



The shadow of carceral collectivism: A case study of prison reform and policy transfer failure in Moldova

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Abstract

Europeanisation of post-Soviet prisons is a challenging endeavour because of the deeply rooted and enduring legacy of carceral collectivism. This paper examines the critical case of reform in the Goian Juvenile Detention Centre, created as a European model prison for Moldova. Adopting a reflexive autoethnographic approach to analyse data from multiple sources collected over a decade, this paper provides insights into the interplay between path-dependent colonial legacies and Europeanisation-driven reforms. The research revealed that improved infrastructure and piloted practices inspired from Norway, though necessary, were insufficient to sustainably transform the institutional culture and the logic of punishment. The entrenched repressive mentality resurfaced after an escape incident, triggering lasting reform setbacks and heightened levels of violence, thereby demonstrating what scholars call “the paradox of reform”. Furthermore, this case of hybrid carceral collectivism, a “soviet-inherited subculture” operating in “European-like” physical space, is illuminating for a theoretical and empirical understanding of post-Soviet penal reform trajectories and the varieties of order such hybrid models instil.

Key words

Prison reform, carceral collectivism, Europeanisation, policy transfer, Moldova, juvenile justice, post-Soviet penalty

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Resumen

La europeización de las prisiones postsoviéticas es una tarea difícil debido al legado profundamente arraigado y duradero del colectivismo carcelario. Este artículo examina el caso crítico de la reforma del Centro de Detención Juvenil de Goian, creado como una prisión modelo europea para Moldavia. Adoptando un enfoque autoetnográfico reflexivo para analizar datos de múltiples fuentes recopilados a lo largo de una década, este artículo ofrece una visión de la interacción entre los legados coloniales dependientes de la trayectoria y las reformas impulsadas por la europeización. La investigación reveló que la mejora de las infraestructuras y las prácticas piloto inspiradas en Noruega, aunque necesarias, eran insuficientes para transformar de forma sostenible la cultura institucional y la lógica del castigo. La mentalidad represiva arraigada resurgió tras un incidente de fuga, lo que provocó retrocesos duraderos en la reforma y un aumento de los niveles de violencia, demostrando así lo que los estudiosos denominan “la paradoja de la reforma”. Además, este caso de colectivismo carcelario híbrido, una “subcultura heredada de la Unión Soviética” que opera en un espacio físico “de tipo europeo”, resulta esclarecedor para la comprensión teórica y empírica de las trayectorias de la reforma penal postsoviética y las variedades de orden que instilan estos modelos híbridos.

Palabras clave

Reforma penitenciaria, colectivismo carcelario, europeización, transferencia de políticas, Moldavia, justicia juvenil, penalidad postsoviética

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1. Introduction

The lasting effects of Russian colonial legacies challenge Moldova's aspirations for European integration. Prison order in most former Soviet Union countries continues to resemble a model of governance conceptualised as "carceral collectivism" (Piacentini and Slade 2015). This form of penal order is characterised by mutual peer surveillance (polyopticon), devolved disciplinary power to prisoners who enforce a system of informal rules, and communal living by housing prisoners *en masse* in dormitories combined with freedom of movement within large areas (*ibid.*, 180). Reforms of post-Soviet prisons are "structurally and conceptually problematic" (*ibid.*, 186) as they tend to cause resistance and surges in violence (Slade 2016). The resilience of carceral collectivism is explained by two factors: architecture and attachment. Indeed, the front-runner of reforms in the post-Soviet area, Estonia, managed to demolish the old system by modernising infrastructure and hiring new staff who were extensively trained by Western European and Scandinavian experts.

This paper offers a single-case study of prison reform in a non-Western setting. The selected institution is a critical case because it is Moldova's only reform aimed at changing both the physical infrastructure and internal order by piloting a "European model prison" for juvenile offenders. The reform strategy was holistic, covering renovation of facilities, hiring new staff, and adopting practices from Norway. However, two years after the opening, the escape of three inmates triggered a sequence of backward steps. How can this backsliding be explained? From a success story, this prison became one of the worst-performing institutions, with disturbances of order occurring almost yearly. Aiming to understand what worked well and what failed in this reform, the author uses autobiographical reflections and data collected over a decade to trace the process of change before, during, and after the pilot prison project, up to the present day. Combining insights from path dependence, Europeanisation-oriented policy transfer, and prison order, this study dives into the problem of order during prison reforms in the post-Soviet context.

Building on the work of Piacentini and Slade (2015) and Symkovych (2023), this study showcases a hybrid form of carceral collectivism: European architecture alongside a persistent Soviet-inherited informal order and hyperopticon surveillance. These findings reveal a clash and coexistence between Soviet legacies and European standards. Theoretically, this paper bridges the structure-focused perspectives of path-dependent carceral collectivism as a distinct form of penal order with human agency explanations predominant in Europeanisation-oriented policy transfer. Empirically, it offers, to the best of my knowledge, the first descriptive analysis of juvenile imprisonment reform in Moldova and an in-depth investigation of policy transfer from Norway to the Juvenile Detention Centre Goian.

The remainder of this article proceeds with a review of key theoretical explanations of the post-Soviet penal order and reforms driven by Europeanisation, followed by a description of the data sources and methodological approach. The empirical part first presents Moldova's broader reforms and then describes the piloting of a "model" European juvenile prison. The conclusion links the findings to theoretical explanations and suggests future research directions.

2. Carceral collectivism and Europeanisation reforms

Penal order in post-Soviet prisons follows a distinct logic of punishment that evolved in communist states through a “totalitarian surveillance-oriented bio-politics” (Los 2004) aimed at building a collective socialist consciousness. The concept of carceral collectivism is useful for analytically differentiating between post-Soviet and Western forms of penal order. The defining features are peer surveillance, dispersal of power to prisoners, and communal living along with freedom of movement across large areas (*ibid.*, 180). Unlike most Western prisons, where the disciplinary power of surveillance is manifested as a panopticon (the few watching the many) (Foucault 1977, Bentham 1995), in post-Soviet prisons, it manifests as a polyopticon (the many watching the many) (Piacentini and Slade 2015) or as a hyperopticon - the watcher is being watched (Symkovych 2023).

Based on the claim that order is a “matter of degree” that is “never fully present in concrete social reality, so as to exclude all deviations” (Wrong 1994, 9), it is assumed that variations of prison order exist in and within a context (Carrabine 2005). While collectivist and carceral individualist models appear opposed, neither is inherently superior, as disruptions can occur in both systems. Hybrid models that combine elements of the two are also possible. However, cross-national evidence of variations in post-Soviet prison order remains unexplored. Thus, the desirable reform outcome is alignment with European prisoner treatment standards rather than full implementation of carceral individualism.

Piacentini and Slade explain the region’s reform failings as an effect of attachment to the “practices and values of carceral collectivism as well as persistence of architectural forms that engendered these” (2015, 183). The “embedded cultural attachment to a particular punishment form [is] reflected in architectural design”, and simultaneously, prison “spaces also *organize* the social life of captives” (Piacentini and Slade 2015, 193, emphasis in original). Building on this framework, Symkovych (2023) theorises the role of officers in the carceral collectivism and suggests that order relies on the hyperopticon as an institutionalised system of total, vertical and horizontal surveillance, whereby prisoner collectivisation and staff atomisation generate a co-governance form of order (Symkovych 2023, 492-493). The attempt to incorporate formal authority and power relations into the carceral collectivism model is welcomed; however, this study confuses complementarity with causation. Characteristics such as centralised micromanagement, militaristic culture, and understaffing, though complementary to collectivist order, may also be the sources of administrative breakdown and disruptions of order. A limitation of both accounts is that human agency is either portrayed as attached to the carceral collectivism culture (Piacentini and Slade 2015) or as inevitably required to share power with prisoners to preserve order (Symkovych 2023). This provides a limited scope for explaining why and how a change in the carceral model is likely to occur. Therefore, insights from historical institutionalism related to incremental change are useful.

Among the plethora of theoretical arguments about institutional continuity and change, this paper focuses on path dependence for three reasons. First, it has a tradition of incorporating “temporal” variables such as *timing, duration, and sequence* in theoretical explanations. In path dependence, *when* an event occurs and *in what order* events unfold are both crucial for explaining an outcome (Pierson 2004, 44). Secondly, both causes and

outcomes are viewed as *processes* that develop over short and/or long “time horizons” (*ibid.*, 97). Lastly, a core feature of path dependence is the mechanism of self-reinforcement, which according to Pierson is enabled by four sources of positive feedback: *collective action* and coordination, meaning that one actor’s decisions are dependent upon others’ actions, thus, once institutionalized, these arrangements have a strong tendency to persist; the *high density of institutions* and policies that generate “extensive, legally binding constraints on behavior”; using *authority to enhance asymmetries of power* happens when actors change the rules of the game to enhance their power and capacity for action, thus reinforcing a certain direction of development; and finally, there is an intrinsic complexity and *opacity* of politics due to the incommensurable goals and diffuse links between actions and outcomes (Pierson 2004, 30-40, emphasis added). In the criminal justice system, institutional outcomes depend on the degree of openness or “insulation” from external institutions, especially political ones (Zimring and Johnson 2006). In addition to a reinforcing sequence, Mahoney suggests that path dependence may unfold as a reactive sequence “marked by backlash processes that *transform* and perhaps *reverse* early events” (Mahoney 2000, 526, emphasis in original, Mahoney *et al.* 2016, 83). In this logic, the carceral collectivism path is reinforced by: officers’ and/or prisoners’ capacity to act collectively against changes; the dense network of institutions, and the soviet legal tradition of regulating every detail of prison life; the asymmetry of power between formal and informal “authorities” working mostly in favour of the latter; the ubiquitous and opaque nature of informal rules covering a wide range of behaviours, rituals and worldviews (Burciu 2023, 113-114).

Thelen and Conran (2016) suggest that the same elements that reinforce stability and persistence represent “points of potential vulnerability” to changes. Thus, reproduction and change are two sides of the same coin that are inextricably linked. In a political environment where direct intervention in old institutions is difficult, the most likely mechanism of change is “layering” — new rules attached to existing ones (Schickler 2001, Thelen 2003, Mahoney and Thelen 2009). If successful as a mechanism of layering, the pilot prison could serve as a point of departure from the carceral collectivism path.

Aiming to uproot Soviet legacies, Moldova is learning from European partners and institutions. In this paper, Europeanisation is defined as a “process of domestic adaptation” (Jaremba and Mayoral 2019) which is “not limited to structural and policy changes” (Olsen 2002, 935) but involves an “internalization” of European values and paradigms (Checkel 2001). Thus, the Europeanisation of prisons means adjusting national policy and practice to a body of principles, termed “European Prison Policy” (van Zyl Smit and Snacken 2009). Studies on the effects of Europeanisation warn of “pathological” effects due to façade compliance (Börzel and Pamuk 2012) or the reinforcement of corrupt networks and failure to address informal norms (Mungiu-Pippidi 2014). For policy transfer scholars, past policies (Heclo 1974, Rose 1993, Dolowitz and Marsh 1996), path dependencies, policy layering, and other “historical background” factors (De Jong 2009, 147, Benson and Jordan 2011, 372) are constraints that influence what lessons agents would seek drawing, how they engage in the process, and how they apply what was learned. Rose and Mackenzie (1991, 46) suggested that transfers are most likely to succeed when they are both highly desirable and practical (feasible). For them, a highly desirable, yet impractical program is similar to a “siren call”, whereas a transferred program with high practicality and low desirability becomes an “unwanted

technical solution" (*ibid.*). Later, Rose (1993, 120) introduced several contingencies for effective lesson drawing, such as institutional substitutability, resource equivalence, value congruity, program complexity, and novelty.

One challenge specific to prisons is the task of maintaining order while implementing changes in rules and routines. Crouch and Marquart (1990) coined the term "the paradox of reform" to describe phenomena in which prison reforms aimed at improving the institution often produce violence and disorder. In their influential book, Sparks *et al.* (1996) posited that order is not simply the absence of violence but rather a more complex, dynamic, and negotiated outcome. For them, the maintenance of order rests on legitimacy which has many facets, such as:

fair procedures and... consistent outcomes [...] the quality of behaviour of officials [...] the basic regime of the institution - its accommodation, services, and activities [...]. A procedurally 'correct' and bureaucratically efficient regime might simply fail on grounds of impersonality and lack of humaneness [cf. Jacobs 1977], perhaps helping to explain why prison disorders can occur in brand new, uncrowded, well resourced facilities. (Sparks *et al.* 1996, 89)

Using evidence from post-Soviet Georgia, Slade (2016) found that reforms heighten prisoner insecurity because of disruptions in informal governance structures, power distribution, and trust-building mechanisms. Slade argued that impaired information flow serves as a critical link between disorganisation and heightened conflict and violence. In summary, Moldova enacted a reform aiming to change the paradigm for managing prisons through institutional layering and lesson-drawing from Norway. However, the reform collapsed into a scandal and was abandoned. Why did this occur? The paper takes the above literature as a guide for answering this question and focuses on the following variables shaping the outcome of reform processes:

- Architecture adaptations aimed at reducing overcrowding and communal living
- Changes in cultural attachment manifested as preference for informal subcultural rules
- Degree of desirability to adopt European solutions at both political and practitioner levels
- The practicability of the policy transfer package in terms of its novelty and complexity
- The timing and duration of the learning part of the institutional reform
- The sequence of policy steps that forecloses or opens up possibilities for path departure.

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a reflexive autoethnographic approach (Ellis *et al.* 2011) to explore the Europeanisation of prisons "phenomenon within its real-life context" (Robson 1993, 146). The single-case study design is adopted to examine more in-depth the "configuration" of factors (Ragin 2000, 64-87) shaping the institutional development by piloting a "model" prison at the Goian Juvenile Center. The case unit is the process of change in juvenile imprisonment. The empirical puzzle underpinning this inquiry arises

from the author's direct participation in the reform process and the case under investigation. This engagement spans from providing policy advice as part of the Norwegian Mission of Rule of Law Advisers to Moldova (NORLAM) during 2007-2017 and participating in the Goian pilot project to serving as the State Secretary of the Ministry of Justice, responsible for corrections during 2022-2024. The author has a unique, profound, and longitudinal perspective on this case. Autoethnography as a method is justified here as "the author retroactively and selectively writes about past experiences" in order to "illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders" (Ellis *et al.* 2011, 275-276). The author reviewed relevant literature to make sense of real-life situations by "comparing and contrasting personal experience against existing research" (*ibid.*, 276). The process-tracing method is also used to "explore the processes by which initial conditions are translated into outcomes" (Vennesson 2008, 224), because it allows for "identifying steps in a causal process leading to the outcome of a given dependent variable of a particular case in a particular historical context", although this may "require enormous amounts of information" (George and Bennett 2005, 176-223).

This single-case study focuses on the Goian Juvenile Detention Center, selected as a critical case (Yin 2018) because it represents Moldova's only concerted effort to pilot a "model" prison based on European standards by adapting both the infrastructure and its operation. Furthermore, it is an atypical case due to its unique history and status as the only custodial institution for juveniles in the country. Goian was an open prison for adult males before it was closed in 2012 for renovations and adaptations for juvenile detention. Prior to May 2013, young offenders were incarcerated in Lipcani, located in the northernmost part of Moldova, a facility that housed both juveniles and former officers/servants, who were detained separately from other inmates for their safety. From 2014 to 2023, only a single detention block was functional in Goian, with a capacity of 64 places, accommodating 25 to 35 juveniles. With the opening of the pre-trial block, the total capacity of the Goian Prison expanded to 164 places, housing 43 juveniles as of 31 December 2024. Goian has a payroll of 70 staff members, of which nine were vacant positions in 2023. The level of resources available here surpasses that of other correctional facilities in the country. Thus, analysing this case provides insights into the opportunities and challenges of prison reform in a post-Soviet setting.

This research draws on multiple sources of data collected by the author over the years, including field observations and notes from conversations during prison visits, interviews, studies, reports, statistics, and project records, both publicly available and solely in the author's possession. A core piece of evidence used is the data from interviews conducted by the author and a Norwegian expert in 2015 for the purpose of evaluating the progress of the Goian Pilot Prison. All respondents (17 juveniles, 8 employees) were informed about the purpose of the interview and gave verbal consent for their views to be reflected in a NORLAM report. The interviews were conducted in Romanian and occasionally in Russian, with the author providing consecutive interpretation for the Norwegian co-interviewer. The notes and transcriptions in Romanian were subsequently translated into English. The collected data were anonymised to ensure confidentiality. For further details, please refer to Appendix 1 for the list of respondents and Appendix 2 for the interview questions. The author also visited Goian immediately after the 2016 prison riot (and the burning down of the 4th

floor) and during the 2022 collective hunger strike. In both cases, the purpose of group discussions with juveniles and separately with staff was to understand what happened. To construct validity, the author used data triangulation and presented verifiable facts from several sources.

The data analysis takes a diachronic approach, thus comparing the case to itself at different points in time (Gerring 2006, 2011). This process included reviewing field notes, meeting minutes, interview transcripts, project records (project document, yearly plans and reports, result frameworks, risk assessment, and mitigation plans), comparing relevant statistical data over years (please see selected indicators in Appendix 3), and reviewing reports about Goian published by independent monitoring bodies: European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment of Punishment (CPT), Ombudsman Office, the Council for the Prevention of Torture - the National Preventive Mechanism (Consiliul pentru Prevenirea Torturii), hereinafter NPM.

The key principles of research ethics were respected despite the fact that the primary data used in this study were not originally collected for research purposes; thus, it lacks the controlled framing of a formal academic research project. However, this is also a strength, as the data reflect respondents' authentic, in-the-moment perspectives, untainted by the "research gaze". Owing to data anonymisation and staff turnover, retrospective consent from the respondents could not be obtained. The use of these data presents minimal risk to the participants, as all identifying details have been removed and the highest standards of confidentiality are adhered to. The author's personal background and hands-on experience with the research subjects have several implications. The decade-long experience of working in a team of Norwegian legal professionals might have shaped the researcher's cognitive frames in terms of the appropriate behaviour of correctional officers, what a well-organised prison looks like, and the meaning of humane treatment. To mitigate the risk that the author's sentiments of disappointment, frustration, or regret penetrate the narrative, secondary sources of data, such as independent monitoring reports, are used extensively.

4. The challenging prison reforms in Moldova

After gaining independence from the USSR in 1991, Moldova embarked on a path of democratisation. Like other former Soviet countries, Moldova has experienced rising criminality during its transition from a planned to a market economy. Violent crimes against property were rampant. The homicide rate was 10 per 100,000 inhabitants in the 2000s (UNODC 2014), four times higher than that in the present day. This impacted corrections. The prison population exceeded ten thousand during 2002-2004 (293 per 100,000 inhabitants). The number of imprisoned juveniles nearly doubled in two years (106 in 2002 and 191 in 2004). Economic challenges have caused resource deficits in prisons, electricity outages, and an inadequate food supply. Prison authorities started allowing prisoners to receive large quantities of food parcels from home, a practice which continues to the present date despite the level of resourcing increasing tenfold, from 79 million Moldovan lei in 2003 to 812 mil. in 2023 (Ministry of Justice 2011). Against a background of economic impoverishment and Soviet-era nostalgia, the Communist Party returned to power in 2000, pledging to restore collective farming and the "good old days". Despite an initial pro-Russian stance, the Communist Party, which

ruled until 2009, pursued Europeanisation. In 2005, the EU-Moldova Action Plan was signed, requiring the *inter alia* eradication of torture and ill-treatment in police and prison establishments (EU External Action 2005). Prison overcrowding, poor conditions, and physical ill-treatment have prompted reforms towards humanisation, amnesties, and seeking lesson-drawing from European counterparts.

Juveniles have been prioritised in penal “humanisation” reforms. The 2003 Criminal Code introduced two new alternatives: punishment exemption for juveniles and punishment deferral for pregnant women and mothers with children under eight years old. The year 2008 was consequential in Moldova’s penal-reform history. These reforms include an article-by-article revision of the Criminal Code to reduce sentencing levels, the adoption of Probation law which mandated pre-sentence reports in juvenile cases, and the introduction of Individual Sentence Plans in prisons. As Parliamentary elections were approaching, and perhaps aware of the Communists’ low popularity among youngsters, the President declared 2008 the “Year of Youth”. Although criticised for being an “electoral charity” (ZdG 2008), the initiative included the opening of a Youth Centre, expanding youth participation in decision-making, guaranteeing the right to education, expanding state-funded places in vocational training, and mass amnesty of young prisoners. The Amnesty Law released all inmates under 21 years old serving punishments of less than seven years, and pregnant women or mothers with children under eight years old (Parliament of Moldova 2008). This led to a significant decrease in the number of imprisoned juveniles, from 218 in 2006 to 24 in 2009. Although multiple pundits warned about reoffending risks (Zdg 2008), the Prisons Administration reported that only 25% of those released in 2008 reoffended (returned to the prison system within five years after amnesty). These measures failed to garner the support of young voters, and the Communist Party was ousted from power following the post-election youth demonstrations in April 2009. The massive arrests and torture of hundreds of protesters, including the death of a young man, triggered popular outrage against the ruling party, which lost its majority in snap elections in July of the same year. This illustrates the “dual reality” as a Soviet legacy, the “mismatch [...] between formal norms and laws and the actual operation of institutions” (Kosals and Maksimova 2015), a human rights narrative that contrasts the repressive behaviour of police officers.

Lipcani Prison held convicted juveniles until May 2013. During a 2004 monitoring visit, the CPT found that the environment was green and well-maintained, “avoiding a prison-like atmosphere” (para. 82). The penal colony comprised residential and industrial areas, with facilities including a classroom, sports hall, performance hall, and sports pitches. Minors and adults (convicted former military or civil servants) occupied separate buildings. Lipcani provided the best conditions among the penitentiaries visited, although overcrowding remained a concern. The largest dormitory (72 m²) housed up to 60 inmates. Shower facilities were inadequate, with only 10 showerheads and 9 sinks serving approximately 100 people. In the juvenile colony, 120-130 of the 200 minors attended school six days per week, while 90 received vocational training in carpentry, locksmithing, and metalworking. Twenty attended computer courses, and up to 70 worked during harvest. The school employed 11 teachers and struggled with a deficit of educational resources, relying on donations to meet its needs. Despite the existence of facilities for education and training, during a field visit to Lipcani in August 2010, the author noticed dust on the classroom desks and all juveniles spending idle time outside

without an apparent structure of their day. The Lipcani administration explained that the school is closed for the summer, but they do have 16 different “educative” programs. The CPT delegation criticised the practice of charging families up to 20 Moldovan lei per day per visitor during 3-days-long visits. No allegations of physical ill-treatment were received on site by the CPT delegation; however, the “culture of inter-prisoner violence” remained a concern:

In the various establishments visited, the prospect of becoming a victim of violence was a daily reality for many vulnerable prisoners in the form of physical attacks (mainly beatings) and intimidation. This was also a reality in the Lipcani juvenile colony, where such acts emanated from older prisoners (known as ‘the hills’) who used their physical superiority over younger prisoners. (CPT 2006, para 65)

Moldova’s fragile democracy and stagnant economy are reflected in its dilapidated prison estate. There are 17 penitentiary institutions, of which two are in satisfactory material condition (Rusca for women and Goian for Juveniles), two are partially renovated (Taraclia and Leova), and seven resemble Soviet-era correctional labour camps, with 90% of spaces still designed as communal living (Lipcani, Cricova #4, Cricova #15, Soroca, Bender #8, Pruncul, Brănești). The legislation categorises institutions as closed, semi-closed, or open; however, the architecture of closed prisons for sentenced prisoners and semi-closed facilities is largely indistinguishable. A significant difference from Western practices is the absence of a formal, risk-based prisoner classification system. The assigned type of prison depends on the sentence length, and inmate allocation inside a prison is based on informal hierarchy rules. Beyond a 3-months “initial regime” and 6-months preparation for release called “resocialization regime”, the rest of the sentence is served in a “common regime”, allowing inmates to move freely within a large security perimeter. A juvenile facility corresponds to a semi-closed type of prison. Moldovan legislation provides a limited differentiation in the particularities of sentence enforcement by juveniles. The specific provisions mainly refer to “additional” food ratio for minors, more family visits, the right to education, the possibility to stay in the juvenile detention center until turning 23 years old.

Human resources are organised into fragmented and narrowly specialised services (guards, psycho-social, patrol/regime, internal security, and administrative roles), similar to the description provided by Symkovych (2023) about Ukraine. The hiring process is highly centralised in Moldova. Prior to the 2017 “demilitarisation” reform, all prison officers were appointed by the Minister of Justice. Currently, recruitment for leadership positions, such as prison governors and heads of departments within the National Prisons Administration (NPA), is decided at the ministry level. The hiring of officers is managed by the NPA, while the recruitment of sub-officers (e.g. guards) is conducted at the prison level. The work processes in Moldovan prisons are highly bureaucratic; for example, prison officers manage dozens of handwritten registers, document minutiae tasks, and have limited decision power (Vîlcu and Burciu 2016).

5. The case study: Creating a European model prison

5.1. Pilot project to create a model prison for juveniles in Goian 2012-2016

In 2011, the Mission of Rule of Law Advisors to Moldova (NORLAM) suggested implementing a pilot prison project. Initially, the Department of Prisons selected Cricova Prison #4 and Pre-Trial Isolator #13. When a new Director General was appointed, he decided on juveniles as the target group and Goian as the location for the pilot project. Goian, the only open prison at the time with about 100 inmates, was closed for about one year to renovate and adapt the institution for the detention of juveniles.

The project to create a model prison in accordance with European standards was launched in 2012, spearheaded by the Ministry of Justice and the Department of Prisons (DIP), in collaboration with NORLAM. The project objectives were to ensure minimum detention standards, implement juvenile re-education programs by enhancing prison staff capacity, revise the legal framework for juvenile detention and reintegration, and adopt practices from European and Norwegian institutions (NORLAM 2012). The total cost was estimated at 1.9 million Euro, with Norway providing 70 000 Euro as technical assistance and expertise to the project. The fundraising efforts were futile, yet the European Union included the transfer of juveniles from Lipcani to Goian as one of the conditionalities for budgetary support under the Justice Sector Reform Strategy. Given the insufficient funding, infrastructure refurbishments were covered by the state budget (65 000 euro), prompting authorities to take unconventional measures (e.g. obliging all 2 900 employees to donate one day's salary, engaging the newly hired Goian staff in renovation work along with adult inmates). The Romanian Government funded workshop refurbishments in the amount of 90 000 euro (UNDP 2015), while the NGO Regina Pacis sponsored vocational education and training. The renovation of the pre-trial block and activities centre was postponed, and the prison officially opened in May 2013 after the renovation of only one block.

The staff training program, collaboratively developed by the Norwegian Correctional Academy (KRUS) and Moldova's Prison Training Centre, comprised six modules: management, legal framework, professional ethics, communication techniques, criminology, and safety and security. Two modules, each lasting two weeks, were conducted in the fall of 2012, with the remaining modules implemented post-opening. The staff continued construction work after training hours, which adversely affected their performance the following day and caused turnover. Following a study visit to Norway in August 2012, the Goian and DIP staff identified several key practices to be piloted in Goian: dynamic security, personal contact officer, progressive detention regimes, vocational workshops, gradual release (leaves), decentralised management, and case management through interdisciplinary weekly meetings to assess inmate behaviour and determine transfers to either milder or stricter security levels.

The opening ceremony on 7 May 2013 was attended by high officials, prison governors, Norwegian guests, and civil society organisations, garnering extensive media coverage. The speaker of the Parliament encouraged Goian staff to "see these detainees first and foremost as children, who need help, support, care, and understanding", while the Minister of Justice expressed hope that this project would "transform the entire juvenile justice correctional system" and that this institution would become more similar to a

school where juveniles can improve themselves (Ministry of Justice 2013). Before the opening, while inspecting the “readiness” of the prison for the transfer of juveniles, the DIP leadership instructed Goian staff to arrange accommodation “by their category”, meaning the informal caste status. This message was in stark contrast to what Goian employees learned from Norwegians. It also shows the gap between the official narratives of Europeanisation proponents at the policy level and the reality on the ground.

The novel practices piloted in Goian included merging staff into a unified “detention” department to create all-round case managers akin to the Norwegian “contact officer,” implementing individual weekly plans for juveniles, and designating a specific probation officer for coordinated release. The most challenging part to “translate” into practice was the concept of dynamic security, defined as security provided by “an alert staff who know the prisoners” (CPT 2006). In Norwegian thinking, safety in prison relies on physical, procedural, and dynamic security. The latter means “security by building relations and getting knowledge through participating in the daily life of the inmates” (Lundeby 2007). This is feasible in Norway, given the extensive officer training, favourable staff-inmate ratios, and the combined custody-and-care role. In stark contrast, the Moldovan context prohibits such “cordialities” because having “irregular” relations with prisoners is a breach of conduct.

A 2014 DIP study surveyed juveniles in the new facility in Goian (N=26) and in pre-trial facilities (N=39) in Cahul, Bălți, Chișinău, and Rezina facilities. Minors in Goian reported better conditions, including better food quality, hygiene, activities, and better staff performance. In contrast, juvenile detainees in Penitentiary #13 in Chișinău reported poor-quality food, limited activities, and negative staff behaviour. However, adolescents in Goian were dissatisfied with smoking restrictions, limited outdoor time, and being “under permanent pressure to be occupied” (Department of Penitentiary Institutions 2014).² In the same year, NORLAM commissioned the State University to conduct an anthropological study of informal social order, rites of passage, and taboo behaviours among Goian youth (Saharneau and Mărgărint 2014). This research examined how adolescents aged 17-19 experienced institutional life and how group dynamics shaped their identity. The study identified rituals marking prison entry, nicknames, criminal subculture slang, and informal hierarchies. These unwritten norms which they learn in pre-trial from adults, structure their interactions according to the “understandings” dating back to the Soviet-era subculture. The breach of subculture rules was punished by the peers. While Goian offered better rehabilitation opportunities, criminal subcultural elements persisted (*ibid.*).

During 2013-2014, approximately 90% of the juveniles at Goian participated in meaningful activities daily; most employees reported applying dynamic security, and the prison garnered positive attention for its transparency and adherence to rights-based practices. Material and sanitary conditions improved, the regime of activities expanded (NORLAM 2015), general education was provided by teachers from the community, and

² Department of Penitentiary Institutions, *Identificarea problemelor cu care se confruntă copiii în detenție* [Identification of Problems faced by Imprisoned Juveniles] (unpublished report, presented at a closed-door briefing the author attended, Chișinău, Republic of Moldova, 2014). A copy of this report is held by the author.

vocational training was provided in trades such as cobbling, mechanics, and cooking (UNDP 2015). This led to positive outcomes such as: “no cases of self-harm or hunger strikes amongst juvenile detainees (which used to be the case before Goian opened); no serious incidents where the use of force has been required; and recidivism is currently at 0%” (ISSAT 2014, 23). The project was promoted as a success story in both political narratives and mass media communication, and success was broadly attributed to NORLAM’s consistent guidance and support (ISSAT 2014). Furthermore, the DIP communicated intentions to replicate this new inmate-centred approach in Prison #9 in Pruncul, a closed-type prison for men (*ibid.*).

This initial success began to unravel after an escape two years after the opening which triggered a repressive response from the DIP, including the dismissal or sanctioning of key staff and abandonment of Norwegian-inspired practices and philosophy. The trained personnel left, and those who replaced them lacked ownership of the reform vision and principles, as well as the training necessary to continue the piloted model. The dismantling of the Norwegian-inspired model was easy because the new practices were not institutionalised in a legally binding act, apart from the new organisational chart.

5.2. Prison escape, riots and the fallout

On 22 May 2015 three juveniles escaped from Goian. Although the fugitives were quickly found, this incident revealed critical security vulnerabilities. The Department of Prisons (DIP) responded with a comprehensive inspection from 25-29 May, which suspended Goian’s leadership. The resulting report was less an investigation into the root causes of the incident and more a long catalogue of deficiencies ranging from staff discipline, outdated protocols, poor documentation of staff training, biased bonuses, inconsistent program delivery, and infrastructure failures, ultimately rating the prison’s performance as “unsatisfactory” and demanding urgent changes (DIP 2015). NORLAM’s own evaluation, based on interviews conducted between July and August 2015, revealed that deviations from project objectives started earlier, as one Goian employee conveyed:

In the first year of Goian’s activity [...] staff were enthusiastic to be part of a Norwegian project, and NORLAM’s seminars and study visits motivated them to continue despite the resistance and criticism from DIP or other prisons. Gradually, most of the employees recruited via competition, together with NORLAM, and trained by NORLAM and Oslo Prison experts, became disappointed and quit or moved to other prisons. Subsequent hirings [...] were performed without competition. In 2014, a group of employees fired from Prison #4 Cricova for improper service was transferred to Goian by the DIP’s decision. Most of these employees [...] gradually reintroduced the old system and the ‘traditional’ working culture common to other prisons. (Respondent 3)

The problem of staff appointments without adequate qualifications was flagged in the summer of 2014 by the Goian Governor, who reported that these transferred officers refused to obey her orders. Institutional rivalry, scepticism towards a female governor, and unexperienced staff in Goian are a few of the reasons that may explain this sabotage. The commitment to this pilot eroded as the main proponent, the DIP Director General, was promoted in May 2013, and the key Norwegian adviser was rotated out. Gradually, signals of dissatisfaction with Goian were voiced by representatives of the DIP, both by those who failed to understand its philosophy and by those who were disillusioned:

I do not see different security levels and sectors with progressive regimes in Goian. The Governor uses prison staff for her personal and family tasks. Some donations for juveniles in Goian can be found in the Governor's residence. The prison was transformed into a private business. The Governor divided the staff in Goian into 'favourites' and 'non-favourites'. People leave because of the Goian leadership. The personnel stopped using the case management method and stopped having weekly meetings. Some staff members are overloaded with tasks, whereas others do nothing. (Respondent 2)

Further deviations from the project plan were reported by the NORLAM-appointed release coordinator, who informed the author that the "smoking ban is just declarative" and that "criminal subculture rules are followed by approximately half of the juveniles," who feared repercussions in adult prisons if they were seen to 'cooperate' with prison staff (Respondent 1).

The post-escape period triggered a punitive backlash from the DIP, leading to dismissal, demotion, or even criminal charges against some employees. Frequent changes in Goian leadership and high turnover created a void, as captured by one staff member: "Before there was a vision, there was a plan, and now everyone is waiting for something..., and nobody knows where to go or what to do" (Respondent 5). According to one Goian employee, a change in the regulatory framework giving this pilot prison a different status might have helped them experiment with methods without the fear of punishment (Respondent 4). There was also an overall feeling of unfair treatment by higher-ups who abandoned the project ideals, as one officer lamented, "It is unfair for DIP to say that everything done before was bad. We had good results. [...] Now only five of the staff trained by the Norwegians are left; the rest do not know anything about the project... The security staff needs training in communication, because now they are just guards, opening and closing doors" (Respondent 6). This perception was corroborated by the juvenile inmates: "Initially, the staff wanted to reach European standards. [Now there are] zero activities... The new staff have no clue about working with juveniles... After the escape, everything is worse. [There are] conflicts all the time" (Respondent 17). The NORLAM evaluation (2015) confirmed this stark regression, documenting a decline in individual approaches and activities, a rise in self-harm and violence, and instances of staff beating prisoners. The author observed staff using inmates' subculture-assigned nicknames, a fact signalling the normalisation of the informal hierarchy.

External monitoring bodies have confirmed this drastic backsliding. A September 2015 visit by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) found satisfactory material conditions - adequately sized rooms (measuring approximately 11 m²) with good lighting (including natural light), ventilation, and suitable furniture. "a number of allegations from juvenile inmates of physical ill-treatment by certain staff members", consisting of "slaps, punches, kicks and truncheon blows" (CPT 2016, 6). The main concern was that among the visited establishments, Goian was the only one where violence by the staff was reported.

At Goian, the CPT's delegation received a number of allegations from juvenile inmates of physical ill-treatment by certain staff members. The alleged ill-treatment mainly followed instances of disobedient behaviour by the juveniles and consisted of slaps, punches, kicks and truncheon blows. [...] Certain features of the prison subculture

(including the inmate caste system) were also prevalent among juvenile inmates at Goian Prison. (CPT 2016, 6)

The CPT has criticised the practice of using sanctions to influence juveniles' behaviour, with 212 disciplinary sanctions recorded in the first nine months of 2015, and the excessive use of solitary confinement. Later that year, Ombudsman representatives conducted private interviews with nearly all inmates and documented similar allegations, including "welcome beatings" for new arrivals. A DIP-commissioned survey (Curea 2015) further revealed that only 38% of juveniles were satisfied with staff behaviour, and 25% reported corruption among senior staff (N=24). While 41% of juveniles rated detention conditions "acceptable" and 29% - "good," other 25% found them "degrading." Food quality scored low, and most prisoners complained about insufficient portions. Representatives of the Ombudsman's office visited Goian after a riot in September 2015 and concluded that staff-inmates relations were conflictual and the imposed smoking ban lacked legal grounding (Ombudsman 2015), thus it may have been perceived by inmates as a decision lacking legitimacy.

In response to this worsening environment, NORLAM shifted its strategy to support rehabilitation activities delivered directly to juveniles. A Theatre and Film Workshop engaging seven incarcerated adolescents, delivered by renowned actors from Moldova, pioneered a drama-based rehabilitation activity. Interestingly, the criminal subcultural caste system did not apply during drama classes. For example, juveniles could shake hands with the so-called untouchable caste. The program received mass media coverage and culminated in a performance staged by juveniles at the Academy of Theatre and Arts. A short movie developed by juveniles was used by NORLAM in seminars for criminal justice practitioners. However, such isolated efforts could not stabilise the deteriorating environment.

On 8 June 2016 juveniles locked themselves in and burned down the 4th floor of Goian. Doors and walls were destroyed, furniture was burned, and windows were broken. The participants in the riot communicated their demand to be transferred to adult prisons, where smoking is allowed and there is more outdoor time. Juveniles also reported physical abuse by the staff, including being stripped and beaten until they lost consciousness. One juvenile became emotional and cried during his account of the events. In contrast, staff blamed the riot on a perceived leniency, arguing that juveniles needed to "feel the punishment" and "feel the regime" to understand the consequences of their actions. Staff also cited infrastructural limitations preventing compliance with legal standards, such as the absence of toilets in initial regime cells, and that riot initiators were all newcomers placed in this regime. *Prima facie*, this incident resembles Scraton *et al.*'s account of "the alienation and boredom, the rigorous enforcement of petty rules, the psychological desolation [...] and the fear and reality of violence" found in a Scottish prison (Scraton *et al.* 1991, 132).

A baseline study of the criminal subculture phenomenon in Moldovan prisons found that Goian juveniles initiated disturbances and violence to signal commitment to prisoner leadership and secure a better position in the informal hierarchy once transferred to an adult prison (Gasparyan *et al.* 2018, 36). The declared reason for the first two riots in September 2015 and June 2016 was the smoking ban, and in the May 2017 riot, they demanded access showers at any time. However, the real problem concerned

the separation of the prisoners into two floors: those who adhere to the inmate code — eight juveniles, on the fourth floor — and the rest on the floor below. Upon the arrival of three prisoners from Chisinau Prison no. 13, the top-floor prisoners demanded that they be brought up to their floor, presumably to bolster their number, and when the administration refused, “a riot broke out in which an officer was cut and prisoners were beaten” (*ibid.*).

A final attempt to salvage the situation was the creation of a consultative group that drafted an action plan for Goian’s development (NORLAM 2016). Although a new methodology for working with juveniles was formally approved (DIP 2016, Ministry of Justice 2017), its implementation was discontinued due to political instability and the final withdrawal of NORLAM in May 2017, marking the end of the pilot phase.

5.3. Dynamics after project ended 2017-2024

The pattern of disorder that followed revealed an ongoing contestation of power and strong cultural attachment to informal order, despite a favourable staff-to-inmate ratio of 70 to approximately 35 juveniles. This case challenges the explanation that understaffing is the primary cause of the system of co-governance and the dispersal of disciplinary power onto prisoners themselves. There is no need for extralegal co-governance (Symkovych 2018), and there is no system of extortion into the common fund (Gasparyan *et al.* 2018), but the informal hierarchy is intact. From the juveniles’ perspective, the compulsion to follow informal rules stems from a fear of consequences once transferred to adults in some cases and a desire to demonstrate loyalty to the criminal underworld in other cases. Although Moldovan legislation allows well-behaved juveniles to remain in Goian until 23, courts often disregard the “recommendation” from the prison administration, and juveniles who take part in educational activities risk harsh treatment once transferred to an adult prison. While in Norway, prison administration can transfer an inmate from one wing/security level to another, even from one prison to another, in Moldova, this aspect is strictly regulated. Transfers to the initial (locked-in) regime are disciplinary sanctions, transfers to other prisons of the same type are decided by the National Administration, and transfers to another type of prison are decided by the Court. As prison administration is limited in its power to influence the transfer of juveniles to adult prisons, and the coercive power of criminal leaders is stronger, most juveniles rely on the latter:

I have to trust people who live by the understandings and people higher in the hierarchy... I will try to move up the hierarchy as much as I can and honestly, I want to go to Cricova #15 really, not [Prison X], because in Cricova #15 you have a thief-in-law [Vladimir Moscalciuc] and people live by the rules. (Gasparyan *et al.* 2018, 36)

Participation in riots is a communicative act to ensure that their resistance is acknowledged, which directly impacts their future caste position and potential for advancement within the prison hierarchy (Gasparyan *et al.* 2018). The inmate subculture is sustained by the strategic collection and dissemination of information, as illustrated by the account of a juvenile transferred from Goian Prison to Chisinau Pre-trial isolator no. 13 following his participation in a riot:

those of us who follow the understandings we show interest in each other, actually we are interested in what is happening in the prison in general and outside the prison.

When I was in Chisinau #13 I collected information to bring back to Goian about who is coming here, [...] we can understand who should be an untouchable or who is already an untouchable. (Gasparyan *et al.* 2018, 33-34)

The hostile relations between staff and juveniles instigated by informal prisoner leaders during pre-trial are further exacerbated by the abusive behaviour of staff in Goian. An unannounced monitoring visit by the Ombudsman's Office and NPM in February 2017 revealed a range of disturbing violations of juveniles' rights (Ombudsman 2017), such as recurrent ill-treatment, including physical violence administered to avoid visible injuries, blows to extremities, cold water exposure, and confinement in cold cells (*ibid.*). The 2018 CPT report found no complaints from inmates about staff ill-treatment in Goian; the installed CCTV cameras seemed to prevent the "welcome beatings," and staff appeared to make genuine efforts to develop positive relationships between staff and juveniles/young adults and prevent inmates from exercising power over others (CPT 2018, 7). In 2021, the Children's Rights Ombudsman found inter-prisoner violence, verbal abuse by staff, and inadequate documentation of injuries (Ombudsman 2021).

Juveniles' strong adherence to subculture rules was witnessed first-hand by the author in the summer of 2022 when a collective hunger strike was staged demanding replacement of all kitchenware because it was allegedly "tainted" by an "untouchable." During the conversation about Soviet legacies and European standards, the juvenile "leader" voiced narratives that are common in Russian propaganda channels (e.g. derogatory remarks about LGBTQ community and Europe). The prison did not accept this unreasonable demand, and the juvenile instigator was temporarily transferred to Prison no.13.

Transfers to remand centres function as a critical mechanism for coordinating the subculture across the penal system (Gasparyan *et al.* 2018); therefore, finalising the renovation of the pre-trial block in Goian was a priority and a recommendation by the CPT and Ombudsman. As of March 2023, juveniles in pre-trial detention from Prison no.13 were provided custody in Goian. In October that year, three juveniles escaped from the pre-trial detention block. The cause was breaching a basic safety rule: one guard opened the cell door alone at night when the lights were off and was attacked by three juveniles. The Ministry of Justice commissioned a Security Audit of Goian Prison (D. Muresan and I. Jantuan, inside report, 2024).³ The evaluation revealed systemic safety vulnerabilities, including high staff turnover, insufficient training, inexperienced officers, weak perimeter security, and outdated protocols. In fact, the national-level Regulation on prison safety and handling crisis situations dates back to 2003 and is long outdated.

Overall, Goian experienced nine significant incidents between 2015 and 2023, including four escapes, four riots or hunger strikes, and one staff attack, highlighting unresolved root causes and ineffective responses. This is in stark contrast to the old Lipcani Prison, which experienced only two incidents in eight years (a mass disturbance in 2002 and an escape in 2008), as reported to the author during a visit in 2010. Goian's performance metrics continued to deteriorate: the reported injuries increased from 8 cases in 2020 to 23 in 2021, 44 in 2022, and 121 in 2023, whereas the number of juveniles stayed at around

³ *Raport Audit de Securitate Penitenciar Goian* [Security Audit Report of Goian Prison]. Report commissioned by the author, not published.

30 throughout this period, except for 2023 when it reached 45 juveniles, including pre-trial inmates. The number of self-harm cases increased from 7 in 2022 to 38 in 2023. The true numbers could be worse, as a recent NPM report (2025, 37) revealed that Goian underreported injuries. The staff continues to resort to coercive measures towards juveniles, as evidenced by the excessive use of disciplinary sanctions (108 in 2022, 162 in 2023), comparable to the total number of sanctions in much larger adult prisons. The most frequently used disciplinary reaction in 2023 was the suspension of the right to family visits (42%) and solitary confinement (30%) (Ombudsman 2023). The most recent CPT report found disturbing manifestations of the criminal subculture among juveniles in Goian:

... the delegation observed that the prison subculture had not been fully eradicated in this establishment, and the castes of informal prisoner leaders and ‘untouchables’ could still be discerned among the juveniles. Inmates in the latter category were mainly employed to clean the communal toilets and corridors and were only allowed to distribute food to other ‘untouchable’ prisoners [...]. [J]ust like their adult counterparts, the juvenile ‘prison leaders’ used other inmates to clean their cells and asked for a share of their food parcels, in return for ‘protection’ from other inmates. (CPT 2020, 31)

The juvenile detention centre at Goian today is closer to a reformed “European” prison infrastructure-wise but remains anchored in carceral collectivism culture-wise. In Lipcani, the juveniles lived in crowded dormitories but moved freely across a wide territory, leading to higher informality and a prevalent subculture. In Goian, accommodation is more individualised in double-occupancy cells, but juveniles are locked in, resulting in frustration, violence, and self-harm. Compared to male adult prisons, Goian has a better staff-inmate ratio, improved infrastructure, and larger support from donors, all favourable preconditions for upholding European standards.

6. Conclusion: Moldova’s hybrid carceral collectivism

In the vast post-Soviet penal space, most countries struggle to uproot resilient colonial legacies by adopting a range of reform strategies. The literature on penal reforms and transformations in the region overlooks the case of Moldova. This paper fills this gap by providing a longitudinal, descriptive account of a case of reform aimed at creating a “European” model prison for juveniles. Drawing on autoethnographic reflections and ample data collected over time, this analysis unpacks the structural, cultural, and contingent factors shaping the current outcome. Although this Europeanisation-driven reform was holistically designed and backed by high-level political will and international expertise, it ultimately failed to achieve its aims and backslid into a state of recurrent prison disorder. The findings reveal that improved infrastructure and imported practices, while necessary, were insufficient to dislodge a deeply entrenched penal culture, thereby lending support to the carceral collectivism resilience thesis (Piacentini and Slade 2015). Furthermore, this case of reform created a hybrid model of carceral collectivism, where a Soviet-inherited subculture and informal order persisted within a European-like prison architecture.

The case of the Goian Juvenile Detention Center vividly illustrates the paradox of reform (Crouch and Marquart 1990, Sparks *et al.* 1996). Initially, when the staff focused on dynamic security, individual case management, and providing a meaningful regime of activities, the prison recorded a period of stability and positive outcomes, such as zero

recidivism and no self-harm. However, this change was not sustainable for a range of reasons, as predicted by the literature on policy transfer and path dependence. Firstly, the case exposed the limitations of lesson-drawing in the prison context. The high desirability for learning from Norway faded when the DIP leadership changed and fundraising efforts proved unsuccessful. The transfer practicality was hampered by staff turnover making it difficult to nurture the ideological congruity between policy “exporters” and “importers.” In the end, none of Rose’s (1993, 120) contingencies for transferred program fungibility were met, and the pilot project faced a “double rejection” — becoming undesirable and impractical (Rose and Mackenzie 1991, 46). Moreover, the gap in the levels of resourcing and penal culture between Norway and Moldova may have proven too large.

Secondly, the attempt to layer (Thelen 2003, Streeck and Thelen 2005) a new model onto the old system was ultimately overwhelmed by the foundational penal logic of the existing path. The rapid dismissal of reform-oriented staff and the transfer of personnel opposed to the project’s philosophy demonstrate how the positive feedback mechanisms of path dependence, collective action against change, institutional density, and power asymmetries (Pierson 2004) effectively reversed the layering process. Changing the paradigm among a small employee group and piloting novel practices without legal institutionalisation worked in favour of reinforcing carceral collectivism. The 2015 escape acted as a critical juncture, but not one that opened a new path. Instead, it triggered a powerful reactive sequence (Mahoney *et al.* 2016) that reinforced the old path. This concurs with scholarly claims that institutions have multiple effects and contradictory motivations; thus, they may not reflect the original expectations of institutional designers (Pierson 2004, 121). This case invites us to look at both causes and institutional outcomes as slow-moving processes, where the triggering events can be completely “random or incidental to the core causal process at work” (Pierson 2004, 93). Thus, the escape can be viewed as the “superficial” cause, while cultural attachment as the real, deeper core causal explanation of the current outcome.

The main theoretical contribution of this paper lies in providing empirical support for the core thesis of Piacentini and Slade (2015) on the resilience of carceral collectivism while refining the assumptions about change. This case demonstrates that even when architecture is altered - replacing mass dormitories with smaller rooms and reducing communal living — and even when the understaffing problem is solved, the cultural attachment to old penal logic can be overwhelmingly powerful. Staff organisation, officer roles, and their multifaceted power should feature more prominently in explanations of resilience and change in carceral collectivism. Hyperopticon surveillance (Symkovych 2023) in the Moldovan context is manifested as surveillance of the “commander” by its subordinated officers who are recruited and appointed at the central, higher level and peer-to-peer surveillance among staff and prisoners, feeding the fear of “negative visibility” (Symkovych 2020). This excessive surveillance has a disciplining effect on actors to follow the common “logic of appropriateness” regarding punishment (March and Olsen 1996, in Piacentini and Slade 2015, 189).

The surge in violence and riots that followed the first escape confirms that order, as Sparks *et al.* (1996) argue, is a negotiated outcome based on legitimacy. The change in staff and the “new” officers’ brutality towards inmates, endorsement of subculture-

assigned statuses, and excessive use of disciplinary measures are among the few actions which had a delegitimising effect and erosion of prisoners' compliance. Unlike the evidence from Ukraine, where Europeanisation reforms have corroded the power and legitimacy of the criminal leaders, in Moldova, the opposite happened: the abusive behaviour of Goian's staff corroded the trust in the "Europeanisation" cause. Therefore, the story of Goian is not just a case of policy transfer failure but a sobering lesson on the limits of penal Europeanisation and the enduring power of Soviet-inherited carceral logics.

The shadow of carceral collectivism looms large because it is woven into the social and institutional fabric of post-Soviet states such as Moldova. The juvenile imprisonment reform underestimated the tenacity of path dependency. Reforms by layering a "model" institution require a level of decision-making autonomy and legal "insulation" from the rest of the system (Zimring and Johnson 2006). Sustainable institutional change requires fundamental, system-wide reconfiguration. This includes rewriting the legislation to introduce differentiated levels of security and risk-based categorisation of inmates, formulating distinct occupational profiles for officers working with juveniles, decentralising decision-making to empower staff with legitimate sources of power, modernising staff recruitment and training to dismantle the punitive, militaristic culture, and adopting a coherent strategy of uprooting the informal hierarchy.

The resilience of Soviet-era practices and mentalities, albeit in adapted forms, demonstrates the long-term impact of Russian colonialism on the penal system in Moldova. This single-case study is limited in its generalisability, but it is relevant for reform debates in countries that were once occupied by the Soviet Union. Future research should focus on incidents accompanying reforms that set back or reverse changes. The concept of carceral collectivism proved useful and could be further developed theoretically with respect to power dynamics, change mechanisms, and policy-learning explanations.

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Appendix 1. List of individual interviews

Interview code	Interviewee affiliation	Date of the interview
Respondent 1	Probation Social worker	Sept., 2014
Respondent 2	Department of Prisons Employee	Feb., 2015
Respondent 3	Goian Prison Employee	14.07.2015
Respondent 4	Goian Prison Employee	29.07.2015
Respondent 5	Goian Prison Employee	29.07.2015
Respondent 6	Goian Prison Employee	29.07.2015
Respondent 7	Juvenile inmate in Goian	30.07.2015
Respondent 8	Juvenile inmate in Goian	30.07.2015
Respondent 9	Juvenile inmate in Goian	30.07.2015
Respondent 10	Juvenile inmate in Goian	30.07.2015
Respondent 11	Juvenile inmate in Goian	27.08.2015
Respondent 12	Juvenile inmate in Goian	27.08.2015
Respondent 13	Juvenile inmate in Goian	27.08.2015
Respondent 14	Juvenile inmate in Goian	27.08.2015
Respondent 15	Juvenile inmate in Goian	27.08.2015
Respondent 16	Juvenile inmate in Goian	27.08.2015
Respondent 17	Juvenile inmate in Goian	27.08.2015
Respondent 15	Juvenile inmate in Goian	27.08.2015
Respondent 16	Juvenile inmate in Goian	27.08.2015
Respondent 17	Juvenile inmate in Goian	27.08.2015
Respondent 18	Juvenile inmate in Goian	27.08.2015
Respondent 19	Juvenile inmate in Goian	27.08.2015
Respondent 20	Juvenile inmate in Goian	27.08.2015
Respondent 21	Goian Prison Employee	22.09.2015
Respondent 22	Goian Prison Employee	22.09.2015
Respondent 23	Goian Prison Employee	22.09.2015

Appendix 2. List of questions

Questions for semi-structured individual interviews with Goian employees

1. What is your professional role in the Goian Prison?
2. How long have you worked at the Goian Prison?
3. Would you consider changing your workplace and leaving Goian?
4. How is it to work in Goian prison now?
5. How do you assess the development (evolution) of the Goian prison?
6. What would you like to change/prioritize in how Goian works?
7. Do you think Goian is a prison working according to European standards?
8. What do you think about subculture, between inmates, between staff?
9. Is there corruption in Goian?
10. What should be the future of this institution?
11. Is there a need for further training, and if so, what kind?

Questions for semi-structured individual interviews with Goian juvenile inmates

1. How old are you?
2. Have you been transferred from other prisons? Which one?
3. How long is your sentence? How long have you been in Goian?
4. What is the best with Goian? What do you like most here?
5. What would you like to change in the Goian Prison?
6. Who is visiting you in the prison?
7. What activities do you do daily?
8. What is your dream after being released from prison? What do you want to become?
9. Are there rules among juveniles (subculture)? What do you think about them?
10. How is the staff?
11. What has changed in Goian recently?
12. Is there corruption in the prison?
13. Have you been beaten or seen beatings in the prison?
14. Have you written complaints about this institution?
15. If appropriate, ask about the crime committed.

Appendix 3. Descriptive data on Lipcani and Goian prisons

<i>Name of the prison</i>	Lipcani	Lipcani	Goian	Goian
<i>Indicators (stock numbers)</i>	01.01.2004	28.12.2012	31.12.2014	31.12.2024
Official capacity, places	250	200	64	164
Number of juvenile inmates*	191	35	26	46
aged 14-18	161	35	16	38
aged 18-21	30	n/a	10	8
Convicted minors	161	35	26	23
Minors in Pre-trial	n/a	n/a	n/a	15
Number of employees	70	70	70	79
<i>Indicators (flow numbers)</i>	2004	2012	2013	2023
Minors in general education	120	20	18	16
Vocational education and training	90	25	9	57**
Disciplinary sanctions	n/a	15	115	162
Incentives (for good behaviour)	n/a	66	11	19
Self-harm cases	n/a	4	2	43

Notes:

* This data covers the number of juveniles detained in Lipcani and Goian, (other prisons excluded)

** This number covers graduates of 7 different vocational courses with a duration of 3-4 months, thus the same juveniles can graduate several courses and counted multiple times.