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Between Survivability and Crime

The Nature of Informal Practices in post-Communist Societies

Reviewed by Ostap Kushnir

Abel Polese’s *Limits of a Post-Soviet State* provides an interesting insight into the nature and mechanisms of informal practices in the post-Soviet space. At its core, the book is an amalgamation of real life stories, individual reflections, and a very refined analysis; academic theorizing is usually expanded with an illustrative reportage, and vice versa. Some of the book chapters constitute reprints of articles or parts of articles published by Polese in different peer reviewed journals.

*Limits of a Post-Soviet State* includes a significant amount of case studies, and this should be specifically highlighted. For instance, Polese describes and explains trans-boundary trade arrangements – some sort of a smuggling – in Transistria where a *de facto* state does not exist, or outlines the informal economic component of Ukraine’s systems of higher education and healthcare, or scrutinizes grassroots provision of welfare in the Chernobyl area where the state’s presence is minimal, or portrays indigenous mechanisms of ensuring supply and demand equilibrium in Odessa bazars, or assesses economic constituents of the hospitality rituals and food consumption in Batumi - the list may be continued. All of these case studies, though, are regarded through the prism of roles performed by three actors: 1) individuals who seek certain services or goods; 2) individuals who provide these services and goods; and 3) the state which constitutes the framework.
for cooperation between individuals or, in particular, employs individuals to administer the state’s provision of certain services and goods. To put it directly, the nature and mechanisms of informal practices, as well as the overall logic of the post-Soviet informality, are presented and assessed through various types of spatial interactions among the above mentioned three actors.

Polese draws a distinguishing line between informal practices and illegal activities. In some respect, however, he justifies the state- or individual-harming informal practices portraying them as means of survival. As he puts it: ‘Organically speaking, informality is the (survival) instinct of a society, it is the intuition of a musician, the creativity of the educated artist’ (p. 37) The difference between illegal activities and justified informal practices resides in social interpretation of available opportunities. In other words, the ‘organic’ survival incentive does not envisage exploiting the state or social misconducts exclusively for enrichment of an individual. That said, Polese stresses that the difference between what is lawful and what is not depends on circumstances and should not be axiomatized.

Outlining the niche for informal practices to emerge, Polese writes the following: ‘If state salaries are too low to secure the survival of public workers, they will look for an alternative source of income and this will most likely be in conflict with what the state rules, although it is generated by the fact that the state itself is unable to regulate such situations’ (p. 77) In other words, individuals expect the state to perform functions it is prescribed to perform. ‘A state, to be respected, must not only be a state but also act as a state’ (p. 76). Otherwise, individuals will find themselves engaged in practices the state condemns. Developing these arguments further, Polese introduces the cubic watermelon phenomenon. Society, as a planted watermelon, will develop – or grow – in any case. However, if one hopes to grow a cubic watermelon, a proper framework should be applied; i.e. state should wisely regulate social processes. This being said, if the framework is too strict, the watermelon will not grow. If it is too loose, the watermelon will not become cubic (p. 35). In this light, informal practices constitute a social response to inappropriate (too strict or too loose) state regulatory attempts.

Speaking of the legal nature of informal practices, two types of these should be distinguished: those which harm fellow citizens, and those which harm the state. According to Polese, in the post-Soviet environ-
ment with its huge amount of under- and over-regulations, harm to the state becomes an acceptable lesser evil. For example, cross-border cigarette smuggling is socially tolerated while selling drugs on the street is not (p. 112). Another example is a personal interaction between the state administrator and individual in the event the latter requires a service which is impossible to obtain legally within the needed time-frame or scope; apparently, this kind of interaction leads to violation of official procedures, but ensures the achievement of mutually beneficial outcomes and, again, is socially tolerated (p 115).

Polese specifically introduces the concept of a *brift* which stands for a very “grey” intermediary between bribe and gift in the post-Soviet space (p. 111). The *brift* is, for instance, an individual monetized gratitude to doctors for providing life-saving services which should be, theoretically, secured by the state on a free of charge basis. Having received the *brift*, doctors neither inform hospital administrators about it, nor about provided services (p. 127). Polese concludes here that the degree of individual access to state resources and services predefines the degree of social compliance to legal ways of benefiting from these resources or services.

Apart from this, Polese stresses the link between informal practices and commonly accepted patterns of moral behavior. In conditions of dysfunctional state and necessity to take desperate actions, individuals still align to certain moral standards. For instance, as Polese observes, female cigarette smugglers tend to condemn prostitution regardless of its higher profitability (p. 84).

To conclude, *Limits of a post-Soviet state* provides a very multi-layered perspective on informal practices. This is the perspective of a curious Western traveler, who is at the same time an unbiased social anthropologist and meticulous economist. Polese claims not to apply Western concepts to explain the variety of informal practices; however, this is not exactly the case. The social paradoxes he observes in the post-Soviet space are portrayed as paradoxes simply because they are different from what the Western scholar used to see. The economic pragmatism makes Polese seek “irreplaceable” supply and demand forces behind every interaction in an environment of faulty institutions and developed interpersonal relations. At the very end Polese highlights that informal practices are far from being fully researched; moreover, there does not exist a fully explanatory methodological model for researching informality in the post-Soviet space.