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Why Can't We Really Blame Informality for Weak Governance in Central Asia and the Former USSR Region:
Sharing Reflections and Evidence from the Shadow Economy Index Calculation

POLESE, Abel

Despite the growing number of studies featuring "informality" in their title, from the post-socialist region as elsewhere, little has been done to reach a consensus on what informality means, how to measure it and, in general, towards a widely agreeable theorisation of the phenomenon. In addition, a large amount of studies have tended to rely on a mere intuitive understanding of the phenomenon, often intended as "the opposite of formal", contributing to topical confusion rather than better define what informality may be.

Stemming from this "terminological chaos" this intervention frames the Eurasian debates on informality in global ones. It traces the links between the theoretical findings from the post-socialist region and their counterpart in wider debates, which is shown in the table below.

Table 1: 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 Western world)
(Human) Geography	Alternative economies	Worldwide
Area studies	Geting 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 [Polese 2021]

Informality has been used in different parts of the world and with different meanings depending on the discipline, a thing that this study is set out to explore to then show the possible contributions of Eurasian studies to global debates, which is summarised in the table below.

Table 2: Main Tendencies on Informality in the Eurasian Region

Classic	Contribution to debates
Corruption	In addition to bribing, informal payments have shed light on the personal side of economic relations that sometimes drifts into activities simplistically classified as “corrupt”
Shadow economy	In addition to attempts to measure shadow economies, some regional studies have tested novel measurement methodologies
Informal governance	Before and after the “corruption line” there are activities that depend on inter-personal relations that influence top or mid-range politics
State-citizen relations, dependency and the everyday	Citizens not respecting the rules, or engaging in illegal activities, can be seen as attempting to survive, boycotting or protesting against the state

Source: Adapted from Polese [2019]

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