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A criminology of the postsocialist East: State-corporate harm in Georgia

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Abstract

This article critically engages with recent calls for a Global East criminology that highlight the marginalisation of East-Central Europe and Eurasia (ECEE) in criminological knowledge production. It argues that a focus on epistemological exclusion should not obscure the unequal integration of ex-socialist states into the global economy and the inequalities this generates within and between them. Bringing postsocialism into conversation with recent critical criminological accounts of neo-colonialism, the article shows how criminological inquiry in and from the East can illuminate the mechanisms and violent consequences of the global system of capital accumulation. Using the case of Georgia — and the mining town of Chiatura — it demonstrates how neoliberal restructuring, anti-communist ideology, and the selective reappropriation of socialist legacies combine to enable the state-corporate co-production of crime and harm in a postsocialist setting.

Key words

Global East; regimes of permission; state-corporate crime; critical criminology; Georgia

Resumen

Este artículo aborda de forma crítica los recientes llamamientos a favor de una "criminología del Este global", que ponen de relieve la marginación de Europa Central y Oriental y Eurasia (ECEO) en la producción de conocimiento criminológico. Sostiene

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que centrarse en la exclusión epistemológica no debe ocultar la integración desigual de los antiguos Estados socialistas en la economía mundial y las desigualdades que esto genera tanto dentro de como entre los Estados. Al poner en diálogo el postsocialismo con los recientes relatos criminológicos críticos sobre el neocolonialismo, el artículo muestra cómo la investigación criminológica en y desde el Este puede arrojar luz sobre los mecanismos y las consecuencias violentas del sistema global de acumulación de capital. Tomando como ejemplo el caso de Georgia y la ciudad minera de Chiatura, se demuestra cómo la reestructuración neoliberal, la ideología anticomunista y la reapropiación selectiva del legado socialista se combinan para permitir la coproducción estatal-corporativa de la delincuencia y el daño en un contexto postsocialista.

Palabras clave

Este Global; regímenes de autorización; delincuencia estatal-corporativa; criminología crítica; Georgia

Table of contents

1. Introduction 4
2. Limitations of the Global East approach 4
3. Enduring relevance of “postsocialism” 7
4. The regimes of permission framework 10
    4.1. Georgia and regimes of permission 11
    4.2. Chiatura: A local regime of permission 14
5. Conclusion 17
References 17

1. Introduction

This article argues that the production of social harm and violence in ex-socialist states is structured by a specific conjuncture: inequalities generated by neoliberal transformations, legitimated through anti-communist ideology, and perpetuated through the selective reappropriation of Soviet and state-socialist legacies by domestic elites. The article's contribution is to offer a criminological account of how these distributional and ideological dynamics are translated into patterned forms of social and environmental harm, and into disciplinary strategies for managing labour, dissent, and exposure to social injury.

recent call for Global East criminology (Piacentini and Slade 2023) serves an important task of elucidating both the epistemological exclusion of East-Central Europe and Eurasia (ECEE) from criminological knowledge production, and the interstitial nature of certain power relations involving these societies. However, it overlooks how the latter are also at the receiving end of globalisation. While the concept of the Global East signifies the call for *recognition* of a previously neglected part of the world, the *postsocialist* perspective elaborated in this article additionally emphasises the issues of *redistribution*. This is achieved by underlining the unequal integration of ECEE countries in the global economy, and the inequalities between and within these countries that this integration generates. I argue that this approach allows for an exploration of potentially productive ways in which criminological inquiry *in* and *from* the East could enhance our understanding of the mechanisms and violent consequences of the global system of capital accumulation.

This intervention aligns with an emerging literature in critical criminology that directs attention to the disproportionate burdens of harm borne by peripheral and semi-peripheral regions within the world-economy. Social injury in ECEE unfolds within a specific historical, socioeconomic, and ideological context shaped by the neoliberal restructuring of former socialist states. To offer a criminological analysis of these dynamics, the article applies a postsocialist lens to recent scholarship that traces the co-production of crime and harm by states and corporations (Tombs 2012). In particular, building on David Whyte's (2014) concept of "regimes of permission" and Pablo Ciocchini and Joe Greener's (2021, 2022) criminological account of neo-colonial accumulation, the article shows how attention to Georgia's postsocialist transformations and instrumentalisation of its Soviet legacies helps reveal and explain the multi-scalar effects of global inequalities on the production and persistence of harm and violence in ECEE.

The article proceeds as follows: the next section critically engages the Global East approach and, while preserving its valuable insights, proposes a revised framework by integrating it with the concept of postsocialism. The remainder of the article analyses state-corporate symbiosis in the production of crime and harm in postsocialist Georgia, with a focus on the industrial city of Chiatura.

2. Limitations of the Global East approach

In their important recent article, Laura Piacentini and Gavin Slade (2023) align themselves with the southernizing movement in criminology and criticise the exclusion of the former socialist states of ECEE from that movement. Southern criminology

emerged in recognition of the fact that traditional criminological theories and knowledge production have been predominantly shaped by the experiences and concerns of the Global North (Carrington *et al.* 2016, 2018). As a response to this one-way flow of criminological knowledge, southern criminology scholarship calls for inclusive, context-sensitive analyses that centre marginalized voices. This project to democratize and decolonize the discipline highlights how colonial legacies continue to shape crime and justice issues in the South, challenges the uncritical application of Northern-centric assumptions, and advocates for theory development rooted in Southern perspectives. Piacentini and Slade note a "double silence" on the ECEE region in these perspectives as it is neither acknowledged in the imaginary of the South nor the North. However, the authors seem to suggest that this exclusion is not entirely accidental. They argue that the North-South binary fails to capture the elusive reality of ECEE societies. Instead, the authors turn to the concept of the Global East to signify interstitial spaces and power relations involving ECEE peoples that cannot be reduced to the North-South distinction. The task of a criminology of the Global East is then to capture unique experiences of the socialist and postsocialist world, shedding light on the influences of "Soviet colonialism" and Marxist ideologies on how both the North and the South conceptualize crime causation, social control, and corrections (Piacentini and Slade 2023, 3). While acknowledging the diversity among Eastern societies, the Global East becomes a tool of "strategic essentialism" that is, "a political practice to mobilise heterogeneous marginalised groups to band together under a common banner for an emancipatory political project" (Müller 2020, 744), aimed at giving voice to ECEE peoples and democratising the criminological knowledge production process.

While the effort to integrate the East into the southernizing movement in criminology is indeed praiseworthy, the Global East approach reproduces some of the limitations of southern criminology and introduces its own shortcomings. I contend that Piacentini and Slade's conceptualisation of the Global East reveals several such limitations.

First, by advancing a "strategic essentialism" that juxtaposes domination under state socialism with domination by Western powers, privileging the former as the defining experience, Piacentini and Slade displace analysis of neoliberal globalisation as the primary structuring force shaping ex-socialist societies since at least the breakdown of the Eastern bloc.It is worth recalling that the concept of the Global East was originally introduced by Martin Müller (2020) as a deliberate departure from the ostensibly obsolete concept of postsocialism. Müller (2019, 534) criticized postsocialism for its entrenchment in the socialist past, where the past is construed as determining contemporary processes and institutions in ex-socialist states. By contrast, the Global East reframed the problem in terms of "ontological and epistemological" interstitiality and liminality that defies categorisation along the North-South dichotomy (Müller 2020, 743), treating this liminal condition as a shared feature of ECEE societies. This approach effectively discarded the socialist past as a "glue" holding the region together (Chelcea 2023, 6).

Piacentini and Slade, while adopting Müller's framework, reintroduce the state-socialist experience as a constitutive element. In their formulation, the Global East refers to

> those peoples who have been subjugated *less by* Western empires, or the spread of Northern neo-liberal market hegemony, and *more by* those regimes and their successors

> that stood in opposition to the West, espoused emancipatory ideologies, while dispossessing, executing and incarcerating millions of people globally in the name of those ideologies. (Piacentini and Slade 2023, 11, emphasis added)

The analytical centre of gravity thus shifts toward the historical experience of peoples subjugated by regimes opposed to the West - above all through "Soviet colonialism" - and toward tracing its material and epistemological repercussions. By contrast, as the case study below shows, neoliberal globalisation and unequal incorporation in the global economy have been decisive in shaping ECEE - and Georgia in particular - creating an urgent need for criminological analysis of the North-led political-economic structures through which harm is produced and distributed.

Moreover, it is important to note that the concept of the Global East need not compel us to outright dismiss shared experiences of state socialism, as suggested by Müller. Likewise, it doesn't require us to diminish the significance of neoliberal globalisation while exaggerating the impact of state socialism, as proposed by Piacentini and Slade. Rather than presuming the analytical irrelevance or primacy of state-socialist experience, I believe that the focus of inquiry should revolve around the selective re-appropriation of the legacies of the past in the process of neoliberalisation. This leads us to another limitation: the Global East approach overlooks how the internal inequalities within ECEE generated by neoliberal restructuring have been sustained through instrumentalisation of the socialist past by domestic elites. In particular, it neglects how inherited institutional forms and practices - such as, for instance, informal governance arrangements and patrimonial networks (discussed below) - have been selectively reappropriated and redeployed to facilitate neoliberal accumulation. At the level of ideology, the critique of the Soviet past and of "Russian imperialism" has operated as a legitimating repertoire for the new order, frequently displacing responsibility for developmental failures onto "socialist legacies" and thereby depoliticising postsocialist inequalities. Thus, the Global East's emphasis on epistemological exclusion risks romanticising "Eastern voices" - treating them as self-evidently emancipatory (cf. Ciocchini and Greener 2021) - while depoliticizing the dominant ideology of anti-communism (Chelcea and Druță 2016).

Finally, the Global East approach fails to account not only for inequalities *within* ECEE societies but also for inequalities *between* them. Treating interstitiality, understood as a condition of betweenness, as a defining and unifying feature of the East risks obscuring the uneven and heterogeneous incorporation of these societies into the global economy and the differentiated power relations that follow from it. Borrowing from Müller (2020), Piacentini and Slade's analysis appears to interpret interstitiality in both ontological and epistemological senses (2023, 10). From an epistemological standpoint, this concept underscores a significant aspect of the marginalisation of Eastern societies from knowledge production processes. However, when considering interstitiality as an ontological category, caution is warranted. In this latter sense, the concept tends to offer an essentialist and undifferentiated picture of the East, suggesting that interactions involving Eastern societies, or "Eastern dynamics," inherently possess an interstitial quality. Yet, the precise attributes, shaped by socialist and postsocialist legacies, that define the East's ontological interstitiality remain vaguely articulated.

I contend that the distinct characteristics and conditions prevalent in the East, which I will elaborate on below, should be understood as shaping both liminal and *southern* power dynamics. Eastern idiosyncrasies do not *invariably* result in interstitiality. They might equally underpin or amplify exploitative and repressive practices, as will be illustrated in the forthcoming case study. The volume and degree of the liminal or southern power interactions in which Eastern societies partake roughly correspond to their semi-peripheral or peripheral positioning within the world-system (Wallerstein 1974, Frank 1967I). Therefore, for instance, most of the current developments in or involving Georgia cannot be reduced to liminal power relations. Georgia predominantly finds itself at the receiving end of globalisation. Therefore, the term "Eastern dynamics," rather than being equated solely with liminality, should denote the unique attributes, shaped by socialist and postsocialist processes, that Eastern societies bring to global power relations.

Overall, the concept of the Global East is valuable in drawing attention to the epistemological exclusion faced by the ECEE region and for naming relational dynamics that do not fit neatly within a North-South schema. Yet, as currently formulated, this framework largely centers on issues of *recognition*, neglecting critical dimensions of *redistribution* (Chelcea 2023). To address this gap, criminological inquiry from and about the East should not limit itself to amplifying the calls of marginalized ECEE societies for participation in knowledge production. Instead, it must prioritize investigating the harm and violence these societies endure as a result of their subordinate position within the global economy.

The concept of *postsocialism* provides crucial analytical tools to unpack the unique conditions that facilitate repression and exploitation in ECEE. As the following section argues, postsocialism reveals how the inequalities resulting from ECEE societies' uneven integration into the neoliberal global order have been both legitimized by anti-communist ideology and perpetuated through the selective reappropriation of institutional legacies.

3. Enduring relevance of "postsocialism"

For an increasing number of authors, the socialist past, once a productive reference point for explaining the present in ex-socialist societies, is diminishing in its explanatory power. This decline is evident in the face of new challenges threatening the East that have little to do with the bygone era (Dunn and Verdery 2015, Müller 2019). Socialist legacies are now relegated to just one facet of inquiry among several others, and even within that, they are perceived as a "vanishing object" (Boyer and Yurchak 2008, 9), destined for irrelevance. However, the robust criticisms of the concept should not prompt us to dismiss the enduring similarities present in the East which are inherited from state socialist systems and shaped by the transformations that followed their dissolution. It remains crucial to acknowledge these shared traits, thus allowing the identification of distinct characteristics of the region (Cima and Sovová 2022, 1379). The task is, however, to account for how the socialist past and postsocialist transformations shape realities without succumbing to historical determinism (Stenning and Hörschelmann 2008, 313).

The concept of postsocialism helps illuminate the specific conditions that facilitated neoliberal restructuring - and its persistence - in the former socialist states of ECEE. The newly independent states had a collective experience of a journey through rapid and extensive reforms. While these reforms varied in their execution and outcomes (Drahokoupil 2009, Bohle and Greskovits 2012), they universally engendered significant disparities between the “haves” and “have-nots” within those societies (Milanovic 1998, 40-59; Ghodsee and Orenstein 2021, 16). The primary challenge for ex-socialist states was a severe scarcity of capital, stemming from the absence of domestic sources of liquid capital, currency devaluations and high inflation, or even hyperinflation in cases like Georgia and other countries (Appel and Orenstein 2018, 116). The imperative to attract foreign funding acted as a primary driver of policy reforms (ibid), leading to heightened dependence on foreign capital and international actors (Nölke and Vliegenthart 2009). The post-war global order would have allowed ex-socialist states to pursue markedly different development strategies (Shields 2012, 20). However, postsocialist transformations unfolded within the straitjacket of neoliberal globalisation, a context that has shaped their development paths. In the context of global neoliberal hegemony, organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the European Union advocated, supported, and oversaw the transition towards increased reliance on the private sector and market forces. ECEE countries engaged in intense competition for foreign capital, adopting free-market policies and lowering social and environmental standards to outbid each other and other global regions (Appel and Orenstein 2018, 116ff). This manifested in an unprecedented wave of neoliberal socioeconomic reforms characterized by their extensive scope and rapid implementation (Myant and Drahokoupil 2011, 83ff).

Postsocialist transformations resulted in a significant deterioration of the conditions of social reproduction. In the early 1990s, all ECEE countries went through “transformation depression” with declining gross domestic product (GDP), especially affecting the countries of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (*ibid.*, 49ff). Depression had dire social ramifications, marked by plummeting income, rising unemployment and poverty (Milanovic 1998), and elevated mortality rates (Stuckler *et al.* 2009). The deteriorating quality of life and the necessity to reconfigure social protection systems in response to new challenges exerted immense pressure on social provisioning (Deacon 2000, Cook 2007), particularly evident in CIS countries, where revenue collection issues exacerbated the problem. Furthermore, the worsening conditions of social reproduction, combined with the deregulation of labour relations, contributed to the precarisation of labour power and the weakening of trade unions in the region (Ost 2009). In addition to these “external” structural factors, “internal” conflicts among workers also played a decisive role in labour’s decline. Skilled segments of the working class embraced market reforms, anticipating that they would penalize “slackers” and reward merit, — a process that eroded working-class solidarity (Kalb 2019). Overall, as Ghodsee and Orenstein (2021, 16) argue, what characterises postsocialist transition is the fact that it opened up vast inequalities on individual, regional, and national levels. The postsocialist space has been the site of the impoverishment of the many and substantial gains for a few.

Another phenomenon that sustains the relevance of “postsocialism” as a concept is the persistence in ECEE societies of certain practices and institutions inherited from the socialist era that sustain and reinforce the inequalities in the East. The literature on soviet

legacies is extensive, identifying them as constituting distinct aspects of political culture (Grzymala-Busse 2002), political preferences (Minkenberg 2009), a lack of support for democracy (Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017), challenges associated with democratisation (Aliyev 2015), economic beliefs (Baxandall 2003), the character of capitalism in ex-socialist countries (Bohle and Greskovits 2012), etc. A substantial body of literature exists on the persisting influence of informal institutions and practices (Gel'man 2004, Morris and Polese 2014). Informal governance, the focus of our case-study below, is widely considered as one of the most prominent features in ex-socialist countries, especially in Georgia. Soviet Georgia is frequently regarded as the most corrupt republic in the Soviet Union, marked by an extensive shadow economy and a vast network of informal relations (Mars and Altman 1983). This legacy manifests prominently in the law enforcement system and prisons. Georgia, like every other former Soviet republic, inherited a politicized, militarized, non-transparent, and violent police force, coupled with repressive informal governance of the prison system (Shelley 1996). Without ascribing deterministic qualities to these legacies, it is important to examine how they have been re-appropriated and instrumentalised within the framework of neoliberal governance to reinforce the unequal social order.

The socialist past, and hence *postsocialism*, remains an analytically relevant category in explaining the inequalities of the present in one additional sense. Here I mean the special purchase that the anti-communist ideology has in ex-socialist countries, where de-communization is seen as a necessary precondition for the integration in the global capitalism (Channell-Justice 2019, 48). In the East, the "ghost" of state-socialism is regularly invoked by economic and political elites to support neoliberal reforms and undermine its leftist critique (Moll 2019, 123). Anti-communism as an invocation of the memory of the discredited past is instrumental in legitimising austerity politics or enabling the maintenance of low wages and serves "as an ultimate bogeyman" and a "disciplinary device" (Chelcea and Druţă 2016, 521) that undermines any opposition to the neoliberal doxa. In this manner, as Liviu Chelcea and Oana Druţă (2016, 537) contend, anti-communism has become part of neoliberal ideology, and its prevalence represents a key characteristic of contemporary capitalism in postsocialist countries, creating "a particularly strong version of neoliberalism." Moreover, anti-communism in certain Eastern countries, including Georgia, is often indistinguishable from anti-Russian attitudes or even Russophobia, against which the idealised image of the West and concomitant "Eurocentrism" and "capitalocentrism" are systematically reproduced (Tichindeleanu 2010, 27).

The synthesis of the concepts of Global East and postsocialism offers a sharper lens through which to examine both the political quest for recognition and the demands for redistribution voiced by marginalized communities of the East. The criminology of the *postsocialist* Global East then should expose not only epistemological exclusion of ECEE societies from criminological knowledge production, but crucially the harm and violence inflicted on those societies who find themselves at the receiving end of neoliberal globalization.

In the next section, I argue that a postsocialist lens can advance critical criminology's effort to explain the uneven global distribution of social and environmental harm and state violence by specifying the conditions through which repression and exploitation

are reproduced in ECEE societies. I apply this lens to state-corporate crime scholarship and the concept of "regimes of permission," using the case of Georgia to show how postsocialist trajectories shape permissive governance arrangements that enable harm and violence.

4. The regimes of permission framework

The prevailing approach to state-corporate crime in criminological literature perceives (in)actions by public authorities that *initiate* or *facilitate* harmful activities by private actors as "moments of rupture" or "regulatory pathologies" (Bernat and Whyte 2017, 76-77); that is, aberrations within the normal dynamics of the interrelationship between public and private institutions. This viewpoint, however, is contested by scholars who point to broader and opaque contexts (Lasslett 2010, Tombs 2012). The concept of "regimes of permission" transcends the immediately observable conditions precipitating criminal acts, and helps grasp how state-corporate crimes are "historically and socially situated" (Bernat and Whyte 2017, 77-78). This framework highlights that regulatory relationships are themselves constitutive of broader regimes of permission. In this view, corporate actions depend on states' infrastructural capacities (Whyte 2014, 240). It is states that constitute and maintain markets, including labour markets, create national and international legal regimes, ensure adjudication of conflicting interests, discipline the poor and working classes, and promulgate and uphold hegemonic ideas. Symbiotic relations between states and corporations facilitate capital accumulation and normalise the conditions under which corporate crimes are perpetrated.

Ciocchini and Greener (2021) further develop the concept within the context of neo-colonialism and imperialism, using the term "regimes of *extreme* permission" to describe more intense and violent modalities of capital accumulation found in the South. On the examples of palm oil industry in Indonesia and Export Processing Zones for garment production in the Mekong region, these authors explore the construction of regimes of extreme permission through state violence and extreme deregulation of labour and environmental protections (Ciocchini and Greener 2022). These examples are focused on what I refer to as *local* regimes of permission, that is, conditions created by states and transnational actors that enable "specific capitalist project[s]" (Appel 2019, 2). Implicit in these accounts, however, are other levels of the regimes that merit further extrapolation. I distinguish between international, national, and local regimes that operate in conjunction to facilitate the exploitation of labour and the environment in the South.[1]

Thus, local instances of neo-colonial extraction and exploitation are sustained by *nationally* operating regimes of permission that provide the political, social and economic infrastructure within which local regimes are established and maintained. These domestic regimes, in turn, are nested within a network of complex, interlocking, and mutually reinforcing international regimes of permission (Bittle *et al.* 2018, xli). International regimes establish the overarching conditions for global transfer of value and resources from the Global South to the North, discipline states into neoliberal orthodoxy, and narrow the space for alternative development paths. These constraints

[1] For a fuller discussion of regimes of permission and their criminogenic character, see Eristavi [forthcoming].

are then translated by southern elites into domestic legal frameworks, policy choices, and enforcement practices that also secure their own political and economic advantages.

Perhaps the most formidable of these international regimes are those governing debt and trade. Capital scarcity drives Southern states to seek assistance from international financial institutions, with the IMF serving as both the "gatekeeper for market access" and the coordinator of a "private creditors' cartel" (Roos 2019, 76). Through Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) aimed at reducing public spending, the IMF systematically curtails the sovereign industrial capacities of the Global South (Hickel 2017), locking them into spirals of debt and dependency. This structural reliance on foreign capital is further entrenched by international trade regimes, including free trade agreements, World Trade Organisation rules, and SAPs, which compel the South to dismantle tariffs, subsidies, and protections for emerging industries (Tandon 2018). This dismantling leaves Southern markets exposed to transnational corporations, enabling their exploitation and reinforcing the subordinate roles of Southern countries within global commodity chains.

Moreover, structural dependence is a key source of authority for the international investment regime which forces the South to conform to the frameworks of corporate impunity (Ciocchini and Khoury 2025). Shaped by the history of colonialism and violent forms of protection of Northern corporate interests, international investment law exhibits a "distributive tilt" that benefits the North (Perrone and Schneiderman 2019, 460). Its principles, norms, agreements, and dispute resolution mechanisms are geared exclusively toward protecting investors and imposing obligations on host states, offering Southern states little to no means to hold investors accountable (Miles 2013, 2-3).

In sum, the international, national, and local scales of regimes of permission interlock and reinforce one another in complex ways, shaping the global system of capital accumulation and rendering corporate crime and harm "both possible and plausible" (Bittle and Hébert 2019, 496). Using a multi-scalar reading of these regimes informed by postsocialism, the remainder of the article examines the case of Georgia.

4.1. Georgia and regimes of permission

The dramatic need for foreign funding has generally defined Georgia's transition from the state-socialist system, prompting the newly independent country to gain the trust of international financial organisations and creditors by adopting large-scale neoliberal reforms (Gurgenidze *et al.* 1994, Papava 2013, 13-14). The implementation of structural adjustment programs amidst deindustrialisation, alongside the proliferation of free trade agreements, the drain of resources, and the obligations of servicing external debt, severely circumscribed the capacity for sovereign industrial development and engendered a structural dependence on foreign capital. Additionally, the capitalist class that was formed on the ruins of the agricultural and industrial sectors oriented itself towards import-based business models.[2] These developments led to Georgia's integration into the global economy not as a manufacturer and exporter of complex products but as an importer of goods and exporter of natural resources and low-value-

[2] For an analysis of class composition in Georgia, see Eristavi and Mikhelidze (2025).

added goods, entrenching the dependence on foreign capital and international actors (Khelaia and Chivadze 2022).

Following the period of "reluctant neoliberalism" in the 1990s and early 2000s - when Georgia often failed to fully implement the prescriptions of international financial institutions (see e.g., EBRD 2003, 148-151) - the rise to power of the United National Movement in 2003 marked a decisive turn. The new government accelerated Georgia's integration into the global economy and a consolidation of neoliberal institutional reforms. Attracting FDI became a key development strategy (Schueth 2011). Challenging rampant crime and corruption, flexibilising labour relations, repressing wages and deregulating natural resource governance were identified as primary goals to cultivate a "business-friendly" environment (see e.g. Gilauri 2012).

Thus, the reformed Georgian police, strengthened by increased resources, stricter sanctions, new anti-mafia and anti-corruption statutes, and a stringent drug policy, embarked on an aggressive campaign against crime, corruption, and the shadow economy (World Bank 2012, Light 2014, Rekhviashvili 2015). The 2006 proclamation of a zero-tolerance approach propelled Georgia to one of the foremost positions globally in terms of per capita incarceration rates. The government used high punitiveness to signal to foreign investors its commitment to tackling widespread crime and ensuring the security of their investments (Slade 2017, 188). It also signalled the commitment to discipline labour and ensure a seamless process of capital accumulation (Eristavi 2025). As a result, labor unions faced intensified persecution, including asset confiscation, while their leaders were targeted with arrests, blackmail, and intimidation (International Trade Union Confederation 2023). Labor strikes were violently dispersed (IndustriAll Global Union 2023). The abolition of Labour Inspection deprived workers of vital oversight mechanisms. Consequently, workplace fatalities, particularly prevalent in the mining sector, soared (Human Rights Watch 2019). The confluence of a repressive environment, high punitiveness, and the persecution, institutional exclusion, and co-optation of unions enabled the government to dismantle labour protections with little resistance. The labour code was amended to favor employers' interests, its 250 articles reduced to just 55 (Labour Code of Georgia, 2012).

The instrumentalization of the Soviet past and its legacies played a key role in this process. The government leveraged Soviet legacies of repressive and informal governance, exerting unofficial influence over the judiciary to maintain extremely low acquittal rates (Council of Europe 2011, 5). At the same time, widespread reports emerged of torture and inhumane treatment in detention centers, along with allegations of unlawful surveillance, investigative misconduct, and extrajudicial killings (Slade *et al.* 2014). Moreover, penal repression was instrumental in advancing a distinctive "modernisation" project steeped in postsocialist peculiarities. The UNM legitimised aggressive neoliberal reforms and "law and order" politics through a compelling narrative of a "mental" and "cultural" revolution (U.S. Institute of Peace 2012). This discourse attributed widespread crime and corruption to certain prevailing mentality and culture (Janelidze 2023, ch. 6). Hence the society was depicted as inhibited by the archetype of Homo Sovieticus, signifying an unmodernised, uncivilised, conservative subject bearing "criminal mentality" with proclivity toward corruption and laziness (Makovicky 2014). Crime and corruption and other ills of Georgian society were

depicted not as phenomena emerging from or influenced by the neoliberal transition but as vestiges of Soviet inheritance, alien to Georgian identity, and the consequence of the mentality and culture forced upon Georgians by the Soviets and the Russians, as they interrupted, in the first decades of the 20th century, Georgia's "natural progression" towards the Western-type modernisation. The task, then, was to liberate Georgian subjectivity from the grip of Soviet/Russian culture; transform the society with "a clan and tribal mentality", into a European one with "civic consciousness" (President of Georgia 2011). The criminalisation of Soviet symbols, strict policing of schools (Tangiashvili and Slade 2014), or informal ban on Russian music at restaurants (Netgazeti.ge 2011) comprised this project of mental revolution, railing against the past which ostensibly tethered Georgia to Putin's Russia. Importantly, it was against this backdrop that the image of a law-abiding, hard-working, responsible neoliberal citizen and the idealised image of the West as representing the alternative to "socialist backwardness", was created and promoted, and the punitive approach was seen as central to this process.

The UNM government undertook sweeping environmental deregulation, affecting, among others, manganese mining in Chiatura - a case we examine below. It drastically reduced the number of required permits and eliminated the need for environmental impact assessments and public participation in most mineral extraction activities, excluding oil and gas (Tsintsadze 2020, 38). Furthermore, the licensing procedures for mineral extraction were streamlined. In addition to the curtailment of formal environmental standards, there has been a systematic relaxation in the enforcement of the remaining environmental laws and regulations.

Since assuming office in 2012, the Georgian Dream (GD) government has continued to prioritize attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) and upholding neoliberal economic policies centered on privatization and deregulation. The structural conditions underlying the weakness of labor's collective power have seen little improvement during this period. Although the government adopted a somewhat more lenient stance in certain areas, the broader punitive and informal mode of governance remained largely intact (*ibid.*). Environmental deregulation and the "de-risking" of large infrastructure projects (Gabor 2021) intensified, with significant efforts to attract foreign investors to numerous hydropower initiatives (Rekhviashvili and Lang 2024). At the same time, the GD leadership's persistent anti-communist rhetoric has continued to marginalize progressive voices in the country (Eristavi 2025, 18). For instance, in 2013 a major labour-code overhaul was initiated, but it was publicly denigrated by then-deputy prime minister (and soon-to-be president) Giorgi Margvelashvili, who dismissed the draft as "Rosa Luxemburg's dream labour code." This anti-communist framing was echoed by GD leaders more broadly, and - given that Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili appeared to share these views - substantial worker guarantees were ultimately excluded from the reform (Eristavi 2025).

Within these interlocking regimes of permission - including labor, penal, repressive, environmental, and ideological frameworks operating at the national level - Chiatura has emerged as an "extractive frontier". I now turn to this local-level regime of permission, characterized by its "extreme" nature.

4.2. Chiatura: A local regime of permission

The case of Chiatura offers critical insights into state-corporate crime, particularly through the lens of the legacies of postsocialist transformations, informal governance practices, and the anti-communist ideology pervasive in the postsocialist East.

Chiatura's wealth lies in its abundant manganese reserves, an essential element for resilient steel. In 2020, Chiatura's output represented 10% of the nation's export portfolio (Tsinstadze 2020, 31). A significant share of the manganese mined in this region is destined for the United States, comprising almost a third of its total silicomanganese imports in 2022 (U.S. Geological Survey 2023). Chiatura is heavily dependent on manganese mining, which serves as the region's primary employer and main source of revenue. The state has failed to tackle the problems associated with the dependence on a single industry (Diakonidze 2020). The lack of initiatives to diversify the local economy perpetuates the problems associated with mono-industrial cities and stifles the creation of alternative employment options. This dependence, particularly in the context of elevated poverty rates which are among the highest in the country (*ibid.*) undermines people's mobilisation potential, as community members fear antagonising the investor and risking job security.

Once a key resource for the industrialization of the Soviet Union, following the latter's dissolution, it fell victim to deindustrialisation, leading to a halt in manganese production and immiseration of the local population. Efforts to privatize the mines were fraught with difficulties until 2006, when mining rights over 13,000 hectares were granted to a subsidiary of the British steel trading giant Stemcor, later taken over by a Miami-based company under the Ukrainian oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskiy's ownership.

Informal governance has played a prominent role in and around the company. Since 2017, the mining corporation, known today as *Georgian Manganese*, has found itself under the aegis of a provisional manager appointed by the state after a court ruling on environmental malfeasance, amounting to 416 million Lari (Mgeladze 2021). This appointment ostensibly reflects a move towards corporate accountability. However, the appointee, being a former employee of minority shareholders who themselves have past affiliations with organised crime and intimate ties to the governing party (*ibid.*), casts doubt on the purportedly remedial intentions of the government and suggests a practice of rent-seeking. Consequently, there has been no actual compensation for environmental harm, while Chiatura's status as an ecological disaster zone not only persists but, according to many environmentalists, is deteriorating (Mtivlishvili 2023).This context gains additional complexity when considering the broader geopolitical landscape. Mere months prior to the Georgian government's intervention, Kolomoyskiy's US steel operations were reportedly undermined, with speculated US government involvement (Prince 2020). Additionally, the onset of Russian aggression in Ukraine precipitated sanctions against Kolomoyskiy (Dickinson 2021). These developments surrounding the Ukrainian oligarch appear to have fortuitously benefited the Georgian political elite, affording them a convenient pretext to marginalise his influence within the company.

Regulatory regimes have created a permissive context for exploitation. In addition to the deregulation of natural resource governance at the national level discussed above, duties and fees on manganese extraction were substantially lowered, while the environmental laws and regulations in Chiatura have been underenforced (Tsinstadze 2020). This laxity

has led to the state's failure to oblige the company to compensate the affected local communities, recultivate the mined land, manage industrial waste sustainably, and avoid further environmentally harmful practices. Additionally, the state has sidestepped established protocols for approving new polluting refineries, excluding public input from the decision-making process. As a result, Chiatura has been grappling with pervasive air, water and soil pollution. Damage to the land predominantly stems from open-pit mining operations outsourced by Georgian Manganese to small private companies, colloquially known as "cooperators," operating in neighbouring villages. These operations necessitate the excavation of vast areas, while recultivation efforts are scant, leaving villages marred by gaping craters and hills of waste rocks. This process incurs severe environmental repercussions, including deforestation, soil degradation, landscape deterioration, and contamination of water and air. In light of these challenging conditions, exacerbated by poverty and limited economic opportunities, many villagers actively seek cooperators to mine on their own properties too, hoping to earn income and relocate.

The underground mining also profoundly affects villages. Notably, settlements such as Shukruti and Itkhvisi, situated above mining sites, are experiencing soil subsidence (Mtivlishvili 2023). The villages are gradually sinking, resulting in demolished houses and destroyed infrastructure. Despite mounting evidence of damage, the mining corporation absolves itself of responsibility, attributing adverse effects to prior Soviet-era operations (Pertaia 2019), while government abstains from intervening in the conflict, leaving affected communities bereft of compensation and recourse. Residents here, despite occasional protests, face an uphill battle against the undisturbed company and the government, sometimes encountering state-sanctioned repression, typified by police intimidation and coercion, as was the case when Shukruti residents blocked the entrance of a mine in protest (Mtivlishvili 2023).

Furthermore, the environmental damage extends beyond the immediate mining sites, impacting the entire hydro-network of the region (Tsintsadze 2020, 44). Ore dressing and improper waste management contaminate drinking water sources. The Kvirila River, traversing the city, bears the brunt of pollution, its waters tainted black by untreated manganese waste. Moreover, the atmospheric concentration of harmful substances exceeds permissible limits by multiple times (Mtivlishvili 2023). Uncovered trucks transporting chemicals within the city are one of the sources of air pollution, dispersing hazardous dust along roadsides, particularly evident during rainy seasons when streets become silted with pollutants (Georgia Fair Labour Platform 2023).

Amidst the environmental crisis, Chiatura emerges also as a focal point of labour exploitation. Miners and workers endure hazardous conditions devoid of labour guarantees, social safety nets, or robust union representation. Despite sporadic protests, often symbolized by extreme acts such as sewing mouths shut or even eyelids, demands for basic workers' rights and government intervention in the ecological crisis typically yield limited success. The trajectory of labour relations in Chiatura reflects a pattern of persecution, institutional exclusion, and co-optation of organized labour at the national level (Eristavi 2025). In Chiatura's mines, workers face heightened risks due to the disregard for occupational health and safety norms both by the company and the government. Absence of effective regulation and supervision fosters management

practices that perpetuate hazardous working conditions by among others prioritising production quotas over safety standards (Human Rights Watch 2019). Unrealistic production targets and performance-based remuneration exert immense pressure on supervisors and workers, incentivising a disregard for safety protocols, often with fatal consequences. Workers' rights are systematically disregarded, with reports of prolonged shifts, unpaid overtime, lack of breaks, and restrictions on movement (*ibid*.). Attempts by miners to organize and protest are met with intimidation from local law enforcement and corporate security personnel, whose ranks often comprise former security and police officers.

These difficulties are further aggravated by the local population's and workers' susceptibility to global market fluctuations. For example, in 2023, the company initiated a "temporary work mode" in response to falling global ferroalloy prices (Georgia Fair Labour Platform 2023). This shift entailed unilateral wage reductions and the introduction of a new work schedule that neglected health and labour safety standards, effectively reducing workers' wages. The absence of legal and social safeguards from the state has significantly weakened the negotiating position of both workers and the impacted community, rendering them more susceptible to exploitation and mistreatment.

On 7 March 2025, the company announced it would permanently cease underground mining in the municipality due to unprofitability, refusing to pay outstanding salaries and arrears. This decision triggered widespread protests, including mass demonstrations and a hunger strike, as workers and citizens faced unemployment and deepening poverty (Kobakhidze 2025). Protesters demanded urgent state intervention, including the postponement or cancellation of mounting bank debts (Radio Freedom 2025). In response, the company's new management — possibly installed through informal government mediation — pledged to partially resume operations, while announcing a vague "reorganization". In practice, this involved pressuring workers into signing new contracts that reclassified them as job seekers, subject to a fresh hiring process. Coercion, misinformation, and threats of dismissal were reportedly used to secure compliance (Social Justice Centre — SJC — 2025a).

The central government actively sought to undermine the protests through repression and media manipulation. Amid escalating tensions, a confrontation between protest leaders and a company representative led to the arrest of four miners. The miners were charged for organizing and participating in group violence, carrying a sentence of 6 to 9 years and denied bail by the court (SJC 2025b). State-aligned media, both national and local, circulated reports — with literally identical wording — highlighting the participation of members of the "German Marxist-Leninist Party" in one of the demonstrations, invoking anti-communist rhetoric to discredit the movement (Imedinews.ge 2025). Similar language was echoed by the deputy head of the main trade union federation, who had been publicly denounced by the protesters days earlier.

At the time of writing, the social and economic crisis in Chiatura remains ongoing, with demonstrations continuing and little prospect of resolution on the horizon. The local regime of permission continues to obstruct meaningful accountability or redress.

5. Conclusion

Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine has thrust the former socialist states of ECEE into the spotlight. However, the war's grim shadow risks narrowing scholarly focus, drawing attention predominantly to the regional and global influences of present-day Russia and the continuities with its past incarnations. Vital as it is to understand these aspects, we must ensure they don't eclipse the broader oppressive forces associated with the global system of capital accumulation.

The article argued that while the Global East perspective productively exposes the epistemological exclusion of ECEE, it tends to downplay neoliberal globalisation and the inequalities it engenders. To move beyond identity politics and centre a redistributive agenda, this article mobilized the concept of postsocialism to foreground ECEE's unequal incorporation into the global economy and the resulting inequalities within and between these societies.

I argued that the postsocialist lens contributes valuable perspectives to ongoing debates in critical criminology. Bringing the concept of regimes of permission into conversation with postsocialism, I offered a criminological analysis of the harm and violence associated with neoliberal restructuring of former socialist states. Using Georgia as an example, I demonstrated how the selective instrumentalization of certain Soviet legacies and the ideological weaponization of anti-communism shape patterns of state-corporate crime and social injury. This approach deepens criminological inquiry by revealing the structural roots of harm in postsocialist societies and connecting them to broader systems of capital accumulation and inequality.

This article advocates for the inclusion of the postsocialist East within criminological knowledge production and insists on confronting the global capitalist structures that perpetuate injustice and suffering worldwide. The state-corporate crime framework is one productive route for rendering the postsocialist East relevant to criminological inquiry. Future research should further explore how postsocialist transformations generate distinctive forms of harm, resistance, and criminalization — thereby broadening the conceptual and geographical horizons of critical criminology.

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