

Masculinity, Criminality, and Russian Men

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Abstract

This article explores links between discourses of masculinity and criminality in the narratives of non-criminal Russian men. Based on the analysis of biographical interviews with Russian men residing in Samara, this study examines different ways in which some of these men draw on criminal ideology or street lads' hierarchies to construct their masculine identities and reveals the complex relations between masculinity, homosexuality and criminality in the post-Soviet Russian context. My data and personal life experience in Russia both suggest that appropriation of criminal or semi-criminal discourse as a resource for making masculinity among my respondents is not accidental and cannot be explained solely by their class and sociocultural backgrounds. I argue that contemporary masculinities in Russia are not only informed by criminal quasi-law (*poniatia*) and rather similar 'lads' rules' (*patsanskie pravila*), but are also in a state of complex power relations with criminal values and hierarchies. This article demonstrates that acceptance and internalization of criminal culture norms in the post-Soviet context acquired a disciplinary character, and allows for the construction of hegemonic masculinity – a specific type of masculinity, which legitimates hierarchical gender relations.

Keywords: hegemonic masculinity, post-Soviet Russia, criminal and street masculine hierarchies, homophobia.

The Russian prison system is a very rigid hierarchical social structure that imposes an indelible imprint on its inmates. As the specialists working on prison reform in Russia have explained, a person who has spent three or four years in prison in this part of the world is never the same person again (Abramkin, Al'pern, 2005). Oleg had spent six years in prison and so his use of terms of reference taken from prison culture comes as no surprise. However the cases of eight other respondents, who have never been imprisoned and presumably have never had serious problems with the law, but still relied on the criminal quasi-law or *poniatia* and rather similar 'lads' rules' or *patsanskie pravila* in their articulation of masculinity, require special consideration. It is especially

curious that these men only drew on the discourse of criminality when they talked about masculinity or homosexuality, while the other parts of their biographical narratives were almost always completely free of criminal language and norms.

Some of these criminal articulations of masculinity tended to idealize criminals, their rigid code of conduct, relied heavily on prison jargon, and in general aimed to demonstrate that a speaker wished to be seen as a respected insider of the criminal men's world. Others referred to the generalized character of the criminal lord, the members of street territorial gangs, and protagonists in Russian movies about bandits in order to ridicule, challenge, or at least disagree with their type of masculine bravado. It is interesting that even those men who specifically contrasted themselves to "*this kind of man*" still paid considerable attention to speculations about the criminal world.

Drawing on in-depth biographical interviews with 20 Russian men living in Samara and interviewed in 2013, I focus on the narratives of eight individuals to explore the links between discourses of masculinity and criminality in the narratives of non-criminal Russian men today. The fact that eight non-criminal interviewees spontaneously raised the topic of the criminal world supports the conclusions of some Russian researchers about the prevalence of prison values amongst all layers of contemporary Russian society (Oleinik, 2001a, 2001b, 2003; Taibakov, 2001; Khanipov, 2008).

Criminological scholarship, however, ignores the gender dimension of the topic. At the same time, studies on men and masculinities in the Russian context have overlooked how the broader ideologies of masculinity and criminality intersect. The notable exceptions here are the works of sociologists researching youth cultures and delinquent gangs in post-Soviet Russia (Gromov, 2013; Gromov and Stephenson, 2008; Kosterina, 2006; Pilkington, Omel'chenko and Garifzianova, 2010; Salagaev, 2001; Salagaev and Shashkin, 2002, 2003, 2005; Shashkin and Salagaev, 2002; Stephenson, 2009, 2011, 2012). Whereas this literature shows that territorial gangs and street lads' groups emulate prison and criminal culture's gender ideals and the romantic brotherhood of outlaws, my research analyses the complex relations between masculinity, homosexuality



and criminality in the broader post-Soviet Russian context. My data shows that *poniatiia* and *patsanskie pravila* are important in the formation of masculinity even to men who are not steeped in this culture.

I argue that post-Soviet Russian masculinities are not only informed by criminal quasi-law and “lads” rules, but are also in a state of complex power relations with criminal values and hierarchies. Although not a representative sample, the interviews with non-criminal men in this study demonstrate that the positive or negative referencing to the criminal culture norms is an important resource for making masculinities in the post-Soviet context. The data also clearly demonstrates how the ideology of the criminal world legitimizes highly structured and hierarchical gender order in Russia. While consideration of this issue and a gender sensitive approach in criminology is almost totally absent from the Russian academic tradition, present study aims to fill this gap and contribute to our understanding of the interplay between masculinity and criminality in Russia.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Criminality

“What is “masculinity”? Although we seem to have a difficult time defining masculinity, as a society we have little trouble in recognizing it, and indeed we spend massive amounts of time and money ratifying and supporting the versions of masculinity that we enjoy and trust” (Halberstam, 1998:1).

As Jack Halberstam rightly notes, defining masculinity is never an easy task for researchers and analysts. I approach masculinity as a socially constructed category and a strategy, rather than as a somehow “natural” or psychological set of individual traits and characteristics. Masculinity is a configuration of practices and discourses that symbolise what it means to be a man in a given culture at a given historical period. “[T]he concept is also inherently relational. ‘Masculinity’ does not exist except in contrast with ‘femininity’” (Connell, 1995: 68). People are socialised into a collective understanding of what masculinity and femininity mean and at the same time can actively challenge and transform conventional gender representations.

Individuals are positioned differently within socially organised power relations and possess different social statuses on the basis of class, race and sexual orientation. International research confirms the initial insights of Connell that we can only talk

about masculinity in plural terms and that “certain masculinities are more socially central, or more associated with authority and power, than others” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 846). In any given society there is a hierarchy of masculine behaviours and at the same time there is a specific form of masculinity that “structures and legitimates hierarchical gender relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among men” (Messerschmidt, 2012: 58). This is known as hegemonic masculinity. Connell and Messerschmidt stress that hegemonic masculinity is not fixed and is not necessarily the type of masculinity that is dominant at a particular time and place. This masculinity is not the most culturally celebrated or the most common in particular settings, but the one that legitimates a culturally and historically specific kind of gender inequality and hierarchies between men and between men and women (Messerschmidt, 2012). For this reason hegemonic masculinity may only be understood in its relationship to femininities and nonhegemonic masculinities. The types of practices and discourses that are considered to be hegemonically masculine differ according to historical context, geographic location and cultural setting (Connell, 1995).

The concept of hegemonic masculinity, “originally formulated to conceptualize how patriarchal relations are legitimated throughout society,” (Messerschmidt, 2012: 63) has influenced gender studies across many academic fields. It has been embraced by many different disciplines, including criminology, a discipline that since the early 1990s has been “seeking to engage with the sexed specificity of its object of study—the fact that crime is, overwhelmingly, an activity engaged in by men” (Collier, 1998: viii). The recognition in the last few decades “that [crime] is almost always committed by men” (Newburn and Stanko, 1994: 10 in Collier, 1998: 1) and that “[m]en predominate not just as officially ‘known’ (and unknown) offenders but also as workers within the criminal justice system” (Collier, 1998: 2) has made criminologists in some countries take masculinity seriously and focus their attention on how men, masculinities, and crime interact (Carlen and Jefferson, 1996; Collier, 1998; Messerschmidt, 1993, 2005; Newburn and Stanko, 1994; Sabo, Kupers and London, 2001).



Although there is a certain degree of disagreement within criminology about the ability of hegemonic masculinity as an analytical category to comprehensively address such a complex subject as crime (Collier, 1998), a number of prominent researchers argue that involvement in crime may and should be seen as a resource in accomplishing or “doing” masculinity (Messerschmidt, 1993, 2005; Newburn and Stanko, 1994). As Messerschmidt has argued, “one crucial way... to understand ‘making of crime’ by men is to analyse ‘the making of masculinities’” (2005: 198).

Methodology

My fieldwork was conducted in Samara, the administrative centre of Samara Oblast in the Volga Federal District. Samara is approximately 1,100 kilometres southeast of Moscow, with a population of 1,164,685 recorded in the 2010 census. Using purposive sampling procedure I collected the life stories of 20 individuals living there and identifying as men in order to explore the relationship between the ideology of manhood and subjective experience of being a man. I aimed to interview participants who were as different in terms of socio-demographic characteristics as possible. For instance, if I had already interviewed an 18-year-old university student or a 68-year-old retired colonel, I would not contact other people with similar characteristics.

All the interviews for this project were conducted in Russian, voice recorded with the informant’s permission, and ranged from two to five hours and most spanned more than one meeting. Along with the questions relating to an individual life story, I directly asked each of my informants if they considered themselves a man, and followed this inquiry with a set of questions about their ideas of masculinity. For instance, I asked them to explain in their own words how they understood the expression ‘to be a man’, who taught them to be a man, if they saw any privileges in being a man, if they had encountered any difficulties in becoming or being a man, and what the main challenges of being a man in today’s world are.

In the following two sections, I explore the notions of the criminal quasi-law (*poniatiia*) and lads’ rules (*patsanskie pravila*) in order to understand how my respondents used these systems of norms to narrate and represent their masculine identities in the interviews. I also explain why, for the purpose

of this study, I draw direct parallels between “criminal” and “street” honour codes as well as between two different types of criminal ideology in Russia: one being “thieves” and the other “bandits”.

Poniatiia, Criminal Quasi-Law

Any Russian, even one who has never been in contact with detention facilities, is familiar with prison and criminal subculture. They would have encountered it while reading literary works, listening to pop songs, speaking argot, reproducing modes of behaviour that came into being in prison. (Oleinik, 2001b: 40).

The criminal quasi-law or *poniatiia* that I refer to throughout this article is an umbrella term for various codes of conduct including those that work in lawful contexts. It is extremely difficult to define and to comprehensively describe. Different social groups and networks in Imperial, Soviet and then post-Soviet Russia each had their own interpretations of *poniatiia* as well as different levels of commitment to its rules. Another key difficulty facing anyone who wants to research *poniatiia* in Russia is that the object of study is extremely volatile even inside a particular network. Although it is possible to get an idea about this set of norms and values while studying multiple cases of their usage, it turns out that these rules are ambiguous and their implementation depends on many factors, including the eloquence, authority, or physical strength of the person defending their version of such norms (Chalidze, 1977).

Certain Russian criminologists regard the Soviet prison subculture and so called “thieves’ law” (*vorovskoi zakon*) of the 1930s as one of the sources of contemporary criminal quasi-law (Dolgova & Djakov, 1989: 109), but these hypotheses have never been verified (Oleinik, 2003: 3). Contemporary criminal quasi-law can be understood as an unwritten code of norms and rules that regulates the relationships between prisoners, professional criminals and with the outside world. It is generally characterized by a strict hierarchical separation of men, disrespect towards formal social institutions and a culture of mutual trust and support within internal networks.¹

Another pillar of the Russian underworld is an ideological exclusion of women from criminal men’s fraternities. *Poniatiia* are recognised, supported, and shared among the overwhelming majority



of prisoners and professional criminals. It is considered to be both an ethical imperative and a means of resistance to prison administrations as well as to the wider institutional order.

In popular conception, *poniatiia* are directly connected with prison and the world of thieves (*vorovskoi mir*). The term 'thief' (*vor*) in the context of Russian prison refers not to the common usage of this word (somebody who steals other people's property) but to an elite group of leaders of the criminal and prison world. The thieves follow their own law, which has initiation and exclusion rituals, prescribes what is right and wrong, and what is and is not acceptable. Although there are some variations in the rules of the thieves' world, its basic principles include an uncompromising attitude towards denunciation, the primacy of collective interest over private, brotherhood between prisoners, and providing help to those who find themselves in a difficult situation. In the thieves' understanding, *poniatiia* dictates that one lives and acts according to one's conscience, not the state's laws.

As Volkov convincingly demonstrates, in the 1990s "the world of thieves has been challenged by a new type of criminal structure – the world of so-called 'bandits'" (Konstantinov & Dikselyus, 1998 in Volkov, 1999: 744). A bandit is a member of a criminal group specializing in the use of violence (Volkov, 2002: 195). In contrast to thieves, who strive to keep a low profile and whose main "task is to steal (in a broad sense) and avoid being caught", bandits are highly socially visible and claim the ability "to apply and manage organised force" as well as "to effect business transactions" (1999:744). Volkov describes the ideologies of these two social groups as follows: "The ethics of thieves is a projection of values and rules of prison life into civic ('free') life. Prison and labour camp terms are the major source of thieves' authority, respect and career advancement to the highest title of thief-in-law. The bandit's reputation and his rise to the elite position of *avtoritet* (authority) is build on precedents of vigorous and successful use or management of violence" (1999: 745). The bandits' power rests on coercive capacity and is a kind of "political power" (Poggi, 1990: 1-18 in Volkov, 2002: 60), while "[t]he power of thieves is much more dependent on moral authority and tradition; it is an example of normative power" (Volkov, 2002: 60).

Volkov explains that thieves and bandits are ideal types in the criminal world and that in the changing social, political and economic conditions of the 1990s the boundaries between them and their ideologies were blurred. Nevertheless, he insists that thieves and bandits had different and conflicting ideologies and that "the underlying rift between the traditional Soviet underworld and the new world of violent entrepreneurs is much stronger than is often assumed" (Volkov, 2002: 54). However different these two subject positions may be in other regards, the masculine ideologies of bandits and thieves do not look that dissimilar. Both rely on strict and straightforward masculine hierarchies, determine a man's reputation on his ability to stand by his word and use physical and discursive violence, and ideologically exclude women from "professional" activities.²

The paradox of the situation is that on the one hand, law-abiding citizens perceive prison and the criminal world as unambiguously negative phenomena that they do not want to have anything to do with. On the other hand, rules and norms that originated in prisons are widely present today in various areas of Russian life (Tishchenko, 2007: 5). *Poniatiia* permeate mainstream culture and the lives of ordinary people through a variety of cultural and linguistic practices, such as jargon, tattoos, gestural language, gang signs, underworld songs, literature, and other mass media productions. Oleinik's research demonstrates that criminal quasi-law is incorporated into the activities of legal institutions and is widely used in various layers of contemporary Russian non-prison society (2001a, 2001b).

Valerii Abramkin, the Director of the Moscow Centre for Prison Reform, argues that the relevance of *poniatiia* in prison and in general society, can be explained by its proximity to the norms, values and attitudes of traditional Russian culture. *Poniatiia* are built on the popular (in contrast to legislative) understanding of justice and national culture in Russia. "Informal principles that we use when making decisions are very different from the state law... to solve a problem in a human way almost always means renouncing the law, not going to the courts or the police" (Utro.ru, 2007).

The popular concept of justice in Russia does not coincide with official law, as the Russian



population perceives the state as hostile. One of my interviewees (who had never been to prison) put it this way.

Here in Russia two different laws regulate our lives: the rule of thieves and the rule of democratic rights. At all times people consulted the thieves for justice. Thieves dealt with the core of a problem. There is even this notion: thieves' laws are the people's laws (*kak po vorovski, tak i po liudski*). They are more trustworthy. They are more knowledgeable about life. They made a decision and people really trusted it. They decided reasonably and competently in contrast to bold-faced bureaucratic pigs who have sold out for their careers. They are people who suffered a lot in exile in Siberia. Vitalii, 29 year old

Although one can find many descriptions of prison life and of criminal codes of conduct, the genesis, evolution and dissemination of *poniatiia* remains under-researched and under-theorized. The works of sociologists Anton Oleinik and Vadim Volkov are exceptions. Drawing on the institutional analysis of Russian society, Oleinik shows that institutional structures in Russian prisons and society are "similar, related, and congruent" (2001b: 42), and argues that the reason for the dissemination of criminal culture in Soviet and then post-Soviet Russia lies in the organization of Russian society and the specificity of power relations (2001a, 2001b). Volkov's research sheds light on the crucial role that criminal groups and violent entrepreneurship played in Russian state building after the Soviet Union's collapse (2002, 2012). While the overlap between *poniatiia* and the ideology of masculinity is apparent, this body of scholarship nevertheless leaves the gendered nature of this connection outside the scope of analysis.

Lads' Rules or *Patsanskie pravila*

At that time, it all flourished in Russia. You go out into the yard and see that the yard is being ruled by *poniatiia*: here lads (*patsani*), there suckers (*lokhi*). You either become a lad or a sucker. Alexei, 28 year old

While the question of masculinity is absent from the works on the criminal quasi-law, in recent years it has attracted the attention of sociologists researching youth cultures and delinquent gangs in post-Soviet Russia (Gromov, 2013; Gromov and Stephenson, 2008; Kosterina, 2006; Pilkington, Omel'chenko and Garifzianova, 2010; Salagaev

2001; Salagaev and Shashkin, 2002, 2003, 2005; Shashkin and Salagaev, 2002; Stephenson, 2009, 2011, 2012). Most of these studies have focused on the cultural codes of street youth groups and the cultural representations and practices of Russian gang members (*gruppirovki*) involved in criminal activities in certain territories. All agree that the street groups of lads and delinquent gangs have a unified masculine code of honour called lads' rules (*patsanskie pravila*), which to a certain degree rests on criminal quasi-law.

Acknowledging the continuity between these two systems of norms and values, the literature on delinquent gangs in the Russian context draws a clear separation between *poniatiia* and *patsanskie pravila*, which is entirely reasonable when one looks at them in a broader context. That said, my research, which is focused on gender, stresses direct parallels between *poniatiia* and *patsanskie pravila* and even uses these honour codes as synonyms, for two key reasons. Firstly, the respondents do not distinguish between them (some use these terms interchangeably or say *patsanskie poniatiia*). Secondly, while differences between street and criminal worlds may be numerous, the shared attributes or at least pathways between their gender-related rules, attitudes and inner masculine hierarchies are not merely coincidental. For example, while explaining to me what the lad's code of honour means, Vitalii directly connects the idealized image of a "true lad" (*nastoiashchii patsan*) with the image of a thief-in-law or *vor v zakone*, an established leader of the criminal elite who lives strictly according to the *poniatiia* and enforces them onto the community he is in charge of:

The lad won't let you down, won't rat on you, and won't tell lies. The lad will help you. His word is as good as his bond. The lad is a mythological respected authority who you can trust. If you take all the Russian prison folklore, [the lad] has the same image as that of a truthful and wise thief-in-law.

Like the criminal quasi-law, lad's rules (*patsanskie pravila*) aim to reproduce very similar types of tough, aggressive, competent, sexist, but fair-minded masculinity that relies heavily on physical and discursive violent practices and promotes a rigid hierarchy among men. This hierarchy is rigorously policed and regulated by entry and exit rituals. A complex set of punitive sanctions is applied to those who fail to comply with the



general rules (Kosterina, 2006: 23). In this sense, the lads' world resembles the world of professional criminals, where violence is perceived as a social norm and a form of social communication (Beumers and Lipovetsky, 2009). Men with rough masculine bodies and tempers as well as those who are willing to take risks, are actively involved in the system of mutual supervision of each other's masculinity, express strong disdain for the official authorities, and occupy the top positions in both the street and criminal worlds. In these worlds, the value of brotherhood and solidarity co-exists with intense competition between men eager to demonstrate their masculine vigour and bravery.

Contemporary congruence between the norms and values of the *poniatii* and *patsanskie pravila* in the streets can be seen to be rooted in a "series of systemic crises in the Soviet and post-Soviet social order" (Stephenson, 2011: 324), and specifically in the weakening of the state after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Stephenson, 2011; Salagaev, 2001; Salagaev & Shashkin, 2005). During the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, professional criminals, gangs, and various semi-criminal networks "became important players in taking control of resources during the period of rapid disintegration of the Soviet system" (Ledeneva, 1998; Humphrey, 2002; Nazpary, 2002 in Stephenson, 2011: 324-325), and "agent[s] of social regulation in a situation when the state was weak, inefficient and corrupt" (Stephenson, 2011: 328). A lot of young and active people responded to the crisis of the social, economic and political order "by building strong neighbourhood organizations with vertical leadership structures and internal normative codes" (Stephenson, 2011: 329).

"The neighbourhood social organizations that became local agents of power were initially inclusive peer groups, companies of kids of different ages who spent time playing together, going to local dance halls and football matches, and defending their turf from other youngsters" (Stephenson, 2011: 325). In their work on the street gangs in Kazan', Stephenson analyses how members of these local organizations became "the informal lords of the city quarters, instilling fear and awe into the local residents, capturing street business opportunities and even moving into positions of wealth and power in the larger society" in the 1990s (2011: 325).³

Plaksiy calculated that at the end of the 1980s every third male aged between 12 and 18 was a member of a territorial group (1990: 90 in Stephenson, 2011: 333). Some of these groups were only involved in group fights and petty delinquency, while others developed into professional criminal networks that used their violent resources for economic gain (Stephenson, 2011: 333). Salagaev and Shashkin also note that from the early 1980s until the mid-1990s there was a massive increase in youth participation in gangs that were in close contact with the criminal world via illegal practices, and prison experiences were quite common among their members; in the social disorder of the 1990s, the acceptance of criminal culture gave new possibilities for social mobility and gender construction (Salagaev and Shashkin, 2003). Detailed knowledge of the criminal value system and internalization of its normative codes allowed for the construction of a specific type of masculinity, which was hegemonic in many different social contexts, and, as my data shows, continues to be in the present day.

Another important factor in the convergence between *poniatii* and *patsanskie pravila* was the heroisation of thieves and bandits in post-Soviet Russian popular media. Ratings for Radio Chanson, which broadcasts songs of the underworld, indicate that this station has been in the top five most popular Russian radio broadcasters for many years (Synovate Comcon, 2002-2007). Today, one in ten Muscovites listens to Radio Chanson and more than 7.5 million people in Russia listen to it daily (WCIOM, 2012). Films and TV series about "honourable" bandits, exploring the ways in which men obtain masculinity, power, money and respect through criminal means, continue to be extremely popular in post-Soviet Russia. Balabanov's films *Brother* and *Brother 2*, where the protagonist Danila constructs his "respectable" masculine image by making a great deal of money working as a hitman for the Mafia, being sexually and romantically involved with multiple women and at the same time expressing "an (ironically) moralistic view that opposes domestic violence and theft", honouring his word and protecting 'the innocent', are pertinent examples (Heller, 2011-2012: 3). Such media projects, along with the romanticisation of the image of the bandit, actively deconstruct the positive image of alternative legal professional groups such as the police and armed forces (Salagaev and Shashkin, 2005).



Stephenson argues that as the economic and political situation in Russia has stabilized, incentives for joining the gangs have been disappearing and as the state reasserts itself, the gangs' role in regulating the social order is becoming history (2011: 341). However, the hegemonic masculinity ideal that these gangs, along with the popular media, introduced into various social circles has not become a thing of the past. A broad awareness throughout all of the layers of Russian society about the criminal quasi-law indicates that this system of norms and values has continued to develop. It is worth noting that most of the respondents I discuss in this article drew on the *poniatii* or *patsanskie pravila* only when I asked them gender-related questions. These systems of meanings were also particularly prominent when my informants talked about homosexuality. The other parts of their narratives were almost always completely free of criminal jargon and norms.

Could you explain in your own words what the expression “to be a man” means to you?

To be a man? I'm not sure I'll give you a precise answer or any answer at all. To look at it from the street lads' perspective: how do they classify the population? They are divided into a respected lad (*avtoritetnyi patsan*), *gobshite* (*baklan*) and faggot (*pidoras*). What is a respected lad? A lad who stands by his word (*otvechaet za bazar*). What is a gobshite? He is in general a normal lad, but he doesn't stand by his word (*za bazar ne otvechaet*), he spouts a lot of crap (*baklanit slishkom mnogo*). A faggot also gabs (*baklanit*) too much and doesn't stand by his word (*za bazar ne otvechaet*) and just generally is not a man, you cannot change or straighten him out. Here is a certain tendency, an archetype of a street character. This tendency helps form the understanding of what it is to be a man. A man—this is someone who stands by his word (*otvechaet za bazar*). Well this is of course a very serious matter; it is just being expressed in an anecdotal form here.

Victor

Victor is a 45-year-old university professor, highly educated and very articulate. He has neither been in prison nor had serious problems with the law. Interviewing him was easy. As an experienced public speaker he was used to talking to people and was able to clearly and vividly formulate his thoughts and ideas. Narratives such as the one shared by Victor are very familiar to me and

extremely common among street lads, petty criminals and prisoners in Russia. What made a mature intellectual or, for example, the eloquent, 52-year-old businessmen, Georgii, originating from Soviet intelligentsia family and well-travelled and the well-educated 22-year-old university graduate, Artem, people seemingly as far from the criminal world as one can imagine, illustrate their understanding of manhood using a street perspective and criminal jargon?

According to Victor and some other respondents, the main characteristic of a man is a non-negotiable commitment to stand by his word. It is difficult to translate the words he is using into English. The original concept that Victor uses, *otvechat za bazar*, is very common in the interviews with the other respondents who articulated their understanding of masculinity in criminal terms. This expression is part of criminal jargon, which currently has a remarkably widespread use in Russian culture. *Bazar* means a conversation, *bazarit* means to speak or talk, *konchai bazar* means “stop talking”, and *est bazar* means “we need to talk”. Today, *otvechat za bazar* expression has slipped into everyday language and has even become a generic designation for those who rely on or enact criminal culture codes. It is not uncommon to hear this phrase in a joking context when bandits and street characters are being mocked. However, in the prison world and the world of violent entrepreneurship, under certain conditions the price of not standing for one's word is loss of safety, health, or even life.

Otvechat za bazar principle maximizes the identification between words and actions. This rule constitutes the main pillar of criminal masculine ideology for very practical reasons. If a man promises to do something or uses threats, these threats should be carried out at any cost, because consistency of words and actions allows one to build a reputation and deal with certain issues without resort to force or coercion but simply with the means of verbal communication and intimidation (Volkov, 2002). Secondly, provided that one's reputation in criminal circles is being rigorously policed and categorized, a single deviation from this principle would lead to the loss of all the symbolic and social capital that a man has. In other words, the functional purpose of the *otvechat za bazar* rule is to minimize physical and economic damage while resolving a certain matter and building and maintaining social hierarchies



between hegemonic and subordinated masculinities.

When used by criminals themselves, the principle of responsibility for one's word may be seen as the normative epitome of a specific regulatory power regime, which determines the conversion of reputation into economic and social benefits (Volkov, 2002). However, what does loyalty to this principle do for non-criminals in the post-Soviet context? Victor, along with a number of other interviewees, seemed to be very invested in the rule of identification between words and actions. Our further conversation showed that for him the value of this principle could not possibly be overestimated:

And you know this manifests itself very strongly in my professional activities. Let's say I've established a theorem, proved that I stand by my word (*za bazar otvetil*) and then let's say some humanitarian writes some essay on Nietzsche. Well, what has he done? He has taken some quotations; if he is smart enough, he has developed a hypothesis; but he has not substantiated anything. Here, you see, it's the same terminology. You claim something? (*Ti pred'iavliaesh?*) Prove it, lad! (*Obosnui, patsan!*) But he can't prove it! And here is this progression. When I argued with my colleagues and acquaintances who are into the humanities, I gave the same example. Guys, I'm a respected lad (*avtoritetnyi patsan*), I stand by my word (*otvechaiu za bazar*), while you're just gabbing (*baklanite*)... And maybe it was, well, I can't say that this is what led me to my profession. When you start thinking about it, start to question yourself: Who are you? What are you doing? Well, maybe you're not the best person in the world, but at least you stand by your word. Know this and be at peace with yourself.

Here it can clearly be seen that Victor draws on the criminal ideology and street lads' hierarchy for a specific purpose - to construct his own masculinity. Victor appropriated criminal or semi-criminal masculine hierarchy as a resource for making masculinity. He did it by positioning himself on the top of this hierarchy and simultaneously constructed his colleagues in the humanities as subordinate. I argue that by doing so he is firstly relying on the cultural model, which is well familiar to him and to other Russian people and, secondly, that he is considering this model to be hegemonic in his socio-cultural context. Although previously he has denoted the street lads' hierarchy as "anecdotal", he is simultaneously very proud to position himself at the top of it.

It is noteworthy that Victor, while explaining to me

how gender double standards work, also specifically emphasized that the *otvechat' za bazar* principle by definition does not apply to women and "faggots", who are both in his opinion just incapable of "watching their tongues". To my next question, what he means when he says "faggot" and if this term refers to homosexual men, Victor replied:

No, no, no, this is different... This is actually a multifaceted word, it does not always mean sexual orientation. It's just not a man. It's fairly easy to describe this type but, again, on a teenage level. This is someone who's discussing his street problems while having a cup of tea with his parents. Like there was a fight and Petya kicked his ass, Petya's bad. So the parents put in a complaint to the police and Petya gets busted.

Victor's example of how a man stops being a man and becomes a "faggot" by denouncing someone and seeking help from the police again refers to the criminal value system according to which these actions are considered to be a major offence.

Later in the interview, placing a strong accent on the perceived costs attached to masculinity, Victor again aligned women's and faggots' social experience and concluded with the next formula of gender relations: "You're a man, you have to. I'm a woman, I'm allowed to. And that is about the same. You're a man - you have to, I'm a faggot - I'm allowed to". The very next moment he anxiously clarified that this is all absolutely unfamiliar to him and in fact he has never come into contact with homosexuals, whom he quite habitually uses the terms "fags" or "faggots". By feminising homosexual men or gender-non-conforming men as weak, irrational, irresponsible, and unreliable, while simultaneously masculinising himself as mentally strong, rational, responsible and reliable, Victor engages in the making of hegemonic masculinity that legitimates hierarchical gender relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among men (Messerschmidt, 2012: 66).

Another respondent Arsenii, a 32-year-old psychologist, was a part of street gang for several months in his late teens, where all the youngsters dreamed of occupying an honourable position in the criminal hierarchy and, in his words, becoming "onlookers" (*smotriashchii*).⁴ Arsenii confirmed that women and girls were actively excluded from the criminal men's world.



Those guys who started to mess with [criminality]... girls immediately disappeared from those companies, because you know this “bros before hoes” lads’ saying. Most likely, though, there was no place for a woman as a full participant in all this. She was perceived as, yes, she’s got tits, yes, it’d be nice to sleep with her, but nothing more than that really.

It is crucial to note that the respondents’ attitudes presented in this paper are not solely formed by the criminality discourse but are a part of the wider patriarchal culture which informed the socialization of young men in Soviet and post-Soviet societies. Among other things, this culture has conditioned and reinforced a culturally specific set of gender double standards, including the expulsion of women and girls from the public sphere. I do not specifically focus on the contemporary gender order in post-Soviet societies, the legacy of the Soviet version of gender equality project, or the recent patriarchal renaissance in Russia. All these questions require a detailed historical description, which falls outside the scope of this article. Nevertheless, as argued earlier, a consideration of the intersections between the criminal culture in Russia and mainstream constructions of gender is vital for understanding the specificity of the region and its gender dynamic.

Masculinity as Homophobia in Russia

Homophobia is a central organizing principle of our cultural definition of manhood. Homophobia is more than the irrational fear of gay men, more than the fear that we might be perceived as gay... Homophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men (Kimmel, 1994: 127).

As Kimmel writes, the main reason for men’s homophobia is not the actual fear of homosexuals or homosexual experience but an anxiety of being seen as untough, uncool, and unmanly. This anxiety compels men and boys to express contempt for anyone who does not fit the culturally specific ideals of masculinity (Kimmel, 1994). As a number of researchers demonstrate, the “fag” label can have both sexual and nonsexual meanings that nevertheless always draw on notions of gender (Pascoe, 2007: 22). For instance, Pascoe’s research on “fag discourse” in a working class high school in California shows that “a fag has as much to do with failing at masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess, and strength or in any way

revealing weakness or femininity as it does with a sexual identity” (Pascoe, 2007: 54).

These insights and conclusions of Western scholars may be applied to a variety of different cultures, including Russian culture, and to some extent have been confirmed by my research data (as Victor’s case demonstrates). However, the fag discourse in a country where homosexuality was criminalized⁵ for most of the twentieth century and marked as anti-social behaviour⁶ lacks the fluidity and ambiguity between sexual and nonsexual meanings that contemporary American researchers have observed and documented.

During my interviews, I came across many instances where men drew direct parallels between the fag discourse and prison attitudes towards homosexuality. Here is how Vitalii, a 29-year-old photographer, describes contemporary attitudes to “fags” in Russia.

Fags? For me it's just surreal. I don't know them ... from childhood for us to be called a faggot or something has been like the main insult. And in general it was very much punished. In modern Russia, after the 90s there is still this terrible cloud of prison abuse (*opuskanie*). One becomes humiliated. And this still exists. Now we're kind of being instilled with tolerance and everybody blames Russia that we're all too laddish here. But Russia is still like that; it is not ready to see guys kissing each other. You can still get your teeth kicked in for that. Many people do not realize that it's better to keep fags [in the closet]. This way they will be safer. If they reveal themselves now, every other [man] will punch them in the face. There could be a special day, like the Airborne Forces day when they beat up the *churki*⁷; here it could be a day when they beat up the fags. It's just crazy and incomprehensible. It's not normal. People are men and women. Full stop. I will not kill them, but I don't want to have anything to do with them. Although there are a lot of them, so we might work alongside them and not even know it.

Vitaly not only describes the word “fag” as a harsh insult to a man but states that for him it is associated with the prison practice of *opuskanie*, which means converting somebody by force into a passive homosexual or, in prison terms, a “rooster”. In the prison world, “fags” constitute a separate lowest caste, the lowest of all, more habitually called *petukhi* - roosters, “the lowly” – *opushchennye*, or *pederasty* - the pederasts. It is the caste of pariahs. Even casually touching a rooster or his possessions (like a spoon or a



towel) can result in the “contamination” of the unwary inmate and his subsequent descent into a lower caste. The roosters are separated from the other prisoners, physically as well as socially. In the prison setting, actual or symbolic rape⁸ is a punishment for serious offences such as stealing from or denouncing inmates, or refusing to pay gambling debts. Once converted there is no way back; a rooster becomes the target of extreme daily violence for the rest of his time in prison. For this reason, inmates consider murder to be more humane than *opuskanie* (Oleinik, 2003).

In spite of the fact that Vitalii has never been to jail and imagines himself to be a progressive representative of his generation who understands the concept of tolerance and holds negative but non-violent attitudes towards homosexual people, his homophobic sentiments are unambiguously informed by prison norms, which he also sees as valid for the rest of the Russian population. In other words, the hegemonic masculine discourse that came into being in prison has not just shaped Vitalii's understanding that a gay man can not be considered a man. It has also instructed him that a real man (a status that hegemonic masculinity promises) must not have anything to do with homosexuals.

The influence of prison culture on homophobic attitudes and ideas about masculinity is also visible in the narratives of the other respondents. Dmitrii, a 26-year-old sales promoter in advertising, did not use any criminal jargon or system of norms throughout the interview. It was only when I probed his views on the boundaries of masculinity and asked whether, in his opinion, a gay man could be a man, that he suddenly drew on prison discourse and answered that “an active one probably can”. Then he added that a passive one most probably could not.

Anatolii, a 32-year-old auditor, whose case will be discussed in the following section of this article, also drew on prison discourse when talking about homosexuality:

M: If you were given a chance to be born in a female body, would you use it?

A: No, indeed, because I see this idea as connected with some kind of sexual deviation. I don't know, there is something disgusting in it for me. Well, if you want it, go to a gay club, say that you are passive, and experience what it feels like when somebody fucks you.

Dmitrii and Anatolii associate the notion of “being a man” and being in a male body with taking an “active” part in a sexual encounter. Therefore it is not a homosexual act that is considered to be emasculating per se, but rather the abandonment of an active masculine role, and the rejection of sexual dominance. This aspect distinguishes the prison understanding of homosexuality and homophobia from mainstream religious homophobia, which does not differentiate between active and passive “sodomites” (Volodarskii, 2013: 175). These respondents' views correspond with the strict prison rules where the ban on touching “roosters” does not apply to having sex with them. The most respected inmates who belong to the top of the illicit hierarchy can have their own lovers from the caste of “roosters”. Provided that they always perform the “active” sex part, it does not affect their superior status.

Discussion of homophobia and homosexuality in Russia is a complicated and multilayered task. The investigation of the roots of contemporary homophobia in this country is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless I should note that in the narratives of my respondents the discourse on fags and homosexuality was very often informed by, and imbued with, the atrocities of prison, where a fag identity is a lifelong sentence resulting in isolation, violence, loss and humiliation. More research needs to be done in this area in order to understand how to address homophobia in Russia. One of the starting points of this research could be to consider whether the post-Soviet Russian government's reluctance not only to fight homophobia but even to talk about it has made prison tales and codes the main source of information about homosexual practices and identities that frames Russian people's attitudes.

Compulsory Criminality

Not all of the respondents who drew on the discourses of criminality when they talked about masculinity did so in the same way. While Alexei, Victor and Vitalii celebrated the criminal culture's values and norms and strove to construct their own masculinity in accordance with them, some of the interviewees spontaneously distinguished themselves from “this kind of man”. Anatolii's story is illustrative in this sense.



I remember that my father wanted to make some kind of a sportsman out of me – well, not a sportsman exactly, but a fighter. So [he said] you need to do sports, boxing, wrestling, all this crap. From his words, it seemed that the world only consists of fighting without rules. At that time he had to do a lot of business with bandits, communicate with them. Well, it was not his business, he just worked in a big company ... He told me: "Yes of course, you are a smart boy, but you'd better go in for sports". Well, anyway I remember that it all turned my stomach. How can I put it? This machismo a la 90s, when thugs are all around and one needs to be able to repel them and stand for his word... Plus, at this time my uncle, who happened to get put in jail in the Andropov years for a fight in a pub, was still alive. And when he got out of prison he began to tell us his stories about prison life using jargon. I don't remember anything good [about him], though he was sort of a normal person, but all this thieves' talk, all these existential maxims of prison life. How terrible! I am sick of it! I myself can use it with a lot of irony. I clearly remember when I was 14-15 years old and my father told me about "bazar" and all this stuff ... That said, he was a person with two degrees. Well, as the saying goes, social settings shape you. In the 2000s, when this banditry had blown over, he, in my opinion, very seriously rethought his so-called values. Now of course he sees it all as a terrible time in his life.

Anatolii's relationship with criminal *poniatiia* is very different from those of the other men whose stories I include in this article. Firstly, he ridicules and disagrees with the criminal type of masculine bravado, and secondly, unlike Alexei, Victor, Arsenii and Vitallii, who all admitted that they engaged with the criminal value system on the streets, Anatolii had encountered it not only among his peers but also at home: "For Christ's sake, my school was full of *gopniks*,⁹ and then you come home and your father tells you the same things". In his words, he experienced considerable pressure from his family members to internalize criminal and prison norms in order to build an adequate masculine identity. His father was a key figure in applying this pressure on him.

The main reason why Anatolii's father wanted to equip his son with knowledge of the *poniatiia* and encourage him to become a skilled fighter was to prepare him for "real life". In the morass of the 1990s, the period that Anatoly refers to, "real life" in Russia and particularly life around the processes of building a market economy was to a considerable degree controlled by the organized crime networks. For almost a decade following the disintegration

of the Soviet Union in 1991, the usual dichotomy between legal and illegal was no longer in place. The new state economic sector existed in a legal and regulatory vacuum, with state institutions being weak or corrupt. At this time, violent entrepreneurs of different levels (organized crime groups, private protection companies, informal units of state police acting as private actors) started to play a crucial role in creating the institutions of a new market and the processes of social regulation (Stephenson, 2012; Volkov, 2002). According to Anatolii's testimony, his father had to do a lot of business with these violent entrepreneurs.

One of the main skills required for carrying out violent entrepreneurship is the competent use and demonstration of physical force. Strong, well-trained bodies and fighting skills were considered a prerequisite for the process of control and establishing order. In the 1990s, physical force could be transformed into economic benefits and was one of the main methods of confirming masculinity. Men who could not rebuff physical and "conversational" violence (the term of Collins, 2008) directed at them became victims because they did not embody hegemonic masculinity and thus were not considered "real men" (Salagaev and Shashkin, 2003). Relying on the principle that "might is right", a man could use his fighting skills to claim social and even moral superiority (Volkov, 2002). Another important skill that Anatolii's father and uncle wanted him to acquire was fluency in criminal norms and values. They assumed that in presenting oneself as a bearer of such norms, a man in post-Soviet Russia identifies with the strong dominant group in the street, criminal, and business spaces, and thus obtains a solid reputation and individual power (Salagaev and Shashkin, 2003). In other words, the adequate masculinity that Anatolii was pressured to learn comprised a high level of physical strength, an active position in life, aggression, and determined use of violence. Within the confines of his family settings, a powerful and straightforward criminality discourse emphasised tough, hegemonic masculinity that he felt obliged to reproduce.

In his narrative, Anatolii constructs criminal culture norms and discourses as ugly, aggressive and pathological manifestations of a lack of cultural and educational competency. For him, this characterized the 1990s in Russia. It is nevertheless curious that while Anatoly connects the existence



of criminal masculinities with a particular historical period, which according to him ceased to exist in the 2000s, he still pays considerable attention to reasoning about the criminal world and repeatedly stresses that he is not like “this kind of man”. One of the reasons why this topic is so important to him is his involuntary sense of familial belonging to this culture. However Anatolii’s story of deprivation of the freedom of choice whether to internalise or reject criminal masculinity accords with the stories of other respondents, who in different ways implied that the criminality discourse had been compulsory for them, had a disciplinary character and in general characterised the daily relations of authority and submission in various social settings. These findings are supported by the conclusions of Beumers and Lipovetsky who state that during the 1990s in Russia discursive violence, “in particular that of a criminal culture... rapidly subordinated the field of social and economic communication... [while] the virtuosos of ‘popular’ communication by means of violence, and those who assimilated these languages, formed the new elites” (2009: 63).

Discussion and Conclusion

This article examines the links between discourses of masculinity and criminality in the narratives of law-abiding Russian men who have never had direct contact with detention facilities. The analysis confirms the conclusions of criminologists and sociologists researching prison, criminal and street cultures in Russia that criminal quasi-law is being widely used amongst various layers of contemporary Russian non-prison society and reveals that rigid criminal masculine hierarchies defined by this law are widely-known and well-recognised. Post-Soviet Russian masculinities are in a state of complex power relations with criminal values and hierarchies. Reliance on the criminal hierarchies in the Russian context offers an opportunity to men, both criminal and non-criminal, to construct a hegemonic masculinity – a specific type of masculinity that structures and legitimates gender inequality and hierarchies between men and between men and women (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

By looking at the interplay between masculinity and criminality in the narratives of law-abiding Russian men, this study contributes to criminological research and masculinities studies in three ways. Firstly, addressing the question of why it

is particularly in the formation of masculinity that *poniatia* and *patsanski pravila* are important even to men who are not actually steeped in this culture, my research contributes to the understanding of post-Soviet masculinities and outlines important and unresearched areas for further investigation. Secondly, my research not only helps to fill the gap in empirical studies on both gender order in post-Soviet Russia and criminal and street cultures, but puts these two fields of study in a conversation with each other. Thirdly and most importantly, by looking at criminological literature via a gender sensitive lens, this study demonstrates that gender blind approach to criminal culture in Russia is unable to explain the patterns of dissemination of *poniatia* among Russian population.

Soviet and post-Soviet Russia was and remains a society with a high level of incarceration, where imprisonment is almost the only type of criminal punishment. Although the prison population was much higher in the USSR,¹⁰ today Russia still has one of the highest incarceration rates (475 per 100,000 of national population) and the third largest prison population (0.68 million) in the world (ICPS, 2013). According to a recent all-Russian public opinion poll of the Levada Center, a total of 17 percent of respondents have either been in prison or have ex-convicts amongst their close relatives. The same poll shows that a total of 46 percent of respondents have “a general idea about the criminal quasi-law”, 38 percent are “well familiar with the criminal quasi-law”, 5 percent “try to follow criminal quasi-law”, 2 percent “live according to the criminal quasi-law” (Levada Center, 2013). This public poll shows that prison culture is highly influential in Russia. However, I argue that simple statistical explanation can only serve us as a starting point of an explanation.

It is important to make clear that when we talk about prison and criminal culture permeating broad sections of the Russian population, we are talking about male prison culture. Women’s prisons, first, are much fewer in number (they constitute only about 8 percent of the overall prison population).¹¹ Second, and more importantly, they function quite differently. In contrast to men’s colonies, the women’s prison communities do not have strict vertical hierarchy based on criminal biographies of prisoners and castes of prisoners. Women prisoners in Russia tend to build horizontal social



relationships and, in contrast to male prisoners, do not organize an active co-resistance to the prison administration (Al'pern, 2004, Tishchenko, 2007, Piacentini, 2004, Pallot and Piacentini, 2012, Omel'chenko, 2012).

It turns out that the heavily masculinized prison or criminal quasi-law with its cult of strong character, risk, action, romantic brotherhood of outlaws, rigid hierarchies, specific type of homophobia, objectification of women and depicting them as inherently different and unequal (not proper human beings) may define not only other criminals' and street lads' ideas about masculinity but spread much further into the broader ideology of masculinity in post-Soviet Russia. The fact that almost half of the research participants spontaneously addressed the rules of the criminal world when talking about gender and sexuality in order to articulate their understanding of masculinity, both refutes the popular opinion that the criminality of the 1990s has become history and indicates that existing criminological research overlooks something very important.

Institutional analysis that explains the infiltration of prison subculture into various spheres of everyday lives by the similarity between the institutional structures of the prison community and Russian society in general (Oleinik, 2001: 42) is not enough to address such a complex phenomenon. Institutional analysis is unable to explain why individual people with very diverse backgrounds chose or chose not to engage in criminality discourse. After all, what does it actually mean for a non-criminal man to perform a criminality discourse? In closing, let me turn to Judith Butler, a renowned philosopher and gender theorist, who posed one very important question: "...the question of whether or not a position is right, coherent, or interesting... is less informative than why it is we come to occupy and defend the territory that we do, what it promises us, from what it promises to protect us" (Butler, 1994: 127-128). Rephrasing Butler, what does acceptance and internalization of the criminal culture's hierarchies and values give Russian men and what does it protect them from? My answer is hegemonic masculinity.

Acknowledgements

This paper was produced under the rigorous supervision of Lynne Attwood, Hilary Pilkington and Adi Kuntsman and I am extremely grateful for their support, encouragement and patience. I would like to thank Stephen Hutchings, Vera Tolz-Zilitinkevic, Svetlana Stephenson for their interest in my work and very helpful suggestions. I am grateful to Ravi Hensman, Roland Clark and Shannon Woodcock for their help in preparing a final manuscript and also acknowledge the Centre for East European Language Based Area Studies (CEELBAS) and the University of Manchester for funding the fieldwork expenses.

Notes

¹ Examples of these hierarchies may be prison castes ("*blatnye*" or "thieves", "*muzhiki*" or "blokes", "*kozly*" or "goats", "*petukhi*" or "fags") or well know criminal and street hierarchies that derived from my data: 1) "*brodiaga*" (vagabond) and "*kommers*" (businessmen); 2) "*avtoritetnyi patsan*" (respected lad), "*baklan*" (gobshite) and "*pidaras*" (faggot); 3) "*Patsan*" (lad), "*banchila*" (fence or pusher) and "*bljad*" (wench or hooker); 4) "*Patsan*" (lad) and "*lokh*" (sucker).

² The ideological exclusion of women does not mean that they were actually excluded from all collaborative illegal activities.

³ By the end of 1980s -1990s, Kazan type street gangs were ubiquitous in many Russian cities, such as Ulan-Ude, Ioshkar-Ola, Ul'ianovsk, Naberezhnye Chelny, Cheliabinsk, Petrozavodsk and in the suburbs of Moscow and St. Petersburg (Stephenson, 2011: 342).

⁴ A *smotriashchii* is a person who is looking after compliance with the criminal quasi-law in a prison cell or enforces this law onto a certain territorial community at liberty, which he is in charge of. A *smotriashchii* is personally appointed by a thief-in-law, has many special rights, authority, and enjoys a very high status in the criminal hierarchy.

⁵ In the early 1930s Stalin's regime instituted infamous "Article 121", according to which men could be sentenced for up to 5 years for homosexual relations (Chalidze, 1977; Kon, 1997).

⁶ "Soviet attitudes [towards homosexuality] began to change only after 1987, with the beginning of *perestrojka* and the decriminalization of homosexuality in the mid-1990s" (Kuntsman, 2003: 302).

⁷ *Churki* is a derogatory Russian term for migrants from North Caucasus, Central Asia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia.

⁸ An example of symbolic rape could be touching a sleeping person's lips with a towel with sperm on it. The consequences of symbolic rape for a victim's status in prison are indistinguishable from those of actual rape.

⁹ *Gopnik* is a derogatory term for "street" young people. They are seen as violently colonising the city space and being involved in turf fights, attacks on young people who are not members of their local groups, small-scale delinquency, and crime (Stephenson, 2012: 69).



¹⁰ Incarceration rates in the USSR differed by year. For example, 780 per 100,000 people were incarcerated in 1936; 1500 in 1941; 2700 in 1953; and 847 in 1986 (Luneev, 2006).

¹¹ According to the official website of Federal Penal Service, the overall number of prisoners in Russia as of 01.04.2014 is 674900, of which women make up 55,300 (FPS, 2014).

¹² In their work on women's carceral experience in Russia, Pallot and Piacentini aim to challenge "the comfortable and comforting picture of compliant women in Russian colonies," and claim that patterns of domination and subordination in these colonies do exist and that social relationships between women-prisoners are "complex and layered" (2012: 198-199). Nevertheless, the authors confirm that social hierarchies in women's and men's prisons in Russia can not be evaluated using the same criteria.

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