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Von Malgorzata Irek

**The Europe of the Ordinary People:  
The Practicalities of European Citizenship after Accession.**  
By Malgorzata Irek

The first of May 2004 has a very special meaning for Poland : the threshold separating the rich West from the poor East and the heavy security officially moved eastwards, leaving just casual passport controls, to be removed in due course. From that day on Poles were no longer excluded from the political and economic benefits of the European Union. The ordinary people were ready for Europe from the very first day, expecting the border crossing to be nice and easy for once, as promised by the authorities during the 'Vote for Europe' campaign. They expected an opportunity to improve their economic situation by the spontaneous and instant implementation of the right to unrestricted travel and permission to reside and work at least in some countries in the West. But when, on their journey westwards, they arrived at the Polish/German border they discovered that in practice nothing much has changed: they found themselves stuck in a gigantic queue and were subsequently ruthlessly searched. It appeared that the border between the formal world as represented by the state bureaucracy and the informal one as experienced by the ordinary people was as real as that between East and West. But this was not some peculiar or isolated accident, because our social space is divided into two realms: the Formal and the Informal one.

The realm of the Formal includes structures such as states and governments, with their administrative apparatuses and legal systems, unions, federations, international organisations, corporations, companies, businesses and civil societies. The difference between the formal and the informal is obvious and rather commonsensical, and therefore it is quite difficult to precise in scholarly terms. A common metaphor of the relationship between the Formal and the Informal is that of an iceberg. The crystal clear white part that is seen above water is the Formal; what is hidden in the dark waters under the surface is the Informal. The Formal side of society is usually considered the right one, the Informal wrong. We used to think of the Informal as something pathological, abnormal, filthy, or at best inferior: one speaks of the black market, the shadow economy, hidden activities, the subterranean economy, semi-legal and illegal activities.

The realm of the Informal is huge. When defined in economic terms, it groups under one label such unrecorded economic activities as a wife cooking a dinner for her family, do-it-yourself repairs, pilfering from work, working without a permit, smuggling, shoplifting, prostitution, pimping, theft and organised crime. The informal activities comprise a large sector of alternative economy, which functions as a supplement to the official economy, representing a quick adaptation to changing conditions; as a safety valve, representing survival or 'coping strategy in times of crisis; or as a liberation from an oppressive social order represented by bureaucracy.

In contrast to this extreme flexibility, mobility and adaptability of structures in the informal zone, the formal structures are static and rigid, their reaction time to change

is slow. The informal sphere therefore constitutes a buffer zone that cushions the formal structures. In other words, it is due to the existence of the informal sector that societies can function and populations survive. It is the three-quarters under the surface that make the iceberg float. That is why it is neither possible nor desirable to destroy the informal sector.

In fact, the informal structures and activities constitute the fabric of human society as we know it. They are prior to the formal ones, just as the spoken language is prior to the written one, and they are natural, while everything formal is superficial, or imposed. The basic informal structure is a personal network of relatives, friends and acquaintances. It is difficult to imagine someone without an informal network. Apart from networks based on friends and family, there are also networks based on different common denominators, like common interests, profession, nationality, religion or ethnicity. One person can be involved in several networks at once, and one network can extend over several countries, even continents, and cut across class, status, race, religion and borders.

In the absence of governments, armies of bureaucrats, forms to fill, written laws and police to sanction them, the informal space - this intricate web of a myriad of networks - is controlled through the routes and inns: the only two constants in this ever-moving environment. Along these routes, medieval pilgrims have been travelling between different sanctuaries, traders have been carrying amber, silk and spices. Along the same routes, couriers in both wars carried secret information, political prisoners were led to safety, and re-settlers transported. Countries have fallen and borders have shifted or disappeared, but the routes remained basically the same. Perhaps the most significant of these routes has been the medieval Via Regia, which linked Santiago de Compostela with Kiev, cutting across France, Germany and Poland. It was deliberately designed by the Church to preserve the unity of Christian Europe. And the route fully delivered its promise, for it was a place of integration for all strata in medieval society. Centuries later, people still use the same route and carry out quite similar informal transactions.

The so-called ordinary people travel slowly on the roads and railways, in cars, buses, coaches, trucks and cheap trains. They have to stop on their way in places where they can catch a train or bus connection, rest, eat and exchange goods and services. Such places are like big knots in a web, where hundreds of networks come together at one point. Each day hundreds of travellers from all possible towns in Europe come to such places and enter into old or new personal networks with the locals and other travellers. Each traveller is a factory of new networks and an economic institution of his own. While the politicians separated Europe with an Iron Curtain, the large army of travellers kept it together.

As the European Union grows territorially, bringing together more and more states, so grows the challenge of keeping it unified in the face of growing diversity, of implementing and preserving the common identity and noble humanistic values that are the essence of European citizenship. This common identity has to bridge nationalist and regional sentiments, ethnic distinctions, financial status, class barriers and religious zeal. While the European authorities seem to be overwhelmed by this challenge, the ordinary people already know how to overcome it. There already exists one social structure that bridges all distinctions.

It is the informal networks, not the bureaucratic procedures, that hold the key to the unification of Europe.