

**Janine R. Wedel**

**Abstract**

The global vernacular of "NGOs," "civil society," and "privatization" often cloaks the fact that there is a dearth of knowledge about the actual practices and patterns of existing state-private mixes so integral to governance and to society. With regard to Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, the study of "transition" has often neglected the role of informal systems in shaping the state. Yet during the transitional years, informal groups and networks in the region evolved as the communist state's monopoly control over resources was crumbling or had collapsed, and opportunities to fill the void abounded. Far from disappearing, informal systems played a pivotal role in reform processes of the 1990s – from privatization and economic restructuring to public administration and the development of NGOs and civil society.

Ethnographic findings challenge the conventional vocabularies of state development and institutional change, which are inadequate to capture the complexity of the state-private mixes that are emerging in the region. These findings illustrate that the state-private distinction may be fluid, subdivided, overlapping, or otherwise obscure. States can be fragmented by competing clans. This kind of ethnographic knowledge should inform proposed political, economic, and societal changes. Without this knowledge, it is impossible to know how new Western policy initiatives might resonate within given societies.