

## **Reforming Informal Institutions. Institutional Reforms and Informal Practices in Post-Soviet Hybrid Regimes**

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This project seeks to improve our understanding of how, when, and under which conditions democratic institutional reforms affect informal practices and informal institutions in post-Soviet hybrid regimes. It pursues broad empirical and theoretical goals. It aims to examine the impact of post-Soviet institutional changes on the use of informal practices and it also seeks to understand what happens to informal institutions and practices when democratic reforms succeed: does informality disappear or do the post-Soviet elites and populations continue relying on informal structures? With an empirical focus on three transitional post-Soviet regimes—Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine—this project attempts to explain the contentious relationship between democratic institutional reforms and informality in the broader post-Soviet context.

On a theoretical level, this project engages with a large and growing body of literature on informal practices and institutions and offers theoretical insights about the relationship between institutional reforms and informality relevant to comparative politics, democratization and institutionalism studies, political sociology, political economy and human geography. This project contributes to the burgeoning literature on post-communist institutions by improving our understanding of theoretical and methodological aspects of studying informal practices and institutions in post-Soviet contexts.

On a practical level, this project shows that in order for institutional reforms to succeed in strengthening, democratizing and formalizing institutions, it is important to approach informal practices and institutions not as detrimental for the reform but as instrumental for its effectiveness. It means that in post-Soviet contexts informality assumes a variety of forms and performs both negative and positive functions. In light of the current crisis in Ukraine, this study demonstrates that the effectiveness of democratic reforms depends not only on formal institutions but also on their informal equivalents. Lessons from institutional reforms in hybrid post-Soviet regimes show us that the success, or lack thereof, of democratic institutional changes depends not on eradication of informal practices but on the reformers' ability to balance between formal and informal functions of institutions. These findings have implications not only for hybrid regimes, but also for the majority of other post-Soviet, as well as other post-communist, countries.