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"States" of informality in post-socialist Europe (and beyond)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the main debates and works that underpin the theoretical conceptualization of this special issue and documents the exponential growth of literature on informality both globally and, especially, in post-socialist spaces. In spite of this growth, informality is still relatively understudied considering how widespread and significant a phenomenon it has become. In particular, if we go beyond a merely economistic view of the phenomenon, one could argue that an understanding of informality explains a variety of social responses and the number of cases where we have been able to apply an informality framework is perhaps very telling. Debates remain too bounded by one of two paradigms: either recourse to geographic particularism or exceptionalism or ongoing debates on transition or transformation (the appropriateness of 'posting' socialism). To break with this attitude, we suggest with this special issue that study of informality needs to build into itself a middle-field theory explaining its endurance which acknowledges both specificities of social action arising from common(ish) pasts and experience of change after 1989/91 leading to translatable presents, as well as these societies' positioning as mediating sites of neocapitalism between the Global North and South, with such a theory being a key articulation of the multiple modernities thesis.

KEYWORDS

Informality; post-socialism; state; Eastern Europe; post-Soviet

Since the early 2000s, the number of articles with "informality" in the title has grown from a few thousand each year to consistently more than 15,000 (according to Google Scholar). Interestingly, if we add in the search term "postsocialism," we observe a smooth upward curve in the number of articles returning these words in their titles from the low tens in 2000 to approximately ten times that number in the last year (271 in 2015–2016 – to be precise). Clearly, a parallel process is occurring. Social scientists are finding the term informality, with all its inbuilt imprecision, more interesting and useful over time, but so too are those scholars focusing on changes in post-communist, or post-socialist societies.

But this growth over more than a decade should make us cautious about complaining too much at the imprecision of both terms. Clearly, such a correlation (which implies no causation) – implies at least some synergy in looking at on the one hand non-formal

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associations and networks, in-group social trust, corruption and on the other at the post-communist spaces as a totality of some kind. Informality then is more than a passing buzzword, even if the theoretical problems with it are similar to those with the term "social capital" – much criticized because of the lack of empirical work in social sciences underpinning the numerous theoretical versions of it.

And that is where the idea for this special issue comes in, given the exponential growth in informality literature. Just as with "social trust," not only are more empirical groundings of the nebulous "informality" needed, we felt it was also time to go beyond empirical reflections and to inject more theoretical rigour in the scholarship on informality, at the very least in terms of the region. It was only at the last EASA conference in Prague (August 2015) that we could sit down and put some ideas on paper for this special issue, which has the humble aim of at least starting to build an understanding of the "state" of informality debate in post-socialist Europe and beyond.

Having been working on informality for some years, we have been fortunate to cross paths with some outstanding people studying informality who have agreed to work with us on this special issue. As a result, we have been lucky enough to feature some of the most promising (along with some prominent) scholars on informality. In no way, however, can we claim to have the only or the best ones. Some scholars to whom we owe a lot intellectually are absent from this list and our hope is that we can work with them in the near future. It is to all of them, present and absent scholars, that this special issue is devoted. We have an immense debt to our authors, who have been able to meet deadlines, and have patiently reworked to their papers following our suggestions. But we have another no smaller debt to all those who are working, in a way or another, on informality, thus inspiring us and demonstrating that the direction we took some time ago was worth taking. We are also grateful to Andy Kilmister and the editorial board of JCCEE for supporting this idea, allowing us to get to the end of this process.

Why informality is important (not to us only)

We believed, and believe, that informality is still relatively understudied considering how influential a phenomenon it has become in accompanying relatively rapid social change and indicating the meaning of state-society relations. If we go beyond a merely economistic view of the phenomenon, one could argue that informality can explain a variety of things and the variety of cases where we have been able to apply an informality framework is perhaps very telling. From the study of corruption (Morris and Polese 2014, 2015a) to redefinitions of the welfare state (Polese, Morris, and Kovacs 2014), to a framework for the analysis of sharing economies (Kovacs et al., forthcoming): in all these cases our approach sees the informal as complementary to the broad framing of activities that are not "regulated, monitored or controlled directly or indirectly by the state." (Routh 2011: 211)

Indeed, increasingly, our desire is to expand the extra-state or para-state framework to incorporate broader insights into what a state is "good" or "bad" at and what citizens do when they perceive the latter. There are always formal rules that regulate the political and economic life of any state, even failing ones. However, these rules cannot account for explaining cultural and sometimes social phenomena that economic logic cannot fully capture. The separation of economic and social realms is a point we owe to Gudeman (2001) and has informed most of the non-economic oriented literature on informality, in particular the cluster inspired by economic anthropology (Hann 2010; Hann and Hart 2009).

We have been also been inspired by the works of critical geographers from Gibson-Graham (1996) onwards. Starting from a feminist framework for the understanding of capitalism, and then neoliberalism, we see a spectrum of works moving from simply critically looking at the role of the state all the way to anarchic geographies (Springer 2012; White and Williams 2012) and emphasizing, in one way or another, the need for a more thorough-going critical reflection on the role of the state that does not assume it to be benign, a process that has also been joined by critical political economists (Bruff 2011).

A result of our commitment to a more theoretically holistic approach, this special issue brings together papers from a variety of disciplines and empirical groundings and is intended to seek a dialogue between scholars, a thing that rarely happens (and is also notable in the "social trust" literature, mentioned above). For one thing, Dixit's work on lawlessness economics (2007) overlaps in many parts with work on informality but has not been sufficiently exploited in our target region. Another example of limited dialogue between disciplines is the dual use of informal governance. Given its regional focus, we are inclined to follow Ledeneva's developments (which in turn point to a scholarly interface between area studies, sociology, cultural studies and political science), looking at how domestic governance structures are informed by informal practices, relations and how most of the negotiations are informal (1998, 2006). However, Stone's framework (2013) suggesting that institutions and international organizations also work informally to discuss and make decisions on international matters is also an interesting evolution of the initially economistic concept of informality (Lewis 1954, 1959). Informality has also started permeating the work of urban geographers and planners (Kudva 2009; Roy 2005), informing reflections on a variety of areas of the world (Roy and AlSayyad 2004) as well as theoretical and epistemological reflections on the boundaries between formality and informality (McFarlane and Waibel 2012).

The post-socialist region has been a fertile ground for the study of informality. Indeed, the fact that we often hear of new colleagues who have "converted" to the study of informality, at least part-time, seems to confirm our guess. We are thinking of the Academic Swiss Caucasus Network conference in Fribourg 2013, featuring 120 papers with informality as a main theme (see also the volumes resulting from the conference: Giordano and Hayoz 2014; Morris and Polese 2015a, 2015b, Polese and Rekhviashvili, forthcoming). We are also thinking of the voluminous Encyclopaedia of Informality that Alena Ledeneva has recently sent to print and the growing number of PhD students that we come across at conferences, showing that there is a real interest in informality with a particular focus on former socialist spaces.

Background and rationale of the special issue

Back to the state; Creed's book (1997) *Domesticating Revolution* serves as a useful starting point in recent scholarship focused on the significance for state socialism of the solidification/emergence of informal arrangements in "oiling" the machinery of creaky centralized systems, a point also made by economists of totalitarianism (Paldam and Svendsen 2000). This makes us think that the "state" relationship of formality and informality deserves further explication – particularly now, with the seeming "victory" of institutional transition belied by the continuing ubiquity of informal relations. Recent debates on informal practices and informal economies have suggested that they may be a direct consequence of excessive bureaucracy even within neoliberalism (the transitionalist or modernist view), or a response to state ineffectiveness (the structuralist view). In spite of a growing body of literature, informality

has often been under-estimated and frequently seen as an unimportant – rather than a major – feature of the economic and social life of a polity.

Initially challenged by sociologists and anthropologists insisting on embeddedness (Granovetter 1984, Parry and Bloch 1989), the debate has widened in the past years, to include at least three approaches. One continues the debates in economic anthropology and sociology, seeing the market and the society as separate, but often complementary (Gudeman 2001); the second has developed from a critical perspective in human geography (Gibson-Graham 1996), gradually informing business, economics and management studies (Williams 2005, 2009, 2013; Williams and Martinez 2014). This "revival" of informality studies has prompted a turn away from a narrowly sociological perspective to engage with political economy issues (Dixit 2007) and political institutions and personalities (Helmke and Levitsky 2004; Isaacs 2015, Mollica 2014), showing that informality is also widely presented in "advanced" capitalist societies (Williams 2005; Marcelli, Williams, and Joassart 2010). Third, we have previously suggested that informality is, in fact, a globally enduring and resilient phenomenon, not transitory and only characteristic of modernizing/transitioning societies (Polese, Morris, and Kovacs 2014; Morris and Polese 2014, 2015a, 2015b; Smith and Stenning 2006). There have also been attempts at theorizing informality as an inseparable element not of modernization to market capitalism(s), but of multiple capitalism(s) (Gibson-Graham 1996).

What we can say now, and from the novel approaches and unturned stones discovered by our authors, is that informality in post-socialism has been widely researched but is still undertheorized, particularly with regard to state–citizen relations. One perspective concentrates on the incentives, or lack thereof, for citizens to act according to official rules– this body of work often falling into the trap of assuming certain values to be universal and equally applicable everywhere. A sub-stream of this approach has explored the modes in which post-socialism could transform and align with more advanced or "effective" states. The other perspective looks at practices and everyday ways of living post-socialist transformations and the acceptance, or renegotiation, of the neoliberal economic and social model locally. Informality is, from this perspective, considered as a way of creating survival strategies or, at most, domesticating neoliberalism through everyday practices (Stenning et al. 2010). These two perspectives have in common the emphasis on the mismatch between what the state claims to deliver and what it actually delivers.

The above debates have also informed policy recommendations and policy-making in the field of fighting informal and shadow economies, policies that have gradually become more pragmatic and directed towards formalization (Williams and Onoshchenko 2015a, 2015b). After the failures of zero-tolerance punitive approaches, a growing number of countries have concentrated on incentives to invite people out of the shadow. This shift is explained in part by a growing number of studies which point to informality as a phenomenon covering a wide range of (economic, social and political) practices, far from being relegated to sweatshops and small-scale, ad hoc economic transactions. Instead, it is a global phenomenon penetrating all aspects of public life. Informality is present everywhere, but in different forms and, whilst limited in some areas, cannot be liquidated as it is an integral part of state–citizen interactions and even state activity (Aliyev 2014; Polese 2015; Rekhviashvili 2015). As a result, there is no evidence that efforts to reduce atomization, the role of human agency and to increase social cohesion might lead to the desired results as far as "the fight against informality" is concerned.

To summarize: debates remain too bounded by one of two paradigms, either recourse to geographic particularism or exceptionalism or ongoing debates on transition or transformation (the appropriateness of "posting" socialism). Ironically, debates on other regions of the world are in a similar vein – (e.g. authoritarian development in South Asia). Recourse to post-socialist path dependency is not sufficient to explain the widespread, persistent and enduring role informality has been shown to play across these societies. The study of informality needs to build into itself a middle-field theory explaining its endurance which acknowledges both specificities of social action arising from common(ish) pasts and experience of change after 1989/91 leading to translatable presents, as well as these societies' positioning as mediating sites of neocapitalism between the global north and south, with such theory being a key articulation of the multiple modernities thesis. We are confident that our authors have made a significant foray into this field.

Content

We are especially proud of this special issue for the variety and depth of the debates featured here. While presenting the contributions we wish to thank once again our authors for delivering (on time) such a variety of thought-provoking papers and for having worked to achieve an excellent balance between providing new empirical material and embedding it in theoretical discussions that, we are confident, will contribute to further the understanding of informality and its function in Europe and elsewhere.

Lela Rekhviashvili examines societal responses to, and consequences of Georgia's market-enhancing institutional reform, primarily focusing on the case of petty traders. Relying mainly on ethnographic data, but also on secondary literature concerning small-scale entrepreneurship, she shows that instead of being embraced, the market-enhancing institutional reforms were fiercely contested by petty traders, as well as by a variety of other social groups). Moreover, under the pressure of traders' discontent, street-level officials devised new types of informal practices, primarily designed to counterbalance the social and economic costs of marketization for informally operating groups and individuals.

A close examination of the conflicts and the new forms of informal practices that emerged in response to the institutional reform in Georgia implies the need to revise the problem analysis and remedies to informality offered by the new institutionalist perspective and the literature implicitly inspired by this perspective. The key assumption of this literature is that economic actors voluntarily exit from the formal/state regulated economic sphere to escape state imposed costs, such as high taxes and burdensome regulations, corruption and inefficient bureaucracy (e.g. Johnson et al. 1997). In contrast, the responses to market enhancing reforms in Georgia illustrate that informally operating actors also try to avoid and counterbalance market related risks and competition emerging from new, market-enhancing institutions. The informal interventions that street-level bureaucrats devised to accommodate the traders' needs indicated limits to market-based solutions to informality and illustrated the inevitability of state involvement in the micro-level process of adjustment to the marketization process.

Rune Steenberg's article joins the many authors writing about "informal" practices in calling for more attention to practices outside the "formal" political and economic systems, at the same time he sees a need to critically assess further and qualify the analytical use of the term of informality. He maintains that, while valuable attempts have been made to refine

the study of informal practices by allowing for differential analytical treatment of different kinds of informality, the analytical limitations of the concept itself need to be more clearly recognized, whilst not leading to a wholesale rejection of the term. Rather, making explicit its implicit ideology enables more reflection on the actual utility of the concept. An important and ever more relevant use of the concept, he suggests, is that it enables analytical dialogue between sciences that heed non-bureaucratic, non-state practices, like anthropology, on the one side and more state centred social sciences, such as political science and economics, on the other. The notion of 'informality' introduces into these latter disciplines and their analytical apparatuses an awareness of practices central to people's lives but often unrecognized by their theoretical models.

Borbala Kovács makes the argument that while the commodification of early years childcare services in the Romanian context is shaped by similar drivers as elsewhere in Europe, the overwhelmingly informal character of this commodification is first and foremost policy-induced. In particular, the configuration of family policy provisions and the care gaps created by the absence of quality childcare alternatives especially during the first three years are mainly responsible for the expansion of undeclared home-based early year's childcare services. By reflecting on the particular configuration of macro-level social and economic deficits that have shaped demand for and supply of early years childcare over the last ten years in conjunction with family policy provisions, the paper empirically engages with the ways in which these deficits play out at the household level, generating a need for informally provided bespoke early years childcare. Relying on in-depth interview material with urban and rural dual-income couples, collected in 2010 and 2015, the article captures the crucial importance of family policy instruments in shaping the nature of specific configurations of need for care services, to be provided first and foremost informally.

Marius Wamsiedel contributes to the scholarship on the mobilization of personal connections for securing preferential treatment and other privileges by examining the informal referral of patients at the triage of two emergency departments in Romania. The study focuses on the practical accomplishment of the practice, and argues that the success of informal referrals is contingent upon the social distance between the referrer and the triage worker, and the ability of the former to act in accordance with the etiquette pertaining to informality. It also shows that participants in informal referrals jointly construct public secrecy, obscuring and obliquely revealing the true nature of the practice, in order to maintain their reputation and avoid repercussions for departing from formal rules and procedures. Public secrecy is practically accomplished by creating and maintaining an ambiguous definition of the situation; misrepresenting the practice; minimizing the transgression of formal rules; and shifting the focus away from informality, by embedding the practice into socially acceptable phenomena such as helping family members in need.

Urinboyev and Polese explore the role of informality among Uzbek construction workers in Russia. The authors start from a relationship that originates in individual economic reward but which extends to common interests involving non-economic components of this relationship. Economically, the workers entrust their supervisor and agree to work for him for a given amount of money. However, this decision is also embedded in a non-economic dimension. All workers, and their master, come from the same village so that an additional layer of social obligations come with this. First, workers are able to receive a treatment that goes beyond economic relations, with favours or paternalistic attitudes when needed. Second, they are also able to use social sanctions on the line manager through their families in cases

where things do not work out the way they expected. The case study proposes the existence of a non-monetary currency (or even currencies) that complements formal currencies. Money, its symbolism and the power attached to it still play a major role in the relationships and dependencies analyzed here. These points help the authors suggest that relations encompass a wide range of transactions and rituals that go beyond mere economic interest and that cannot be neglected when understanding informality.

Alessandra Russo's article aims at studying the articulation of different security models in the former Soviet space. On the one hand, she explores to what extent a Eurasian structure of security governance has emerged/is emerging; on the other hand she advances the idea that security governance in the region results from the co-contribution of formal and informal security practices. In spite of several methodological limitations when tracing practices, the article presents a preliminary classification of the sources of informal security practices in the former Soviet space, and identifies two mechanisms to explain how regional security governance is affected by informal security practices.

Huseyn Aliyev shows what happens to informal institutions in the process of institutional reform. His article explores one particular aspect of the complex interaction between institutional reforms and informality; the impact of reforms on informal political institutions. The success of Ukraine's Euromaidan in overthrowing the autocratic government of Viktor Yanukovich in 2014 has ushered in a wind of change to the post-Soviet political landscape, for decades dominated by authoritarian and semi-authoritarian forms of governance and the reliance on informal institutions engraved in political traditions. This study is among the first to question as to whether an ambitious reform agenda currently implemented by the Ukraine's post-Euromaidan Government has had a notable impact on deeply rooted informal relations in the political sphere. Drawing on empirical insights from a series of in-depth interviews conducted in Kiev in 2015, Aliyev's study shows that while informal relations became increasingly vulnerable to formalization efforts and, as a result, various informal institutions in present-day Ukrainian politics have lost their functions and influence, other informal institutions are not only being preserved by the political elites, but also are employed to promote the reform processes.

Williams and Horodnic aim to evaluate which consumers in Central and Eastern Europe are more likely to acquire goods and services from the informal economy and to unravel their multifarious motives for doing so. Analyzing 11,131 face-to-face structured interviews conducted in 11 Central and Eastern European countries in 2013, a logit regression analysis reveals that some groups purchase from the informal economy to obtain a lower price, others for social or redistributive rationales, and yet others due to the failures of the formal economy in terms of the availability, speed and quality of provision. The implications for theorising and tackling the informal economy are then explored.

Karla Koutkova departs from the standard premises of informality. In terms of normative rendering, she shows through empirical examples built on ethnographic fieldwork among "local" and "international" actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina that the "informal" cannot be dismissed as inherently detrimental or residual to formal structures. In this vein, the theoretical claim builds on those sources in social science literature that digress from the notion of the "informal" as parasitic on and residual to formal arrangements. The most notable grounds for this chain of thinking have been laid by Bourdieu (1990) and Scott (1998) who claims that "formal order (...) is always and to some considerable degree parasitic on informal processes, which the formal scheme does not recognise, without which it could not exist,

and which it alone cannot create or maintain." (1998, 310) Taking these assumptions further, the article shows that informality cannot be constructed merely as a detrimental antidote to the "formal". Complementary to literature that discusses informality as a qualifier for "networks," "practices" and "institutions", Koutkova discuss its role as an interpretive filter used by transactors in navigating the international prerogatives in community management in Bosnia.

Each of the articles included in this special issue already poses provocative questions allowing us to reflect further on the state of informality debates in the region, and possibly beyond. However, we believe that the value of this collection is the variety of angles informality is approached from. Starting from a number of studies on informal practices and their function, the authors here contribute to the wide panorama of informality and bring the debate forward theoretically. Informality is present, is here to stay and permeates many aspects of socieyl and the state's "way of life" so it cannot simply be claimed that more effective moves towards modern bureaucracy, marketising and democracy will see its passing. The question remains: What can and should we do about informality?

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