

Informal Relations and Institutional Change: How Eastern European Cliques and States Mutually Respond

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In the 1990s, there has been widespread talk in eastern Europe of "clans," "Mafia," and other informal groups and networks. People in the region use these terms to describe groups that wield influence and run things. When used in the West, however, these terms often connote criminality in the form of high-profile activities such as money laundering, capital flight, and trafficking in drugs, weaponry, and prostitutes. Western observers often fail to appreciate the relationships that underpin these activities; informal groups and networks not only enable the activities but also can shape the development of the state. Further, most clans are not criminal, at least not to this extent, and the fact that the same terms mean quite different things fosters Western misconceptions of eastern Europe.

The assumption underlying many "transition" studies— that Western models of institutional change are directly applicable— further impairs understanding of the role of eastern European informal groups and networks. Models employed to explain institutional change are often inadequate because they fail to appreciate the role of informal relationships, their historical foundations, and their ability to shape the nature of the state. Conventional vocabularies from comparative politics, public administration, and sociology appear insufficient to probe changing state-private and political-administrative relations in complex administrative states. During precarious moments of legal, administrative, political, and economic transformation, old systems of social relations, such as the informal groups and networks that functioned under communism and helped to ensure stability, can be broken up. These informal systems also can be crucial supports for, or obstacles to, the development of new types of institutions. Informal relationships may be as likely to shape and circumvent state and other formal institutions as the latter are likely to reorganize or overcome the former.

The impetus for this paper comes as a response to attempts by a few anthropologists and socialists of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union to characterize informal groups and networks so that their roles in shaping markets and institutions might be more readily

understood. Implicit in these attempts is the recognition (1) that these informal groups and networks are critical to the shaping of markets, institutions, and society; (2) that they are complex in their social organization, and (3) that, so far, Western concepts have been inadequate to describe them.

Dirty Togetherness

The way in which these terms are used in eastern Europe, as opposed to the West, implies differences in social organization. Ideas of bureaucratic authority and rationality incline Westerners to focus on *activities* and apply labels such as crime and corruption. But the legacy of communism predisposes eastern Europeans toward interpreting these same phenomenon in terms of *relationships among people*, what Polish sociologist Adam Podgorecki (1987) calls "dirty togetherness." Whereas the Western starting point is often *what*; the Eastern one tends to be *who*; who is connected to whom. "Dirty togetherness" is about *who* (relationships) and what that implies about *what* (activities). The local focus on relationships is worthy of our respect, not just because it is a native category, but because it tells something about how eastern European societies are organized— and how they are changing.

In the past few years, the term *clan*, originating in Moscow, has proliferated throughout much of the region. The notion of clan has a long legacy in Russia. It can be traced to the 14th century, according to Nancy Kollmann (1987), who argues that clans played a pivotal role in the making of the Muscovite political system from 1345 to 1547.¹ This usage appears to have a parallel in Russia today, where *clan* is widely used to describe the expansive influence of a certain political—economic elite. Although members of this elite are not typically bound by bloodlines, they are connected by long—standing association and common experience and also have incentives for working together.

In Russia *clan* has a southern Soviet and negative connotation of family togetherness and operating in concert. In Moscow in the mid—1980s, the intelligentsia elite used the word *clan* to disparage Uzbek political groups.

The idea of clans has been adopted from the Russian contemporary usage by Western scholars, journalists, and policymakers, especially after Thomas Graham (1995, 1996), a senior political officer at the U.S. embassy in Moscow, wrote a ground—breaking article, published first

in the Russian daily Nezavisimaya Gazeta and later in Harpers, suggesting that Russia is run by rival clans with largely unchecked influence. Since Graham's article, there has been a proliferation of this usage in the Western literature. Articles in the Washington Post and The New York Times now refer to clans in the former Soviet Union almost as readily as they might to political parties.

Mafia, like clans, also has spread throughout the region. Eastern Europeans subsume a wide variety of groups and activities under *Mafia*, including: (1) former *nomenklatura* (communist) managers who transferred state factories to themselves at fire sale prices; (2) officials who accept bribes; (3) ex-convicts with their own armed police or common street criminals; and (4) ethnic Mafia, in which Poles talk of a Russian Mafia, and Russians of a Chechnyan Mafia, and so on.

The legacy of communism has encouraged clans and Mafia both as suggestive idioms in eastern European life and as powerful agents reorganizing market and state institutions since the fall of communism.

Why have these idioms become so powerful and so prevalent? What accounts for their resonance in eastern European life? I have identified four reasons:

(1) The legacy of relative income equality. In contrast to the relative equality that eastern Europeans came to expect under communism, a huge divide has developed between a few people with enormous wealth and the vast majority of the population with little by comparison. Yet these societies continue to aspire, to a large degree, toward more equitable distribution of wealth. The previous scarcity of resources, the newfound huge current disparities, and the fact that such disparities are publicly known, in contrast to the past, all contribute to the belief that people with privilege have achieved that privilege through dubious means and at the expense of those less fortunate.

(2) The legacy of little street crime. Visible, dangerous, and sometimes organized crime, much of it in unpredictable patterns, has exploded in societies with little experience of street crime but some exposure to Western depictions of the Mafia in television and movies. This invokes the association of Mafia, which might be expected to be behind these crimes.

(3) The legacy of suspicion. Because state propaganda under communism was untrustworthy and contradicted by everyday life, eastern Europeans learned to "live in the lie," as Vaclav Havel (1985) described it, to doubt official explanations. And, because so much had to

be "arranged" under the table in economies of shortage, many transactions were shrouded in secrecy. Everyday life required considerable political skill. Who was doing and getting what and people's real motivations and loyalties were often not what they appeared. This led to seemingly interminable speculation and suspicion at all levels of society — from an academic's or bureaucrat's interpretation of her colleague's promotion to a citizen's explanation for his neighbor's good fortune.

Suspicion was widely circulated through informal networks, which were the lifeblood of economic and political survival. This kind of thinking has encouraged people today to interpret life's vicissitudes in terms of the influence of clans and Mafia. Katherine Verdery (1996:220) points out that, "Talk of Mafia is like talk of witchcraft. [It is] a way of attributing difficult social problems to malevolent and unseen forces." With the label *Mafia*, one points the finger at a certain person or group such as business competitors or political opposition, and suggests they are under the spell of sinister powers. Much like witchcraft, being labeled as Mafia is an irrefutable indictment.

(4) The legacy of informal organization under communism. Experience with communist social organization appears to have fostered the tendency to think in terms of clans and Mafia. Eastern Europeans have a lot of experience with networks that connected themselves and their groups to the state bureaucracy and economy. These relationships were "*particularistic*" — dependent on individual connections and criteria — rather than "*universalistic*," in which connections and criteria are independent of a particular social relationship.² Based on this experience, eastern Europeans tend to expect the world to work through particularistic relationships, and that makes groups that interpenetrate business and government appear clan-like.

However, although experience with communist social organization may encourage the tendency to think in terms of Mafia and clans, that experience does not necessarily lead to the social organization associated with a Sicilian-style Mafia or other informal social organization.

The State and the Power of the Communist Past

With regard to present-day social organization, the legacy of communism again is critical. And in analyzing the organization of eastern European informal groups and networks, a critical element is the role of the state.

Under communism, the key to state power was its expansionist bureaucracy that monopolized the allocation of resources (Verdery 1991, 1996). In a shortage economy in which demand always outpaced supply (Kornai 1980), control over resources insured state power. Anthropologists of Central and Eastern Europe have pointed out the transformation of state distribution systems and formal bureaucratic procedures under socialism through extensive use of informal social networks (e.g., Hann 1980 and 1985, Kideckel 1982 and 1993, Sampson 1986, Wedel 1986 and 1992). These networks connected individuals and groups to the state economy and bureaucracy and also pervaded these institutions. Further east, patronage networks virtually ran various regions of the Soviet Union (e.g., Albini, Rogers, Shabalin, Kutushev, Moiseev, and Anderson 1995, Fainsod 1975, Hough 1969, Hough and Fainsod 1979, Orttung 1995, and Ruble 1990). Although not explicitly institutionalized, these relationships were regularized and exhibited clear patterns. Anthropologists attempted to map some of them.

Although communist regimes collapsed in 1989 (Central and Eastern Europe) and 1991 (Soviet Union), informal groups and networks did not. Many groups, empowered by the erosion of the centralized state and enticed by myriad new opportunities for making money and wielding influence, rose to the occasion and seized the opportunity to fill the vacuum. The state might have collapsed, but not "dirty togetherness." Such informal groups could serve as crucial supports for, or obstacles to, the development of new institutions.

What do we know about the informal groups and networks that have filled the vacuum? Groups and networks variously called *clans*, *Mafia*, *unruly coalitions*, *restructuring networks*, *suzerainties*,³ *social circles*, and other names, help shape society, politics, and business.

The term *unruly coalitions* was coined by Katherine Verdery (1996:193) to describe Romanian elite networks. According to Verdery, unruly coalitions are "loose clusterings of elite [largely former Communist Party apparatus], neither institutionalized nor otherwise formally recognized, who cooperate to pursue or control resources." Verdery (1996:194) writes that

"what defines unruly coalitions in contrast to political parties is that they are less institutionalized, less visible, less legitimate."

David Stark (1996) writes of *restructuring networks* that shape Hungarian privatization processes. He identifies the resulting property forms in Hungary as neither private nor collective but "recombinant" property. He describes how Hungarian firms develop institutional cross-ownership, with managers of several firms acquiring interests in one another's companies. This makes clear that only people with extensive inside information and hence networks have the knowledge to participate in such schemes.

With regard to Poland (1992:13–14), I have discussed the *srodowisko*, or social circle, as a driving force in political and economic life. The circle is dense and multiplex; its members operate in many arenas and have multiple functions vis-a-vis one another. In the post-communist period, members of a few elite social circles have put their fingers in a multiplicity of pies — in politics, business, foundations. Members are "institutional nomads," as Polish sociologists Antoni Kaminski and Joanna Kurczewska put it (1994:132–153), because circumstances demand loyalty to the circle but not necessarily to the formal positions the circle's members occupy, which typically are multiple.

The social circle served — and, to a large degree, still serves — to organize Polish politics and business. For example, members of the various post-communist governments belong to previously existing and identifiable social circles. While leaders of the first post-communist government of Tadeusz Mazowiecki largely hail from a Krakow Catholic intelligentsia circle, those of the government of Jan Krzysztof Bielecki come from a Gdansk circle.

Further east, I (1996, 1997a, 1997b) have written about the decade-old "St. Petersburg Clan," which has become one of Russia's most powerful clans. The St. Petersburg Clan traces its roots to the mid-1980s, to university and club activities in what was then called Leningrad. The chief figure in the group, Anatoly Chubais, is currently the second most powerful man in Russia after President Boris Yeltsin. Chubais was St. Petersburg's deputy mayor before being brought to Moscow in 1991 to help execute economic policy. Chubais recruited his group of energetic young male associates from St. Petersburg.

With the post-Soviet economy under contention, the St. Petersburg Clan competes for control and resources, operates in multiple spheres, and has a wide scope of influence. With its

source of money and power base largely the West, the Clan acquired a broad portfolio, operated largely through decree, and set up still other means of bypassing democratic processes including a network of "private" organizations funded by the West. These organizations (ostensibly formed to conduct economic reform activities) serve as the Clan's political resource to allocate in the communist tradition, through patronage networks like those that virtually ran the Soviet Union.

All these informal groups and networks — Romanian unruly coalitions, Hungarian restructuring networks, Polish social circles, and Russian clans — appear to have some common features. I have identified the following four characteristics.

First, these informal groups and networks mediate spheres. They mediate state and private sectors, as well as bureaucracy and private enterprise, through both horizontal and vertical linkages that penetrate government and bureaucracy. This is why the conventional vocabularies from comparative politics, public administration, and sociology are inadequate to probe changing state–private and political–administrative relations in complex administrative states. Two conventions often distort our analysis: The conceptualizing of institutional change in terms of sharp polar opposites (e.g., state versus private, centralized versus decentralized, bureaucratic versus market) and in terms of sharp discontinuities⁴ rather than complex and altering interactions of the new and the old. Informal groups and networks defy accurate conceptualization in terms of polar opposites or discontinuities.

Second, informal groups and networks operate in many arenas. Because they are active in many arenas beyond the political, it is misleading to assume they are just another form of *interest group*, *faction*, or *coalition* — as these terms are understood in Western social science. The potential influence of the social circle or clan, for example, is much more widespread and monopolistic than that of interest groups, factions, or coalitions. Far from being confined to the political or economic realm, social circles and clans are multidimensional and multifaceted. Because terms like *interest group*, *faction*, and *coalition* are inadequate to analyze these groups and networks and the social organization of which they are part, different concepts are needed. I argue that clans are "cliques" made up of dense⁵ and multiplex⁶ networks whose members have a common identity, *a la* Boissevain (1974:-174). Boissevain explains that the clique has both an objective existence, in that "it forms a cluster of persons all of whom are linked to each other,"

and a subjective one, "for members as well as nonmembers are conscious of its common identity."

A clique is a strategic alliance that responds to changing circumstances. Cliques remain together not just because of long-standing collaboration. They promote common interests (Ryan 1978:41) through strategic concentration of power and resources. Cliques generate mutual benefits and further the interests of their members (Ryan 1978:41), and they strategically concentrate power and resources unto themselves. (This use of *clique* should not be confused with the Russian *klyka*, which has a decidedly pejorative connotation.)

Third, informal groups and networks can wield extensive influence because of the contexts in which they are operating: where, to varying degrees, the rule of law is weakly established, "the rules are what you make them," and interpretation and enforcement of the law is subject to much manipulation.

Fourth, it is the clique, not the individual, that typically makes the choices about how to respond to new opportunities. Operating as part of a strategic alliance enables members of the clique to survive and thrive in an environment of uncertainty and indeterminacy. This is a different unit of economic analysis than is usually considered — and yet another problem with conventional models. Westerners in particular tend to think of individuals as the primary unit to take advantage of economic opportunities. But in eastern Europe, the unit of analysis of responses to economic incentives is not necessarily the individual — it is often the clique.

Emerging Clique–State Relationships

What kinds of relationships are emerging between cliques and states and how are cliques shaping the nature of the region's states? Have informal groups and networks replaced the former centralized state, or simply penetrated it to some degree? In what ways? To what extent are they merely using the state for their own purposes, and to what extent are they reorganizing it? To what extent do informal groups drive formal institutions — not the other way around? A key difference appears to lie in (1) the nature of vertical linkages and (2) the degree of penetration of state bodies and authorities, which depends to some degree on traditions and incentives for the rule of law. I have observed two distinct patterns of clique–state relationships.

One form of clique–state relations is the "partially appropriated state" in which Polish social circles (and, I believe, also Hungarian restructuring networks and Romanian unruly coalitions) take over from the state, or privatize, certain functions or spheres. In Poland, for example, legislative initiatives since 1989 have, as Antoni Kaminski (1996:4) writes:

led to the creation of formally non–governmental bodies engaged in profit-making activities which involve the resources of the state, and which rely on the coercive powers of the state administration. They allow for the establishment, between public and private domains, of corporate bodies with undefined functions and responsibility which create legal opportunities:

- for the appropriation of public resources by private groups and institutions, through the spread of political corruption;
- for an indirect enlargement of the dominion of the "state" through founding of institutions that in appearance are private, but in fact are part of the ("appropriated" by the ruling parties) public domain.

The result is that, while the state is incapacitated because it has delegated decision–making to organizations under the guise of "self–government," parts of the state have simply been appropriated by private groups. Under the "partially appropriated state," informal groups and networks clearly deal with relevant state authorities, or what is left of them, but the group as such is not synonymous with the authorities.

By contrast, the "clan–state" assumes the communist state's former monopoly on power and control over resources. While occupying multiple institutions, members of the clan maintain dense and multiplex ties. Members of the clan are dispersed, but, as Russian sociologist Olga Kryshtanovskaya (1997:2) put it, "[they] have their men everywhere."

The notion of a "clan–state" builds on the observation a la Graham that Russia is run by rival clans with largely unchecked influence. Certain clans are so closely identified with particular ministries or institutional segments of government, such as privatization, that their agendas sometimes seem identical. Meanwhile competing clans have equal ties with other segments of government such as the Central Bank and the Ministry of Finance. With rivalry

between clans within the executive branch, the Russian government is not a level playing field that can ensure impartiality under the rule of law.

Under the clan–state, the clan uses state resources and authorities (to the extent they can be separately defined in a given instance) but also keeps state authorities far enough away so that they cannot interfere with the clan's acquiring and allocating of resources, but close enough to insure that no rivals can draw on the resources. This enables the clan to bypass sources of authority and influence that might otherwise apply, and thereby enhance its own. The strength of the clan lies in its ability to circumvent, connect, override, and otherwise reorganize political and economic institutions and authorities.

The clan–state model appears to recreate the "dual system" of communism in which state organizations had counterpart Communist Party organizations that wielded the real influence, albeit de facto. The St.Petersburg Clan, for example, set up a series of Western–funded "private" organizations run by the Clan whose actions in lieu of the Russian government include negotiating loans from the International Monetary Fund. By providing a model for shadow government that persisted beyond its own supposed collapse, the communist dual system appears to have smoothed the way for the clan–state.

Clan–State or Partially Appropriated State?

Several key characteristics distinguish the "clan–state" from the "partially appropriated state."

The first question concerns the degree to which independently sustainable institutions can be built. Do state authorities have the capacity to remain separate from the institutions and agendas of cliques? Does the agenda of the clan differ from that of state authorities? (In some instances the two may appear to be indistinguishable because they are so strongly identified with each other. The ability of "state" bodies to influence and execute policies depends more on particularistic ties than on formal authority.) Do clan members empower state institutions, or can state authority empower the clan? The real source of influence is the clan: Thus, when the clan departs, the institutions it empowered lose their influence or disappear altogether.

The clan–state model allows for maximum deniability. If the state is criticized, activities can be attributed to the clan. If the clan is criticized, activities can be attributed to the state. This

setup not only facilitates deniability, it institutionalizes it and, indeed, may be the closest thing to institutionalization that exists under the clan–state model.

Under the partially appropriated state model, informal groups and cliques use state actors, who are passive, corruptible, and "bought." For example, cliques in Poland may use or help to place non–clique members in Parliament. However, under the clan–state model, state actors associated with clans are actually doing the "buying." In Russia, clan members occupy positions in the executive branch as a clan and are clearly buying.

The partially appropriated state model exists in the context of a weak state. Verdery describes a state in which "the center has lost control over political and economic processes, and the structures of domination are segmented." In the clan–state model, on the other hand, ministries– indeed, entire segments of government– are ruled by certain powerful clans. This can hardly be called a "weak" state.

The second question concerns the shape of the rule of law and how it can be used and manipulated. The clan–state operates in a context where the rule of law and democracy are not possible because there is little separation of the clan from the state. The same people with the same agenda comprise the clan and the relevant state authorities. The clan is at once the judge, jury, and legislature. The system is weak in constitutional terms and lacks outside accountability, visibility, and means of representation for those under its control.

The third question pertains to horizontal ties. What is the legacy of and potential for the development of counteracting horizontal ties? In addition to differences in the nature of vertical linkages, there are critical differences in the nature of horizontal ties.

Here Poland and Russia represent diverse social organizational and cultural conditions that influence the existence and capacity of horizontal linkages. While Poland has traditions of collective action and horizontal ties (e.g., Wedel 1986, 1992), Russia largely lacks such recent traditions. While the Polish church has served as a major catalyst for organizing horizontally, the Orthodox church in Russia, under communism, did not play such a role. Poles are noted for their flouting of the law in the face of attempted vertical control, but Soviet rule was credited with effective vertical control.

Indeed, the existence and capacity of horizontal ties that can counteract attempted vertical control appear to differ fundamentally in the appropriated state model, as compared with the clan–state model. For example, in Moscow businesses are known to pay some 30 percent of

their turnover to "Mafia" groups that control and have divided up the city through force, collusion, and/or monopoly power. In stark contrast to what may be possible in Moscow, in July 1994, I observed business people in Warsaw's Old Town who, in response to "Mafia" attempts to collect protection money and to lax responses on the part of local police, actually shut down their shops for several days at the height of the tourist season, in protest.⁷

What is the potential in these two contexts for an "anti-*mafia* movement" as Schneider and Schneider (1994) have described for Sicily? The history and recent experience of horizontal organization suggests that, unlike in Poland, in Russia, there appears to be little potential for an "anti-*clan* movement." I would speculate that, in Poland, such a movement would pattern itself after the informal social circles that began to speak out around issues in the latter half of the 1980s. Experience suggests that these circles can be quite effective in counteracting attempted vertical organization.

The nature of vertical linkages and the existence of potentially counteracting horizontal ties clearly affects the shape of the rule of law and the mutual responses of eastern European cliques and states. And the relationships that are emerging between eastern European cliques and states have enormous implications for the future shape of eastern European states, societies, politics, and economics.

Notes

1. According to Kollman, the Muscovite political system was grounded in affinitive relations, kinship ties, marriage alliances, and clans, notably the "Boyar clan".
2. An example of a particularistic relationship is one in which a job applicant is known to be married to a powerful person. A universalistic relationship is one in which, using the job applicant example, the applicant may not be asked if he or she is married, let alone the identity of the spouse.
3. Caroline Humphrey (1991:8) writes of "organizations and enterprises in the [former Soviet] regions, run in a personal way almost as 'suzerainties' by local bosses."
4. These tendencies derive from the classical social theories of the 19th century and from the structural-functionalist "integration" models of sociological theory employed by many fields. These models reinforce this tradition of dichotomous thought through their assumption that effective institutionalization of a new system requires a tight and standardized mode of integration.

5. The networks that comprise the clique are "dense" in that members of a person's network are in touch with one another independently of that person.
6. Members are connected to each other for multiple purposes. Thus the networks that comprise the clique are "multiplex" (rather than "single-stranded"), in that members relate to each other in multiple capacities - political, economic, and social.
7. Accounts of this episode were reported in local newspapers and in the New York Times ("Warsaw Tourist Shops Close to Protect Against Crime," Aug. 7, 1994, A-11).

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Comments Appreciated!

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