

## CHAPTER 11

# ‘Eastern Criminals’ and Moral Panic

## On Lithuanian Offenders in Danish Prison Facilities

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### Introduction

As a result of the end of the Cold War and the rise of the EU, internal European borders have to a large extent been dissolved, and the free mobility of EU citizens has been promoted. As we now know, the various alterations of borders have resulted in unanticipated dynamics and outcomes (O’Dowd 2002; Wilson and Donnan 1999). One of the consequences has been an increase in the number of foreign offenders being encountered by national criminal justice systems.

In Denmark, public awareness has been focused on a new group of foreign offenders who have popularly become known as ‘eastern criminals’ (Danish: *østkriminelle*). This media-coined term refers to offenders from Europe’s previously socialist countries who engage in mobile crime in Western Europe – mostly acquisitive crime and trick theft committed by men in their twenties, primarily from Lithuania and Romania. Following the Soviet collapse and the EU’s eastern enlargement, this phenomenon has been the subject of political

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concern and media attention, leading to constructions of the Eastern European offender as a new folk devil – here understood as an unambiguously unfavourable symbol (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009 [1994], 27) and a personification of a general and concerning condition in society (Cohen 2002 [1972]).

In this chapter, I will focus on the case of Lithuanian detainees and follow the development of how Eastern European offenders became a new folk devil in Danish society. As pointed out by Ana Ivasiuc (Chapter 8), who writes about perceptions of Roma in Italy, we deal with both a *figure* who is constructed in public discourse and the people behind, who do not resemble the created figure. I will argue not only that the emphasis on the threat from Eastern Europe singles out a particular group of young men as deviant but also that this demonization and moral panic in turns helps shape not only the Danish political scene but also the ways in which inmates are perceived in prisons.

Two terms will be used when analysing the case of Lithuanians detained on the suspicion of criminal activities: *folk devil* and *eastern criminal*. Folk devil is a scholarly term introduced by Stanley Cohen in 1972. According to Cohen (2002 [1972]), folk devils are persons who are perceived as a threat and whom the general public, led by the media, agrees to dislike or even fear. As Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda (2009 [1994]) elaborate, Folk Devils are agents that threaten the normal order and cycle of society. Certain groups of people make better folk devils than others. Usual suspects are drug dealers, child molesters, terrorists and murderers, but also muggers, robbers and thieves. These are referred to as *suitable enemies*. Thus, Lithuanian offenders, known for breaking and entering, are one among many groups fitting this definition. The term ‘folk devil’ is used here owing to the interrelation with the moral panic surrounding this group: many people can be engaged in terrible actions, but when they form a group in the public eye, and when their actions cause the rise of a moral panic, this is when we can speak about actual folk devils.

The other term used in this chapter is ‘eastern criminal’. This is a standard reference used in newspapers when writing about offenders from Eastern Europe. This term is far from neutral but is connected by two separate words that together reinforce the negative picture: an origin from Eastern Europe and criminal behaviour.

By providing an analysis of both society’s concern with the ‘eastern criminal’ and an exploration of Lithuanian inmates’ detention regimes in Denmark, my objective is to investigate the interrelations between public and political discourse and the direct and indirect effects it has on local-level administrations in Danish prison facilities. I then build on the assumption that prison life offers a unique vantage point from which to analyse current transformations in society, as perceptions of different groups of inmates are embedded in what James Scott (2015) calls ‘the everyday construction of borders’ through media representations, political discourses and institutional practices. Thereby I wish to point out the very real consequences a consistent devilish media image has for the group of people being portrayed in this manner. In my example, the stereotyping

of Lithuanian inmates as particularly brutal and hardened has direct effects on how prison staff *per se* perceive them, despite the fact that their day-to-day interaction with the inmates contrasts this picture.

### On Prison Research

In an article from 2014, Keramet Reiter describes prison facilities as 'black sites' in our society of which we have but a limited knowledge. According to Reiter, there are two reasons for this: a physical barrier and an emotional barrier. The physical barrier implies that it is difficult to gain access for the public and researchers alike, as prisons are restricted places located outside our communities. This has led researchers to list the difficulties of entering correctional facilities at large and to bemoan the scarcity of prison research in a time of mass incarceration (Rhodes 2001, 2004; Wacquant 2002; Waldram 2009, 2012). Second, Reiter (2014) argues, when researchers overcome the practical difficulties of entering correctional facilities, they remain emotionally estranged from their informants, as the researchers' primary goal is to secure 'hard' data. Reiter's second point links up to a debate among criminologists started by Yvonne Jewkes (2011, 2014), who argued that the positivist tradition of criminology tends to prevent an engagement with the self in the field, with the result that the interaction between researcher and inmates remains distanced and obscure to the reader. This results in the research process in itself being crucial for the analysis and understanding of the inner dynamics in prisons (Jewkes 2011, 2014; see also Rowe 2014). According to Reiter (2014), the combination of difficult access and emotional disengagement thus creates a double obfuscation for prison research, rendering correctional facilities to be largely unexplored sites in society.

While Reiter is concerned with the inner life of the prison, anthropologist Lorna A. Rhodes (2004) argues for the value of prison research as a mirror to the surrounding society, as the people incarcerated bear clear witness to developments in society as such. As in my example, the growing number of Eastern Europeans in Danish prison facilities resembles the changes in the surrounding society. More than that, as I will later discuss, they also symbolize current political discourse, and their being incarcerated in Denmark feeds into a heated political discourse, where certain political parties use them to further their own agenda such as harder punishments for crime and closed borders. Thus, *when* we manage to enter prison facilities and engage in research that values 'soft' ethnographic data, we are not only provided with information about prison's inner life but likewise with a reflection of the surrounding society, as public approaches to certain forms of crimes and criminals are mirrored inside the correctional facilities. How the crime is processed and the perpetrators dealt with matters to us all, as it provides a link to society's stand on 'abnormal behaviour' (see also Rhodes 2004; Waldram 2012).

Anthropologist James Waldram (2012), in his detailed ethnographic account of sexual offender rehabilitation in American prisons, writes that he is often asked why he has chosen this particular research subject. His foremost ready answer is that these people one day will be released and return to society. Thus, knowledge about what happens to them in prison and the accompanying attempts to rehabilitate them is crucial to public safety (Waldram 2012, xv). With my case on Lithuanian inmates in Denmark, a significantly different group of inmates is targeted: people who do not belong to the society that keeps them imprisoned, people who ideally never return after their release and, thus, people who need no resocialization since they from the beginning to the end remain an unwanted and foreign element. This, however, makes the research no less important. I will argue that the extensive media portraits of the offenders as particularly hardened criminals both directly and indirectly influences the way they are treated by the prison guards, whose main knowledge about the Lithuanian offenders derives from public discourses. Thereby, the evolving portraits of them as hardened *folk devils* obscure the fact that they are among the weakest group of offenders when incarcerated, both due to language barriers and little knowledge of the Danish legal system and because their label colours their treatment on the inside. My case raises the question of whether legal rights for this particular group of foreign offenders, rather than being based on law and order, are in fact a product of 'law and border', and one that is markedly affected by moral panic.

This chapter is based on two fieldworks conducted in Danish detention houses, one lasting from May to July 2013 and one lasting from May to September 2015. Thirteen detention houses and 30 inmates participated in the research. My focus was on Lithuanian inmates, partly because they represent the largest ethnic group among Eastern European inmates and partly because of my previous research in Lithuania (Harboe Knudsen 2010, 2012, 2015a, 2015b, 2017) and knowledge of the language. The research has been based on qualitative research methods: detailed interviews with the inmates and semi-structured interviews with guards and the heads of the detention houses. I aimed at making my visits to the detention houses participatory by spending additional time looking around the facilities and engaging in small talk, just as the prison staff used me as a Danish–Lithuanian translator. I have likewise analysed political debates and media coverage of Eastern European offenders. Permission to conduct the research was granted by the Danish Data expectorate, the Danish Prison and Probations Service, the individual detention houses and, importantly, the inmates themselves.

### *Eastern Crime and Imprisonment*

'Eastern crime' executed by Lithuanians has largely been centred on Denmark's mainland Jutland, with burglaries as the main offence. The perpetrators are primarily younger men, who act because of precarious and insecure situations,

such as unemployment and debt on the home front, that stimulate them to take risks. According to criminal investigator Christian Jørgensen, who specializes in mobile crime, the predominance of Lithuanian offenders in Jutland is a result of the high number of Lithuanians working in the agricultural sector in the area. Some of these individuals facilitate access to and provide information about the area to criminal networks in their home country. While Lithuanians are known for burglaries, Romanians are better known for theft and trick theft, and operate in higher numbers in the capital, Copenhagen.

When a Lithuanian is caught and sentenced, a regular case goes as follows. He<sup>1</sup> will get a sentence for one year for burglary. If he behaves properly, he will be released after six months. A police investigation normally takes four to five months. During this period, inmates are held under control of letters and visits. Control of letters and visits is obligatory while the police investigate a case, in order to avoid people influencing the inmate or providing them with information on the investigation. During this period, all visits require special permission and are monitored, and all letters are passed to the police. The police read them and decide whether they can be sent to the addressee. The inmates receive a new prolongation of the control every second week for as long as the police are investigating their case. Several inmates I encountered had experienced being prolonged so many times due to the length of their investigation that they were expecting release immediately after having received their judgement.

Based on interviews with police and inmates, I divided the Lithuanian offenders into two groups, a) those who were part of an organized criminal network in which they operated as 'foot soldiers'; and b) those who had come to Denmark alone or with a friend, merely to try their luck.

The inmates from the first group, who engaged in organized crime, were below 30, unemployed, with short to middle/long education paths, and had, with one exception, no family of their own yet – all characteristics that made them easier to recruit. For these inmates, unemployment, debt and promises of 'easy money' had been stimulating factors in driving them towards crime. The recruiters are solely looking for young men, which in turn also provides an answer to why there were no women among them. The inmates in the second group were, as a rule, over 30. Here the diversity was greater, with inmates ranging from having short educations to university degrees. Several had children. Unemployment, low salaries, debts or insecure job situations were often stimulating factors behind their criminal activities, especially when they had family responsibilities in their home country. Some also had debt or were experiencing a family crisis that required them to 'pool' economic resources.

### **The Moral Panic Unfolds**

On 18 June 2015, the four-yearly parliamentary elections were held in Denmark. The results were unusual; while Denmark hitherto had been divided into red and blue zones, respectively indicating the specific regions' preference for

a red left-wing government or a blue conservative government, a new colour appeared on the election map: yellow. Yellow was the colour of the furthest right-wing party Dansk Folkeparti (DF).<sup>2</sup> DF had made a successful transition from being a party for extreme nationalists to becoming a party with a broad appeal to the Danish population. A reason for their popularity was their focus on welfare policy (for Danes only), combined with a strict policy towards foreigners, which became attractive to voters who had traditionally voted for the Social Democrats.

One of the new supportive yellow regions was the southern Danish borderland. Here an important contributing factor to the popularity had been DF's ambition to do away with the internally open borders in Europe and reinstall border control. The aim was thus to secure the Danish–German border against smuggling and mobile criminals. Although against the Schengen Agreement of free mobility, the suggestion had been highly valued among people who lived in the borderlands. The mobile criminals in question were popularly known as 'eastern criminals' owing to their origin from Europe's former socialist countries. The definition comprised a broad group including both people engaged in organized crime with connections to mafia groups in the home countries, and what the police referred to as *soldiers of fortune*, people who on their own account engaged in theft for personal gain.

The 'eastern criminals' were portrayed not only as a threat to society; they were also a burden after being detained, as they would take up space in Danish prisons at the cost of approximately 2000 Danish kroner (268 euros) a day. Eastern Europeans had in Danish media discourse quickly become associated with crime and cheap labour, and this was a frequent topic for DF when arguing for the case of border control. On this account, a young politician from DF, Peter Kofoed, had created an internet page with the title [www.meldenøsteuropæer.dk](http://www.meldenøsteuropæer.dk) (report-an-eastern-european.dk). The intention was to give ordinary people an opportunity to report on negative experiences with people from Eastern Europe and to further stimulate the debates on border control. The idea was not his own but had been borrowed from the controversial Dutch politician Geert Wilders, who had created a similar page.<sup>3</sup>

A further concern expressed in the Danish debate was that the Eastern Europeans were not scared of getting caught, as a Danish prison in their eyes equalized a five-star hotel: meals served three times a day, offering the inmates sporting and educational facilities and to work inside prison and thereby make enough money to support their families at home. The tale of the five-star hotel had its origin in the story of 28-year-old Romanian Dumitru Pacuta, who was serving three years in a Danish prison after having been convicted of 24 burglaries. In an interview with the news channel TV2 in 2014, he had stated that a Danish prison was 'like a 5-star resort', that he found it 'a pleasure' to do his time here, and added that he felt 'no remorse' for what he had done. The TV station further made the journey to Romania to interview his ageing

mother in a remote village. The mother praised her son, as he frequently sent her money from prison, where he was able to work.<sup>4</sup> Pacuta came to serve as the prime model of the Eastern European prisoner: ruthless, indifferent, unable to feel guilt and a parasite abusing the benefits of the Danish welfare system. The interview fed into the already heated debate, where politicians on both the left and the right wings emphasized the need to send Eastern European inmates back to prisons in their home countries. As a consequence, the liberal right-wing party Det Konservative Folkeparti (The Conservative People's Party) articulated their 'tough-on-crime' policy, as Eastern Europeans were not frightened by the thought of getting caught, since a stay in a Danish prison was nothing but a hotel stay.<sup>5</sup>

The Conservative People's Party followed the proposed policy by posting a song on Facebook to fuel their campaigns. The song, entitled '*Stop de Øst-kriminelle*' ('Stop the Eastern Criminals'), was based on the tune of a children's song about a naughty kangaroo. The lyrics went as follows:

Three Lithuanians went on a robbery  
They hid behind a hedge  
They beat up old Mrs Jensen<sup>6</sup>  
Took the money and were gone.

*Chorus:*

Then we yelled:  
Stop the Eastern criminals  
Before they rob again  
Stop the Eastern criminals  
And throw 'em in prison at home  
What rhymes on 'entry ban'?  
We hope that's what they got  
More respect for the victims  
This is the politics of the K.<sup>7</sup>

*Chorus:*

That's why we say:  
Stop the Eastern criminals ... etc.<sup>8</sup>

The song was met with much critique, not least from law-abiding Lithuanians living in Denmark, and it was subsequently removed from Facebook. The issue was likewise raised in the Lithuanian media, where angry Lithuanians counter-argued the portrayal of their people.<sup>9</sup> The Lithuanian member of parliament Jurgis Razma wanted the subject raised in the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and he wanted the Lithuanian embassy in Denmark to take action. The Conservatives went on to explain that it was meant as a humorous addition to the campaign, but that they realized that their sense of humour was not shared by all. The song and its later removal stimulated eager discussions on

social media in Denmark. Some people found that the song was straight to the point and its removal was yet another sign of Danish weakness towards eastern criminals, while other people argued that it was below decent standards. While the song was thus disputed from several points, it had still quite accurately described the popular picture of the 'eastern criminal' in the media and the political debates related to the problem. If we start with the description of the 'eastern criminals': they were typically Lithuanians, they were hardened and violent criminals (beating up old Mrs Jensen) and they were known for acquisitive crime. The political responses appeared as the need to enforce stricter laws and the demand that eastern criminals should not serve their time in Danish prisons but should be sent back to prisons in their respective home countries after having received their sentence. The song thus reproduced popular opinion and political responses.

In 2015 the Danish minister of justice, Mette Frederiksen,<sup>10</sup> from the party Socialdemokratiet (the Social Democrats), voiced the opinion that not only were the eastern criminals a threat to security in Denmark but they also undermined the normal interaction between citizens – based on trust. She added that the key to solving the problem was modern police work and cooperation with the police forces from Eastern Europe, while the proposal to close the border was but a political stunt by the Danish People's Party. She finally added that, although 'several' had pointed to that Danish prisons were nothing but a beach vacation for 'eastern criminals,' she did not believe that removing 'the human aspect' of the prison stay would solve the problem. She did, however, work hard on making an agreement that would make it possible for Eastern European offenders to serve their sentences in prisons in their home countries. This excerpt was quoted in a newspaper article that highlighted that the number of Eastern Europeans in Danish prison facilities had quadrupled since 2006, and underlined the gruesome tales of robberies committed by Eastern Europeans.<sup>11</sup> The comments from the Danish minister of justice show that, although there were internal differences between left- and right-wing parties on how to stop the Eastern European offenders (regarding border control/police cooperation), there was actually consensus on the issue of sending them back to their home countries to serve their sentences. In addition, the assumption of Danish prisons being 'beach vacations' or 'hotel stays' appeared again and again, although there was no real evidence to back this claim up – apart from the remarks made by Pacuta.

The debate about eastern criminals was not new as such, but was being brought back to the limelight owing to the upcoming elections. Concerns over 'eastern crime' and not least the burden it caused the Danish taxpayers, had been returning in the media, often brought up by yellow press newspapers advertising new crimes and criminals from the east. While the above-mentioned examples derive from 2014–2015, the topic resurfaces again from time to time. In December 2018 the news reported on the possible establishment of a Danish prison in Lithuania's capital, Vilnius, as a way to 'send them to prison at



home', as it was formulated in the song made by the Conservative Party. While news reports confirm political action from Denmark's side, Lithuania, however, will not confirm the existence of these political discussions.<sup>12</sup>

### Eastern Criminals and Moral Panics

The above example from the Danish elections is a classic example of a 'moral panic'. As Cohen (2002 [1972]) explains, calling something a moral panic does not mean that the thing in itself does not exist. Rather, it points to that the issue is highly angled to fit a certain political discourse (here tough on crime, closed borders) and that atypical examples are used as 'typical' for the situation as such. In our example, we can point to Pacuta, who received much attention from the media and from politicians, even though he was by no means representative of the vast majority of Eastern European offenders.

Moral panics also follow a certain pattern, from an event – or repeating events – that lead to general concern. This vibe is caught by the media, which then publishes extensively on the subject and thereby creates a picture of the immanent and current threat to society. In Denmark, the panic has been carried by newspaper articles with 'shocking' headlines that focused attention on the imminent danger. A few examples of headlines are: 'Close the Borders!' 'This Is How the Eastern Criminals Swindle the Danes', 'Eastern Criminals behind Bars Cost Us 100 Million a Year', 'The Police about Eastern Criminals: Warn the Elderly' and 'Jailors Demand "Discount Cells" for Eastern Criminals',<sup>13</sup> to mention but a few. According to Cohen (2002 [1972]), the media panic is continued by political action: exposed to the growing societal threat, politicians are called on to do something. In Denmark, the first and foremost political response has been to close the border or attempt to send them to prison facilities in their home countries. The latter, however, has not been working in practice, as an inmate needs to have at least six months of his sentence left in order to be able to serve the remaining time at home (after receiving his sentence). As we know, most Lithuanians are out in six months, and do not even get to a Danish prison, let alone a Lithuanian one. They serve all their time in detention. Thus, this response merely has the function of showing political will.

The case of the Danish People's Party likewise shows us how the emergence of new folk devils efficiently is used to shape and create society, as pointed out in the Introduction to this volume. In Benedict Anderson's (1991 [1983]) work about *imagined communities*, he explains how nations are powerful constructions due to people's ability to imagine them being real, and the unity felt with fellow citizens. In the current example we likewise see how the perception of Denmark inevitably grows stronger, as mobile criminals become instruments to support ideas of closed borders (which are very concrete instruments to define the nation) as well as ideas of what the Danish nation is – a society based on trust between people, as explained by the minister of justice – as a contrast

to the current threat. Thereby, the threat from outside is a strong tool in both defining the physical borders of the nation as well as a helping us defining and not least imagining that very society.

If we dwell further on Cohen's moral panic, I would like to bring language into attention. The Danish philosopher Peter Kemp (1991) has explained how the words used to describe certain people influence our assumptions of them and attitude towards them. When we label people in a certain manner and actively use this vocabulary to describe them, this is also how we end up treating them. In this manner, words pollute our understanding of other human beings, as the spoken word is powerful. As has been further argued by communication consultant Knud Lindholm Lau (2018) in his analysis of the Danish rhetoric towards foreigners, there is a tendency to dehumanize and stigmatize various groups of foreigners in Danish society, by defining them as less human. Thus, when a general rhetoric towards Eastern Europeans is dominated by negative and devaluating statements, both by politicians and by the press, people tend to adapt their vocabulary – and their behaviour – to the words spoken.<sup>14</sup>

The word *østkriminel* was officially added to the Danish language in 1999, certified by the Danish Language Council. It was defined as 'a person committing eastern crime' – while 'eastern crime' was defined as 'criminal actions committed by eastern Europeans'.<sup>15</sup> Although the word is seemingly a neutral connection between the offenders' origin (Eastern Europe) and their doings in Denmark (crime), it still turns into a label where 'eastern' per se is negative. Paired with the word 'criminal', the negative circle is complete, as, when used as persistently as it is in Denmark, it ends up linking Eastern Europe with crime and offences. When further combined with attributes that promote their inhumanity (such as violence, roughness), the term 'eastern criminal' suddenly embeds further negative assumptions. In this way, the mere media circle already serves the function to stigmatize Lithuanians in general, but also Lithuanian offenders within the prison system.

Cohen (2002 [1972]) further elaborates the formulae for moral panics as bearing the following three characteristics. The first is that they are new phenomena emerging – yet old in so far that the evil in itself already is well known. In this case, we can point to the threat from the east that has also previously made Danes uneasy, albeit in a different form. Whereas earlier it was marked by the nearby presence of the Soviet Union, and ranged from fears of a competing ideology, Soviet spies and ideas of a roughened culture to fears of nuclear war, or nuclear disasters that materialized itself with Chernobyl, the threat has, after the fall of the Soviet Union, changed its form considerably. Thus, the eastern threat is old, but is now marked by political alterations and attempts to unite Europe.<sup>16</sup> The result is that what before was behind a wall now easily fluctuates through open borders.

The second feature Cohen points to is that the events leading to moral panics are damaging in themselves, but likewise warning signs of deeper and more fundamental problems. Here we can pay attention to the obvious and immediate

damage of burglary, but likewise the widespread local fear of open-border politics. Third, the events providing the basis for moral panics are transparent in so far that everyone can see what is going on, yet they are also opaque, as experts are called to explain the more cryptic issues of the panic. Linking this to my research, I – as an anthropologist working with Lithuania – ironically became the expert in question, as in a period around 2014 and 2015 I received multiple calls from both journalists and the police, seeking an 'expert opinion'. Taking these three aspects together, the Lithuanian offenders in Denmark came to embody a threatening 'other' and a manifestation of what is wrong in society. Thus, they end up as symbols of deeper societal trouble and concerns.

What we also need to keep in mind when dealing with panics, media and rhetoric is that prison facilities are only seemingly closed facilities. In reality, a large number of people, goods and information travel in and out every day (Reiter 2014). Importantly, people working in prisons and detention houses are also walking in and out and are being subjected to the same information as every other citizen in the country.

### Behind Bars

'You know, they are having a good time here. It is like a five-star hotel for them.' The jailor smiled at me while nodding to his colleague, who instantly confirmed: 'They stay for free and get food every day. They also have TV.' As this was one of my first visits at a Danish detention centres, I was perplexed about the statement. First of all, it felt as if they needed to tell me this before I had even had the chance to start my interview with the two Lithuanian inmates in their custody. Second of all, the words quite accurately resembled the previously mentioned statement by the Romanian Pacuta, who had claimed Danish prisons to be five-star resorts. As it turned out, this would be the first but not the last time I heard the jailors compare the detention house to a five-star hotel. When visiting the detention centres, I often overheard statements of the inmates' 'summer holiday', 'hotel stay' or 'family retreat' (when people from the same family had been detained).

Some jailors issued concern that serving time in Denmark would not 'scare them away from crime' because, as a female jailor expressed it, the conditions were simply too good. 'They are used to a rougher treatment at home; they are not used to having it this good.' Another jailor expressed his surprise as I, on behalf of an inmate, asked if he could get the one phone call he technically was allowed to after being arrested. The jailor responded: 'They all want this phone call, but I do not understand why. Who can they call? Does everyone have a phone in Lithuania?'

The above statements, combined with what I had learned by holding a range of seminars on Eastern Europe for employees in the detention houses, had given me the understanding that the employees' background knowledge on the

previous socialist countries was very limited. When further combined with my interviews with Lithuanian inmates and the stories they told me about their stay behind bars, I could conclude that none of them could confirm that prison facilities in Denmark were like a five-star hotel.

The issue was combined with a general poor communication inside the detention houses. Many of the inmates spoke only little English; some spoke none at all and had to rely on their fellow countrymen to act as translators on the inside. It became a common practice for jailors to use a fellow Lithuanian to translate details about the sentence to an offender, despite the fact that this information was confidential.

Much understanding between the two parts was based on assumptions of 'the other', that is, an understanding of each other as inherently different. A concern expressed by several jailors during one seminar I held was that they found the Lithuanians' body language scary, as they appeared to be rough and masculine. This again made them uncertain of what their actual intentions were. Or, as one jailor expressed with anxiety, 'When they communicate internally in Lithuanian it really stresses me out. Because, I do not know if they are saying: "Can I borrow a cigarette?" or "Come on! Now we both jump on the guard!"' A further frustration was expressed among the guards, as they felt that some of the Lithuanians were 'playing games' with them. This was with regard to language. As one guard expressed it, he often ran into difficulties when he had to report duties to them regarding the rules of the detention, cleaning up the cells, drug inspections and other regulations. In these situations, they appeared not to be able to understand English, which made the conversations tiring. However, when a football match was to be arranged, or when they could get an hour in the gym or it was time to order their weekly groceries,<sup>17</sup> they were all with a sudden very good at English. Another common way to navigate the system was to select a 'favourite guard'. Among the guards there were always some who were more helpful than others, some who were easier to agree with or who did a little more to help the Lithuanian inmates. The Lithuanians were thus saving their requests for the day their 'favourite guard' came to work, whereafter he or she was subjected to multiple questions and requests. This not only gave these guards disproportional more work but could also affect their relations with their colleagues, who were less inclined to work in this manner.

The very understandable concerns of the guards thus derived from several sources: little to no background knowledge on the offenders, masculine body language and poor communication and a feeling that the Lithuanians tried to 'play them' when they suddenly did not speak English, and/or they felt they were manipulating working relations by selecting 'favourites'. From the perspective of the Lithuanians, who felt vulnerable in the Danish system of justice, these were their 'weapons of the weak', as described by James Scott (1985). A struggle plays out between a group with clear advantages and a group with clear disadvantages. Yet, the latter are still capable of opposing the superior part by

using the options available in an everyday resistance. For the Lithuanians, these were limited to body language and spoken language where they were able to create some discomfort for the guards in certain situations. A further factor contributing to the interaction between guards and inmates was that, when the guards actually heard reports on Eastern Europeans, it was the very same reports as the rest of the population, which painted a poor portrait on violent and rough 'folk devils'.

However, these often-inaccurate pieces of puzzles on the Lithuanian inmates led some guards to draw conclusions on how to interact with them. As one expressed it, 'We need to be a bit rougher with them than with the others. It is the only thing that they understand, that is what they are used to at home.' Or another guard commented, after I had finished an interview, 'I know they probably told you we are tough on them. But you know, they should not complain. After all, then they should not have committed the crime in the first place. They kind of ask for it.' Another bluntly stated his wish to put them on water and bread and isolate them from the other inmates, his only problem being that it was not allowed. What further puzzled me during these informal conversations with the prison guards was that their daily interaction with the Lithuanians did not seem to alter their assumption of them. While I overheard many assumptions of their roughness and masculinity, I only heard one story of an unfortunate incident with a Lithuanian, who had acted inappropriately and broken a window.

I addressed my concerns about the negative perceptions of Lithuanians behind bars to criminal investigator Christian Jørgensen, who had worked with 'mobile crime' for years. But he was not able to confirm the picture painted by the guards. He said:

If there is one thing that clearly characterise the Lithuanians, then it is that they are not violent. When we get to their camp to arrest them, then yes, they will try to run. But they are never violent. If they are caught, then they know that it is 'game over'. I only once had an incident with Lithuanians, where a police officer was hurt. We had surrounded them and moved in on them. One of the Lithuanians was in a car, and he decided it would be better to escape by foot into the nearby forest. He quickly opened the door to run, but when doing so, the door hit a police officer that was approaching. The poor fellow got so distressed, that he did not even try to run after that. That's the only time someone was hurt – and that was an accident. (interview, May 2015)

As my ethnographic material bears witness to, there is an experience of the Eastern Europeans being a possible threat for the guards, and this affected the guards' attitude towards them. This was further stimulated by the everyday struggles of resistance where Lithuanians made use of a masculine appearance

just as those who speak English are furthermore capable of ‘choosing’ when they do and when they do not understand what the guards tell them. While some guards cultivated good relations with the Lithuanians, the idea still remained among some of the guards that this group stood out as particularly hardened, and as a group that needed a certain and rougher treatment than the rest, which again was understood as a provocation among the Lithuanian inmates, who in turn felt agitated to further cultivate the weapons of resistance they possessed. A vicious circle was closing. Yet, despite their daily contact with Lithuanians, and the absence of any actual violent episodes, the guards who held this opinion about the Lithuanian inmates did not change their attitude or ideas about them. A possible conclusion is that, when the Folk Devil image is this persistent, even evidence to the contrary is not able to affect the general picture.

### Meeting the Devils

‘You know, there are three kinds of answers you get in this place. Let me tell you!’ The words came from a male at 30, with half-long blond hair and visibly muscular arms, which he displayed through a tight shirt. One of his arms was in a white bandage, as the police had used dogs on the arrest. Following this event, he had been escorted to the hospital to have the dog bites treated and to get a tetanus vaccine. As I had approached the detention centre, he had been more than eager to talk with me, as the mere boredom drew him to his limits, as he expressed it. A far cry from the violent devil portrayed in the newspapers, he was on his best behaviour, holding the door for me, taking out a chair for me, pouring me coffee, and only addressing me with *Jūs* – the Lithuanian equivalent to the German *Sie*.

‘So,’ he continued, ‘you ask the jailors for something, let it be an extra cup of coffee, a toilet visit out of hours, a clean towel or whatever. So, they will either answer “no”, – that means no. The second answer you can expect is “later”. That also means “no”. The third option is “I will think about it”. It means... no.’ He laughed a bit, although his general frustration revealed that he did not find it funny. He was, like the vast majority of inmates I talked to, uneasy about what he found to be an uneven treatment of him compared to the Danish inmates. While several of the inmates whom I already had talked to at the time were struggling with their English, the man in front of me had a university degree and did not express that this miscommunication was due to language barriers. It was other barriers.

He continued:

You know, I have never been this low in my life. I really just want to call my family, but I am only allowed to when I get my sentence. And I do not know when that will be. I have been here for four months already, and every two weeks I show up in court, only for the police to ask for an extension. What gets to you the most is not even the loneliness or

the actual sentence, what gets to you is that you never really know when this will stop. You just sit and wait, count the hours, count the minutes. I do not get this system, do not know what to expect. You just have this constant feeling that they look down on you, the jailors I mean, that you are a bother to them.

His narrative about the conditions in detention did not vary much from what I had heard from others. The main difference was that he was better formulated, and thus able to express himself more concisely.

A common frustration was the language, as they only had the right to a translator in court, just as all court papers were given to them in Danish, which they made little sense of. Others expressed being deprived of basic things that they saw were given to others: an hour in the gym, a bath, or some even narrated having been deprived of their daily walk in the yard for extended periods of time. One told of an aching tooth pain and a denial to see the dentist. In one detention I entered, I noticed a big blackboard in the hall with different names and cell numbers written on it. I asked the guard what the purpose was, and he said that these were the names of inmates who were exempted from work. In this detention the work consisted of folding paper stars for traditional Danish Christmas decorations. According to the guard, the doctor found this work ridiculous, and, when inmates complained of aching eyes, headache or an aching back due to the many hours of folding stars, he readily gave them a paper that certified their need for a period without work. During the interview I held with the Lithuanian in the same detention centre, he likewise said that he was displeased with the work, as the many hours of paper folding was hard on his back. I went on to explain him what the guard had told me about the helpful doctor. 'Well, I already talked with the doctor,' the inmate replied. 'But as he entered the cell, his first question was: "Are you from Poland?" I answered – "No – from Lithuania." "There is nothing wrong with you,' he replied, and left the cell without even examining me. So, I still have to do the work.' Stories like this added to the Lithuanian inmates' perception of unequal treatment.

If we dwell with the perception of the five-star hotel, we can see that the perception of what a 'good stay' behind bars is varies significantly between the guards and the inmates. The guards base the assumptions on perceptions of a roof over their head, three meals a day, shower and sporting facilities, access to TV and sometimes the option to work as factors that promote a good and safe stay for the inmates, especially when they pair it with their own assumptions of the rough society the inmates come from. For the inmates, however, the story differs significantly. The mentioned conditions do not generate a positive stay, as their main concerns are not solely their physical needs but the constant insecurity they suffer from. This often starts with not being able to call home after being detained, as most detention houses operate with the rule that phone calls are only allowed when conducted in a language the guards can understand. Communication is only allowed by mail, but, as the police reported to me, they



often hold their letters back longer than necessary in order to put the Lithuanians under more pressure. The more psychological pressure they are under, the more willing they are to confess their crimes. Thus, separation from family and lack of options to communicate with them, paired with a general problem of understanding the Danish prison system, court documents given in Danish while receiving prolongment after prolongment without knowing when it would end, put them under a substantial psychological pressure. Combined with the concern about what awaited them at home – conflicts with their family, continued unemployment and financial difficulties – this puts them into a constant feeling of insecurity, which, as stated by Franz and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann (2007), is as much a counterpoint to social order as open conflicts and disruption. One story of an inmate illustrates this.

Once I arrived at a detention centre in order to conduct an interview with an inmate. One of the guards told me that they had never had any problems with him but recently he had behaved differently, culminating in an event where he during his working hours had broken a window with a chair. After that he had been expelled from work. The guard found it strange, as the inmate previously had always been well behaved. Furthermore, all inmates valued the opportunity they got to make some extra money by working in the detention. As I went to talk with the inmate, a 17-year-old, he explained that the insecurity and the waiting time had driven him to his limits. It was almost time for summer exams, and he risked having to redo his entire school year if he was not released soon. As he was also a professional rower in Lithuania's junior rowing team, he was afraid that he would lose his place before the summer competitions. His parents were also worried sick, but he could not get to call them. He had been in detention for more than five months, and had already received his sentence. He was only waiting for the guards to inform him about his exact date of release. But for weeks they had not said anything. Every time they entered the cell, he had jumped up, as he thought that now it was time to go home. Eventually he had lost it, and smashed the window with a chair. He said, 'We have a saying in Lithuanian. A piece of glass brings luck [*šukės neša laimę*] and I am really in need of luck.'

Soon after he had told me his story, the guard arrived with a stack of papers. She said she could just as well could use the opportunity of me being there to explain when he would get released and go home. They had had the papers for a while, but she just had not got around to talking with him, she explained. As she arrived, the young inmate instantly switched to English, and the guard explained the plan for his return to Lithuania without any communication problems. As she left again, he was clearly relieved as he had finally got the information he had been waiting for.

As this instance illustrates, the lack of communication is a core point. It was the sheer pressure of not knowing anything, despite that fact that the guards had known it for weeks, that escalated with the incident with the window. And it was not due to language barriers that the information had been withheld, as he was very capable in English.



## Concluding Remarks

Lithuanian offenders in Danish detention centres in many cases reflect a classic moral panic. They encompass the entire circle, from incident, over media attention, to political action, while we witness an escalating panic in the Danish society, as a certain group of people is stigmatized as a threat to society. The Lithuanian folk devil is not based on illusions or hysteria; he is real and tangible, and posing a threat to people's private property and their feelings of security in their home. He is a criminal offender. However, the story of how dangerous, inhuman and violent he is has taken its own life in public discourse and media, and is not representative of the vast majority of Lithuanian offenders. This addresses the question: when a panic escalates, what consequences does it have for the perceived folk devils? This again overlaps with the call from criminologist Yvonne Jewkes (2011, 2014) to go beyond numbers and statistics when conducting prison research and develop a more comprehensive picture of 'soft data' from behind bars in order to get an insight into the perceptions and reflections of 'the devil' himself.

Following the idea of James Scott (2015) that borders are created and developed in everyday discourse, we see how processes of 'bordering' are developed on an everyday basis, and grounded in perceived images of the Lithuanian offender, and that these images actually outdo the jailors personal experiences with the Lithuanians. Despite the fact that Lithuanian offenders are a weak group in Danish prisons, having difficulties in understanding and navigating the system, the idea of them living in hotel-like surroundings prevail. This is again based on the jailors' poor knowledge of their home country, which they perceive as highly undeveloped, dangerous and rough. What this case study points to is that a more comprehensive understanding of the devil himself provides us with another story of the panic, and which consequences the panic has for the people who are called out as devils.

As the narrative surrounding the panic appears to have a stronger influence on the jailors' daily interaction with the Lithuanian inmates than do the direct experiences with the inmates themselves, it tells a clear story about how powerful the panic is. While the borders between EU countries thus have become open, the social borders continue to exist, with profound consequences for vulnerable groups of people, who risk becoming further stigmatized – which in the end is no solution to the problem of mobile crime.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> As I never encountered a female Lithuanian inmate, I will refer to them as 'he'. Talking with the prison guards, no one had had a female Lithuanian in their detention. Romanian women, however, were not uncommon. That only Lithuanian males were incarcerated led the prison guards to joke about there probably being no women in Lithuania.
- <sup>2</sup> Danish People's Party.
- <sup>3</sup> See Jens-Kristian Lütken, 'Meld en østeuropæer [blog entry]' (*Jyllands-Posten*, 12 September 2014, <https://jyllands-posten.dk/debat/blogs/jenslutken/ECE7020943/Meld-en-østeuropæer/>, accessed 25 January 2020) and 'Ny hjemmeside: Anmeld en østeuropæer' (*DR*, 10 February 2012, <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/udland/ny-hjemmeside-anmeld-en-oesteuropaeer>, accessed 25 January 2020).
- <sup>4</sup> See Julie Bjørn Teglgaard: 'Rumæner: Dansk fængsel er som femstjernet hotel' (*TV2*, 13 March 2014, <http://nyhederne.tv2.dk/samfund/2014-03-13-rumæner-dansk-fængsel-er-som-femstjernet-hotel>, accessed 25 January 2020).
- <sup>5</sup> See 'Konservativ retspolitik giver mere tryghed' (Det Konservative Folkeparti, <https://konservative.dk/tryghed/>, accessed 25 January 2020); Bendt Bendtsen, 'Pas på Danmark [blog entry]' (Bendt Bendtsen, 21 March 2014, <https://www.bendt.dk/pas-paa-danmark>, accessed 25 January 2020); Tove Videbæk: 'Nu skal der gøres noget ved de øst-kriminelle i Danmark [letter to editor]' (*Herning Folkeblad*, 13 May 2014, <https://www.herning-folkeblad.dk/artikel/84931d19-480c-4720-92ba-8160938e3624>, accessed 25 January 2020).
- <sup>6</sup> Jensen is a very common Danish surname and is often used as a reference to the average citizen.
- <sup>7</sup> K: Konservativ (the Conservative People's Party).
- <sup>8</sup> My translation from Danish. The original lyrics can be found on <http://www.information.dk/535122> (accessed 25 January 2020).
- <sup>9</sup> See for example Rūta Pukėnė, 'Danai išsityčiojo iš lietuvių: plinta pašėpianti daina' (*Delfi*, 1 June 2015, <http://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/danai-issityciojo-is-lietuviu-plinta-pasiepianti-daina.d?id=68119044>). In the newspaper *15min* the issue is also raised, albeit it here is claimed that the song is about three *drunken* Lithuanians. However, this is actually not the case. See 'Danijos konservatoriai rinkėjus vilioja su daina apie girtus lietuvius, kurie apvogė ir primušė moterį' (*15min*, 1 June 2015, <http://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/emigrantai/danijos-konservatoriai-rinkejus-vilioja-su-daina-apie-girtus-lietuvius-kurie-apvogė-ir-primuse-moteri-592-506693>). All websites accessed 25 January 2020.
- <sup>10</sup> Mette Frederiksen became prime minister of Denmark in 2019.
- <sup>11</sup> See Ingelise Skrydstrup: 'Fylder i fængsler som aldrig før: Sådan skal øst-kriminelle stoppes' (*BT*, 8 April 2015, <https://www.bt.dk/nyheder/fylder-i>

-faengsler-som-aldrig-foer-saadan-skal-oestkriminelle-stoppes, accessed 28 December 2020).

- <sup>12</sup> See 'Danmark forhandler om splinternyt fængsel i Litauen til udvisningsdømte kriminelle' (*DR*, 3 December 2018, <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/danmark-forhandler-om-splinternyt-faengsel-i-litauen-til-udvisningsdoemte-kriminelle>, accessed 25 January 2020) and 'Litauen afviser dansk ønske om splinternyt fængsel til udvisningsdømte kriminelle' (*DR*, 4 December 2018, <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/politik/litauen-afviser-dansk-oenske-om-splinternyt-faengsel-til-udvisningsdoemte-kriminelle>, accessed 25 January 2020).
- <sup>13</sup> See 'Læserne raser: Luk grænserne' (*Ekstrabladet*, 26 April 2015, <https://ekstrabladet.dk/nationen/laeserne-raser-luk-graenserne/5539321>); 'Østkriminelle bag tremmer koster 100 mio. kr.' (*Avisen*, 5 March 2012, [https://www.avisen.dk/oestkriminelle-bag-tremmer-koster-100-mio-kr\\_161683.aspx](https://www.avisen.dk/oestkriminelle-bag-tremmer-koster-100-mio-kr_161683.aspx)); 'Politi om østkriminelle: Advar de ældre' (*TV2 Øst*, 18 July 2015, <https://www.tv2east.dk/sjaelland-og-oerne/politi-om-ostkriminelle-advar-de-aeldre>); and 'Fængselsbetjente kræver discount-afdelinger til østkriminelle plattenslagere' (*Politiken*, 20 February 2014, <https://politiken.dk/indland/art5503042/Faengselsbetjente-kræver-discount-afdelinger-til-østkriminelle-plattenslagere>). All pages accessed 25 January 2020.
- <sup>14</sup> From the side of the Prison and Probation Service, there was awareness about the general language used about inmates (Danish and foreign inmates alike). There had formally been inserted a rule in Danish detention houses that inmates should be referred to as 'clients.' The idea was to change the guards' attitude towards them by changing the spoken language. However, in everyday practice the rule did not apply. As the guards said to me, they still referred to them as 'prisoners' (Danish: *fanger*), as this, after all was what they were.
- <sup>15</sup> See entry on the Danish Language Council website <https://dsn.dk/nyt/noid/?q=østkriminell>, accessed 28 December 2020. Translations from Danish by the author.
- <sup>16</sup> See also Chapters 2 and 3 with regard to how previous devils appear in new forms.
- <sup>17</sup> In all Danish detention houses the inmates get the option of ordering groceries once a week.

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