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RUSSIAN CRIMINAL AND PRISON CULTURE: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND, IMPORTATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY, AND THE WAGNER PHENOMENON

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Abstract

The article is focused on the origins of the Russian criminal and prison subculture and the current state of this phenomenon, which is imported by the Russian Federation within its imperialistic neocolonial policy aimed at restoring the *'Soviet space'.*

In order to analyse the preconditions for the emergence of the Russian criminal and prison subculture, it is necessary to consider a large complex of historical, cultural, political, geographical, and economic factors, which together created the phenomenon that has no analogues in the history. Neither the deportation of criminals by the British government to the New World in the 17th century, nor the deportation of convicts by the British government to Australia in the 19th century, nor the deportation of the *relégués* to French Guiana and other colonies in the 19th and 20th centuries by the French government created the cultural-criminal-prison phenomenon that began to take shape during the time of the Grand Principality of Moscow. Later, it was significantly strengthened during the reign of Peter I and finally took shape in the second half of the 19th century. Moreover, world history provides no other examples of state formations such as the *Vyatka Republic* (14th-15th centuries), which was founded by professional criminals and whose economic base was founded on professional and organised criminal activity.

So, the origins of the Russian criminal and prison subculture can be traced back long before the creation of the Soviet Union and even long before the creation of the Russian Empire collapsed in 1917. It remained almost unchanged until the beginning of the Soviet period, when it was transformed to meet the needs of Stalinist industrialisation.

Moreover, multiplied by the phenomenon of the *Gulag*, the Russian colonial-penal-carceral political complex created a new phenomenon, which, as it turned out, is very useful for modern Russian imperialistic policy in terms of providing an uninterrupted source of recruits for military operations in the war against Ukraine in the 21st century *(the Wagner Phenomenon).* However, the Wagner Phenomenon is about how to manage the State as a *prison*. The Wagner Phenomenon is also about how to treat citizens as *prisoners*.

So, here, we analyse the contemporary phenomenon of the post-Soviet criminal and prison subculture and its importation by the Russian political elites. Limitations in academic research

of this phenomenon *only to the period after 1917* is a fundamental methodological mistake. Such a mistake makes it impossible to study the real preconditions of the simulacrum of the contemporary Russian criminal and prison subculture, which, we emphasize, has lost the prefix *'sub'* and has become a national criminal and prison culture.

Keywords: culture, history of prison, Russia, Russian colonial policy, Russian Empire, Soviet Union, Gulag, informal prisoner hierarchies, criminal subculture, prison subculture, prison labour, exile.

Introduction

In this paper, we investigate the issues of the origins of Soviet criminal and prison subculture, the corresponding informal prisoner hierarchies, and the current state of this social and cultural phenomenon in post-Soviet states.

Accordingly, we raise questions about the historical preconditions for the formation of the phenomenon, which continues to influence the citizens of the countries that were once part of the Soviet Union. Nowadays, this phenomenon is actively imported to these countries by the Russian Federation within its imperialistic neocolonial policy aimed at restoring the *'Soviet space'*.

Outlining the main idea about the influence of the Soviet criminal and prison subculture, we form a hypothesis that, despite its name, the origins of the Russian subculture can be traced back long before the creation of the Soviet Union and even long before the creation of the Russian Empire collapsed in 1917.

Previous Author's Publications

In our previous publications, we investigated the issues of torture and other forms of ill-treatment in the context of criminal activities of informal prison hierarchies in prisons of the post-Soviet states (Yagunov, 2020; Yagunov, 2021; Yagunov, 2023a; Yagunov, 2023b).

In several papers, we investigated the phenomenon of informal prison hierarchies and the *simulacrum* of prison subculture in contemporary power relations, with a focus on the post-Soviet prison systems (Yagunov, et al., 2023a; Yagunov, et al., 2023b; Yagunov, 2024b).

We also made a comparative analysis of the post-Soviet prison hierarchies and prison gangs in the USA and some other American countries (Yagunov, 2024a; Yagunov, 2024c; Yagunov, 2025).

However, in the process of the research, we have found that the origins of Soviet prison subculture are not sufficiently presented in the academic sources, and some academic papers present this issue in an overly simplified manner. On the one hand, authors generally do not examine the factors that contributed to the emergence of the Soviet criminal and prison subculture, which had formed long before the creation of the Soviet State. On the other hand, insufficient attention is paid to the issue of using prison subculture to control a modern Russian society by the Russian political elites. In addition, the issue of using prison subculture to import Russian neocolonial narratives has been unexplored.

The Hypothesis

In his memoirs about the Sakhalin Katorga, Anton Chekhov wrote about 'the prison conditions, similar to those of the *military* (Chekhov, 2004).

Here, we should note that both the Tsarist Russian and the Soviet prison systems have their foundation in *military carceral collectivism*, where the main focus was not on the individual prisoner but on *'the collective of prisoners',* which had to serve the State in its aggressive colonial policy and corresponding industrial needs. The main essence of the collective of prisoners in practice was manifested in the fact that the *collective* served as a connection between the administration and the prisoners. As the Soviet authors argued, '*the principle of collectivity* is inextricably linked to the organisation of industrial competitions. Together with them, it should form the basis for changing the mindset of prisoners'. That is why, according to official Soviet sources of that time, *'educators',* relying precisely on the *collective*, showed examples of 'miraculous transformation of human consciousness' (Yagunov, 2009; Averbakh, 1936: 142; CPT, 2025a; CPT, 2025b).

This factor should be considered as one of the cornerstones of this paper.

Coming back to the pre-Revolutionary Russia, in contrast to many other countries, numerous collective entities of criminals and vagrants from lower classes were the sources of the social and political processes that determined both the rapid territorial expansion of the Russian State and the nature of internal social transformations (Liventsev, 2013, p. 178-182).

Here, we should mention one of the most important theses of our research: if the American colonialisation of the West was based on *free individuals with revolvers*, the Russian colonization of the North and the East was based on *masses of convicts with heavy shackles and chains*.

A special significance of Russian exile and *'the katorga'* lay in the fact that it served not only punitive but also *colonization* purposes (Khlomova, 2010, p. 111-117). From the time of the arrival of Russians in these lands, exile was an important element of the Russian colonial policy (Ivanov, 2012: 59-66). As authors argue, 'the uniqueness of the situation lies in the fact that Siberian exile, from the moment of its inception, served two distinct purposes: on the one hand, it was used as a punitive measure to punish and isolate criminal elements expelled from the centre of the country; on the other hand, it served as a means of *populating new territories'* (Ivanov, Kuras & Kuras, 2023, p. 318-335).

So, the history of the settlement and development of 80% of Russian territories is inextricably linked with the exile of criminals and the *katorga*. As a result, exile to Siberia and Sakhalin Island and penal labour servitude *(the katorga)* occupied a special place in Russian history, impacting the Russian national culture and self-identity.

The exile originated in the 16th century as a means of removing individual opponents of the Grand Principality of Moscow and the sovereign, but over time it became permanent and widespread. Modern researchers cannot help but be struck by the scale of this punishment: in the 19th century alone, around one million people were exiled to Siberia and Sakhalin Island. At the same time, the reasons for the establishment of penal servitude on Sakhalin were mostly economic in nature (Korablin, 2005, p. 72-83; Chernyshov, 2023).

At all stages of the Russian Empire's history, there was not only a close connection between prisons, the state, and society. In addition, the *katorga* and exile played a significant role in preserving and strengthening the existing political system based *inter alia* on violence and criminal and prison subculture (Filatov, 2006, p. 132-139; Chernyshov, 2023). It is not surprising that by the end of the 19th century, the issue of Siberia and Sakhalin Island exile and the *katorga* had become one of the most pressing, affecting the interests of all social groups of Russian society. Exile and the *katorga* became the symbols of the Russian Empire.

However, in this paper, we argue that both contemporary *Russian criminal and prison subculture* and *Russian national culture* have origins in criminal and prison subculture shaped from the beginning of the colonial era of the Grand Principality of Moscow. As the authors argue, in the emerging prison informal hierarchy in the Grand Principality of Moscow, 'each prisoner had his place. *The strong* had access to all basic necessities, while the *weak* were satisfied with the bare minimum' (Zverev, 2022, p. 103-108).

Even early Siberian places of detention confirm the very fact of the emergence of a stable prison subculture developed within the Moscovian criminal and penal policy, where the latter served the military, colonial, and industrial needs. Accordingly, the vast all-Russian network of places of exile, prisons, and penal colonies affected a huge number of the population of the Russian Empire, leading to the adaptation of prison language and traditions. At the same time, a strong informal prisoner hierarchy was formed, which did not disappear after 1917.

The issue of managing the Russian exile and the *katorga* should also be considered in the context of the general theme of *colonial administration of giant territories*. From the beginning of the Moscovian and later Russian imperial colonial history, huge territories and distances, a significant isolation from the metropolis, and a lack of adequate funding for prisons – all these and other factors made the prison service itself an extremely unpopular place to work, and the prisons themselves were as *dysfunctional* as possible in terms of formal objectives of punishment. These factors contributed to the formation of *informal organisations* of criminals and prisoners, which acquired the characteristics of a real force within the prison system and the society in Tsarist Russia and later in the Soviet Union.

Corruption and violence were the permanent features of the Russian exile and prison, serving to establish informal prisoner hierarchies and corresponding prison castes. As Mikhail Gernet noted in his brilliant work on the history of the Russian prison, 'the prisoners are crammed together on the bunks so tightly that they can hardly move; some lie at the feet of others, on the edge of the bunks, while the rest lie on the floor and under the bunks. One can imagine how stuffy it is here, especially in bad weather, when everyone arrives wet, in their dirty shirts! On top of that, at night they put in the so-called *'parasha',* i.e., a simple wooden tub that serves as the necessary nighttime furniture. The stench from this *'parasha'* is unbearable. In general, a philanthropist would find here a complete absence of the idea of humanity,

both philosophical and Christian; but the unfortunate, as if competing in cruelty, try to show the most repulsive side of their humanity. They are, so to speak, hardened here in all vices' (Gernet, 1960, p. 449).

The Soviet prison system has always been associated with informal prison castes and the high-level inter-prisoner violence that was put at the heart of such an informal social stratification. It is a well-known principle common to all post-Soviet prisons that the *'untouchables'* are not allowed to sit at the same tables as the representatives of higher castes, which was stressed by the Committee for the Prevention of Torture in numerous reports resulting from the visits to the post-Soviet states (CPT, 2018; CPT, 2021; CPT, 2025a; CPT, 2025b). However, we presume that the origins of such an informal caste system can be found in *formal* regulations that even in the Tsarist Russia prisoners of different status were required to sit at different tables in the common dining room. Noble prisoners were provided with plates, dishes and tin spoons, while other prisoners ate from wooden bowls with wooden spoons: 'The legislator saw fit to develop menus for breakfast, lunch, and dinner for prisoners of different classes, providing white bread only to those of noble birth and ordering that they be given *kvass* to more elite drinks, while the others were given water' (Gernet, 1960, p. 42).

In pre-Revolutionary Russia, the customs and traditions of the criminal world were already clearly identified. They described the structure of interpersonal relationships inherent among convicts, the hierarchy of subordination in this environment, identified informal rules of conduct among convicts and demonstrated their significance using specific examples. Their content consists of descriptions of the lives and daily routines of people rejected by society. In real life, individuals rejected by society create their own *closed world*, thereby rejecting those who rejected them, their rules of life and values (Kuzmin, 2018, p. 9-16).

Social development in the Russian Empire has always had an obvious *criminal atmosphere*, caused by vast territories populated by criminal and semi-criminal elements, support for these elements by the population, the State's inability to organise the normal functioning of prisons across large areas and, as a result, the giant migration of criminal elements – both as a result of release and regular escapes of prisoners. As a result, a specific phenomenon of *vagrancy* developed in Russia, which also served to spread criminal and prison rules and norms among the general population. As Dostoevsky mentioned, 'even the convicts did not frighten me – they were Russian people, *my brothers* in misfortune, and I had the good fortune to find generosity even in the soul of a robber, precisely because I could understand him' (Dostoevsky, 1985, p. 40).

Therefore, we argue that the Russian criminal and prison subculture, hatched from the egg of the Russian colonial policy (the Tsarist period) and industrialisation (the Soviet period), became a *culture in its own right*, acquiring the status of one of the main elements of Russian civilisational development for many centuries to come.

At the same time, having shed the prefix *'sub',* the Russian criminal and prison culture became a valuable instrument of *cultural import* from the Russian Federation, performing purely *political* tasks of a neocolonial nature.

Ushkuyniki: an Old Russian 'Isla Tortuga' – the Preconditions of the Russian Professional Criminal World

In our view, the research on the Russian criminal world and criminal subculture should be started with the phenomenon of the *'Ushkuyniki'.*

An *ushkuy* – a sailing and rowing vessel used in northern Russian territories in the 11th-15th centuries. According to one version, the name is associated with the Oskui River, a right tributary of the Volkhov River near Novgorod, where the Novgorodians built boats they called *'oskuy'* or *'ushkuy'.* According to another version, '*ushkuy'* comes from the Old Vepsian word *'uškoi',* meaning a small boat.

The Ushkuyniki were Novgorod river members of the organised criminal groups who ventured far north and east, thereby contributing to the expansion of Novgorod's pirate trade and colonies. They were free men who belonged to an *armed militia* equipped by Novgorod merchants and noblemen, rode on *ushkuis* and engaged in trade and raids on the Volga and Kama rivers. The expeditions of the *Ushkuyniki* were beneficial to Grand Novgorod as a whole, as they undermined the economy of its trading competitors on the Volga (Ilyushin, 2020; Musikhin, 2014; Seleznev, 2011; Vasilenko, 2014). In addition, in the 14th-15th centuries, the *Ushkuyniki* were active on the northern rivers as members of the armed squads of the Novgorod City army (in the Novgorod and Vyatka lands). In their leisure time, the *Ushkuyniki* went on trading expeditions to the Volga and Kama rivers.

The movement of the *Ushkuyniki* can partly be compared to the Crusades, although a comparison with the Vikings and their raids is more appropriate here. Often, the majority of them were young, wealthy people, children of noble Novgorodians. Not only Slavic tribes participated in Ushkuyniki, but also Finno-Ugric tribes (Korela, Vesh, Izhora).

Some authors argue that the *Ushkuyniki* were classical pirates and bandits, who are considered to be the forefathers of organised crime (Zotov, 2023). As usual, the authors stress that 'the Ushkuyniki were bandits, free people who made a living by robbery' (Nazarov, 2019). Some note that 'after the strengthening of the Moscow princes and the decline of Novgorod, the Novgorod tax collectors in Western Siberia found themselves out of work and degenerated into bandits, who did not care whom they robbed: natives or their people' (Shumilov, 2017).

Indeed, we believe that neither the criminal nature of the *Ushkuyniki* phenomenon nor the organised nature of such criminal activity can be denied. As researchers rightly point out, '*the Ushkuyniki* were a phenomenon that emerged as a result of the activities of organised armed groups in the Novgorod Republic in the 12th-15th centuries, consisting of the urban lower classes, officially not connected with its authorities, but defended its interests in conflicts with neighbouring lands' (Sysolina, 2023).

However, the movement of the *Ushkuyniki* was not a classic piracy. Indeed, initially the *Ushkuyniki* pursued the goal of exploring and colonising lands and, on the orders of the local nobility, established fortified settlements. However, this did not exclude the element of professional and organised crime at the heart of this movement and the formation of a corresponding type of *criminal subculture*.

Given Novgorod's proximity and active contacts with the Norman and Pomeranian lands and tribes, many inhabitants of the region may have exhibited pirate-like behaviour, which was quite common at the time. Unlimited freedom, weak restraints of the democratic government of Novgorod, and constant struggle between political groups led to the emergence of a *special class* with a *specific semi-criminal subculture* in Novgorod that did not belong to any community. The authorities sought to get rid of such undisciplined elements of the population and entrusted them with expanding the borders of Novgorod; landowners and industrialists used them as defenders of their interests against foreign expansion; most often, the *Ushkuyniki* conducted their campaigns at their own risk.

In fact, *the Ushkuyniki* became the first social group who created a *political unity* around organised and professional criminal activity, significantly influencing even European politics. In 1187, the *Ushkuyniki* attacked the old capital of Sweden, the city of Sigtuna. This criminal landing party completely plundered the city, which lost its capital status forever after this attack. In 1318, the *Ushkuyniki* looted the city of Abo (now Turku), the capital of Finland, where they seized five years' worth of church taxes collected for the Vatican. *The Ushkuyniki* also carried out daring raids on the Golden Horde's territories (Naumov, 2017). In 1360, the *Ushkuyniki* sailed down the Volga River and carried out their first raids on the Horde city of Zhukotin on the Kama River.

In total, between the end of the 12th century and the end of the 15th century, the *Ushkuyniki* carried out almost a hundred different criminal actions. The criminal component was mixed with military and political elements. Moreover, the phenomenal nature of the situation lay in the fact that the river pirates created their own pirate state, the *Vyatka Republic*, which existed in the 14th and 15th centuries (Khalyavin, 2016).

Finally, in 1489, the Moscow prince Ivan III marched on Vyatka with an army of 64,000. By order of Ivan III, the capital of the pirate state, the city of Khlynov, was treated as Novgorod had been previously: most of the inhabitants were deported to Moscow, replaced by residents of the capital, and the main 'rebels' were executed.

After the destruction of the free pirate state of Vyatka, the descendants of the *Ushkuyniki* went east. Some settled in the Vyatka and Perm forests, while others went to the Don and Volga rivers. The authors argue that the Volga Cossacks adopted the traditions of the *Ushkuyniki*. Modern linguists find similarities in the dialects of the Don Cossacks, Novgorodians and residents of the Vyatka region. Similar features of the folk culture of the Don Cossacks, Novgorodians and Vyatka residents can also be found. However, through the prism of our research, we cannot fail to note the social and cultural influence of the *pirate society* and the *pirate state* on the further criminalisation of Russian society and, most importantly, on the *promotion of criminal behaviour* as socially acceptable, tolerable and even desirable.

The Grand Principality of Moscow

Back in the days of *the Grand Principality of Moscow*, the wheel of criminal repression was set in motion, becoming the main instrument of social control. Unlimited repression against the population was

the basis of the rule in the Principality. As Isaac Massa wrote, 'after ascending the throne, Ivan Vasilyevich ruled quite well for several years, but then, learning *what the Muscovites were like*, he began to brutally subdue and tyrannise them' (Massa, 1936, p. 20). Of course, the people responded to the authorities in kind. Accordingly, mutual repression and cruelty could not but increase within the framework of mutual approval by both sides of the power relations, which were based on the approval of criminal behaviour as socially acceptable and useful.

The evolution of crime, including professional and organised crime, was also extremely negatively affected by the severity of punitive measures. On the one hand, people were driven to commit crimes by poverty and the arbitrariness of the political elites, and on the other hand, by the impossibility of returning to their former lives, since voluntary surrender to the authorities (as well as detention by them) entailed severe punishments and torture.

The formation of a centralised Russian State was linked to the strengthening of internal economic ties and accelerated by the need for aggressive order of the new State. In September 1497, a significant event took place in the Grand Principality of Moscow that influenced the history of Muscovy's statehood. Grand Duke Ivan III Vasilyevich adopted the *Sudebnik of 1497 (the 1497 Conciliar Code).*

The introduction of the concept of a *'well-known bringing trouble man' (vedomyy likhoi chelovek)* into the *1497 Conciliar Code* became significant for the development of organised crime in Russia and further criminalisation of the population. Its essence can be compared to the modern definition of a professional repeat offender (Zotov, 2023). In Paragraph 37 of the *1497 Conciliar Code*, it was stated that 'if someone is accused of theft, robbery, murder, malicious slander with intent to extort money, or any other criminal offence, and it turns out that the person against whom the charges have been brought is indeed a *'well-known bringing trouble man'*, then the governor shall order that this person (the criminal) be put to death, and the amount of the claim shall be recovered from his property. And whatever remains of the property shall be taken by the governor and his deputy. And if the criminal has no property with which to pay the amount of the claim, then the governor shall not hand over the criminal to the plaintiff (as compensation) for his losses but shall order him to be put to death' (The Peter Stolypin Museum of Russian Reforms, 2025).

In the 17th century, the prison system of the Moscovian State was a set of places of detention, including prisons in city fortresses and strongholds, at provincial government offices, in palace estates, earthen or underground dungeons, and monastery prisons. The word *'prison' (*old Turkic *'Türmä'* – 'dungeon', Tatar *'törmä',* Altay *'türmö',* Kyrgyz *'türm')* was first mentioned in Moscow chronicles when describing events in the territory that later became the Moscow State, under the date of July 24, 1471 (Sumin, 2021). Prison *'yards'* became the largest places of detention in the 16th-17th centuries and were located in the large cities of that time (Moscow, Novgorod, Yaroslavl, Astrakhan).

In Moscow, prisons also existed under separate *'Orders',* such as the *Robbery Order* or the *Zemsky Order*, whose powers and responsibilities included fighting crime. *The 1649 Conciliar Code* contained an article stating that all prisons in Moscow were to be built by the *Robbery Order* at the expense of the state treasury, and that it was also responsible for recruiting prison guards (Lushin, 2018).

In large cities in the 17th century, prisons were located near and under the constant supervision of state authorities. *The 1649 Conciliar Code* stipulated the establishment of city prisons with a staff of prison officers. It also stated that prisons should be secure and strong to prevent escapes. City prisons usually consisted of three log cabins. One cabin *('razboina izba')* held men, another held women, and the third was intended for those awaiting trial (Lushin, 2018).

Many documents contain information about prisoners being confined in earthen prisons, which were located near some fortresses and later near the outskirts of the Grand Principality of Moscow, and were intended for the strict confinement of prisoners who were most dangerous to the authorities.

Large *'palace'* villages in the 17th century usually had their prisons.

Monastery prisons were special places of detention, where members of noble families were most often held. At the same time, clergymen who had offended the church authorities were also placed in monastery dungeons. Noble prisoners were sometimes held in solitary confinement in *'stone bags'* in the deep cellars of some male monasteries, while disgraced female prisoners from *boyar* families were typically forcibly sent to female monasteries.

During the 17th century, the scope of imprisonment expanded: it was used as both a primary and additional punishment; moreover, imprisonment replaced bail. However, a common feature of the 17th century was that the guilty party was typically sentenced to exile instead of imprisonment (Maistrenko, 2020).

Before this, in the middle of the 16th century, exile was enshrined in law. Article 7 of the *1550 Conciliar Code* mentions exile in the form of *'disgrace' (to be in disfavour with the sovereign, 'byti ot gosudarya v opale').* In the provincial charters of the 16th century, exile was frequently referred to as *'expulsion from the land' (vybyti von iz zemli) or 'expulsion from the district' («vyslati iz volosti von)* (Mikhailova, & Yatsova, 2024).

In the second half of the 16th century, exile to a specific place became common practice. For example, according to a Decree of 1582, exile was imposed '*to the cities of Sevsk, Kursk and others*', and was already primarily a political measure. Until the *1649 Conciliar Code*, exile was mainly used against disgraced *boyars* and not particularly dangerous political criminals.

Information about the use of exile can be found in the memoirs of Dutch traveller Isaac Mass in his book about the Muscovite State during the reign of Boris Godunov and the Time of Troubles: 'Foremost, in November 1600, Tsar Boris Godunov ordered several scoundrels to accuse Fyodor Nikitich, who had given him the crown, and his brothers…, along with their wives, children, and relatives... Fedor Nikitich was captured and exiled 300 miles from Moscow to a monastery near Kholmogory, where he took monastic vows. Mikhail and Ivan were sent into an unfortunate exile: one to the Volga, the other to the Tatar border; Alexander was ordered to be taken to Beloozero, together with his young son Fyodor' (Massa, 1936).

Exile to outlying towns as a criminal punishment was first mentioned in an additional Decree to Ivan the Terrible's Code, published on March 12, 1582. Until then, Russian law did not recognise exile in the literal sense of the word, i.e. forced resettlement to a specific location.

According to the 1649 Conciliar Code, exile was not an independent punishment but served as an *additional* one. In particular, it accompanied commercial punishment (Chapter X, Articles 129, 198; chap. XIX, art. 13, etc.), mutilation (chap. XXI, art. 911, 16; chap. XXV, art. 16), imprisonment (chap. XXI, art. 9–11, 16), and dismissal from office (chap. X, art. 129)

For example, Article 198 of Chapter X stated: *'If anyone comes to someone's yard by force, in a gang and in conspiracy, with thieving intent, and commits murder against the person he comes to, or against his wife, or against his children, or against other people, then the one who commits such murder shall himself be put to death, and all his companions shall be flogged and exiled to wherever the sovereign directs'.*

However, the annexation of Siberia created the conditions for the widespread use of exile, which by the end of the 17th century had become the most common and widespread form of punishment (Margolis, 1996). As Petr Kropotkin argues, 'as soon as the Moscow tsars learned that their rebellious Cossacks had conquered a new region *'Beyond the Cliffs'* (the Urals), they began sending *crowds* of exiles there. The Moscow tsars ordered them to settle along the rivers and paths connecting the fortresses that had been built over the course of 70 years from the source of the Kama River to the Sea of Okhotsk. Chained in chains, the colonists had to begin a desperate struggle with the wild nature, where no one would settle voluntarily' (Kropotkin, 1906).

In the first half of the 17th century, Tobolsk City became the centre of concentration for exiles in Western Siberia. From here, they were sent to cities in the region, as well as to Lena via Yeniseysk City (Ivanov, 2014, p. 43).

In order to highlight the socio-historical preconditions for the formation of a criminal and prison subculture in Russia, it is necessary to take a brief tour into the history of the *enslavement of Russian peasants*.

Here, we can start with the rise to power of the famous *Romanov Dynasty* (1613-1762).

On December 6, 1590, Tsar Fyodor Ioann issued a Decree prohibiting peasants from transferring from one owner to another. Back in 1597, the term for searching for fugitive peasants was set at five years.

However, two fundamentally new circumstances appeared in the *Sobornoye Ulozheniye (the 1649 Conciliar Code).*

Firstly, an unlimited period for searching for fugitive peasants was announced. The noblemen now had the right to return the fugitive himself or even his descendants with all the property acquired during their escape, if they could prove that the peasant had fled from their estate.

Secondly, even a debt-free peasant lost the right to change his place of residence – he became *'permanent',* i.e. permanently attached to the estate where he was found during the census of the 1620s. In the event of his escape, the Code ordered that the formerly free person be forcibly returned with all his property and family.

The 1649 Conciliar Code contains several articles that bring free peasants closer to serfs. His farm was increasingly recognised as the property of the lord.

For example, the *1649 Conciliar Code* ordered that a peasant daughter who had run away to get married be returned to her owner along with her husband, and if the husband had children from his first wife, they were to be left with his landlord. This allowed for the separation of families and the separation of children from their parents.

In effect, the Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich's Decree brought about a *social and penal revolution*, depriving the majority of the country's population of the right to freedom of movement and control over themselves, their labour and their property. As a result of the total enslavement of the Russian population, increased tensions led to the flight of large numbers of people who had until recently been free to the South and East. As fugitives, they became *criminals* and formed their subculture, hierarchies, and language.

At the same time, against the backdrop of the formation of a new population in the eastern territories due to refugees, the Moscow state filled this social vacuum by exiling large numbers of criminals.

In the Code of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich, exile was imposed for various crimes (Filatov, 2008). The main contingent of exiles initially consisted of runaway peasants, deserters, beggars, vagrants, thieves, swindlers, robbers, bandits, counterfeiters, smugglers, murderers, blasphemers, participants in various protests, riots, and uprisings, as well as serfs exiled by landowners for immoral behaviour. What is important is that by 1645, during the first half-century after Siberia's annexation, approximately 1,500 people were sent beyond the Urals for imprisonment and exile. This figure is very impressive for the prison population of Russia at that time (Volynets, 2014). By 1662, more than 10% of the population of Siberia consisted of exiles (Margolis, 1996). According to the first census in Siberia (1662), exiles and convicts made up approximately 8,000 out of 70,000 people in this harsh region. In the following centuries, exile and hard labour were one of the sources of population growth in Siberia and the formation of the local peasantry (Korablin, 2017).

By deporting criminals (both political and criminal, in equal measure) to Siberia, the government solved two problems at once – punishment and colonization. Ultimately, exile played a significant economic role in the development of the Empire's outlying regions. It was no coincidence that Alexei Mikhailovich's Decrees clearly stipulated that criminals should not be executed but exiled to Siberia for life (Filatov, 2008). Moreover, in an effort to firmly establish control over new Siberian territories, the Moscow government sent *families* to the Tsar's farmland, as they settled there much better than single exiles (Ivanov, 2012).

In terms of the preconditions for Russian criminal subculture, it is important to emphasise a fundamentally important aspect that explains why, starting in the 16th century, professional and organised criminal activities by the Russian were extremely beneficial to the Grand Principality of Moscow and the Tsardom of Moscow. The fact is that in the 16th and 17th centuries, public institutions in the conquered lands were weak or non-existent. The State relied on professional criminals and semi-criminal social groups. At the same time, the inhabitants of these regions developed different identities, behavioural practices, and socialisation strategies.

Here, at first glance, the values of well-known Russian Cossacks may seem internally contradictory. Their commitment to a free life, self-government, the election of *atamans* and other officials, and the principle of constant change of power (the deprivation of this right by the Moscow government led to riots and uprisings) were entirely compatible with their identification as *'servants of the sovereign'*. After the conquest of Siberia, Yermak's cossacks (mostly professional criminals and adventurers) did not even attempt to create a new army or some kind of new quasi-state entity there, or to defend their freedom from the tsarist authorities. Instead, they sent an embassy to the Tsar with a request to accept the new land under his rule and to forgive them *'their past sins'* (Filippov, 2022).

In general, the main way for the Russian Cossacks to make money was to raid nearby areas and loot them to get rich (Zotov, 2023). This *triple identity of* the Russian Cossacks (as free people, as professional criminals, and as 'servants of the sovereign') can be explained by the sources of their prosperity. The Russian Cossacks had several sources of income – raiding merchant caravans, raiding neighbouring territories and robbing their inhabitants, and human trafficking, which was legitimised by the Russian Cossacks themselves as '*service to the sovereign'* and '*defence of the Orthodox faith'*; salt mining, fishing, the sale of horses, including stolen ones, as well as the sovereign's allowance.

As authors argue, in general, numerous Russian communities and settlements participated in the robberies and other organised criminal activities during this period (Zotov, 2023). This means that the goals of the community grew and evolved within what we now call *professional and organised crime*. Accordingly, even *criminal dynasties* were created, where children were raised according to criminal principles and within a criminal subculture, which in these circumstances acquired the status of a *local culture* without the prefix *'sub'*.

Moreover, when analysing the settlement of Siberia by *de facto* professional criminals, it is necessary to point out an important aspect of Russian colonial policy that had a direct impact on the spread of criminal subculture among the general population. As researchers note, exile to Siberia *'for guilt'* was not so widespread and therefore could not solve the problems of colonising a giant territory. The Moscow government then began to use a *'cleansing exile',* which meant that the state *'cleaned up'* well-established agricultural areas in the centre of the country and forcibly sent entire villages of peasants beyond the Urals, relocating them to new, uninhabited places 'forever' (Ivanov, Kuras, & Kuras, 2023; Lyutsidarskaya, 2006). Therefore, the arrival of large *patriarchal families*, built on the principle of a *centralised hierarchy*, into a criminal environment, also built on the principle of a *centralised hierarchy*, could not but contribute to the spread of criminal traditions among the hitherto non-criminal population.

Stepan Razin's Uprising

As of the 1660s, the population of the Tsardom of Russia stood at 11 million people. This was the period after the Time of Troubles when the country was gradually recovering. However, the historical development was not stable.

The Peasant War of 1667-1671 (the uprising of Stepan Razin) had a significant impact on the further evolution of a criminal and prison subculture in Russia. In 1670, the Peasant War reached its peak. According to contemporary estimates, during the second stage alone, when the Peasant War expanded, around 200,000 people took part.

Stepan Razin's uprising was suppressed with unprecedented cruelty, even for that time. Historians claim that the total number of rebels killed exceeded 11,000 people. Mass executions of rebels swept through large cities in southern Russia. According to foreign merchants, the entire Volga region was covered with gallows (Mitsyk, 1986; Chistyakova, & Solovyov, 1988).

However, many rebels were punished not to death. Accordingly, being already *'dangerous criminals',* they brought more social preconditions in shaping the criminal culture in Russia, considering the number of general populations.

Peter I: Industrialisation and Katorga

The origins of the *katorga* in Russia date back to the era of Peter the Great's reforms. It was under Peter I that exile began to be viewed not only as a protective measure based on the forcible removal of criminal and political offenders, but also as an unlimited source of cheap labour that could and should be actively exploited both on the periphery and in the centre of the Tsardom.

The Katorga began to be used as a form of criminal punishment in the late 17th century. The first group of prisoners was sent to the *katorga* after the suppression of the *Streltsy Uprising*. For example, in accordance with the Decree *'On the Punishment of the Rebel and Traitor, the Commander of the Streltsy Regiment, Fyodor Shaklovityy, and His Accomplices, with Death',* some of his accomplices were sentenced to corporal punishment and exile to Siberian cities for life for their treacherous attempt on the life of Tsar Peter and his mother, Tsarina Natalia (September 11, 1689) (Uporov, 2023). The reason for its emergence was the socio-economic development of Russia in the late 17th and early 18th centuries: economic growth required an influx of labour, but this task was limited by the conditions of serfdom (Belousova, 2018)

Here, it should be noted the main idea crucially important for this period: it was Peter I who organically integrated new punishments into the State's penal system. Moreover, in 1688, the idea of using slave labour for the Russian rowing fleet arose (Ivanov, Kuras, & Kuras, 2023; Reinhardt, 2024; Uporov, 2024; Margolis, 1996).

An analysis of the penal landscape of Russia in the early 18th century is impossible without considering the political and military ambitions of Peter I, the Northern War, and the mass forced industrialisation through the recruitment of former peasants, who were forced to become semi-skilled workers, semi-serfs. For a long time, Russia had to buy metal from Sweden, but the Northern War forced Russia to establish its iron production for the needs of the Army and the Navy, and for this, technical knowledge and skills were urgently needed (Hudson, 1986).

In the 18th century, the *katorga* became widespread and was widely used in the construction of the Northern capital and numerous Russian fortresses. Under Peter I, hard labour came to mean *slave labour*, which was extremely difficult and exhausting. Hard prison labour was officially included in the penal system and quickly became one of the most widespread punishments in Russia (Belousova, 2018: 5). It replaced medieval intimidation and revenge driving criminals out of prison (Ruban, 2020;

Fumm, & Yakovleva, 2017). The Russian State started the *Katorga Epoch*, which became the symbol of the Russian Eastern colonial policy. As Ivanov argues, 'the 18th century marked the beginning of the St. Petersburg period. Its distinctive feature was the emergence of a fundamentally new type of punishment: hard labour. It was precisely with hard labour that the Russian state began to associate the long-term development and settlement of Siberia' (Ivanov, 2014, p. 44).

Under Peter I, the first *transit prison* for convicts being sent to Siberia was built. Its construction is known from a decree issued to the commanders of the *Verkhotursk Ostrog* (now in the Sverdlovsk Region) on September 1, 1697. However, the majority of criminal were not sent to Siberia, but rather to build canals and row galleys in the Baltic Sea. Exile to Siberia was imposed in exceptional cases, giving way to exile to other places (Azov, Rogervik, Orenburg, Riga, Revel, Taganrog, and St. Petersburg).

In the context of further colonization, the peasants and freedom-loving Ukrainian Cossacks were replaced by exiles convicted of criminal offences. It was at this time that the practice of sending fugitives to Siberia began in order to populate the region as quickly as possible. By Decree of July 15, 1729, vagrants began to be sent to Siberia from the centre of the country. The exile received another boost with a Decree of 1754, which replaced the death penalty for criminals with their removal beyond the Ural Mountains. All these measures led to the fact that among the exiles there began to prevail people who were far from free peasant labour. Accordingly, among the exiles, there began to prevail people deepened in *criminal subculture.*

Further economic development of the 18th century and the settlement of Siberia required the attraction of new populations. Therefore, in the 18th century, penalties such as exile and hard labour were significantly increased. Exile could be combined with hard labour for 10-15 years or be imposed without it or be permanent (Ruban, 2020).

Therefore, the final legal formalisation of the system of exile for big masses of population, together with their families, directly to the Siberian farmlands took place during the reign of Peter I. This formalised the *colonization objectives* of exile (Filatov, 2008)

At the same, in the period of the reign of the Peter I, even more Russian peasants who fled the oppression of landowners became *vagrants* and joined criminal gangs of thieves and robbers, shaping the basis of the future Russian professional criminal world with its specific subculture and values shared not only by them but also general population.

The Demidov Family

The history of the prison system of the Russian Empire, closely intertwined with violence, colonization and industrialisation, cannot be imagined without mentioning the *Demidov merchant dynasty*.

The founder of the Demidovs merchant dynasty, Nikita Demidov (1656-1725) was a blacksmith in Tula City. During the reign of Peter I, he rose rapidly through the ranks, receiving vast tracts of land in the Urals for the construction of metallurgical plants. In 1696, Nikita Demidov built a pig iron smelter near Tula. By decree of Peter I in 1702, he was given the state-owned Nevyansk plant in the Urals. Demidov brought craftsmen from Tula and Moscow there and founded new enterprises. In 1726, when the industrial empire was already ruled by Nikita Demidov's successor, his son Akinfiy, Demidovs received a hereditary noble title. Akinfiy Demidov (1678-1745) owned 25 factories at the end of his life, including iron smelting, ironworks and copper works in the Urals, Altai and in the centre of the country. In the mid-18th century, the Demidov brothers owned 33 factories, land, and over 13,000 male serfs. The total number of workers employed by Akinfiy Demidov reached 38,000 men.

In total, from the end of the 17th century and throughout the 18th century, the Demidov merchant dynasty built 55 factories, including 40 in the Urals. In the middle of the 18th century, the Demidov factories produced more than 40% of the Russian Empire's pig iron, and by the beginning of the 19th century, about a quarter.

In the context of our study, it should be noted that the Ural region at that time was just beginning to be actively populated, and the police forces were minimal. Local supervisory bodies, established in county towns in March-April 1722, rarely had more than 10 people on their staff. Therefore, until the middle of the 18th century, supervision of compliance with the articles of the *1649 Sobornoye Ulozheniye* in villages, settlements, and factory towns was carried out on an itinerant basis. However, collecting complaints and reviewing them on the spot took a lot of time, and prosecutors were unable to reach some remote villages and factories.

It is indisputable that the Demidovs merchant dynasty created more than just an industrial empire. The first two generations of the Demidovs merchant dynasty produced outstanding figures of the early industrialisation era. During Peter's reforms, the once simple blacksmiths became the richest landowners

in the Urals. It acquired the characteristics of a *quasi-state entity*, but was unable to compete with the central government, which sought to keep the Demidov industrial empire under maximum control (Bobrov, 2023).

By using the labour of *de facto* slaves rather than expensive hired workers, the Demidovs were able to further reduce the cost of their products. But at what price was this success achieved? It is known that all orders were carried out unquestionably at the Demidov factories, and those who disobeyed were severely punished. Workers and members of their families were brutally beaten, shackled and thrown into prison for any production defects (Hudson, 1986).

Considering the impact of the Demidovs' industrial empire in the context of prison policy, it should be mentioned that business owners created their *private prisons* and implemented *private prison policies*. The Demidovs built numerous stone factory prisons, which replaced the earthen punishment pits. It can be presumed that private industrial prison policy inevitably had consequences for workers in terms of acquiring the skills not only of slave labourers but also of *prisoners*, putting bricks into the basics of the future Russian criminal and prison culture.

Akinfiy Demidov's attitude towards 'working people' and 'registered peasants' was ruthless, which later made the Demidovs' name a symbol of cruelty in the treatment of factory workers, and their enterprises – the embodiment of cruel factory labour. Historical documents originating directly from Akinfiy Demidov, i.e., instructions to factory managers, business letters and orders, characterise the cruelty of this man. He demanded that guilty craftsmen be punished *'without any leniency'* and *'without omission, with chains and broken bones'* (Gavlin and Shevyrin, 1998, p. 35).

The First Half of the 18th Century

In the first half of the 18th century, the social and cultural landscape in Russia was presented with already developed rules for admission to the gangs, stability in thieves' communities, mutual assistance among criminals, a developed criminal jargon, and the use of criminal nicknames. In other words, all characteristics of professional criminal activity were obviously visible.

Between 1719 and 1742, more than 500,000 peasants were listed as wanted. According to scholars' estimates, an average of over 200,000 serfs fled from landowners each year. It is also known that peasants fled in earlier years (Gurov, 1990). It is evident that, having already become criminals, they rallied around informal leaders and formed informal laws and rules, developing the Russian criminal and prison subculture that would later begin to influence the general culture and supplant it. At the same time, the 'laws' of the criminal world were still weak.

By the beginning of the 18th century, there were about 25,000 prisoners and exiles in Siberia. They accounted for about 10% of the Russian population east of the Urals. Criminal exile to Siberia at that time was indefinite, and months or even years of relocation beyond the Urals was a difficult and, for many, impossible task to survive (Volynets, 2014).

In the Russian Empire, the main principle was *'imprisonment as a military service, military service as an imprisonment'* (Vainerman, 2006). Not surprisingly, as Michail Gernet notes in his brilliant research on the history of the Russian prison system, military service for peasants and all unprivileged classes was in itself a kind of *penal servitude*, but the prisons become even harsher penal servitude. Such militarisation of the crime-control industry was entirely in line with the reactionary direction of Nicholas I's domestic policy, with his desire to turn Russia into one huge barrack' (Gernet, 1960, p. 49-51).

The Second Half of the 18th Century

From 1761 to 1782, about 60,000 people were exiled and imprisoned along the Siberian tract. Until the beginning of the 19th century, an average of just over 2,000 people were sent to Siberia each year (Volynets, 2014).

Mikhail Gernet emphasises how, during the second half of the 18th and early 19th centuries, the central government, pursuing purely *colonial goals*, had neither the strength nor the resources to provide the colonised territories with even the minimum administration necessary for classical state governance: 'The actual rulers of the places of detention were the prison warden, who was an officer, and guards who were retired disabled soldiers, while the detention centre was supervised by a guard. This composition in itself predetermined the actual disorder and arbitrariness that were inseparable from every place of imprisonment in Tsarist Russia' (Gernet, 1960, p. 38).

Such a state of things stimulated *further criminalisation of the society*.

The first mentions of criminals forming stable groups in the Irkutsk province, or as they were called back then, *'bandit gangs',* date back to the late 18th century (Sysoyev and Kavetsky, 2017).

According to the first chroniclers of provincial life, 'the surroundings of Irkutsk were unsafe. Bandits nested in the dark forests covering Verkholensk Mountain and its foothills, attacking travellers, robbing and killing them' (Kalashnikov, 1905). A few dozen miles from the city, there were three factories where convicts worked – two distilleries and one salt works. The factories were guarded by the Cossacks and military invalids. 'When the convicts got tired of working, they would calmly approach the invalids, take their guns and go wherever they pleased' (Kalashnikov, 1905). In this way, according to the writer, 'large gangs were formed, and their favourite place was the Verkholensk Mountain, overgrown with dense forest and not far from the city: two necessary conditions for banditry' (Kalashnikov, 1905).

For example, in February 1799, 12 exiles escaped from the Telminsk Factory, broke into the house of peasant Emelyan Bykov, killed him and slaughtered his entire family (Pezhemsky, 1911, p. 151)

The gang of former military officer Baratoev gained particular 'fame' at that time. During one of their raids, the bandits managed to even capture the town of Zhigansk (Andrievich, 1889: 215).

It is obvious that such widespread criminalisation of society could not but lead to a rise in organised and professional crime.

Yemelyan Pugachev's Uprising

An equally interesting and yet little-studied aspect of the influence on the formation of the Russian criminal and prison subculture is the uprising of Yemelyan Pugachev (1773-1775). A rebellion of the Yaik Cossacks escalated into a full-scale war between the Yaik Cossacks, peasants, and numerous nations of the Urals and Volga regions against the government of Empress Catherine II.

Firstly, it is necessary to point out the number of rebels gathered by Pugachev varied throughout the uprising: start of the uprising (17 September 1773) – about 70 people; growth in numbers (October 1773) – about 3,000 people; peak numbers (November 1773) – about 40,000 people; peak of the uprising (January 1774) – about 120,000 people; the end of the uprising (September 1774) – about 2,000 people.

The uprising was brutally suppressed by the government with great difficulty, and the punitive consequences for the population were not long in coming (Mikytyuk, 2017). There were mass executions, public corporal punishments, and mass confiscation of the property of those who took part in the uprising. However, the main point in the context of our study is that one of the consequences was the additional mass deportation of the population to remote areas of the Empire.

The First Half of 19th century

After the Napoleonic Wars, when construction of the easternmost section of the Siberian Road from Tomsk to Irkutsk was completed, the number of Siberian *'convoys'* increased sharply, reaching 8,000 per year during the reign of Emperor Nicholas I (Volynets, 2014).

In July 1822, Alexander I approved *'The Establishment for the Administration of the Siberian Provinces',* a document that included nine statutes, two of which were *'The Statute on Exiles'* and *'The Statute on Convoys in the Siberian Provinces'.* The Statutes became the first step in the legislative formalisation of penal labour, the systematisation of existing legal norms on penal labour and exile, and the introduction of new laws.

There were several types of exile in Russia.

In the *1822 Statute on Exiles,* exile was divided into two groups: exile to hard labour *(the katorga)* and exile to settlement.

At the same time, the *katorga* was classified as a special type of exile – a punishment that was more severe than exile to settlement but more humane than the death penalty.

The 1822 Statute on Exiles did not regulate the management of exiles in the places where they were exiled, nor did it define a mechanism for monitoring the work and living conditions of exiles. This created favourable conditions for 'creativity' and initiative at the local level, could lead to arbitrariness and abuse by local officials, a weakening of discipline or violence against exiles, and hindered the implementation of the tasks set by the legislature for the Russian penal colony system. Similarly, uncertainty in legal regulation, compounded by staff shortages and a lack of adequate funding, has led to the rapid development of subcultural norms and the establishment of informal hierarchies among prisoners.

The Second Half of the 19th Century

When discussing the essence and characteristics of Siberia as a vast territorial space, it is worth recalling the words of Petr Kropotkin, geographer, historian, philosopher, creator of anarchism and one

of the most influential theorists of anarchism. Concerning the role and the function of Siberia in the Russian colonial and penal policy, he said, 'Siberia, a land of exile, has always been perceived by Europeans as a *place of horror, a land of chains and whips*, where convicts are beaten to death by cruel officers and worked to death in mines. Undoubtedly, no one, whether Russian or foreign, has crossed the Ural Mountains and stopped at its watershed, at the border post, where on one side is written 'Europe' and on the other 'Asia,' without shuddering at the thought that they are entering a *land of weeping and wailing*. Many travellers have probably said to themselves that Dante's 'Hell' would be a more appropriate inscription for the border post of Siberia than these two words, which are supposed to divide the two parts of the world' (Kropotkin, 1906).

Sergei Maksimov, another Russian scholar who visited numerous Russian prisons and penal colonies in Siberia personally, wrote, *'There, ahead, is the very place where all the serious criminals exiled from Russia, all the murderers, robbers and thieves, come together'* (Maksimov, 1891, p. 69).

In the second half of the 19th century, exile to Siberia was still considered as a tool of the Russian colonial policy (Arkhipov and Shkabin, 2021). The liberal reforms of Tsar Alexander II resulted in an even more dramatic increase in the number of people deported to Siberia – 296,582 between 1862 and 1881, or about 15,000 per year. By this time, prison statistics allowed for an accurate calculation of the number of prisoners in Russia (Volynets, 2014).

Nikolai Yadrintsev, a well-known researcher of the Russian exile, presents the statistic on the use of exile in the Russian Empire:

- between 1823 and 1832, 98,725 people were exiled;
- between 1833 and 1842, 86,550 people were exiled;
- between 1843 and 1852, 69,764 people were exiled;
- between 1853 and 1862, 101,238 people were exiled;
- between 1863 and 1872, 146,380 people were exiled;
- between 1873 and 1882, 175,918 people were exiled;
- between 1883 and 1888, 106,326 people were exiled.

In total, for 1823–1888, 781,901 people were exiled.

The total number of people exiled to Siberia between 1807 and 1898 was 864,823.

According to data from the Main Prison Administration, between 1861 and 1898, 543,800 people were exiled to Siberia, including family members who voluntarily followed the exiles (Solovyova, 1983: 214-226).

On January 1, 1898, there were 309,265 exiles and 64,683 members of their families in Siberia. Exiles accounted for 5.4% of the total population of Siberia.

The exodus of exiles was followed by a government Decree in 1880 prohibiting those who had served their sentences from leaving and obliging them to build houses and engage in agriculture. The ban on leaving took effect, and the number of settlements on Sakhalin began to grow rapidly. Thus, over the course of 15 years (from 1879 to 1894), 79 new prison settlements appeared in Sakhalin (Korablin, 2005).

A complex of seven penal prisons designed to hold 1,444 prisoners was created and then expanded in the Trans-Baikal region in the first half of the 19th century and in 1889-1893. It was called the Nerchinsk Penal Colony and was centred in Gorno-Zerentuysk. It consisted of four first-class prisons: Akatuy, Alagachinsk, Gorno-Zerentuysk and Kadainsk, and three second-class prisons: Aleksandrovsk, Kutomarsk and Maltsevsk (Shilovsky, 2018).

In the last quarter of the 19th century, some changes took place in the prison system itself. Reformatories and workhouses, prisoner companies and debtors' prisons ceased to exist. Political prisons continued to function – the Peter and Paul Fortress and the Shlisselburg Fortress. In the 1870s, large prisons began to be built under central authority (i.e., under the authority of the Main Prison Administration) – *central prisons*. They were intended for the isolation of participants in the revolutionary movement. At the same time, the importance of *penal colonies* (Sakhalin Island, Yakutia) increased (Pertli, 2018).

Here, it is necessary to point out an important aspect of exile, which concerns the organisation of exile as a whole. Moreover, this aspect directly concerns both the formation of professional and organised crime in Russia and the subsequent formation of a criminal and prison subculture. In fact, the Tsarist government became a victim of its colonial policy, sending masses of people to Siberia and Sakhalin without creating any conditions for the accommodation of criminals or the adaptation of those who had already served their sentences. As a result, a huge number of criminals, taking advantage of the lack of adequate personnel, committed mass regular escapes, creating new sociocultural ties and spreading their subculture among the local population.

Not all exiles were integrated into the economic life of the region. A significant proportion of criminal offenders, not seeking a settled life in a new place, resisted forced labour. Some exiles, upon arriving at the district administration and receiving a residence permit, disappeared with it to an unknown location, joining the ranks of the so-called *'unknown absentees';* others simply did not reach their place of assignment: accompanied by peasants from the district to the village, they hid at the first opportunity; still others were released from the journey on the initiative of peasants who did not want exiles in their communities (Ivanov, 2014, p. 50).

Escapes became part of everyday life in Siberia.

For example, as of January 1, 1898, the following numbers of exiles were *'missing without leave': the* Yenisei Province – 11,556 (22.65%); the Irkutsk Province – 29,403 (40.95%); the Transbaikal region – 3,374 (23.44%); the Yakut region – 1,277 (24.66%); the Amur region – 484 (71.27%); the Primorsky region – 1,817 (85.82%) (Arkhipov, & Shkabin, 2021; Nefedovskaya, 2013).

These figures indicate that approximately half of all exiles were outside the control of the police and the prison service. Without any means of subsistence, they posed a permanent and significant threat to the local population, creating instability in many areas of the Empire. All Siberian governors reported periodically on the negative consequences of the disorderly exile to the government in their annual reports.

Consequently, tens of thousands of fugitives created in the country, primarily in its remote regions, a huge mass of *'passportless'* individuals with no fixed place of residence, forming a *Russian underground vagrant world,* a special social class. The phenomenon of *'vagrancy'* was particularly widespread in Siberia. The region was distinguished by 'a significant number of individuals brought to trial for concealing their rank and origin'.

An important factor that exacerbated the situation was that the exiled criminals already possessed profound knowledge and skills in many areas of criminal craft. Thus, due to the peculiarities of the harsh prison policy, conditions conducive to the formation of stable groups of professional criminals arose in a region with a minimal population density and virtually no industrial centres (Sysoyev and Kavetsky, 2017). The high concentration of professional criminals in certain areas, their support by the part of the local population, and the possibility of obtaining substantial material benefits from criminal activities have contributed to the formation of stable criminal groups. As Makhayanova and Gunzynov argue, the downside of exile was an increase in crime in the region. Those who remained in exile exacerbated the situation in the Transbaikal Region. There were constant threats of recidivism and the spread of criminal subculture in populated areas (Makhayanova, & Gunzynov, 2024).

Here, we can point at the really shocking statistics that additionally explain the situation in prisons and the community, especially in the aspect of the spreading of criminal and prison subculture in Russia.

In 1873, in the Yenisei Province, out of 1,545 registered crimes, 1,158 were murders, i.e. about 72% of the total number of detected illegal acts (Yadrintsev, 2012, p. 199).

A similar situation prevailed in the Irkutsk province and the Transbaikal Region, where, according to the estimates of old-timers, murders played a major role in all crimes committed (Yadrintsev, 2012. p. 199). At the same time, official data for 33 provinces of European Russia for 1874 showed that out of 81,963 registered crimes, only 3,173 were murders, i.e. about 3.8% (Sysoev, 2022).

In his memoirs, Sergei Maksimov wrote, 'we recall last year's event, the story of how, in these very fishing grounds, a *'beast'* escaped from some prison and, in one night, killed five people in different houses, including a mother and her two babies, out of love for someone else's blood, without any reason or cause' (Maksimov, 1891, p. 61).

Additionally, as Alexey Sysoev notes, the harmful practice of eliminating all witnesses to crimes led to the emergence of the phenomenon of *mass murders*. Entire families fell victim to the perpetrators. The criminals did not even spare children. Robberies involving the murder of several people, which were incidents of an extraordinary nature, began to occur in Siberian territories with frightening regularity. Even residents of the capital of Eastern Siberia, which had the largest police force, were not immune to such crimes (Sysoev, 2022). Moreover, the powerful and well-organised political police apparatus proved ineffective in countering the highly developed criminal environment. Unlike in the European part of the country, where law enforcement agencies were able to exercise relative control over criminal activity, here on the eastern fringes of the Empire, they suffered a complete collapse.

Even those who were exiled accidentally or intended to return to a law-abiding life after serving their sentences encountered a wall of obstacles that made it impossible to realise their intentions. Finding work, housing, and prospects in an impoverished society saturated with criminals and their relatives, where

communication between people was based on criminal values and prison slang, there was a little chance of breaking out of the vicious circle, which was also caused by the vast expanses and geographical distances to the metropolis.

The central government's intentions to create a system of institutions for social adaptation of former criminals were unsuccessful. As researchers emphasise, 'the difficulties in developing local welfare institutions for the poor in Siberia were also caused by the fact that the personal interests of wealthy citizens who were members of local government bodies did little to encourage their broad participation in solving the problems of the poorest sections of the population. The *'city fathers'* responsible for the social adaptation of former criminals, who were mainly elected from the merchant class, were rather inert in fulfilling their public duties, viewing elected office as an additional source of income. Their scandalous 'popularity', propensity for financial 'adventures', and inability to undertake broad public initiatives resulted in the inevitable disruption of the city budget and internal order' (Katzina, 2010).

A significant portion of the exiles lacked motivation not only for farming, but for any kind of work at all. The main occupation of the exiles became robbery, horse theft, and counterfeiting. This took on such proportions that neither the rural community nor the authorities could cope with the dominance of criminal elements, and the local population was forced to submit to their criminal dictatorship.

The Reign of Nicholas II

In the imperial Russian penal system, hard labour ranked second in severity after the death penalty. Moreover, even the latest edition of the 1909 Decree on Exiles provided for its serving '*in mines, factories, and plants in Siberia'*.

By the end of the 19th century, there were seven main types of detention facilities for civilians in the Russian Empire: prison castles (provincial, district, regional), correctional detention centres, penal labour colonies, transit prisons, detention centres, police detention centres, and educational and correctional institutions for minors. Excluding the last of these types of penitentiary institutions, which traditionally stood alone, let us consider the ratio of all the others (data for 1900–1905): penal labour colonies – 18; correctional detention centres – 36; prisons in capitals, provincial and regional cities – 98; district prisons – 626; detention centres – 714; special investigative prisons – 2; transit prisons – 4 (Stremukhov, 1905). Total (excluding stages and half-stages) – 1,498 places of detention. The prison population of the empire was consistently high, reaching 93,108 by January 1882 (Gernet, 1952, p. 6). The peak came during the first Russian revolution: in 1905, the average daily number of prisoners in Russia was estimated at 85,000, in 1906 it was 111,000, in 1907 – 138,000, and in 1908 – 170,000 (Myakotin, 1909, p. 79-99).

By the beginning of the 20th century, Siberia and Sakhalin Island (until 1905) had become the only places in the Russian Empire where exiles were sent.

In the 1910s, there was a penal colony with 700 places in Tobolsk City, and 70 miles from Irkutsk, there was the Alexandrovsk Central Prison for 1,500 prisoners (Shilovsky, 2018).

The persecution of participants in the 1905-1907 Revolution and the rise in criminal offences contributed to an increase in the number of people sentenced to *hard labour*. By the beginning of 1908, their number had reached 12,591, and by January 1909 – 20,936, and in 1912 – close to 32,000. Subsequently, the number of convicts stabilised at around 27,000, and with the outbreak of the World War I, it began to decline.

By 1913, there were about 12,000 exiles in Siberia, including 3,300 in the Alexandrovsk penal colony near Irkutsk, 700 in the Tobolsk penal colony, about 4,000 in the Nerchinsk penal colony, and 3,500 were working on the construction of the Amur Railway.

In total, there were 10,537 prisoners of this category beyond the Urals at the beginning of March 1915 (Shilovsky, 2018).

The World War I influenced deeply the further evolution of the prison sociocultural complex. Initially, the central government prioritised the War itself, but later attempts were made to curb growing discontent among the population due to economic problems caused by the war. The lack of adequate funding, material resources and delays in salary payments led to mass dismissals of prison staff by February 1917 (Konovalova, 2019, p. 162). Prisons began to evolve on their own, which inevitably affected both the state of the prison subculture and the degree of penetration of subcultural norms into society.

The End and the Beginning of the Great Russian Exile

With the construction of the Siberian Railway, exile lost its significance as a means of protecting the security of the European provinces of Russia.

In June 1900, an Imperial Decree abolished exile for most sentences, which accounted for 85% of convicts (Chernyshov, 2023).

In April 1917, the Provisional Government finally and irrevocably abolished exile to Siberia. However, Russian 'humanism' did not last long, and by 1921, exiles were once again being sent to Siberia (Chernyshov, 2023).

Like many social anachronisms, exile to Siberia was abolished in the Russian Empire not because of the State's great love for its citizens. It was simply because its historical time had clearly passed. Exile ceased to fulfil its main function – *'conservation in a natural prison'* (Chernyshov, 2023).

However, exile did not achieve either punitive or colonisation goals. From a historical retrospective, all possible measures for organising exile had been tried and proved unsuccessful.

Pre-Revolution Prison Subculture and Informal Prisoner Hierarchies

Starting in the 15th century, professional criminals in the Grand Principality of Moscow and later in the Tsardom of Russia formed themselves into a separate social group with its subculture and language. The first mentions of various fraudulent operations in Russia date back to the feudal period. Cheating and swindling, petty fraud *'at banquets',* 'bogus deals to the detriment of third parties', and the drawing up of forged documents are just a few examples of the types of fraud that flourished in the Moscow feudal state (Zarubina, 2023).

In the 18th century, the prison system of the Russian Empire was already represented by a developed informal prison hierarchy and a corresponding prison subculture. The latter grounded on centuries-old traditions of organised and professional crime among the population of the vast territories of the Grand Duchy of Moscow, the Moscow Tsardom and the Russian Empire, formed both within the framework of criminal quasi-states such as the *Vyatka Republic* and within the framework of the policy of total enslavement of the peasantry, which resulted in mass escapes of peasants from the authorities and the formation of a *new class of criminals*.

It is no coincidence that Sergei Maksimov, in his memoirs about visiting a Siberian penal colony, speaks of the detailed *'prison customs'* and *'prison science'* that had developed there (Maksimov, 1891: 74). In addition, Maximov directly and literally points to the existence of a *prison hierarchy* – precisely a *hierarchy* (Maksimov, 1891, p. 115).

In fact, the State itself contributed greatly to the creation of a permanent social group of professional criminals and prisoners in Russia, with the subsequent importation of their language, customs and rules into the society. A big part of this was the old tradition of just leaving prisoners to fend for themselves and not even giving them the bare minimum to help them fit into society: 'Prisoners, surrounded by material and moral filth, become cruel themselves and then feel bitter resentment towards those people and institutions that, having led them to crime, deprived them of their freedom. Making up their own rules, often ridiculous and rarely fair, they are strict and always original in their application of these rules' (Maksimov, 1891, p. 105).

The history of the prison system in Tsarist Russia in the second half of the 19th century tells us that prisoners were already divided into stable castes. Some occupied a dominant position, while others were subordinate. There were also categories of prisoners who, for one reason or another (betrayal, snitching, failure to fulfil obligations to other prisoners, etc.), were persecuted by the other convicts (Kutyakin, 2023).

As Sukhov and Tirskikh argue, by the beginning of the 20th century, a certain hierarchy of convicts had formed in places of imprisonment, mainly in penal colonies. It consisted of four castes of criminals: *'Ivany' (the Ivans), 'Khrapy' (the Snorers), 'Igroki' (the Gamblers)* and *'Shpana'* (Sukhov, & Tirskikh, 2009).

A reliable source on this issue is the book 'Katorga' by Russian writer Valentin Pikul, in which he describes the informal prison hierarchy on the penal colony of Sakhalin Island: 'Right from the prison door, the assault on the living quarters began because in prison, your place on the bunks determines your worth. *The 'Ivans'* took the best spots, surrounded by their henchmen *('podduvaly'),* who used their fists and feet to defend the sacred rights of their overlords from any attempts to overthrow them. After the *'Ivans',* the *'Snorers'* took over the bunks. They were not yet the *'Ivans',* but they imitated them, using force to take everything they wanted from the weak. Behind the *'Khrapy',* the *'Gloty'* sprawled out on the bunks. They maintained their authority through arrogance, but in case of danger, they blamed others. When the highest ranks of the criminal elite were satisfied with their position on the best bunks, far away from *'Praskovya Fedorovna' (the bucket that served as a toilet),* then, with fights, cursing, and swearing, all the remaining places were tightly packed, like herring in a barrel, with the *'Kuvyrkaly',* who did not have high ranks.

Finally, for the most timid, for all the unhappy and weak, the penal colony, with mock generosity, reserved places under the bunks' (Pikul, 2008).

So, the elite of the Russian prison world in the second half of the 19th century was the *'Ivans'.*

They got their nickname because, having no permanent place of residence (or hiding it when arrested) and evading registration, they were able to move around the country uncontrolled by the police. During the day, these professional criminals usually slept, and at night they 'worked' in cities and their surroundings, in the estates of lords and merchants, in the barns of rich men, and on the roads. When arrested and brought to criminal responsibility, *'vagrants',* having no identity documents, gave themselves fictitious names *(Ivan Ivanov)* and told the court that they did not remember or did not know their place of birth or relatives.

According to Doroshevich, they were something like a *'knightly order'.* They kept to themselves, stood up for each other, and were the absolute rulers of the penal colony; they had power over the life and death of others; they were legislators, judges, and executioners; they pronounced and carried out sentences, sometimes death sentences, which were always final (Doroshevich 2001). The unifying principle for the *'Ivans'* was that they came from the category of *'vagrants'* – the most professional part of the criminal world.

The 'Ivans' – the prison aristocracy – were kept in the central prison in a state of constant idleness. Day and night, card games flourished in their cells, in which they involved prisoners convicted of 'minor' offences *('shpana'),* forcing them to play not only for their daily rations, their government-issued clothing and shoes, stripping them naked, but also to lose money *'not yet stolen for their future freedom'.*

Having created an exceptional position for themselves in prison, the *'vagrants'* had a significant moral impact on other convicts. Their influence was particularly great on young, inexperienced prisoners who were new to prison life, whom they introduced to prison life and psychologically reconciled with their new situation. They provided competent and intelligible explanations for all questions concerning prison life. Their philosophy and rich life experience gained in prisons calmed and attracted people who found themselves in prison for the first time and experienced strong emotional turmoil and even despair. All these qualities, as well as the optimism of the 'vagabonds' in their views of the future, instilled a sense of confidence and calm in the newly arrived prisoners, inspiring respect for these people and a desire to emulate them (Kutyakin, 2023).

They played cards for real money and fake money, which was successfully and with remarkable skill printed in the prison itself. At the end of the 19th century, the prison 'factory' in the Alexandrovsk Central Prison produced three-ruble and five-ruble notes and even attempted to print 25-ruble credit notes. All these counterfeits were smuggled out of prison by guards. For a year and a half, the prison supplied the entire Irkutsk province with counterfeit money. The 'factory' was discovered accidentally, during a search conducted for entirely different reasons (Ivanov, Kuras and Kuras, 2025, p. 290-296).

The existence of strong interdependent ties with government structures led to a qualitative transformation of the criminal community. Individual criminal groups merged into powerful, well-organised syndicates. Having complete control over the territories of Eastern Siberia, criminal groups actively expanded their influence on other regions of the country. Crimes were committed by organised gangs with strong ties to Verkhneudinsk, Sretensk, Khabarovsk, Manchuria, Blagoveshchensk and other locations.

The authors point at the struggle between the *'Ivans'* and political prisoners. There were cases when criminal offenders were placed together with *'politicians'* in general cells, and their relations became tense (Krivorukov, 1928). The professional repeat offenders hated the political prisoners, who did not allow them to mock the *'Spana'* (Ivanov, Kuras, & Kuras, 2025, p. 290-296).

In his memoirs, Andrey Sobol also writes about the confrontation with the *'Ivans'* (Sobol 1925). As a political exile, he was brought from Irkutsk prison to the Aleksandrovsk Central Prison in 1906. The author was struck by the fact that the prison had been effectively taken over by criminals who lived in a separate cell and behaved, according to Sobol, like *'kings in exile'.* From their 'sixth cell, trials, and executions took place; with the tacit consent of the prison authorities, the *'Ivans'* took control of the kitchen and the distribution of work. In return, the administration was calm: the *'Ivans'* were responsible for order, punished the guilty, and monitored cleanliness and work'. But then a group of sailors arrived at the central prison – participants in the revolutionary uprisings on the Black Sea Fleet in 1905, and with their arrival, *'the old order began to crumble'.* But the *'Ivan's* did not want to give up their positions. The pretext for the brutal massacre was another binge by the *'Ivans',* who managed to smuggle vodka into the prison and grabbed all the prisoners' meat rations for a snack. They fought in the bathhouse, in the laundry room, in the corridor.

Three were killed, the rest were maimed. The guards hid... The 'revolution' won, but the *'Ivans'* cell remained, albeit with greatly reduced rights (Krivorukov, 1928, p. 89-95).

However, it would be naive to contrast political criminals with professional criminals. Many of the 'political' criminals had committed crimes of a general criminal nature before their imprisonment and hard labour. Most of them, even though they were 'political', lived according to the rules of the general informal prison hierarchy. Many 'political' prisoners committed crimes of a general criminal nature both during their imprisonment or exile and after their release.

The 'Khrapy' and the *'Gloty'* were another criminal caste. They tried to do everything by someone else's hands. Among the convicts, they were called because they contributed to quarrels between convicts, during which they took the side of the strongest in order to gain some advantage.

The 'Igroki' (the 'Gamblers') were a caste consisting of professional gamblers, often card cheats.

The prison community for 'vagrants' and other habitual or professional criminals was a *substitute family*, replacing their fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers. Only there could 'vagrants' and other professional criminals accept themselves as members of society. The famous tattoo *'I Will Not Forget My Mother',* which was very common in the mid-20th century among members of *'thieves'* communities, has no connection to the traditional family. It referred exclusively to the *'thieves' family'.*

It once again confirms that the highest social value for professional criminals who are members of the *'thieves' community'* and occupy a dominant position in it was their belonging to this community. The more a person was rejected by society, their relatives and loved ones, and their family, and the longer the prison sentence imposed on them by the court, the closer and dearer the prison community became to them.

After 1917, Soviet prisons were built on the principles of *self-government*, with the most authoritative prisoners being given control over the rest of the inmates. From the perspective of the prison administration, the traditional approach was to ensure that there were no emergencies, riots, protests, or unrest among prisoners, and the best way to achieve this was to delegate power to the prisoners themselves, which usually took the form of delegating power to the most influential and often dangerous prisoners. In exchange for external 'order' in the prison, informal prison leaders were provided the opportunity to create a *system of extortion* from the general prison population and impunity for the torture of any prisoner who challenged the existing order.

A similar situation continues to exist in all post-Soviet prisons, which is a constant focus of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture.

For example, following a visit to Moldova in 2018, the CPT emphasised that any attempts to remove informal prisoner structures are unlikely to lead to significant results as long as key prison management tasks are *'outsourced'* to prisoners, who are thus placed in a position of superiority over other prisoners and are effectively responsible for controlling life in prison (CPT, 2018).

Therefore, as an example, the CPT emphasised that it calls for 'an end to the practice of delegating powers to informal prisoner leaders and using them to maintain order among prisoners' and 'an end to the practice of involving prisoners in key administrative tasks of the prison staff (e.g. keeping individual records of prisoners)' (CPT, 2018).

However, it should be emphasised that this model of prison management was established long before the 1917 Revolution. As the authors argue, 'in prison, each cell had its head, who was responsible for looking after the interests of its inhabitants. In addition, a general head was appointed for all cells, with whom the cell heads communicated when necessary. The general head of the prison was in direct contact with the prison authorities, and this arrangement was one of the reasons for the relative order in the prison. On the other hand, the heads were responsible to the prison authorities for what happened in their cells, so all prisoners were obliged to obey them and follow their advice. As a rule, the elders were chosen from among experienced, intelligent, strong-willed *'vagrants'* who knew how to influence the 'gang', talk to them, and understand their needs. This state of affairs only reinforced their unquestionable authority among the inhabitants of the prison world' (Kutyakin, 2023, p. 389-397).

It was this model of prison management, based on the principle of delegating power to professional criminals in contrast to the formal objectives of the prison, that was spread throughout the Russian Empire, including its European part. And it was the model of prison management that took such deep root that it still functions today in all the states that were part of the Soviet Union.

At the end of the 19th century, the Russian researcher Sergei Maksimov provided a detailed description of this delegation of power and authority to professional criminals, which exists today in all post-Soviet prisons, creating conditions for the spread of violence and organised crime in prisons: 'Each prison

has its own immediate superior, a civil servant, the prison director. Each prison director is assigned an assistant, known as a prison guard. In addition, each prison brigade elects a foreman from among its members (one for every 40 prisoners). The foreman was also the steward, responsible for food, the assistant warden (sub-inspector), responsible for being a room warden and the fiscal officer. Thus, depending on the number of prisoners, there are 3, 4 or 5 elders in each prison. Above them is another senior elder, who in prison slang is called the 'general' (Maksimov, 1891, p. 76).

Today, all modern prisons in post-Soviet countries are characterised by a developed system of informal and illegal economic relations, based on the concept of *'the obshchak',* i.e. an informal common fund of prisoners, to which each prisoner must contribute a certain amount regularly. It is *'the obshchak'* that is the material and financial basis for the existence of organised crime in prisons, as pointed out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture in its General standard on countering informal prisoner hierarchies (2025).

Of course, throughout the history of prisons, extortion, and racketeering among prisoners has been a natural consequence of the functioning of total institutions. However, even in the 19th century, all prisons in the Russian Empire without any exception existed on the basic economic concept of *'the vlaznoe'* (from Russian *'vlazit'* – 'to get into') where *'the vlaznoe'* was 'the amount that every newcomer *(a 'shpan')* must pay to the prison community upon entering the prison. Peasants and all free men usually pay 3 rubles, settlers 50 kopecks, vagrants 3 kopecks. Those who have no money are obliged to 'work off' their debt to the *'shpan',* i.e. carry water, wash floors, take out the *'parasha'* (excrements and rubbish), etc' (Trakhtenberg, 1908, p. 14).

The CPT's General standard on informal prison hierarchies (2025) focuses special attention on the informal status of '*untouchables*' in contemporary post-Soviet countries, the very fact of being in which constitutes a form of ill-treatment. However, the memoirs of pre-Revolutionary authors provide grounds for asserting that a similar class had already been formed in the prison system of the Russian Empire at the end of the first half of the 19th century. Sergei Maksimov wrote about this: 'They rush to intimidate prisoners with all kinds of fears, to destroy their self-esteem and self-awareness, bringing them to the desired limit, usually placing them in the category of unskilled labourers, forcing them to take out the nightly rubbish, the so-called *'Paracha',* or to clean the toilets (which, as we know, is the duty of prisoners)' (Maksimov, 189, p. 99).

However, the informal prison hierarchy was based on extortion and physical violence, but *not sexual* violence, which was typical of the Soviet period.

Prison Subculture in Transition

The mass relocation of the most dangerous members of Russian society to the eastern outskirts of the Empire, in the absence of proper police and prison supervision, led to the emergence of a significant number of close-knit criminal groups. At the same time, a significant part of the *local population* had direct and immediate ties to the criminal world. 'Most of the residents of the district are exiles, descendants of exiles, and various scum of society, sent here as undesirable elements from European Russia,' reported the chief magistrate of the Nizhneudinsk district to the provincial authorities (Sysoyev, & Kavetsky, 2017).

A study of contemporary academic works indicates that the very environment, daily life and relationships between inmates in prisons in the Russian Empire are determined and shaped with unique 'concepts', 'customs', 'rules', and 'traditions'. The established order at that time, as we can see, gradually spilled over into the way of life of inmates in places of deprivation of liberty and into subsequent historical eras, including the modern existence of 'prisoners' in the 21st century.

The customs, traditions, and habits of the convict contingent developed against a backdrop of prolonged, constant and dangerous opposition from the prison administration. As a result of this confrontation, the temporary association of exiled convicts turned into an organised community, which established its self-government, its legislation, its economy, and developed into a structured, well-defined form with a unique social type (Kharmaev, 2024, p. 566-573).

As Nikolai Yadrintsev accurately observed, 'in this way, prisoners became friends, exchanged knowledge, and merged into a single, united mass of thoughts and feelings, developing a consciousness of complete unity among prisoners throughout the vast and expansive Russian land' (Yadrintsev, 2015).

Therefore, the prisoner community as an organised structure with self-government, its own 'legislation', stratification (division of the general mass of prisoners into certain 'classes'), governing bodies,

and economic levers in the form of a common 'pot', became a kind of precursor to the emergence of organised crime in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

Soviet Political Leaders, Organised Crime and Prison Subculture

In the context of this research, we cannot ignore an important aspect of the formation of the Soviet prison subculture, which later acquired the status of *national culture* without the prefix *'sub'*.

The point is that most of the first leaders of the Soviet state and officials at all levels of government had gone through the Tsarist penal system.

As a result, even as 'political' prisoners, they acquired the skills of prison life. They could not help but notice that many methods of prison management and self-government in prison could be successfully applied to the management of the Soviet state.

Moreover, it is not that many of them were just prisoners. It is that many of them were professional criminals before their imprisonment, having committed common crimes.

Perhaps the first person to mention in this context is Joseph Stalin, who gained fame and political influence among the Bolsheviks for his participation in the attack on June 13, 1907, in Tiflis (now Tbilisi) on a treasury carriage transporting money from the post office to the Tiflis branch of the State Bank. The attack was carried out by Bolsheviks led by Simon Ter-Petrosyan (Kamo). In 2012, the amount stolen was estimated at $5 million. The attack was organised by many Bolshevik leaders, including Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Maxim Litvinov, Leonid Krasin and others. Symbolically, Maxim Litvinov (born Meyer-Genoch Wallach) held the position of People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the USSR from 1930 to 1939.

Soviet Period: The Political and Ideological Origins of the Criminal Elite

The modern self-designations of *'thieves'* such as *'law-abiding', 'lawful thieves',* and *'thieves-in-law'* also originate from the pre-Revolutionary subculture of the *'vagrants'*.

The category of a *'vagrant-lawyer'* was popular among prisoners back in the 19th century. A *'vagrant-lawyer'* was well versed not only in the laws of the Russian Empire, but also in ways to circumvent them. He was equally skilled in the laws of the prison community, interpreting them and advising other prisoners on them. Sergey Maksimov wrote about '*thieves-in-law'* as the most experienced prisoners who can tell newcomers about the peculiarities of criminal proceedings in order to evade punishment or delay the investigation: 'Around '*thieves-in-law'*, the new prisoner quickly becomes what he is supposed to be, i.e. a [real] prisoner' (Maksimov, 1891, p. 99).

The thieves' category completely freed itself from political influence, believing that a thief should only steal and not interfere in the affairs of the State. Those who adhered to the thieves' rules of conduct were called *'thieves-in-law'*. It is quite difficult to determine with certainty when (in what year) the group emerged and why it came to be called *'thieves-in-law'*.

The modern understanding of *'thieves-in-law'* has fascinating political and historical roots, connected, oddly enough, with the Russian Imperial Army and its officers, where former White Army officers became the catalyst for the formation of the elite professional criminal class in the Soviet Union.

After the Civil War in Russia, most White officers emigrated, but many remained in the country and tried to continue fighting against Soviet power, albeit mostly in a clandestine form. However, they no longer had the material resources for any ideological struggle in society, and so a significant part of the defeated White Guard regiments turned into ordinary gangs that robbed and killed until the mid-1920s. Former officers of the Russian Imperial Army began to live by the laws of the criminal world and proved themselves to be cruel organisers, but at the same time 'ideological' criminals.

Many of the former White Guards were not physically destroyed, but were placed in Soviet prisons and concentration camps, where they were usually kept separate from other prisoners. Former White officers differed from most prisoners in their high level of education, discipline and undisguised anti-Soviet ideology. They sought to become leaders in the prison and camp environment, which they naturally treated with contempt for the 'proletarian origins' of the latter. The former White Guards considered themselves superior to others and demonstrated their superiority over other prisoners, forming a corresponding hierarchy – both in prisons and in society.

In Russian criminal subculture, the word *'zhigan'* has ancient origins, where *'zhigans'* were called representatives of the lowest castes – *'prison proletariat, pitiful beggars who were regularly humiliated by other prisoners'* (Trakhtenberg, 1908: 24). The verb *'zhiganut'* meant '*to hit someone'* (Popov 1912).

However, former White officers created a new caste and called themselves *'zhigans',* giving this term a new meaning, not a derogatory one as before, but that of the new ideological anti-Soviet leaders of the criminal world (Leonov et al, 2019).

Their main difference from other bandits was the *cruelty* with which they committed crimes. For their twisted and already utopian political ideas, the former White officers were ready to kill any opponents, which scared off other representatives of the criminal world.

Former tsarist officers established separate rules of life in Soviet concentration camps and prisons, according to which it was forbidden to: 1) work for the benefit of the Soviet Republic; 2) have an official family; 3) participate in any military actions for the benefit of the Soviet Republic and receive weapons from the Soviet Republic; 4) cooperating with the Soviet authorities as a witness or victim.

In the community, most often, the *'zhigans'* collected tribute from corrupt Soviet officials and Soviet entrepreneurs as long as entrepreneurial activity was permitted (the period of the so-called 'New Economic Policy'). Being brilliant organisers and highly educated, the *'zhigans'* became known for their talent in inciting criminal activity among vagrants, street kids and homeless children, but as a rule, they did not take direct part in the attacks.

However, over time, former vagrants and street children, who were gaining more and more criminal and prison experience, did not like this state of affairs. They grew up, became professional bandits and did not want to be subordinate to their ideological mentors, whose ideas they did not understand and did not accept from the very beginning. As a result, a caste of so-called *'urki'* was formed, many of whom later joined the group of *'thieves-in-law'.*

It is necessary to note that in old Russian criminal subculture, an '*urka'* is a bold thief, unlike an *'orenburka'* who is a petty and indecisive thief (Trakhtenberg, 1908, p. 61).

From the outset, *'thieves-in-law'* did not call themselves that, and they were given this name by law enforcement officers. The members of the caste called themselves 'thieves', 'brothers', 'vagabonds', and 'law-abiding people'.

The *'zhigans'* were ideologically unable to unite with other prisoners, even though they tried: they put forward the idea of equality among all members of the 'brotherhood', but *'urki'* and *'thieves'* were in no hurry to accept them.

The leadership conflict intensified. The lower circles of the criminal and prison hierarchy wanted to gain the upper hand over the *'zhigans'.* They supported their leaders, the 'thieves.' The latter differed from their opponents in their greater restraint; their crimes were not ideologically motivated, and the *'thieves'* were not as cruel as the *'zhigans'.*

The 'thieves' who came out of the *'urki'* introduced a rule not to admit criminals convicted of serious non-property crimes, such as sabotage, murder, and rape, which were often committed by the *'zhigans',* into their circles.

In the constant struggle for power, it became necessary to create a single set of rules that all prisoners could live by – the *'zhigans',* the old pre-Revolutionary *'thieves',* and the *'urki'.* A new 'law' of the criminal world was formed, according to which some of the most respected and authoritative criminals were given the right to call themselves 'thieves'. Only a man who had passed a probationary period could become a 'thief'. The applicant had to spend at least three years as a *'patsan'.* Then he had to go through the 'school' of the prison or camp and, on the recommendation of other 'thieves', could become one himself.

The 'zhigans' were left without work, their radicalism and 'ideology' were not liked by other prisoners. At the same time, the new *'thief'* world adopted the *zhigans'* 'concept': the requirement to completely renounce one's family and the creation of a family, personal property and participation in commercial activities. Most importantly, there was a strict ban on serving in the Red Army and a requirement not to take weapons from the Soviet authorities. Both the *'urki'* and subsequent generations of the *'thieves'* considered these rules to be reasonable and tried to adhere to them.

As propaganda against the *'zhigans',* the *'thieves'* introduced the slogan *'Do Not Live at the Expense of Your Brothers'.* It compromised former White Army officers, who often lived off the money of 'bums' from their circle and did not earn their living.

The Soviet authorities also contributed to the disappearance of the *'zhigan'* class. Realizing that former White officers occupied an important position in the criminal hierarchy and could oppose the Soviet regime, the authorities began to create the image of 'foreign bourgeois criminals', creating a confrontation between the *'socially close criminals'* and the *'socially distant criminals*'. Of two evils, they chose the lesser: convicted proletarians and lumpen-proletarians were more 'respected' by the authorities than

former tsarist officers. For this reason, *'thieves'* and other castes tried to remove the former White officers from the community.

Thus, in the early 1930s, *'thieves-in-law'* emerged as a result of such complex social processes in the professional criminal environment.

Prison Language as an Indicator of the Transformation

One of the reasons for the stability of the criminal world, which is common to all post-Soviet countries, is linked to the single language that serves as a cementitious mortar for the post-Soviet prison subculture.

For further characterisation of the importance of prison slang, we must turn to Sergei Dovlatov: 'One of the most amazing phenomena [of camp life] is *language*. The language of an experienced camp inmate replaces other camp adornments. Namely, hairstyle, foreign clothing, shoes, ties, and glasses. Moreover, it replaces money, social status, awards, and regalia. A well-delivered speech is often the only weapon of an experienced camp inmate. It is their only lever of social influence. It is the unshakeable and stable foundation of their reputation. Refined speech in the camp is a weapon on the same scale as physical strength. A good storyteller in the forest is much more than a good writer in Moscow. Camp language cannot be faked. Its main condition is authenticity' (Dovlatov, 1991, p. 66-67).

In Russia, from the beginning this language was known as *'Blatnaya Muzyka' or 'Muzyka' ('the Music'),* or '*Fenya'*. Today, this phenomenon is mostly famous as '*Blatnoi Yazyk' (professional criminal language).*

There is no consensus among scholars about when the jargon of Russian criminals first appeared. Some authors argue that the jargon and conventional script of criminals originated from the conventional symbols used by peddlers of small goods, whose words were found in 17th-century manuscripts.

One of the most well-grounded versions of the origins of the *Fenya* language is concerned with the word *'ofenya'* and so called the *Ofenya language*.

The Ofenya language was the most famous and influential argot (specialised secret dialect) in Russia.

This language was invented, as its name suggests, by the *Ofens*, travelling merchants who moved from one Russian city to another with boxes of goods. They could have books, icons, clothes, jewellery, cheap prints, anything. It was the *Ofenya dialect* that became the basis for modern thieves' slang.

The history of the *Ofens* began in the 15th century. *The Ofen* trade originated in the area between Vladimir City and Nizhny Novgorod City, where there were entire villages of icon painters. Icons were the main goods sold by the first *Ofens*. A century later, wandering merchants began to consider themselves a separate secret society in Moscovia; they adopted the lifestyle of travelling merchants and craftsmen, and from pilgrims they acquired literary wisdom and Greek words. They called themselves the *Ofens*, which, most likely with some distortion, means '*Athenians*.'

Couldn't icons be bought in an icon shop? Yes, but only officially authorised ones. And from the middle of the 16th century there was a religious schism in Russia, and in addition to the 'official' Orthodox Christians, there appeared the *Old Believers*, or schismatics. *The Old Believers* had their rituals and icons; the official church considered them heretics and persecuted them at various times with varying degrees of severity. So, for openly selling Old Believer icons, one could instantly end up in prison. That is why one of the largest and most profitable 'black markets' in Russian history emerged in this area.

This market was supplied by icon painters. And there was a lot of money involved. Firstly, the *Old Believers* were willing to pay serious money for icons. In addition, the schismatic communities often lived in remote areas, far from the authorities. Secondly, by interacting with the schismatics, the icon painters could exchange or buy ancient icons, which were then resold to collectors at many times of their original price. There was much to be concerned about and much to hide from both the public and the police.

So, these trends contributed to the formation of a new language that later became a criminal language.

For example, the word '*khaza'* in the prison slang of the southern Russian provinces meant a house, flat, room, or corner occupied 'at large' by an influential 'criminal'. But this word comes from the *Ofen* word *'khaza', 'khaz', 'khas'.*

Others link the emergence of jargonisms to the appearance of the Volga bandits where this river had been seen by Russian people as a *terra incognita* for all free-minded people and the place of escape from the tyranny and cruelty of Moscovian princes. The emergence of a secret criminal language dates back to an earlier period, when society in Russia was divided into classes and, as a result, crime began to appear and grow. The development of jargon was spontaneous and dictated by a kind of necessity, in connection with which the secret language of the thieves' organisation developed along with the criminals themselves.

As far as foreign sources are concerned, the first information about the existence of a special language called *'Otvernitsa',* which was used among rebellious Cossacks led by Ivan Bolotnikov, was recorded in the notes of Dutchman Isaac Massa, who visited Russia in 1601-1635 (Massa, 1936). His contemporary, the Englishman Richard James, also mentions *Otvernitsa* but nothing is known about this slang except its name.

Therefore, an analysis of the jargon allows us to conclude that the criminal professional language of certain categories of criminals, mainly thieves, was finally established in Russia in the first half of the 18th century.

In general, it can be said that the constituent elements of '*Blatnaya Muzyka'* largely provide us with either common international 'roots' or at least an international, universal way of associating meanings of words, with all the metaphors, allegories, etc (Trakhtenberg, 1908: XIV).

The Russian criminal-prison *argo* borrowed many words from many other languages:

– **from German:**

'*fraier'* – a general term for a victim; a fashionably dressed person; a person who is not involved in crime; an inexperienced and naive person; a potential victim of professional criminals; someone who pretends to be someone of a higher social status than they actually are (from German 'der Freier' – free, single, unmarried);

'*guten morgen'* – a morning theft;

'*shpana'* – a petty criminal (from German '*der Span'* – sliver);

'*shpanka'* – thieves, vagrants, the prison population, a derogatory nickname for prisoners (from German 'der Span' – sliver);

'*shnif'* – a burglary (from old German 'der Schniffer' – a thief; also, from German 'schnappen' – to snap, to grab, to seize); also, from German 'schnippen' – to flick, to click);

'*shnifer'* – a safe cracker or a thieve who steal from uninhabited premises by breaking walls and ceilings (from old German 'der Schniffer' – a thief; also, from German 'schnappen' – to snap, to grab, to seize); also, from German 'schnippen' – to flick, to click);

'*home shnifer'* – a local thief (from old German 'der Schniffer' – a thief; from German 'schnappen' – to snap, to grab, to seize); also, from German 'schnippen' – to flick, to click);

'*shniftit* – to steal through broken shop windows, windows (from old German 'der Schniffer' – a thief; also, from German 'schnappen' – to snap, to grab, to seize); also, from German 'schnippen' – to flick, to click);

'*abver'* – an investigation department of the prison (from German 'Abwehr');

'shvarts-vais' – a blank passport form (from German 'schwarz' – black, 'weiß' – white);

'shpilit' – to play (from German 'spielen' – to play);

'blat' – any crime irrespective to its nature (from German 'das Blatt' – 'a sheet of paper', with a meaning 'an open letter' accompanying the prisoner, in which the crime committed by him is recorded);

'vara' – smuggling (from German 'die Ware' – goods, products);

'zeks' – an exclamation replacing German *'sechs' in* southern and western prisons, representing a synonym for danger;

– **from French:**

'*mariage'* – to lure;

– **from English:**

'*shop'* – a shoplifter;

– **from Hungarian:**

'*eiger* '(prison) – *Egri vár* (the castle in Hungary);

'haza' – a house, a flat, a dwelling (from Hungarian 'ház' – house, 'haza' – mother country or fatherland; also, from the Ofenian);

– **from Yiddish:**

'shekel' – a suitcase;

'tsatsa' – jewellery, a woman, a girl, an unapproachable woman.

As far as the impact of German is concerned, it is reasonable to mention the Soviet movie (1988) *'Proshchaj, Shpana Zamoskvoretskaya' ('Farewell, the Guys from Zamoskvoretsk District').* Zamoskvoretsk is a historical district in Moscow located on the opposite side of the Kremlin. Accordingly, the title of the movie reflects the final scene, when the main character of the movie is arrested by the police and he shouts to his friends, *'Farewell, the shpana from Zamoskvoretsk'.*

However, the most striking example of the influence of German on Russian criminal and prison slang is the television series *'The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed',* which tells the story of the fight against organised and professional crime in the Soviet Union after World War II.

In the film, an undercover police officer tells the leader of a gang that one of their members has been arrested and is in custody. The gang leader utters a phrase that became iconic for the entire Soviet and post-Soviet culture: 'I told him that pubs and women would lead him to the *tsugunder*'. In this context, *'tsugunder'* means *'big trouble'.* However, the origin of this word is more important.

The word *'tsugunder'* in contemporary Russian has several meanings, mainly related to punishment, imprisonment, or trouble. It meant a place of imprisonment or simply trouble that a person could get into.

The word comes from the German *'zu hundert',* meaning '*to a hundred blows'*, and was used as a command for punishment by flogging. Over time, it came to mean the place where this punishment takes place, i.e., prison. In addition to a place of confinement, *'tsugunder'* can mean the punishment or execution itself, especially in expressions such as 'take to the tsugunder'. In a figurative sense, *'tsugunder'* can mean trouble or misfortune that a person may encounter. For example, the expression *'to bring to tsugunder'* means to cause trouble or to prove something. In modern slang, the word *'tsugunder'* is most often used to mean 'prison' or 'imprisonment'.

The study of *'Blatnaya Muzyka'* provides an invaluable opportunity to go beyond the simplistic approach that links the origins of contemporary Russian (post-Soviet) subculture directly to the Soviet prison system. In this context, one of the best examples is probably the so-called *'obshchak',* which is at the heart of modern informal prisoner hierarchies and corresponding prison violence, and which is the focus of the Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT, 2018; CPT, 2020; CPT, 2025). As an example, we can mention the CPT Report on Georgia, where the CPT emphasised that 'prisoners confirmed the existence of an informal hierarchy and the collection (or rather extortion) of money (from prisoners, but more often from their families) to an illegal fund for prisoners (*obshchak*)' (CPT, 2021; CPT 2025).

An analysis of the language used by professional criminals and prisoners in the pre-Revolutionary Russian Empire allows us to draw many important conclusions.

As Boduen-de-Kurtine noted in his foreword to Trakhtenberg's well-known book on this subject, 'the unity of '*Blatnaya Muzika*' is determined by the fact that its bearers are people who constitute a separate class, a separate estate' (Trakhtenberg, 1908, XII).

Therefore, even from this perspective, one can critically view the Soviet prison subculture and the corresponding hierarchies of professional criminals as a concept that was supposedly born only in Soviet times.

Moreover, an analysis of pre-Revolutionary sources indicates the extent to which the social group of professional criminals in pre-Revolutionary Russia experienced sociocultural exchange within the framework of the colonial and imperialist policies of the Russian Empire, becoming an additional 'melting pot' which the central government subjected peoples who had been conquered or were under the control of the tsarist government to assimilation. As Boduen-de-Kurtine noted, 'in purely tribal and linguistic terms, '*Blatnaya Muzika*' reflects both general Russian characteristics and the characteristics of the dialects from which its speakers originate. Thanks to the diverse tribal composition of the Russian state, all kinds of people are also involved in Russian '*Blatnaya Muzyka'.* 'Foreigners' and 'foreign-speakers' also leave their mark on this unique product of linguistic creativity and reproduction' (Trakhtenberg, 1908, XIII).

However, perhaps the most important thing is how much modern Russian is saturated with words that have their roots in Russian criminal subculture or were preserved in criminal subculture and later revived in modern Russian. Of course, such words have lost their original meaning, but nevertheless, it is impossible to imagine modern Russian without them.

For example, the word *'barakho'* comes from the Old Slavic and dialectal word *'boroshen',* which meant 'travel items' or 'treasure'. Etymologically, the word is related to 'bor' in the sense of 'movable property' and the root 'ber', which means 'to carry'. Thus, *'barakho'* literally means 'movable property' or 'hand-held treasure'. However, in the Russian criminal and prison subculture, this word meant any item that had a certain value and could be used instead of money when playing cards in prison. Today, the Russian language cannot be imagined without this word, and it was the criminal and prison subculture that, in the course of its development, 'preserved' this word for further spread in modern Russian, giving it the meaning of 'useless thing' or 'poor-quality thing'.

The word *'blatnoy'* originally meant 'criminal' or 'characteristic of a criminal'. In modern Russian, this word, being extremely widespread, means 'privileged' or 'indicating the superiority of the social status'

of a certain person (a person has a 'blat', a 'blatnoy' person, etc.). Even the 2025 CPT Standard mentions the word *'blatnye'* for describing the contemporary informal prisoner hierarchies (CPT, 2025).

The noun *'borzoy'* in the Russian criminal and prison subculture meant an agent of the investigative police. In modern Russian, however, the word *'borzoy'* means a rude, cynical or, in certain circumstances, courageous person who acts passionately, unlike most people in similar circumstances.

The verb *'zanachivat'* in Russian criminal subculture meant 'to hide something on oneself (in clothing, in the mouth, in the hair, etc.)'. The modern Russian language cannot be imagined without this word in principle. It is necessary to recall the classic Soviet *'zanachka'* – part of a man's salary that he hid from his wife to have fun with his friends.

The noun *'kanai'* meant a cry uttered by an accomplice standing on the sidelines when danger approached. However, in the course of its development, the noun became a verb, which is also very common in modern Russian and means a rude order to leave a certain place and go in a certain direction.

The word *'khaltura'* in prison subculture meant theft committed in the flat where the deceased person was staying (the doors of such premises were usually open during the funeral), and the word *'khalturshchik'* meant a thief who specialised in theft at funerals. Modern Russian language is also unthinkable without the word *'khaltura',* which means things of low quality. Accordingly, '*khalturshchik'* means a person who creates products of low quality.

However, one of the most striking examples of the influence of pre-revolutionary Russian prison subculture on post-Soviet culture is probably the word *'loh',* which was widely used long before the 1917 revolution throughout Russia, especially among convicts and prisoners. This word is mentioned by the well-known researcher of Russian penal servitude, Sergei Maksimov, in his book about penal servitude and exile in Russia in 1891.

The origin of the word *'loh'* is associated with the language of the *Ofens*. In common slang, *'loh'* means a simple-minded peasant, of little intelligence and naive. In the language of professional criminals, *'loh'* means a victim. In any case, the meaning of the word *'loh'* is associated with at least negative irony, bordering on a derogatory attitude (an undeveloped person, a simpleton, a victim of criminals, an amateur). There is a well-known proverb from the criminal world: *'Lohs are not mammoths; they will not die out'.*

However, what is more important is that in Russia, Ukraine, and other post-Soviet countries, the word *'loh'* is still widely used, both among young people and the older generation. A '*loh'* could be a foolish person who acts senselessly and recklessly; a person who is unable to organise their life and, despite making every effort, achieves uncertain results or nothing at all.

On the other hand, in Ukraine, among young people, the word *'loh'* is considered partially outdated, and we believe that this was facilitated by the cultural rift between Russia and Ukraine, which began in 1991, intensified significantly in 2014, and came to an end in 2022. Nevertheless, the word, which is mainly used in criminal slang, is still widely used even in Ukraine, despite the factors mentioned above. Moreover, in Russia itself, it is commonly used by the entire population to describe a naive person, which once again proves the influence of prison subculture on Russian national culture.

Prison and Criminal Songs as an Element of Russian Sociocultural Reality

Numerous sources, including folk songs composed by convicts and prisoners since the late 17th century, point to the colonial nature of Russian penal policy. For example, in a prison song from the Siberian city of Tobolsk entitled *'Why Was I Born, Boy?',* the following lines can be found: '*I was sentenced to exile in cruel Siberia, where a monument was erected in honour of Yermak for the conquest of Siberia'* (Songs of the Hard Labour Penal Colony, 2012, p. 22). This actually points to the violent colonization of Siberia and other eastern Russian territories.

In general, the main idea behind the portrayal of Russian society as a carceral society since the 17th century is the song *'Steppe, My Beloved'* from Kutarbinka Prison near Tobolsk: *'I was born a vagabond, and a vagabond I will die. I couldn't settle down in Russia; I value my freedom above all else'* (Songs of the Hard Labour Penal Colony, 2012, p. 23).

In *'Kandalny Marsh' (The Shackles March)* from Tobolsk penal colony, one can find a reference to the word *'shpana',* which were mentioned earlier '*Ivans'* (Songs of the Hard Labour Penal Colony, 2012, p. 25). However, what is more interesting is that this song contains a reference to the existence of an informal prison hierarchy, at the top of which were the '*the Ivans who do not remember their lineage*,' or simply *'the Ivans'* (Songs of the Hard Labour Penal Colony, 2012, p. 25).

In the mentioned above *'Kandalnyy Marsh' (The Shackles Marsh)* from Tobolsk penal colony, one can find a reference to the word *'Duh' (a spirit),* which meant 'the convoy and all the authorities in general' *Ivans'* (Songs of the Hard Labour Penal Colony, 2012, p. 25). Here, it should be noted a very fascinating detail.

Russian prisons, as instruments of aggressive Russian colonial policy, have always been based on the *militarisation* of both staff and prisoners. And this prison song contains a very interesting example of how much prison influenced the Soviet army, which at the end of the Soviet Union's existence acquired a completely negative connotation due to the phenomenon of '*Dedovschina',* i.e., an informal hierarchy among soldiers based on length of service and personal characteristics. In fact, both the prison and the army were largely built and run on the same principles.

The hierarchy was as follows: a soldier who had served less than a year was called a *'spirit'.* This was the most humiliated and mistreated caste, which had to carry out all the orders of the senior soldiers (often humiliating and meaningless). After serving for a year, a *'spirit'* became a *'scoop'* – this was the middle class between *'spirits'* and *'grandfathers'.* Those who had served for a year and a half and had six months left before discharge became *'grandfathers'.* The *'spirits'* had to do all the dirty work in the barracks and carry out any orders from the *'grandfathers'* (including those that were clearly against the rules); those who tried to resist this system in any way were beaten and humiliated, even to the point of being 'lowered' in the prison sense of the word.

So, here we see how a purely pre-Soviet prison *'spirit'* was transferred to the Soviet Army, although the meaning of the word changed.

Finally, the increase in the prison population in Russia due to the participants of Stepan Razin's uprising was reflected in folk prison songs, which later became simply 'folk songs' (Songs of the Hard Labour Penal Colony, 2012, p. 32).

For example, the song *'Ne ryabina z berezoi' ('Not a Rowan Tree with a Birch')* is not just a reflection of the Governmental repression after Stepan Razin's uprising. This song is an important historical source on the conditions of prisons at that time, which, because of limited material resources, the expansion of colonial policy and the lack of appropriate staff, looked more like earthen pits than stone buildings, where prisoners and exiles were held in inhumane conditions (Songs of the Hard Labour Penal Colony, 2012, p. 32). The same can be found in another song: 'Our nimble feet are shackled. At the gate stand fierce guards, fierce guards – brave soldiers. There is no way out for us, good fellows, no escape from this strong prison. Oh, threatening clouds, break down the earthen prison!' (Songs of the Hard Labour Penal Colony, 2012, p. 113).

A no less interesting song is *'From Behind the Forest, the Dark Forest'* from the Zerentui Katorga, founded in 1825 near the Nerchinsk mining district's silver and lead mine. This song includes the lines, '*A long imprisonment and settlement in distant, unbaptised Siberia await me*'. It should be noted that this prison was established for the industrial needs of the empire with the accompanying use of slave labour only in 1825. At the heart of this song are the words '*unbaptised Siberia'*. However, it was not until 1702 that Peter I appointed his ardent supporter and admirer, Metropolitan Filaret (1650-1727), as Metropolitan of Siberia and Tobolsk. One of the main goals of his appointment was to spread the Orthodox faith not only in Siberia, but also in China. Therefore, a fascinating historical and cultural aspect can be identified: the folk songs in the prison, established in 1825, were based on folk art that had been formed a century earlier. Similarly, long before the creation of this prison in 1825, Russian colonial expansion was unthinkable without the use of imprisonment, which resulted in the formation of corresponding social relations and social groups that were completely immersed in imprisonment and, as a result, in prison subculture. Therefore, we can once again talk about the very significant influence of prisons and informal prison rules on Russian society (Songs of the Hard Labour Penal Colony, 2012, p. 34).

The well-known prison song *'Ne v Moskve, ne za Moskvoju' ('Neither in Moscow Nor Outside Moscow')* is highly significant for the aims of this study, as it contains the lines *'Our hearts will beat for our loved ones, they will cry tearfully for us. They are sending us to Siberia without asking us about it'* (Songs of the Hard Labour Penal Colony, 2012, p. 37).

The well-known Russian song of vagrant criminals, *'The Song of Yermak Timofeyevich*', further highlights the issue of aggressive Russian expansion to the East and the use of criminal elements for this purpose*: 'Let us go, brothers, with God's help, let us sail, brothers, up the Irtysh River. We will cross the steep mountains, brothers, and we will reach the kingdom of the infidels, and we will conquer the kingdom of Siberia'* (Songs of the Hard Labour Penal Colony, 2012, p. 44).

Among Russian prison songs, songs about escapees occupy a special place. They are based on the desire to break free from the cycle of prison subculture and gain real freedom: '*I'll get to Russia, and I'll pay back my old debts with interest'* (Songs of the Hard Labour Penal Colony, 2012: 54).

One of the most important songs in Russian folk music is '*Slavnoe more, svyashchennyj Baikal*' (*Glorious Sea, Sacred Baikal*), which every Russian knows by heart. In 1848, Dmitry Davydov, a caretaker at a district school, wrote a poem called *'Thoughts of a Fugitive on Lake Baikal',* which was dedicated to escapees from penal servitude. The poem later became one of the most famous Russian folk songs. Among other things, the song contains the lines, *'Shilka and Nerchinsk are no longer scary, and the mountain guard did not see me'.* It should be explained that, firstly, Shilka and Nerchinsk were part of the Karyi Penal Servitude Colony. Secondly, the *'mountain guards'* were guards at the corresponding penal mining enterprises, which had a dual status as both prisons and enterprises. However, the main conclusion is how much prisons were incorporated into the social relations of Russian society, if one of the most famous Russian folk songs is a song about prison (Songs of the Hard Labour Penal Colony, 2012, p. 65).

The song of professional criminals, *'The Rustling Forest',* reflects that we, vagabonds and criminals, are '*children of Yermak*'. In fact, it says that the conquest of Siberia by the Grand Principality of Moscow and the conquerors themselves, who were criminals and lumpenproletariat, were Russian conquistadors. Even this song indicates that the conquest was carried out with the participation of individuals who belonged to the social group of professional criminals of that time. Similarly, the conquered territories were governed according to principles characteristic of a criminal organisation with a corresponding subculture (Songs of the Hard Labour Penal Colony, 2012, p. 79).

The fact that the Russian penal servitude system was determined by the industrial interests of the state is also indicated by a penal song with the words '*They began to sort out the service – Someone should go to Bobrutsk [Prison] Factory, someone should go to the Nerchinsk [Prison] Factory'* (Songs of the Hard Labour Penal Colony, 2012, p. 154).

The active internalisation and aestheticization of prison folklore continued in the poetry of the Romantics. The opposition between freedom and bondage, which was central to prison folk songs, fit organically into the Romantic dualism: the social and existential lack of freedom of man in the real world, described in images of the confined space of prison, damp dungeons, bars, and shackles, is contrasted with the freedom of the open skies, the wild steppe, and the blue sea. The original focus on folk songs in the poems of Pushkin and Lermontov, both entitled *'The Prisoner',* became the basis for their rapid and widespread folklorisation (Trubitsyna, 2012, p. 59-64). By historical circumstance, the 'prison' song was finally established in Russian lyric poetry by the Decembrists' poets (Wilhelm Küchelbecker, Alexander Odoevsky, Vladimir Raevsky, Fyodor Glinka), who also added to the folk song repertoire.

Post-Soviet Informal Prisoner Hierarchies and the Standards of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture

In April 2024, an event took place that is of enormous significance both for our research and for the prevention of torture and other forms of ill-treatment in prisons.

The President of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) presented the General Report on the CPT's activities covering the year 2024 to the Ministers' Deputies of the Council of Europe *(hereafter – the Standard).* The Committee reiterated its call to European states to put an end to informal hierarchies (CPT, 2025).

Together with the General Report, the CPT published its Standard on informal prisoner hierarchy, a phenomenon based on a *caste system* inherited from the Tsarist Russia, and which continued to exist in nine countries that were formerly part of the Soviet Union. An informal system of prisoner *self-governance* persists to varying degrees, creating the informal prisoner hierarchy by dividing prisoners into categories or *castes* and the existence of an informal prisoner code.

Prisoners are usually divided into three categories: the top prisoners, the middle caste and the lowest caste or *'untouchables',* who are stigmatised, segregated and assigned menial jobs, and who are often subject to intimidation and violence. Prisoners belonging to the lowest caste can be considered to constitute inhuman or degrading treatment.

On the basis of its visits over the last 35 years and an in-depth analysis of the problem, the CPT makes specific recommendations to eradicate this phenomenon, in particular to protect vulnerable prisoners at risk of violence and exploitation, and to prevent the leaders of these hierarchies from continuing their criminal practices in prison. In this context, an essential measure is the phasing out of large dormitories, which

facilitate the development, maintenance, and cohesion of criminal organisation structures, increasing the risk of intimidation and violence. The CPT also recommends that the governments reform their criminal law policies and allocate adequate investment to prison and probation services (CPT, 2025).

In the context of our research, firstly, we should stress on the deep view by the CPT made in the context of the evolution of informal prison hierarchies in the Soviet prisons and, after the USSR collapse, in post-Soviet States. The value of the Standard, alongside the text in general and the recommendations made, is the reference to the *pre-Soviet* roots of the contemporary informal prisoner hierarchies established much before the 1917 Revolution.

As we noted above, analysing the role of the prisoner community and self-government among prisoners, both the pre-revolutionary Russian and Soviet prison systems were based on *prison collectivism*. Therefore, it seems critical that the Committee refers to this category in order to explain the origins of the contemporary Russian criminal and prison subculture: 'Soviet prisons were principally defined by *carceral collectivism* (the opposite of the carceral individualism of most western European countries), which has been described as consisting of three main elements: a system of penal governance based on mutual peer surveillance; the displacement of authority and governance to prisoners themselves; and communal living produced by the structuring of prison life through the housing of prisoners *en masse in* dormitories' (CPT, 2025).

Carceral collectivism has survived the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the nine States Parties to the ECPT still struggle with its legacy (including the informal prisoner hierarchy and its malignant influence) (CPT, 2025). Attempts to tackle the informal prisoner hierarchy have been pursued to varying degrees of success because countries have been sluggish in converting the Soviet prison infrastructure, with its multiple-occupancy dormitories, into modern cellular-type accommodation. Inadequate staffing numbers, resulting in a lack of appropriate staff presence and supervision inside prisoner accommodation areas, combined with poorly trained staff, have also enabled the informal prisoner hierarchy to persist (CPT, 2025).

The Standard explains the nature of the informal prison hierarchies in the post-Soviet states, focusing on the main idea that a traditional informal prisoner hierarchy in the national prison systems is founded on the *caste system*, with specific behavioural and communication rules. This caste system continues to be deeply embedded in almost every aspect of daily prison life in former Soviet countries, as every inmate must belong to one of the castes.

Belonging to a particular *caste* is determined by several factors, they include the crime committed, connections to organised crime (if any), a person's financial situation, previous imprisonment, debts, and conflicts in prison or outside, sexual orientation and experience before prison, or even the accidental violation of one of the many unwritten rules of the informal prisoner hierarchy.

Despite the differing names of the castes in each country, and the specific national features of informal prison hierarchies, the three main castes can be described as follows:

- informal leaders (the highest caste);
- ordinary prisoners (the middle caste, the most numerous); and
- untouchables, or outcasts (the lowest caste).

The informal leaders *('blatnye')* are the representatives of the highest caste in the informal prisoner hierarchy, the self-proclaimed *'guardians' of* the informal prisoner code, which is universal in a country's prisons and serves as a crucial regulatory element of prisoners' daily lives and their interactions.

According to the numerous prisoners interviewed by the CPT over the years, the main rules of the code are the prohibition of informing on other inmates or collaborating with prison staff, stealing from fellow prisoners, or interacting with the lowest caste prisoners, and the requirement to repay one's debts, support fellow inmates in need, defend one's honour, and keep one's word.

To ensure compliance with the informal prisoner hierarchy rules, there is often a so-called *'smotryashchiy' (top prisoner)* in every prison, with deputies in every block or unit of a prison. Their role is to ensure some semblance of respect for official internal prison rules, resolve conflict between inmates, act as intermediaries between the prison administration and prisoners, collect and manage the *common fund ('obshchak'),* and authorise punishment for violations of the informal prisoner hierarchy rules, which could be executed through the infliction of physical and/or sexual violence, extortion, psychological threats, lowering of a person's caste, or even murder.

'Smotryashchie' from different prisons are in constant contact with each other in order to share information, discuss various plans, or agree on a common position on some important issue such as, for example, prisoner participation in drug rehabilitation programmes.

The most populous middle caste consists of *regular prisoners ('muzhiki').* Unlike *'blatnye',* they are 'allowed' to work in prison but should not interfere in the affairs of the highest caste or expect to participate in making key decisions. They generally follow both official and informal rules, execute the orders of the highest caste, and try to avoid conflict either with other prisoners or the administration. This caste often lives in fear of being demoted to the lowest caste for a violation of the informal prisoner hierarchy rules (examples of such infractions include informing on another inmate, stealing, not paying one's debts, or even for shaking hands with, sharing a cigarette with, or drinking from the same mug as a lowest caste prisoner).

The lowest caste *('opuschennyje')* are the untouchables, both *literally* and *figuratively*. They are not allowed to have an opinion in relation to prison life and higher castes, to raise their voice, or to physically resist when being hit by an inmate from a higher caste. They have to stand guard outside a unit for hours every day and inform other inmates when they see prison staff approaching.

Untouchables have their own separate cells or dormitories, or their separate place in the dormitories and cells (usually next to the door or the toilet); they must use separate sanitary facilities, eat at separate tables at the canteen using marked tableware, exercise in a separate gym (or use a sports field only when it is not being used by the higher castes), and be the last to go to the prison shop. In some prisons, they are not allowed to use the kitchen in the unit, and in others, they have to use a separate cooker, separate fridge, and separate table.

All the maintenance work in common spaces, which is paid for by the prison administration, is usually carried out by the untouchables. The cleaning of the toilets is reserved for the lowest sub-category of the untouchables, usually those on remand for or convicted of a sexual offence.

The lowest caste often has its own *sub*-hierarchy: the self-styled 'cool' untouchables, the *'goats' ('kozly')* these are the informers who collaborate with the prison administration, and the *'roosters' ('petukhi'),* who are the lowest *sub*-category, which invariably includes prisoners remanded for or convicted of a sexual offence. In some countries, prisoners who refuse to live according to the informal prisoner hierarchy rules are perceived mostly by other inmates as having even lower status than the untouchables.

Reflection of the Post-Soviet Informal Prisoner Hierarchy in the Case Law of the European Court of Human Rights

In many post-Soviet jurisdictions, the issue of prison subculture and the existence of an informal prisoner hierarchy was a secret one, subject to an *unspoken taboo*. Post-Soviet states were very reluctant to acknowledge the existence of informal prison hierarchies in their prison systems. Recognising this fact would mean admitting that the States had lost part of their sovereignty and transferred some of their powers to manage prisons to organised criminal groups and professional criminals, as well as giving organised crime leaders a licence to extort from prisoners and their relatives in exchange for the outward appearance of order in the institution and the absence of complaints from prisoners.

However, this issue has been addressed thanks to the case law of the European Court of Human Rights, which has issued several decisions raising the issue of the existence of informal prison hierarchies in post-Soviet countries and the threats posed by such hierarchies. It is thanks to the practice of the ECtHR that national governments have *'found the courage'* to speak openly about the problem and, most importantly, to identify the problem and acknowledge that their prison systems are indeed under the control of organised crime.

Two judgments of the European Court of Human Rights – in the case of *S.P. and Others v. Russia* (no. 36463/11) of August 2, 2023 and in the case of *D. v. Latvia* (no. 76680/17) of January 11, 2024 – are particularly important when discussing the informal prisoner hierarchy in post-Soviet countries due to the significant findings of the Court regarding the threshold of severity triggering the application of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

In *S.P. and Others v. Russia*, Court notes that the case concerns essentially the applicants' allegations that they have been subjected to humiliating treatment and physical abuse as a result of being part of a group of *'outcast'* prisoners *(Para 81).*

The Court notes that the reports and academic research documenting the informal prison hierarchies within the Russian prison system, lends credence to applicants' description of the treatment they have personally suffered, and the abuse resulting from it. The applicants described being constantly segregated, both *socially* and *physically*, with separate beds, tables, cutlery with holes, different visiting times for the bathroom and television room, lower quality food, and restricted access to medicine. All the applicants, without exception, were forced to perform what was considered *'dirty work',* such as cleaning latrines, shower rooms and.

The segregation and the work they were forced to perform were enforced by physical violence and threats of violence, and even sexual violence in respect of some applicants *(Para 85).*

The accounts given by the applicants coincide with the descriptions of an informal prisoner hierarchy in academic papers, which likewise refer to the existence of *four broadly defined categories of prisoners* and the abuse and deprivations suffered by the group of *'outcast'* prisoners. It is significant that much of that research was conducted by current or former members of the prison staff or members of public monitoring commissions who have had the advantage of observing the situation of 'outcast' prisoners on the ground *(Para 86)*. The studies consistently documented the *hierarchy system* and the existence of *'outcast'* prisoners and the treatment to which they were subjected as a *widespread practice* in Russian prisons that had been in place for decades and had affected a considerable number of prisoners.

The Court stresses that, while distinct prisoner groupings and an *inmate code* based on informal norms are relatively *common features* of prison structures around the world, the informal hierarchy appears to be an *entrenched feature* of Russian prisons *(Para 87).* The Court notes that there were also sufficiently strong indications that the domestic authorities have been *aware* of the informal hierarchy *(Para 88).*

The Court notes that, 'while not all the applicants were subjected to physical violence in connection with their status as *'outcast'* prisoners, some of them did suffer physical attacks, while another one was forced to provide sexual services to a member of the *'criminal elite'*. Physical and sexual violence undisputedly constitute forms of ill-treatment' *(Para 91).*

A further indication of degrading treatment meted out to the *'outcast'* applicants manifested itself in the arbitrary restrictions and deprivations they endured in their daily life. Their separation from the other inmates took place on *physical* and *symbolic* levels. They were allotted the least comfortable places in the dormitory and canteen and prohibited from using any other areas under threat of punishment. Their access to prison resources, including showers and medical care, was limited or excluded; they could only use what was left over from the other groups of inmates. They were also forbidden to come into proximity with, let alone touch, other prisoners because of the risk that that person would become *'contaminated'*. In the Court's view, denial of human contact is a dehumanising practice that reinforces the idea that certain people are inferior and not worthy of equal treatment and respect. The resulting social isolation and marginalisation of the *'outcast'* applicants must have caused *serious psychological consequences (Para 93).*

The way in which work duties were assigned on the basis of status, with *'outcast'* applicants being forced to perform jobs and occupations deemed *'unclean'* or otherwise unacceptable for the other prisoners, further debased them and perpetuated their feelings of inferiority. Not only were the applicants forced to do menial types of work, such as cleaning latrines or shower cubicles, but they were also held in low esteem and looked down upon for doing the work considered to be inherently degrading *(Para 94).*

Moreover, the sense of inferiority and powerlessness among *'outcast'* applicants would have been intensified owing to the permanence of the stigma attached to their low status. An informal rule required them to reveal their status when transferred to another institution, and failing to do so could result in severe punishment. The enduring nature of the stigma removed any prospect of improvement for the *'outcast'* applicants, even after a lengthy period of detention *(Para 95).*

In the light of the above, the Court finds that the applicants' stigmatisation and physical and social segregation, coupled with their assignment to menial labour and denial of basic needs such as bedding, toiletries and medical care, enforced by threats of violence and also occasional physical and sexual violence, have led them to endure mental anxiety and physical suffering that must have exceeded the unavoidable level of suffering inherent in detention, even if not all applicants have been subjected to physical or sexual violence. That situation, which the applicants endured for years on account of their placement in the group of 'outcast' prisoners, amounted to inhuman and degrading treatment within the meaning of Article 3 of the Convention *(Para 96).*

In *D. v. Latvia*, which is comparable to the above case, specifically as regards the physical and symbolic separation faced by prisoners in the lowest caste, the Court also found that life in such a hostile environment often resulted in a continuous accumulation of stress, particularly for individuals subjected to inequity, and not solely from immediate or chronic threats. The mere anticipation of such threats could also cause enduring mental harm and anxiety of an intensity exceeding the level of stress caused by detention under normal conditions.

Another noteworthy judgment is the case of *Ashlarba v. Georgia* (application no. 45554/08) of July 15, 2014, relating to the criminalisation of membership of the *thieves' underworld ('vorovskoy mir') in* Georgia. In the judgment, the Court briefly presents the key functions of the *'thief-in-law'*.

The Wagner Phenomenon: Russian Neo-Imperialism and Importation of Prison Subculture

The issue of the Russian criminal and prison subculture and its spread is by no means historical or criminological in nature. In fact, assessing the Russian criminal and prison subculture solely within the framework of historical science or criminology deprives researchers of the opportunity to analyse the essence of this phenomenon. Having shed the prefix *'sub',* Russian criminal and prison culture has become one of the pillars of Russian statehood and the spread of *Russian neocolonial narratives*.

As it was many centuries ago, the Russian state is a mixture of colonialism, imperialism, and vast yet uninhabited territories conquered in past centuries as a result of brutal wars against the local population, followed by its destruction or assimilation. For the modern Russian Empire to survive, it needs two things: an *external enemy* with a corresponding war against that enemy, and the creation of *total fear* within the country, combined with the isolation of the population from alternative sources of information, similar to the isolation of prisoners.

Accordingly, the Russian prison system has proven to be much more necessary and instrumental than it was during Stalin's rule. On the one hand, the prison system is extremely necessary for intimidating its population. On the other hand, the prison system is a constant source of soldiers who, in terms of their status, are little different from *slaves*. To create slave soldiers, an extremely repressive state apparatus of criminal justice is needed, which punishes citizens with imprisonment even for isolated pickets and peaceful protests, reposts on social networks or singing songs, for which the prison system is an instrumentally useful appendage.

And this is where the criminal and prison subculture, which in modern Russia plays the role of *cement*, becomes particularly important. With its characteristic and established language, preserved for centuries, it unites citizens in society, students and teachers, parents and children, soldiers and commanders on the fronts of Russia's neocolonial wars, prisoners, and prison staff. With its pre-revolutionary penal and prison origins, it is no longer perceived in the context of its historical background but is instead used as a *modern product*.

We call all this the *'Wagner Phenomenon',* which is based on the name of the Wagner Private Military Company – a Russian non-state illegal armed group created by entrepreneur Yevgeny Prigozhin, which has the status of a terrorist organisation in several countries.

Since July 2022, numerous media outlets have reported on visits to Russian prisons by a man with the *Hero of Russia* star, resembling Yevgeny Prigozhin. According to these reports, he began a recruitment tour of colonies for former law enforcement officers and then moved on to Russian maximum-security prisons. He offered prisoners the opportunity to take part in combat operations in Ukraine as part of the Wagner private military company in exchange for a pardon, expungement of their criminal records, Russian passports and cash payments. In September 2022, a video appeared confirming Prigozhin's personal recruitment of prisoners, filmed in maximum security colony No. 6 in Mari El.

In June 2023, there was a mutiny by fighters of the Wagner Company. On June 23, 2023, Prigozhin announced that the Russian military had launched a missile strike on the rear camps of the Wagner Company. In the evening of the same day, Yevgeny Prigozhin announced that he was going to carry out a 'march of justice', denying a military coup. During the mutiny, mercenaries from the Wagner private military company, meeting no resistance, took control of Rostov-on-Don, entering the city in tanks, among other vehicles, then passed through the Voronezh and Lipetsk regions with minimal resistance during the day, heading for Moscow, shooting down one Russian army aircraft and six helicopters. A counter-terrorism operation was declared in several regions, including Moscow. However, on August 23, 2023, Yevgeny Prigozhin died in a plane crash in the Tver region.

In the context of the issues we are investigating in this paper, it is necessary to highlight several important aspects that, at first glance, may seem unrelated.

These aspects are: 1) the very fact of the creation and successful existence of this *de facto* military order, which directly influences Russia's foreign and domestic policy; 2) involvement of this military order in the mass recruitment of prisoners from Russian prisons to participate in the war against Ukraine; 3) importation of prison subculture by this military order.

All these facts need to be analysed together with the factor of *mass support* for the 2023 uprising by the local population, as well as the nationwide trend of filling the Russian army with prisoners or forcibly mobilised individuals, even without the participation of the Wagner private military company or similar structures, since the state itself has openly taken on this initiative.

As far as conclusions can be drawn from various sources, the modern Russian army, which is carrying out aggression against Ukraine, is built entirely on informal prison laws. It has the same prison language,

the same hierarchy with *'blatny'* and *'opushchennye'*, with *the* same *'concepts'*. Modern Russia is the most radical example of a *prison state*, not because it has many prisons and many prisoners, especially since the number of prisoners in Russia has significantly decreased due to mass mobilisation. Modern Russia is the most radical example of a *prison state* because both the army and society function according to the informal prison laws formed over the last five centuries.

In this context of Russian criminal and prison culture, the 2023 mutiny of the Wagner Company is a modern-day uprising of Stepan Razin or Yemelyan Pugachev – an uprising against the authorities, *not against the tsar*, but *with faith in the tsar*. However, unlike the large-scale Russian rebellions of past centuries, which were uprisings of relatively free people, this rebellion by Wagner mercenaries demonstrated that it was a revolt by people who consciously live by the informal laws of Russian prisons, which seem completely natural and comfortable to them.

Taking the above into account, we can confidently conclude that the *modern Russian prison state* is not about the number of prisons, the number of prisoners, or the number of prison staff. It is about the Russian population's acceptance and internal perception of the idea that the state should be governed by informal prison norms. In this prison State, a minority plays the role of prison guards, a second, sufficiently large group of citizens should be imprisoned, but the rest of the citizens are only *'temporarily and conditionally released'*.

That is why the criminal and prison subculture is one of the most important instruments of Russian neocolonial policy, both domestic and foreign. The official formal authorities of Russia cannot help but use these channels of penetration into Ukrainian 'territory' – in the broadest sense of the word – to further support its neocolonial policy, which is becoming increasingly unsuccessful considering the European and Euro-Atlantic vector of development of Ukrainian society, finally formed after another armed attack by Russia on Ukraine.

Conclusions

Thus, we can conclude that the Russian criminal and prison subculture had developed within the Russian colonial policy starting from the 16th century.

In the 17th century, the policy of *carceral colonization* changed dramatically: criminal offenders, fugitives, and peasants rejected by their communities began to be exiled to Siberia, including the lands near Lake Baikal. During this period, exile came to be seen more as a *punitive measure*, with the problems of settlement and development of the territory also being considered, but to a much lesser extent. Criminal exiles did not settle well in their new homes, did not engage in agriculture, and their presence only increased crime. Exile during this period had no significant impact on the region's economy. The presence of a large contingent of criminal elements affected negatively on the moral state of society in both parts of the Russian Empire.

By the early 1860s, the Russian criminal and prison subculture had finally developed in all prisons of the Russian Empire, especially all Siberian and, later, Sakhalin prisons and penal colonies.

The prisoner community as an organised structure with self-government, its own 'legislation', stratification (division of the general mass of prisoners into certain 'classes'), governing bodies, and economic levers in the form of a common 'pot', became a kind of precursor to the emergence of organised crime in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

The Russian criminal and prison subculture remained almost unchanged until the beginning of the Soviet period, when it was transformed to meet the needs of Stalinist industrialization. In the context of evolution of the Russian criminal and prison subculture, the first element of this subculture was a system of hierarchical relations that clearly defined the place and role of each prisoner, endowing them with a corresponding informal status, which was much more important to the prisoners themselves than their formal status.

In the second half of the 19th century, the elite of the Russian prison world, its ruling class, consisted of *'vagrants'* and criminal authorities known as *'the Ivans'*. They commanded the Russian prison community that existed across the vast expanses of the Russian Empire. *The 'Ivans'* and the *'vagrants'* became the prototypes of the future *'thieves-in-law',* whose power in the criminal world of places of deprivation of liberty eventually became virtually unlimited.

At the same time, it was only within the prisoner community that prisoners could realise themselves as full members of society, receive support from their 'brothers' and, in numerous instances, even have a guarantee of survival in the harsh and inhuman conditions of Russian prisons. Although the prisoner

community actively opposed formal prison rules and the very purpose of prison, the community model of prisoner self-government was supported and approved by the prison administration, given the meagre number of prison staff in Russia at the time, its high level of corruption and direct involvement in criminal activities of the prisoner communities, such as counterfeiting money.

At the same time, delegating power to *'the vagrants'* and *'the Ivans'* became so attractive to the prison administration that it not only took root in the prison system of the Russian Empire, but was also 'inherited' by the Soviet Union, where it was further developed. Similarly, the practice of delegating power in prisons to informal prisoner leaders has persisted in post-Soviet countries, which today is rightly considered a prerequisite for inter-prisoner violence and torture of prisoners by informal leaders and their *'subordinates'*. It can be confidently asserted that the phenomenon with which the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture is currently struggling has not a Soviet but a Russian *imperial* basis.

The representation of prison subculture found wide reflection even in Soviet literature. One can recall Valentin Pikul's 'Katorga', where, rejecting the author's chauvinistic and imperialist accents, one can form a clear picture of the existence of a deeply rooted informal prisoner hierarchy in Russian penal colonies, and, most importantly, of the deep immersion of the prison staff and other state agents in subcultural prison norms, as well as the facilitation by state agents of the spread of subcultural power among the general prison population.

Examples and analysis of crime in Russia reinforced the idea among publicists of the corrupting influence of exile on the indigenous population and the existence of a *specific criminal atmosphere*. The phenomenon of *vagrancy* stood out for the authors of the public discourse as the most widespread deviation among exiles. The focus was on statistical data on the number of escapes, the psychology of vagrants, and their routes of movement. *Vagrancy* in public discourse was interpreted from the perspective of European theories of cultural and social development and was a factor that made it *impossible* to classify Russia as *'civilised'* country. The analysis of the endless movement of vagrants complemented the journalistic image of criminal exile with metaphors of the cyclical nature and mobility of the Siberian population and the absence of stable social ties. The failure of the colonization and punitive potential of exile was part of society's perceptions.

An important element of Russian criminal and prison criminal subculture – the so-called *'Blatnoi Yazyk', 'Fenya',* or *'Blatnaya Muzyka'* – had a significant impact on Russian society. Moreover, it continues to influence Russian society. '*Blatnoi Yazyk'* was not only an accessible means of communication for prisoners who belonged to the elite of the Russian criminal world and the top of the informal prisoner hierarchy, but also a symbol of their verbal, moral and ideological affiliation with the 'world of hard labour'. In addition, a mastery of *'Blatnoi Yazyk'* was one of the main tools of socialisation in the criminal environment and of career advancement in informal criminal and prison hierarchies.

The third integral element of interpersonal relations became *card games*. Its main purpose was entertainment, and the result was 'enrichment' or impoverishment (losers lost everything – money, rations, clothes, wives, children).

The fourth symbol of subcultural relations became Russian *penal songwriting*, which was amalgamated into the national creative output of Russian society.

Overall, in order to analyse the preconditions for the emergence of the Russian criminal and prison subculture, its successful preservation during the Soviet period, its spreading in post-Soviet countries, and its current importation by Russian political elites to post-Soviet countries, it is necessary to consider a large complex of historical, cultural, political, geographical, and economic factors, which together created a phenomenon that had no analogues in the history of mankind.

Exile as a form of criminal punishment is one of the most striking examples of colonial practices. However, neither the deportation of white criminals by the British government to the New World in the 17th century, nor the deportation of convicts by the British government to Australia in the 19th century, nor the deportation of dangerous criminals *(relégués)* to French Guiana and other colonies in the 19th and 20th centuries by the French Government created the cultural-criminal-prison phenomenon that began to take shape during the time of the *Grand Principality of Moscow*, was significantly strengthened during the reign of Peter I, and finally took shape in the second half of the 19th century. Moreover, it should also be noted that World's history provides no other examples of state formations such as the *Vyatka Republic* of the 14th-15th centuries, which was founded by professional criminals and whose economic base was founded on professional and organised criminal activity.

Moreover, multiplied by the phenomenon of the *Gulag*, the Russian colonial-penal-carceral political complex created a new phenomenon, which, as it turned out, is very useful for modern Russian imperialist and colonial policy in terms of providing an uninterrupted source of recruits for military operations in the war against Ukraine in the 21st century *(the Wagner Phenomenon).*

However, the Wagner Phenomenon is about how to manage the State as a *prison*.

The Wagner Phenomenon is also about how to treat citizens as *prisoners*.

In order to analyse the contemporary phenomenon of the post-Soviet criminal and prison subculture and its importation by the modern Russian political elites, *limitations in academic research only to the period after 1917* is a fundamental methodological mistake. Such a mistake makes it impossible to study the real preconditions of the simulacrum of the contemporary Russian criminal and prison subculture, which, we emphasise, has lost the prefix *'sub'* and has become a national criminal and prison *culture*.

In general, modern Russian criminal and prison culture is based on a wild mix of factors that were not characteristic of other countries in the world. These factors include the following:

1. Giant geographical areas and distances.
2. Harsh climatic and weather conditions.
3. The need to colonise new territories.
4. The need to fill new colonised territories with people who, under any other circumstances, would *not* have wanted to live there.
5. Lack of proper control over the new colonies and their populations by the central authorities.
6. Restriction of the population of the new colonies even in basic needs and, as a result, forcing a significant part of the population to *beggary*.
7. Extreme cruelty of colonial and penal policies.
8. Mass and systematic escapes of prisoners and exiles, the creation of new links between the criminal and non-criminal worlds and, as a result, the blurring of boundaries between the *'criminal'* and *'non-criminal'.*
9. Support for the criminal element by the local population, which in the past also belonged to the category of 'convicts' or those who were deported to new colonies without the right or real possibility of returning to the metropolis.
10. Introduction of *self-control* among prisoners and delegation of control functions to the leaders of the criminal and prison hierarchy.
11. Total corruption among prison staff, the police, and other public officials.
12. Complete absence of social adaptation for former prisoners and, accordingly, the creation of conditions for their return to professional criminal activity.
13. Spread of criminal values and prison subculture among prison staff and other public officials.
14. Participation in organised criminal activity, acquisition of prison experience and accumulation of prison subculture by future leaders of Soviet Russia and later the Soviet Union, most of whom had been through the Tsarist *katorga* and exile.

In conclusion, we would like to add what we believe to be an important point.

By creating a giant colony *'Beyond the Cliffs,* unparalleled in world history, and populating it mainly with criminal elements, the Muscovite Tsardom and the Russian Empire laid a time bomb not only under their economy, but also under the very *cultural code* of the country.

This bomb has already exploded several times and continues to explode time and time again.

Being a highly criminalised society from the very beginning of the Moscow Principality, with zero tolerance for torture and perceiving criminal practices as socially acceptable and even desirable, Russian society nevertheless had extensive cultural contacts with Europe, which acted as a brake on the further criminalisation of Russian society.

However, even broad segments of the population, who were also massively exiled *'Beyond the Cliffs'* and were not immersed in the criminal subculture, fell victim to the cultural influence of professional criminals and adopted the same principles of social existence as those of the criminal and prison hierarchies.

By maximally developing and expanding the internal colonial-penal *'anti-Russia',* defining new and new categories of 'exiles' and new territories of exile, the Russian Empire gradually created a laboratory that eventually exploded, even before the establishment of Soviet regime.

Being already highly criminalised, Russian society was influenced by a criminal subculture nurtured over three centuries of exile and penal servitude, which programmed it for development and management only within the framework of informal criminal and prison traditions and norms.

The Soviet Gulag ensured the third explosion and seems to have finally turned Russia into a *prison state* that can only be governed as a prison, and its citizens can only be governed as a *collective of prisoners*, as mentioned by the CPT in its 2025 Standard on informal prison hierarchies (CPT, 2025a; CPT, 2025b). In fact, Russia, having demonstratively set a course to withdraw from the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture, has declared carceral conditions to be the main principle of state governance. Although the citizens of the *'Wagner State'* themselves no longer have any particular objections to this.

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FORECASTING POLITICAL RISKS: MODERN MODELS AND THEIR EFFICIENCY IN THE CONDITIONS OF "BLACK SWANS"

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Abstract

The article is devoted to a critical analysis of modern methods for forecasting political risks and their ability to adapt to conditions of high uncertainty, particularly to the emergence of "black swan" events. The aim of the study is to identify the limitations of traditional quantitative and qualitative models of political risk analysis and to systematize the latest approaches aimed at enhancing the resilience of political and socio-economic systems. The methodology is based on a systems approach, comparative analysis, and principles of complexity theory. The article reveals the essence of N. N. Taleb's "black swan" concept and substantiates its relevance for contemporary political analytics. The key shortcomings of classical models are analyzed, highlighting their excessive reliance on historical data and extrapolation of past trends, which makes them vulnerable to unprecedented events. Four groups of modern adaptive approaches are examined: scenario planning, agent-based modeling (ABM), the use of big data and artificial intelligence (AI), and the paradigm shift from forecasting to building antifragility. It is established that scenario planning allows for preparation for multiple future outcomes, ABM helps understand the nonlinear dynamics of complex systems, and big data analysis can identify hidden patterns and weak signals. The conclusion is drawn that in the current environment, the focus of political risk analysis is shifting from attempts to accurately predict specific events to building adaptive and resilient systems (resilience and antifragility) capable of withstanding unpredictable shocks and even benefiting from them.

Keywords: political risks, forecasting, «black swan», uncertainty, modeling, scenario planning, big data, antifragility, political riskology, political process, political power, state, political space, mass media, digital technologies, artificial intelligence, social networks, political changes.

Introduction

Political riskology, which emerged at the intersection of political science, economics, and sociology, has traditionally aimed to identify, analyze, and forecast political risks that can negatively affect the interests of states, corporations, and societies. However, the twenty-first century, with its cascade of crises – from the financial collapse of 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 – has demonstrated the fragility of existing forecasting models. These events, often described as "black swans," have shown that the future is not always a linear continuation of the past, and that traditional methods based on extrapolation and the analysis of historical data prove powerless in the face of radical uncertainty.

The relevance of this study arises from the urgent need to rethink the methodological tools of political riskology. In conditions of permanent turbulence, the ability to adequately assess and prepare for unexpected threats becomes a key factor in the survival and successful development of any political or economic system. For Ukraine, which stands at the epicenter of global geopolitical shifts, developing effective mechanisms for managing unpredictable risks is a matter of national security.

An analysis of recent studies indicates growing interest in this issue among scholars. The works of Ukrainian researchers such as V. A. Hoshovska and O. V. Reznikova focus on analyzing specific political risks for Ukraine (Hoshovska, 2021; Reznikova, 2021). Western researchers, including I. Bremmer and I. Goldin, examine the nature of global risks in an interconnected world (Bremmer, 2022; Goldin, 2021). A special place belongs to N. N. Taleb's concept of "black swans," which has become a methodological framework for criticizing classical forecasting models (Taleb, 2021). Nevertheless, there remains a lack of comprehensive studies that systematically analyze and compare new predictive approaches developed in response to this challenge.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the effectiveness of modern models for forecasting political risks in the context of "black swan" events and to determine the directions of methodological transformation within political riskology.

To achieve this purpose, the *following research objectives* are defined: to explain the essence of the "black swan" phenomenon and its significance for political analysis; to identify the main ontological and epistemological limitations of traditional quantitative and qualitative forecasting models; to systematize and analyze the potential of new adaptive approaches such as scenario planning, agent-based modeling, and the use of Big Data and artificial intelligence; to justify the need for a paradigmatic shift from precise forecasting toward strategies aimed at resilience and antifragility; and to analyze Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a "black swan" case study that demonstrates the failure of classical models and highlights the relevance of the antifragility concept.

The methodological basis of this study consists of a combination of general scientific and specialized methods. The systems approach makes it possible to consider political risks not as isolated phenomena but as elements of a complex, dynamic system of international relations. Comparative analysis is used to evaluate the capabilities and limitations of both traditional and modern forecasting models.

The principles of complexity theory and synergetics serve as the conceptual framework for understanding the nonlinear nature of political processes and the mechanisms behind the emergence of "black swan" events. The case study method is applied to conduct an in-depth analysis of a specific example – the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

Results. The "black swan" phenomenon presents a methodological challenge for political riskology. This concept, introduced into academic discourse by Nassim Nicholas Taleb, refers to events that meet three criteria: abnormality, extreme impact, and retrospective predictability (Taleb, 2021, p. 15-18). The problem for political riskology lies in the fact that its traditional tools are not suited for working with such events.

To understand this problem, it is worth briefly examining quantitative and qualitative models. Quantitative models (statistical analysis, regression models) are based on large datasets of historical information and perform well in predicting regular, recurring events. However, "black swans," by definition, lack precedents in the past, so statistical models simply do not detect them (Tkachenko, 2022, p. 45). Their logic rests on the assumption that the future will resemble the past, which becomes a fundamental error under conditions of nonlinear dynamics.

Qualitative models that rely on expert assessments (such as the Delphi method and index construction) are somewhat more flexible but also have limitations. Experts, like all people, are prone to cognitive biases: they think within existing paradigms, underestimate low-probability but high-impact events, and often extrapolate current trends into the future (Melnyk, 2022, p. 91). As a result, expert communities frequently fail to notice the approach of a "black swan." Therefore, the "black swan" phenomenon requires not only improvement of old models but also a fundamental revision of approaches to forecasting and risk management.

Unlike traditional forecasting, scenario planning seeks to develop several alternative yet plausible future situations. This method does not answer the question "What will happen?" but instead asks, "What could happen, and how will we prepare for it?" The process includes identifying key driving forces and critical uncertainties, at the intersection of which scenarios are built (Kovalenko, 2023, p. 112). The main advantage of this method is that it prepares systems for different potential developments, increasing their adaptability and preventing "strategic shock," when reality diverges sharply from expectations.

Agent-based modeling (ABM) also deserves attention as a computer simulation method that allows researchers to study the dynamics of complex systems by modeling the behavior and interaction of individual "agents" (Gilbert, 2021). Unlike traditional top-down models, ABM operates from the bottom up (Petrenko, 2023, p. 78). Each agent is assigned certain behavioral rules, and during simulation it becomes possible to observe what macroscopic patterns arise as a result of their interactions. This approach makes it possible to explore how small changes at the micro level can lead to large-scale consequences – that is, to the emergence of "black swans."

The development of digital technologies has opened access to massive amounts of unstructured data. Analysis of such data with machine learning and artificial intelligence can identify "weak signals" – subtle anomalies that may precede significant political changes (Shevchenko, 2023, p. 33). For example, sentiment analysis of social media posts can reveal rising public dissatisfaction earlier than sociological surveys. Although AI cannot directly predict a "black swan," it serves as a powerful tool for environmental monitoring and early warning.

The most radical response to the "black swan" problem is the proposal to change the very goal of political riskology. If it is impossible to precisely predict the most dangerous events, efforts should focus on building systems that can endure unpredictable shocks. Two key concepts emerge here: resilience and antifragility.

Resilience is the ability of a system to withstand external shocks, maintain its key functions, and recover quickly after crises (Vasylenko, 2022, p. 58). Antifragility, another concept introduced by Taleb, goes further. While fragile systems collapse under pressure and resilient ones endure it, antifragile systems benefit from volatility, uncertainty, and stressors (Taleb, 2022). Such systems not only survive but become stronger after crises. This paradigm shift means that governments and corporations should invest less in attempts to achieve perfect prediction and more in developing systems characterized by redundancy, decentralization, flexibility, and the capacity for rapid experimentation and learning from mistakes.

The full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation into Ukraine on February 24, 2022, became a textbook example of a "black swan" for most international actors and institutions. This case clearly demonstrates both the failure of traditional forecasting models and the practical importance of the antifragility concept. The invasion meets all three of Taleb's criteria for a "black swan." For many Western governments and analytical centers, despite alarming intelligence data, the very idea of a full-scale conventional war in Europe in the twenty-first century seemed abnormal and irrational, and therefore unlikely. The impact of this event proved extreme: it caused the largest humanitarian crisis in Europe since the Second World War, triggered global energy and food crises, and fundamentally changed the architecture of international security. Finally, in retrospect, this event appears quite logical and even inevitable: an analysis of the imperial ideology of the Russian regime and its previous aggressive actions (Chechnya, Georgia, the annexation of Crimea) made the likelihood of escalation clear.

The forecasting failure stemmed from the fact that most models were based on the assumption of a rational actor guided by economic logic. The Russian leadership, however, acted according to a different, irrational – from the Western point of view – imperial revanchist logic. Experts who had studied Russia for years fell into cognitive traps, assuming that "this could not happen because it would not be in Russia's own interest."

At the same time, Ukraine's response to the invasion became a vivid example of antifragility. Ukrainian society and the state not only withstood the blow (resilience) but also became stronger, more mobilized, and more united as a result. Key factors of antifragility included decentralization: local resistance, volunteer movements, and civic initiatives proved more effective than the centralized command structure of the enemy; flexibility and adaptability: the Armed Forces of Ukraine rapidly adopted new tactics and Western weapons, while society quickly reorganized around wartime needs; and learning from experience: the lessons of 2014, though painful, strengthened both the army and the public, eliminating illusions about the intentions of the Russian Federation.

This case shows that in the modern world, the ability to self-organize, adapt quickly, and learn during crises is far more valuable than attempting to construct an ideal but fragile plan based on flawed forecasts.

Conclusions

The conducted research allows us to conclude that the "black swan" phenomenon has become a fundamental challenge for classical political riskology. The modern political environment is characterized by high complexity and nonlinearity, which makes unprecedented events with extreme impact an inevitable part of reality. New approaches such as scenario planning, agent-based modeling, and

the analysis of Big Data through artificial intelligence represent important steps in adapting the methodological tools of political riskology.

However, even these methods cannot ensure accurate forecasting of "black swan" events. Therefore, a fundamental shift in paradigm is taking place – from attempts to predict the future toward building systems prepared for unexpected developments. The key concepts of this new paradigm are resilience and antifragility. The focus is moving toward the creation of flexible, decentralized, and adaptive institutions capable of functioning effectively in conditions that cannot be foreseen.

For Ukraine, which has experienced the destructive consequences of a "black swan" firsthand, the implementation of these approaches is a strategic imperative. Building an antifragile state and society should become a national priority, enabling the country not only to withstand current challenges but also to lay the groundwork for sustainable development in an unpredictable world.

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POLITICAL ISSUES OF NATIONAL SECURITY

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THE IMPACT OF VIRTUAL ASSET REGULATION ON THE BALANCE OF DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN POLICY: THE DIMENSION OF NATIONAL SECURITY IN THE EUROPEAN SPACE

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Abstract

The article highlights the timeliness of researching the institutionalization of the virtual assets (VA) market, particularly cryptocurrencies, and its transformation from a niche technological innovation into a significant factor in international relations and public policy. It emphasizes that virtual assets challenge the state's traditional monopoly on money issuance and control over financial flows, creating new threats to national security. In response, governments are compelled to develop comprehensive public policies that lie at the intersection of competing interests. The study argues that this conflict of interests is especially acute in the European space, where the European Union, through the Regulation on Markets in Crypto-Assets (MiCA), seeks to establish uniform rules that will have global implications.

The purpose of the article is to determine how virtual assets influence the balance between domestic and foreign policy priorities of states and their role in ensuring national security within the European space. According to this purpose, the research sets the following objectives: to demonstrate that public policy on cryptocurrency regulation represents a point of convergence between internal and external political interests; to show that domestic policy in this area aims to protect consumers and combat crime; and to argue that in the sphere of foreign policy, this direction serves as a tool of geopolitical influence and protection of sovereignty for European states, thereby strengthening collective national security.

Thus, the political science conceptualization of cryptocurrency regulation is examined not as a technical or economic matter but as a strategic security task, in which the state must balance the competing imperatives of domestic innovation and external security. Regulation of virtual assets is no longer optional but has become a critical component of state policy. A successful balance between domestic (economic development) and external (security and sanctions) priorities will determine the resilience of the state in the new digital reality.

Keywords: state, EU, national security, regulatory policy, cryptocurrency, virtual assets, European space, domestic policy, foreign policy, MiCA, FATF.

Introduction. The study of the institutionalization of the virtual assets (VA) market, particularly cryptocurrencies, and its transformation from a niche technological innovation into an important factor

in international relations and public policy, is both relevant and timely for modern political science in its theoretical and practical dimensions. Virtual assets challenge the state's traditional monopoly on money issuance and control over financial flows, creating new threats to national security. Unregulated VA circulation is used for money laundering, financing terrorism, circumventing international sanctions, and conducting cyberattacks.

In response, states are compelled to develop comprehensive public policies that emerge at the intersection of competing interests. On the one hand, domestic policy seeks to stimulate innovation, protect consumer rights, and collect tax revenues. On the other hand, foreign policy and national security demand strict control to prevent illegal cross-border activities and preserve financial stability. This conflict of interests is especially acute in the European space, where the European Union, through the Regulation on Markets in Crypto-Assets (MiCA), attempts to establish a single set of rules that will have global implications.

The purpose of the article is to determine how virtual assets influence the balance between the domestic and foreign policy priorities of states and their role in ensuring national security within the European space. To achieve this purpose, the study sets the following research objectives: to demonstrate that public policy on cryptocurrency regulation represents a point of convergence between domestic and foreign political interests; to note that domestic policy in this area aims to protect consumers and combat crime; and to substantiate that in the sphere of foreign policy, this area becomes a tool of geopolitical influence and protection of the sovereignty of European states, thereby strengthening collective national security.

The research methodology is based on political science analysis employing several approaches. The comparative method is used to examine regulatory models; the neo-institutionalist approach helps to analyze the role of new rules such as MiCA and FATF standards; and elements of the risk-analysis approach are applied to identify threats to national security.

The source base includes EU normative acts (MiCA, TFR), FATF reports, analytical papers (WEF, Chainalysis), and academic publications from 2021-2025.

Results. The European space, through the Regulation on Markets in Crypto-Assets (MiCA), demonstrates an attempt to create a "gold standard" of regulation, using the "Brussels effect" to extend its norms globally. This approach strengthens the collective national security of the EU member states but at the same time creates challenges for maintaining a balance with innovation policy. A key global actor that forces states to integrate domestic and foreign policy in this area is the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), particularly through the implementation of the "travel rule."

The scientific novelty of the article lies in the political science conceptualization of cryptocurrency regulation not as a technical or economic issue but as a strategic security task, in which the state must balance the contradictory imperatives of domestic innovation and external security.

The phenomenon of virtual assets (VA), led by cryptocurrencies, has undergone a rapid evolution – from a niche interest of narrow technical communities to a powerful factor in global politics. In 2024-2025, the stage of the "Wild West" is ending, giving way to the systemic institutionalization of this market. This process has a fundamental political dimension, as it directly affects the foundations of state sovereignty: the monopoly on money issuance and control over financial flows (ResearchGate, 2025).

The decentralized and cross-border nature of cryptocurrencies creates a unique set of threats to national security. They are actively used for money laundering, financing terrorism, and paying cybercriminals (for example, ransomware developers). Most notably, in the current geopolitical context, they serve as tools for bypassing international economic sanctions (TRM Labs, 2024). Reports from international analytical companies such as Chainalysis indicate that, although illegal operations account for a relatively small share of total volume, their absolute value is critical for the activities of criminal and hostile state actors [Chainalysis, 2025].

In response, states face a complex political choice in shaping independent public policies for regulating these aspects. Such policy becomes a point of intersection—and often conflict – between two core domains: domestic and foreign policy. Domestic policy focuses on supporting innovation, protecting consumer rights, and generating budget revenues through taxation (Zavada, 2022). In contrast, foreign policy and the security sector emphasize strict control, transparency, and compliance with international standards, particularly those of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) (2025).

The most systematic response to this challenge is emerging within the European space. The adoption of the Regulation on Markets in Crypto-Assets (MiCA) in 2023 and its entry into force in 2024, along

with the related Regulation on Transfers of Funds (TFR), which implements FATF standards, represents an unprecedented attempt to create a unified and comprehensive regulatory framework (European Parliament, 2024; FATF, 2024). Analyzing how MiCA balances domestic and foreign priorities is crucial for understanding the future of global financial governance and security policy.

The scientific discourse on virtual assets between 2021 and 2025 has shifted from primarily economic and technical analysis toward political science and security studies. Broadly, recent research can be divided into three groups.

The first group focuses on virtual assets as instruments of geopolitics and threats to national security. Scholars analyze the use of cryptocurrencies to bypass sanctions by state actors (such as Russia and North Korea) and to finance non-state groups, including terrorist organizations (TRM Labs, 2024; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2025). In this context, the war in Ukraine has become a catalyst, demonstrating the dual role of cryptocurrencies: as a tool for providing rapid financial assistance to the victim of aggression, and as a potential means for the aggressor to evade restrictions (Joshi, N. 2025).

The second group of studies addresses regulatory responses, particularly in the European context. The main focus is on the MiCA Regulation, which analysts view as the EU's attempt to expand its regulatory influence globally (the "Brussels effect") by setting a "gold standard" for the industry (European Parliament, 2024). Meanwhile, Ukrainian authors actively examine the incorporation of MiCA provisions into national legislation, such as Draft Law No. 10225, which forms part of Ukraine's commitments on its path toward EU membership (Staryk, 2025).

The third group of works focuses on the role of international institutions, primarily the FATF. The organization's updated standards – especially Recommendation 15 and its "travel rule," which requires virtual asset service providers to exchange information about senders and recipients – have become a global driver of regulatory policy (FATF, 2025). Studies show that despite slow implementation, these standards are steadily compelling states to tighten control over the sector (FATF, 2024) and to seek a balance between domestic and foreign policy objectives.

Forming state policy on virtual assets requires balancing competing imperatives. On the domestic policy level, governments must address three core tasks: stimulating innovation, ensuring fiscal interests, and protecting consumers and financial stability. Excessively strict regulation risks stifling the industry or pushing it to other jurisdictions. Therefore, public policy should create incentives for the development of the fintech sector. Moreover, states seek new revenue streams through the taxation of VA transactions. In Ukraine, this issue remains highly debated and is reflected in recent legislative initiatives (Staryk, 2025; Zavada, 2022). Domestic policy also aims to protect citizens from fraud and excessive market speculation, which can have systemic consequences (Myronov, 2024). These goals generally call for legalizing and integrating virtual assets into the legal field while establishing clear rules of conduct.

In terms of foreign policy and national security, control and sanctions are key tools that define state sovereignty. Priorities in this domain differ fundamentally and focus mainly on oversight and restriction. A central element is combating illegal activity (AML/CFT) as a core national security requirement. The state must implement international standards, particularly those of the FATF, to prevent money laundering and terrorist financing (FATF, 2025). Another aspect concerns the international sanctions regime, as cryptocurrencies have become proven instruments for sanction evasion. For instance, the U.S. Department of the Treasury has repeatedly imposed sanctions on crypto mixers and exchanges associated with Russia and North Korea (TRM Labs, 2024; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2025]. Consequently, controlling virtual assets has become an instrument of foreign policy used to exert pressure on hostile regimes.

Recent academic literature also draws increasing attention to monetary sovereignty, particularly in connection with the emergence of global private stablecoins and central bank digital currencies (CBDCs) of other states (for example, the digital yuan), which are viewed as direct threats to national sovereignty and thus require state-provided protective mechanisms (ResearchGate, 2025).

Within this context, the European space under MiCA serves as a model of balance. The MiCA Regulation represents a unique attempt to reconcile these two dimensions (European Parliament, 2024). On the domestic side, MiCA creates a single market through "passporting," allowing licensed companies to operate across the EU, which stimulates innovation. It also introduces strict consumer protection requirements and rules for stablecoin issuers (Pingen, 2023). On the external side, MiCA is closely linked with the Regulation on Transfers of Funds (TFR), which directly implements the FATF "travel rule." This enhances transaction transparency and significantly restricts the anonymous use of virtual assets for illicit purposes, strengthening the EU's collective security (FATF, 2024).

Thus, through MiCA, the European space addresses the problem of balance by setting a high regulatory standard. It functions not merely as an internal directive but as a foreign policy instrument that, through the "Brussels effect," compels companies and countries outside the EU (including Ukraine) to adopt these standards to gain access to one of the world's largest markets (European Parliament, 2024).

Therefore, state policy on the regulation of virtual assets has evolved from a narrowly specialized financial issue into one of the central components of national security strategy and political governance. The analysis demonstrates that effective public policy in this field requires a careful balance between domestic priorities (innovation, taxation, and consumer protection) and external priorities (anti-money laundering, sanctions enforcement, and protection of monetary sovereignty).

The European experience with MiCA and TFR implementation illustrates this balance model, where high standards of transparency and security (required by FATF) are integrated into a unified market mechanism. For Ukraine, which seeks EU integration, harmonizing national legislation with MiCA (Staryk, 2025). is not only a technical obligation but also a strategic step toward strengthening its own financial security and resilience amid hybrid aggression. Regulation of cryptocurrencies has ultimately become an integral part of the modern political process. A successful balance between domestic (economic development) and external (security and sanctions) priorities will determine a state's resilience in the new digital reality.

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POLITICS OF MEMORY

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POLITICS OF MEMORY IN EAST ASIAN COUNTRIES: BETWEEN POSTCOLONIAL TRAUMA, STATE NATION-BUILDING, AND REGIONAL CONTROVERSIES

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Abstract

In the contemporary world, memory politics has gained particular significance in East Asian countries, notably Japan, China, and India. It encompasses the memory of colonial pasts, wars, occupations, and decolonization processes, shaping national identity, state legitimacy, and foreign policy. The historical experiences of these countries differ: Japan – a former imperial state, China – a country subjected to imperial influence, and India – a postcolonial state developing its own national consciousness. Memorials, state rituals, and museums become key elements of memory politics, as well as instruments of 'memory diplomacy.'

Contemporary memory politics in China combines state institutions with material and non-material practices, forming an official narrative of victimhood under imperialism and national unity. In India, memory of the colonial past and the struggle for independence serves as a decolonial project, simultaneously integrating cultural diversity and religious heritage. Memory politics in Japan exists within a political discourse between nationalist and pacifist interpretations of the past, reflected in controversies over the Yasukuni Shrine and school textbooks.

The study demonstrates that memory politics in East Asia serves as an important tool for state-building, fostering civic solidarity, and international positioning. It combines local, national, and transnational practices, enabling the construction of national identity, legitimization of power, and influence into regional relations. Three models of memorial politics in the region can be identified: the Japanese model – reconsideration of post-imperial responsibility; the Chinese model – a narrative of victimhood and revenge; the Indian model – a decolonial project of self-determination. Memory politics thus becomes a dynamic political resource, linking the past, present, and strategic state planning in a global context.

Keywords: memory politics, East Asia, Japan, China, India, postcolonial trauma, national identity, commemorations, memorials, memory diplomacy.

Introduction

In the contemporary world, processes of memory politics are acquiring increasing significance. In East Asian countries – primarily Japan, China, and India – the issues of remembering colonial pasts, wars, occupations, imperial ambitions, as well as decolonization and nation-building, have become crucial components of state policy, the formation of national identity, and regional international relations.

Firstly, the historical experience of these countries is extraordinarily complex. Japan emerges as a former imperial power, China as a country subjected to both Western and Japanese imperial influences, and India as a postcolonial state that developed its national consciousness through the process of decolonization. Historical traumas, memory rituals, national museums, sites of memory, and state commemorative practices have become central factors in both domestic politics and regional diplomacy.

Secondly, memory politics exerts a significant influence on international relations. A prominent example is the disputes between China and Japan over the interpretation of history, symbols, and commemorative rituals – particularly regarding Japanese politicians' visits to the Yasukuni Shrine. For China, such acts are perceived as attempts to revise history, whereas in Japan they are viewed as expressions of patriotism and respect for the deceased. Thus, memory becomes an instrument of 'memory diplomacy,' wherein history is used as a lever of influence in contemporary international politics (Berger, 2012).

Thirdly, in the era of globalization, digital media, and social networks, memory is no longer merely local or national. It acquires a transcontinental dimension, forming a 'virtual memory' of the past, where competing narratives interact in digital spaces and influence international public opinion. Memory increasingly becomes a resource of soft power, through which states seek to enhance their image or restore historical justice.

Fourthly, in East Asian countries, the issue of memory is inseparable from questions of legitimizing authority, mobilizing citizens, and shaping patriotic discourse. As J. Winter and E. Sivan (1999, p. 38) emphasize, the state in such contexts acts as the '*primary producer and choreographer of memory commemoration*' (Winter & Sivan, 1999, p. 38). However, even within official frameworks, memory remains polyphonic. In each country, numerous mnemonic communities maintain their own versions of the past (Kansteiner, 2002).

As John Lee Candelaria (2023) notes, for most Asian states, the postwar period was a time of societal consolidation and the formation of new national identities. Memorials and monuments served as material symbols of this transformation – they not only honored heroes but also created an imagined community of citizens united by a shared past (Morley & Robins, 1995; Davis, 1994). Nevertheless, the significance of such symbols is not fixed, and the content of memory changes depending on political interests and contexts (Berger, 2012).

In Japan, memory politics is closely linked to questions of national responsibility and identity. On one hand, there exists an official stance of apology toward the victims of Japanese aggression; on the other hand, internal movements seek to 'reinterpret' history without feelings of guilt. Commemorative practices such as visits to the Yasukuni Shrine reflect the conflict between pacifist and nationalist interpretations of the past.

In China, memory politics aims to construct a 'unified historical narrative' of imperialist victimhood. As K. E. Foote and M. Azarhayu (2007) note, elites actively utilize history to legitimize the regime, particularly through institutions like the Nanjing Massacre Museum, which emphasizes the suffering of the people and the moral superiority of the PRC in the global order.

In India, memory of the colonial past and the struggle for independence plays a role in shaping contemporary patriotic discourse. As M. Mayer and K. Pawlik (2023) emphasize, Indian memory politics oscillates between decolonial reinterpretation and Hindu-nationalist tendencies that seek to reframe history within a civilizational vision of the past.

Despite differences in political regimes and cultural contexts, in most countries of the region memory serves as a means of building loyalty and national pride, while simultaneously functioning as a tool of international communication. As K. Blackburn (2010) observes, commemorative practices in Asia create a mosaic of memories – ranging from officially sanctioned to local, alternative, and traumatic.

Thus, memory politics in East Asia demonstrates a complex interplay between authority, history, culture, and international relations. In the context of postcolonial transformations, memory does not appear as a stable archive of the past, but as an arena of political construction, within which states determine what should be remembered and what should be forgotten, shaping their own version of the past and the future.

Theoretical Foundations of the Study

Research on memory politics and memorialization in East Asian countries has developed at the intersection of postcolonial traumatic experiences, state nation-building processes, and regional disputes. In early works, B. Anderson (1983/1991) conceptualized the nation as an 'imagined community,' laying the groundwork for understanding how national narratives are formed through memory and commemoration, particularly in the context of postcolonial Asia. Research by T. G. Ashplant, G. Dawson,

and M. Roper (2013) emphasizes that war and memory politics are not only a means of honoring the deceased but also a tool for state construction of national identity.

An important direction involves studying the influence of colonial and imperial legacies on contemporary memorial politics. A. Anghie (1999, 2005, 2011) and J. M. Hobson (2004) analyzed mechanisms of imperial legitimation and the impact of colonial structures on the international order, which in turn shape postcolonial perceptions of the past in East Asian countries. Suzuki (2004, 2005, 2009) examined the socialization of China and Japan within the European international society, highlighting their duality in perceiving civilizational standards and imperial norms, which affects contemporary narrative practices of memory.

Case studies of memorialization in East and Southeast Asia demonstrate the complexity of the interaction between postcolonial trauma and state narratives. C. Gluck (2022) notes that the wars of the past in Japan, China, and Korea have become a 'political present,' where memory is used to shape national identities. J. L. Candelaria (2023), G. V. Raymond (2018), and K. Noobanjong (2011) analyze commemorations in Asian countries, showing how state monuments become arenas for competing interpretations of nationality and colonial experience. D. Schumacher (2015) observes that East Asia is experiencing a 'boom of complex memories' of the Second World War, including disputes over memorials to 'comfort women' in Japan and the Philippines (Cabico, 2018; Kyodo News, 2018).

Postcolonial dilemmas of memory are particularly evident in the relations between China and India. D. Anand (2012), N. Abhinandan (2021), and M. Juutinen (n.d.) note that historical memory and colonial legacies shape both policy and cultural diplomacy in these states. M. Das (2014) and D. Pal (2019) emphasize that Sino-Indian relations depend on mutual perceptions of the past, including struggles for cultural influence in Tibet and other peripheral regions. S. Gupta (2011) and P. Chacko (2008) explore how national narratives of the past influence contemporary geopolitical behavior and the formation of national identity.

Researchers pay particular attention to conflictual and contested aspects of memory. T. Berger (2012), K. Blackburn (2010), S. Hayase (2007), K. Lunn (2007), and E. Reynolds (1990) describe how different state narratives of war and colonial pasts compete, producing political and cultural tensions in East Asia. C. Rusneac (2022) emphasizes that transnational memory, particularly at Japanese military and colonial cemeteries, functions as a means of communication between states and regions. C. Gluck (2022) and M. Mayer and K. Pawlik (2023) also note that contemporary Chinese memory politics combines traditional and modernist elements, simultaneously supporting the state narrative and regional ambitions.

Thus, the historiography of memory studies in East Asian countries demonstrates the complexity and multidimensionality of the topic. It encompasses the interaction of postcolonial trauma, state-building processes, and regional conflicts, reflecting local, national, and transnational aspects of memory politics (Anderson, 1983/1991; Ashplant et al., 2013; Gluck, 2022; Schumacher, 2015; Mayer & Pawlik, 2023).

Methodological Foundations of the Study

The methodological framework of this research is based on comparative, politico-institutional, discursive, and historical-genetic approaches. Comparative analysis allows tracing how different states, with distinct political regimes and cultural contexts, construct their own versions of the past. The politico-institutional approach enables an examination of the role of the state, its official institutions, museums, monuments, and educational programs in shaping collective memory. As P. Przychodniak notes, in China, memory politics is used as an instrument of political legitimation: '*the authorities interpret the Japanese occupation as the culmination of 'national humiliation,' create and modernize numerous museums and sites of memory, and the Central Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of China supervises the official version of the past*' (Przychodniak, 2018).

Discursive and semiotic analysis is employed to study how material and symbolic forms –monuments, texts, state rituals – produce specific interpretations of history. This approach allows us to view memory politics as an infrastructure through which national identities and moral hierarchies are constructed. As H. Saito emphasizes, the issue of historical memory in East Asia is relational, emerging when states promote self-glorifying versions of the past in opposition to foreign interpretations; at the same time, the region increasingly demonstrates tendencies toward cosmopolitan forms of commemoration (Saito, 2017).

The historical-genetic approach helps to understand how memory politics evolves over time – from postwar narratives to contemporary forms of national self-identification. As highlighted in G.-W. Shin and D. Sneider's 'Divergent Memories: Opinion Leaders and the Asia-Pacific War' (Shin & Sneider, 2012),

national memory undergoes several stages of development – from the formation of a foundational myth to its institutionalization and political utilization (Shin, & Sneider, 2016).

The aim of this study is to analyze how East Asian states – specifically China, India, and Japan – construct, transform, and employ memory politics related to colonial histories, wars, imperial ambitions, and decolonization processes to achieve domestic legitimacy and advance external diplomacy. The research seeks to clarify how memory of the past is transformed into a political resource influencing contemporary regional dynamics and to identify common patterns and differences in the memorial practices of these three states.

The analysis of three case studies reveals the specificity of each state's memorial politics. In Japan, attention focuses on debates over official interpretations of the past, visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, school textbooks, and the commemoration of 'comfort women.' In China, memory politics forms part of the state's ideological apparatus and functions as a tool for national unity through the narrative of the 'Century of National Humiliation.' In contrast, in India, memory of the colonial past and the struggle for independence plays a key role in shaping postcolonial identity and legitimizing the state's vision.

Thus, the study identifies three models of memory politics in the region: the Japanese model – as an attempt to reflect on post-imperial responsibility; the Chinese model – as a narrative of victimhood and revenge; and the Indian model – as a decolonial project aimed at self-determination and the restoration of historical agency. In each case, memory politics functions not only as a means of preserving history but also as a tool for shaping political identity, national solidarity, and diplomatic positioning in the global context.

Contemporary Memory Politics in China: Material-Cultural Perspective and State Commemoration

China, as one of the world's oldest civilizations, exhibits a distinctive approach to its past, which shapes its contemporary memory politics. The current memory policy in China creates a complex space where material culture, historical heritage, and state narratives interact. Research shows that China combines spiritual traditions with material representations of the past, transforming historical memory into a tool for state legitimation and the construction of national identity (Suzuki, 2004, 2009; Gluck, 2022; Mayer & Pawlik, 2023).

Studies of memory, cultural continuity, and heritage in contemporary China echo the observations of sinologist P. Rickmans in Chinese Attitudes Towards the Past: *'the cultivation of moral and spiritual values of the ancients seemed most often combined with a curious neglect or indifference… to the material heritage of the past'* (Rickmans, 1986).

This indicates an approach to historical preservation that emphasizes practices, traditions, and cultural transmission rather than material objects, where '*the past continues to animate Chinese life, living in people rather than in buildings or stones*' (Rickmans, 1986).

Traditionally, cultural heritage was transmitted through texts, calligraphy, and practices, rather than through physical artifacts, ensuring cultural continuity without material representation (Gluck, 2022).

Memory politics in China shifts the focus from material monuments to living heritage. Material heritage is not a priority and has sometimes been deliberately neglected – for instance, during the Maoist period, '*in many cities… 95–100 % of historical and cultural relics were lost forever'* (Rickmans, 1986). The past lives through generations rather than solely through artifacts.

This strategy has several implications. First, the state develops programs emphasizing living traditions, arts, and rituals. Second, material objects may be reconstructed or destroyed, but the essence of memory is preserved through cultural practices. Third, the memory landscape becomes dynamic: memory politics does not merely preserve the past but reshapes it according to contemporary needs. Control over material traces of the past serves ideological purposes, legitimizing authority, and constructing national identity. Rickmans notes: *'From the very beginning – long before Confucius – Chinese developed the notion that only one form of immortality could exist: immortality granted by history… If continuity is not ensured by the immobility of inanimate objects, it is achieved through the flow of subsequent generations'* (Rickmans, 1986). Thus, memory in China becomes a politics of generations, practices, and creativity, rather than merely of stone and brick.

After the fall of the Qing dynasty and during the Republican era (1912-1949), attitudes toward traditions shifted: culture began to be viewed as a resource for nation-building, and private collections and religious artifacts gradually transformed into state museums and cultural institutions (Suzuki, 2005; Mayer

& Pawlik, 2023). Since then, processes of selection, commercialization, and restructuring of cultural heritage have influenced living traditions.

From the late 1990s onward, the PRC government has actively developed material representations of the past: restoration of ancient urban areas such as Beijing's hutongs, the Great Wall, imperial palaces, historical temples, as well as digital reconstructions in video games and multimedia exhibitions (Gluck, 2022; Mayer & Pawlik, 2023). These processes have coincided with rapid urbanization, demolition of villages and monuments, and a 'collective forgetting,' reinforced by censorship following the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution (Gluck, 2022).

Fear of losing shared memory has generated various forms of nostalgia: 'revolutionary,' 'Maoist-new,' cultural and tourist projects, musical and culinary initiatives. The state actively uses historical reconstructions to demonstrate power and legitimize authority. Key institutions shaping official memory include the National Museum of China in Beijing, the Shanghai Museum of the Revolution, and the Memorial of the People's Heroes, where patriotic education, cultural events, and tourism intersect (Gluck, 2022; Mayer, & Pawlik, 2023).

Contemporary Chinese memory infrastructure exhibits three core characteristics: 1) it integrates diverse objects and practices while simultaneously producing an official version of the past; 2) it ensures the resilience and vitality of memory through museums, tourism, and entertainment projects; 3) it provides a space for contested narratives, where different approaches to heritage and authenticity coexist domestically and internationally (Gluck, 2022; Mayer, & Pawlik, 2023).

China actively revives traditional practices and symbols, including Confucian education, ancestor rituals, and the Hanfu clothing movement, often emerging at the community level (Mayer & Pawlik, 2023). Simultaneously, heritage is used as an instrument of foreign policy: the Silk Road and Belt and Road Initiative projects create transnational memory infrastructures, disseminating official narratives beyond the country (Suzuki, 2009; Gluck, 2022).

Chinese memory politics also addresses tragic events of the twentieth century. Memorials commemorating victims of the Japanese occupation, such as the Nanjing Massacre Museum, serve as reminders of historical trauma and as instruments of patriotic education (Gluck, 2022; Mayer & Pawlik, 2023). At the same time, local and alternative memory practices are widespread: private archives, social media, collecting, amateur exhibitions, and educational projects contribute to a complex memory landscape beyond official narratives (Mayer & Pawlik, 2023). Researchers also note the selectivity of Chinese memory. Topics such as internal repression, the famine during the Great Leap Forward, or the Tiananmen Square events are systematically excluded from the official discourse (Zhao, 1998; Yang, 2019). Thus, the state not only constructs what is remembered but actively determines what remains unspoken.

In conclusion, contemporary Chinese memory politics combines state infrastructure with local and personal practices, consolidating official narratives, ensuring the resilience of historical memory, and allowing a degree of interpretive flexibility. It creates a dynamic, multidimensional space of historical commemoration, where material culture, spiritual traditions, and contemporary political needs intersect (Gluck, 2022; Mayer, & Pawlik, 2023; Rickmans, 1986; Suzuki, 2004, 2009). Notably, China's memory politics is closely linked to geopolitical objectives and legislative frameworks. Through the Silk Road and Belt and Road Initiative projects, the state establishes transnational commemorative spaces, restoring historical routes and creating international cultural centers that disseminate official narratives and enhance China's global influence (Suzuki, 2009; Gluck, 2022). Chinese legislation also regulates the use of cultural heritage and historical symbols as tools for national unity and patriotic education, controlling museums, architectural sites, and commemorative practices (Mayer, & Pawlik, 2023). Therefore, memory politics in China serves not only domestic cultural and identity functions but also operates as an instrument of soft power and strategic positioning in the international arena.

Memory Politics in India: Evolution, Legislation, and Geopolitical Context

India, as a postcolonial democracy with a rich historical and cultural heritage, exhibits a complex memory politics shaped by domestic political, social, and religious factors. More than fifty years after gaining independence (1947), pluralistic Indian democracy experiences a period of identity redefinition through the lens of the politicization of religious heritage and the spread of Hindutva ideology. As B. Sarkar (2024) notes, *'the symbolic culmination of this politicization of memory was the consecration of a new Ram temple on the site of the demolished Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, presented as a triumph of a monolithic 'Hindu' heritage'* (Sarkar, 2024, p. 564). This act illustrates how state decisions regarding

heritage can function as instruments of political mobilization while simultaneously dividing populations, even within a single religious group.

India's memory politics has deep historical roots. From colonial times to the present, heritage has served not only as a cultural resource but also as a means of decolonization and national restoration. B. Sarkar (2024) emphasizes that *'for postcolonial democracies, a return to languages, social organizations, beliefs, and arts restores a voice silenced by colonialism'* (Sarkar, 2024, p. 564). This approach involves the critical use of traditions and heritage, integrating them into contemporary political and social realities while avoiding fundamentalism or uncritical nostalgia.

Legislation and institutions in India play a central role in regulating heritage. Museums, monuments, and commemorative practices form the official narrative, combining state legitimation with patriotic education, while limiting access to alternative interpretations (Sarkar, 2024). Following independence, laws for the preservation of historical monuments were enacted, and private collections and religious artifacts gradually came under state control, giving rise to national museums and cultural centers. This institutional framework aims to preserve material heritage while supporting "living traditions" transmitted through practices, rituals, and education (Sarkar, 2024).

The domestic political dimension of India's memory politics is closely linked to disputes over religious identity and political mobilization. As B. Sarkar (2024) observes, '*uncritical nostalgia breeds fundamentalism: the desire to 'restore tradition' within the framework of Hindutva results in violent practices and historical distortions that pit Hindus against Muslims and Christians'* (Sarkar, 2024, p. 564). Consequently, contemporary Indian memory politics involves not only the preservation of material and intangible heritage but also a struggle over the interpretation of the past and the construction of collective identity.

The foreign policy dimension of Indian memory politics manifests in the diplomatic use of cultural heritage and traditions. Similar to China, where Silk Road programs are used to establish transnational commemorative infrastructure (Mayer & Pawlik, 2023), India employs heritage as a tool of soft power, highlighting its civilizational uniqueness and cultural influence within South Asia and beyond (Sarkar, 2024). Memorial and commemorative practices become part of foreign policy when cultural festivals, educational programs, and historical site restorations serve not only domestic patriotic education but also present India's civilizational heritage to the international community.

A central feature of Indian memory politics is the balance between decolonization and the preservation of diverse traditions. B. Sarkar (2024) emphasizes that *'decolonization is not limited to language; it is a return to the full richness of 'what is ours' – both loved and critiqued'* (Sarkar, 2024, p. 564). In this context, memory politics involves the critical reassessment of heritage, support for cultural innovation, and the integration of alternative voices – including those of women and marginalized groups – into commemorative practices and educational programs.

In conclusion, contemporary Indian memory politics is multidimensional, encompassing state regulation of heritage, commemorative practices, museums and monuments, domestic political mobilization, foreign policy positioning, and critical reassessment of traditions. It balances decolonization, preservation of cultural pluralism, and resistance to the monopolization of heritage through Hindutva (Sarkar, 2024). In this sense, India demonstrates both domestic and geopolitical dimensions of memory, linking the past, the present, and strategic planning for the future.

Memory Politics in Japan: From the Meiji Restoration to Contemporary Geopolitical and Domestic Challenges

Since the revolutionary transformations of the late 19th century, Japan has been engaged in the process of shaping its memory politics – a process encompassing both domestic and foreign policy dimensions. The evolution of Japanese memory politics can be characterized in several stages. The first stage followed the Meiji Restoration, which involved the creation of a state narrative, the cultivation of imperial memory, and the symbolic transformation of heritage, exemplified by the establishment of Yasukuni Shrine. The second stage encompassed the period of imperialism and World War II, during which military monuments were actively utilized, the cult of sacrifice was promoted, and patriotic nationalism was reinforced. The third stage began after 1945, when defeat and occupation necessitated a new engagement with history, oscillating between silence, acknowledgment, and denial.

The Meiji era (from 1868 onward) initiated a new state narrative, with the government actively transforming feudal structures, modernizing society, and simultaneously shaping symbolic forms of national

memory. This period laid the foundation for how Japan subsequently interpreted its past, particularly its military history in the 20th century.

In the postwar period, memory politics in Japan became crucial for both domestic identity formation and international positioning. On one hand, the government sought to integrate into the international community, strengthen the alliance with the United States, and avoid conflicts with neighboring countries, notably China and South Korea. As J. Campbell notes: *'Few countries have spent more time recently discussing historical memories than Japan. Yet the country has also avoided confronting the harsh realities of that history'* (Campbell, 2022, p. 1837)

Legally and institutionally, memory has been shaped through the establishment of memorials, museums, state commemorations, as well as educational and public practices. One of the most sensitive symbols of this policy is Yasukuni Shrine, which, according to M. Mullins, '*remains a contested site in contemporary Japan. Despite its name – 'Peaceful Country' – it has historically been associated with war, militarism, and societal conflict*' (Mullins, 2022, p. 145). Established in 1869 to honor soldiers who died restoring imperial authority, Yasukuni quickly became a national space for glorifying all those who perished in Japan's imperial wars until 1945.

Before the war, the shrine was controlled by military authorities, state-funded, and Shinto rituals – officially defined as 'non-religious' – were used to mobilize society, legitimize war, and reinforce the cult of self-sacrifice for the emperor. Following Japan's surrender in 1945, the shrine's status changed dramatically. Under the Allied Shinto Directive, all shrines were separated from the state, and Yasukuni became a religious organization in 1946. In the postwar period, this produced long-standing legal and political conflicts, including constitutional debates (Articles 20 and 89) over the separation of religion and state, controversies over official visits by prime ministers, and practices of commemorating the war dead without consent from families, leading to lawsuits from Japanese Buddhists, Christians, and citizens of Taiwan and South Korea. The issue became particularly politicized after Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone's official visit on August 15, 1985, when the shrine became a symbol of debates on the limits of state patriotism and historical revisionism. Even conservative intellectuals, such as philosopher Umehara Takeshi and writer Sono Ayako, critically assessed the political instrumentalization of the shrine, highlighting risks to democracy and foreign relations, with their early 'minority' warnings gradually becoming part of broader Japanese discourse on memory, responsibility, and freedom of conscience (Mullins, 2022, p. 146).

A. Takenaka (2015) notes that Yasukuni became 'a center where the Japanese state sought to shape the official historical narrative and cultivate a spirit of patriotic sacrifice' (Takenaka, 2015).

Domestically, memory politics manifests in how Japanese governments and institutions have approached war, colonialism, imperialism, and historical responsibility – for example, through disputes over history textbooks, prime ministerial visits to Yasukuni, or the choice between justifying the past and acknowledging guilt. W. Van Kemenade (2006, p. 7) observes that Japanese war "amnesia" creates serious challenges for reconciliation with victims and neighboring countries. S. Saaler and J. Aukema (2024) cite a Japanese business leader noting, '*If things are left as they are … a skewed perception of history – without knowledge of the horrors of the war – will be handed down to future generations'* (Saaler & Aukema, 2024).

By the late 20th and early 21st centuries, attention to historical responsibility intensified, alongside efforts to restore national prestige, as exemplified in studies such as Yoshida Shigeru Years: Coming to Terms with the Issue of Historical Memory (Iokibe, Komiya, Hosoya, Miyagi, & Tokyo Foundation for Policy Research's Political and Diplomatic Review Project, 2020). Although Japan does not have a single, comprehensive memory law, through various acts and state decisions, the government maintains a network of national monuments, museums, educational programs, and state ceremonies (e.g., the annual August 15 commemoration). Recognition of August 15 as a day of remembrance for defeat and victims – including speeches by the emperor and prime minister – illustrates the official codification of memory.

Domestically, Japan faces a dilemma: on one hand, the need to preserve memory, consolidate national identity, and honor the dead; on the other, political control, amnesia, and revisionism create tensions across generations, regions (e.g., Okinawa), and in relations with neighboring countries. Conflicts also arise between "anti-Eurocentrism" and "anti-Americanism" in the sense of asserting Japan's civilizational identity beyond being a 'Western satellite.' In this context, memory of war, colonialism, and imperial past becomes a contested space for debates over Japan's role in the contemporary regional order.

The foreign policy dimension of Japanese memory politics is particularly visible in relations with China, South Korea, and the United States. Yasukuni Shrine functions not only as a domestic political symbol

but also as a source of diplomatic tensions, as visits by Japanese leaders often provoke criticism from neighboring states (Kingston, 2025). Research also indicates that memory and historical narratives are leveraged as part of Japan's soft power and strategic positioning in the Asia-Pacific region (Selden, 2013). Postwar Japanese memory politics increasingly incorporates pan-Asian ideas, seeking to present Japan not merely as a Western nation but as part of Asia with its own high culture and civilization.

In conclusion, memory politics in Japan is a multifaceted phenomenon. It encompasses the formation of the state narrative since the Meiji era, transformations through wars and defeat, domestic policies of remembrance and forgetting, foreign policy strategies of reconciliation and competitive memory, legislative and institutional practices of memorialization, and controversies surrounding symbolic sites such as Yasukuni. Memory serves both as a resource – for national identity and international positioning – and as a political arena for contestation.

Conclusions

Memory politics in East Asian countries demonstrates a multi-layered interaction between historical traumas, nation-building processes, ideological mobilization, and regional competition. A comparative analysis of China, India, and Japan shows that memory functions not only as a cultural phenomenon but also as a political resource, actively employed by states to strengthen internal legitimacy and shape their international status.

A common feature across the three countries is that memory is institutionalized and regulated through official channels – museums, memorials, educational programs, legal mechanisms, and state rituals. At the same time, the objectives and content of these policies differ significantly depending on historical experience and the current political system.

China frames its memory politics around the narrative of the 'Century of National Humiliation,' emphasizing the trauma of colonial oppression and the heroization of resistance. This model contributes to social consolidation while reinforcing ideological and geopolitical claims. Internal tragedies and mistakes of the regime are largely excluded from the official historical memory, as they do not align with the logic of state legitimation.

India, drawing on its experience of British colonialism, constructs memory as a tool for decolonization and the restoration of cultural agency. However, this process is accompanied by the growing influence of Hindutva, which directs memory toward religious nationalism. Consequently, memory simultaneously strengthens the identity of the majority while provoking internal socio-cultural conflicts, limiting space for plural historical voices.

Japan, in contrast, navigates between the need to acknowledge historical responsibility for its imperial past and the desire to reframe national pride. The ambivalence of memory manifests in prolonged domestic debates over the interpretation of war crimes, the politico-legal status of military symbols, and Japan's role in World War II. These unresolved historical issues often exacerbate tensions with China and the Republic of Korea.

It is important to note that each country develops its own balance between remembering and forgetting. In China and Japan, certain historical episodes that could undermine the state's image are concealed, whereas in India, historical memory sometimes becomes a tool for exclusion and marginalization. In all cases, the past is "filtered" through the political interests of the present.

The foreign policy dimension of memory is also decisive. China actively exports its historical narratives within global infrastructure projects and seeks to assert moral authority; India positions itself as a civilizational power reclaiming recognition for its ancient traditions; and Japan uses memory to maintain a pacifist image while gradually integrating this with the restoration of regional authority. History thus becomes one of the main resources in geopolitical competition, with memory serving as an argument, a symbol, and a tool of influence.

The digital era significantly complicates the state's ability to monopolize interpretations of the past: alternative narratives and transnational discussions can challenge official policies even in highly controlled information environments. Today, memory in East Asia unfolds not only in national but also in global spaces of interaction.

Therefore, memory politics in East Asia is not merely about preserving historical facts but represents a struggle for control over the interpretation of the past, shaping both state behavior and the structure of regional relations. China, India, and Japan demonstrate different trajectories in linking memory with political expediency, yet all use the past as a resource for shaping the future. The effectiveness of regional

interaction will largely depend on whether East Asia can move from conflictual memory politics toward practices of dialogue, mutual recognition, and the pluralization of historical narratives – a key condition for stability, cooperation, and peaceful development in the twenty-first century.

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Acknowledgements

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