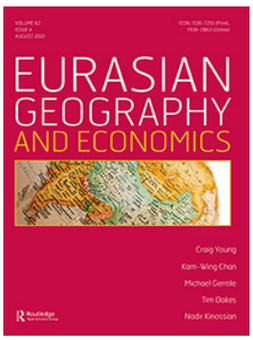

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What is informality? (mapping) "the art of bypassing the state" in Eurasian spaces - and beyond

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ABSTRACT

Despite a growing number of studies featuring "informality" in their title, including many from the post-socialist region, little has been done to reach a consensus on what informality means, how to measure it and, more generally, to develop it into a widely agreed and shared theorization. Instead, and paradoxically, given that a significant number of studies rely on intuitive understandings of the phenomenon, often intended as "the opposite of formal", this increased attention to informality has contributed to topical confusion rather than better defining what informality may be. By surveying and cross-comparing regional and world literature on informality, this article attempts to provide a coherent framework for delineating and understanding "informality studies", outlining its main characteristics and eventually better understand its applicability and boundaries. While doing this, it calls for more attention to the political dimensions of informality and ways in which measurement of informality can be used both as a proxy for quality of governance and a deeper grasping of state–citizen relations.

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Informality; development; Eurasia; governance; state

Introduction: the informality turn

Informality is thriving. A simple academic search of the word generates over 100,000 results across several disciplines, including informal economy (Hart 1973), informal housing (Turner 1968), informal land management (Leaf 1992),

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and informal planning (Roy 2005 cited in Boanada-Fuchs and Fuchs 2018, 414). Although we are far from the 3 m results reached by "social stratification" on Google scholar, informality-related works have grown exponentially in the past decade, expanding to a range of fields – including political science and international relations, and areas of cross disciplinary study – such as studies of informal employment and politics and governance (McFarlane and Waibel 2012; Roy and AlSayyad 2004; Dixit 2007; Helmke and Levitsky 2004; Ledeneva 2013; Stone 2013). This should come as no surprise since "informality" is an intuitive and moldable idea (Peattie 1987) that can be adapted to various contexts, research objects and ideologies. Indeed, a recent paper identified, through metadata analysis, no less than nine distinct categories of informality and over a hundred sub-categories (Boanada-Fuchs and Fuchs 2018).

As studies on informality have expanded in scope, methods and approaches have also been tested, integrated and nuanced by local cultural specificities. But this flourishing of literature has also led to some terminological confusion among scholars, resulting in both a generalization and banalisation of the phenomenon. Informality has increasingly been used to refer the "non formal" and thus to name any tendency – social, economic, political – that existing or mainstream theories neglect or omit. This lumping together of "missing" or "invisible" practices that contain "inefficient", "irregular", "unrecorded" activities, and that ranges from Hart's seminal works on the informal economy (1973) to and Turner's self-help housing literature (1977) belies the ability of such approaches to revisit certain assumptions underpinning the mainstream.

Informality studies have indeed the potential to offer a significant contribution to social science debates and possibly help improving the quality of governance in different areas of the world. But this is possible only if we go beyond locally collected empirical evidence and start suggesting in what the "informality approach" can be used to better tailor interventions to a context, a region or a society. In an attempt to address this deficiency in informality studies, the current paper offers the basis for a possible theory of informality. To do so, its first part surveys discipline-based literature, tracing the origins of informality debates and how they have led to the disciplinary variety we have today. Starting from early economics debates, it draws the path of informality from a merely quantitative discipline (shadow or informal economies) to more qualitative approaches that have informed anthropology, politics, IR and management. By doing this, it will map informality in world debates and show the main tendencies in informality studies developed within a given discipline or world region. The second part of the article explores the variety of works that have attempted to engage with informality in Eurasian spaces to cluster the current regional literature into three main foci, shadow economy, corruption studies and informal governance, whose contributions to global debates go into two major directions. First, it will be noticed that a deeper understanding of informality could be achieved by adopting an overarching framework that takes

into account everyday governance and the role of informal practices and actors in the construction of the political. Second, it will be suggested that informality could, and should, be used for the conceptualization of alternative economic and socio-economic systems that go beyond neoliberal approaches putting economic profits as the ultimate goal. Informality has the potential to become a framework allowing us to bring back onto the spotlight the social, cultural and environmental needs of segments of the population that have been neglected by orthodox economic and economic policy approaches.

As a starting point, this paper defines informality as an activity, performed by an individual or a group of individuals (organization, family, clan), that eventually bypasses the state or the overarching entity regulating the life of that group or society. This may happen because informal practice emerge in areas that a state has not managed to regulate (beyond the state) or because that practice replaces allegedly ineffective state mechanisms (in spite of the state) (Polese, Kovács, and Jancsics 2018). This definition constructs on three main concepts. First, the idea that informality consists of activities deliberately concealed from the state (Routh 2011, 12); second, proposition that informality is "the space between two formal rules" (Polese 2016b, 15) and thus a transaction or activity that becomes possible because it regulates areas of state life that were not previously regulated by formal rules. Finally, and possibly more importantly, it owes a lot to Scott's framework on "infrapolitics" (2019) suggesting that citizens can contribute to the governance of a state through petty and uncoordinated acts of insubordination (or rebellion) that, repeated millions of time change the way a given political measure is implemented in a given context.

Three further underlying assumptions, based on a broad field of empirical evidence, underpin this paper. First, it is assumed that informality is present in the developing as much as in the developed world. The difference between more or less "informal countries" is not in whether informality is present or not at all. Less informal countries have just managed to keep informality relatively out of some spheres of life that eventually affect the quality of governance (Alena. 2018a, 2018b; Williams 2004). In Germany or New Zealand winning a public tender may also depend on trust and endorsement from the people working at the institution announcing the tender. But this trust is, usually, not for sale or awarded on the basis of personal connections. In a majority of cases, in less informal states, credibility is earned by developing a track record of quality in the services delivered over the years. Second, it is assumed that the nature and dynamics of informal practices do not change too significantly across world regions. As we discovered in the study of the Albanian *loteria* (cash redistribution systems) that turned out to be a common practice from Africa to Asia, practices that may seem unique in a given context are discovered to have an identical, or very similar, forms in completely different locations (Alena. 2018a; Imami, Rama, and Polese 2020). This is an important point

allowing us to move away from the idea that "informality in this region is unique" (Aliyev 2015) to embrace the idea that informality is a global and universal phenomenon and can be theorized as such, thus transcending country and regional specificities. Third, informality is not transitory. It is here to stay and therefore worth continued efforts at theorization and analysis (Morris and Polese 2013). It can be domesticated, tamed, limited with regard to its influence on governance, but not liquidated *in toto*. Tackling informality, therefore, is not a question of eradication but rather of assigning it to designated areas of social life where it does not negatively affect policymaking or state capacity.

Unwelcome encroachments of informality often appear to take place where citizens feel that some state instructions go against societal norms or go against them as citizens (Murru and Polese 2020; Scott 1998; Van Schendel and Abraham 2005), a circumstance that often arises when state and individual morality fail to overlap (Polese 2016b). However, states can also ease control over one or more areas of life, allowing informality and self-management to emerge for a more participative (by the citizens) and inclusive management of some public spaces (Haid 2017) or to take advantage of informal welfare tools making up for the lack of formal ones (Polese et al. 2014). Footing on the above points, the next four sections set out to analyze discipline-based literature. Starting from early economics and development economics debates, it draws the path of informality to approaches that have informed anthropology and resistance, then geography and politics and IR debates. The second part surveys the use of informality in Eurasian spaces, exploring what can be considered as the four most recurrent interpretations of informality in the region, and the contribution of Eurasian scholarship to world literature.

Part I: mapping informality in global debates

Informality in economics and development disciplines

Initially embedded in economics, and mostly development economics, informality debates emerged from an attempt to understand why some emerging countries seemed immune to the attempts of the international community to improve their economic performances to eventually acknowledge the relevance of the phenomenon well beyond its economic significance. In the context of decolonization, and post WWII debates on how to best support economic development of less advanced regions, a series of initial studies engaging with the concept of informality were allegedly triggered by the initial predictions that informality would gradually disappear with the advent of modernization (Lewis 1954). The apparent persistence of the phenomenon led to the first conceptualizations of the informal sector (Harris and Todaro 1970) and also attracted the attention of the International Labor Organization which, from 1973 onwards, started monitoring precarious and informal employment across world regions

(ILO 2018). Inasmuch as these positions contributed to a redefinition of the concept of unemployment (Benanav 2019), the existence of a wide gray zone between employed and unemployed (Lipton 1984) seemed so difficult to measure that some queried whether it was worth the effort and whether it was even possible to talk of informal employment at all (Bromley 1978).

An important aspect of informality that is sometimes downplayed in economic and governance debates, is that maximization of gain is not necessarily monetary or even purely economic. Early works, embedded in a rational choice and complex decision framework, devoted a great deal of attention to correlations between tax, social security contribution burdens and the increased desire of people to remain outside the formal economy (Schneider and Enste 2003; Dell' Anno, Gómez-Antonio, and Alañon-Pardo 2007). However, they missed the fact that, peer pressure or mistrust toward the state may keep actors outside of formal structures for a long time, in spite of this decision being less convenient than the one to formalize their business. Besides, studies on the wicked nature of financial flows (Erasmo, Pablo, and Moscoso Boedo 2012; De Paula and Scheinkman 2010) showed that formalization of a business may require an initial investment of money that is not available all at once. As a result, the only viable way to remain in business is to pay small bribes or fines when needed, in spite of the fact that the total payments eventually exceed what would have been paid to simply register a business from the beginning (De.soto 2000; Perry et al. 2010).

Further studies of trends and tendencies within the informal sector (Loayza and Rigolini 2006) and a deeper grasp of labor market segmentation (Maloney 1999) have shown informality under a different light, not just the art of economic survival but also a response to (inappropriate) policy-making (Atesagaoglu, Bayram, and Elgin 2017; Levy 2008). These discoveries have been gradually taken into more serious account in economic debates (Gërxhani and Schram 2006; Rauch 1991; Loayza 1996) and methodological ones (Blades, Francisco, and Lugo 2011; Canelas 2019; Loayza and Sugawara 2009). Attention has shifted from how to liquidate informality as a whole to identification, and addressing of its main negative consequences such as poverty, vulnerability and instability (Williams 2016; Charmes 2012; Chong and Gradstein 2007; Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Klarita 2008). Consensus on the best ways to do that has been difficult to come given that the informal economy is diverse and understood differently across debates, as Table 1.

By the first decade of the new millennium, the scope and meaning of informality had expanded to governance and development debates (Gërxhani 2004; Guha-Khasnobis, Kanbur, and Ostrom 2006a; La Porta and Shleifer 2014; Maloney 2004), with increasing recognition that informality could persist without necessarily being the alter ego of the formal economy (Guha-Khasnobis, Kanbur, and Ostrom 2006b; Mukherjee 2016). Eventually, the wide array of studies on the shadow economy made it possible to establish a correlation

Table 1. Adjectives and nouns used to denote cash-in-hand work[a.]

Adjectives			
Black	Cash-in-hand	Clandestine	Concealed
Dual	Everyday	Ghetto	Grey
Hidden	Invisible	Irregular	Marginal
Moonlight	Non-observed	Non-official	Occult
Off-the-books	Other	Parallel	Peripheral
Precarious	Second	Shadow	Submerged
Subterranean	twilight	Underground	Unexposed
Unobserved	Unofficial	Unorganised	Unrecorded
Unregulated	Untaxed	Underwater	
Nouns			
Activity	Economic activity	Economy	Employment
Sector	Work		

Source: Williams (2004).
Material from: "Williams (2004) reproduced with permission of SNCSC".

between the level of the shadow economy present in a country and a number of factors ranging from tax and social security contribution burdens (Tanzi 1998, Hassan and Schneider 2016 Williams and Schneider 2016) to the quality of institutions or the level of corruption present in the country (Johnson, Kaufmann, and Pablo 1998; Dreher, Kotsogiannis, and Steve 2009, Teobaldelli and Schneider 2012). Other indicators used have been, *inter alia*, the development of the official economy or the level of self-employment, unemployment, the size of the agricultural sector or the use of cash (Feld and Schneider 2010; Hassan and Schneider 2016; Schneider and Williams 2013; Williams and Schneider 2016)

It is now broadly accepted that informality and governance are intimately related and influenced by cultural, economic and social settings (Dell' Anno and Amendola 2015; Dreher, Kotsogiannis, and Steve 2009; Teobaldelli and Schneider 2013) but also to the capacity of a state to propose regulation mechanisms that do not strangle entrepreneurship (Dreher, Kotsogiannis, and Steve 2009, Teobaldelli and Schneider 2012, Amendola and Dell'Anno 2010, Hassan and Schneider 2016, Williams and Schneider 2016) through excessive regulation or inadequate public services (De Soto 1989; Loyaza 2016; Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Klarita 2008; Kucera and Roncolato 2008; Friedrich Schneider 2011). It has been suggested that a better grasp of informality can point at alternative ways to improve state and business performance (Kanbur 2009), improve regulatory performance or predicting market behaviors (Bruhn and Loeprick 2016; Cling et al. 2012) with implications for taxation, tax morale and willingness to comply with tax legislation (Rocha, Ulyssea, and Rachter 2018). Further studies have also maintained that a lack of development results in low productivity, limited available capital, low levels of education or structural conditions that might affect growth or employment (Charmes 2012; Dreher, Méon, and Schneider 2014).

The above positions document a shift from pure economics and development to a broader governance framework throughout the past fifty years possibly leading to a better understanding, or even use, of informality. Because of this, governance indicators (for instance formulated by the World Bank) have progressively been constructed to measure not only economic variables but also micro- and macro-social and political aspects. These may include unregistered economic actors (Freund and Spatafora 2008), relationships between informality and enterprise efficiency (Marlow, Taylor, and Thompson 2010), employment relations (Ram et al. 2001) and geographical diversity across world regions (Thai, Thanh, and Turkina 2013). The above correlations have also received a great deal of attention from studies embedded in sociology, political science or human geography, thus creating the need for further conceptualizations of informality from a number of other disciplines.

Resistance, embeddedness and other social science approaches to informality

In contrast to state and institutions-centered accounts of informality, social scientists have been putting the individual, or the society, at the center of the inquiry. Encouraging explorations the role of human agency in various manifestations of the phenomenon, they have shed the basis for what would then evolve into informality studies. Early enough in the twentieth century, Boeke's study on the structure of the Netherlands' Indian economy (Boeke 1942) had already suggested that formal structures were only one component of a more complex economic system in the then Dutch colony. A further important contribution came from Hart (1973) who coined the term "informal economy" and championed the idea that economies of the Global South should be understood beyond their mere economistic and monetary aspects. It is not "how much money you're making" but "what is the complex and entangled relational framework you are embedded in and that allows you to survive, build trust and sociability networks, things that come entangled and cannot be separated from one another".

Widely availed by anthropologists studying the symbolic use of money to construct bonding relations (Parry and Bloch 1989; White 2004), this idea has also led to acknowledge that society and the market may operate in distinct realms (Gudeman 2015; Hann and Hart 2009) and that not all currencies are monetary, material or even tangible (Pardo 1996). When people are trapped in unstable and precarious conditions, social relations become dependent on indebtedness, help and support networks that function beyond mere redistribution of cash. They generate both dependency and reciprocity (Parry 1986) leading to the consolidation of "strong ties" (Granovetter 1973) between marginalized and weak actors. In such situations the opportunities created by entrepreneurship may vary in significance and meaning (Harris 2016; Moreno-

Monroy 2012). When the absence of state support makes conditions unfit for orthodox economic development (Phelps and Wijaya 2020; Phelps 2021), business is no longer about growing and generating profit (Bosma and Schutjens 2009) but is instead about survival (Altenburg and Jörg 1999), social bonding and invention (Phelps 2021, see also Geertz 1968). The meaning of success is widened (Turner 2013) and comes to include the capacity to generate revenues respecting social rules and obligations (Çizakça 2013), gain esteem (Brennan and Pettit 2005) or respectability (Pardo 1996), and a blurring of the boundary between domestic and professional areas (Guibrunet 2021).

However, all these, and other works, become much clearer when looked through three theoretical tools that Scott's work offer for the exploration of informality. First, his exploration of the moral economy suggested alternative explanations as to why peasants may offer fierce resistance to conditions that could apparently look fair. When taxed only a percentage of their production, individuals do not concentrate on "how much I am paying" but "how much am I left with" and, when this is insufficient to feed their families, they will feel they are legitimate in using whatever strategy available to minimize the amount paid out (Scott 1977). Second, and connected to the first, when people in a weak position feel that it is moral to resist "the system", they will not do it openly but in a guerrilla-like fashion. Their resistance will be informal, petty, minimalistic, contextual and apparently occasional like "I do not have all the money you are asking for today, maybe later I will". When done once, this has no social relevance. But when this attitude emerges regularly every time money is demanded and is used by a myriad of individuals several times during their life course, it informs Scott's concept of infrapolitics (Scott 2019) and, in general, state-citizen negotiations. Third, while the state is there to uniformize, standardize and homogenize, not all projects to improve the human condition end up benefiting a sufficiently large number of individuals (Scott 1998). When damaged individuals have a limited political voice, they will use other means at their disposal to champion their cause or claim benefits from a state that, in their understanding, ignores them (Gupta 1995). Resistance may then happen in a passive, quasi-silent, manner (Bayat 2000; Polese et al. 2019) or more open and active taking an utmost political form (Roy 2009; McFarlane and Waibel 2012; MacLeod and Jones 2011). What matters here is that, once we acknowledge that it is not performed by just one person but is prevalent among a segment of a society, these insights help us to understand a variety of phenomena and identify a wide range of tendencies. Such insights apply to everyday contexts, where citizens negotiate their relationship with the state on a daily basis and are based on what they are able, or not, to live with (Fetzer 2020; Knott 2015).

The social embeddedness of informality is at the basis of an important divergence of opinions in informality studies. The fact that informality and precarious employment comprise up to 80% of the economy in some regions of the world (Benjamin, Arifin, and Sarjana 1985; Charmes 2012; Kraemer and

Wunsch 2016) may lead to the idea that such proportions should be reduced. But, in a chicken and egg fashion, what comes first? Is informality caused by state inefficiency (Roy 2005; McFarlane and Waibel 2012) or it is the reason behind state's limited efficiency? And is informality always and necessarily something "bad" which should eventually be liquidated? Finally, what would a world without informality look like? Several scholars have emphasized that informality is also an immense reservoir of creativeness (Roy 2005), that formality and informality might not exist without each other because they are interconnected and mutually supportive of one another (Buğra 1998; Ledeneva 2009; Portes and Sensenbrenner 2018). But how much (informality) is too much? Informality may become a hindrance to the expansion of modern/Western institutional structures (Roy 2005; Varley 2013), but are these (standardized, homogeneised, Western-centered) structures the best ones we can offer to each and every society? In this respect, informality can be regarded as an attempt to resist Western neoliberal institutions and point at a possible system of values where social and environmental concerns are given the priority, a thing that has been partly attempted in geography debates.

Geography and planning approaches to informality

Explorations of social justice and the role of alternative economies, that are not based on the blind faith in neoliberal institutions, has been a concern of geographers for more than two decades already. Since Gibson-Graham (1998) seminal works, human geographers have been advocating against the TINE (there is no alternative) paradigm to suggest the existence of alternative economic models that can also work to the advantage of the weak and the poor, where profit becomes secondary to equality and justice. Although not explicitly mentioned by early literature on reciprocity, trust networks and self-help, when these concepts are applied to housing (Turner 1977), informality is central to debates in geography and urban planning. For one thing, urban informality – the creation of settlements not regulated by the state that allow migrants and poor people to survive – reshapes urban landscapes and shifts attention from informal housing to planning and management (Boanada-Fuchs and Fuchs 2018, 401; Bredenoord and Van Paul 2010). The above perspectives have encouraged planning scholars (Innes, Connick, and Booher 2007; Roy and AlSayyad 2004) to distance themselves from ILO championing of economic informality and instead to emphasize its political and social aspects (Boanada-Fuchs and Fuchs 2018, 402). Geographers and planners have thus progressively expanded their understanding of urban informality to the use of public spaces, planning and governance (Falla, Vargas, and Valencia 2019). Such a turn has allowed debates to add critical positions on development that may happen beyond state or institutional instructions or even in spite of them (Banks, Lombard, and Mitlin 2020; AlSayyad 2004).

Integrating informal responses to policies into formal political dialogue (Kanbur 2017) has encouraged a broadening of the scope of policymaking (Canclini 2019; Davis 2017) and planning of "ordinary cities" (Robinson 2008). When this happens, informality becomes a tool to redefine the relationship between urban governance (Sarmiento and Tilly 2018) and overarching entities such as the state and its institutions (Haid and Hilbrandt 2019) to explain the persistence of informal institutions that do not have an apparent economic raison d'etre (Bourdieu 1986; Burt 1992; (Horak et al. 2018; Putnam 1995; Tsai and Ghoshal 1998). This is where post-informality approaches may not only help in conceptualizing urbanization processes (Pasquetti and Picker 2017; Streule et al. 2020) but also move beyond state-centered approaches to governance (Schindler 2017). It is not only by acting but also failing to act that a state can legitimize or tolerate what could otherwise be regarded as the illegal or extra-legal (Yiftachel 2009).

Regarded from this angle, human geography informality-inspired debates can be placed at the intersection of resistance studies, anthropological approaches and planning. Geographers have in effect been contributing to the informality framework, despite not mentioning the word explicitly. Footing on Gibson-Graham's (1998) feminist critique to capitalism, and their subsequent works, scholars have gradually come to debate, oppose and then reconceptualize the relationship between economy and society (St. Martin 2005; Varley 2013). They have documented economic and social alternatives to the capitalist model (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2011; Springer 2011) that echoed, to an important extent, post-monetary, post-economistic and eventually post-human views of governance and resource management. Informality has indirectly been engaged through a broader framework concerned with the use of space and the division between private and public. The presence and absence of mechanisms and synergies linking the state and its citizens have been explored (Darling 2017) to look at the way a state deals with vulnerability and uncertainty (Sheppard, Sparks, and Leitner 2020; Thieme 2018). By depriving its citizens of, or providing them with, a sufficient amount of tools and resources for their survival, the state can be regarded as crucial in the production, or limitation, of informality (Davies and Isakjee 2015; Inverardi-Ferri 2018).

This is where geography debates have tended to bring the state back in to suggest a synthesis between economic and social sciences approaches and and look at the interaction between the state and the citizen (Daniele 2020; Wilson, Velis, and Cheeseman 2006), thus challenging a dualistic mode that sees the state as the formal legitimate actor and other (non-state) actors as being at the origin of informality. Indeed, the state can be regarded as a regulatory entity choosing the boundaries of the legal, the allowed, the moral (Polese 2012; Polese 2019b; Van Schendel and Abraham 2005). However, being incapable of acting as a uniform entity (Kasza 2002), its actions are ambivalent and at times contradictory (Haid 2017, 10), its institutions are "peopled" (Jones 2008) and

may act inconsistently. Looking after some areas or segments of the population while abandoning others, state institutions can indirectly create the space for private initiative and encourage the self-management space for people, businesses and non-state actors (Davies and Polese 2015a, 2015b) that end up "supplementing the state" (Picker 2019; Rekhviashvili and Polese 2017; Rekhviashvili 2015). When this happens, the state becomes the primary producer of informality by simply not taking care of some aspects of social life or allowing private and uncoordinated initiatives to emerge in some spaces (Chiodelli 2019; Haid 2017), a thing that has also been widely explored in IR and political science debates, as documented in the next section.

Informality in governance, domestic and international politics

Drawing from North's (1990) understanding of informal institutions, scholars have apparently developed two parallel concepts of informal governance that is applied to either international politics or domestic political dynamics. In international politics, informal governance has emerged as a popular framework among IR and political science scholars who, inspired by a Wendtian perspective, have used it to illustrate the way groundwork for international negotiations is set behind the scenes, allowing to come to consensus about complex issues involving several countries that start from very different standpoints. Eventually, it has been suggested that informal governance can be regarded as referring to any rules, norms, and institutional structures and procedures that are not enshrined in formally-constituted organizations or in their constitutions" (Roger 2020, 10) and has contributed to the consolidation of governance as a mode of international cooperation (Pauwelyn, Wessel, and Wouters 2013; Kilby 2013; Merchant 2015).

Stemming from the above definition, scholars have thus become preoccupied by the study of informal governance within international institutions like the European Union (Christiansen and Neuhold 2012; Kleine 2014; Peters 2006; Piattoni 2006; Christiansen, Føllesdal, and Piattoni 2004) or UN agencies (Stone 2013). They have also been preoccupied by the problem of negotiations between "small states" and large ones for which some studies have argued that a balance between formal and informal institutions shifts power relations between states. Less powerful states, for example, might go long for support from formal institutions in order to bind stronger states more effectively, while stronger states may be willing to accept higher levels of informality because it gives them more negotiating power. It has also been argued that the use of informal and formal rules with informality increases flexibility and speed and reduces the costs relative to formal treaties and organizations (Aust 1986; Downs, Rocke, and Barsoom 1996; Lipson 1991; Abbott and Snidal 2000; Prantl 2005). The challenge for smaller states then becomes a matter of attracting more powerful states to the negotiating table by accepting some level of

informality that will result in some imbalance but will ultimately build a more collaborative framework for all (Roger 2020). By contrast, the alternative definition of informal governance stresses its role in domestic political dynamics and uses informality to explain the way different political actors may reach some sort of consensus within a given state or, alternatively, how informality is used by non-state actors to gain legitimacy and elevate themselves to full domestic actors, thus claiming management rights over a given territory that they would not be allowed to administer otherwise.

Balancing the relationship between individual cases and general trends, some works have attempted to systematize the role of informal institutions and their advantages when compared to the use of formal institutions (Helmke and Levitsky 2004). This can be perceived as helpful, especially given the growing role of multinationals in world politics (Dixit 2007; Davis 2017). Critics of this position have warned against the use of informal institutions as a residual category (Tieku 2019) to be used when everything else has failed (Azari and Smith 2012). Informality is much more widespread and can be evoked anytime a government does not officially sign or ratify decisions and measures by international agencies or pre-agreement informal negotiations (Pauwelyn, Wessel, and Wouters 2013; Risse and Stollenwerk 2018) that are unwritten or only partly written. From a domestic politics perspective, there is a growing consensus about the role of both formal and informal institutions in domestic and international politics (Crawford and Ostrom 1995; Dunoff 2012a, 2012b; Grzymala-Busse 2010; Azari and Smith 2012).

Explorations of domestic political dynamics greatly benefit from Ledeneva's concept of *sistema* (Ledeneva 2010). Applied to Russian domestic politics, she conceptualized a real system, where manipulation and blackmailing are used in ways reminiscent of the old Soviet *kompromat*. In addition to putting people, and even politicians, at high risk (Gel'man 2016; Vasileva 2018), such an approach significantly hinders state capacity to identify and develop long-term solutions to social problems (Cardoso 2016; Rogerson 2017). However, Ledeneva's surgical deconstruction of the Russian policy arena echoes claims that classifications of informality as an evil to be eradicated may miss the bigger picture (Baaz and Verweijen 2013; Jose and Medie 2015; Mitullah 2021; Waylen 2014). First, state effectiveness is not necessarily negatively impacted, at least not totally, by corrupted policies (Darden 2008) and second, because state and society are intimately related and reshape one another (Migdal 2012).

This is why informal institutions have proven a useful concept also when dealing with atomized territories and states. It has served to explore the functioning of regional organizations helping to find agreements on international issues (Libman and Obydenkova 2013; Roever 2016), those negotiating the relationship between state and non-state actors, be these business entities (Piattoni 2006; Stafsudd 2009) or even non-state and insurgent actors that emerge to replace the state either de jure or de facto (Polese and Santini

2018; Raineri and Strazzari 2015; Santini, Ruth, and Kevlihan 2020). There is no demonstrated correlation between legitimacy and capacity to manage a territory more effectively than the formal state but there are cases where administrative efficiency has been enhanced by the presence of insurgent entities (Kevlihan 2013; Donnacha and Kevlihan 2015). It thus becomes possible to talk of negative but also positive informality that benefits some spheres of governance (Polese 2016b; Rogerson 2018). In a similar fashion, there are cases where absence of political legitimacy has nonetheless met broad unwillingness by local people to comply with instructions of a state that is not paying attention toward certain social groups (Steenberg 2016) so that wide portions of the local population refuse to give legitimacy to the state, de facto opening to the existence of a different, yet unacknowledged, order (De Soto 1989; Scott 1998), a hypothesis that is further elaborated in the next sections.

Part II: mapping informality in Eurasian spaces

What is so special about post-socialist informality?

The findings of the previous sections are summarized in Table 2, offering a geographical and disciplinary overview of informality studies and thus locating Eurasian debates within global understandings of informality, so to outline possible contact points between the two and what Eurasian informality can offer to broader debates.

Although literature on informality has been growing across world regions, Eurasian spaces have come to occupy a very specific place given the large concentration of studies produced within a short period on closely related topics (Giordano and Hayoz 2014; Henig and Makovicky 2017; Morris and Polese 2015; Morris 2016; Polese et al. 2018a, 2017; Colin., Round, and Rodgers 2013). This is due to at least three reasons: a homogeneous starting point, congruent findings and opportunities. First, although each socialist republic had its own characteristics, state-citizen relations were very similar

Table 2. Geography of informality.

Discipline	Main focus	Geographical scope
Economics	Development economics	Developing world
Planning	Development world urban setting	Non-Western world (with an eye for the Western world)
(Human) Geography	Alternative economies	Worldwide
Area studies	Getting things done	Eurasia (expanding)
International Relations	Constructing alliances, influence political decisions	International organizations, global politics
Policy and governance	Political negotiations, policy making	Russia, national politics, relationship between elites
Political Science	Corruption, nepotism, neopatrimonialism	The non-Western world with a particular focus on Eurasia

Source: author.

across post-Soviet states. Not only did the shadow economy interact with the government to allow survival of the system (Feldbrugge 1984), but the set of practices now described as informality flourished across the region as a whole. The relative similarity of living standards and governance mechanisms across the post-socialist region in the late 1990s ensured that the places where informality was identified were very similar across the region and links between practices were easier to notice. Second, once scholars began to conduct fieldwork on 30 new countries simultaneously, they had to overcome similar difficulties. Dealing with excessive red tape from Armenia to Uzbekistan and noticing a similar mistrust toward the authorities, many scholars ended up noticing tendencies that turned out being extremely similar and at the basis of the understanding of informality developed in the region. Finally, opportunities arise simply by chance. Inasmuch as the opening of the Soviet Union became a unique economic opportunity for some pioneer scholars and (Wedel 1998), it also led to the widespread adoption of a new term. Informality became fashionable, with an increasing amount of people engaging with informality research and a snowball effect making it easier to get funding for research on informality. Most likely, this will continue until the term loses importance to leave space for new ones that are then deemed more appropriate.

The Eurasian study of informality is highly indebted to Ledeneva's seminal work on *blat* and long-term reciprocity in Russia (Ledeneva 1998). Similar ideas started traveling between Cambridge and the Max Planck Institute of Social Anthropology, where "survival" strategies and the study of legal pluralism became a central topic in the early 2000s (Hann 1998; Humphrey 2019; Mandel and Humphrey 2020; Bridger and Pine 1998). This was accompanied by the use of the word informality to refer to the art of "getting things done" while also referring to a wider range of activities, becoming in the process a synonym for graft, corruption, mafia business, the black-market, patron-client relations (Böröcz 2000; Misztal 2000) and studies on the building of support networks (Lonkila 2010; Patico 2002; Rivkin-Fish 2005b).

The above foci eventually developed into what can be considered the main areas of Eurasian informality studies: the shadow economy, corruption, informal governance. They also provided a starting point for Eurasian scholars to expand to other regions. One of the most popular comparisons has featured the search for an equivalent of *blat* across other regions of the world. *Guanxi* had been well documented for China (Yang 2002) but other studies have highlighted the existence of similar practices well beyond post-socialist spaces (Williams and Onoshchenko 2015) with post-socialist scholars engaged in comparisons with other world regions (Baez-Camargo and Ledeneva 2017; Ledeneva, Bratu, and Philipp 2017; Kubbe and Varraich 2019), eventually leading to the preparation of the ambitious Global Encyclopedia of Informality (Alena. 2018a) and the Global Informality Project.[1] This immense effort highlighted that a number of practices considered unique to the Eurasian region have actually a wide range of

Table 3. Main tendencies on informality in the Eurasian region.

Focus	Contribution to debates
Corruption	Conceptualize distinction between gift and bribe, leading to exploring the difference between corruption (and bribe) and informality (and informal payment) to nuance a discourse seeing the region as simplistically "corrupt"
Shadow economy	Test and expand the shadow economy survey methodology; introduced direct measurement approaches to estimate the size of shadow economy; embed shadow economy research in surveys on satisfaction with government's support
Informal governance	Introduce the concept of *sistema* to explore power dynamics and power games happening behind the scene. Conceptualize informal governance as an alternative (albeit not always beneficial) way of governing a state
Everyday and alternative forms of governance	Expands the concept of informal governance to everyday activities and practices by citizens that do not feel protected by their state. Embed the approach in Scott's infrapolitics concept to show that noncompliance with state instructions is a way to contribute to governance mechanisms and dynamics.

Source: Adapted from (Polese 2019).

equivalents across several world regions (Stahl and Kassa 2018). It also contributed to show the importance of informality to an everyday governance framework, a thing that could be considered the main Eurasian contribution to global debates, as summarized in Table 3.

Corruption and anti-corruption

Corruption is a major topic across world regions and countries and the Eurasian region is not immune to its charm. Here, the main contribution of Eurasian studies to the discipline has been the attempt to conceptualize a distinction between an informal payment and a bribe (Oka 2015; Polese 2009). This distinction is crucial to a better understanding of the underlying mechanisms regulating the relationship between people and their state. It is also possibly the missing link between the study of under-the-table payments as an evil to eradicate and as mechanisms of governance.

If I need to see a doctor who is not immediately available, I can use connections to get to them or I can offer a payment (Polese et al. 2018; Stepurko et al. 2017). Such a payment is usually classified as a bribe while ignoring an important detail. If a small percentage of a population engages in illegal activities, this can be considered a deviation from expected behaviors. But if the majority of a population engages in corrupt practices, it is probably policymaking that needs to be revisited (Polese 2006). Indeed, when an externally-imposed approach and a local ethos do not overlap, then the way citizens behave will diverge from the way they are expected to behave, generating what is technically defined as corrupt behavior (Gill 1998; Werner 2000 citing Tanzi 1998). Informality debates from Eurasia have helped to reconsider some kind of informal payments as practices that happen to achieve something that would not be possible, or easy, using formal channels. This includes favors (Henig and Makovicky 2017; Morris 2017),

establishment of trust and mutual help networks (Lonkila and Gladarev 2008; Rivkin-Fish 2005a) and, only in some cases, monetary payments, or an immediately monetizable asset, to get something done (Urinboyev and Svensson 2013).

As in other regions, a number of orthodox approaches have highlighted the mechanisms and dynamics of corruption from higher education structures (Denisova-Schmidt 2020; Osipian 2012) all the way up to the labor market or at the workplace (Round, Williams, and Rodgers 2008), sometimes identifying the social and economic costs associated with the phenomenon (Round and Rodgers 2009; Whitsel 2011). They have been echoed by literature on clientelism and neopatrimonialism (Stefes 2006) as well as complex schemes (Holmes 2012) showing the persistence of corruption in state structures and policymaking processes. It has thus been noticed that, sometimes located at the boundary of the legit and the "non-illegal", informal schemes may become socially acceptable, tolerated by state authorities but, and by force of this, also contributing to making corruption structural (Uberti 2018). In contrast, a growing number of Eurasian scholars have called for a complication of the corruption discourse in order to address the topic more effectively (Chankseliani 2013; Rostiashvili 2011) resulting in attempts to go beyond the classic definition of corruption – the abuse of entrusted power for private gain – and propose alternative approaches taking into account non-monetary schemes, where reputation or prestige rather than money can be gained, (Zhllima et al. 2018) and reciprocity maintained over a long period of time (Kobakhidze 2014).

Scholars have also pointed to the fact that bribery is rarely an isolated event but is rather embedded in a dependency and exchange system functioning at several levels of society and including state institutions (Ledeneva 2017). As a consequence, it becomes important to study corruption from a variety of angles while taking into account the interplay between government institutions (at any level) and the business sector (Bratu 2018), together with extended linkages to the criminal world (Frederiksen 2015; Kosals and Maksimova 2015; Slade 2017). If, on the one hand, this has encouraged the call for more regulation, control and coercion (Dimitrova-Grajzl, Grajzl, and Joseph Guse 2012), it has also prompted a critical reflection on the normativity of some anti-corruption measures and what may decrease their effectiveness (Kotkin and Sajó 2002; Werner 2000). As Sampson (2018b) warns, uncritical understandings of corruption have bred a growing anti-corruption industry that concentrates on a stereotyped range of transactions, usually money-based, often ignoring the fact that informality is also very present in places like Scandinavia where, however, its role is ignored or neglected (Sampson 2017).

This is why, it has been suggested, corruption can be regarded as a sub-case of informality (Polese and Stepurko 2016b) where social reciprocity rules, necessary for survival in a weak state, are applied between unknown people, in the short term, and with no intention of maintaining a social relationship (Morris 2019; Palmier 1989; Werner 2000). Stemming from this, attempts to define the

boundaries between corruption and governance at the institutional level (Baez-Camargo and Ledeneva 2017) have pointed to the advantages of a better understanding of informality in the improvement of state management mechanisms (Fondevila and Quintana-Navarrete 2019). In some cases, indeed, money is used to replace the missing social interrelatedness, expectations of reciprocity in the long term or social relationships that emerge from an exchange between two or more individuals (Polese 2014). When we are able to predict the regularity of these informal exchanges in a way that decodifies the relationship between (groups of) citizens, the society at whole and state institutions, we are entering a post-corruption territory to get near the understanding of informal payments as an instrument of everyday governance.

Shadow and illegal economies

Studies from the region have gradually offered possible alternative ways to estimate the size and role of the shadow economy in a given context. Starting from a small survey of company managers, they have gradually taken into account elements such as tax morale and satisfaction with government services to estimate the willingness of economic actors to comply with government instructions. What is more important is that, by actually talking in person to the potential beneficiaries of government policies, it becomes possible to get feedback on the capacity of a given government to meet the expectations and needs of the business actors in a given period. This can provide a grasp on the reasons why entrepreneurs may prefer to engage with informal behavior in a number of cases and how to better address the gap between how things should work and how they work in reality.

The Eurasian region is represented in a number of studies comparing shadow economies across world regions (Elgin and Öztunalı 2012; Schneider and Buehn 2017). These works have often attempted using indirect measurements as MIMIC (multiple indicators, multiple causes estimation) approaches to generate an estimate of the size of the shadow economy as a percentage of the country's GDP (Schneider and Medina 2017). MIMIC, as other indirect measurements approaches, is unintrusive in that it foots on an analysis of secondary sources. However, the figures generated include not only production by providers of legal goods and services that remain in the shadows to avoid paying taxes or to remain invisible to the authorities. They also include providers of illegal goods and services (including drugs, smuggling and the economy of organized crime) thus failing to distinguish between the shadow (to be addressed by tax collection and financial institutions) and the criminal economy (of competence of police and border authorities, or intelligence services) of a given country.

In an effort to address the above limitations, some works have used alternative estimation methods such as measurement of electricity consumption (Kaliberda and Kaufmann 1996) or have advocated for the use of mixed

methods and employment surveys to shed light on the nature of informal or unregistered employment (Williams and Horodnic 2016; Williams and Franic 2016) to then propose tailored measures that would encourage businesses to come out of the shadows (Williams 2016). This eventually led to what can be regarded as a major contribution to the understanding of informality through measurement of the shadow economy. Expanding the survey initially conducted in 2009 for Latvia to Estonia and Lithuania, and then testing it further in Eastern Europe and former USSR spaces (Putniņš and Sauka 2020), Putniņš and Sauka (2015) survey of managers offers an opportunity to triangulate with indirect and qualitative methods (including focus groups with entrepreneurs, informal interviews) to produce a comprehensive account of the way informality works in a given country or sector of the economy. Besides, the survey takes into account tax morale and explores the way individuals live with, or without, the rules of the environment, and state they work in.

Direct methods are crucial for the understanding the areas where individual and state morality do not overlap and thus why individuals have no problem in engaging in some kind of behavior allegedly considered illegal or immoral whereas they strictly abide to other rules in a fashion that has no apparent logic. Use of secondary sources can inform calculations about what practices are the most common in a given country but offer little explanation on the reasons behind these tendencies or the main loopholes used to hide incomes. Nuanced analyses can, by contrast, help understand the reasons behind the development of individual moralities that significantly diverge from official state moral standards and the concept of legality (Polese 2016).

The survey of entrepreneurs, as it has been gradually developed, has allowed to take into account social obligations and the overarching policy context to explain the persistence of informality. Interpretations have also gone so far as to suggest that informality could also depend on how much an environment is business-friendly or perceived as such. In an attempt to confirm these assumptions, whilst going beyond an economic or materialistic view on informality, a recent study has measured the role of "connections" (broadly defined, be these built through payments, friendship or expectations of reciprocation) in the everyday life, and stratery survival, of Ukrainian citizens. Results of the study showed that in areas where state trust toward state institutions is lower, citizens prioritize consolidation of relations between one another and a bypassing of the state (and this could include payments and exchange of favors, see Polese and Stepurko 2016a; Polese 2016a). Looking at informality from this perspective, the Eurasian experience can suggest that informality could be taken as a proxy for trust toward state institutions and possibly quality of governance. The more it is present in certain spheres of public life, the more it is likely that citizens perceive their institutions as weak, incapable, or ineffective, and rely on fellow citizens more than the state and thus construct new moralities that have little in common with state morality (Wanner 2005; Polese 2016).

From informal to everyday governance

The above approaches to informality are crucial to an elaboration of the initial framework of informal governance. Indeed, whilst acknowledging Ledeneva's crucial contribution to the understanding of informal governance, the definition of informal governance implicitly opens up to the inclusion of non-top political actors in the mechanisms and dynamics of governance. This makes it suitable to take into account the entirety of activities that entail the relationship between a citizen and their state, which is a major contribution of Eurasian studies to informality debates.

The initial definition of informal governance used in Eurasian studies foots on Ledeneva's understanding of *sistema* that is the use of control, coercion and dependency to manage a country in a way that is constructed around a single actor and his entourage (Ledeneva 2013) whose combination is unique, unrepeatableand prone to both fast decision-making and major policymaking mistakes (Polese 2018). Its extreme manifestation is the personalization of institutions that happens once they function mostly (or solely) thanks to trust-based alliances (Aasland, Grødeland, and Pleines 2012) that has little to do with macro management of a country (Chavance 2008) or its capacity to distribute welfare (Cox 2018). It has also been further explored by looking at informality as a political control mechanism (Schwader and Kosals 2013), a sort of *kompromat* reminiscent of Soviet times (Vasileva 2018) allowing manipulation of actors through punishment and coercion by some ruling elites (Gel'man 2003, 2012; Hale 2011).

The above ideas have been further explored by scholars reflecting on the way things can be ironed out informally with regard to institution building (Gel'man 2004) or power networks (Hayoz 2015; Ledeneva 2010). However, these reflections have not come without criticisms. As it has been noticed for other regions (Pitcher, Moran, and Johnston 2009; Mkandawire 2015) deep entanglement between state and business actors (Grødeland and Aasland 2011; Schoenman 2005) may lead to widespread corruption and nepotism (Shlapentokh 2013), a thing that had rapidly informed a growing stream of literature on neopatrimonialism in post-Soviet spaces (Bach and Gazibo 2010; Gel'man 2016; Ilkhamov 2007).

Whilst providing continuity with previous studies on how things work in practice in the region (Ledeneva 2009), the ideas of *sistema* and informal governance widen up the uses that can be made of informality studies. Governance is indeed a concept that applies to all the levels of policymaking and all the actors involved in the process. Informality could be regarded as a "mode of governance" that can ensure survival of a whole system based on false or inaccurate premises (Dukalskis 2016; Polese et al. 2017), enhance productivity and the potential of a business environment (Petrovici and Simionca 2011; Pichler and Wallace 2007) and eventually remain viable and

sustainable for a long period. Ledeneva's definition of informal governance could thus be expanded to include middle and low-level actors and their contribution to both formal and informal governance mechanisms of a state (Bernhard and Ekrem 2007; Grødeland 2007; Isaacs 2013). This is a important point given that Eurasian studies have been particularly receptive to non-monetary approaches to the construction of reciprocity and inter-dependency through social networks and consolidation of informal institutions (Ledeneva 1998; Efendic and Ledeneva 2020; Peng et al. 2009; Yalçin-Heckmann 2013). They have, however, so far missed the opportunity to explain how these institutions and dynamics could be regarded as a functioning and single governance system.

Footing on the idea that insignificant actions repeated millions of times end up contributing to policymaking and the construction of the political (Scott 2019, xi), everyday informality becomes a means through which new governance mechanisms are created and reproduced for a better interaction between the state and its society as theorized in Figure 1. New practices, tendencies and phenomena emerge every day. Some of them survive while others go extinct. Of those surviving, a number of them will be tolerated by the state whereas for some others some kind of intervention will be needed leading to four possible outcomes: 1) the state perceives that practice as useful and "purchases" or institutionalizes it so to learn from non-state actors how to improve the quality of governance; 2) it attempts to repress unsuccessfully so that the practice(s) remains and is protected by a layer of tacit tolerance; 3) liquidates it or 4) prompts a reaction by a significant number of citizens who realize this is something they want to keep and end up organizing themselves politically to preserve that practice.

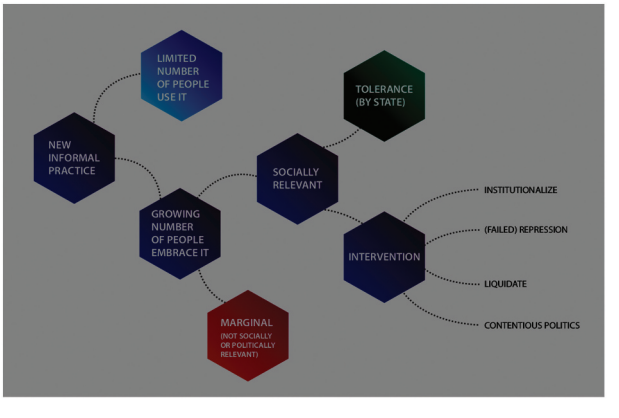

Figure 1. The genesis of informality and its possible developments (Polese 2016b). Material from: Polese, Abel. 2016b. *Limits of a Post-Soviet State: How Informality Replaces, Renegotiates, and Reshapes Governance in Contemporary Ukraine*. Stuttgart: Ibidem Verlag. Reproduced with permission of Ibidem

Informality, governance and the art of bypassing your state

The three sections above point at a possible niche that the idea that informal governance, once expanded to take into account the agency of mid and bottom actors, could occupy. To avoid confusion with Ledeneva's concept, we refer to it here as an everyday-governance perspective that, in principle, has the potential of directly addressing the deficiencies that emerge from the above approaches. First, it complicates the discourse on corruption to interpret the significance of an action within the context where this act happens. Second, it expands the discourse on shadow economies by including motives to stay in the shadow that are not necessarily motivated by a lust for profit but could be rooted in lack of satisfaction toward the way a sector is managed. Finally, it broadens the meaning of informal governance to individual and bottom actors so to acknowledge the role of everyday actions and common people to the construction of the political.

Although never formally conceptualized, this framework roots in a growing body of literature focusing on the region. The creation of an alternative system relying on personal connections and informal networks has been widely explored. It may be burdensome and time-consuming (Efendic and Ledeneva 2020). However, these personal connections and informal practices can be regarded as rooted in mechanisms that were already established during socialism (Archer 2018; Rekhviashvili 2017; Sampson 2018a) and that have just evolved from there into new practices (Humphrey 2019; Sneath 2006). As a result, the leap from previous to novel structures and dynamics, allowing the use of new currencies (respect, indebtedness, social capital, see Baji et al. 2017; Pichler and Wallace 2007; Rose 2000) is relatively straightforward and offers unprecedented advantages to their primary users. First, alternative currencies can be easily accessible and still be exchanged with money (Patico 2002); second, they offer access to services that usually money alone cannot buy (Miller, Grodeland, and Koshechkina 2000; Williams and Horodnic 2018, 2016). For one thing, the study of Mahalle in Central Asia (Dadabaev 2017, 2013; Urinboyev 2012) has offered an understanding of alternative, or informal, welfare mechanisms that end up replacing state structures and could help identifying novel modes of governance. This is not unique to Uzbekistan. Rather, when your state claims to be delivering welfare but only limitedly does so, there is no way for non-state actors to replace it. Instead it is possible that citizens create their own social protection mechanisms that prescind from state ones without challenging the state's symbolic power or invading what the state is declaring as its competence areas as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: splitting competencies between formal (state) ones and informal ones [about here]

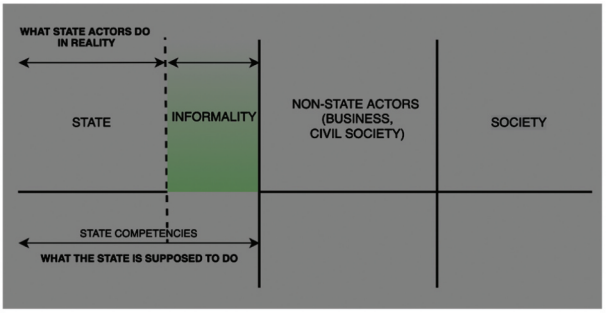

Figure 2. What happens when the state does not act as a state in areas in which it is claiming competence. Splitting competencies between formal (state) ones and informal ones [about here].

At the empirical level, such tendencies in the region have been often studied in a micro perspective, as an attempt to replace the state in areas of governance where its welfare distribution, or social protection mechanisms are weak (Rasanayagam 2011; Rekhviashvili 2017; Morris 2011). Informalisation of protection mechanisms and wide use of indebtedness and reciprocity has been used to shift the boundary between the private and the public (Karakoc 2013; Polese, Rekhviashvili, and Morris 2016) through the everyday use of public spaces – like street vendors' use of public space as a way to contest spatial policies and planning (Eidse, Turner, and Oswin 2016). By force of this, an everyday governance framework is already innovative in that it helps revisiting the way power and agency are regarded at the everyday level, where individual negotiations with the state happen at several levels of the political (Kubik and Linch 2013; Polese and Rekhviashvili 2017). This may include the scaling up of informal exchange mechanisms usually findable at bazaars (Karrar 2017; Polese and Prigarin 2013; Thelen 2011), or entangling labor and social relations (Morris 2016) so as to construct an alternative socio-economic web of interdependencies that ends up replacing the state (Morris and Polese 2016; Polese 2009).

However, these everyday forms of governance can also be regarded from a macro-perspective, corroborating the studies of alternative economic systems conducted in other world regions[2] that go beyond orthodox, economics-centered explanations of a society. Regular noncompliance with official policies is a way to squeeze out a space where heterodox policymaking mechanisms can be produced and maintained. This has been widely studied in a human geography context and has allowed to identify alternative modes of governance in different areas of the world (Community Economies 2012; Springer 2019; White 2004). It is now perhaps time to consider informality, not all informal practices but some of it or at least the dynamics that can be identified through informality-centered approaches, as a way to reshape the political order of a system. They can also approaches blindly trusting the neoliberal order of things. Informality as a mode of governance (Polese et al.

2017) could be the response not of an individual, or segment of a society, but of whole system that tries resisting extreme harmonization (Scott 1998). When powerful international actors suggest, or impose, one-size-fits-all economic policy measures as a pre-requisite to receive development aid or loans, poor or weaker countries have little margin to negotiate. But the gap between how things should work and how they eventually come to work in a given context could be a way to de-formalize development aid. Likewise, tolerance of some informal mechanisms allows taking into account the necessity of a region, a community or a whole country to limit the effects of policies that are eventually unsuitable for that reality (De.oto 2000). From this perspective, informality can be indeed defined as "the art of bypassing the state", a mechanism for the redistribution of welfare and power disjointed from orthodox political economy approaches. It is also a way to gain back control of spaces that had been claimed by a newly organized neoliberal state that was giving too little to its citizens in exchange for their services and payments, or not properly fulfilling its functions (Bruns, Miggelbrink, and Müller 2011; Stenning et al. 2010).

Conclusion: unleashing the potential of informality away from Eurasian studies

Social sciences are often torn in the debate between universalists (looking for a theory that could be applied everywhere) and particularists (defending the untameable uniqueness of a given country or region that, in their view, challenges general theory). One can take up either position since neither of them is wrong per se. But if even the definition of post-socialism as a category is challenged (Gentile 2018), it might be time to think globally and see what Eurasian studies can bring to the world. If informality studies have to be brought to the next level, we should aim at explaining how this new understanding of society, and policy in general, can help us to better deal with the world as it is. This can be done theoretically, by looking at what informality means for fundamental social science debates, or in practice, by looking at how a deeper grasp of informality can help to better perform in terms of governance and the capacity of a state to address urgent social issues.

Think of the arrest of a member of a local mafia member in some parts of the world and the situation where the whole neighborhood throws objects at the police – representatives of the state fulfilling their functions and coming to "liberate" the area from a "dangerous subject". In areas where the state is absent, or distracted, these "dangerous subjects" might be significantly more important than an abstract state to local dwellers, who will turn to him when they need a job, help with money or any other kind of assistance. The state can consider such individuals to be criminals, and their revenue-earning methods

are often undeniably criminal. But they also fulfill an important function by informally offering welfare opportunities to the local community. In this ambiguity lies the social acceptance of organized crime organizations whose methods may be considered immoral by both the state and the local the community, but whose function is widely accepted, and even praised, by the surrounding community because bringing more short-term benefits to many locals than the state.

Area studies is sometimes a tricky territory. We like to think we are studying something unique, which may sometimes be the case. But this idea may deceive us to the point that we might end up forgetting, or ignoring, that similar things have been done in other regions of the world. Furthermore, it is not that informality has just been discovered. It has just moved from the "invisible" to the "visible" world, by "hitting the headlines" (Hobsbawm and Rude 1968) of social sciences journals. It has traveled all the way from Geertz (1968) through Scott's peasant rebellion and then his seminal *Weapons of the Weak* (Scott 1985), through works on the significance of money (Parry and Bloch 1989) and objects (Thomas 1991) to the conceptualization and quasi-monetarization of respect (Pardo 1995). There are also some fundamental works that, without using informality in the title, can be used to better understand informality. From Gudeman (2015) to Migdal (2012) to the work of Hann and Hart (2009), significant advances have been made in informality theory without being acknowledged. Likewise, the milestone set by Gibson-Graham (1998) clearly highlights that the economy, at least the way we have come to imagine it, is not always the driving engine for human interaction.

Works on post-socialist informality have shed light on various faces of informality that, taken together, point at the fact that the governance of a state, from top to middle level and down to on the ground actors, can be regarded as part of political life, providing lenses to better understand political and power dynamics. As it has been shown above, informality can be studied as the art of bypassing the state, as a mode of governance and as a proxy of the quality of a country's institutions and this can be done both in Eurasian spaces as well as away from it. Yet, informality is often treated by post-socialist scholars as proper to the region, somehow unique, at times accompanied by attempts to claim that the region is something special. By sometimes failing to acknowledge the debt to these debates, informality in post-socialist spaces remain thin and largely descriptive.

This article has attempted to find possible overlapping points between Eurasian and global debates and shed the bases for a global theorization of the phenomenon. Eurasian scholars may feel flattered by the fact that "our" informality has almost become a fashionable topic and that it is possible to be found virtually everywhere. But is there a real use for a concept that can be applied always and everywhere to justify what mainstream theory fails to explain? It is always possible to claim that informality fits, but what is the

relevance of a framework that can be applied virtually to anything? Would it not make more sense to look for phenomena to observe, study to then take place at some distance and to seek a dialogue with other world regions, with other disciplines? Human organizations and societal structures can vary, and this is the beauty of the world, but a practice or a tendency can rarely be concentrated in only one part of the world. Societies have a lot in common and a lot of differences; depending on which angle one decide to look at them from. Informality is an opportunity to come out from area studies and seek a dialogue, understand the way human structures and interactions are organized and what we may have in common with other disciplines and regions. When this is attempted, works dedicated to informality from the region can be used to consolidate a core of literature allowing us to classify informality into clearly defined streams (that then can be used outside the region), to better conceptualize it and eventually re-assert the political significance and broader applicability and understanding of the phenomenon.

Notes

1. https://www.in-formality.com/wiki/index.php?title=Global_Informality_Project.
2. see the Community Economies project http://www.communityeconomies.org/about.

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