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Informality and survival in Ukraine's nuclear landscape: Living with the risks of Chernobyl

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ABSTRACT

Recent debates on informal economic activities have partially switched away from a pure monetary logic towards a more complex one, embedded in long term relations and reckoning with non materialistic paradigms. The role of informality in certain aspects of people's lives has however, remained largely unexplored. This article uncovers what happens when the state retires from (providing benefits and social services to) a geographic area and what kind of mechanisms, practices and institutions are created to make up for this. We suggest that, in the face of de facto abandonment by state welfare, and the absence of a private sector alternative, a myriad of transactions and actors can make up for this by replacing these forms of welfare informally. Our case study focuses on the nuclear landscapes around the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone in north–central Ukraine as we reveal the ways the excluded and abandoned, which we frame as post-nuclear "bare life" (Agamben, 1998), have created a mechanism of social security that is independent from the state and yet complements it. Informal, local and unofficial understandings of nuclear spaces are central to survival in this marginalised and risky environment.

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1. Introduction

In post-socialist spaces, beneath the shadows of the neon-lit signs of marketization, the informal economy remains acknowledged and vital, yet largely 'invisible'. Beyond the more obvious street-level traders and the like, most informal activity – for a variety of reasons – occurs beyond the 'panoptic gaze' of the state (Foucault, 1977). The seemingly invisible nature of this economy is suggested in the various names it is given; from 'shadow', to 'underground', to 'hidden' or 'black'. This underlying assumption that informal activity is unseen, that it takes place in 'other worlds' (Gibson-Graham, 2008: 1), is often contrasted with the Western world where, it is assumed, visibility of the economy is secured by the fact that market forces have penetrated almost every sphere of modern society (Hann & Hart, 2009; Williams, Nadin, Rodgers, Round, & Windebank, 2011; Williams & Martinez, 2014). This has been reflected in the wide literature on social transformation starting from either Polanyi (1944) or from developmentalist approaches suggesting the next alignment of new emerging powers with standards set in industrialised countries (Haller & Shore, 2005; Pieterse, 2010).

On the uphill struggle through post-socialism, however, there is an emerging school of thought suggesting that the

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route is no longer planned by neo-liberal ideas of 'transition' from *a* to *b*, nor mapped out teleologically by 'one size fits all' Washington-consensus cartography; in fact there is no 'route' at all (Burawoy, 2002; Ledeneva, 2004; Stenning, 2005). Coping mechanisms such as informal work (Stenning, 2005; Williams & Round, 2007), economies of favours (Kuehnast & Dudwick, 2004; Pavlovskaya, 2004; Polese, 2008), 'social acknowledgement' (Morris, 2012, 2011: 629), gift exchange (Mauss, 2002; Polese, 2014a), memory (Buyandelgeriyn, 2008), and social/kinship networks (Grabher & Stark, 1997; Lonkila, 1997, 1999; Walker, 2010) have not only helped navigate the post-Soviet 'everyday' (Bruns & Migglebrink, 2012; Morris, 2012; Polese, 2006a; Round & Williams, 2012; Sasunkievich, 2014). They have also, and possibly more importantly, pointed to the existence of a persistent and complete system in which 'informality is here to stay' (Morris & Polese, in press, 2014b: 1).

Whilst initially relegated to particularistic and empirically-grounded case studies, unlikely to provide normative or universalistic value to further studies, the growing amount of research and its progressive theoretical engagement has pointed to the social significance, persistence and size of informal activities (Morris & Polese, in press, 2014b; Round, Williams, & Rodgers, 2010). Indeed, such is the prevalence of these behaviours that one could argue that 'formality' could safely be concluded as an exception and 'informality' the rule (Routh, 2011: 212).

Studies on informality have rapidly grown out of their initial framework that saw an informal economy (Hart, 1973) or resistance (Scott, 1984) originating among the poor, the marginalised and the excluded (Gupta, 1995). New directions in the study of informality have suggested that it is also a significant phenomenon in richer countries, including industrialised ones (Williams, 2011) and that both winners and losers of transitions make extensive use of it (Morris & Polese, 2015; Polese, 2014b), including in political spheres (Isaacs, 2011, 2013; Kevlihan, 2012). In many respects, informal activities may be seen as complementary to formal processes or, in market logic, as occupying the niche that remained vacant because of limited action of the formal sphere (Polese, Morris, Kovacs, & Harboe, 2014).

2. Informality and (lack of) welfare

There is a growing literature discussing social solidarity, social justice and other micro-social phenomena that do not necessarily come from the state (Kuznetsova & Round, 2014; Polese et al. 2014, 2015). Post-Weberian conceptions of a state advocate several degrees of state intervention (Darden, 2008): from little – a liberal logic, where the state does not interfere in market activities but creates the instruments for control of fair behaviour – to more proactive intervention, where the state is the warrant of most economic rights and obligations.

In Western Europe, as in other geographical regions, the "ethics of austerity", enhanced by the recent economic crisis (Windebank & Whitworth, 2014), along with a wider desire to decrease public deficit, has encouraged a number of states to reduce the amount of money available for public services and enabled the private sector to penetrate previously state-monopolised aspects such as healthcare or education (Kovacs, 2014; Ó Beacháin, Sheridan, & Stan, 2012; Rogers & Sheaff, 2000; Tatar, Ozgen, Bayram, Belli, & Berman, 2007). This process has been somehow less rapid in Central and Eastern Europe but only because it is building on a de facto process of privatisation (Harboe, 2014; Polese, 2006b) as opposed to a de jure one in more advanced economies. Traditionally, privatisation issues have been a major concern for economists or public policy specialists. Scholarship, however, has often neglected various grey situations that are, nonetheless, frequently encountered. If we see the economic and social life of a state shared between two, or in some cases three, main forces, as in Fig. 2, we can think of three situations that have been underrepresented in scholarship.

The first one is the transition between public and private services. If a state decides to privatise a service – fully or partially – then it is possible that at the end of the privatisation process, the new system will work better than the preceding public one. However, there is generally an adaptation period during which time gaps in provision may appear, sometimes lasting long enough to be more than just 'transition'. For instance some competencies might remain "uncovered" because both state and private sectors claim it is the other side's responsibility. In a second case, one can find a gap between a service that has been

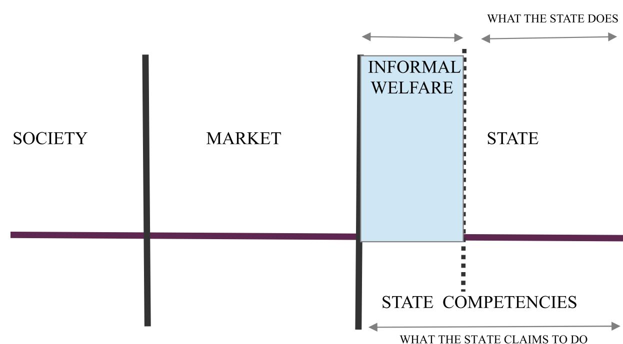

Fig. 1. Informal welfare may be forced to plug the gap between what the state and the market provide, occupying a space beyond the de facto protection of state competencies and forming a "grey zone of informal welfare" (Polese et al., 2014).

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