Chapter 2
Vory v zakone: Russian Organized Crime

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Abstract This article discusses major changes in the criminal traditions, rituals and activities of Russian organized crime, the role of *vory v zakone* throughout history, and the creation of a new image and a new reputation of the Russian Mafia in the post-Soviet period. Organized crime has always existed in Russia, but the years of reform and transition have been crucial in the emergence of new criminal groups and new forms of criminality. The latest events in the Russian underworld are described to highlight the conflict between the traditional *vory v zakone* and the new generation of post-reform criminals who have strong ties to business and politics and are currently trying to oust the *vory* from their traditional leading position.

Historical Background

Criminal Groups in Tsarist Russia

The history of Russian organized crime is a history of bandits and gangs. The formation and activities of these criminal groups during various periods in Russian history depended on the socio-economic conditions and power relations within the state. Organized crime in Russia developed in an environment with a strong

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patriarchal tradition. Until the eighteenth century, Russia was far behind most European countries in economic terms. After the war with the Tartars in the 1200s, a system of serfdom emerged. Thousands of homeless peasants settled on the land of rich landowners and became almost totally dependent on their masters.

Since the reign of Ivan the Terrible in the sixteenth century, the Russian Tsars had followed a consistent policy of transferring political power from the nobility to themselves. During this period of centralization of authority, serfdom increased steadily. By the seventeenth century the Russian Tsars enjoyed autocratic rule over their noblemen. In return, they were forced to grant the noblemen more power over their serfs. In the code of laws called the *Sobornoe Ulozhenie*, completed in 1649 under Tsar Alexei Michailovich, serfs were defined as the private property of the landlords, who were allowed to buy or sell them, lose them in card games and punish them physically. Sexual exploitation of female serfs was common. There were many cases of violent, sadistic punishment, especially of women.[1] The violence was one of the main reasons for peasants to escape to the so-called 'free land' (forests and cities), to organize peasant revolts, and to form units of robbers and thieves. The most capable of the outlaws established professional criminal groups. Some of the first gangs emerged as protest groups against the existing political system and the injustices of the existing social order, while other groups were involved in robbery, fraud and petty crimes without any political connotations (Gurov 1995; Konstantinov 1997; Dyshev 1998). As almost everywhere else in Europe, crimes in rural areas were committed by social bandits, and by urban criminals in towns and cities (Shelley 1981).[2]

Russian Social Bandits

The sixteenth century *razboiniki* (brigands) were often regarded as miraculous heroes, liberators or even holy men. The German concept of *Rauberromantiek* ('bandit romanticism') can be applied to these figures. The local population gave the *razboiniki* moral and material support and viewed them not as criminals, but as defenders of justice against the local gentry. Among such well-known criminal heroes of Russian history as Ermak, Razin, Bulavin and Pugachov, it was the legendary Kudear who people sympathized with and loved the most.[3] Kudear

[1] Cheloukhine mentions the case of Darya Saltykova, a noblewoman who ordered the killing and torture of 138 of her serfs, mostly women and girls (2008: 355).

[2] Hobsbawm described "social bandits" as robbers with a special status, Robin Hood types, who were admired and protected by the peasants against landlord oppression (1969).Anton Blok, who criticized Hobsbawm's 'ideal type' of the social bandit, argued that it was an idealized image, far removed from social reality (Blok 2001).

[3] Legend tells us that he once served as an *oprichnik* (guard) for Tsar Ivan IV, but disobeyed him in choosing his bride. When the Tsar ordered Kudear's young wife to be killed, Kudear devoted his life to taking revenge on the bloodthirsty monarch.

stands out for his extreme violence and military talent; his gang resembled a real army and his violence was praised as a necessity against injustice and lawlessness.

From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, criminality was mainly attributed to the Cossacks, who formed communities of free peasant raiders and developed mobilization strategies for their campaigns. Their profits were divided equally, and the *ataman* (leader) or *bat'ka-ataman* (father-leader) personally tested and recruited new members. These were fraternities based on group solidarity. The line between 'good' and 'evil' was often blurred and, as in the cases of other bandits of that period such as the *haiduki* in the Balkans or the *haidamaks* in the Ukraine, the local peasants interpreted the sins of the *razboiniki* as virtues and their violence and cruelty as noble deeds carried out for the sake of justice. There was a huge difference in the perception of the same actions such as robbery or theft committed by social bandits or by petty bandits. A social bandit was considered to be a hero, while the petty bandits were disliked, distrusted and received no support. A possible explanation is that the role of social bandits was to create an alternative and to meet the people's need for justice, which the state was unable to provide at the time. The relationship between the Russian state and the Cossacks has always been complex. The Cossacks recognized the authority of the Russian Tsar, but they would not let the authorities arrest runaway serfs once they had been accepted into the Cossack community, despite the fact that according to the *Sobornoe Ulozhenie* serfs who escaped from their masters had to be returned and the Cossack movement was not directed against the institution of serfdom itself. The emphasis was on the idea of freedom, expressed in the rule: 'there is no extradition from the river Don'.

Urban Criminals

As elsewhere in Europe, Russian cities in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were dangerous and violent places plagued by armies of pickpockets, forgers and swindlers. McIntosh described urban criminal practices in Europe as follows: 'These are the crafts of picking pockets, … stealing from market stalls and from shops, stealing from inside houses, counterfeiting money or other valuables, cheating at gambling games …'(McIntosh 1975: 35). In Russia, this new criminal subculture marked the introduction of new kinds of relationships amongst thieves, a new argot (*fenya*), new codes of behavior and new criminal bosses. It is quite possible that since this time banditry in Russia came to be considered a profession. As a rule, young bandits only married women connected with the criminal world.[4] Organization and separation from the outside world guaranteed them freedom, mutual support and independence. In the long gallery of famous Russian criminals, Ivan Osipov, alias Vanka Kain, is regarded as one of the first criminal bosses in Russian organized crime. Osipov was a thief who later became a *donoschik* (police informer).

[4] In later times, *vory v zakone* were even not allowed to marry or to have children.

He never received payment for his reports but he was allowed to extort money from local merchants and former gang members.[5]

In the nineteenth century Tsarist Russia, dependence on the Tsar was strong and the boundaries between 'legal' and 'illegal' were almost invisible. Bribery and the abuse of power were common throughout society, including amongst high ranking officials (Cheloukhine 2008: 356). In this period, in contrast to earlier revolts led by peasants and Cossacks who lacked the economic and political knowledge to implement reforms, nineteenth century revolutionary ideas entered the minds of the noblemen.[6] Tsar Alexander II abolished serfdom in 1861 and in 1864 legal reforms were introduced which included trial by jury and peasant courts to judge small offenders in villages according to customary law. In the Penal Code punishment by the *knut* (whip) and branding iron was abolished.

Criminal Arteli

At the end of the nineteenth century, professional criminals started to unite in groups headed by a *pakhan* (authoritative leader). There is a consensus among the authors on Russian organized crime that the first criminal professional organizations were established as *arteli* (Konstantinov and Dikselius 1995: 49 etc.). An *artel* is an old Russian form of cooperative, which includes joint occupation (similar to guilds), communal lifestyle, group activity, mutual support and solidarity (Gilinskiy and Kostjukovsky 2004: 185).[7] Among the criminal *arteli* in Russia the most important were: robbers; professional thieves such as safe-crackers (*medvejatniki*), burglars, horse thieves, pickpockets, etc.; *Ivans* (professional beggars); and swindlers, including 'players' (card swindlers), *farmazonschiki* (swindlers of precious stones), swindlers of money, counterfeiters, etc. (ibid: 186; Cheloukhine 2008: 356). Swindlers were considered to be the elite of the criminal world because their operations demanded intelligence and planning.

In the 1870 and 1880s, there were two centers of professional criminal groups: Rostov and Odessa, called in argot 'Rostov-papa' and 'Odessa-mama'. The bandits of Rostov, a city on the river Don which was traditional Cossack territory, were well known for their strict organization and extreme violence. Odessa was a cosmopolitan seaport, populated by various minorities (mostly Jews and Greeks). The well-known godmother of Russian organized crime, Sheindl Bluvshtein, alias *Sonka Zolotaya Ruchka* (Sonka, the Golden Arm), and her gang ran operations in these two cities, and later all over Russia and abroad. Sonka was one of the most

[5] The memoirs of Ivan Osipov (*The life of Vanka Kain, told by himself*) revealed his talents as gang leader and negotiator with the police and other officials.

[6] For example, the *Dekabristy* (Decembrists).

[7] The criminal *arteli* of horse thieves were known to be especially well-organized with a rigid hierarchy, leaders, assistants, horse thieves, buyers and members responsible for security and protection (Gilinskiy and Kostjukovsky 2004: 186).

admired female criminals in European history. Her beauty and 'seduction skills', as well as her organizational talents were praised in Russian oral tradition and literature. There was a clear division of roles among the members of her gang. Sonka was not just the leader and manager of her gang, but she also participated in the theft of diamonds, jewels and money. She spoke several languages and maintained international connections. Inside Russia she was the only woman who was fully accepted as an equal in the *vorovskoi mir* (the world of thieves) and she was highly respected by other criminal bosses. She advocated solidarity and mutual support, including the introduction of a communal cash fund (*obschak*) to assist members of criminal gangs who were in prison or on the run.

The Criminal World Under the Soviets

Almost all of the leaders of the October revolution of 1917 started their career as ordinary criminals: Joseph Stalin was involved in several robberies, including the famous bank robbery in Tiflis (Tbilisi) in 1907, another communist leader Yakov Sverdlov was *fortochnik*.[8] They often took bandits' nicknames: Stalin was known as 'Koba' (a famous Georgian brigand), Dzerzhinsky as 'Iron Felix', Bauman as 'Rook', etc. Later, when they entered politics they adopted the features of social bandits. It was not only their nicknames, but also their modus operandi which was very similar to that of the social bandits: they presented themselves as liberators, avengers and protectors of the poor they robbed, and they humiliated and killed the rich. Some of these operations were given euphemistic names: robbery, for example, was renamed 'expropriation of property in the name of the Motherland'. The illegal acts of the communists were justified within the framework of the socialist ideology (Hobsbawm 1969: 112).

The growth of the revolutionary movement and its repression by the Tsar's policy against it led to the emergence of new political prisoners, who had no knowledge of criminal habits and rules, but found themselves regarded the same as criminals. The mutual influence of professional criminals and political prisoners was great and new ideological principles were developed, which later became manifest in the so-called Code of the *vory v zakone*.

The general amnesty in March 1917 resulted in the release of thousands of criminals (Gurov 1995), many of whom joined the ranks of the Communist Party, while others renewed their criminal activities. Illiterate workers and peasants were hired in newly formed *militia*, but their capacity to combat professional criminals was negligible (Cheloukhine 2008: 358). As a result, after the October Revolution of 1917, hundreds of violent gangs operated all around Russia. The new authorities

[8] Lit. 'window leaf', a small window at the top of a regular one. Because of his small posture he was able to slip into apartments through such a window and open the door for his criminal partners.

reacted with extreme measures, wiping out whole gangs and imprisoning crime leaders on a wide scale. For example, the Chekists[9] claimed the 'right' to issue a death sentence for a whole gang without even listing the names of the members and to destroy the gang without any investigation (Konstantinov 1997: 60).

In the 1920s, Russian prisons and camps were crowded with 'old' and 'new'prisoners, among whom were on the one hand *urka* (traditional authority figures) and on the other hand *zhigani* (ideological criminals, including former officers of the Tsar's army), who introduced new rules. The criminal war between *urka* and *zhigani* was finally won by the *urka,* who had more power inside the penitentiary system (Gilinskiy and Kostjukovsky 2004: 191). However, the old-style criminals learned how to make use of the traditions of the pre-revolutionary criminal world in a new reality. The culture of these criminal groups—their language, manners and ideas—is known as the culture of *vory v zakone*. Their basic new idea was opposition to the Soviet state, where *vory v zakone* were not allowed to take part in the work of society, to take up arms on behalf of the state or to work within the justice system (either as victims or witnesses). A *vor v zakone* was a professional criminal, who chose crime as an occupation, had a good reputation in the criminal world, obeyed the law of the thieves and occupied a leading position on the criminal ladder. A *vor* is literally a thief, one who steals, but in Russia this word has a deeper meaning, including criminals irrespective of the kind of crime they commit (ibid). *Zakon* means law, but in combination with 'thief', it means a special law of criminals, a code of behavior adhered to by the criminal community.

The Code

A *vor v zakone* is supposed to live according to the *ponyatiya* (lit. "the notions", or "understandings"), the rules of conduct (or code of honor). These *ponyatiya* are observed both in and outside the prisons and camps. There are basically two kinds of rules, the so-called *vorovskyie ponyatiya*, 'the rules for *vors*', formulated in the Code, and the *ludskie ponyatiya*, 'the rules for folk', required for all prisoners, which include specific rules on interrelationships, on the distinction between different categories of prisoners[10] and on certain taboos. The Code is an oral law, mainly learned in prisons, which regulates all emotional and material aspects of the life of a *vor v zakone*. The *vorovskoi zakon* (thieves' law) is passed down from generation to generation, but some rules have been changed during *schodki* (meetings). The most important rules of the Code are the following:

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[9] *Chrezvtchainaya Komissiya po borbe s kontra-revolutziei, sabotazhem i spekulatsiei, CheKa* (The Extraordinary Commission to Fight Counter-revolution, Sabotage and Speculation) operated between 1918 and 1922 under the leadership of Felix Dzerzhinskyi. It was the forerunner of the KGB (*Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopasnosti*), Committee of National Security.

[10] The *petuchi* (roosters), the lowest layer of inmates, are subjected to constant humiliation.

- A *vor* does not have emotions
- A *vor* must leave his family to avoid any attachment other than to the brotherhood
- A *vor* must not have a family of his own,[11] but he can have as many women as he wishes
- Never and under any circumstances is a *vor* allowed to have a job or property
- A *vor* should live only on what he has stolen, won at card games, acquired by deception
- A *vor* does not adhere to the Soviet laws
- A *vor* is not allowed to be involved in political activities
- A *vor* must not participate in public activities or organizations, or serve in the army
- A *vor* must not be a witness in a court
- *Vory* have their own laws and systems of arbitration (*skhodka*)
- A *vor* must respect and obey the decisions and verdicts of the council of thieves
- A *vor* must acquire a leading role in the camps and prisons, be a ruler and a judge in the criminal world and protect the basic needs of criminals and prisoners
- A *vor* must help other *vory* materially and morally and share all he has with other *vory*
- A *vor* must refrain from using violence
- A *vor* must have a good command of *fenya* (criminal slang)
- A *vor* must educate young criminals in the *vory*'s way of life
- A *vor* must never deny his status of *vor*
- A *vor* is not allowed to leave the brotherhood[12]

(sources: 1935; Monachov 1957; Shalamov 1994; Varese 2001: 151–152; Gilinskyi 2004).

In the 2000s there have been speculations that the Code is no longer in use, but *vor v zakone* Vitaly Diomochka stated in an interview that in camps and prisons the Thieves' Code is still as respected today as it was in the past.[13]

Prison was and still is the place where criminal bosses recruit soldiers for their future operations. It was traditionally also the place where a new *vor* was 'crowned'. Today, initiation rituals can also take place outside prison, at gatherings held in luxury restaurants or on board ships. Traditionally, the initiation included a recommendation of two or more *vory*, who promised to take full responsibility for the behavior of the novice and for his loyalty to the *vorovskaya ideya* (thieves' idea), followed by a ceremony during which the novice swore an

[11] This rule was changed in the 1980s.

[12] Becoming a *vor* is considered to be entering a lifelong contract, from which the only escape is death or permanent expulsion from the brotherhood. The uncrowning of a *vor* is considered a very serious punishment.

[13] Interview with *vor v zakone* Vitaly Diomochka, alias Bondar, in: Gentelev 2010.

acceptance oath. He was then given a *klichka* (nickname) and 'stars'—tattoos on the shoulders or knees indicating his official status as a *vor*.

The lives, activities and interrelationships of *vory* with other prisoners and especially with the authorities in the Soviet Gulag are widely discussed subjects. The attempts to destroy the *vory* during World War II and in the 1950s during the so-called *Suchiya Voina* (Bitch War), when different camps within the *vorovskoi mir* fought each other while the authorities tolerated and encouraged the bloodshed, are described in detail and analyzed elsewhere. Their secret codes and clandestine language of tattoos, nicknames, symbols and rituals are also described in various sources (Solzhenitsyn 1974; Shalamov 1994; Gurov 1995; Varese 2001; Siegel 2005).

Less is known about the changes in their traditions and customs in the period of Gorbachev's reforms and the transition to a new socio-economic order in the 1990s. In this period, the threat of the so-called Russian Mafia spread throughout the world. What happened to the traditional Russian *vory v zakone* after the collapse of the Soviet Union and how did they respond to actual changes? Are they still the elite of the Russian criminal world?

Vory v Zakone Today: Russian Mafia?

When Gorbachev's reforms legalized the private sector, the former *nomenklatura* (high ranking officials) saw an opportunity to increase their wealth by taking advantage of the 'privatization' policies. In 1988, the law on Cooperatives permitted the establishment of private companies, thereby legalizing all kinds of shadow businesses. Almost overnight, the *nomenklatura* turned into bank directors and managers of commercial enterprises and they transferred the Communist party's money to their new private enterprises. Money and power did not change hands and many *nomenklatura* bureaucrats became wealthy businessmen through their connections and influential positions (Wilson and Donaldson 1996: 48–49). KGB officers who had accumulated personal wealth in the Soviet period transferred billions of US dollars out of Russia. *Komsomol* (Young Communists) activists also used the assets of their institutions for private businesses.

The younger generation realized that there were plenty of opportunities to make money without the need of education or experience. The old *nomenklatura* was joined by new young entrepreneurs, the so-called *Novyie Russkie* (New Russians), who had no government money but enough motivation and talent. Informal networks and trust relations formed the basis for the first private businesses. Thus, 'most "pioneers" of Russian business acknowledged that their registration documents were prepared by friends or contacts' (Ledeneva 1998: 184). It was easy to solve financial difficulties through personal contacts. Goods, services and bank loans were also obtained through personal channels.

In this period of transition the traditional *vorovskoi mir* began to change. During *perestroika* there were still about 600 recognized *vory v zakone* within the territory

of the former Soviet Union, among them 400 Georgians and Armenians (Dyshev 1998: 28). Varese provided more detailed numbers on the post-reform period: 'The number of *vory* went from less than one hundred in the late eighties to 740 in 1994, and then declined sharply to 387 in 1999' (2001: 167). In May 2011, the list of *vory v zakone* issued by the Prime Crime news agency included 1,876 names of crowned *vory v zakone*, 633 of whom were dead and 197 uncrowned.[14] From these statistics it appears that 1,243 *vory v zakone* are active in different parts of the former Soviet Union, in Europe, the USA and Dubai. Georgian thieves make up approximately half of all the names.[15]

The new opportunities appeared to enable a *vor* to acquire a 'respectable position'. Whereas traditionally the title could only be given in prison or in a camp and only after spending some time there, in the 2000s one could buy it with money (Varese 2001: 168). This act of 'buying a title' is not really recent, according to Gurov it had already happened in the mid-eighties (ibid). The price of an initiation ceremony varies from 150,000 to a million dollars. In some cases, however, criminals paid nothing at all, simply declaring themselves *vory v zakone* (ibid: 169). The new role of *vory v zakone* was directly related to the emergence of a new market situation. Some of them became involved in the 'business of protection' and faced competition with young and strong new criminals. Other *vory v zakone* realized the changing situation in the legal world; they entered criminal business enterprises, bought real estate, grounds, ships, publishing houses, etc. and became leaders of criminal groups. However, there were also *vory* who lost their influence and prestige and descended into street crime (Finckenauer and Waring 1998: 109–110).

In the beginning new young criminals, often called 'new bandits', worked together with the *vory,* who were experienced in arbitrating the gang conflicts which were taking place on the streets of Russian cities. On the other hand, this young generation, which included *sportsmeny* (sportsmen) and *Afghantzi* (former soldiers who fought in Afghanistan) criticized the old-fashioned ascetic *vorovskoi mir* and refused to accept the code and authority of *vory v zakone*. In the 1990s, there were several contract killings of *vory v zakone* resulting in a criminal war which only ended in 1998 (Cheloukhine 2008: 367) and at times during 2010–2011 there were also recurrences in big cities. Criminal bosses from both sides, *vory* and new bandits, were killed in Moscow, St. Petersburg, the Far East and in many other regions. According to the American criminologist Shelley,

[14] An uncrowned *vor* is one whose status and rights are taken from him as punishment for his behavior, which is usually a violation of the rules of the Code. The decision to uncrown a *vor v zakone* is considered a very serious matter and is usually taken by the council of *vory* at *schodka.*

[15] This is a calculation by the author based on the lists of names of *vory v zakone* published by the Prime Crime news agency, see English version at: http://russianmafiaboss.com. Though this is an important source, the data lacks many names of important *vory v zakone*, especially those who operate internationally, one can therefore expect that the 'dark number' is significant and there are many more *vory v zakone* than indicated here.

the survivors were often criminal leaders who were operating internationally (Shelley 2004: 571).

According to Alexander Gurov, after Gorbachev's reforms *vory v zakone* changed drastically: 'they married, they built *dacha*' (luxury summer houses), etc.'[16] The appearance of old-style *vory* was also different from the new bandits. One of the main features of the modern new-style bandit is his *krutost* (coolness), which he demonstrates in public. 'Men with scarred faces, broken noses, thick necks, and bulging biceps were seemingly everywhere in Moscow' (Klebnikov, 2000: 34). They also use a new *blatno*i (criminal) argot, which is highly 'economized' (Ledeneva 1998: 191).

The dominant view in critical studies is that the economic chaos and the situation of lawlessness in the transition period in Russia made it difficult for any business to survive without state protection. The government was also unable to provide economic order. Business fell under the so-called *krysha* (roof) which was protection by a criminal organization. Usually *krysha* is associated with extortion, but that is not always the case today. Often Russian and foreign businessmen seek *krysha* themselves, in order to safeguard the proper functioning of their companies. 'The "krysha" model is a key component of a significant post-communist development in Russia—the integration of the criminal and legal economy' (CSIS 1997: 29). This report refers to protection not only against petty criminals, but also against competitors and 'unprofessional racketeers'. Varese gives various examples from leading Russian newspapers, in which businessmen are advised to acquire a safe 'roof', to guarantee their success in the business world (2001: 59).

At first, *krysha* was only provided by criminals, but later a *militseiskaya krysha* (a 'roof' by police) also emerged. According to Gurov: 'All police units provided *krysha* to bankers. First they started to ask money for this, then it became profitable, and then the police started to extort the banks. If they had to kill—they killed'.[17] *Vory* usually tried not to have anything to do with businessmen who had police *krysha,* 'so as not to incite the police'.[18]

The Changing Structure of the Russian Underworld

There are different accounts of the structure and organization of Russian organized crime. The structure seems to remain the same in all sources: it is hierarchical and clearly defined (Varese 2001; Konstantinov 1997; Cheloukhine 2008, etc.). At the head of the organization is a *vor v zakone*, who is 'just like a member of parliament. His mission is basically to help people',[19] beneath him are the deputies of

[16] Interview with Alexander Gurov, in: Gentelev 2010.

[17] Interview with Alexander Gurov, in: Gentelev 2010.

[18] Interview with *vor v zakone* Vitaly Diomochka, alias Bondar, in: Gentelev 2010.

[19] Interview with*vor v zakone* Alimzhan Tokhtakhounov, alias Taiwanchik, in: Gentelev 2010.

various sections, team leaders and soldiers. The net of connections among criminals is called a *bratva* (brotherhood). A good example of such a structure is the *Solntsevskaya bratva*, sometimes called the *Solntsevskaya brigada* (Karyshev 1998). A group of several brigades forming a larger unit is called a *zveno* (chain; Konstantinov 1997).

Each organization has its own account, separate from the private accounts of its members. It is a new form of the traditional *obschak* (communal cash fund). The presence of soldiers or well-trained and well-armed members is important for the survival of the groups. After the reforms many wrestlers, boxers, weight lifters, hockey players and karate experts joined criminal organizations. Some of them were members of the old Soviet Olympic Team. They were employed by different criminal groups as 'security guards' and enforcers (Klebnikov 2000: 34).

The criminal groups are named after the home location of their founders and first spheres of influence. Thus *Solntsevskaya, Izmailovskaya, Luberetskaya, Podolskaya, Dolgoprudnenskaya* appeared—all these names stand for various neighborhoods in and around Moscow and *Kazanskaya* and *Tambovskaya* in St. Petersburg. Traditionally *vory v zakone* never had a strong position in St. Petersburg, in contrast to Moscow. The 'new criminals', or 'guys with bad luck, former sportsmen, former *Afghantsy*, simple people, who had difficulties in their life' became the first extortionists (Konstantinov 1997: 177). The leaders of these groups are interconnected. The criminal world in Russia at the end of the 1990s could be described as a mosaic, where each piece stands for an exclusive criminal group with its own military unit, spheres of influence and commercial structure. Some of these groups were led by well-known *vory v zakone*, others by new bandits, who did not have a strong position in the traditional professional underworld. Traditionally, the Thieves' *schodka* (meeting) is considered to be a governing entity and its participants make important decisions, including how much money goes to the *obschak*, how to manage criminal businesses, whom to give a bribe, etc. These meetings still take place regularly in the 2000s. However, the new criminals do not feel obliged to fulfil the decisions of the *vory* and have their own ways of resolving disputes (mainly through violence) and investing criminal money (mainly in real estate or foreign bank accounts).

Is the Russian Mafia Really Russian?

In addition to the geographical location, economic activities, size and structure of the criminal groups, ethnicity plays an important role in the post-Soviet criminal world. With the collapse of the Soviet Union ethnic sensitivities—which for generations had been silenced under the communist regime—emerged in the form of ethnic conflicts and wars among different groups. Politicians were not immune to these sensitivities either.

In the West, the Russian mafia was seen as a single homogeneous criminal organization. This concept of the 'Russian mafia' is however too vague. Post-Soviet

organized crime is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon, it is not a single entity and it manifests itself in various sectors in different forms and sizes in Russian society (Shelley 2004: 570). Ethnic minorities are important participants in 'Russian' organized crime. What they have in common is that after the reforms ethnic gangs used to operate not only within their own regions, but also (and mainly) in the big cities of Russia, the Ukraine and other former Soviet republics, and that in the late 1990–2000 s they expanded to the international market. In 1997–98, there were 34 organized criminal formations in Moscow alone: 20 originally from Moscow, seven from other cities and seven ethnic, which usually means Caucasian. They provide *krysha* and protect their compatriot businessmen. 'In the end of the 1990s they were organized in 116 criminal groups, among them 30, Azerbaijani; 20, Chechen; 20, Dagestanian; 17, Armenian; 14, Georgian; 9, Ossetian; 4, Ingushetian, and so on' (Dyshev 1998: 63). There were also 'guest gangs' which still exist and which arrive in the city and spontaneously organize specific criminal acts, in contrast to local ethnic criminal gangs who have settled in the big cities (Konstantinov 1997).

In present-day Russia, the word 'Chechen' has become synonymous with 'criminal' and the Chechens are held responsible for most crimes and acts of terrorism in Russia. The Chechen occupy a special place in organized crime; they are considered to be the elite of the post-Soviet criminal world. Being as 'free as wolves' and only under obligation to their own clan (Smith 1998: 9), Chechen criminal gangs were operating on an international scale long before the fall of socialism. They were, for example, engaged in stealing cars in Turkey and Eastern Europe in the late 1970s. After the reforms they developed an interest in banking and laundered profits from smuggling operations (especially in oil and gold) through major Russian banks. Chechen criminal capital is increasingly being invested in legal businesses (Konstantinov 1997). Their focus on financial criminal activities, counterfeit money, and the smuggling of opium from Afghanistan are often linked to their terrorist activities and political ideas. Chechen criminals do not recognize the authority and the Code of the *vory v zakone*, but instead emphasize their own tradition and religion as the only right one.

Georgian criminals, on the other hand, have always been well-represented in the *vorovskoi mir* and they have a reputation of being 'criminals with a rich past'. Among the *vory v zakone* two-thirds were Russians (33%) and Georgians (31%), the others were Armenians (8.2%), Azerbaijanis (5.2%) and the rest Ukrainians, Kazakhs, Kurds and Abkhazians (together 21.9%; Cheloukhine 2008: 368). In the 1990s, Georgia came to be divided into three criminal areas, each of them engaged in drug-trafficking operations (the purchasing of opium and morphine in Tajikistan and the smuggling of heroin into Turkey), as well as in speculation in petroleum products, extortion and trafficking in arms from the former Soviet military in the Caucasus.[20] In the early 1990s, Georgian *vory v zakone* who were imprisoned outside Georgia were convoyed back and received amnesty. Almost immediately

[20] La Depeche Internationale des Drogues, no. 44, June 1995, at: http://www.ogd.org/gb/44AGEGTA.html.

they started to return to Russia. At the end of the twentieth century, about 50 Georgian *vory v zakone* were living permanently in Moscow (Dyshev 1998: 64). According to the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, over a half or more than 1,200 *vory v zakone* are immigrants from Georgia, only about 100 of them reside in Moscow, many of whom have forged documents or live there illegally. The president of Georgia, Mikhail Saakashvilli, has stated that: 'Our major export to Russia is not wine, but *vory v zakone*. About 90% of organized crime leaders in Russia are today our compatriots'.[21]

Under the Soviets both in Georgia and Azerbaijan illegal private businessmen 'would operate more openly than in other parts of the country, these (business) meetings traditionally take the form of banquets lasting several hours, during which the decisions are made, business is discussed, and revenues are distributed' (Simis 1982: 161).[22] The Russian authorities consider Azerbaijan the second nest for criminal activities after Chechnya. In Moscow and St. Petersburg Azerbaijani criminal groups are involved in drug dealing and illegal gambling.

Other ethnic groups include Armenians, Kazakhs and Uzbeks. They focus on specific criminal activities on the one hand, but are often challenged and compete with 'Slavic' criminal organizations on the other hand. Some of them are led by professional *vory*, but the majority are new criminals, who emerged after the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Transnational Russian Organized Crime

There are various forms of organized crime in Russia in the 2000s, not only due to the huge territory and criminal tradition in different parts of the country, but also due to the proximity of southern Russia to the conflict areas in the Caucasus, to the world-drug producer Tajikistan, and to western criminal groups from Europe in the western parts of Russia (Shelley 2004: 570). These geographical and economic conditions are not only a basis for transnational operations such as drugs and arms smuggling, human trafficking, illicit trade in art, vehicles, exotic animals, human body parts, etc. into and out of the country, but also for the further expansion of Russian organized crime activities in the territories of foreign countries. In addition, as a result of the rapid growth of capital accumulated by protection (*krysha)* activities, in the 2000s the necessity arose to launder criminal money and make investments abroad. In the late 1990s Russia became too small for Russian criminal organizations, which started to 'migrate' to Europe, the USA and Canada. Varese uses the term 'transplantation' when referring to the ability of a mafia

[21] Prime Crime, 'Georgian "thieves-in-law" are the most influential', http://russianmafiaboss.com/news/2009-04-01_4069, 01.04.2009.

[22] For many years the Sumgait Mafia, named after Sumgait a city in Azerbaijan, has controlled a large part of the Afghan opium traffic through Kirghizia. The opium is processed into heroin at Sumgait and then transported via the 'Caucasian route' to Turkey.

group to operate outside its homeland and he discusses the example of the successful expansion of the *Solntsevskaya* organization in Hungary. His explanation for this is that it is a result of a sudden expansion of legal markets and lack of Hungarian governmental control (Varese 2011). Though not all attempts by mafias to 'migrate' are successful, in many cases Russian criminal organizations did manage to establish their branches and to settle in various countries around the world, mainly following their influential leaders.

Numerous reports from the USA, Germany, UK, France, Israel and the Netherlands presented evidence of the Russian mafia's activities in their territories and its potential threat to their economy and democracy (Finckenauer and Waring 1998; Galeotti 1995; Ruthland and Kogan 1998; Siegel 2005; Varese 2011; Williams 1997). The emphasis placed on the transnational character and 'global' intentions of Russian crime organizations by Russian scholars also contributed to the idea of a worldwide threat (Gurov 1995; Konstantinov 1997; Dolgova and Diakov 1996; Gilinskiy 1998, 2000).

With regard to *vory v zakone*, many of them have settled outside Russia, however, there is no precise data on their numbers and activities. In 1997, 15 Russian *vory v zakone* were living in Germany, two of whom are the most influential figures in the Russian underworld, Rafael Bagdasarian, alias Rafik Svo and Alimzan Tokhtakhounov, aliasTaiwanchik[23] (Konstantinov 1997: 454). Prominent *vory v zakone* such as Evsei Agron and Vyacheslav Ivankov, alias Yaponchik, continued their criminal careers in the United States. According to the Israeli police, the Russian criminal bosses who operated at the end of 1990s in Israel were registered on the 'list of 32'. Many criminal leaders obtained Israeli citizenship, or passed through or lived in Belgium, Italy, France, Spain, Cyprus and other countries in the 1990s (Siegel 2005).

Following the criminal careers of the bosses operating outside of Russia, it is remarkable how high the degree of mobility is in Russian organized crime in the world. Criminals do not stay long in one country; each country has its function, some countries appear to be more attractive and useful for criminal activities for Russian organized crime than others, and the criminals are always on the move.[24]

It is not only the expansion of legal economic markets and the demand for protection which unstable governments were not able to provide, but also the presence of relatively large immigrant communities which played a role in the transnational activities of Russian organized crime. In countries with large numbers of immigrants, such as the USA, Germany and Israel, criminal groups are involved in the extortion of wealthy compatriots, drug trafficking and human trafficking.[25]

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[23] Taiwanchik lived in Israel, Italy and France before he moved back to Russia in 2009.

[24] The Netherlands, for example, appears to be less interesting for Russian criminals than Germany or Belgium (see Siegel 2005); the attempt of the Russian mafia to 'transplant' to Rome was less successful than that to Budapest (see Varese 2011).

[25] In Belgium, these groups have been engaged in diamond smuggling and the sale of stolen or counterfeit jewels (Siegel 2003: 57); in Germany, in arms smuggling, car theft, and the illegal trade in smuggled art and antiquarian articles (ibid: 59).

Large criminal organizations send their representatives to establish new contacts and search for new clients in Diaspora countries, such as the *Dolgoprudninskaya* organization (based in Moscow), the members of which settled in Germany, where they were laundering criminal profits derived from the illicit drug and art trade, and dealing in real estate (Siegel 2003: 60) and the *Tambovskaya* organization (with its headquarters in St. Petersburg), which for more than 12 years was active in Spain, involved in arms trafficking, contract killings, drug smuggling, tax fraud and money laundering.[26]

In 2010, the European operation Java took place against the Georgian mafia. In Austria 25 people were arrested, including two *vory v zakone*, Zaal Makharoblidze and Gocha Antipov. The other arrests took place in Austria, Germany, Switzerland, France and Italy. In Spain 21 arrests were made, including two *vory v zakone*, Kakhaber Shusganashvilli, who controlled the gang's *obschak*,and Koba Akhvlediani. The register of the gang's money transactions was captured by the police which contained important evidence about the gang activities. In Switzerland 11 people were arrested, though no *vory v zakone* were among them. According to the police the *vory* who were not detained either went 'underground' or moved abroad, presumably to Turkey or another Middle Eastern country. The main target of the Java operation, the *vor v zakone* Lasha Shushanashvilli, managed to escape arrest in Greece.The chief allegations against his gang were burglary, theft, drug trafficking, arms smuggling, money laundering, conspiracy, extortion and conspiracy to murder.[27]

Every Diaspora country plays its own role in the international network of Russian organized crime. For example, *vory v zakone* organize their meetings in Israel, while in Spain and France they invest criminal capital in real estate. The evidence of different 'specializations' in each country where Russian criminal groups have operated since the beginning of mass emigration from the former Soviet Union as of the end of 1980s, constitutes proof of the transnational character of Russian organized crime (Siegel 2003: 61–62).

Sophisticated Russian Mafia

Another significant change in post-reform organized crime in the former Soviet Union is its sophistication. Finckenauer and Waring defined the 'criminal sophistication' of the Russian mafia as 'the ability to carry out complex, high-stakes (high risk and high return) crimes' (1998: 119). Russian criminal organizations have employed hundreds of highly educated professionals, such as

[26] *BBC News*, Spain raids 'major Russian gang', 13 June 2008, at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7453388.stm.

[27] *BBC News*, 'Georgian mafia suspects arrested in six countries', 15 March 2010, at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8567653.stm; *Prime Crime*, 'Details of the famous operation', http://russianmafiaboss.com/news/2010-03-22_4325, 22.03.2010.

economists, chemists, computer specialists, professional soldiers and members of the former KGB. Unemployment in Russia was the main reason for these professionals to join criminal organizations, which in many cases were the only organizations which were interested in their skills and knowledge. The main targets were banks and other financial institutions. As early as 1994 the Russian police had arrested members of criminal gangs who specialized in financial schemes in Russia.

By following the criminal careers of several crime bosses this specific feature of sophistication becomes obvious. Whereas in the beginning of the 1990s their criminal groups started with extortion and *krysha* for new Russian businessmen, in 2010–2011 they mainly became involved in complex financial crimes. In the context of 'sophisticated Russian mafia' the chief figure is Semyon Mogilevich, alias Seva, or Clever Don. Graduated from the University of Lviv in economics, he is a former high ranking KGB official, an Israeli citizen, lives in Hungary and is known as a crime boss who surrounded himself with highly trained specialists and who specializes internationally in financial and cyber-crimes, art fraud and other illegal activities. In 2003, Mogilevich was charged in the USA with securities fraud, wire fraud, mail fraud and money laundering. He and his two partners are also wanted for their earlier participation in a multi-million dollar scheme to defraud investors in the stock of YBM Magnex International Inc., during which investors lost millions dollars at the end of the 1990s.[28]

Organized Crime, Economy and Politics

In the 1990s there were approximately 3,000 so-called 'banks' in Moscow alone. For many years being a banker was the most dangerous occupation in Russia, amongst businessmen bankers were killed most frequently. According to an Interpol official 'there was no single bank without criminal influence' and 'criminals became vice presidents of banks'.[29] Since the break-up of the Soviet Union everyone could open his own bank, providing he had three board members and 80,000 (later 120,000) dollars. According to an FBI report in the United States in 1998 half of the banking sector in Russia (about 550 banks and financial institutions) were controlled by criminal organizations, which operated together with corrupt politicians and businessmen.[30] Through banks criminal organizations laundered criminal money, performed illegal transactions to their private accounts

[28] The company pleaded guilty to securities and mail fraud and paid 3 million dollars as part of a plea bargain.

[29] Interview with Vladimir Ovchinsky, in: Gentelev 2010.

[30] INAF New Bulletin, 1 November 1998, at: http://www.emu.edu.tr/%7Einaf/English/newsbul/011198.html.

in European banks and received information about rich new Russians—potential subjects for extortion.

In the 2000s organized crime in Russia has penetrated all sectors of the economy and politics and the most influential criminal leaders control their criminal enterprises in the country from outside Russia. They have joined legal businesses and have become members of the boards of directors at commercial companies and banks. As bank directors they are able to exercise total control over the money. When other Russian bankers did not agree with them or contested their authority, they were killed.[31]

Today they donate their former criminal money to sports and welfare institutions, orphanages and hospitals. One of the paradoxes is that some criminal groups even supply local police with fuel and cars (Dolgova 2004). In other governmental institutions criminals also provide financial help. As one *vory v zakone* explained: 'The government cannot feed the prison system. The administration of prison regularly turns to us (criminals) and we provide them with supplies and help them out'.[32] According to Interpol official Vladimir Ovchinsky: 'Russian laws were written under the strict control of the mafia. They (criminals) are embedded in the governmental structures and have a very strong influence on significant economic and political decisions'.[33]

In recent years new criminals who have strong ties to business and politics are replacing the *vory* in their traditional leading position. According to Russian criminologist Vadim Volkov, "*Vory* are still strong in the gambling and retail trade, but their significance in the Russian economy and society is rather low".[34] Large criminal organizations have moved from extortion to legitimate business.

The *vory v zakone* have played down the situation: 'Show me one person in Russia who does not have a criminal record! Give me one name!'.[35] And according to another *vor v zakone,* Taiwanchik, the role of organized crime groups in the former Soviet Union was temporary and has now changed: 'There were criminal times … We must forget these times today. These people (criminals) are not bad, they are just products of those times. Everything has improved. There is no organized crime in Russia now. It's finished!'.[36]

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[31] Among the murdered bankers were directors of Proftech Bank, the Bank for Development of the Wood Industry, the Techno Bank, the Pragma Bank, the Eurasia Bank and the Agroprom Bank. None of these murders was solved.

[32] Interview with Vitaly Diomochka, alias Bondar, in: Gentelev 2010.

[33] Interview with Vladimir Ovchinsky, in: Gentelev 2010.

[34] Quoted from an interview in the *New York Times* 'Vory v Zakone has hallowed place in Russian criminal lore', Tuesday, 29 July 29 2008. Vadim Volkov (European University at St. Petersburg) is the author of *Violent Entrepreneurs. The use of force in the making of Russian capitalism.*

[35] Interview with *vor v zakone* Leonid Belunov, alias Makintoch, in: Gentelev 2010.

[36] Interview with *vor v zakone*Alimzhan Tokhtakhounov, alias Taiwanchik, in: Gentelev 2010.

New Mafia Wars in Russia?

On 28 July, 2009 *vor v zakone* Vyacheslav Ivankov, alias Yaponchik, was killed at the entrance of a restaurant in Moscow by a sniper. Though killings are part and parcel of the *vorovskoi mir* in Russia, this specific case may be seen as more than just another assassination. Yaponchik was considered by many to be a symbol of the rise and fall of the old-style *vory v zakone*. In the 1960s Ivankov became a member of a Moscow gang. He was crowned as a *vor v zakone* in 1972 in the Far East and became the 'godfather' of the region. In 1980 he was sentenced to 15 years for robbery, but his name, stature and connection with politics led to his release in 1991. At the decision of the *schodka* he was sent to the USA to establish the so-called *Organizatsiya*, with headquarters in Brighton Beach in New York. In 1995 he was convicted for extorting $3.5 million from two Russian immigrant businessmen. He was extradited to Russia in 2004 to face charges of murder. However, under the pressure of numerous politicians, public figures and artists with whom he kept close contacts, he was once again released.

Having been in prison in the USA for such a long time did not work in his favor. Though still highly respected as a *vor v zakone* he belonged to an old-style criminal camp and was unable to find his place in a changing world, where new young criminal businessmen had taken over the criminal activities and had begun to dominate the Russian criminal scene. Ivankov adopted a position of neutrality, he had no 'business partners' and no gang of his own. His role was restricted to arbitrating conflicts between criminals.

One of these disputes was between the Kurdish *vor v zakone* Aslan Usoyan, alias Ded Hasan, and the Georgian Tariel Oniani. Some speculated that Ivankov would be on the side of Ded Hasan. Together Yaponchik and Ded Hasan had allegedly called for Oniani to be uncrowned as *vor v zakone*. According to a former Ivankov attorney Yaponchik's allies were ready to kill Oniani at the first opportunity and it is possible that Oniani was one step ahead. Another reason that Ivankov was killed is allegedly that he cooperated with Ded Hasan against Oniani in attempting to take control of construction rackets for the Sochi Olympics Games in 2014 which were worth about $80 billion.[37]

The actual motive for the murder remains unknown. At Yaponchik's funeral, the Slavic *vory* promised to find the person who ordered his killing and to avenge him in the same way. One year later, on 16 September, 2010, Ded Hasan was shot in Moscow by a sniper in the same way as Yaponchik had been, in the stomach. Perhaps the supporters of Ivankov thought that the order to kill Yaponchik actually came from his friend Ded Hasan. On the other hand, the symbolic message of the shooting could mean that all rivals of Oniani would be destroyed in the

[37] *Moscow News*, Yaponchik's death to provoke gang war, 19 October 2009, at: http://www.themoscownews.com/proetcontra/20091019/55390717.html.

same way.[38] Oniani himself was blamed for the killing of *vor v zakone* in the criminal *bratva* and is now in danger, and two of his underworld allies have already been killed in Europe.[39]

The latest events in the Russian underworld confirm that the conflict continues between traditional *vory v zakone* and a new generation of post-reform criminals so that Taiwanchik's wishful thinking about the end of the 'criminal period' in the post-Soviet era is just not a reality. The mafia is still alive and has also produced numerous victims in Russia in 2011. Similar to previous historical periods, today we observe not only a struggle for the control of territory, clients and markets, but also for the survival of the *vorovskaya idea*, the ideological justification for criminal behavior. Russian law enforcement has little hope of solving the killings as mentioned above, due to a lack of evidence and because the Code of the *vory v zakone* prohibits them from assisting in official investigations and encourages the members to avenge their bosses themselves, which in its turn initiates yet another new round in the Russian mafia wars.

Conclusion

The so-called Russian mafia has a rich history and there has always been a nexus between organized crime, politics and the economy. By the end of the twentieth century, the chaos caused by rapid privatization had almost disappeared. Criminal bosses had accumulated huge capital and were able to slowly transform themselves into respectable and legitimate businessmen. Many of them joined Russia's political and economic elite. Today, the Russian mafia has embedded itself in all sectors of Russian society thus becoming legitimized. Illegal financial activities, such as demonstrated by the example of Semyon Mogilevich, illustrate the parasitic involvement of organized crime in international business. On the other hand there are also crime bosses who invest their capital in legal businesses, expecting that over a period of several years the origins of their money will have become obliterated in multiple transactions and be integrated in legal commerce, while their criminal records will also be 'laundered' by their legal and philanthropic activities.

The former Soviet Union is too small a territory for the activities of post-Soviet criminal organizations, which are always in search of new markets, new illegal products and new clients. Russian organized crime is active in many European countries, the USA and Canada, and is continuously searching for new markets, clients and opportunities.

With regard to the traditional criminal world of *vory v zakone*, it would appear that though many old-style criminals have been able to adapt to the new business-oriented

[38] In 2010, Usoyan survived an attempt on his life. He now lives in a suburb of Moscow guarded by a dozen armed men.

[39] Oniani was extradited to Spain at the request of Interpol.

situation like chameleons, for hundreds of them the traditional Code and *ponyatiya* remain important. The conflict between two generations of Russian criminals manifests itself in an ongoing mafia war in Russia.

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