University of Western Ontario
1137 Western Road
London, ON N6G 1G7, Canada

September 14, 2026

Dear Organizers of the Workshop on Development Economics and Networks for Early-Stage Researchers,

I am writing to apply to the Workshop on Development Economics and Networks for Early-Stage Researchers. I completed my PhD in Economics at the University of Toronto in June 2026, under the supervision of Ceren Baysan and Gustavo Bobonis. My research lies at the intersection of development, political, and labour economics, with a broader focus on how institutions and information shape economic and political behaviour.

My job market paper uses a randomized experiment to study how independent media shape citizen behaviour and political engagement in environments saturated with disinformation. My other main project examines the long-run economic and social consequences of the Gulag system in Russia. I use a geographic discontinuity in post-Gulag settlement restrictions to identify historically exposed areas and combine firm-level ownership networks with business litigation records to study local economic connectedness and dispute resolution. I find that historically exposed regions are more industrialized but have weaker local inter-firm networks and greater reliance on distant partners.

I have training in development, labour, political economics, and applied econometrics, and I have also audited a course on social network analysis using R. I am particularly interested in this workshop because I would like to deepen my understanding of network methods and strengthen their application to my research on the long-run effects of forced labour. I would greatly value feedback from researchers working on development and networks, as well as the opportunity to engage with other early-stage researchers.

A reference letter from Professor Gustavo Bobonis (gustavo.bobonis@utoronto.ca) can be sent on my behalf. I would be happy to provide any additional materials if needed.

Sincerely,
Dina O'Brien
Tel: +1 (647) 546-9090
Email: dobrie26@uwo.ca

Dina O'Brien

Address:
Postdoctoral Associate
University of Western Ontario
1137 Western Road
London, Ontario
N6G 1G7, Canada

Phone: +1-647-546-9090
Email: dobrie26@uwo.ca
Website: https://sites.google.com/view/dinaobrien

Citizenship: Canadian

Research Interests: Applied Microeconomics, Development Economics, Political Economy

Education

Ph.D. in Economics, University of Toronto 2026
Committee: Ceren Baysan (co-supervisor), Gustavo Bobonis (co-supervisor), Arthur Blouin

Course	Course Name
ECO1011H	Mathematics and Statistics for MA Doctoral Stream and PhD Students
ECO2020H	Microeconomic Theory I
ECO2021H	Macroeconomic Theory I
ECO2400H	Econometrics I
ECO2030H	Microeconomic Theory II
ECO2031H	Macroeconomic Theory II
ECO2401H	Econometrics II
ECO2704H	Topics in Growth and Development
ECO2800H	Labour Economics I
ECO2803H	Advanced Methods for Empirical Microeconomics
ECO4060Y	Graduate Research Seminar
ECO2404H	Empirical Applications of Economic Theory
ECO2701H	Development Economics I
ECO2801H	Labour Economics II
SOC6108H	Networks II – Social Network Analysis
RST9999Y	Research/Thesis

Research

Independent media and political engagement in an autocracy: Evidence from Kazakhstan (Job Market Paper)

Economic benefits and social costs of Stalin's Gulag

Awards and Grants

J-PAL's Governance Initiative (US$49,885 full project)	2025
J-PAL's Governance Initiative (up to US$9,988 travel grant)	2024
The Weiss Fund for Research in Development Economics, University of Chicago (US$14,685 pilot project grant)	2023
Department of Economics, University of Toronto ($9,994 research grant)	2024
School of Graduate Studies, University of Toronto ($3344 research travel grant)	2023
Doctoral Fellowship, University of Toronto ($18,000 x 5 years)	2019 - 2024

Professional Experience

Course Instructor — 2024 - 2025

- ECO 372: Data Analysis and Applied Econometrics in Practice
- ECO 220: Introduction to Data Analysis and Applied Econometrics

Teaching Assistant — 2018 - 2026

- ECO 372: Data Analysis and Applied Econometrics in Practice
- ECO 220: Introduction to Data Analysis and Applied Econometrics
- ECO 403: Development Economics
- ECO 439: Methods for Empirical Microeconomics
- ECO 2843: Methods for Empirical Microeconomics
- PPG 1008: Program Evaluation for Public Policy

Research Assistant — 2019–2021

- Laura Derksen: Data analysis
- Arthur Blouin: Data entry
- The World Bank Impact Data and Evidence Aggregation Library (IDEAL) — 2025–2026

Other work experience — 2007 - 2012

- ILO-Child Labour Programme, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- "Rakurs" Center for Economic Analysis, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- The World Bank Office in Kazakhstan, Astana, Kazakhstan

Conference Presentations

Association for Comparative Economic Studies Political Economy Summer School (London, UK)	July 2022
Canadian Public Economics Group CPEG (Québec City)	November 2025

Languages

Russian (native), English (fluent)
Programming: Stata, R, ArcGIS, Python

References

Gustavo Bobonis
Department of Economics
University of Toronto
150 St. George St.
Toronto, Ontario
M5S 3G7, Canada
gustavo.bobonis@utoronto.ca
+1-416-946-5299

Ceren Baysan
Department of Economics
University of Toronto
150 St. George St.
Toronto, Ontario
M5S 3G7, Canada
ceren.baysan@utoronto.ca
+1-905-569-5742

Arthur Blouin
Department of Economics
University of Toronto
150 St. George St.
Toronto, Ontario
M5S 3G7, Canada
a.blouin@utoronto.ca
+1-416-946-3404

Research Statement

Dina O'Brien
Postdoctoral Associate
University of Western Ontario
dobrie26@uwo.ca

Current Research

My research focuses on how information and institutions shape political and economic behaviour in non-democratic and transitional contexts. I am currently working on two complementary research agendas: one applying network methods to study the long-run legacy of forced labour, and another studying how independent media shapes political behaviour under autocracy. I am particularly motivated to attend because it sits at this intersection of development economics and network analysis. I would like to deepen my technical understanding of network methods, discuss ongoing extensions of my network-based work with other researchers, and get feedback on how best to apply these methods across my broader research agenda.

A central line of my research uses network methods to study how historical institutions and coercive state policies continue to shape economic outcomes today. In a paper on the legacy of Stalin's Gulag, I use a regression discontinuity design built around a post-1953 settlement restriction on former political prisoners to identify areas historically exposed to forced labour, and I construct firm-level ownership networks for each affected city, combined with business litigation records, to study local economic connectedness. I find that historically exposed regions are more industrialized today, yet firms there maintain fewer ownership ties with local partners and litigate with them less, relying instead on distant partners and formal legal institutions to resolve disputes. This divergence between economic scale and local connectedness, consistent across both network measures, shows how the erosion of informal trust networks raises long-run transaction costs and reshapes firm behaviour.

In my job market paper, I examine a complementary question: the role of independent media in an autocracy. I use a randomized control trial to study how exposure to truthful, uncensored information affects citizens' beliefs, polarization, and political engagement in Kazakhstan. I find that while independent information increases awareness of democratic shortcomings and support for opposition movements, it can reduce overall political participation, particularly among individuals with weak democratic preferences, underscoring the complex pathways through which media influences regime stability and prospects for democratization. This study makes a novel contribution by examining the correction of political misinformation that reveals state manipulation in an autocratic context, and I have secured funding from the Weiss Fund for Research in Development Economics at the University of Chicago and the Governance Initiative at J-PAL (Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab) to support it.

Economic Benefits and Social Costs of Stalin's Gulag

Extended Abstract: Local and Distant Partners in Litigation and Ownership Networks

Dina O'Brien

Abstract

This study examines the long-run economic and social consequences of the Gulag system in Russia, with a focus on how historical exposure to forced labour shaped firms' local economic networks. I exploit the geographic discontinuity generated by post-Gulag settlement restrictions on political ex-prisoners to identify areas historically exposed to forced labour. Gulag-affected regions remain more industrialized today, consistent with long-run path dependence: areas in and around former camps host more firms, which are larger, more labour-intensive, less capital-intensive, and generate higher revenues. At the same time, these regions exhibit persistently lower generalized trust. I examine whether this legacy is reflected in firms' relationships with local and distant partners by combining firm-level ownership networks, constructed separately for each city, with litigation records on business disputes. The ownership data capture underlying inter-firm connectedness independently of whether a relationship generates a dispute, while the litigation data reveal how firms resolve disputes once they arise. The two sources reveal a common divergence. In the areas most directly exposed to forced labour, firms maintain fewer ownership ties with local partners and are less likely to litigate with them, even as the number of firms increases. They are instead more likely to litigate with distant partners, where weaker trust increases reliance on formal dispute resolution. These findings suggest that historical exposure to forced labour generated a persistent divergence between economic scale and local connectedness: Gulag-affected regions became more industrialized while developing weaker local inter-firm networks and greater reliance on distant partners for dispute resolution.

Introduction

When forced labour is used to establish industries and expand economic activity, its legacy is likely to leave a lasting mark on the very sectors it built. The long-term effects of forced labour have been studied mainly in relation to public goods and institutional development, such as education, infrastructure, and the regulation of land and labour, while its influence on the private sector remains underexplored. Industries founded through forced labour may have benefited from initial investment and path dependence, sustaining elevated economic activity over time; alternatively, the coercive foundations of such systems may have undermined trust and social capital, impeding exchange and raising transaction costs. Forced labour may therefore produce a dual legacy: stronger industrial bases, but weaker social fabric. This paper uses Stalin's Gulag system of forced labour to examine how this tension shaped the long-run development of firms in Russia.

I use a spatial regression discontinuity design built around the 101-kilometre settlement restriction imposed on former Gulag prisoners after 1953, comparing firm outcomes, litigation behaviour, and social capital in areas historically exposed to forced labour with outcomes in nearby protected cities. Within the exposed side of that boundary, I distinguish locations by proximity to a former camp: those within 30 kilometres of a camp ("Around Gulag," the high-intensity treated group) and those farther away but still beyond the 101-kilometre boundary ("Outside Gulag," the low-intensity treated group). Gulag-affected areas remain more

industrialized today with more firms that are larger, more labour-intensive, and generate higher revenue, but they exhibit persistently lower generalized trust.

To measure whether Gulag exposure weakens local firm relationships directly, I construct a firm-level ownership network, linking firms within each city through shared ownership, common managers, shared addresses, or a shared parent-company registration number, and examine its structure using the same regression-discontinuity design. Additionally, I also have litigation records, a separate dataset that shows what happens once a relationship breaks down. Litigation records provide a second, corroborating window onto the same pattern: firms in Gulag-affected regions litigate less with local partners and more with distant ones (Table 5), consistent with the idea that generalized trust, not just personal or repeated-interaction trust, governs both how firms tie themselves to local partners and how they resolve disputes with them.

Ownership Ties Between Local Firms

For each city, I compute standard network statistics (density, degree centralization, the number and size of connected components, mean degree, the maximum k-core, and the mean betweenness and closeness of the largest component) and estimate the same regression discontinuity used elsewhere in the paper, with the city instead of the firm as the unit of observation. Results are reported separately for the low-intensity treated subsample ("Outside Gulag", more than 30 km from a former camp) and the high-intensity treated subsample ("Around Gulag", within 30 km), each measured against the protected-city comparison group.

Table 1: Density and Degree Centralization

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Outside Gulag	Around Gulag	Outside Gulag	Around Gulag
	Network density	Network density	Degree centralization	Degree centralization
Exposed to Gulag	-4.071	0.271	4.897	-1.175
	(0.901)	(1.363)	(1.750)	(1.182)
Observations	30	34	21	27
Diff-in-disc p-value	0.008		0.004	
Obs left of c	5	7	4	6
Obs right of c	8	3	5	2
Bandwidth	90	90	90	90

Notes: *Robust clustered standard errors. There are 138 location clusters. The unit of observation is a city. The odd columns perform the analysis for the low-intensity treated and the even columns for the high-intensity treated. The fixed effects for the nearest protected city and linear distance to the boundary are included in all regressions. There are 18 protected cities.*

Table 2: Number of Components and Largest Component Size

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Outside Gulag	Around Gulag	Outside Gulag	Around Gulag
	Number of components	Number of components	LC size	LC size

Exposed to Gulag	3.671	-1.277	29.731	-7.916
	(3.346)	(0.734)	(7.923)	(7.981)
Observations	30	34	30	34
Diff-in-disc p-value	0.149		0.001	
Obs left of c	5	7	5	7
Obs right of c	8	3	8	3
Bandwidth	90	90	90	90

Notes: *Robust clustered standard errors. There are 138 location clusters. The unit of observation is a city. The dependent variables are the number of components and the size of the largest component (LC) in the city ownership network.*

Table 3: Largest Component Connectedness, Mean Degree, and Max k-core

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Outside Gulag	Around Gulag	Outside Gulag	Around Gulag	Outside Gulag	Around Gulag
	Share of nodes	Share of nodes	Mean degree	Mean degree	Max k-core	Max k-core
Exposed to Gulag	-2.148	-0.590	4.752	-1.269	-1.980	-1.724
	(0.565)	(0.792)	(0.991)	(0.626)	(0.392)	(0.927)
Observations	30	34	30	34	30	34
Diff-in-disc p-value	0.109		0.000		0.800	
Obs left of c	5	7	5	7	5	7
Obs right of c	8	3	8	3	8	3
Bandwidth	90	90	90	90	90	90

Notes: *Robust clustered standard errors. There are 138 location clusters. The unit of observation is a city. The dependent variables are the share of nodes in the largest component, mean degree, and maximum k-core.*

Table 4: Mean Betweenness and Mean Closeness of the Largest Component

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Outside Gulag	Around Gulag	Outside Gulag	Around Gulag
	Mean betweenness (LC)	Mean betweenness (LC)	Mean closeness (LC)	Mean closeness (LC)
Exposed to Gulag	-4.210	-3.489	-6.899	0.854
	(3.115)	(4.262)	(1.424)	(1.065)
Observations	30	34	30	34
Diff-in-disc p-value	0.891		0.000	
Obs left of c	5	7	5	7
Obs right of c	8	3	8	3
Bandwidth	90	90	90	90

Notes: *Robust clustered standard errors. There are 138 location clusters. The unit of observation is a city. The dependent variables are mean betweenness and mean closeness of the largest component (LC).*

Around Gulag, the locations closest to former camps, shows a clear signature of weaker local ties. Mean degree in the ownership network is significantly lower there (-1.269, Table 3) than in the protected-city comparison group, even though the number of firms in these locations is significantly higher (Table 7 in the main paper) and the number of distinct ownership clusters falls marginally (-1.277, Table 2). Firms in the areas most exposed to forced labour are tied to fewer local partners through ownership, despite operating in a local economy that grew substantially in scale. The maximum k-core result adds a further piece of consistency: even the most tightly connected ownership clusters in these locations are shallower than in the protected cities (-1.724, Table 3), so the pattern reaches beyond peripheral firms.

Outside Gulag areas show a sharper divergence in ownership structure: lower density, higher degree centralization, and a much larger but more loosely connected largest component (Tables 1–2), and lower closeness (Table 4). This pattern appears more consistent with a rural–urban distinction than with a legacy of the Gulag. Their divergence in ownership networks from the protected cities is characterized by a relatively small number of hubs with a larger and more loosely connected set of firms around them, broadly consistent with the structural relationship typically observed between an urban centre and its rural periphery. Around-Gulag areas do not follow this urban-rural pattern at all: they track the protected cities closely on density, degree centralization, and largest-component size, and diverge only on the specific measures tied to weaker local ties: mean degree and maximum k-core (Table 3).

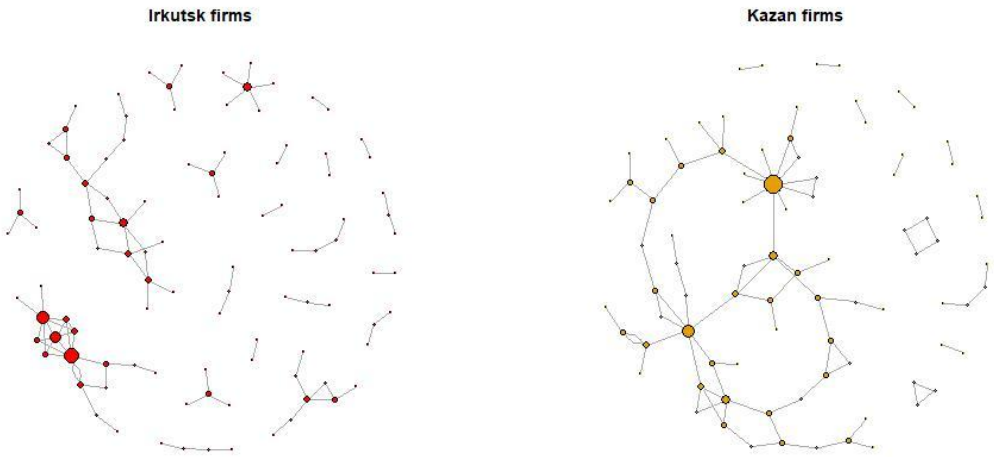


Figure 1: Ownership Networks in Around Gulag (Irkutsk) and Outside Gulag (Kazan)

Litigation with Local and Distant Partners

If Gulag exposure genuinely weakens local ties, the same pattern should show up in a completely different kind of data: what happens when a relationship breaks down and a firm turns to the courts. Table 5 reports the paper's litigation result on local versus distant partners, and it provides exactly this kind of corroboration. At the baseline of a local partner (*Distant partner* = 0), the *Exposed to Gulag* coefficient is the effect of Gulag exposure on litigation with a local partner. This is

significantly negative in Around Gulag, both as plaintiff and as defendant, while it is essentially zero or slightly positive Outside Gulag, the same subsample split as the ownership-network results above. Litigation with a distant partner, captured by the large and significant *Distant partner* coefficient in every column, is common everywhere, but the interaction term shows it is relatively more common still in the Gulag-affected locations.

This mirrors the ownership-network finding closely. Firms in Around Gulag are not only tied to fewer local partners through ownership; they are also less likely to take a local partner to court, while relying more, not less, on formal institutions for distant partners. The litigation result does not explain the weaker ownership ties, but it is exactly the pattern a weaker-local-ties story would predict once a relationship breaks down.

Table 5: Litigation per Revenue with Distant Partners

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Outside Gulag	Around Gulag	Outside Gulag	Around Gulag
	As plaintiff	As plaintiff	As defendant	As defendant
Exposed to Gulag	0.022	-0.041	0.002	-0.047
	(0.008)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.018)
Distant partner	0.958	0.845	0.915	0.879
	(0.003)	(0.032)	(0.005)	(0.024)
Exposed to Gulag × Distant partner	-0.023	0.099	0.010	0.041
	(0.004)	(0.034)	(0.008)	(0.026)
Observations	14,351	29,380	15,913	30,762
Diff p-value	0.000		0.252	
Num of clusters	63	45	65	47

Notes: *Robust clustered standard errors. There are 138 location clusters. The unit of observation is a firm. The dependent variable is a dummy for litigation with a distant partner as opposed to a local partner. All regressions use being distant interacted with treatment (Gulag). The odd columns perform the analysis for the low-intensity treated and the even columns for the high-intensity treated. The fixed effects for the nearest protected city and linear and quadratic distance to the boundary are included in all regressions. There are 18 protected cities.*

The estimates are drawn from a small number of cities, as few as 21 to 34 in total, with only 2 to 8 observations on either side of the cutoff in some specifications, so I treat the point estimates as indicative of a real pattern rather than as precisely estimated. Even with that caveat, the ownership-network result is the more direct test: it measures local connectedness itself, rather than the disputes that weaker connectedness sometimes produces, and the litigation evidence, moving the same direction in the same locations, corroborates it.

Conclusion

The ownership-network and litigation-data analyses provide two independent sources of evidence for a local-versus-distant divergence in firm relationships across areas affected by Gulag camps. In locations most directly exposed to forced labour, both measures point in the same direction: firms engage in less litigation with local partners and maintain fewer ownership ties with them, even as the number of firms operating in these areas increases. The fact that two conceptually

distinct measures of local inter-firm relationships exhibit a similar pattern strengthens the interpretation that this divergence reflects a substantive feature of how firms in Gulag-affected areas conduct business, rather than an artifact specific to either dataset.