the wake of rising oil prices in the 2000s and the ensuing construction boom in the northern energy-rich FSU republics, millions of (mostly seasonal) migrant workers emerged from this vast relative surplus population "freed" from, and denied access to, the land and the commons. Unsurprisingly, international migrants from Uzbekistan "most often" have been "from rural areas and from large families," with 81 percent thereof being male and 19 percent female in 2017.<sup>91</sup> Generally, they have taken up informal work in construction, trade, and agriculture in Russia and, to a lesser but still significant extent, Kazakhstan,<sup>92</sup> facing harassment and bribe-taking by the police at border crossings on the way to their destination, as well as lacking social protection at home and in the host countries, where they toil in appalling conditions and experience discrimination in the housing market and in access to social services. Tellingly, Uzbekistan's migrant workers mention high unemployment and low wages as the main reasons for migrating.<sup>93</sup>

The exponential growth and acceleration in migration from Uzbekistan to Russia and Kazakhstan in the 2000s, in parallel to the dismantling of the institutions of collective agriculture, testify to the direct and unequivocal link between decollectivization and the rise of a vast relative surplus population in the Uzbek countryside. As hundreds of *shirkats* were being dissolved between 1998 and 2006, the number of official work permits to Russia for Uzbek citizens soared from a few thousands in 2000 to more than 666,000 in 2009.<sup>94</sup> Given the high prevalence of informality in migrant work, however, the actual figures were much higher. For example, it is calculated that, already in the early 2000s, next to 44,000 registered Uzbek migrant workers in Russia there were up to 600,000 unregistered ones.<sup>95</sup> This mass movement of people has continued since, with official statistics estimating that, in 2019, between 2.6 and 3 million Uzbeks were abroad as migrant workers.<sup>96</sup> And so has the flow of migrant labor's remittances travelling in the opposite direction grown in line with the rising numbers of Uzbek seasonal workers, reaching a gargantuan \$6.7 billion USD,

or 12 percent of the country's GDP, in 2013.<sup>97</sup> The international price of oil—a crucial export commodity for the Russian and Kazakh economies—has been a key factor in the upward and downward fluctuations of these remittances, which dropped, for example, as a consequence of the financial crisis in 2009 and again in 2014–2016 due to the recession that hit Russia and Kazakhstan.<sup>98</sup>

These money transfers have been crucial to sustaining consumption particularly in Uzbekistan's rural areas, amounting to about 10 percent of overall income in the two poorest quintile households and providing especially for food and housing, along with the purchase of consumer durables.<sup>99</sup> This is particularly true given that, while some targeted assistance for the poorest strata of the population has been provided through the revival of an old institution like the *mahalla* ("neighborhood"),<sup>100</sup> as well as specific schemes such as the Low Income Allowance, these expenditures "have fallen significantly since the 1990s, and were only 0.1 percent of GDP in 2009,"<sup>101</sup> a figure that roughly remains the same today.<sup>102</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper argued that land decollectivization was central to Uzbekistan's post-independence transformation, as it ended the collective reproduction of the rural population in the country's rural areas, giving rise to the class stratification of Uzbek society as a result. While a minority of private farmers could exploit the labor of a majority of newly-turned landless peasants to profit from multiple cropping and other activities, this vast relative surplus population was thrust into the informal economy, where they struggled to guarantee their reproduction as a precarious labor force engaged in daily, seasonal, and migrant work. In parallel, as the state-maintained ownership of the land and monopsony power over the cotton harvest, it could divert the rents accrued from the sale of cotton on the global market toward capital accumulation in the form of import-substitution industrialization, leaving the majority of the rural population to fend for themselves instead.

As such, the paper explained why Uzbekistan's class stratification and labor precarization following independence were directly related to the Uzbek model's mediation of the country's integration into the global economy as a cotton exporter, putting to rest the "paradox" of no transition and transformation that has marred the transition literature. In this context, it is hoped that future research on the FSU will likewise engage with the issues of ownership and class beyond the legal forms of change in the region, focusing instead on the very real transformation in the relations of production and social reproduction in countries that were once part of the Soviet Union.

## Notes

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2. See, e.g., Anders Åslund, "Why Has Russia's Economic Transformation Been So Arduous?" paper presented at the Annual World Bank Conference on Development Economics (Washington, DC, 1999); World Bank, "Transition, The First Ten Years: Analysis and Lessons for Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union" (Washington, DC, 2002); Alexander Cooley and John Heathershaw, *Dictators Without Borders* (New Haven, CT, 2017), 52–57.
3. See, e.g., Pomfret, *The Central Asian Economies*, 265.
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14. Tommaso Trevisani, *Land and Power in Khorezm: Farmers, Communities and the State in Uzbekistan's Decollectivisation* (Berlin, 2010), 216.
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- (Tashkent, 1993), 174–258; Deniz Kandiyoti, “The Cry for Land: Agrarian Reform, Gender and Land Rights in Uzbekistan,” *Journal of Agrarian Change* 3 (2003): 225–56.
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