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Gian Marco Moisé

# THE HOUSE ALWAYS WINS

The Corrupt Strategies that Shaped Kazakh Oil Politics and  
Business in the Nazarbayev Era

With a foreword by Alena Ledeneva

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## Foreword

'Follow the oil' is the starting point of this forensic inquiry into Kazakhstan's informal practices. The reader is about to embark on an unusual journey, more nuanced than Daniel Yergin's *Quest for Oil*. Context-specific, but also comparative. By establishing five universal patterns of informal governance in rentier states, tested against the cases of Venezuela, Russia, Chad, Mexico, and Brazil—patrimonial embezzlement, state racketeering, fine threats, extra-legal contract cancellations and bid rigging—Moisé offers a taxonomy of political corruption in rentier states. The taxonomy fits within the wider typologies of post-communist corruption (Karklins 2005) while also linking the established patterns with the idea of informal governance.

There is a blurred line between corruption and informality (Ledeneva 2014). One can distinguish between these two categories by their relation to the legal and social norms: while corrupt practices are both illegal and unethical, informal practices are either legal but unethical, or illegal but socially acceptable. Informal practices become corrupt if/when qualified as such in law. Some complications emerge where legal norms are either not in place, as during post-communist transitions, regime change or constitutional crises, or cannot be enforced as the legal institutions are 'captured'. Further complications emerge from the ambivalence of social norms, or double standards, applied to us and them, insiders and outsiders, and the ambivalence of social networks—the relationships can be both social and instrumental, depending on the context and positionality: 'If I do it, it is friendship, if others do it, it is a favour'. Similar logic can differentiate between gift and bribe: 'If I give it, it is a gift, if I am forced to give it, it is a bribe'.

In corruption studies, the operationalisation of the concept tends to rely on bribes, which are material, instrumental, measurable, traceable, associated with a particular office.

Informality is less instrumental and more diffuse: informal practices rely on social ties (intimate relationships, family

connections, friendships, and professional networks) to reach out, pull strings, or use connections to help children, relatives and friends, which are a default mode of human existence and cooperation, but also are instrumental for getting things done. Some informal transactions such as gifts (otherwise known as 'brifts'), hospitality, nepotism and patron–client relationships are included in the typologies of corruption (Listovaya 2021; Polese 2021), yet they are also forms of accepted human behaviour.

The crossover between sociability and instrumentality — the doublethink that allows for a relationship to be both sociable and instrumental — is only one of the four types of ambivalence, found to be characteristic of informal practices around the globe (Ledeneva et al. 2018; 2024). The ambivalence of the doublethink, double deed, double standards and double motives, which becomes resolved only in a particular context, makes the conceptualising of informality context bound: the context determines the *modus operandi* of a social tie.

Just like in the uncertainty principle in quantum physics, where particles exist in a state of superposition before observation, the informal transactions become categorised by observers, while the insiders might choose to remain oblivious to the instrumentality of a social tie until the latter is broken. As noted by Luc Boltanski, human transactions move between regimes of love, driven by common humanity, and regimes of justice, driven by ideas of the common good (2012). Norms of reciprocity — in the regimes of affection, equivalence or power — qualify informal transactions further, but often are not clearly articulated, which is the case with the overlap of family and power relationships in Nazarbayev's networks.

Informality is notoriously difficult to research. A scientific rigour of naming, describing, and classifying informal practices works at cross–purposes with the context–bound, bottom–up nature of informality, racing ahead of the top–down, regulatory efforts. For different reasons, capturing these elusive practices is a challenge for both native ethnographers and outsider researchers alike. The observers cannot help relying on their insider respondents, yet also maintain a critical perspective. This book does a good job at the

balancing act of the insider–outsider perspectives, however difficult it may be. It strikes a rare equilibrium between data analysis and theorising informality. Gaining access to the closed–door data through in–depth interviews and open sources, as well as questioning the existing theoretical frameworks of categorisation of informal practices, do make this book stand out. There are three theoretical puzzles that it helps to solve.

First, this book is essential as it claims back some territory for the informality studies from the corruption field, and usefully discerns the concept of informality from that of corruption. Moreover, the informality angle serves to carve out the grey areas as distinct, even where practices of corruption and informality are intertwined in a seamless fashion. Such an approach is non–normative and fills the void in political sciences that lack discourses for capturing the ‘grey zones’ in non–democratic and non–market political regimes. Such approaches explore the ways in which patronal power works (Hale 2020).

Secondly, the book tackles the issue of the invisibility of informal practices, especially those with no colloquial names. Following the logic of Wittgenstein’s linguistic turn, *The Global Informality Project* ([www.in-formality.com](http://www.in-formality.com)) has adopted a so–called bottom–up approach that relies on linguistic filters as sufficient proof of the existence of practices. In other words, once the meanings of idiomatic names of informal practices are understood and shared, some spread of practices within a user community is a given. This heuristic cut–off point made it possible to identify new practices in unfamiliar contexts and reach out globally to researchers capable of capturing informal practices while navigating local contexts. Thus, the question of non–articulated practices remained open. In this book, the author ventures into the unarticulated and aims to capture informal practices without their linguistic signifiers.

Identifying practices without names has long been a puzzle, unresolvable without some top–down input of ‘categorisation’ by a researcher. The outcome in this case, however, is promising. Each chapter offers insights on a particular set, or cloud, of practices that account for non–articulated transactions and policies. There have been attempts to categorise informal practices as *strategies* of

cooptation, control, and camouflage in the 3Cs model of informal governance (Baez Camargo & Ledeneva 2017; see also Magyar & Madlovic 2020).

In my own research of power networks, whereby the non-articulation is the *modus operandi*, I have qualified the unarticulated practices of informal governance indirectly, through the types or uses that those networks perform. For example, in a wider range of informal governance tools available for leaders, the power networks operate on the basis of *informal incentives*, *informal affiliations*, *informal agendas* and *informal signals* that drive and divert the workings of formal institutions (Ledeneva 2013: 236–9).

Informal governance, or network-based system of governance, serves to mobilise and coopt people; to access and control resources, to ensure that policy implementation is aligned with informal agendas and that informal signals entail compliance and stability. The goals of informal governance are not so different from that of formal governance institutions. But the means are network-based. Membership in such networks is meant to be beneficial for their members, but also comes with a cost: vulnerability to prosecution, limited property rights, lock-in effect etc, misreading the informal signals or losing the practical sense, effectively pointing to the ambivalence of networks. The double-edged functionality of networks, or their ambivalence, complicates the difficulties of the categorisation of invisible and non-articulated practices further. To pin down informality, one tends to rely on the concepts of institutions, networks and practices, and in the best examples is an interdisciplinary endeavour.

Thirdly, the ambivalence of oil is an important takeaway from this book. Petroleum is not an accidental object of this inquiry. The biggest industry in the world, oil has become not only a key axis of geopolitics but also a key target for the securitisation of the world order. Furthermore, the reliance on cheap oil underpins the 20<sup>th</sup> century environmental *modus operandi*, whereas the drive for economic growth intertwines with undermining planetary survival. Hence, oil is a basis of globalisation (food, energy, mobility, development), but also entails global divides, intricate interdependence between producers and consumers and corrupt alliances, which are