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Small solutions, big problems? Problems and opportunities of tanish-bilish networking culture in Uzbekistan through a foreign lens



Uzbekistan is trying to open up to the world in search of foreign investments and societal development, following the reforms initiated by the president Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Chasing economic and societal development after President Karimov's death has led the country to seek to attract foreign experts from western democratic societies to work in Uzbekistan. While the country manages to bring western workforce in, its informal society and networking practices often make work difficult for these foreign experts. What kind of challenges, for example, do Finnish education representatives face while working in Uzbekistan? In this text I tackle the pros and cons of the Uzbek networking culture called tanish-bilish in the work life of foreigners, through my own experience of working as a Finnish teacher in the country's capital, Tashkent.

A year ago in September I had just arrived in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, with my Finnish colleague and her husband when something peculiar happened. We had agreed to teach Finnish for a year at a private university in Tashkent, operated by the Honorary Consul of Finland in Uzbekistan. My colleague and I were supposed to get our work visas at the Tashkent airport upon arrival. However, for some reason, the officials simply let us enter the country without issuing our visas, and we didn't realise this at the moment. This caused a big bureaucratic problem, as officially we had entered the country as tourists. Our employer, however, came up with a solution quite quickly, without even making an appearance himself. The next day we returned to the airport with one of our Uzbek colleagues and our passports. The colleague called an airport employee, shook hands with

him, handed over our passports along with a noticeable amount of money, and disappeared.



After we waited for what felt like ten minutes, while glancing at the anti-corruption-stickers on the walls of the airport, the men returned happily with visas on our passports. The following day, we drove half an hour to the border between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and re-entered Uzbekistan in order to get stamps on our visas and finalise the odd procedure. Despite the comedic nature of it all, for us Finns it was an on-the-spot-lesson on how things get done in Uzbekistan. *Xush kelibsiz!*

This visa-case is a good example of what Uzbeks would call a good use of tanish-bilish networks. The website of the Global Informality Project describes the phenomenon of tanish-bilish as follows[1]:

“Tanish-bilish is an Uzbek term for networks/contacts used for extracting both material and non-material resources, or just for ‘getting things done’ (ishingni bitirish). Tanish-bilish literally translates as ‘acquaintance-known’, and may thus be considered a form of social capital” (Rano Turaeva, Global Informality Project).

In short, tanish-bilish is an Uzbek term for a practice of networking, a type of patron-client relationship. Even though the many kinds of this type of informal networking – widespread in Central Asia – have long been explored academically, I prefer to refer to the Uzbeks’ own concept of tanish-bilish (explained by Turaeva) to make my point fit the context of Uzbekistan.

Turaeva describes tanish-bilish as “strategic contacts who can solve problems or help one to achieve goals” (Turaeva, 2022, p. 10). In my case, the visa problem was handled quickly from my employer’s side by contacting the airport staff and paying them to help us – which did show the efficient, problem-solving nature of this informal networking. The tanish-bilish, however, has its own set of rules and cannot be exercised by everyone everywhere. Uzbekistan is a highly hierarchical society where social status, age, family background, and other forms of kinship play part in forming and using tanish-bilish. If a person is higher up in the hierarchy (katta), the lower-status person (kichkina) usually fulfills their request, forming a sort of patron-client type network (Turaeva, 2022, p. 12). Understanding one’s status in the local hierarchy is crucial for navigating this type of transactional networking – which can be a difficult nut to crack for foreigners coming from outside these social systems.



After months of working in Uzbekistan, it became apparent that this kind of networking was used almost daily by locals. My colleague and I were shocked when we realized that cheating in exams was more of a rule than an exception, even among the really good students. The weaker students would convince the better ones to help them cheat, or would simply ask us for a better grade and were surprised when we refused (without extra work).

It often felt as though we and our students didn’t understand each other’s social expectations. My colleague and I tried our best to work normally, as if we were still in Finland. After all, we were there to showcase the Finnish style of education. However, the informal culture in Uzbekistan made genuine learning and teaching very difficult, as the students tried to use tanish-bilish to get around in their studies.

For example, while working at a state university, one student asked me to raise her grade to an A, but I told her that her points were not quite enough for that. Soon after, the zav of the faculty called me and told me to raise her grade “because she works at the Dean’s office, and we all try to help each other out.” The call was, of course, a way to remind me of everyone’s position in the university’s networking system, while contradicting my Finnish work ethics. These kinds of instances made me question the whole purpose of working in Uzbekistan, despite the apparent demand for Finnish expertise in education.

As mentioned before, tanish-bilish networking can be useful for its problem-solving qualities. However, foreigners and Uzbeks often have a different idea of what is a problem to be solved. It was, of course, beneficial to have our work visas arranged quickly, but actual learning through hard work was often seen as a problem for the students to overcome – which, at the end of the day, made me question the whole purpose of obtaining those work visas in the first place.

Yet, I was happy to see at least two students truly learn out of thirty. It seemed that even small, grassroot level changes were challenged by the locals' differing priorities and reliance on informal networks. Ironically, I do realize that my own presence in Uzbekistan was itself a direct result of tanish-bilish – it was because I knew the Honorary Consul that I was able to work in different universities in Tashkent, despite not having a formal background in teaching Finnish (my background is in Russian).

As showcased through my experiences, informal practices like tanish-bilish are a two-edged sword: both constructive and destructive in nature (Aminova & Jegers, 2011). It is understandable how these informal practices came to be: they emerged to combat the uncertainty caused by failures of formal systems after the fall of the Soviet Union, all while working as an alternative space for “getting things done” (Turaeva, 2022, p. 13). For locals, this can mean getting a job or a place at a university – or even just reliable information (Aminova & Jegers, 2011).

While working in Uzbekistan, I noticed how this kind of networking indeed did get small-scale things done efficiently (for example, students getting a good grade for little work). However, it also does a great disservice for the society in the long term, as professionalism won't develop – or in our case, is not even implemented in spheres where it is needed. Not only is this a culture shock, but it also makes everyday work difficult for us foreigners, especially those coming from western democratic societies with little corrupt practices and hierarchy.

On a larger scale, international organisations like the EU and OSCE have been formally trying to implement practices like good governance, media freedom, and other western ideals into Central Asian societies since the late 1990s, yet with little visible change. Ideally, to tackle this paradox between theory and practice, both Uzbeks and foreign experts should engage in meaningful dialogue to better understand each other's roles and goals in implementing foreign knowledge and practices in Uzbekistan. But can we even begin to understand each other's priorities in this problem solving equation, where tanish-bilish was born?

References

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