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BOOK REVIEWS

When Informal Institutions Change. Institutional Reforms and Informal Practices in the Former Soviet Union, by Huseyn Aliyev. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017, pp. 284.

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When Informal Institutions Change by Huseyn Aliyev is a clear and informative appraisal of informal processes in the Former Soviet Union, as well as a good and pleasant read. It explores the relationship between informality and institutional change and, in order to do so, provides a fair account of both conceptual realms and detailed case studies by offering a comparative perspective on them. For all intents and purposes, the book is composed of two large sections that “talk” to each other, with the first part (chapters 1-3) supporting the development of the three case studies in the second part (chapters 4-6), which in turn offer ample empirical material to illustrate the more general and theoretical topics dealt with at the beginning.

The book presents a good review of the literature on informality across disciplines and geographical areas, as well as on alternative understandings of informality as institutions, networks and practices. It also includes, refreshingly, a

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brief but sound reflection on how we can study informality. In fact, the first chapter provides a coherent and sturdy framework that supports the development of two enlightening chapters on informality in the wider post-Soviet space and three additional chapters on the specific cases of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

In its bid to chart informality, the author provides an overview of the most well-known informal practices, detailing variations that span from Asia to Latin America (chapter 2). But tracing informality globally is not the aim of the book; and so, while adequately embedding this study in a larger literature, the author successfully maps informality in the Former Soviet Union (FSU). While focusing on a comparative appraisal of former Soviet countries, the author also underlines the differences between the FSU and other post-socialist contexts. In so doing, and in line with a number of comparative studies carried out in the late 1990s and early 2000s, he argues in favour of a post-Soviet specificity (due to the Soviet legacy and problems of postcommunism). Similarities and differences across regions of the FSU are sketched out, discussed, and analysed. What emerges are both country-specific elements of informality and a more uniform culture of informality which exists throughout the FSU. Here, Aliyev usefully underlines the cultural dimensions of informality, depicting the culturally specific traits of the various declinations of the one phenomenon. In turn, the tension between the local/national on one side, and the regional/post-Soviet on the other, clearly emerges as one of the book's key leitmotifs. This sort of tensions, which blur linear and simplistic analyses, is recurrent and concerns not only the abovementioned geographical dimension, but also the temporal one. As a consequence, while Aliyev maps the establishment of contemporary informality through the impact of Soviet legacies, he also factors in the specific issues brought about by post-Socialism. In other words, he couples distant

and near past as key components of today's systems, which are then affected by more recent institutional reforms. Crucially, this complementarity is then applied to the analysis of the three case studies. In other words, the author shows that Georgian, Moldovan, and Ukrainian informal institutions are the result of Soviet and post-Soviet practices, which have, at first sight, fused into each other but which can – and are, in the case of this book – carefully be unpacked.

Chapter 3 makes for a heavier – although necessary – read. It is a thick, informative, and largely theoretical review of the relationship between informality and institutions in times of institutional changes. Inevitably, it includes a review of the literature on issues such as democratisation, transition, and modernisation, and ties the relevant debates to the evolution of informal practices and their relevance in the institutional make-up. Here again, there is a comparative dimension that nurtures the analysis: the author insists both on the regional dimension, by including just as many examples from the Russian Federation and Central Asia as from the west of the Former Soviet Union, and on a wider one, including other post-socialist contexts.

In light of this first substantial and conceptual half of the book, chapters 4 to 6 provide thorough investigations into the specific realms of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, organised largely along chronological lines. While readers will be familiar with some of the dynamics, names, and events sketched out here, they will surely appreciate the tracing of such intricate case studies through a longer and comprehensive time span. All three chapters include the multiple temporal dimensions of Soviet and early post-Socialist periods, in addition to the reform spells of the 2000s, as determinants of the more recent state of affairs. The author dedicates ample room to answering the research question of the book, namely assessing the impact

of institutional reforms on informal practices and outlining the peculiarities of each case. This in turn allows for a last round of comparative analysis on the following dynamics: when, why, and how reforms affect informality and, more specifically, informal institutions. Aliyev's results are clearly sketched out, bringing the book full circle from its introductory chapter. He shows that informal practices and institutions are crucial determinants of the outcome of institutional reforms and that "informal institutions are not always bad". Granted, this last point has been argued before; however, through its methodical investigation, Aliyev proves – once again and convincingly – that this holds true.

Aliyev's *When Informal Institutions Change* is an insightful and dense study of informality in the FSU, focusing on the nexus between institutional reforms and informal practices. It is an enlightening read for scholars working on governance, informality, and/or the post-Soviet area. Well structured, well written, well researched, the book makes for an excellent read on a subject matter that is far from straightforward.

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