

Katharina BIEGGER
Institute for Advanced Study, Berlin
kb@wiko-berlin.de

Constantin ARDELEANU
New Europe College, Bucharest
cardeleanu@nec.ro

Diana MISHKOVA
Centre for Advanced Study, Sofia
mishkova@cas.bg

Informal practices in Southeast Europe – Examples and Analyses (Introductory text)

On April 10/11, 2022, the Institute for the Recent History of Serbia (*Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije / INIS*) hosted an international workshop on “Informal practices in Southeast Europe – Examples and Analyses”. The event was conceived by representatives from the Center for Governance and Culture at the University of St. Gallen, the New Europe College Bucharest, the Center for Advanced Study Sofia and the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, together with the local host, and was part of an ongoing engagement with the topic.

The issue of informality in societies has been the subject of academic study and discussion for quite some time, mostly in connection with post-communist or non-Western states. Informality, however, is not simply a side effect of a short-term transition to a modern market economy or a characteristic of traditional economies - informality is just as much a part of the neoliberal system or of any economy as a whole. It permeates all areas of life and is not limited to the economic sector. Likewise, equating “informal” with “imperfect” or even “illegal” falls short and fails to recognize the omnipresence of informal practices and their multiple functions. In the social world, all institutions, actions, or relations have a certain level of in/formality: it is an inherent, culture-specific component of social relations.

The literature generally agrees that defining informality is difficult. The workshop’s conveners - Sandra King-Savic, Constantin Ardeleanu, Diana Mishkova, Vladan Jovanović and Katharina Biegger - aspired to start from a broad theoretical, socio- or anthropological understanding: informality defined as the complement to formality, as an original and dynamic property of social bod-

ies or processes. Informality prevails where formality is deficient - informality emerges where formality has set in. Societies thus differ not in terms of the presence or absence of informality, but in the scope and degree of in/formality. Such differences between social entities (countries, groups, companies etc.) are experienced as cultural differences; they can be enriching and productive as well as problematic and destructive. Modern societies have developed complex formal systems, law being the most important formal macrostructure that is encoded and enforced by the state. There seems to be general agreement that effective institutional frameworks (“rule of law”) are crucial for economic and social development and wellbeing. Southeast Europe and the Balkans in particular have, however, a longstanding reputation for informal – if not downright illegal – “ways of doing things”. What are the causes, the conditions and consequences of this persistence of informal practices? Are there specific historical premises? Which are the detrimental effects of this societal characteristic, and where are its advantages? How are the boundaries between informal practices and regulated procedures to be drawn? With such questions in mind, the initiators went about planning an international workshop that would take a multidisciplinary approach. One of the aims of this exploratory undertaking was to test whether enough numerous and fruitful case studies could be found to draft a more comprehensive research project around this complex and dazzling phenomenon. Our intention was to develop a better understanding of in/formalities in Southeast Europe from actor-centered, bottom-up perspectives complemented by governance and institutional approaches meant to examine the questions about how and when individuals and communities resort to informal practices in their everyday lives.

Following an open call for proposals, 16 participants from Serbia, Romania, Albania, Hungary, Bulgaria and Germany were invited to the Belgrade workshop. They presented a variety of mostly historical case studies from the socialist and the post-transition periods, but also flashbacks to the era of nation-building and modernization in the 19th century. The studies focused on the area of Romania and former Yugoslavia; they often dealt with classic cases of corruption, but also, for example, with the efforts of ordinary people to find housing and shape their habitats where state support and control were absent. Particularly intriguing were contributions that showed how state institutions navigated the thin line between legal-formal and unregulated-informal approaches, and exploited the shades of gray between the poles to achieve their goals or those of their office holders. In the end, four papers analyzing occurrences of the second half of the 20th century, have been selected for publication in this volume.

Three of the articles are concerned with cases from the socialist world in the decades before 1989. Alexandra Bardan observes how, on a small scale, the Iron Curtain was pierced for import of Western consumer goods into the East. In this process, students from “friendly” developing countries, enrolled in Romanian universities, played an unexpected, but arguably profitable role, since they had access to coveted items – western clothing, music, foodstuffs, and the like - in their home countries or could visit (and pay in) “Dollarshops” in Ceaușescu’s Romania. Informal transnational networks thus emerged, counteracting the country’s otherwise severe isolation and goods shortages during the gloomy 1980s, and helping some citizens obtain modest western consumer goods.

The article by Ognjen Tomić also deals with the transfer of goods, albeit at a higher level and on a significantly larger scale. As he is able to show, on the basis of files from the Yugoslav state archives and other sources, production units and companies used all kinds of illegal schemes in border traffic with Italy in order to bring goods into the international circuit and reap profits - and this not infrequently with the tacit consent of the state authorities. In this respect, Yugoslavia took advantage from its special position between the front lines of the Cold War. Whenever transgressions of international customs were all too obviously against the rules, however, government agencies had to intervene and, for example, prohibit the resale of imported goods under false designations of origin.

Using the biggest economic scandal of late Yugoslavia as an example, Jovana Jović examines how this “affair” was presented in the public. The food corporation *Agrokomerc* had incurred debts of staggering proportions through fraudulent exchange transactions, dragging numerous banks into the abyss. Specifically, the author draws on a corpus of articles in the influential newspaper “Politika” that referred to the scandal and, following the categories identified through the analysis software, recorded the terminology used to describe it. This linguistic analysis provides a valuable basis for a deeper, dynamic, and contextualized exploration of the concept of corruption.

Sandra King-Savic’s study spans a broad time horizon and exemplifies convincingly how ‘ordinary people’ resort to informal relations and actions in order to survive in times of crisis and state failure: Bosnian Muslims from the Sandžak region mobilized family ties to relatives who had emigrated to Turkey, to illegally bring goods into sanctioned Serbian territory and, drawing on their previous training in state-owned (but now collapsed) factories, to establish small businesses. Based on interviews with present-day residents of Novi Pazar, the author taps into memories of widespread smuggling at the time of

the Yugoslav succession wars and shows the emergence of transnational networks and “chains of solidarity“, the structure of which point back to distant historical events, indeed to the Ottoman period.

We believe that the four papers in this section show the usefulness of studying in/formality and corruption using the lenses of different disciplines that involve various sources and tools, from archival documents and newspaper articles to oral interviews, and demonstrating the diverseness and malleability of informality.