



## Grey zones of welfare Normative coping strategies in rural Lithuania



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### ABSTRACT

In this article I explore the 'grey zones of welfare' in rural Lithuania whereby I point to the inherent ambiguities that lies in a system where people to a high degree rely on networks and normative solutions to everyday shortcomings, rather than on the state. I argue that we in the period after socialism witness an increased degree of informal economies and social arrangements, as the formal sector of social security is perceived as unreliable. This results in a model where liberalism and individual ethics co-exist with a strong morality to support the poorest in society.

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In this article I provide an ethnographic account of what I call 'the grey zones of welfare' in the Lithuanian countryside. I here point to the inherent ambiguities that exist within a system in which the state claims to be the sole or main provider of security, but which in reality sees people rely on normative orders and opt for their own solutions to get by in everyday life. Despite the introduction of liberal capitalism in Europe's formerly socialist states, we cannot automatically assume that this has led to more individualised lifestyles in these countries. As argued by Haukanes and Pine, we are 'witnessing a simultaneous development of individualism and associated lifestyles, on the one hand, and entrenchment of patterns of economic and emotional reliance on extended kin relations, on the other' (2005, 9). The period following the socialist collapse has been marked by households pursuing their own strategies of survival, which often are based on informal economic actions (Pine, *in press*). In this sense, trust, morality and extended sociability are playing vital roles in securing bearable lives for

people after socialism. Social welfare has become an ever-changing and normatively loaded concept in which individual strategies, perceptions, moralities and social obligations are determining people's everyday social and economic security. In my approach the concept of welfare entails arrangements through which people obtain food, shelter, care, medical treatment and education. Of equal importance is coverage in case of workplace accidents, loss of employment and loss of one's home. In Lithuania these basic guarantees are all intertwined with the informal sector, as relying on the state alone does not guarantee people safety in their everyday lives. This likewise affects citizens' sense of social and economic security and predictability in everyday life, as people do not trust the state to provide them with welfare. As argued by F. and K. von Benda-Beckmann, this assessment by citizens of their everyday security embeds normative strategies that go beyond the scope of the state to provide emotional support and a general sense of safety (2000 [1994], 2007; see also Leutloff-Grandits, Peleikis, & Thelen, 2009; Thelen, Cartwright, & Sikor, 2005).

Using my research material on rural Lithuania, I will argue that current models of social welfare are dependent

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on normative solutions to everyday shortages, and that these local systems should be seen as something in and of themselves, not as a transitory state of being before a 'functional' capitalist model kicks in. As noted by anthropologists [Morris and Polese \(2013\)](#), Western international financial institutions engaged in an ideologically driven transition with the aim of finally doing away with the remnants of the socialist state, attempts which led to an increase in informal economic activities and relations throughout the 1990s. Although state services in Lithuania are free in principle, informal payments to doctors, connections with people in relevant positions and bribes paid to people working in the municipality are still the order of the day. Likewise, minimal salaries, a lack of attention to workers' rights, and minimal unemployment benefits and child support hollow people's perceptions of living in a welfare state ([Kideckel, 2002](#)).

My analysis is based on two extended case studies that examine the lives of people living on the margins of society, with a focus on the systems of normative welfare they rely on to get by in everyday life. The first case study focuses on the life and destiny of the local countryside *bomžas* (*bum*)<sup>1</sup> in the aftermath of the Soviet dissolution, and how he, despite his role as a local outcast in the village, still manages to make a daily living. He achieves this not through state support or any publicly provided benefits, but because of the villagers who, despite their contempt for him, still feel obliged to help him with getting daily work. The other case study examines the daily life of a young informal worker, who, caught between work in urban areas and obligations towards his parents, pursues a life of circular migration between his rural parental home and temporary employment in the city. By this means he tries to satisfy both his personal ambition of increased independence as well as his parents' expectations of continued support.

The findings of my research are based on one-and-a-half years of participant observation conducted in two regions of rural Lithuania. My first stay was for half a year in 2004, during which I lived and worked together with people from a village in rural Lithuania, which I here call Straigiai. In Straigiai there were 290 households with a total of 685 inhabitants (information provided from the local municipal office, 2006). This was followed by one year of research from 2006 to 2007 in which I expanded my fieldwork by visiting an additional neighbouring village, here called Bilvytis. Bilvytis is located near the Polish border and has a scattered settlement pattern. There are about 100 households with approximately 260 inhabitants in the village and the surrounding area (information provided from local municipal office, 2007). In 2011, 2012 and 2013 I continued my research with several smaller periods of fieldwork in urban Lithuania, which collectively were of 6 months'

<sup>1</sup> The term '*bomžas*' is not originally Lithuanian, but originates from the Russian word '*bomzh*' (*бомж*), which consists of the first letters of *bez opredelionnogo mesta zhitelstva* (*без определенного Места Жительства*); in English this translates as 'without a permanent place to live'. The English '*bum*' and the Russian '*bomzh*' sound quite similar, however the origins of the words differ: whereas '*bomzh*' is an abbreviation originating from the Soviet Militiya, the English '*bum*' is believed to originate from the German word '*Bummler*', which translates as 'loafer'.

duration. Although this latter fieldwork has not been directly incorporated into this article, my keeping up to date with the situation of welfare and social security in Lithuania (along with several trips to the two villages I visited for my previous pieces of research) has influenced this present piece of work. I have chosen to give in-depth descriptions of a limited number of informants, rather than building my analysis on a larger and more diverse sample. This comes down to two reasons. First, both case studies tell stories that go beyond their individual informants and exemplify a combination of increased liberalism and reinforced social obligations, just as they both adequately reflect the current unsettled situations and dilemmas in which insecurity in itself becomes a way of living. Second, this method gives me the liberty to develop ethnographic details and give more in-depth impressions of the people described.

## 1. Exploring the grey zones of welfare

In a retrospective essay about life in a concentration camp during World War II, Primo [Levi \(1988\)](#) introduces the concept of 'grey zones' as a way to describe situations of uncertainty and ambiguity. Levi describes how the initial expectations of newcomers to the camp were dashed as they discovered that there was no clear division between perpetrators and victims. Some fellow inmates operated as prisoner-functionaries who, in order to survive and improve their own living conditions, assisted the SS officers both in mundane and brutal ways; furthermore, they would act independently and kill fellows in the camp who were seen as a threat to their livelihood and extra privileges. Levi thus conceptualises the concentration camp as a grey zone, as black-and-white perceptions of 'us' and 'them' and 'good' and 'evil' were dissolved, leaving the world less accessible and understandable. Life is grey, Levi writes, although most of the time we struggle to make it appear in black and white and thus adhere to a certain order of things.

Drawing on Levi's idea, my colleague Martin Frederiksen and I have utilised the notion of grey zones to explore everyday lives and practices in Eastern Europe, with a focus on situations in which uncertainty and ambiguity have become ordinary ([Frederiksen & Harboe Knudsen, in press](#)). As [Pine \(in press\)](#) emphasises in her contribution to the debate, these are situations that create the conditions for social and economic practices that straddle the borders between legal and illegal, acceptable and corrupt. While situations may change over time, our people have been continuously subjected to everyday uncertainty and ambiguity. We therefore utilised grey zones as an analytical approach to conceptualise a given area or situation marked by ambiguity or porous boundaries which has a consistency through different time periods, all marked by their particular set-up of contradictions and uncertainties ([Frederiksen & Harboe Knudsen, in press](#)). The concept of grey zones in this approach thus encompasses Eastern Europe and the intriguing and confusing developments that have taken place in the region during the last two decades (e.g. thorough attempts to remake political and geopolitical relations, the insertion of new ideological and economic

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