

Organized crime in contemporary Russia

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Introduction

Long before China introduced its One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative, it was obvious that all around the world Chinese influence had been growing in terms of economic markets, transportation, migration, and technology. “OBORization”, therefore, is a natural phenomenon, which inevitably continues exerting an impact on participating countries. Russia is one of the OBOR participants, the importance of which cannot be underestimated. The proposed new networks of rail and pipeline are especially important in southern Russia and the main cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Russian authorities promote OBOR as an opportunity to strengthen economic ties with China within the framework of a two-year-old cooperation of five former Soviet countries: Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan (with an aggregate population of 183 million people and a gross domestic product of about US\$4 trillion). In addition to multilateral agreements in traditional areas of energy and agriculture, China and Russia also have developed bilateral trade agreements in new areas of digital economy and technological innovation (Russia-briefing.com, December 13, 2017). This link between the two countries seems significant and welcome on both sides. However, some critics downplay its importance, claiming that OBOR is aimed at only few energy-related projects involving Russia (China–Mongolia–Russia Economic Corridor, New Eurasian Land Bridge, and the Central and West Asia Economic Corridor), and actually China has ambitions to move to the north, bypassing Russia. Additionally, critics argue that there has been very limited cooperation between the two countries; whereas Chinese companies invested about US\$225 billion internationally in 2016, only 2% was invested in Russia (RFE/Radio Liberty, June 26, 2017).

On the political level, however, both countries continuously emphasize the potential success of OBOR in the near future. This optimism totally ignores the real obstacles to the initiative, namely traditionally very strong organized crime in Russia and in China, and a high level of corruption in the region, which can further evolve through OBORization. In this chapter, we focus specifically on different forms and activities of organized crime in Russia, which

present the main threats to the OBOR initiative. Organized crime is a serious danger, because criminal organizations have considerable wealth, capital, and experience working with businesses, the economy, and politicians.

Organized crime in Russia: definitions and statistics

There is an abundance of definitions of organized crime (Abadinsky, 1994; Albanese, 2000; Arlacchi, 1986; Block, 1994; Smith, 1975). We use one of the definitions, which refers to organized crime as the functioning of stable, hierarchical associations engaged in crime as a form of business that sets up a system of protection against public control by means of corruption.¹ Gary Becker (1987) argued that organized crime is a form of *business enterprise* and that criminal enterprise is the same as other professions, such as teaching or engineering. Crime, as a business, is chosen when the profit (revenue minus production cost) exceeds that of legal occupations.

Is it always possible to draw a distinction between legal and criminal businesses in terms of the criteria of morality and legality? In Russia, it seems to be hardly possible. Organized crime is not only the “sum of criminal organizations”, it is a complicated social phenomenon that influences the economy and state policy. Criminal associations are a *kind of social organization* belonging to a type of “working (labor) collective body”. The growth of the organizational aspect of crime is a natural, objective process; it is a manifestation of the growth of the organizational aspect of social systems as well as their sub-systems (such as the economy and politics). It is a global, worldwide process. Criminal business arises, exists, and develops under certain conditions: When there is a demand for illegal wares (drugs, weapons, etc.) and services (sexual, etc.); when there is an unsatisfied demand for legal wares and services (e.g., the total “deficit” in the former Soviet Union); when there is a high level of unemployment and other sources of social exclusion (Finer and Nellis, 1998; Kanfler, 1965; Lenoir, 1974; Paugam, 1996; Young, 1999); and when there are defects in the tax and customs policies of the state.

In this context, a criminal organization (syndicate) that builds up a system of organized crime (industry) is defined by the following indispensable characteristics: A stable association of people, designed for long-term activity; the criminal nature of the activity (financial pursuits dependent on criminal activity); the deriving of maximum profits as the key goal of the activity; the complex hierarchical structure of the organization; the corrupting of political and law enforcement bodies as the main means of the criminal activity; and the aspiration to monopolize a certain sphere of trade or certain territories. The high degree of adaptability of criminal associations (resulting from their strict labor discipline, their careful selection of staff and high profits) ensures their great and vital capacity. The mafia is immortal! For example, Russian criminal organizations recruit only the youngest, bravest, and most enterprising people. We can observe the trends of the official data about organized crime in Russia in Table 9.1.

Table 9.1 Crime data for criminal organizations, 2003–2016²

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
No. of crimes committed by criminal organizations	25,671	28,161	28,611	30,209	34,814	36,601	31,643
No. of known participants in the criminal organization	10,321	10,893	11,199	11,715	11,543	10,591	10,179
Organizations in the criminal community (Art. 210 CC RF)	141	224	244	255	337	325	247
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
No. of crimes committed by criminal organizations	22,153	17,645	17,844	17,158	13,659	13,367	12,581
No. of known participants in the criminal organization	8,770	7,487	7,444	8,086	8,375	9,664	9,317
Organizations in the criminal community (Art. 210 CC RF)	172	172	202	351	255	285	252

We can see that the number of crimes committed by criminal organizations reached its peak in 2008 and gradually decreased until 2016; the number of known participants in the criminal organizations was the highest in 2006 and fell to its lowest point in 2012, increasing again between 2013 and 2016; and the number of organizations in the criminal community rose from 141 in 2003 to 351 in 2013 without an apparent (visible) tendency.

Though we cannot completely trust the available official statistics, similar track records for many indicators in Russia and other countries are indicative of a quantitative reduction of all parameters of criminality during this period.

Short history of Russian organized crime

Organized crime has always existed in Russia, before and after the October revolution in 1917, and especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. Briefly reviewing the history of Soviet and post-Soviet organized crime in Russia can help us to understand the contemporary situation (Gilinskiy, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2002, 2006; Gilinskiy and Kostjukovsky, 2004, Siegel, 2005, 2012; Varese, 2001; Volkov, 2002). In general, the development of Russian organized crime can be divided into three specific periods.

Late 1970s to mid-1990s

From the end of the 1970s, there was the rise of a new generation of criminals (so-called sportsmen or bandits) and, more generally, the consolidation of contemporary organized crime. Its activities were initially related to traditional black market racketeering – drugs, arms, and weapons–dealing, and

control over gambling and sex businesses. Due to the immense opportunities created by the fall of the Soviet Union and the liberalization and democratization processes, from the end of the 1980s, there was a merging of organized crime with legal businesses and political structures. This included small illegal businesses and legal “cooperative societies”, large illegal businesses under the protection and with the participation of leaders in the Communist Party and state devices, and the illegal exchange of currency and speculation (*fartzovka*). Scandals involving the illegal manufacturing and sale of cotton, fruit, caviar, and fish in the 1970s and 1980s revealed for the first time the close alliances that *teneviki* (shady dealers) and traditional criminals had with executive staff and official leaders of the Soviet Republic (the first secretaries of the central committees of the Communist Party in Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Georgia, and Kazakhstan were all involved in scandals at some point), the central bodies of the Communist Party, and government and law enforcement bodies.

These years formed and shaped the relationship between different organized crime groups. For instance, in the 1990s, there were four criminal, mafia-like communities in St. Petersburg (the Tambovs, Azerbaijanians, Chechens, and Kazans), dozens of criminal associations (e.g., Komarovs), and hundreds of criminal groups. The larger criminal organizations conducted racketeering, drug trafficking, “protection” of small- and middle-scale businesses, market trade, sex businesses, car theft, the selling of nonferrous metals across the border (through Estonia), gambling, and the production and trafficking of fake liquor. Falsification of strong drinks is a traditional criminal business. In the 1990s, large amounts of Absolut vodka, French cognac (Napoleon), Italian liquor (amaretto), and others have appeared in commercial spots that were produced in the city and the local region. The result of international criminal cooperation was that greater amounts of adulterated strong drinks from Poland, Hungary, the Netherlands, and Germany were produced and sold as authentic (at corresponding prices) in Russia.

The Center for Deviantology (Sociology of Deviance) of the Sociological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences has been involved in criminological studies of the black market and the relationship between the economy and organized crime since 1993. According to different studies, business in St. Petersburg and other regions of Russia was divided among criminal communities. Excellently organized informational services enabled them to track and monitor all commercial structures; the moment a new commercial structure started making a profit, it aroused the interest of criminal groups. As one businessman interviewed asserted: “100% of commercial structures are embraced by rackets. . . . Racketeering penetrates all the enterprises except those of military-industrial complexes and some foreign firms.” According to the officers of the Federal Service Security, criminal associations controlled about 90% of legal businesses.³

There were two levels of racketeering: Tribute money extracted from small kiosks and shops (“black racket”) and money obtained from commercial

enterprises. In the latter case, one can distinguish various indirect, disguised types of rackets: Payments for “guarding”, for “service in the field of marketing” in compliance with contracts for “cooperation”, or for “services” (e.g., recovering debts). The “taking care” of commercial structures by criminal organizations included having their representatives on administrative and managerial bodies.

On the basis of information from our respondents, we are in a position to single out typical situations in which businessmen were forced to commit crimes. Bribery was required in the following situations: When registering businesses, when renting premises from state bodies, when acquiring licenses to operate from state bodies, for obtaining low-interest bank credit, when reporting to tax inspectors, and when completing customs formalities. A current taxation rate amounting to 80%–85% required concealment of revenues, as businesses could not survive in competition with other firms if revenues were revealed honestly.

Most of the state-owned business enterprises found themselves “under the protection” of bandits. They were “guarded” by some gangs against other gangs, for which they paid a “tribute” and rendered (obligatory) services. In particular, criminal organizations included their “representatives” on councils of directors and boards of business enterprises, organizations, and banks. Thus, legal and illegal businesses merged.

The rigid normative regulations in some kinds of economic activity and the absence of such regulations in other fields resulted in businessmen ignoring the law in some cases and/or making their own “law” in others. The synthesis of legal and illegal elements in the country’s economy engendered fake goods and services.

Sophisticated crimes, such as bank fraud, were connected to computer engineering, but new technologies were also used in areas such as the falsification of alcoholic beverages, manufacturing of drugs, theft of automobiles, and development of new weapons. To some extent, the new developments in the field of computer engineering initially passed through criminal structures. Growing attention was being paid to attracting scientific staff (chemists, programmers, economists, and lawyers) who were engaged in criminal business.

The narcotics business was one of the least visible, well-established forms of organized crime in Russia. The struggle against the narcotics mafia was complicated by widespread corruption within law enforcement and state organizations and was part of the political games that Russia played with countries that exported drugs (Azerbaijan, Chechnya, and the nations of Middle Asia).

The theft and illicit trade in (resale of) vehicles was another type of criminal activity, as well as *gambling*. In cities, clients were engaged in uncomplicated gambling (card playing, dice, backgammon, etc.) in so-called dens (*katran*). These activities involved very large amounts of money. The majority of the clients of these dens were representatives of the criminal world. The other significant part of this business was street gambling, which consisted of games

like “thimbles”, “three cards”, and street raffles. Independently from the playing rules, clients never won. Modern organizers of street raffles paid about 20% to their criminal group for protection (*krysha*, literal meaning, “roof”) and contractually paid a percentage to the patrol service of police (PPS). Criminal organizations also provided protection (“cover”) to massage companies, saunas, escort and “call girls” firms. Street prostitution had no clearly marked locations; it was usually organized around bus and train stations and hotels. Hotel prostitution had existed from Soviet times until the present day. All the hotels in the city were divided among criminal groups. Criminal organizations also facilitated the exporting of prostitutes across the border.

Mid-1990s to early 2000s

In this period, traditional organized crime was blossoming and gradually introducing its members into structures of power and legal businesses. Criminal organizations displayed a keen interest in *real estate*. They obtained information about forthcoming auctions, attended the auctions with their armed men, and decided who would buy which property and at what price. Active rivals from legal businesses were requested to abstain from buying to avoid trouble. The *gun trading* business had been a very widespread and profitable criminal activity since the mid-1990s. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Army found itself in hard economic conditions. Larceny of technology and weapons from units had become a regular channel for arms to enter the illegal market.

Also the illegal *drug market* had changed. Originally, this mostly consisted of cannabis and poppy straw, but, in the 1990s, the most popular drugs were heroin and exotic cocaine. Criminal organizations in big Russian cities actively cooperated with regional and foreign representatives of organized crime who were involved in the growing production, trafficking, and distribution of drugs in the cities.

Russian criminal organizations had different dimensions, organizational structures, and specializations, but they also had a unified, general essence: illegal enterprises. The following elements were typical of organized crime in this period: a widespread sphere of influence (controlling over 40%–60% of the country’s enterprises and 60%–80% of banks); a very high profit (“super profit”) derived from criminal activity; the fulfillment of some of the functions of law enforcement bodies through “arbitration”, “enforcement of rulings (verdicts)”, “executive functions”, and protection rackets (*krysha*); total corruption in administrative and law enforcement bodies at all levels; and heavy use of violence.

There was a wide social basis for organized crime, because, first, many idle hands were available among youths and, second, legal business activity was impossible due to corruption, high taxes, the “criminal mentality”, and social anomie. New tendencies developed as criminal organizations strove to legalize their activities. In Russia, this was possible when capital was invested in legal businesses

and cooperation obtained with the upper world. There was both politicization of organized crime and the criminalization of politics and the economy.

Contemporary period (from the early 2000s to the present)

This period has a unique particularity that cannot be explained from the standpoint of the usual features of organized crime. In a personal interview (2005) with a police officer from the unit dedicated to fighting organized crime (UBOP), he explained:

Russian organized crime? It does not exist. There are we (*menty*, i.e., police)!⁴ Who is *krysha* over the stalls, the market, *points* (drug retail points)?⁵ “Menty”. . . . Today, all small trade enterprises and small- and medium-scale businesses are under the *krysha* of *menty*. Bandits are not showing up!

The traditional protection (*krysha*) provided by criminals is now replaced by the protection of police subdivisions under the direction of their chiefs. In other words, Russian police (militia) are now organized crime. In the Russian media, there are daily reports on police acting as organized criminal groups in different regions of Russia; militia (police) *krishuet* (protect) small- and medium-scale businesses as well as retail drug businesses. They also protect criminal-supported politicians (or criminal authorities) while abstaining from acting against criminal organizations. Additionally, the militia has recently taken part in a *black raid* (usurpation), which is a seizure of criminal organizations or legal businessmen who successfully run enterprises and companies. Organized crime in contemporary Russia is directly connected with the local police body and exists under its protection.

Criminal organizations, like other social organizations, strive to exert an influence on state power and control it through lobbying, bribery, and infiltration of their representatives into power structures. Criminal authorities often become city mayors or deputy local organizers of power, as well leaders of criminal organization.^{6,7} Police protection permits criminals to act for many years without denouncement, as happened with the criminal group run by Sergey Tsapok in the Krasnodarsk region, the criminal group of Kozaev in the Sverdlovsk region, and the criminal group of Alexandr Trunov in the Novosibirsk region, all of whom were active from the early 1990s to 2010.

More and more information is becoming available on the lobbying of some representatives of state organizations by organized crime groups. Consequently, we are confronted with the criminalization of businesses in combination with the economization and politicization of crime. One of the big scandals was the case of the “Kushevskaya phenomenon”. Kushevskaya is a large Cossack village (*stаница*) in the Krasnodar Region in South Russia. The population of this *stаница* exceeds 35,000 people. On November 5, 2010, 12 persons,

including three children and a nine-month-old baby, were killed in their home in Kuschevskaya. This kind of violence was not unique in the *stаница*, but this specific event stunned Russia, challenging the patience of many millions of people living in small cities and villages. The counsellor of the chairman of the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation, and general-major of militia in retirement, Professor Vladimir Ovchinsky, told the newspaper *Moskovsky Komsomolets* on November 25, 2010, and the journal *Ogonjok* on November 22, 2010:

Kuschevskaya is not an anomaly but a mirror to the whole situations in Russia with organized crime. The leaders in law-enforcement constantly report about the reduction of criminality, manipulate the statistical data, manipulate mass coverage of the crimes, but at the same time dwell on sheltering gangs in all regions of Russia. . . . The main question is why was the large gang of Tsapok allowed to operate for so long with impunity in Kuschevskaya? There were suspicions long ago about the cruel murder of a farmer, a girl, and hundreds of rapes. People practically live in a kind of concentration camp. And it was kept quiet; it was fear. The gang leader was a local deputy.

Bandits acted with impunity in full confidence. They robbed, beat, killed, and forced villagers into criminal organizations or activities against their will. Their criminal organization had branches in many large Cossack villages, and they also ran legal businesses.⁸ The writer Bykov analyzed this specific case by adding:

And I do not entrust that after the exit meeting of the Committee of Gosduma on safety, a new gang – a “new *Tsapok*” – will not appear in the large Cossack village of Kuschevskaya, now with the blessing of the higher management of the country.

(Bykov, 2010)

There are many other examples in Russia that show the close link between local politicians and organized crime, such as the Kozaev gang that had terrorized the city of Berezovsk in the Sverdlovsk region for several years. Another case involves the Chudinov gang in the Sverdlovsk region. The gang members forced 12- to 15-year-old minors into prostitution. One girl who refused was suffocated; dead bodies were thrown into the forest. Only accidentally, one of the inhabitants of the city of Nizhnyi Tagil found a mass grave containing 15 dead bodies. When the crime was uncovered, it became clear that for several years criminal activities of this group were protected by police.

In the Republic of Bashkortostan, criminal organizations attracted the attention of a senior official under the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), Leonid Dayanov, who created a criminal group for marketing drugs. Among the

40 members of this criminal group, six members were policemen. In the Chelyabinskaya area, a large organized crime group involved in insurance swindling (involving 32 people) was revealed, of which 11 persons were policemen. They prepared phony documents, in which they doctored facts about car accidents regarding cars that had sustained damage. The documents were given to insurance companies for receipt of payment.

Members of another well-armed criminal group were arrested in November 2010, in the Engelsky region of the Saratovsk area, on charges of murder.⁹ According to Vladimir Ovchinsky, who spoke on the radio show, *Liberty*, on November 19, 2010: “The situation with organized forms of criminality is critical. . . . If in the ’90s organized criminal groups gathered power, now they have inward authority”. The President of the Russian Federation, Medvedev (2010), spoke about criminals “joining the police bodies and organizations of power”.

In 2009, *vor v zakone* (thief in law), the highest authority in the traditional Russian criminal world, Vyacheslav Ivankiv, alias Yaponchik, was killed by a sniper. Yaponchik was considered a symbol of the rise and fall of the old-style criminal world. The actual motive for the murder remains unknown. At his funeral, the Slavic vory promised to find the person who ordered his killing and to avenge him in the same way. One year later, Aslan Usoyan, alias Ded Hasan, was shot by a sniper in the same way as Yaponchik. These events confirm that the traditional mafia wars in Russia continue, especially between traditional *vory v zakone* and a new generation of post-reform criminals (Siegel, 2012). In recent years, however, the link between criminal police groups, legal businesses, and criminal organizations became stronger than ever. As the participants in the discussion, “The State and the Mafia” (Furman, 2000, p. 7) argued:

If you start to follow all the requirements of the law, your business will actually be destroyed. . . . We must follow the laws and pay taxes, but in return nothing is guaranteed – neither health nor education. This makes the modern state such a type of mafia that works to enrich the few at the expense of all. These three concepts – the state, the law, and the mafia – at present strongly overlap.

The mafia and the state do not “intersect” only in Russia. In the 2000s, organized crime has penetrated all sectors of the economy and politics. The most influential criminal leaders control their business in Russia from abroad. The Russian mafia became transnational organized crime, and large criminal organizations send their representatives to establish new contacts and search for new clients and markets all around the world. The former Soviet Union appeared to be too small a territory for the activities of Russian criminals. They have become more and more active in various countries and manage to create fruitful alliances with other (local) criminal groups (Siegel, 2005, 2012).

Russian and Chinese organized crime

With the reforms in the 1990s, Russian criminals have shown growing involvement in organized crime activities on the global level. Drug trafficking, human trafficking, and arms trade are the international activities of organized criminal groups involving Russia and China. In the 21st century, the influx of Chinese individuals into Russia, especially in its eastern regions, has been sharply increasing. However, despite the fact that Russia, especially in the areas neighboring China, has been badly in need of labor migrants who could and would work in Russia, these migrants were considered as a threat (Ryzhova and Ioffe, 2009, p. 351). Illegal migration, accompanied by abuses and discrimination of Chinese migrants, was the result. This, however, did not stop them from crossing the borders in search for work and establishing businesses.

Along with legal Chinese businesses, nonlegal, criminal businesses started to enter Russia. The rapid accumulation of Chinese compatriots in the country is because almost all (according to operational units) are under the unofficial control of their own mafia structures. The system of relationships in criminal organizations is actually organized according to the model of Chinese “triads”, with strict subordination to shadow leaders, a vow of silence, and cruel punishment of recalcitrants (Lo and Kwok, 2013, 2014). Of the entire array of cases of operational accounting instituted by internal affairs agencies on ethnic organized crime groups in 2002, the Chinese accounted for 38% in the East Siberian region and 40.9% in the Far Eastern region.

Intensive integration of Russian and Chinese mafia structures is taking place mainly in the Far East. For example, in Ussuriysk, triads are building relationships with local leaders of the criminal world on a purely business basis. Representatives of Russian organized criminal groups help to buy up metal and send it abroad. Russians create passenger transportation companies, the services of which are used by the Chinese and which provide warehouses for storing goods, including smuggled goods. Recently, another trend has emerged; the Chinese are increasingly joining Russian organized crime groups. They participate in theft and illicit export of strategic raw and radioactive materials to China, for example in the Irkutsk region.

The main activities of Chinese criminal organizations in Russia are smuggling and drug trafficking, trafficking Russian women for the purpose of sexual exploitation, organizing illegal immigration from China to the EU through the territory of the Russian Federation, organizing an illegal financial system and laundering “dirty” money, and smuggling and exporting raw materials from Russia to China. Chinese criminal organizations often operate in conjunction with Russian criminal organizations.

Conclusion

Parallel to the OBORization process, we also witness a process of *amalgamation* – a union of criminal organizations, businesses (legal and semilegal), power

structures, and the police in Russia. Indivisible clusters of criminal power and business and police structures that control the country's regions determine the fate of the country. In a country with enormous socio-economic inequality (about 80% of the citizens are very poor), with a high level of unemployment, with total corruption in all state organizations, including law enforcement and in a country where only a small percentage of the population can obtain the existing goods and services (e.g., expensive cars, pricey restaurants, the possibility to travel abroad), organized crime is flourishing. In addition, Russia is a *consumerist society* (Bauman, 2005, 2007); the slogan "all on sale" is realized in both street crime (e.g., thefts, robberies, fraud) and white-collar crime (e.g., corruption, organized crime) (Gilinskiy and Shipunova, 2012; Hall et al., 2008).

The main problem is that it is unrealistic to expect real and successful action against organized crime in conditions of economic, financial, social, and political crisis, and instability and total corruption in all power structures (federal and regional), including the police and the courts. Under China's new OBOR initiative, the process of OBORization, sparked by the social-economic inequality of different OBOR states, will speed the development of organized crime, corruption, and trafficking through political and economic transformations. An issue of concern is whether Russia will export its amalgamation model of organized crime through OBOR and whether the power of the Russian mafia will increase further given its close connections and constant exchanges with Chinese criminals in the Far East.

Notes

- 1 As defined at the International Seminar on Organized Crime held in Suzdal, Russia, October 21–25, 1991, under the aegis of the United Nations.
- 2 The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation. Retrieved from www.mvd.ru/stats/.
- 3 Personal communication with a police officer, 1995.
- 4 Slang name for a policeman, like "bobby" or "cop".
- 5 Slang for a place for retail sales of drugs.
- 6 For example, the criminal authority Gennadiy Konyahin was the mayor of the city of Leninsk-Kuzneck; Vladimir Nikolaev [alias: "Winnie-the-Pooh"] was the mayor of the city of Vladivostok.
- 7 For example, "Uralmash", Alexandr Chabarov, and the leader of a criminal organization in Krasnodarsky region, Sergey Tsapok.
- 8 *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, November 25, 2010; *Ogonjok*, November 22, 2010.
- 9 Retrieved from <http://news.mail.ru/incident/4860592/>.

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