INFORMALITY IN EASTERN EUROPE
Structures, Political Cultures and Social Practices

Christian Giordano & Nicolas Hayoz (eds)
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Introduction: Exploring Informality in Eastern Europe through Different Disciplines

The idea for this book goes back to a discussion between anthropologists and political scientists on the meanings of informality and on the question about how to link diverging conceptions of informal practices and structures, particularly in the context of the ongoing political, economic and social changes in Eastern Europe. The objectives of this book are twofold.

First, and with regard to the main distinction of this book between informality and formality, it aims to discover whether or to what extent informal structures and practices in Eastern Europe have meanings, functions, forms and effects different from those that can be observed in the politics and societies of Western Europe. The authors of this volume – the majority among them are from the region – working with the conceptual distinction between informality and formality, have been invited to discuss these questions. A particular focus is given to the question of the extent to which informal institutions and practices can be considered as a transitional phenomenon, to be observed in certain fields, areas and periods, or whether we are confronted here with a rather more structural or persistent phenomenon. As all three important regions in Eastern Europe are covered by the contributions we may expect to see that patterns of informal structures and practices are following more-or-less the direction of the transformations in the political systems, the regional economies and societies.

Second, this volume is an attempt to bring together scholars from different disciplines under the “umbrella” distinction between informality and formality. It aims not only to inform about the potential of this distinction from an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary perspective but also to address the question of where the points of convergence are and where the differences on the conceptual as well as on the methodological level are. In that sense the volume aims to launch a dialogue, centred on the complex social phenomenon of informality, between various disciplines in the social sciences, which, although next-door neighbours, usually have
little more than a nodding acquaintance with each other. In our opinion, from a theoretical and a methodological point of view they clearly have much to share. These disciplines are political science on the one hand and social anthropology on the other as well as sociology, especially in its more interpretative, and thus rather qualitative, forms.

The above disciplines have significantly different theoretical and methodological scopes. Yet, we believe that this interdisciplinary exchange would be fruitful, not because we are under the illusion that a common approach might be found but precisely because we wish to highlight differences and similarities between the various disciplines’ approaches, which are nevertheless characterized by family resemblances (in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s terms) due to shared cognitive interests. Finally, we believe that the discussion of the relevance of informal patterns and particularly the relationship between formal and informal norms or rules is a fertile and “productive” terrain to assess such questions. We can see only what our distinctions allow us to see! In an interdisciplinary enterprise the interesting point would be to learn to see how different disciplines address the main informality/formality distinction differently.

Political Informality in Eastern Europe

Informality has become, without any doubt, a fashionable topic of research. The amount of literature on informal practices and networks in Eastern Europe and Central Asia has increased rapidly, producing useful empirically based research material. Typologies and research agendas advanced by authors like Helmke and Levitsky, focusing on the correlation between the effectiveness of informal and formal institutions and their outcomes, have obviously inspired many scholars to produce empirical research on the questions raised by these authors. This is also the case here in this

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1 For a good overview of the literature see Ledeneva (2012). See also the contributions in Meyer (2006), Mansfeldova and Pleines (2011) and Christiansen and Neuhold (2012).

2 See Helmke and Levitsky (2004) (republished in Christiansen and Neuhold 2012) and also Helmke and Levitsky (2006). See also Lauth (2012), whose work on informal institutions has also been inspired by Helmke and Levitsky’s typology.
volume: Helmke and Levitsky’s conceptual framework is used or critically discussed in more than half of all contributions. This can certainly be considered as a good example of the productive use of conceptual distinctions allowing a discussion with neighbouring disciplines, despite the fact that such typologies deal primarily with problems related to the political system and that the notion of institutions, so central for political scientists, is not necessarily useful for other disciplines.

Moreover, the growing interest among scholars in topics related to informality may also be explained by the fact that, in many Eastern European and Central Asian countries, different forms of informal power networks hinder or even block the democratization process. Hybrid political regimes, or regimes with considerable democracy deficits, cannot operate without informal institutions and practices. One may even conclude that informality is part of the governance mode of all more-or-less soft variants of authoritarian regimes. Furthermore, it seems obvious that personalized governance networks are not really structures supporting democracy and rule of law; on the contrary, they undermine them. Political scientists analysing the more-or-less democratic character of specific political structures and procedure cannot avoid the question of the impact of informal arrangements, rules or institutions on democracy.

There are many contemporary studies on informal institutions revealing the persistence and perverse effects of such informal structures. The economic crisis, however, particularly in Southern Europe, has again shown the extent to which clientelist networks are co-responsible for the political, economic and financial crises in the region, in addition to the populist movements riding on the waves of widespread distrust between political elites and the population at large. However, it would be erroneous to insist only on the negative effects of informal practices or to pretend that the bad informality is only in Eastern Europe or, more generally, in the countries of the “global South”. It would be also completely misleading to put the “negative” conception of informality, usually associated with corruption and clientelism, in the camp of political scientists worrying about democracy and to leave the “good” informality to anthropologists

3 For such aspects see, for example, Levitsky and Way (2010).
4 For a very differentiated analysis of this question of the impact of informal institutions on democracy see Lauth (2012).