

CONFERENCES

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The International Summer School on “The Role of Informality in Socio-Economic Transition Environments”

National Research University Higher School of Economics,
Moscow, 30 June — 6 July, 2014



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The International Summer School on “The Role of Informality in Socio-Economic Transition Environments”, organized by the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) in cooperation with Freie Universität (FU) Berlin, was held from 30 June to 6 July, 2014 at the Moscow campus of HSE. The Summer School brought together 20 students from both of the sponsoring institutions, as well as from other European universities, around a rich programme of lectures given by HSE and FU Berlin faculty. The lectures covered various aspects of informality such as informal entrepreneurial activity, corruption in transition societies, informal political action and social networks, as well as methods for their study, ranging from ethnographic methods to lab experiments on police corruption. The students were organized into three working groups to study informality in more depth. Each working group focused on one of the following topics: corruption in (higher) education, informality in the labor market and violent pressure on businesses. The working groups met with experts at HSE Moscow research centers, and at the conclusion of the Summer School made a presentation of their findings. The Summer School shows how a rich research agenda can emerge from bringing together perspectives from Russia and Germany as well as other West European countries on the field of informality.

Keywords: informality; transition; modernity; interdisciplinarity; cross-cultural exchange; interplay of formal and informal institutions.

Introduction

The International Summer School “The Role of Informality in Socio-Economic Transition Environments”, organized by the National Research University Higher School of Economics in cooperation with the Freie Universität Berlin, brought together 20 M.A. and B.A. students from the disciplines of sociology, political science, economics, social anthropology, law, and history at the Moscow campus of HSE from 30 June to 6 July, 2014. This year’s participants comprised students from HSE, Freie Universität Berlin, Warsaw University, LUISS University in Rome and Magdeburg University.

The goal of the Summer School was to provide students with an understanding of the multifaceted role of informal institutions in transition socio-economic environments. The programme was composed of a series of lectures by HSE and

FU Berlin faculty and group work by participants that included meetings and exchanges with experts at HSE Moscow research centers. The lectures covered a wide range of topics linked to informality, such as informal entrepreneurial activity, corruption in transition societies, informal political action and social networks.

Furthermore, the Summer School provided a forum for discussing planned project of PhD college¹ on the interplay between formal and informal institutions, a joint initiative of Freie Universität Berlin and HSE.

Various approaches to the study of informality

The Summer School began with an introductory lecture by Prof. Katharina Bluhm from FU Berlin entitled “Informality and Modernity. The explanatory power of different conceptual frames”. Her talk emphasised the need to go beyond the common narrow understanding of informality that is often associated with negative phenomena such as corruption and clientelism, and which is seen primarily as a feature of the “East”. Prof. Bluhm suggested transcending the conventional East-West divide and proposed a more nuanced approach to informality that would not be limited to the idea of a “formal West” and an “informal East”. The central thesis of the lecture was that the existence of informal rules, norms and practices are themselves not an indicator of backwardness, but represent a universal phenomenon in modern societies, that is, they increase with the extension of formal regulation. The forms of their occurrence, societal relevance and relation to formal regulation are not accidental.

Various aspects of informality were highlighted in subsequent lectures. Assist. Prof. Di Puccio gave a lecture on corruption in transition societies and the extent to which transition offers a particular environment that could foster corruption. Prof. Segbers from FU Berlin proposed an interactive lecture that encouraged participants to reflect in small groups on the differences and similarities between formal and informal institutions in Russia and Germany. Participants also considered whether it was easier to alter formal or informal rules. Prof. Radaev and Assist. Prof. Kotelnikova both presented the results of an ongoing research project at the HSE Laboratory of Economic Sociology on moonshining and counterfeit alcohol in Russia. Prof. Radaev focused on the consumption and production of homemade alcohol, while Assist. Prof. Kotelnikova addressed the issue of consumption of counterfeit alcoholic beverages. Prof. Chepurenskiy highlighted the particularities of informal entrepreneurial activity in transition environments, pointing to the factors behind the emergence of this type of activity, as well as different actors and categories that characterise it. Prof. Andrei Yakovlev’s lecture also addressed the question of the business environment as he considered the issue of illegal violent pressure from state actors on businesses and how Russian businesses can engage in collective action against this type of pressure. Prof. Theodor Grigoriadis from FU Berlin addressed the issue of religion through a study on whether Orthodox norms matter for the provision of public goods in Russia. Finally, Jackie Kerr, junior fellow at the HSE Center for the Study of New Media and Society, gave a lecture on how the use of social media influences social political movements and activism, particularly in the former Soviet Union.

The participants were also introduced to various methods to study informality as a complex phenomenon whose empirical examination can present certain difficulties. Assist. Prof. Sarah Busse Spencer proposed applying ethnographic methods, in particular to study informal networks and social capital. She provided examples from her own field research on civic organisations in the Russian city of Novosibirsk, discussing the practice of “*chaepitie*” (“taking tea”) as a ritual food event with a long history in Russian culture. Assist. Prof. Rafal Mrowczynski gave a lecture with the title “Inside Plato’s Cave: Phenomena of Informality and the Potential of Narrative-Reconstructive Methods in Social Sciences”. He likened social-scientific data to “shadows on the wall” and presented the documentary method as the reconstruction of “patterns of frames of social orientation” based on the practical knowledge of research participants. He invited participants to give an interpretation of selected extracts of narrative interviews conducted with Russian lawyers to illustrate this approach to study-

¹ At the core of this FUB-HSE project is a joint PhD program focusing on Informality and Institutional Change. It will be an interdisciplinary program including professors and students in economics, sociology, political science and other social sciences.

ing informality. The methods section of the Summer School also included the presentation of an experimental approach to the study of police corruption created by Prof. Alexei Belianin and Prof. Leonid Kosals, with participants being invited to use the software developed for this experiment.

The students had the opportunity to apply the concepts and methods presented by working in groups with the task to study a certain thematic field, identify the key problems in this field and develop policy recommendations for the Russian government on how to address them. The three groups each focused on a separate topic: corruption in (higher) education, informality in the labor market and violent pressure on businesses. The groups' activities consisted of directed reading on the assigned theme, visits at Moscow research centers to meet with experts, preparation of policy recommendations, and a final oral presentation to the Summer School participants and faculty. The various experts that were consulted by the working groups included researchers at Transparency International Russia, the HSE Center for Labor Market Studies and the HSE Institute for Industrial and Market Studies.

Students presented the results of their work on the final day of the Summer School to HSE and FU Berlin experts who provided feedback.

At one of the final discussions, Summer School participants had the opportunity to hear about and exchange views on the planned project of PhD college and more generally, on ways to approach the topic of informality. Students' feedback on the Summer School's programme was solicited by the organizers. Overall, the students appreciated the diversity of approaches to the study of informality that were proposed during the lectures, for example that the methods section covered ethnographic, quantitative and experimental approaches to study these phenomena. Foreign students also gained from learning more about the wide range of thematic fields that HSE faculty are researching and benefited from the possibility to have direct access to Russian experts as well as establishing informal contacts with them.

Some of the visiting students expressed interest in planning a subsequent research stay at HSE and established some preliminary contacts with experts and research centres to this end. The School also offered an opportunity for HSE and FU Berlin professors to discuss common projects and future areas of collaboration.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the Summer School showed that a vibrant exchange of ideas and expertise between Russian and German scholars from various branches of the social sciences can provide a substantial foundation for a more nuanced and rich approach to the issue of informality and the interplay between formal and informal institutions.

Indeed, the discussions and exchanges during the Summer School showed that informality should not be confined to transition societies such as Russia, but can be seen as a natural occurrence in the development of formal institutions, as revealed in the cases of Germany and other West European countries. Informality is best studied as an integral element in the functioning and evolution of formal institutions and as a feature of modern societies rather than an indicator of "backwardness" or as a negative occurrence that is necessarily linked to corruption, clientelism and the shadow economy. Analyzing similarities and differences in the manifestations of informality in various cultural, socio-economic and political contexts is a first step to devising a richer research agenda around the topic.

Received: August 21, 2014

Citation: Di Puppò L. (2014) The International Summer School on "The Role of Informality in Socio-Economic Transition Environments". *Ekonomicheskaya sotsiologiya = Journal of Economic Sociology*, vol. 15, no 4, pp. 115–117.