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Currency, Control, and Stigma: The Complex Lives of Soviet Ukraine's Currency Prostitutes

Aliesia Soloviova
European University institute

Abstract: This article discusses the phenomenon of currency prostitution in Soviet Ukraine in the late 1980s, a period marked by glasnost – a policy of wider dissemination of information initiated under Mikhail Gorbachev – and increased public discourse on sexuality. The growing visibility of currency prostitutes in the mass media – predominantly women who engaged in relationships with foreigners in exchange for hard currency – challenged the state's narrative of economic equality and justice. Drawing on declassified Soviet archival materials, media reports, legal decrees, and Soviet-era films, this study examines how hard currency prostitution was framed in Soviet moral discourses. The analysis shows that the regulation of hard currency prostitution was aimed not only at controlling the illicit economy but also at preserving socialist ideological stability. Both the Soviet authorities and the press sought to portray sex workers engaged in hard currency prostitution as morally corrupt figures who threatened public morality and undermined the image of the Soviet people. The study also demonstrates how single mothers were subject to special state control and policing under suspicion of prostitution. The study contributes to the existing literature on prostitution in socialist societies by demonstrating how prostitution functioned as an ideological battleground that reflected Soviet ideological anxieties.

Keywords: currency prostitution, Soviet Ukraine, socialist morality, state surveillance, ideological control

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In 1986, TV presenters Vladimir Pozner and Phil Donahue organised one of the first Soviet American teleconferences of the glasnost era. During the conversation, an American participant in the teleconference asked the question: 'In our TV advertising, everything revolves around sex. Do you have such TV advertising?' The Soviet participant, Lyudmila Nikolaevna Ivanova, who was the administrator of the Leningrad Hotel and a representative of the public organisation Committee of Soviet Women, replied: 'Well, we don't have sex, and we are completely against it!' Her comment, partially drowned out by audience laughter, was soon paraphrased, and circulated out of context: 'There is no sex in the USSR' (Sovetskie filmy, spektakli i teleperedachi 1986). This phrase was often mentioned by Soviet citizens in various contexts, ridiculing the sanctimony of Soviet morality. Although often seen as humorous, this moment also reflected deeper anxieties surrounding sexuality in Soviet public discourse. In Soviet society, open discussion of sex was widely considered inappropriate or indecent. While sexuality was certainly an undeniable part of everyday life, it was largely absent from public conversation or the media.

By the mid-1980s, however, the discourse on sexuality began to shift. On 25 February 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev delivered his report at the 27th Congress of the CPSU declaring the policy of glasnost. For Soviet media, the introduction of glasnost opened up the opportunity to explore a greater number of previously censored or taboo topics, including those related to intimate life. Although Gorbachev's call for glasnost did not immediately dismantle the multi-layered system of censorship and self-censorship that had been established over seven decades of Soviet rule, the absence of regular directives from above allowed for the first signs of diversity in the Soviet media (Gessen 2020: 197). This shift allowed sexually provocative subjects to enter the public domain through newspapers, magazines, and television. Soviet magazines began to explore sexual topics beyond the traditional concept of sex as a part of heterosexual marriage.

The topics discussed on the pages of Soviet magazines were designed to strongly resonate with readers and often focused on controversial topics relating to sexuality, including monetized intimacy. In this context, prostitution[1]—long presented as non-existent in the Soviet Union—re-emerged as a subject of public discussion.

This article discusses how currency prostitution in Soviet Ukraine was framed within broader Soviet discourses of socialist morality and economic inequality. The central questions explore how the Soviet state and state institutions sought to regulate cur-

[1] The terms 'currency prostitution' and 'currency prostitute' were used in a variety of Soviet contexts, including official documents and media publications in the late 1980s. This article retains the original terminology to reflect how the phenomenon was discussed at the time. The terms 'prostitution' and 'sex work' are used interchangeably throughout the text.

rency prostitution, how Soviet media shaped narratives surrounding it, and what these measures reveal about Soviet anxieties related to gender and ideological stability?

Notably, in both Russian and Ukrainian,[2] the word prostitute (prostitutka, prostytutka, poviya) is a feminised noun that, in the late 1980s, had no widely recognised masculine equivalent. This linguistic pattern reflected – and reinforced – the gendered framing of prostitution as an exclusively female phenomenon, which is why this article focuses specifically on women.

The article draws upon previously declassified archival documents of the Soviet government in Ukraine, as well as on the Soviet-era documentaries, magazine and journal articles, and a satirical feuilleton that played an important role in influencing societal perceptions. It also explores the Soviet cinematic and literary depictions of sex work to analyse the cultural construction of these women as economic deviants and moral transgressors.

While previous studies have explored the regulation of prostitution in different socialist contexts—including Soviet state policies towards women engaged in sex work (Hearne 2022), state-sanctioned responses to 'hotel prostitutes' in Hungary (Komáromi 2023), and commercial sex and citizenship in post-war Poland (Dobrowolska 2025)—other scholars have addressed broader patterns of state control and stigma in socialist societies (Marcinkevičienė, Praspaliauskienė 2003; Simić 2022; Dolinsek, Hetherington 2019). This article builds on that scholarship by focusing specifically on currency prostitution in Soviet Ukraine, with particular attention to how women engaged in this form of sex work were perceived and regulated within the framework of late Soviet gender ideology. Drawing on materials from Ukrainian central and regional archives, this article examines the Ukrainian context of currency prostitution in the late 1980s, including how union-wide policies were interpreted and implemented in local contexts and how regional institutions participated in broader Soviet discourses on morality, deviance, and gender.

Forbidden luxuries

In November 1986, the Russian-language newspaper *Moskovsky Komsomolets* published two sensational essays, 'Belyy Tanets' (White Dance) and 'Nochnyye okhotnitsy' (Night Hunters), written by Yevgeny Dodolev. The articles were among the first to provide a glimpse into the world of currency prostitution—referring to women who engaged in relationships with foreigners in exchange for hard currency. Through these

[2] I use both Russian and Ukrainian terms to reflect the linguistic context established by the Soviet authorities. Many official documents from the period were written in both languages, and the press circulated in Soviet Ukraine in the late 1980s was likewise published in both Ukrainian and Russian.

interactions, these women gained access to foreign currency that was otherwise not accessible to ordinary Soviet citizens.

The basis of this phenomenon was the rigid monetary policy of the Soviet Union. The Soviet ruble was not a freely convertible currency; it could be legally exchanged only at fixed exchange rates set by the Soviet government and was subject to significant restrictions (Conway 1995). Since the ruble was not tied to international trade, the official exchange rate set by the state did not correspond to its real value (Chudnov 2003). In 1980, for instance, the official dollar exchange rate in the USSR was around 64 kopecks. However, this fixed exchange rate was largely disconnected from economic realities (Alexashenko 1992). On the black market, the demand for foreign currency exceeded the official rate, with the dollar trading for 4, 6, or even more rubles, depending on the year and the economic situation (Okunev 2020).

Certain individuals were legally permitted to possess foreign currency. This group included diplomats, sailors, artists, tourists, and Soviet citizens who received transactions from abroad, such as writers earning royalties or individuals receiving money from relatives for some type of legal work. These people, however, were required to exchange the currency for special cheques. These cheques were a special means of payment in the USSR, which could be used to pay in the *Beryozka* ('Little Birch') stores—state-run outlets that sold only imported goods and did not accept ordinary rubles as payment (Ivanova 2017). Similar stores existed in other republics of the USSR, often named after the national tree or another symbol of the republic (Kashtan Media 2024). In the Ukrainian SSR, the equivalent store was called *Kashtan* (Chestnut).

At a time of chronic shortages in the regular stores of the Soviet Union, *Beryozka* provided goods of the highest quality, creating a huge gap between individuals with and without foreign currency. This disparity contributed to the widespread popularity of currency speculation on the black market, where illegal traders – *fartsovshiki* – bought and resold currencies or acquired cheques from those who had them legally (Romanov, Yarskaya-Smirnova 2005). Exchanging money for other currencies at a free rate not established by the State Bank of the USSR was considered a criminal offense. Strict penalties for unauthorised currency transactions had been established back in 1961 by a decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR 'On Strengthening Criminal Liability for Violating Rules on Currency Transactions'. According to this decree, engaging in currency speculation as a trade or on a large scale could entail punishment in the form of imprisonment for a term of five to fifteen years with the confiscation of property or, in some cases, the death penalty with the confiscation of property.

In this climate of economic scarcity and financial disparity, currency prostitution was increasingly portrayed as a means for women to gain access to luxuries mostly unat-

tainable for Soviet citizens. These representations, which repeatedly stressed a desire for easy money and material comfort, were intended to provoke public debate and condemnation. At the same time, they exposed deeper ideological anxieties: women engaging in currency prostitution appeared to benefit from the shadow economy in ways that undermined official narratives of equality and socialist morality. In his article 'Belyy Tanets', Dodolev detailed the luxurious life these women could afford, such as being able to buy boots, blouses, and high-end clothes and even being able to make international phone calls—a privilege in the Soviet Union. He also gave examples of their huge earnings, which could reach or exceed 100,000 rubles:

> The courtesans partly sell the multi-coloured banknotes obtained through monotonous 'love' and partly spend them on buying food at Beryozka and, frankly, on rather expensive things. They buy from each other – boots for 20,000 Japanese yen, sandals for 100 dollars, a swimsuit for 500 francs … (Dodolev 1987)

As well as describing the wealth of sex workers engaged in currency prostitution, Dodolev also criticised the insufficient punishment of prostitution. He argued that although the law defined crime as a socially dangerous action that violated the existing legal order, the dictionary of the Russian language applied a broader definition of a 'crime' as harmful behaviour or a bad or reprehensible act. In this regard, Dodolev, referring to prostitution as 'considerable and not particularly hard-earned source of income from body trade', called for stricter regulation of prostitution within the framework of the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR *On Strengthening the Fight against the Extraction of Unearned Income*.

In 1986, prostitution as such was not explicitly considered an illegal act. Instead, it was often prosecuted under the article on parasitism, like in other states under Soviet rule. On 4 May 1961, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR issued a decree *On Strengthening the Fight against Persons Evading Socially Useful Work and Leading an Antisocial Parasitic Lifestyle*. The decree established that able-bodied (*trudosposobnye*) adults who 'do not wish to fulfil the most important constitutional duty – to work honestly according to their abilities – and who avoid socially useful work, and lead an antisocial parasitic lifestyle are to be recruited for socially useful work at enterprises (construction sites)' (Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR 1961). This law was used to persecute various groups of people who were not officially employed and, accordingly, were not socially useful (Fitzpatrick 2006). Among those targeted were individuals struggling with alcoholism, those receiving income from property, representatives of creative professions, sex workers, and, in some cases, political dissenters. As in other socialist states – such as Czechoslovakia, where prostitution

was framed as 'avoidance of honest work' (Dudová 2015: 37) – the use of parasitism charges served to align legal prosecution with socialist labour ideology rather than moral or sexual transgression.

Although prostitution was not classified as a separate legal offence, it was heavily stigmatised in the Soviet Union (Hearne 2022: 291). Prostitution was not perceived as a societal issue, but rather the moral failing of an individual woman, a deviant who had somehow emerged in well-structured Soviet society. This perspective was articulated in 1957 at a meeting of the Subcommittee of the Commissions of Legislative Proposals of the Council of the Union and the Council of Nationalities of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, which was preparing a conclusion of the draft law *On Strengthening the Fight against Antisocial, Parasitic Elements*:

> We don't have prostitution, but we do have women with negative behaviour, and many of them do this not so much out of a desire to acquire a source of livelihood, but out of a love of it or a desire for an easier life.' (Subcommittee of the Commissions of Legislative Proposals of the Council of the Union and the Council of Nationalities of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR 1957)

Soviet legislation reflected this ideological belief, affirming that prostitution did not exist and, therefore, did not require separate legal prosecution. Scholars Dalia Marcinkevičienė and Rima Praspaliauskienė (2003: 658), analysing prostitution in post-war Lithuania, argue that prostitution was officially non-existent in the USSR, as to establish legal liability for prostitution in the Criminal Code would have been an ideological contradiction because under socialism such issues had supposedly been eradicated. Given that in state-socialist societies prostitution was often presented as something that only existed under capitalism, it was challenging to advocate for the eradication of prostitution and the rehabilitation of sex workers (Simic 2022). However, with the rise of glasnost and the increasing appearance of essays about prostitution as a fairly widespread phenomenon – particularly currency prostitution the Soviet authorities shifted this approach.

In 1987, the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Ukrainian SSR *On Amendments and Additions to the Legislation of the Ukrainian SSR on Liability for Administrative Offences* introduced administrative liability for engaging in prostitution. When committing this offence for the first time, the prescribed sanction was a warning or a fine of up to one hundred rubles. Following the introduction of administrative liability, in 1987, the Central Committee of the CPSU issued a resolution *On Serious Shortcomings in the Organisation of the Fight against Prostitution and Violations of the Rules on Currency Transactions*.

The work on implementing the resolution in the fight against prostitution was entrusted to various authorities, such as the Prosecutor's Office, the ministries of internal affairs, justice, health, and housing and communal services of the Ukrainian SSR, the Main Tourism Directorate, the Ukrainian Office of the State Bank of the USSR, the Ukrainian Trade Union, and the Central Committee of the Komsomol of Ukraine (Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukrainian SSR 1988: 1). Even though the decree mostly targeted currency prostitutes, it also occasionally mentioned other individuals engaged in illegal currency-related activities, such as illegal currency transactions, purchasing goods from foreign tourists, and speculation.

Both the title of the decree and its text make it evident that the central problem for the authorities was currency prostitution. However, as sociologist Igor Kon (1997: 329) emphasised, currency prostitution was not the 'tip of the iceberg', as access to this sphere required good looks, relevant skills, such as basic English proficiency, and external connections. The much more numerous categories of sex workers were those who worked for Soviet rubles, carrying more risk and earning substantially less.

Why, then, did Soviet authorities pay particular attention to currency prostitution? The Soviet state's focus certainly reflected a broader Soviet concern with the development of illicit markets. However, women who engaged in prostitution were not only perceived as contributors to economic crime; they also experienced a certain degree of financial autonomy, which was not accessible for most Soviet citizens. Their earnings sparked discussions about the unfairness of earnings from such 'unearned income', fuelling concerns about social inequality and anxieties over prostitution as a potential ideological subversion. Women working in currency prostitution gained access to benefits normally reserved for members of the privileged elite, including foreign goods, high-status accessories, and sometimes the ability to exercise monetary power in personal interactions. For Soviet ideology, this phenomenon was undesirable not only because it exposed the persistence of the shadow economy, but, most importantly, because it further revealed the existence of social inequality, which contradicted the state's official narrative that it had been eradicated. Translator Lilianna Lungina (Dorman 2010: 340), in her memoirs, described how a growing trend of demonstrating material well-being began to emerge in the late 1970s: 'Social inequality came out onto the street. Wealth was no longer hidden, it became demonstrative. (…) Girls showed off in silver fox fur coats - either daughters of nomenklatura officials, or hard currency prostitutes servicing foreign tourists.'

By the late 1980s the Soviet press was constantly highlighting the luxurious lifestyles of these women. For instance, Taranov (1988) ridiculed the insignificance of a fine for prostitution, as daily income from currency prostitution could be much greater than the amount of the fine. The luxuries associated with currency prostitution became

the subject of discussions in the documentaries *Gruppa riska* (Risk Group 1987) and *Khau du yu du* (How Do You Do, 1988). In *Gruppa riska,* the interviewed women emphasised the contrast between official wages and their daily earnings, stating that while an official salary could be no more than 150 rubles a month, prostitution could bring in a much larger sum in just one day. Similarly, in *Khau du yu du*, one interviewee shared that she could afford to go on vacation by herself, and if some man harassed her, she had the means to pay him to leave her alone.

This difference in the material situation of ordinary Soviet workers and women engaging in prostitution underscored the shortcomings of the state-socialist system. In such conditions, the attitude towards prostitution and its causes also shifted. Whereas previously prostitution was considered a social evil born of capitalist influence, it was now seen as a moral failure for which the bulk of the blame fell on women (Waters 1989: 4)

The fictional feature film *Interdevochka* (Intergirl 1989) shone even more public attention ono the luxurious lifestyle of women who were engaged in currency prostitution. The film tells the story of Tatyana Zaytseva, who is portrayed as living a double life – as a nurse and as a 'currency prostitute'. *Interdevochka* depicts Tatyana as solely driven by a cynical attitude towards marriage and a desire to marry a wealthy foreigner. In pursuit of profit, she accepts a marriage proposal from a regular client, despite the lack of emotional connection. However, after moving to Sweden, Tatyana doesn't find the happiness she expected and feels isolated. She renounces her luxurious lifestyle and dies while attempting to return home to the Soviet Union. The moral crisis in *Interdevochka* reflects the uncertainty surrounding the influx of capitalism during perestroika – not portraying Tatyana as a wholly negative character, yet not giving her a chance for redemption either (Ter-Grigoryan 2017). Capitalism, therefore, is still depicted as a factor of negative influence, but a large part of Tatyana's downfall is blamed on her cynicism towards love and marriage and on her economic motivation for engaging in sex work.

Interdevochka also highlights the phenomenon of marriages with foreigners – one of the ways women could legally emigrate, improve their economic situation, or quit prostitution altogether. The desire to marry a foreigner was also explored in the documentary *Adam, Eva, i Zagranpropiska* (Adam, Eve, and the Foreign Residence Registration, 1987). The film tells the story of a woman involved in currency prostitution who wants to marry her foreign client. In an interview with her, she expresses her love for the man and her belief that her feelings are reciprocated. However, the film's voiceover highlights that the woman's diaries reveal that she is looking for someone who will buy her a fur coat and then diamonds. Regardless of the authenticity of the interview and its participants, like in *Interdevochka,* the documentary depicts

the women engaged in currency prostitution as willing to start a family in pursuit of profit but unable to truly form an emotional connection.

Adam, Eva, i Zagranpropiska also follows the story of a deceived foreigner who contacted the Leningrad police because his wife, after moving to Greece, left him for another man. In *Belyy Tanets*, Dodolev (1987) also tells the story of a betrayed Spaniard who was married to a sex worker who continued to work as a prostitute while married to him. In these narratives, women involved in currency prostitution were portrayed as calculating, unscrupulous people looking for profit in the form of hard currency or for the opportunity to leave the Soviet Union in search of a better life.

Priska Komáromi (2023: 11), who studied the perceptions of 'hotel prostitutes' under Hungarian socialism from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, also argues that the portrayal of women who had sex with foreign men as manipulative money hoarders was prevalent in both police reports and the press. In the Ukrainian context, while earlier socialist narratives framed prostitution as a relic of capitalism – or ignored it altogether – by the late 1980s, prostitution came to be viewed less as a structural or ideological issue and more as a symptom of women's personal moral failings, greed, or moral corruption.

'Shield tourists from the advances of women of easy virtue': policing morality and regulating tourist spaces

With the growing visibility of currency prostitution, Ukrainian Soviet authorities were swift to control tourist spaces and dormitories housing foreign students, which served as key sites of encounters between clients and sex workers. The Main Directorate of the Ukrainian SSR for Foreign Tourism intensified the work of Intourist departments with the police to ensure stricter control. To further combat currency prostitution and foreign currency speculation, the authorities also established specialised police units in the large cities of the republic – Donetsk, Zhdanov (now Mariupol), Kyiv, Lviv, Odesa, Kharkiv, Uzhhorod, Chernivtsi, Yalta, and along the South-Western Railway (Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Ukrainian SSR 1988: 4). Major port cities such as Odesa, Kherson, and Mykolaiv had long been centres of commercial exchange and foreign interaction and experienced the presence of prostitution even during the Stalin era (Osokina 2021). These cities and transit hubs continued to attract a high rate of international tourist activity, and the state therefore sought to ensure stricter surveillance over these spaces. As part of these initiatives, Intourist established a rigid passport control regime, while the police carried out raids to enforce compliance with these regulations. Employees who directly interacted with foreign tourists were required to undergo special training (Main Directorate of the Ukrainian SSR for Foreign Tourism 1988: 19).

Beyond administrative control, the authorities also strengthened public surveillance. Hotel workers were often complicit with sex workers and *fartsocvshiki* (black marketeers), facilitating clandestine interactions with tourists (*How Do You Do* 1988). The authorities sought to ensure that society reported cases of prostitution rather than enabling them. To achieve this, the state called for the personal responsibility of service personnel – such as doormen, cloakroom attendants, elevator operators, baggage handlers, and hotel and restaurant officials – to report any suspected cases of prostitution (Main Directorate of the Ukrainian SSR for Foreign Tourism 1988: 19). In addition to police raids, the Ukrainian SSR reported on intensifying the activities of squads of volunteers and Komsomol vigilantes in places visited by foreign citizens. The policy promoting public control mechanisms reflected a broader Soviet trend, characterised by the idea that each Soviet citizen was responsible for upholding socialist morality through surveillance and denunciations (See Weiner, Rahi-Tamm 2012). However, in the late 1980s this system was difficult to sustain, as in the conditions of deficit and poverty citizens often prioritised economic benefits over ideological loyalty.

Any cases of non-work-related contacts between Intourist employees and foreign guests were discussed at meetings of the work collective, while public control groups, prevention councils, and comradely courts conducted targeted educational efforts. In some cases, hotels used technical surveillance, such as video cameras in the Zakarpattia Hotel in Uzhgorod (Main Directorate of the Ukrainian SSR for Foreign Tourism 1988: 20).

As framed in the official report, the Directorate for Foreign Tourism took all these measures to protect the property of foreign guests and 'shield the tourists from the advances of women of easy virtue' (Main Directorate of the Ukrainian SSR for Foreign Tourism 1988: 20). The wording of the documents reflected the widespread attitude towards prostitution as a problem of the low moral character of the woman, and not of the clients who sought sexual services.

This gendered discourse was not limited to prostitution but echoed more broadly across late Soviet discussions on sexuality. During perestroika, asymmetrical sexual norms became more explicitly pronounced and articulated. Female sexuality was expected to embody restraint and purity, while male promiscuity was often viewed as natural or developmental. For instance, an article published in *Rabotnitsa* in 1990 opened with psychotherapist Alexander Ponizovsky's remark that 'a man is a polygamous creature', suggesting that male infidelity was a biological reality, not a moral transgression (Ponizovsky 1990: 28). Although Ponizovsky clarified that this statement was merely a fact, not a call for a polygamous lifestyle, this framing implied that monogamous relationships are natural only for women.

Moreover, concerns about improper sexual behaviour were almost exclusively directed at women and linked to a poor upbringing or failed moral education. G. Sutrina

(1990: 40), for example, argued that previously Ukrainian society had clear boundaries of acceptable sexual behaviour for women, and those who violated these norms were subject to universal contempt and condemnation, or even physical punishment in the western regions. Sutrina's references to national traditions in sexual education related to her general argument about the need to take national traditions into account when preparing young women for family life.

These concerns over women's morality and sexual behaviour were also shown in the 1988 documentary film *How Do You Do*, which explored the topic of currency prostitution. The hotel workers interviewed in the film expressed a sharply negative attitude towards prostitution, largely because it disgraced the honour of the Soviet people:

> They don't leave foreigners alone … looking at them, sometimes you think that they were brought up in the same school, read the same books, the same magazines, watched the same films, were brought up on the same examples. But where did women's honour go, the dignity of the Soviet people? (How Do You Do 1988).

Prostitution thus became widely perceived as disgracing Soviet society in the eyes of foreigners. It was associated with a poor upbringing and education, which led to the moral decay of women. Interestingly, foreign visitors seeking sexual services were not considered to be a corrupting influence on Soviet women, despite prostitution having previously been attributed to the moral decline of capitalism. Instead, the Soviet media conveyed the message that prostitution was an expression of moral degradation and social disgrace, while failing to acknowledge that it arose under socialism (Buckley 1992: 207).

Moral deviants and public threats

While the Main Directorate of Tourism was engaged in inspecting the places of residence and the recreational activities of foreign tourists, the Ministry of Health of the Ukrainian SSR, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Ukrainian SSR, and the executive committees of local Soviets were tasked with identifying women engaged in prostitution, conducting medical examinations for venereal diseases, and ensuring their treatment and employment. In 1987, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Ukrainian SSR reported the implementation of comprehensive operational and preventive measures. The authorities investigated 3500 women labelled as engaging in 'immoral behaviour', identifying and registering 2165 of them as prostitutes. All registered sex workers received an official warning to cease their 'antisocial behaviour', 174 were charged with an administrative offence, 10 were sent for compulsory treatment for

drug addiction, and 37 were charged with a criminal offence for infecting citizens with venereal disease and evading treatment for the disease (Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Ukrainian SSR 1988: 5).

The Ministry of Health of the Ukrainian SSR reported an increase in venereal diseases in the Zhytomyr, Ivano-Frankivsk, Zaporizhzhia, Odesa, and Chernivtsi regions, attributing their spread to prostitution, drug addiction, and alcoholism (Ministry of Health of the Ukrainian SSR 1988: 9). In response, Ukrainian health authorities ordered the heads of regional and city health departments to create a registry of individuals with socially-negative behaviour and those engaged in prostitution who had been discharged from closed-type hospitals after completing treatment for venereal disease (Ministry of Health of the Ukrainian SSR 1988: 10). To ensure further medical and police surveillance, the state fostered collaboration between healthcare institutions and the police. Police officers were responsible for transporting suspected sex workers and individuals with socially negative behaviour to medical institutions for compulsory examination and treatment (Ministry of Health of the Ukrainian SSR 1988: 10).

Official reports from state bodies consistently referred to prostitution as 'immoral', 'antisocial', or 'socially negative' behaviour. However, the report from the Ministry of Internal Affairs did not specify the criteria by which the 3500 women were considered 'immoral', which left room for accusations based on subjective moral judgement.

This ambiguity was also demonstrated in more specific cases, such as in a report from the Prosecutor's Office of the Ukrainian SSR. According to the report, Lutsk resident E. B. had previously studied at a medical institute but was expelled for her 'immoral lifestyle' (Prosecutor's Office of the Ukrainian SSR 1987: 22). She lived with her mother and their apartment was often visited by men. Although E. B. was not officially employed and her mother had a relatively modest salary, she appeared to be well off financially. The report criticised the Department of Internal Affairs for not having information about the woman's sources of income and for failing to take measures to stop her antisocial lifestyle (Prosecutor's Office of the Ukrainian SSR 1987: 23). The Prosecutor's Office, however, failed to specify whether it had been proven as a fact that the woman was engaged in prostitution.

In cases like that of E. B., the authorities determined 'immoral' behaviour without referring to specific evidence of criminal activity, relying only on vague signs such as unexplained wealth, frequent male visitors, or financial independence. In addition, the ambiguity of the concept of immoral behaviour allowed for the control of a wider group of women under the guise of moral regulation. The main reasons for the authorities' close attention included the lack of official employment, the lack of an officially registered marriage, and the status of a single mother.

Soviet law enforcement agencies specifically monitored single mothers, viewing them as morally and financially unstable. This gendered attitude towards single moth-

ers correlated with the negative stereotypes that existed in Soviet Ukraine in the 1970s and 1980s, according to which single mothers were portrayed as immoral women and feared as a possible threat to the family (Tyshchenko 2017: 198). In 1987, the Russian-language magazine *Pravda Ukrainy* (Truth of Ukraine), at the direction of Soviet authorities, published an article titled 'Ulybka Dzhozefiny' (Josephine's Smile), in which Yuriy Solyanik, the head of the Kyiv city criminal investigation department, argued that the majority of women engaged in prostitution were single mothers (Solyanik 1987).[3] Satirical magazines like the Ukrainian-language *Perets* (Pepper) (Figure 1) ridiculed women who engaged in currency prostitution and had a child, portraying them as greedy, irresponsible, and generally unsuitable for the role of a mother, and emphasised that they required state intervention.

In line with this belief, the State Committee of the Ukrainian SSR for Labour conducted extensive studies on the lifestyle, material support, and living arrangements of unemployed single mothers. The committee investigated the causes of their unemployment and registered those who remained jobless without 'valid reasons'. Acceptable reasons for unemployment included an ill child or a lack of available jobs in certain regions. For instance, the report specified that in Armiansk of the Crimea region and several towns in the region of Kyiv, suitable working places were limited owing to the 'specifically male' type of work in the area, hazardous working conditions, etc. (State Committee of the Ukrainian SSR for Labour 1987: 16).

Single mothers with no valid justification for unemployment were assigned a mandatory job. The primary task of this committee was to officially employ as many women as possible. As a result, during 1987, the authorities reported the employment of 2,840 women with many receiving support in enrolling their children in preschool institutions (State Committee of the Ukrainian SSR for Labour 1987: 15). Beyond these efforts, the State Committee for Labour also classified a separate group of single mothers that 'shirk work, lead an unworthy lifestyle, violate public order' (State Committee of the Ukrainian SSR for Labour 1987: 17). Single mothers who evaded official employment faced severe consequences, such as placement in medical and labour treatment centres, prosecution, deprivation of parental rights, or limitation of their legal capacity (State Committee of the Ukrainian SSR for Labour 1987: 17).

The state placed the responsibility on women to be employed, while providing places in a state childcare facility for the woman's children as though that were the only obstacle to employment. However, the woman's financial situation was largely disregarded. Instead, the Committee for Labour claimed that some single mothers avoided

[3] According to the 1988 Ministry of Justice of the Ukrainian SSR Report, the publication was classified as a law enforcement resource on combating prostitution (Ministry of Justice of the Ukrainian SSR Report 1988).

work even though they did not have any difficulties finding a place of employment or places for their children in preschool institutions. The report highlighted that out of 172 sex workers registered in the Odesa region, none required access to kindergartens, suggesting that some women willingly chose prostitution despite having official options of employment (State Committee of the Ukrainian SSR for Labour 1987: 17).

The idea that prostitution is a conscious choice prompted by a desire for wealth was also widely reflected in Soviet Ukrainian media. In 1988, the Ukrainian-language satirical magazine *Perets* (Pepper) published an article called 'Love with an appendix' which discussed various types of prostitution and police measures taken to combat the issue. The article told the stories of girls involved in prostitution, noting that some were as young as 15 years old and one who was still studying in the 8th grade (Naumov 1988: 3).

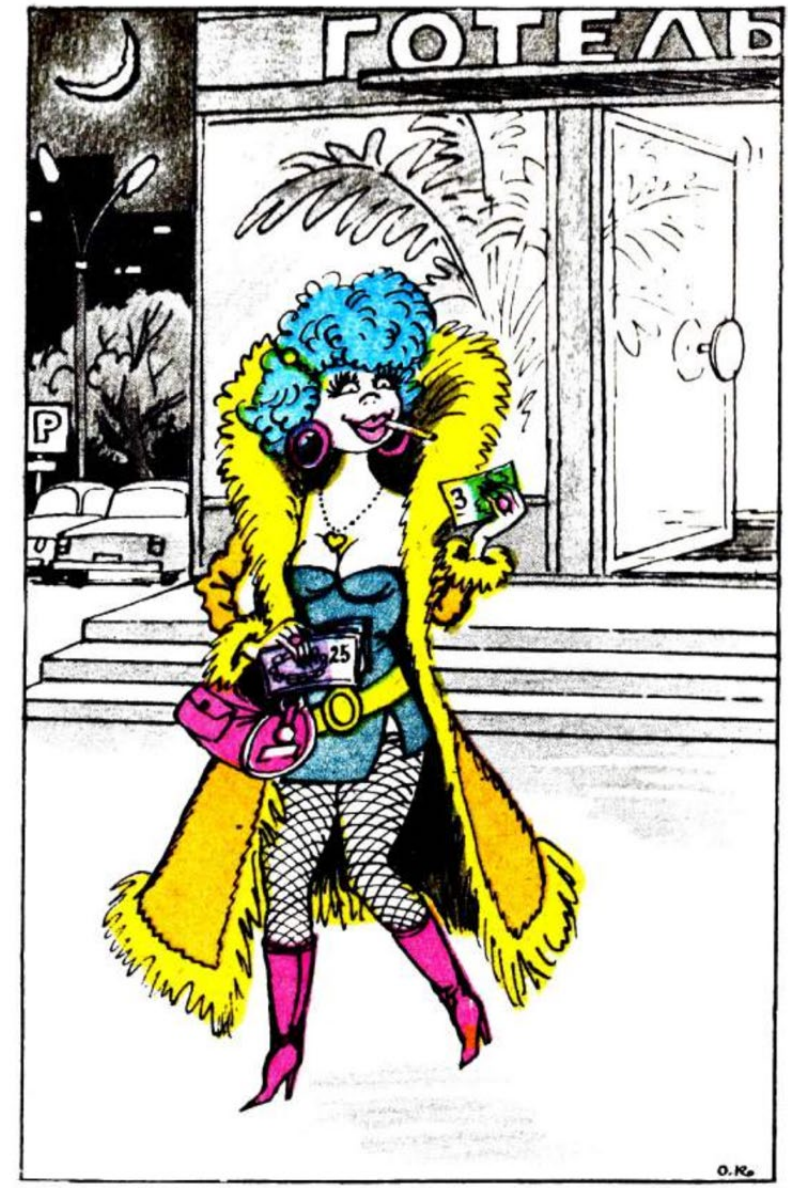
'Love with an appendix' concluded that no police force was capable of eliminating prostitution, since the problem, it argued, depended on the moral purity of society as a whole: 'Prostitution, as the pinnacle of depravity, does not emerge in a vacuum. It arises from the vices of idleness, a lack of spirituality, and drunkenness.' (Naumov 1988: 8) Prostitution was thus associated with an unwillingness to engage in honest labour and was often ranked alongside other Soviet 'pathologies' such as alcoholism, drug addiction, and parasitism in general.

The Soviet press frequently emphasised the desire for luxury rather than necessity, further emphasising that prostitution was associated with a decline in morals fuelled by consumerism. This narrative was further perpetuated in the 1990 magazine *Kalus'kyy khimik* (Kalush Chemist). In it, medical professional Chernyak devoted his article to the growing cases of AIDS, starting with the cautionary tale of a woman who also engaged in sexual relationships in pursuit of profit:

> Beauty and youth conquer everyone. This young woman knew this axiom well and knew how to use it. She was brought up in abundance, grew up without knowing worries. She recognised her power over men very early. Even in her school years, she entered into intimate relationships, because she immediately received some expensive new clothes for it. To her misfortune, as she said, she became involved with foreigners. And here is the payback. One of her friends, who came to study in our country, tested positive for AIDS. Her name was on the list of women who had had an intimate relationship with him. (Chernyak 1990: 4)

As a result, prostitution was categorized as a personal and a social vice, along with alcoholism and parasitism. Both the media and government agencies reinforced this moralistic position and perpetuated a narrative that punished and marginalised wom-

Figure 1: 'And I will donate this three-ruble note to the Children's Fund because somewhere out there, my own child is also being raised in an orphanage …' (Kokhan 1988: 12).



en. Rather than these women being recognised as needing economic or social support, they were labelled as immoral subjects requiring correction. As Soviet scholar Sergei Golod (1988: 23) asserted, the problem of prostitution stems from the culture of consumption and the alienation of feelings. He argued that combating this phenomenon is only possible through a moral transformation of sexuality in the society, with the transformation of material relations into personal ones.

In this regard, the Ukrainian Republican Council of Trade Unions also stepped up its efforts aimed at moral education and preventive work with girls. The main objective of this work was to improve the moral atmosphere. As part of this initiative, the authorities developed comprehensive programmes across regions, such as the Leisure and Youth, Culture and Education, Leisure of Workers, programmes etc. (Ukrainian Republican Council of Trade Unions 1988: 25). In addition, new amateur associations and clubs of interest for women, such as Homemaker, Girlfriends, You and I – a Young Family, were established in clubs and cultural centres (Ukrainian Republican Council of Trade Unions 1988: 26). Bringing about a change in the Soviet moral atmosphere was largely envisioned through channelling women into a family unit, instilling in them a sense of femininity and domesticity.

This idea that women who had deviated from Soviet moral norms could be rehabilitated by forming a family was also described in media narratives. A 1990 issue of the Ukrainian-language newspaper *Molod Ukrainy* (Youth of Ukraine) published an article titled 'A Mine for the Gene Pool? The Prosecutor Will Preserve Health', which discussed adolescent girls who were forcibly treated in a closed hospital for venereal disease (Shevchenko 1990). The author described them as 'women who were fifteen or sixteen years old, and who, although evoking some human sympathy, should not be met with hasty compassion'. The article portrayed these teenage girls as brazen, dissolute, and cruel, suggesting that their behaviour derived from personal moral failings. A photograph accompanied the text, and the author noted that the girls' eyes were intentionally covered, as they could still marry, have children, and improve their lives. This perspective demonstrated the Soviet belief that women who had engaged in extramarital sexual relations or sex work could be rehabilitated through reintegration into the family structure.

Closing thoughts

By the end of the 1980s, discussions about sexuality, including prostitution, had become increasingly widespread in Soviet discourse. Prostitution was no longer viewed as something confined only to capitalist societies; it was now acknowledged to exist within the Soviet Union. Both in the press and in legislative initiatives of the Ukrainian SSR, prostitution began to be discussed primarily as a problem of women's moral decline.

It is no coincidence that currency prostitution, although not the only form of sex work, became the focus of the Soviet authorities' enforcement efforts. Women engaged in currency prostitution embodied several Soviet anxieties at once: the development of the shadow economy, the exposure of persistent social inequality, and the subversion of Soviet ideology.

To combat this perceived threat, Soviet discourse portrayed women as morally fallen, unwilling to work, and driven by greed. The role of corrupting evil shifted from capitalism to women who, engaging in sex work, were seen as degrading societal norms and disgracing Soviet society in the eyes of foreign guests. Moreover, this attitude to prostitution was closely intertwined with the stigmatisation of single mothers, who also deviated from the ideal of the Soviet woman of the late 1980s, existing within the traditional family framework. This linkage allowed Soviet authorities to reinforce control over female private lives.

Ultimately, 1991 marked the end of the state's scrutiny over this phenomenon. However, the public interest in prostitution that emerged in the 1980s along with the surge in negative perceptions contributed to the significant stigmatisation of sex workers, which persisted in post-Soviet Ukraine. Moreover, the repeated depiction of currency prostitutes as women who sought material gain through relationships with foreigners helped create a cultural perception of the West as a pathway to economic escape. This narrative remained relevant in the late 1990s, when increasing numbers of women from the post-Soviet space, including Ukraine, migrated abroad and entered the sectors of informal labour and sex work across Western Europe and other regions.

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Aliesia Soloviova is a PhD researcher in the Department of History and Civilization at the European University Institute. Her research focuses on the history of marriage and everyday life in Soviet Ukraine, examining how legal frameworks, ideological narratives, and institutional structures shaped intimate relationships and family dynamics. She explores questions of gender roles, sexuality, domestic labour, and moral norms in the Soviet context. Her broader interests include the history of emotions, gender history, and the regulation of private life under socialism. ORCID: 0000-0001-8384-0512. Contact e-mail: aliesia.soloviova@eui.eu.