

Informal Markets and Trade in the Caucasus and Central Asia: A Preliminary Framework for Field Research

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Introduction

The end of the Cold War and the emergence of independent states in the Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) and Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) witnessed the rapid proliferation of new — and often spontaneously developing — marketplaces across the periphery of the former Soviet Union. These new marketplaces emerged as a consequence of the easing of restrictions on small-scale, private commercial activity. These markets have continued to grow since 1991, and some, such as Kyrgyzstan’s Dordoi Bazaar (in Bishkek) and Georgia’s Lilo Market (in Tbilisi) serve as pivots for the circulation of goods within Eurasia. While markets in the Caucasus and Central Asia frequently enjoy support from oligarchs, the daily exchanges by sellers and buyers are largely unregulated by the state, and consequently, within the domain of the informal economy (Hart 1973, 1992).

This is the first in a series of working papers on the informal economy in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The present paper presents a starting theoretical framework for a multicenter, collaborative study of informal markets and trade in the region, which is funded by the Volkswagen Foundation for a period of three years (2016-2019). This paper presents the initial framework and methodological considerations — which were the theoretical basis for our successful proposal — followed by a short description of the nine sub-projects of the individual researchers, and concluding remarks.

Rational and Hypotheses

Our research builds new understandings of informal marketplaces and new trade opportunities that have emerged in the wake of the Soviet Union, and of the circulation of traders and merchandise across the Caucasus and Central Asia. Our focus is on commercial activities and exchanges by individual entrepreneurs — sometimes described as microentrepreneurs (Maloney 2004) — outside of state regulation, what Hart (1973, 1992), Sassen (2001) and others have described as “informal economic activity.”

Alongside the emergence and growth of the actual marketplaces, informal commercial activities spurred new social and cultural values and have transformed identities. The undermining of the Soviet middle class, and the emergence of a new economic elite — today’s so-called oligarchs — have produced new values where status is frequently predicated on economic success. We contend that the informal markets we study play a key role in regulating social networks, building hierarchies, and supporting intercultural flows and the exchange of information.

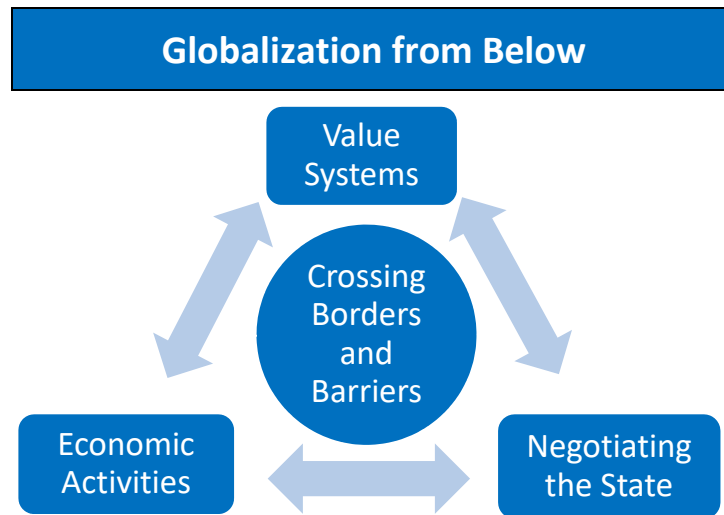
This project is in keeping with the line of inquiry opened up by scholarship on “globalization from below” or “grassroots globalization” (Appadurai 2000, 2003; MacGaffey & Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000; Mathews 2011; Mathews et al. 2012; Portes 1997) that contrasts with globalization from above, usually understood as functioning through formal bodies such as nation states, international financial institutions, and regulated firms. Insofar as we consider globalization a useful analytical tool, our interest lies in individually forged transnational linkages that bypass state regulation. These transnational exchanges are managed by petty traders, microentrepreneurs, and migrant laborers relying on personal networks structured along family, kinship, or ethnic-community lines (for examples from other parts of the world, see MacGaffey & Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000; Mathews 2011).

But this is not to argue for a division between globalization from “above” and “below.” The eight countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia have seen the development of bilateral and multilateral economic cooperation with other countries since independence (Giordano & Hayoz 2013; Hann & Hart 2011; Pomfret 2006), and informal transnational exchanges occur alongside exchange in the formal economy. Besides being a comprehensive phenomenon — that gives form to cross-border social and cultural interaction through the exchange of symbols, ideas, and goods — the informal economy operates with tacit state approval. From time to time, regional states consider informal exchange another form of comparative advantage. The state is neither static nor monolithic; changes in regulation and trade policy across the region result in an oft-changing commercial realm, including in the informal sector (Karrar 2013). This is evident from the fact that the scale of the informal economy continues to grow, and though officials often seek rents from this trade, the state usually refrains from outlawing informal exchange (Abdih & Medina 2013; Kaminski & Mitra 2010; Mogilevskii 2012; Reeves 2014). This partly explains why, for example, laws restricting street vending have softened in recent years in Georgia (Khutsishvili 2012), and why Dordoi Bazaar’s pivotal role in the national economy was foregrounded by state officials during Kyrgyzstan’s protracted negotiations for entry into the Customs Union that includes Russia and other countries in the region.

Three countries neighboring the Caucasus and Central Asia play a role in shaping the regional informal economy: Russia, which still retains close commercial, cultural and political ties — both formal and informal — with other former Soviet states China, that borders Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and is a global source for manufactured goods; and Turkey, the other major source of manufactured goods in the region, that also enjoys close cultural ties with the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The economy is not an impersonal machine, but is made and remade by people in everyday life and exists in conjunction with other societal realms (Hann 2010). Starting from this assumption, we parse our study of informal markets into three categories: (1) the negotiation of statehood, (2) markets and exchange, or different types of economic activities, and (3) the creation and change of social and cultural values. As the diagram below illustrates, the relationship between the three is complimentary and dynamic. Furthermore, what is common to all three is

that they entail the crossing of borders and barriers, both geographical as well as institutional, bureaucratic, social, cultural and moral.

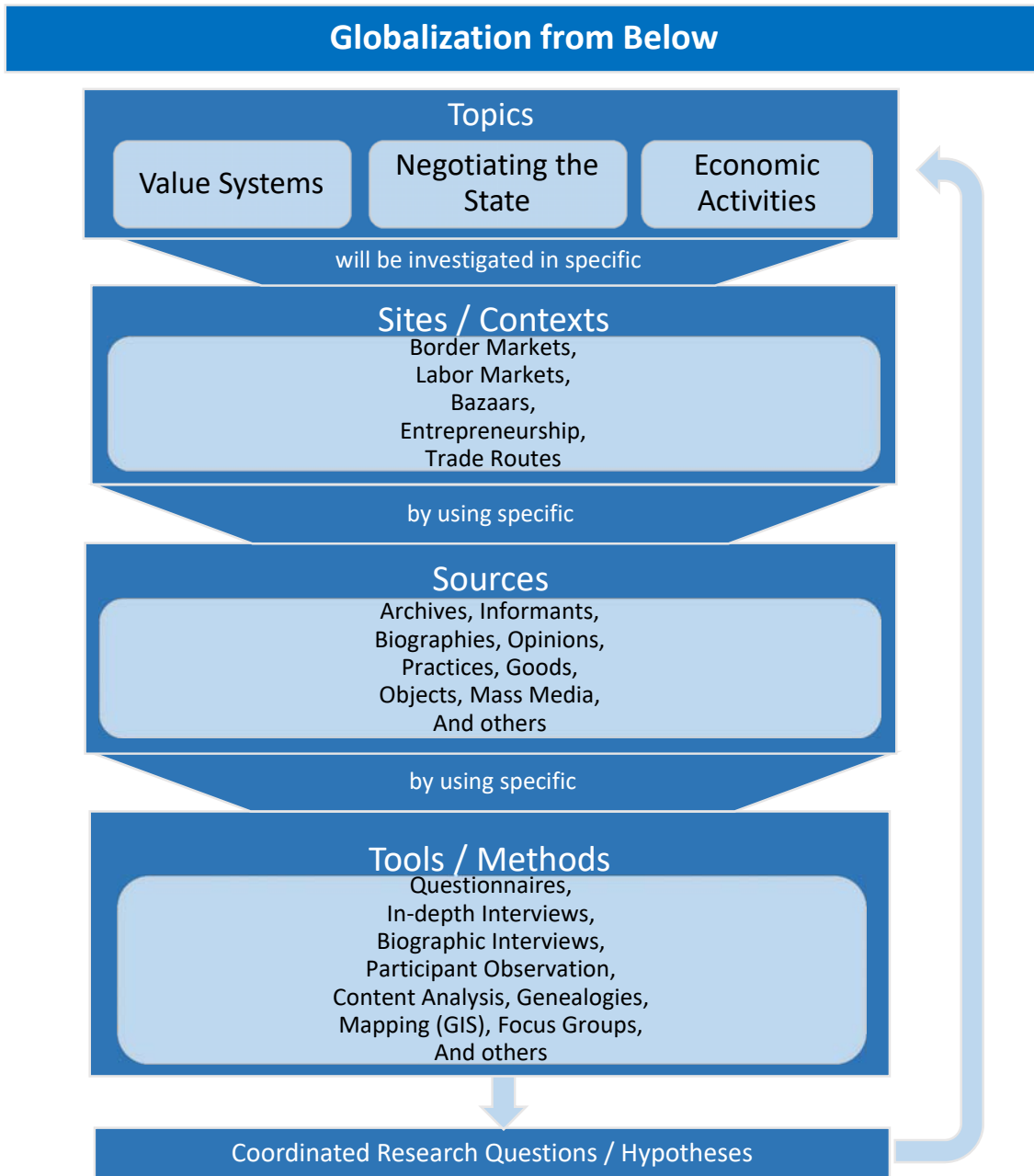


Our study of informal markets begins with five hypotheses: (1) While states, institutions, and values vary between places, how these are negotiated in the marketplace is comparable across the Caucasus and Central Asia; (2) Instability and violence (for example, the Tajik Civil War, the Rose Revolution in Georgia, or the 2010 upheaval in southern Kyrgyzstan) usually have two outcomes: a decline in overall commerce, but a rise in informal exchanges; (3) Informal exchanges exist alongside and in close interaction with formal institutions in shaping the market; (4) Grassroots globalization increases mobility, builds transnational exchange webs, and shapes communities; (5) Formal regulations are seen to impede trade flows, and considered suboptimal, which in part explains not only the tenacity, but also the growth of informal exchanges.

Research Questions and Methods

Besides shared hypotheses, our methodology converges at three points, as the diagram below illustrates: (1) Our research sites are similar, including (but are not limited to) border markets, labor markets, bazaars, and other sites of microentrepreneurship; (2) We use a range of sources including archives, official documents, media sources, oral histories, open-ended interviews, and participant observation; And (3) the researchers extract data from the above sources for quantitative content analysis and integration into Geographic Information Systems (GIS) platforms.

Aside from the above convergences, other similar questions we are interested in include: What typologies are used by traders and officials to describe informal markets? How are these typologies assigned to particular markets and do they change? What mobilities and circulation are manifested in these markets? What material and immaterial resources are exchanged? What are the formal, institutional constraints, such as laws and regulations? What are the motivation and expectations of the commercial actors?



In terms of their impact on culture and society, we inquire how informal markets and exchanges transform the community and socio-cultural ideas, worldviews, traditions, informal norms, laws and rules, and affect attitudes towards religion and morality. We consider whether there are core values in relation to economic activity. If so, what are these and what values are the most important? Is there a clash of values, and if so, when and why? Where do obstacles to trade and entrepreneurship lie? Is trading activity stigmatized, such that people are reluctant or ambivalent to engage in it? If so, what values lie behind this, and how might they be changing? Does trade, business or entrepreneurship have negative connotations? Is economic success, when it is feared, perceived as corruption, or achieved through circumventing regulations, positive or negative? Furthermore we ask: Is trade or entrepreneurship perceived as “real work”? Does trade

evoke concerns of contamination through flows of goods and people that raise moral concerns? Is profit perceived as anti-social? Do socio-cultural values compete with individual values and trade? For example: does trade affect the so-called purity of female traders? How do community values restrict or support trade, markets and entrepreneurship?

Finally, we also inquire: Why do people resort to informal practices? What is the link between informality and political and economic transitions? Does informality adversely affect formal institutions? Are informal practices more efficient than formal practices? Are they more consonant with social norms, or less so? How does informality affect economic development? What formal obstacles do people face when they enter the market? What is the role of formal regulation in regional exchanges? What advantages and disadvantages would derive from formalizing informal trade? Is the formal versus informal binary useful for understanding economic development? What are the short-term and long-term implications of transnational exchanges that we are describing as globalization from below? And, finally, has the transition from socialism, as well as the context of the regimes that have developed since, resulted in particular configurations of informal trade in the wider economy and society compared to cases where capitalist markets and related social norms have long existed.

Subprojects

While adhering to a common framework, we work on individual subprojects, focusing on different aspects of informal exchanges. In the following, we present the nine subprojects, which are conducted and/or supervised by group members:

Hasan Karrar's subproject, "Bazaar Networks of Central Asia: Towards a New Commercial Topography" explores the emergence of, the interlinking between, and everyday commercial practices in bazaars in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Despite being landlocked, and despite a centralized command economy for most of the twentieth century, today Central Asia boasts some of the largest wholesale bazaars in Asia — Dordoi (Bishkek) and Karasu (Osh) in Kyrgyzstan, Barakholka (Almaty) in Kazakhstan, and Korvon (Dushanbe) in Tajikistan — where billions of dollars change hands yearly, most of which is not formally accounted for. Previous fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan (in 2013 and 2014) has shown that nearly 80 percent of the goods sold in these bazaars originates from China. The large wholesale bazaars in Central Asia are both connected horizontally (for example, goods may flow from Dordoi to Karasu within Kyrgyzstan or cross the border to Barakholka, in Kazakhstan) and vertically (where the wholesale bazaars supply smaller, auxiliary markets). This subproject also focuses historically on how these bazaars originated in the post-Soviet period.

Susanne Fehlings's project, "Informal Trade and Informal Globalization in Post-Soviet Eurasia" focuses on the traders, who work in and travel between wholesale markets in the Caucasus and neighboring countries. Similar to Central Asia, petty trading boomed in the Caucasus following the liberalization of the Soviet era restrictions. Informal economic practices, morally condemned as "speculation" in Soviet times, were widespread in the former Soviet Union

and a way to compensate with shortages in goods. However, in the 1990s, trade activity increased drastically as it had become an exit strategy to cope with crisis in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. People who had never worked in this domain, before began to travel abroad “to do business”. Up to the present time, one can observe many itinerant traders working since that time, especially women, who cover long distances to make a living. Simultaneously, a younger generation of traders has grown up and is quite successful. Many of these traders may buy a few goods, such as furniture and clothes, which they sell for a small profit in their home-country markets. Often, traders use routes that are much more circuitous than those used by professional logistic companies, which use the official highways and sea routes. This subproject thus focuses on how these alternative routes have come into being; on how knowledge about routes is passed on to successive generations and to peers; and on how and why routes change. This implies, of course, the investigation of the formal framework and the history of bureaucracy as formal institutions determine commercial laws, borders, and therefore decision-making (negotiating the state). Furthermore, the project investigates the travelers’ social and cultural background, asking: What are their motives? What relationships exist among traders, between traders and their travel routes, and between travelers and the people and places on the crossroads as they make their way to distant markets? How does their socio-cultural background (value system) influence their economic activities and their decisions to trade in specific ways with specific goods?

Most of the manufactured goods sold in informal markets in the Caucasus and Central Asia originate in Asia. In addition to China, purchasing is also done in India. In his project, “Transcontinental and Cross-border Trade in Post-Soviet Eurasia” **Zviad Mirtskhulava** studies Georgian-Chinese business relations, while **Ana Ramazashvili** studies traders travelling between Georgia and India in her project on “Informal Economic Relations between Tbilisi and Delhi”. Along with Susanne Fehlings, both researchers shall follow traders from their home countries to destinations abroad and inquire about motivation, social background, and everyday practices of traders.

Over the course of travel, traders repeatedly cross multiple borders: geographical institutional, bureaucratic, social, cultural or moral. In her project, “Market Places: International Meeting Points in Border Zones of Georgia,” **Ketevan Khutsishvili** examines the multitude of border crossings by focusing on the trade and flow of goods in the border regions of Georgia. Khutsishvili’s research sites are the Batumi area (the border zone between Georgia and Turkey, which is a part of the Ajara region of southwestern Georgia) and the Zugdidi area (Abkhazian border zone in the western Georgian region of Samegrelo). In the first case, a closed state border was opened in 1993. In the second case, a new border has emerged after the ethno-political conflict in 1998. Both facts — the closing and opening of borders — influenced and changed the formal relationships and stimulated the development of new forms of informal ones, especially in terms of economic interaction. The agents in this context are the local population, the state (institutions, officials), non-governmental organizations, international organizations, and criminal groupings. All of them are involved in a complex net of relations, in which informal

connections play an important part based on which Khutsishvili's research inquires: How does the existence of political borders impact the development of informal trade activities? In what ways can the informal activities in border regions be considered manifestations of globalization from below? How do the trans-border contacts transgress conflicts or situations of latent conflicts from below? These questions start from the hypotheses that even if signs of tensions are continuously present in the borderlands, the local population often does not conceive of the border as an impermeable institution to impede economic activities, and when the formal interaction becomes more problematic, people find informal ways to deal with the situation. Another key premise is that the transgression of borders happens through pragmatic interactions as a part of globalization from below.

At the same time, the transgression of borders and the contact with other people and institutional frameworks, outlines political, economic and socio-cultural differences and forms new identities. Traders, commodities, and networks have their specific backgrounds and are socio-culturally embedded — and distinguished from other socio-cultural contexts. In his project on “Cultural Goods and Identity Formation in Georgia and Kazakhstan,” **John Schoeberlein** investigates the ways that flows of cultural goods and values play a role in shaping new social landscapes, especially among youth in post-Soviet market environments. Like other subprojects, this one examines how exchange networks are embedded in social, culture and political contexts that give the networks their particular dimensions and composition. In this case, meanwhile, the objects of exchange — cultural goods — are not incidental to the networks, but form their *raison d'être*. The goods in question are ones that are symbolically important in defining people's identities and orientations, such as the clothing that one wears in order to express membership in a particular group, or halal food that is viewed as essential for adhering to group norms, or a folk musical instrument that enables participation, symbolically and practically, in certain cultural group. The development of new markets in the post-Soviet space has been accompanied by the emergence of new cultural orientations, and often the markets and values mutually give each other form (e.g., see the analysis of links between religious orientation and beverage consumption in Lankauskas 2002). Group identity, membership and participation are mediated by economic and cultural access to key goods that have become available mainly through informal markets and means of exchange, including travel, friendship, and the internet (information and marketing). This project examines two cases: Southwestern Georgia, where trade and cultural links with Turkey and the wider Muslim world are forming a new cultural-religious landscape, and urban Kazakhstan and the emergence there of groups that are shaped by trade and cultural links with Russia, with Kazakh communities abroad, and with global youth culture (often mediated through Russia). In both cases, this will build on previous work examining new cultural orientations, but within the framework of the project, developing a focus on the role of trade and flows of cultural goods and the values that they embody. This subproject explores the differences and similarities between how cultural goods and more “culturally neutral” goods pass through exchange networks, what the relationships are between the goods, the networks, the sellers and the consumers of such goods, and how the different kinds of goods and their characteristics

(availability/scarcity, sources, mobility, cost, etc.) affect the ways that networks form and values change. Particular attention is paid to the dynamic relationships between new market relations, networks and exchange systems interact with other socio-political circumstances, such as distribution of ethnic populations, location and passability of borders, and concerns about the dangers of certain kinds of movements affect the emergent meanings that form identities.

In certain markets, the value of commodities, the socio-cultural background of traders, and their relation to formal institutions are obvious; examples of such markets are flea markets and markets for religious goods where identities linked with cultural values, social status and specific objects become peculiarly visible. **Hamlet Melkumyan** investigates such markets in “Informal Economic Practices in the Post-Soviet Caucasus: Traveling Goods and Values in Flea Markets.” In Armenia in the 1980s, and Georgia in the 1990s open-air markets for second-hand souvenirs and household goods developed. The emergence of such markets was a result of the increase of urban poverty. Today, Yerevan has two flea markets called “Vernissage.” The first, “Sarian Vernissage,” emerged in the 1980s as a small cultural center in Yerevan; the second, “New Vernissage,” is a souvenir and flea market in Yerevan that tourists and local residents regularly visit. Beginning in 1993, the New Vernissage came to attract growing numbers of customers seeking handcrafts, and grew economically more attractive for sellers from other markets (Melkumyan 2010, 2011). A similar flea market, the Dry Bridge Market in the center of Tbilisi, has seen increasing popularity in post-Soviet times. The markets in Yerevan and Tbilisi have three structural similarities: (1) both are located in the city center; (2) both have outlets for street art and souvenirs, and (3) both are surrounded by smaller flea markets, where one can find vendors of second-hand household goods. This subproject examines the daily practices through which the state is negotiated, and which permit the continuation of informal economic activity in Tbilisi’s and Yerevan’s flea markets. The subproject also inquires into common strategies for the traders’ economic survival, underscoring cultural differences between Armenia and Georgia in this regard.

Yulia Antonyan’s subproject, “Religious markets and markets of religious goods” investigates local modalities of markets in religious goods in Armenia that have proliferated throughout the country. These markets are either permanently located near or within pilgrimage sites or are organized on the occasion of religious holidays. Churches, through priests, frequently market goods with direct or indirect religious purposes (candles, calendars with religious iconography, copies of icons, religious literature, religious symbols and souvenirs like crosses, small replicas of churches and *khachkars* [cross-stones], jewelry, paintings, etc.). In addition, religious goods are sold in regular markets. Antonyan’s research aims to unravel and analyze the social background of religious markets including its formation, content, structure, and functioning throughout Armenia and the Armenian Diaspora. Her research asks: How does the religious market affect the variety of goods for religious purposes? How does the demand for special religious goods come into being? What are spatial, temporal and social dimensions of the organization of markets of religious goods? How do tourism, religion and everyday life intersect

in these markets? How is the sacredness of religious goods defined? What are the main routes of importing or exporting religious goods? Who are the formal and informal manufacturers and sellers of religious goods? What are their motivations apart from the pure economic ones? Does the church depend on manufacturing and marketing religious goods? And, how are religious goods marketed?

One of our basic assumptions is that the markets we study, including the traders working there and the commodities being exchanged, are broadly similar. Under the supervision of **Philippe Rudaz**, research group members shall collect basic quantitative data through a short questionnaire. In addition, Rudaz is also conducting focused research on entrepreneurship in Kyrgyzstan by collecting extensive quantitative data on entrepreneurship. Although there are studies on economic development and entrepreneurial activities in Kyrgyzstan (Lasch & Dana 2011; Luthans & Ibrayeva 2006; Yalcin & Kapu 2008; von der Dunk & Schmidt 2010) none approach entrepreneurship through the framework of globalization from below. Rudaz's subproject identifies the barriers and enabling factors of entrepreneurship and also describes how the informal economic practices studied in other subprojects enhance our understanding of entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

Together the individual subprojects explore informal economic practices in the Caucasus and Central Asia within the context of grassroots globalization; all subprojects rely on ethnographic methods. Besides collecting specialized data, the collaborators shall also collect comparable quantitative data from all research sites, building on themes that emerge from the theoretical and thematic approach common to all projects: negotiating statehood, the role of markets, and the creation of value. In the end, qualitative data will be related to survey-based quantitative data. Though a comparative analysis of diverse but conceptually and systemically linked cases, we expect to offer innovations in both theoretical models of, and methods for the studying of, the embeddedness of informal economic activity in its broader environment of socio-cultural norms and practices and formal economic and administrative institutions. Our work should shed new light on the complex phenomenon of informal trade, particularly in the post-socialist context where such markets are rapidly developing and playing a crucial role in changing societies.

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