**Emerging penality: Shifting ideologies, reconciliations and clashes**

 **Abstract**

 Drawing on ethnographic research in the only women’s prison in Latvia, this article expounds the impact of the ideological shift from socialism to neoliberalism on the way women’s imprisonment operates. The aim is to provide a more nuanced understanding of how the transition from the Soviet regime to a market-led neoliberal economy has impacted on women's imprisonment in the Global East, while challenging the neglect of this area by mainstream criminological scholarship. The ideological rupture introduced ‘governing through freedom’ which has currently resulted in a sophisticated amalgam of penal power that includes a complex fusion of the Soviet legacy which informs the ‘Eastern soft power’, the rights-based approach and other Western influences such as sentence planning based on inmate risks and needs. These developments have significantly transformed the power dynamics in a Latvia women’s prison - on the one hand, this has improved staff-prisoner relationships and assisted the implementation of international rules for the treatment of prisoners while on the other, more complex, individualised and distant relationships between the women prisoners have emerged.

**Introduction**

This article focuses on linking Latvia’s radical socio-political changes after the collapse of the Soviet Union to the conceptual and practical reconfiguration of penalty, which rested upon a new style of ‘governing through freedom’ (Rose, 1999) that is soft and indirect by its nature, but still has controlling and disciplinary powers. For penal institutions this meant transition from an inhumane and authoritarian prison regime, which relied upon the use of ‘hard power’ and strict military discipline, to the introduction of a progressive stage system, the use of ‘Eastern soft power’, and a gradual move towards a rights-based approach emanating from the international legal order and its convergence across jurisdictions (see Piacentini and Katz, 2017; 2022). Drawing on ethnographic research in the only women’s prison in Latvia, this article expounds the sophisticated amalgam of penal power that has emerged as a result of the ideological shift from socialism to neoliberalism. The aim is to provide a more nuanced understanding of how this transition has impacted on women's imprisonment in the Global East, while challenging the neglect of this area by mainstream criminological scholarship. A North – South binary has recently dominated criminological inquiry whereas the Global East, which can be defined as ‘a relation of betweenness… within and between the South and North’ (Piacentini and Slade, 2023) and includes the former Soviet Union (FSU) countries, has attracted far less scholarly attention.

The article starts by engaging with the carceral past, as the cultural and social mechanisms of the Soviet era are still informing contemporary punishment. The brief historic overview is followed by a conceptualisation of both societal and penal changes that were triggered by the ideological rupture after the collapse of the Soviet Union and an abrupt transition to a market economy. The latter part of the article introduces the methodological framework for this research and discusses the empirical results. The findings suggest that the multiple complex streams of penal power have transformed women’s imprisonment in Latvia - on the one hand, this has improved staff-prisoner relationships and assisted the implementation of international rules for the treatment of prisoners while on the other, more complex, individualised and distant relationships between the women prisoners have emerged.

**The Carceral Past**

After World War I, in 1918, Latvia emerged as a country but at the end of World War II it was incorporated within the United Socialist Soviet Republic (USSR) and the brutality of Soviet imprisonment has been well documented by the Soviet dissidents (Ginzburg, 1967; Celmina, 1986; Aizupe 1974; Solzhenitsyn, 1974). The Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic (LSSR) succumbed entirely to Soviet rule and the central apparatus in Moscow, which meant the penal system was forced to adjust to the Soviet model in which imprisonment served political, ideological, and economic ends. Initially the prison system in the LSSR was seen as a poor fit for the Soviet model due to its limited capacity. The Soviet approach was either to expand and remodel prisons as correctional colonies or close them down (Krumins and Poksans, 1996). The LSSR subordinate status also meant that the central apparatus in Moscow could demand any number of prisoners from the LSSR as the penal establishments functioned as transit facilities, which supplied the ‘captive workforce’ to the vast Soviet territories (see Haney, 2010). Often Soviet imprisonment was used as an instrument of colonisation when new, environmentally hostile territories were developed to accommodate human settlement. This practice not only helped to address the economic needs of the Soviet state but also met the political requirement of dislodging any resistance towards the establishment via isolation and removal of ‘the enemies of the state’ (Pallot, 2015; Piacentini and Katz, 2022).

However, the LSSR was also receiving Soviet prisoners; this was particularly the case with women as the LSSR had a mother and baby unit. Even if in the USSR women were subjected to harsh penal regimes and military discipline their sacred duty of motherhood was protected (see MacKinnon, 2019). This approach towards motherhood, and subsequent childbearing in prison has had a lasting influence on how incarcerated women are treated in Latvia and other FSU countries. A ‘maternal mandate’ privileges women and their role as mothers (Pallot, Piacentini assisted by Moran, 2012). Even now various protective measures including an exemption from punishment for breaking prison rules, increased food rations and better living conditions are offered to women who are mothers or pregnant. Moreover, the Soviet legacy not only shapes today’s carceral experiences for mothers but also other women who across the FSU countries encounter spatial and cultural ‘carceral collectivism’ (Piacentini and Slade, 2015; Vaiciuniene et al., 2022) which by design precludes solitude and women’s privacy (Pallot, 2007) as well as prison work that is framed through the prism of ‘rehabilitation’ (see Haney, 2010; Tolokonnikova and Zizek, 2014; Krupnyk, 2018). The latter point is particularly salient across the FSU as prison staff can be sentimental about times when the prison system could ensure full employment, holding the belief that ‘rehabilitation’ of women is about the process through which they ‘become reintegrated into the institutions of work and family’ (Haney, 2010: 79).

While there might be a strong attachment to employment, the current realities of precarious labour and insecurity in the wider community as well as the high rates of family breakdown mean these outdated views on rehabilitation would rarely prepare women for life in the community. The next section will further delve into the ideological shift and its effects on penality and women. The ideological rupture after the collapse of the Soviet Union not only established a new form of governance but also instigated the destruction of the Soviet way of life and its associated values that officially tried to evoke a sense of community, comradeship, and shared purpose.

**Understanding the Ideological Shift**

The breakdown of the Soviet Union in the early 1990’s meant the FSU countries embarked on a new political trajectory framed by capitalist market principles as democracy went hand in hand with the new economic arrangements. It was a radical transition from the Soviet collectivist ethos of organising social life to a society where the pursuit of individual and private gains became the dominant principle of social and economic life (Currie, 1997). This transition brought the Soviet people into a ‘neoliberalised’ framework which gives primacy to individualism, competition, consumerism and marketisation (see Hayward and Young, 2004; Hayward and Smith, 2017, Pearson, 2019). These new principles were in stark contrast to the Soviet values of collectivism, ordinariness and sameness. Hence, the creation of a ‘new’ human being who embodies the new ideology and enacts it in day-to-day life was required. The individual transition from the ‘Homo sovieticus’, a submissive pessimist, but well-adjusted to live under adverse conditions (Zinoviev, 1986) to ‘Homo consumericus’, who can engage in conspicuous consumption and status rivalries (Saad, 2007) was on its way. But as predicted by Dahrendorf (1990), the rebuilding of cultural codes and reconstruction of society was a slow process and may take generations.

Women were particularly affected during the transition period as Latvia embraced a nationalist and masculinised state in which women and femininity became ‘depoliticised or solely linked to the maternal role’ (Zake, 2002: 638). Latin American scholars have reported similar findings of neoliberal economic reforms leading to ‘re‐traditionalising gendered roles and responsibilities’ (Molyneux, 2006: 425) and the overall unresponsiveness towards women’s demands and rights (Rodriguez, 2021). Some feminist scholars would suggest that neoliberalism in the global context reinforces patriarchal relationships of power and gender oppression, where women’s labour (both paid and unpaid) is undervalued (Arruzza et al., 2019) and the ‘entire panoply of structures and practices… prevent women from participating on a par with men in social life’ (Fraser, 2013: 9). Young women in particular can be constructed as ideal neoliberal subjects who not only become exposed to the symbolic violence of the mainstream culture which colonises their minds and distorts their bodies (Arruzza et al., 2019) but also makes them more likely to respond to gender inequalities in an individualised manner while embracing neoliberal narratives of resilience, self-transformation, and empowerment (Scharff, 2020).

These societal transformations were also reflected in the carceral state as prisons and their internal life embody the wider political and economic framework in which they operate (Haney, 2015; Crewe, 2009). The first substantial prison reform in Latvia took place in 1994 when the progressive stage system was introduced and a year later Latvia joined the Council of Europe. A new focus on the European (rights-based) approach towards punishment emerged, which according to Daems and Robert (2017: 4) includes eradicating ‘inhuman and degrading penal practices from the continent’s penal institutions’. As part of the progressive stage system, closed, semi-closed and open prisons were introduced along with a system of incentives and privileges (Kamenska, 2006). For women’s imprisonment, this meant moving away from one general prison regime applied to all sentenced women to a multifunctional prison system in which the prison was divided into zones with different security levels and regime types through which women were encouraged to smoothly progress. Other European scholars have called it the ‘mobilitarian ideology’ (see Mincke and Lemonne, 2014; Mincke, 2017) through which the prison environment could be brought in line with the developments outside, as mobility, constant change and progression are some of the key features of neoliberalism and ‘governing through freedom’ (Rose, 1999). This new approach diversified and individualised women’s prison experiences as additional entitlements, incentives and privileges alongside the established spatial zoning ensured different pathways through the prison sentence, making prisoners more reliant on the institution than each other (see Crewe 2009). At the same time, similarly to other FSU countries (see Gounev, 2013), prisons in Latvia started to reflect the ethnic and racial disparities in the country where Roma people became the most over-penalised group (FIDH Latvian Human Rights Commission, 2018).

Nevertheless, while the prison regime underwent a gradual but significant transformation, the carceral space was neglected; no new prisons were built during this period (or to date in Latvia). The same prison facilities were adapted to implement the new regime. The limited resources available for prison improvements forced the prison administration to adopt a piecemeal approach to renovation instead of making substantive structural changes. However, Latvia’s commitment towards implementation of the minimum standards set by the Council of Europe has meant four square metres are provided for each prisoner in shared accommodation and six square metres for an individual prison cell (see CPT, 2015). In addition, in line with the international standards significant improvements were made in relation to food and sanitary arrangements, quality of health care provision and means of communication, availability of treatment programmes, and specialists including psychologists and social workers (Walmsley, 2005). These changes partly reflect a deeper integration in Europe which brought increased external scrutiny. The new rule bound system essentially altered the use of power - direct coercion or 'hard power’ along with strict military discipline were displaced by ‘governing through freedom’ and ‘Eastern soft power’. ‘Governing through freedom’ directed human behaviour in a specific way by relying on an entrepreneurial model of the self where the individual is responsible for managing their personal resources and their continuous self-development while ‘Eastern soft power’ integrated Soviet and Western principles. The concept of ‘soft power’ in the Western penal context was developed by Crewe (2009; 2011b); as defined by Crewe (2011b) ‘soft power’ is exercised through staff–prisoner relationships and the enforcement of rules that increase self- regulation and shift the responsibility to prisoners to be in charge of positive engagement with the regime while promoting ‘tightness’, which Crewe (2011a:522) describes as:

 ‘the way that power operates both closely and anonymously, working like an invisible harness on the self. It is all-encompassing and invasive, in that it promotes the self-regulation of all aspects of conduct, addressing both the psyche and the body’.

The concept of ‘soft power’ in Latvia might seem to be ‘exported’ from the West, but much of it derives from the interplay between the ‘new’ and ‘old’ order or mismatch between ‘governing through freedom’ that introduced the Western style focus on progression, self-regulation and the rights-based approach and the Soviet legacy - tangible and intangible. The latter plays a particularly important role in operationalising ‘Eastern soft power’ in the women’s prison, which contains traces of Soviet values that are particularly embraced by some members of staff and elderly prisoners who gained their education and life experience during the Soviet times. Nevertheless, these sentiments do not amount to neo-sovietism (see Domanska & Rogoza, 2021) that can be understood as a desire to restore certain practices associated with the Soviet past and the all-encompassing state apparatus. Instead, women prisoners and staff in Latvia espouse idealistic Soviet values that were promoted in the past such as community, comradeship, simplicity and anti-materialism and bringing them into the present in a romanticised form. The all-pervading Soviet ideology gave meaning and evoked certain feelings of belonging and greatness that went beyond the individual experiences and, while much of it was Soviet propaganda, many people believed in it and for many people these feelings were real. These aspects will be further interrogated in the empirical sections but before that a brief overview of the research methodology is provided.

**Research Approach**

This research explores how women’s imprisonment in Latvia adapted and positioned itself after the breakdown of the Soviet Union in a wider socio-political context of neoliberalism. The research question was informed by literature on the Soviet and the FSU country imprisonment and the penal approaches in the Global North. The research literature on Soviet imprisonment included Latvian and Russian dissident writings such as Celmina (1986), Aizupe (1974), and Ginzburg (1967). In relation to FSU country imprisonment many Western academics were used (Piacentini and Katz, 2022; Haney, 2015; Moran et al., 2009; Pallot, 2015) as well as FSU scholars (Krumins and Poksans, 1996; Gounev, 2013; Tolokonnikova and Zizeik, 2014; Vaiciuniene and Tereskinas, 2017; Krupnyk, 2018; Burciu, 2023) to observe and study patterns and general trends in the Global East. Autoethnographic publications of women’s imprisonment in Latvia by either those who have experienced imprisonment (Asare, 2009) or those who work in the prison (Strelevica, 2017; Losane, 2016) were also an integral part of this research. However, in terms of research methodology, this article mainly draws on literature from the Global North and Western academics that have researched FSU countries; this is due to limited local academic research in prisons within the FSU countries - especially in Latvia. Moreover, too often local authors and academics aspire to belong to the Global North knowledge stream, but the day-to-day prison realities are very far from this ambition. By projecting a ‘European’ outlook which is guided by research literature of the Global North the local scholars fail to capture the prison reality. My unique positionality of being brought up in Latvia but spending most of my adult life residing and studying in different European countries allowed me to become a ‘connected outsider’ who can understand and relate to women in prison but at the same time maintain distance while translating and locating these experiences in their broader ideological frameworks.

The original research data collection took place between summer 2015 (phase 1) and summer 2016 (phase 2) as part of a doctoral research project supported by the University of Plymouth and approved by its Ethics Committee as well as the Ministry of Justice and the Prison Administration in Latvia. The study used an ethnographic approach to draw on observations, informal conversations, and 37 semi-structured qualitative interviews based on appreciative inquiry or a strengths-based, positive framework (Liebling, 2015) with women prisoners (25) and prison staff (12). Field notes were an integral part of documenting the data collection process and personal reflections, which were later used for analysing lived prison experiences. This approach ensured a more holistic view of the women’s experiences of imprisonment.

Unlike some Western prison researchers (see Gooch, 2017; Crewe et al., 2022), I was not allowed to carry keys in prison; the prison staff collected and escorted me around the prison, which aligns with experiences of other FSU researchers who report limited access (Piacentini and Katz, 2022) and constantly remaining under the gaze of the authority (Milhaud and Moran, 2013; Moran et al., 2009). My access was restricted to weekdays only from 9 am – 4 pm and officially I was only allowed to remain inside for four hours per day, though this rule was not strictly enforced. But by sharing a common language with my research participants and spending a prolonged time in prison I managed to build trust and closeness while fostering open communication.

 During this study most of my time was unstructured – I would just follow the day-to-day life in prison, but there were also some opportunities for structured activities, for example, for a month I was attached to the nail beauty course, which was followed by shadowing prison officers for two weeks in different units. The average prison work experience for the interviewed staff members was 10 years with the longest being 25 years. All interviews were conducted at the end of each phase; this approach helped to establish more meaningful relationships. In phase 1 all my interviewees were selected by the Head of the Department of Resocialisation and they were all ‘typical’ prison research participants ‘well-adjusted, emotionally stable respondents’ (Moran et al., 2009: 707). But I did manage to set some conditions, such as interviewing first time or repeat offenders or suggesting a certain age group or women from a specific ethnic background as well as including those who are at the start or many years into their sentence. Also, the prison staff were keen to identify those research participants who could tell me how the penal system had changed over the years and included women who have either worked during Soviet times or endured imprisonment. During phase 2, I managed to negotiate that I would interview all women who took part in the nail beauty course, which I followed, and I was able to select a couple of other participants. However, this was not the case for members of staff - neither during phase 1 nor 2, could I select my own prison staff sample. Hence, only a few members of staff with whom I spent more time with prior to commencing interviews were happy to share their opinions and experiences openly. It was also striking to observe that there were no male guards present (there were some male employees, but they worked for specialised units - prison security, psychology or maintenance) so there were no male prison officer interviewees. Most of the interviews took place in the administration office, where many important events for prisoners were held, such as prison adjudications, court proceedings, and weddings, whereas some of the prison staff interviews were held in their offices. During all interviews I was left alone with my research participants and no suggestion was made that another observer should be present. However, I was not allowed to use a digital recorder for most of the interviews, and I had to transcribe and translate information in real time as interviews were both in Latvian and Russian (Latvian is my mother tongue, and I am fluent in Russian).

After data collection, data analysis entailed open coding, which was followed by a second more focused coding that linked some of the emerging themes to the established theoretical interpretations. At the same time some of the themes and sub-themes were deduced from the research literature, thus codes were derived both deductively and inductively (see Haney, 2015). For more detailed methodological considerations see Chapter 5 (Jalili Idrissi, 2020).

This article focuses on the most striking examples of what shapes penal power and human relationships and how they are linked with the Soviet past and the current regime. The following empirical data sections are divided into two parts, with the first addressing the shift from Soviet penality to the current penal regime, which delves on the ideological rupture and how women experienced this shift. The second part responds to calls to conceptualise how penal power flows and shapes experiences in the women's prison (Crewe et al., 2022) as well as depicting how the power balance has changed affecting the relationships between staff and women prisoners.

**Shifting Penality: From ‘Hard’ to ‘Soft’ Power**

Imprisonment in the Soviet Union was characterised by the use of ‘hard’ power, which entailed harsh discipline imposed by prison officials and fellow inmates. The Soviet regime operated on the premise of ‘undisputed’ authority, in which hierarchical and authoritarian power structures were used to dislodge any resistance towards the established ruling regime. This approach contributed towards distant and dehumanised staff-prisoner relationships. Prisoners would be exposed to hard labour and inhumane and punitive penal regimes. As recalled by Emily, a respondent in this research who endured Soviet imprisonment just shortly before the collapse of the Union, the underlying assumption was that ‘zek’ (a Russian slang for prisoner) must work and the use of degrading and inhumane treatment of prisoners was an inherent part of the system:

*Zek must work… At 6 am the bell… it didn’t matter if you needed to pee or not,*

*you had to stand in a rank… all day you worked and you fell off your feet* [in the

evening]… *10 o’clock you switched off in bed… you were drained… You were*

*nobody… they were not talking with you, yes, like now - well like calmly… they*

*were simply barking at you just like dogs… that’s it you are no longer a human*

*being you really understand it… we were afraid… even from a prison guard*.

 (Emily, prisoner)

**The Prison as a Factory**

The Soviets used the same factory system, which was fiercely criticised by Karl Marx as a ‘real subsumption of labour under capital’ (Marx, cited in De Giorgi, 2006: 15). Prisons were turned into factories or strategically located near the actual manufacturing lines. The women’s prison in LSSR was no exception – it functioned as a large-scale factory with an on-site ever available workforce. As shared by a prison staff member who worked under the Soviet regime: ‘*there were 1600 women… they worked in three shifts, they worked all day long*’ (Rita) and as further elaborated by Emily who was on the receiving end of punishment at the time:

*There were 1600 people in those days here – in these little houses… three story*

*beds… We worked in three shifts – first, second and third one a night shift…*

*everyone worked. If you didn’t work, you were in the punishment cell…it wasn’t*

*about you want it or not.*

(Emily, prisoner)

The Soviet Union’s approach towards punishment was marked by fundamental attachment to hard work and military discipline whether enforced by prison staff or prisoners themselves as hard and productive work symbolised the prisoner’s successful ‘rehabilitation’ coinciding with the ideological narratives of building communism together.

**The new beginning**

The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s signalled a new beginning. For prisoners this meant a transition from an inhumane and authoritarian prison regime, which relied upon the use of ‘hard power’ via forced, productive labour and strict military discipline to the introduction of a progressive stage system and a gradual move towards the use of a rights-based approach informed by Council of Europe guidelines and ‘Eastern soft power’. This qualitatively different trajectory implied a shift in how compliance is achieved within carceral institutions. Initially the breakdown of the Soviet Union caused chaos and ‘liberation’ within the prison system which meant prisoners took over the control of penal institutions, as shared by a member of staff: ‘*The awakening did not start only outside… the awakening… also started in prisons… and it was the awakening in their* [prisoner] *sense of understanding’* (Dee). The ‘awakening’ [‘atmoda’] is a widely used term in Latvian to describe periods of national revival but in this case the use of alcohol, connecting cells and visiting prisoners of the opposite sex were mentioned as some of the ‘liberties’.

This early stage of transition could be conceptualised as the time of interregnum when the old rules in prison no longer applied but the new ones were yet to be devised (see Gramsci, 1971; Bauman, 2012) as the changes in the wider socio-political context not only unsettled rules outside leading to unprecedented levels of crime and insecurity, but also changed the power dynamics within the prison. For some women this period brought pain and suffering due to a high level of prisoner-on-prisoner violence:

[In the 90s] *I was abused, they wanted to get me into bed I was young and didn’t*

*understand what was happening, it wasn’t acceptable to me… I had herpes along the whole body there were also scars… it was from stress… I was very scared of prison… I was crying a lot… I wanted to be home... they* [prisoners] *took everything away from me… the prison staff knew this, but it was a different system*.

 (Binny, prisoner)

Other women who were imprisoned during the early 1990’s recalled that they were able to enjoy some ‘liberties’, but by the mid-90’s these were increasingly becoming curbed by the implementation of the progressive stage system that consolidated the power of the prison administration and brought the ‘compliance project’ (Liebling et al., 2004) into action:

*Previously… we did what we wanted… Previously there were no* [progressive]

*stages… it was very good to sit out* [your sentence]… *Previously we did hooligan*

*stuff oh what only we didn't do… we did as we pleased… we didn’t give a shit*

*what the administration thought… now the administration have managed well…*

*people know about stages… if you will commit violations you won’t go through*

*them… you won’t go ahead… with this they brought people down to earth… they*

*made a very comfy system… When they started… those stages I understood*

*straight away that… the system is being created… I knew that there will be*

*something out of this… if previously I could do some hooligan behaviour with*

*someone, now nobody will go for it.*

 (Olivia, prisoner)

The introduction of the progressive stage system marked a new era, which required social adjustment for both prison staff and prisoners. Prison staff had to adhere to the new laws and deliver punishment according to the legally prescribed measures, as explained by one of the staff members: ‘*laws change so you adapt to that*’ (Laima). Many members of staff continued their work until their age of retirement and so the workforce only gradually changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union:

*Those who worked in the Soviet times retired changing the employee mix and composition… it wasn’t straight away, it happened step-by-step. It wasn’t because we got independent and employees went away, no… some due to age… retired.*

(Zinta, prison staff)

Similar observations about how the system ‘cleansed’ itself were made by incarcerated women who said that the prison staff that could adapt to the European approach continued working in prison, but others who could not left:

*This administration adapted* [‘perestroilosj’]*… Previously it was suppression… you*

*could lie down like a dog with your hangover… now you want an ambulance, you’ll*

*get it - everything is very calm now… the workers within the system… it’s like they*

*have been swapped… With Europe we have grown… you can feel it a lot… structure changed and those who could adjust… yes, and accept the new system* [stayed]… *those who couldn’t, those who thought that we are nobody went away… they cleansed themselves* (researcher: so there was no need to dismissanyone?) *No… they didn’t cope you know… simply I know people… who worked… simply said… you cannot return to the past… I cannot live through this*.

 (Emily, prisoner)

Certain adaptation was also needed for incarcerated women who became increasingly aware of the importance of progression through the stages, which depended upon their behaviour. Just like in the West, a broader ‘compliance project’ was initiated, which ‘responsibilises’ prisoners and enhances self-regulation and control (Liebling et al., 2004) or generates a particular form of ‘tightness’ (Crewe, 2011a) that weaves compliance into the fabric of everyday life, as argued by one member of staff:

*They don’t have a choice they have to abide… so that they get home so that*

*the sentence would be reduced… if you have three reports you are put in the*

*punishment cell, there you cannot smoke or watch TV, they are interested in*

*obedience. They beg you not to write a report if they know that in other shifts,*

*they have had rule violations already*.

(Katja, prison staff)

Even if women universally are perceived to be more obedient carceral subjects in comparison to their male counterparts, the level of control is not necessarily diminished because of it. This kind of thinking also explains why the research was only allowed in a women’s prison and the confidence with which it was announced by a senior staff member: *‘we will organise everything - there are no problems in our prison’* (Eva). Incarcerated women indeed used the term ‘red’ zone, which, as found by Pallot et al. (2012: 105), is a form of informal classification of prisons in FSU which means that ‘the life of prisoners is strictly controlled by the penal authorities’. This idea was reinforced by many women: *‘the administration is controlling everything here in the female prison and the law is being enforced’* (Flame, prisoner). Hence, even if the prison regime has changed significantly, the prison authority has tight control over women but in comparison to the oppressive ‘hard power’ that was used in the past it is ‘Eastern soft power’ in conjunction with the rights-based approach that allows the achievement of this.

**‘Eastern Soft Power’**

Just like the concept of the Global East which refers to power relations that do not fit easily into the North – South binary or that of coloniser and colonised (Piacentini and Slade, 2023) ‘Eastern soft power’ relies on a unique way of regulating women prisoners’ by integrating Soviet and Western principles. The former consists of retaining control through maintaining a type of intimate relationships with prisoners while embracing values of the bygone era. Some women prisoners described prison officers: *‘like relatives, they have also been here for many years, the difference is only that they don’t sleep here during the night’* (Lidia, prisoner) or as shared by another incarcerated women, Cindy: ‘*She is like a mother to us, I think I have a better relationships with her than my own mother* [in a reference to her educator]. *I know she’ll help us as much as she can*. The members of staff made similar comments: ‘*here they are like relatives* (we) *know everything about them – all their family tree’* (Field notes). During interviews many younger women compared their relationships with prison staff, in particular with their educators, as to parent- child relations, which highlights infantilisation of women prisoners that is a commonly found theme across different jurisdictions (see Crewe et al., 2022). Similar findings have been reported by Pallot (2015: 706) who studied women’s imprisonment in Russia where the detachment officer (head), was ‘represented as a mother figure or, alternatively, a teacher’.

The reliance on a maternal logic which tends to be associated with positive discipline (Hannah Moffat, 2001), has been a widely used approach towards women’s imprisonment across the world. Women tend to be perceived through a gendered lens and while parent-child dynamics can be viewed as infantilisation (Carlen, 1983; Crewe et al., 2017; 2022), Liebling et al. (2011: 55) have suggested that officers can have a ‘paternalistic-therapeutic orientation towards prisoners’. This means officers recognise prisoner problems and are willing to help. This seemed to be the case in Latvia where incarcerated women admitted that they can receive support from the prison staff when needed but this support is linked to the ethos and values of the bygone era instead of the Western understanding of ‘paternalistic-therapeutic orientation’. These were mainly prison educators with whom prisoners shared their pains and problems instead of specialised staff such as the prison psychologists: *‘our educator is really humane it’s not like we are prisoners and that’s all… she is like close’* (Dolly, prisoner). Educators also alluded to this view: ‘[Prisoners are] *talking* [with you] *all the time, they want to talk, you have to talk because educators are closer than psychologists*. [Women are] *crying, telling their problems’* (Zuzanna, prison staff). Later the same educator admitted that she cannot do any administrative tasks when she is in her office because she is based in an open unit where women can move around freely. This was also observed during the fieldwork: *‘When we walked in, she* [educator] *went straight upstairs to her office*… [I followed and some women wanted to see her straight away]’. Educators essentially fulfil the role of psychologist, social worker and prison officer.

By shifting away from directly coercive measures such as forced labour, strict discipline and the authoritarian use of power, the prison educators who used to be an integral part of prison organisation also during the Soviet times, have adapted to ‘governing through freedom’, sentence planning and risk management while also implementing ‘Eastern soft power’ which is informed by the Soviet values and extends beyond the penal remit. Overall, ‘governing through freedom’ has not only resulted in a more pacified prison environment in which women prisoners are expected to follow the rules and take up rehabilitative activities when offered, but also changed the relationship dynamics among incarcerated women and prison staff. The next section will investigate this shift in power dynamics and relationships in greater detail.

**Shifting power balance and relationships**

The transition from the authoritarian Soviet regime to the system of progressive stages has changed the way prisoners relate to one another and the prison staff. The aim of this section is to conceptualise how this new form of penal power that emerged from a complex fusion of the Soviet legacy which informs ‘Eastern soft power’ and the adherence to the rights-based approach promoted by Council of Europe guidelines and other Western influences including sentence planning based on inmate risks and needs is affecting relationships in a women’s prison. The main argument is that this sophisticated amalgam of penal power appears to improve the quality of prisoner-staff relationships while at the same time having the opposite effect of creating more distant relationships among women prisoners.

***Power dynamics and relationships between incarcerated women and staff***

 ‘Eastern soft power’ similar to ‘soft power’ in the West is exercised through building positive relationships. This approach allows women to develop more meaningful relationships with the prison staff as well as improving the prison’s legitimacy and ‘moral performance’ (Liebling et al., 2004: 475). The interpersonal treatment and psychological well-being of prisoners is an essential component of this process, which appears to be embraced in much the same way in women’s imprisonment in Latvia:

*One employee is helping me a lot… she was always close by when I thought I’ll*

*crumble down she was close by… it is very good that people are not telling us -*

*you have psychologists go and share* [your pain]*… it isn’t like there is a*

*psychologist and that’s why you go and tell everything… not to everyone you*

*can open up your soul… with some you form a bond.*

(Zaza, prisoner)

Such close and trustful relationships help to reduce self-harm and suicide in prison and can be essential for maintaining a positive emotional climate. Even if such an approach is used at a superficial level, it contributes towards building an ethos of care and minimises the harms associated with imprisonment:

*We are asking prisoners how they are doing or what is happening in their lives…*

*We are not doing it because we are interested in their lives or that we are*

*curious and nosy… It is for a simple reason that we need to find out the state of*

*mind of each prisoner to ensure calm environment in their cells. We need to*

*know if everyone is feeling fine so that nobody is committing a suicide*.

(Sky, prison staff)

Incarcerated women can also be asked to look after vulnerable prisoners. This practice can be emotionally draining and physically challenging, but by distributing responsibilities also to prisoners the likelihood of suicide and self-harm is significantly reduced. According to the Latvian Prison Administration (2022) between 2007 and 2022 there have been only two suicides (both occurring in 2011) in women’s prison.

Overall, there is a strong Soviet undercurrent to the ethos of care and the use of ‘Eastern soft power’. In a way, prison staff still seem to embody some Soviet values. In addition to the dominance of the Russian language in prison and the adherence to Soviet festivities, the poor pay, hazardous work conditions and low occupation prestige mean that the prison system relies upon higher moral appeals, which can compensate for these shortcomings while some research participants interpreted this as post-Soviet romanticism (see Joesalu, 2005) which implies that the Soviet ideology and values are still shaping staff working practices and relationships:

*Prison is that place in which… many Russian-speakers are employed, in particular*

*within this administration. Yes, they live with those values, those are their values…*

*and in some ways it is some kind of post-Soviet romanticism in which they live*

*and maintain that they are somewhat special or something.*

(Dee, prison staff)

Many of the interviewed prison staff sought meaningful work that provided more than just financial gain. Even incarcerated women thought that prison staff should *‘have a calling’* (Zaza) for work or as pointed out by one member of staff only the Soviet people are willing to work in prison:

*Only us – the Soviet people work here. My daughter in jurisprudence* [a student]

*tells me – mother only for a big salary!* [she would come to work in prison]… *I*

*graduated from university and worked in the kindergarten it wasn’t acceptable at*

*that time* [Soviet times] *to ask what will my salary be? Everything has changed…*

*now people go where they can earn a lot because everything is accessible now.*

*We were very humble - we were very different people… Materialism arrived from*

*other countries. Each individual is thinking only about themselves, each lives*

*separate lives. Everything changed… Everything is materialistic. Everyone wants*

*to live good.*

 (Zaiga, prison staff)

***Power dynamics and relationships between incarcerated women***

 Nevertheless, while the relationships between prisoners and prison staff have seemingly improved during ‘governing through freedom’, the internal relationships between prisoners have become more complex and distant:

*During those times it was a bit different* (researcher: what exactly?)

*relationships, the conditions were different… Now… conditions are improving…*

*people are changing… before conditions were bad, but people were closer, they*

*were helping* [each other], *they kept together… those young ones* [now] *are*

*each by themselves.*

(Dolly, prisoner)

 *People have changed a lot now, there is no work now, the shop is expensive,*

 *everyone is eating away each other because everyone wants to eat and smoke -*

 *in those days it was very friendly now everyone is by themselves… everything*

 *was different*.

 (Emily, prisoner)

The prevailing ethos of individualism and the promotion of self-interest, as discussed earlier, has resulted in the erosion of the prison community and ‘collectiveness’. Women tend to keep ‘more separate’ and distant despite communal living arrangements. In addition, access to financial resources can ensure enhanced well-being and power in prison but unlike in the past, when prisoners were assisting each other by mitigating severe deprivations under the Soviet regime (see Celmina, 1986; Ginzburg, 1967; Aizupe, 1974), this is rarely the case now:

*Those who have money get power here … It used to be different… those who*

*didn’t have were helped because that person didn’t have* [something] *now it’s*

*different… Now very rarely you’re helped.*

 (Dolly, prisoner)

Thus, as in other FSU countries, the high level of integration and support among prisoners has disappeared (see Vaiciuniene and Tereskinas, 2017). Incarcerated women are more likely to receive assistance from the prison staff who are looking out for those in need, although in return obedience and cooperation can be expected:

*They* [prison staff] *are warm, fair and understanding when they see that indeed*

[you are in need] *and you kindly ask* [you will be helped]*, but of course, you also need to behave and help them when needed.*

(Teresa, prisoner)

*This lady… she didn’t have any support… she didn’t have anything and she was so deep down that she got fed up with life… they called the head of the department…* [and she] *said don’t worry we’ll get everything for you a shampoo, washing powder, towel… even a hair colour.*

 (Zaza, prisoner)

Women and their relationships have changed within the prison environment and beyond in response to shifts in the wider ideological framework. Due to exposure to market techniques and the progressive stage system, incarcerated women have become increasingly aware of the importance of access to resources and constantly striving for progression, and this has affected the way they relate to each other. Prisoner relationships have become guided by transactional, market -like principles making their relationships more ‘business like’, where, as shared by Zaza ‘*nobody is doing anything for a thank you’* but a fair ‘price’ for the service is being agreed monetising their interactions:

*What is currency in prison – those are cigarettes…* [or] *products for non-smokers. If you have money then you can use these ‘little’ people. I will give you three cigarettes and you wash the laundry instead of me. You become as a servant to somebody.*

(Beth, prisoner)

Consequently, some prisoners suggested that access to financial resources has become one of the most important elements for surviving in prison: *‘in principle if you have money, you have everything’* (Olivia) but access to such resources can be limited. Meanwhile prison staff, in particular educators, have stepped in to mitigate the impact of deteriorating relationships between women prisoners by embracing certain values and practices of a bygone era as many grew up under the Soviet regime, which structured their understanding and interpretation of the world (see Pallot and Katz, 2017).

**Conclusion**

The neglect of the Global East by mainstream criminological scholarship has led to a binary debate on the Global North and South. However, such neglect can contribute to further schisms and a profound lack of understanding of what is happening in the Global East and why. The insularity and inaccessibility hard to reach nature of the Global East can prevent research from being conducted, but those who manage to break through the long obstacle course can produce meaningful results.

This article considered the transition period and how the ideological rupture after the collapse of the Soviet Union which was based on the notion of liberation from the totalitarian state and ‘governing through freedom’ affected women’s imprisonment in Latvia. The breakdown of the Soviet Union had an immediate effect on all spheres of life. For women prisoners this meant a transition from an inhumane and authoritarian prison regime, which relied upon the use of ‘hard power’ and strict military discipline, to the introduction of a progressive stage system and a gradual move towards a rights-based approach informed by Council of Europe guidelines. While other Western influences including sentence planning based on inmate risks and needs also appeared, ‘Eastern soft power’ seamlessly blends the Western rule bound penal system with the Soviet intangible legacy in the form of values became the dominant mode of regulation. Consequently, this ideological rupture created a different flow of power in prison. This article has focused on conceptualising the new flow of power and relationships in the only women’s prison in Latvia. The research findings suggest while ‘governing through freedom’ has played an important role in improving staff-prisoner relationships and assisting the implementation of international rules for the treatment of prisoners, more complex and distant relationships between prisoners have emerged. This is in response to shifts in a wider ideological framework which promotes individualism, competition, and marketisation. The increased awareness of the role of resources, in particular financial resources, has also contributed towards the erosion of solidarity and mutual aid among incarcerated women as some of the entitlements such as conjugal visits become available only for those who can afford them, emulating the world outside. The prison as an institution maintains cultural and spatial attachment to the Soviet past, still harbouring Soviet values and nostalgia from a bygone era. Therefore, it can be argued that women’s imprisonment in Latvia is a battle ground for a complex mix of ideologies that compete for authority.

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