

# Bazaar Pathologies: Informality, Independent Businesses, and Covid-19 in the South Caucasus

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# **Bazaar Pathologies: Informality, Independent Businesses and Covid-19 in the South Caucasus**

## **Introduction**

As 2021 draws to a close, Covid-19 continues to prevail worldwide. With the proverbial return to normalcy still appearing distant, there is now a tacit acceptance globally that at least for the foreseeable future, we must live with Covid-19. Given that Covid-19 is an infectious disease—which by definition is transmitted from person to person—the continued prevalence of Covid-19 has implications for how local authorities, communities, and individuals around the world will approach public spaces. While it may be premature to assume a so-called coronacene (see Higgins et al. 2020), going into the future our use of public spaces will be overshadowed by the possibility, even if remote, of illness or death by virtue of close proximity to other individuals.

Along with parks and squares, streets and avenues, bazaars constitute ubiquitous public spaces, including in countries of the developing world, such as Armenia and Georgia, our countries of discussion here. Although there is not a clear bifurcation between bazaars and other types of marketplaces, bazaars will usually be comprised of a multitude of nonfranchised, self-owned, small businesses that are variously family-run or rely on family labor. They are usually perceived as chaotic places that lack hygiene (the purportedly unhygienic character of the bazaar was brought to the forefront with the pandemic, given how Covid-19's origin is widely assumed to be a Wuhan wet market).

In Armenia and Georgia, and indeed, across the former Soviet Union, bazaars are a source of employment for the urban and peri-urban population; they also offer goods at price points attractive to a wide demographic. This working paper builds on the premise that the bazaar is an informal institution. Bazaar traders will typically assemble networks by themselves (with manufacturers and wholesalers, buyers and transporters). These networks will usually vary from one business to another. Also, ownership and rent structures are frequently opaque, and the majority of commercial transactions are in cash, which does not appear in state records. As a consequence, for the state, many small businesses do not exist (Fehlings and Karrar 2016, 2020).

For those of us researching bazaar trading, Covid-19 has given rise to a basic question: How have independent businesses been transformed by the pandemic? This working paper is an attempt to parse this question in light of developments in Armenia and Georgia. In this working paper, we suggest that the Covid-19 pandemic has deepened informality in the bazaar. That being said, we want to underscore that the present discussion is exploratory. Our ethnography remains limited, and we look forward to returning to the field as soon as it is safe to do so.

## Methods and Covid-19 Research: An Evolving Field

In the postwar academy, the study of bazaars and marketplaces attracted particular attention from anthropologists. With its focus on the human experience and on place-specific relationalities and their meanings, the anthropological method is well suited for understanding the impact that Covid-19 is having on society, in particular the uncertainty of the near-term future and the myriad intertwined biological and social complexities that stem from it (Higgins et al. 2020: 2). Although ethnographic fieldwork, which requires time in the field, has been particularly difficult, at the time of writing in 2021 anthropological research on Covid-19 is beginning to appear.<sup>1</sup>

Rylan Higgins, Emily Martin, and Maria D. Vesperi, editors of a special issue of *Anthropology Now*, note, “The COVID-19 pandemic has hit the global human population with a one-two punch like perhaps no other entity ever has, at least with regard to the scale and scope” (2020: 2). Modifying “anthropocene,” they introduce the term “coronacene” to signal a new era of uncertain futures. Outside anthropology, in fields such as urban geography, development studies, and management, Covid-19 is fast becoming a topic of study as well (Arabindo 2020; Coletto and Vanhellomont 2021; Kiaka, Chikulo, and Slootheer 2021; Low and Smart 2020).

Scholarly focus on Covid-19 has tended to have at least four angles, some of which, of course, are not new to Covid-19. (1) The research is emotive; personal experiences and emotions feature prominently, including those of the researchers themselves—a consequence of the fact that everyone has been affected by the pandemic. An excellent example here is the “Witnessing Corona” blog series.<sup>2</sup> (2) The research highlights the interplay between public health governance and body politics.<sup>3</sup> (3) The research approaches the pandemic as structural violence; in other words, it underscores the fact that the pandemic affects people unequally and increases vulnerability for the marginalized. (4) The research inquires how business and the economy are being impacted, including seeking to understand new adaptation strategies, such as digitalization. Some of these themes are also reflected in the recent *Pandemic Exposures: Economy and Society in the Time of Coronavirus* edited by Didier Fassin and Marion Fourcade (2021).

In our specific area of research, we are beginning to see research on how markets and independent businesses are being affected (Kiaka, Chikulo, and Slootheer 2021; Kesar, Abraham, Lahoti, Nath, and Basole 2021; Maduwiniarti and Andayani 2021; Song 2020). Finally, there is also the question of whether there may be shifts in global macroeconomics, or what Leigh Bloch poses as the possibility of “the pandemic [allowing] people to imagine a different economic order

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview see American Anthropological Association, “Covid-19 Resources.” <https://www.americananthro.org/covid-19>; Anthropology News, <https://www.anthropology-news.org/articles/tag/covid-19/>.

<sup>2</sup> The “Witnessing Corona” blog series is published by Blog Medizinethnologie of the German Anthropological Association’s Work Group Medical Anthropology, in collaboration with *Curare: Journal of Medical Anthropology*, the Global South Studies Center, Cologne, and *boasblogs*. See [https://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/ethnologie/forschung/arbeitsstellen/medical\\_anthropology/news/2020-witnessing-corona.html](https://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/ethnologie/forschung/arbeitsstellen/medical_anthropology/news/2020-witnessing-corona.html).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, “Medical Anthropology Weekly: COVID-19” for a compilation of COVID-19-related materials jointly published by the Society for Medical Anthropology, the *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, and *Somatosphere*. <https://medanthro.net/medical-anthropology-weekly-covid-19>.

in the future” (2020: 5). In the next section we turn to why we think the pandemic might deepen informality in the bazaar.

### **Covid and the Bazaar: Deepening Informality**

The bazaar is an informal institution because of particular processes that we have previously described as negotiating state and society (Fehlings and Karrar 2020). By this we mean that in the process of running independent businesses, traders are also continuously adjusting to border regimes, regulatory mechanisms, city administration, and ownership structures. Each of these are aspects of bazaar trading that have to be figured out by traders, individually or through horizontal networks in which information is shared.

After the appearance of Covid-19, regulations regarding use of public spaces in general and marketplaces in particular meant there was a new set of rules that had to be understood and negotiated, adding to the informality of marketplaces. Lockdowns, restricting hours of operation of bazaars or the number of people who could visit, enforcing face-mask usage or social distancing—each of these were new contingency measures that had to be accepted by the populace, selectively accepted, or rejected outright. As the frequency of person-to-person interaction in the bazaar is high, it naturally becomes a place where authorities often seek to impose Covid-19 restrictions. Now regulation and informality intersect.

Even prior to Covid-19, bazaars and street vending were contested spaces and practices, where there was incongruence between the normative or day-to-day commercial operation and how it was perceived by regulatory bodies. Indeed, in the new century, across the former Soviet Union, there were attempts to “civilize” marketplaces (Karrar 2019). Such perceptions are particularly relevant in the case of Covid-19, which is widely believed to have originated in a wet market in Wuhan (Huang et al. 2020). The Chinese government’s response, the closure of the marketplace and indeed of wet markets across the country, speaks to the perception of bazaars as unsanitary places. In many parts of the world, a stricter regulatory regime will likely accompany a so-called return to normalcy (Grant 2021, Song 2020, Xiao et al. 2021).

These developments are not limited to the developing world. Writing about the weekly Valkenswaard in the Netherlands, Van Eck, Van Melik, and Joris Schapendonk (2020) describe changes in social dynamics and a temporary death of public space as a result of new municipal and state policies. As the authors note, this leads them to conclude that “the marketplace lost its status as a social infrastructure and transformed into a ‘sanitized’ or ‘prickly’ public space of rational and immediate economic interactions.”

### **Covid-19 in the South Caucasus**

As we have not been able to utilize traditional field methods, we have relied on digital or remote ethnography (Góralaska 2020) to capture an initial snapshot of ongoing developments in the

bazaar. In Georgia and Armenia, the first cases of Covid-19 were recorded at the end of February 2020. In the case of Georgia, flights from China had been suspended earlier, in January.

As Covid-19 cases began multiplying, the ruling Georgian Dream Party and opposition groups set aside their differences to follow the recommendations of public-health specialists, whose opinions were widely accepted by the public. A state of emergency was declared on March 21, and a lockdown was imposed on March 31. Isolation and quarantine rules restricted movement in public. Public transportation was suspended, and new regulations limited entrepreneurial activity. On May 16, the borders were sealed to non-Georgians.

Georgia's economy had been expanding during the pre-Covid-19 period between 2005 to 2019. This development was reversed during the pandemic. After early success in containing the spread of the disease, infections surged in late 2020, and by the summer of 2021, Georgia had one of the world's highest per capita infection rates. Economic output tumbled, contracting by 6.2 percent in 2020, a consequence of new mobility restrictions and the collapse of tourism.<sup>4</sup> Individuals who lost regular employment because of these developments were entitled to a monthly stipend of 200 lari (62 USD) for six months, while the informally employed and self-employed received a onetime payment of 300 lari (94 USD) if they could provide evidence of their employment and earnings; for many, such as street vendors, this was impossible (cf. Qeburia 2021).

In Armenia, the pandemic hit in the wake of the Karabakh war. One consequence was the adaptation of militarized language that characterized Covid-19 as an enemy being fought. As the first cases were confirmed, educational institutions were closed for a week. On March 16, the government announced a one-month state of emergency, banning gatherings of over twenty people, including at religious ceremonies.<sup>5</sup> After March 25, only hospitals and pharmacies, banks, supermarkets and greengrocers, and delivery services were allowed to operate. Citizens were required to carry identification and written justification for being outdoors.<sup>6</sup> After April 1, public transport, including the subway, was halted.<sup>7</sup> But the vulnerability of the national economy and its dependence on remittances from labor migrants in Russia made it difficult to uphold restrictions, which were rejected by a large segment of society.

Data from June 2020 shows trade contracting by 9.9 percent, 33.1 percent, and 18.4 percent when compared to March, April, and May of the previous year. And yet, despite this decrease, by

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<sup>4</sup> "Georgia Overview: Development News, Research, Data," World Bank, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/georgia/overview#1>, 11/9/21.

<sup>5</sup> "Declaring a State of Emergency, March 16," e-gov.am, [https://www.e-gov.am/gov-decrees/item/33564/?fbclid=IwAR00jM\\_nHx8p74lNxfEdItbpOOgAFu9aeZqpH-74o8FZK6dLkKv7WOGHTew](https://www.e-gov.am/gov-decrees/item/33564/?fbclid=IwAR00jM_nHx8p74lNxfEdItbpOOgAFu9aeZqpH-74o8FZK6dLkKv7WOGHTew).

<sup>6</sup> "Armenia Declares State of Emergency from March 16 to April 14," press release, 16.03.2020, <https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2020/03/16/Cabinet-meeting/>.

<sup>7</sup> However, in March, despite increasing infection rates, Prime Minister Pashinyan urged citizens to visit polling places to vote in a referendum on reforms to the Constitutional Court. As a consequence, people questioned the risk the pandemic posed, and conspiracy theories started to spread on social media. See "Armenia's Pashinian Kicks Off Campaign on Constitutional Reform," <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-s-pashinian-kicks-off-campaign-on-constitutional-reform/30479766.html>.

May, trade had improved (Mkrtchyan, Osipyan, & Sahakyan, 2020). The reason was the gradual loosening of restrictions and one-time financial support for those working in hard-hit sectors. These sectors were to be identified by the State Revenue Committee; here too, as in Georgia, informal trade, by definition unregistered, did not benefit from subsidies (Mkrtchyan et al., 2020). Thus, street vendors and bazaar traders benefited little. This had two diverging consequences. First, a large segment of self-employed people—for example, tour guides—registered themselves, and second, those who did not found themselves yet more marginalized. These individuals could neither carry on as usual nor get registered. In both countries traders had to seek out ways to deal with the current situation and often did so by turning to informal practices.

### ***Georgia: New Challenges, New Opportunities***

After initial shutdown orders, in Georgia all retail and wholesale stores were allowed to reopen on May 11, including those in bazaars. Lilo Bazroba, which is the biggest wholesale and retail bazaar in the South Caucasus and a trading hub for Chinese and Turkish merchandise, illustrates how local markets adapted. For example, when eleven traders in Lilo Bazroba tested positive in summer 2020, the market did not shut down. Instead, a testing “corner” was installed in the bazaar to provide rapid tests.<sup>8</sup> Visitors had to undergo a temperature test before entry, and mask wearing was enforced.

Still, the market wore a forlorn look. Newspapers even carried stories on how markets had changed,<sup>9</sup> with pictures illustrating how traders tried to adapt—for example, by trying to coordinate masks with the outfits worn by mannequins to help buyers imagine how a dress would go with a face covering. Open-air markets, such as Mshrali Khidi, had the advantage of being outdoors and were thus less affected by restrictions that applied to covered and closed spaces. However, Mshrali Khidi too suffered from the pandemic. As a market for souvenirs, paintings, and secondhand goods, it lost most of its tourist clientele. Vendors were the only ones who remained in the marketplace, and the municipality took the situation as an opportunity to implement some renovations in the marketplace.

In November, with Covid-19 numbers rising, bazaars were ordered shut again. Lilo Bazroba’s and Mshrali Khidi’s traders sought new adaptations through online platforms and a digital presence. This required new informal regulations, such as group rules developed by platform administrators, and was accompanied by shifting perceptions of trust. Unlike in face-to-face transactions, the buyer cannot see the goods when ordering online. Thus, while mistrust exists about the price of goods in the bazaar, it is the quality of the goods and the reliability of the traders that have to be proved on an online platform. Consequently, digital trading sites and online

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<sup>8</sup> “Epidemic at the Market: Photo Report on Work of Epidemiologists at Largest Market in Georgia,” jam-news.net, 25.07.2020, <https://jam-news.net/coronavirus-epidemic-at-lilo-market-in-georgia-photo-report-epidemiologists/>.

<sup>9</sup> “What Lilo Looks Like These Days—A Photo Essay,” jam-news.net, 25.07.2020, <https://jam-news.net/coronavirus-epidemic-at-lilo-market-in-georgia-photo-report-epidemiologists/>.

advertisements began to carry statements warning that misinformation about the quality of goods would result in the sellers getting blocked.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the pandemic has shifted face-to-face exchange into the digital sphere. This has the potential to expand traders' outreach beyond customers able to visit the marketplace. An example of this is how the volume of trade between Georgia and Armenia reached a record high in the first six months of 2021.<sup>11</sup> While the border between Armenia and Georgia was closed to people from spring 2020 to June 2021, it remained open for cargo. The queue of trucks sometimes extended kilometers. Thus, the transport of goods, which had typically been transported by individual shuttle traders, was outsourced to professional truck drivers and logistics companies.

### *Armenia: Reconfiguring the Market*

Armenian small businesses were hit hard by the pandemic. As informal entrepreneurs, many business owners had no opportunity for assistance from the state. One worker in his sixties—an Armenian refugee who had arrived from Azerbaijan after the first Karabakh war in the 1990s—told Hamlet Melkumyan: “I know the government announced the financial aid program that every citizen can apply for, but I do not even have a passport and do not know how to apply.” Many in the informal sector were by default ineligible for state compensation.

Everyday coping practices and efforts to bypass the restrictions in Yerevan took on absurd—and sometimes comical—traits. For example, one of Melkumyan's acquaintances posted on Facebook: “I was in a hospital yesterday, waiting in line. Everyone was wearing a mask. Someone said he forgot the mask. How could he get in? Someone else in the queue replied: ‘Brother, just wait for me to enter. I will come back and give you my mask. Then you can enter.’”

Yerevan's souvenir flea market, the Vernissage, has a long history of informal—and occasionally formal—trading. Like Mshrali Khidi in Georgia, the Vernissage has been a tourist destination since the 1990s. The marketplace had bypassed state regulations for decades. Traders usually did not register their businesses, and the property was not officially recognized as a commercial zone. However, in the last three years, the Vernissage became a semiregulated location, where traders had to pay fees to run their businesses (Melkumyan, 2017; Taalaibekova & Melkumyan, 2018). In 2018, the municipal administration decided to reconstruct the Vernissage and transform it into a fully regulated marketplace by replacing provisional stalls with permanent metal pavilions, which traders would have to rent to display their merchandise (Melkumyan, 2017; Taalaibekova & Melkumyan, 2018). As at Mshrali Khidi in Tbilisi, some of the construction work was done during the Covid-19 lockdown. With construction, new informal networks appeared. Traders who ran small businesses suspected the bazaar administration was

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<sup>10</sup> Mshrali Khidi, [შშრალი ხიდი], 11.11.2020,

[https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=104049101514518&id=103286218257473](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=104049101514518&id=103286218257473).

<sup>11</sup> “Georgia's Trade Turnover with Armenia Reaches Record High in the First Half of 2021,” jam-news.net, 03.08.2021, <https://jam-news.net/georgias-trade-turnover-with-armenia-reaches-record-high-in-the-first-half-of-2021/>.



using the renovations as a pretext for their own advantage. As one of them told Melkumyan, building a new bazaar became an excuse for the administration to remove or relocate existing vendors and artisans and bring in their own people.

The fear of being relocated—or worse yet, removed altogether—led to yet more new networks of traders (described as “mini-neighborhoods”) who came together to defend their former trading spots in the marketplace. But in order to do so, traders had to be physically present in the marketplace, even if officially there was a lockdown. In the event that a trader could not be present, other traders would campaign on their behalf, speaking to the robustness of these new horizontal networks between traders.

In Armenia, much as in Georgia, the Internet, and especially Facebook, became an important adaptation mechanism. But unlike in Georgia, where Facebook became a sales platform, Facebook in Armenia was used by the bazaar administration to promote the Vernissage as a hygienic and safe space, where visitors could shop without fear of catching Covid-19. Facebook posts showed vendors wearing masks and working in an orderly fashion. They also showcased registered traders’ merchandise. Here, social media was used to sanitize and formalize the market. And yet, according to rumors, whose goods were promoted online by the market administration depended on social networks and bribes.

## **Conclusion**

These examples from Georgia and Armenia show how bazaars and small businesses adapted with the onset of the pandemic. In Georgia, as the example of Mshrali Khidi shows, there was a grassroots initiative that intensified the use of informal networks, which expanded into the digital sphere. In Armenia, two developments could be observed: (1) pressure from administrative institutions, which used the pandemic to push through measures to formalize informal marketplaces, and (2) resistance through informal initiatives against these attempts at formalization. Thus, we would posit as an early conclusion that the Covid-19 pandemic has not only deepened informality in the bazaar but also changed the nature of informal practices.

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