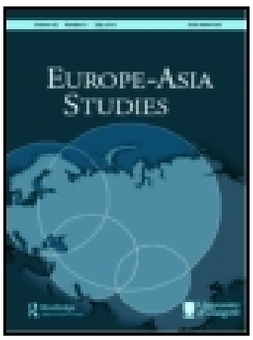

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'We Have Conversations': The Gangster as Actor and Agent in Russian Foreign Policy

MARK GALEOTTI

Abstract

Representations of the role of organised crime in Russia range from characterising it as a dominant force to presenting it as controlled by the Kremlin. This has particular bearing on attempts to identify how, when and why it can be used as an instrument for activities abroad. Based on both secondary materials and interviews with practitioners and analysts in Russia and abroad, this article presents a picture that is essentially antagonistic, transactional and asymmetrical.

IN 2015, I WAS HAVING A CONVERSATION WITH A FORMER RUSSIAN diplomat who likely had been a Foreign Intelligence Service (*Sluzhba Vneshnei Razvedki*—SVR) officer, and the discussion turned to the wider agenda of asserting and expanding Russian soft power in the Balkans, where he had served. After covering the obvious subjects of common historical experiences, religious and cultural affinities, the topic of criminal investment and involvement in the region arose. When asked if, as a representative of the state, he had ever been knowingly involved in dealings with representatives of Russian organised crime in the region, he paused. Eventually he said, 'We have conversations'. That was all he would say.[1]

Despite the easy characterisation of Russia as a 'mafia state', it is difficult to assess accurately the extent to which organised crime networks outside the country can be co-opted by Moscow as a foreign policy tool, and even less so whether it is able to have any influence on policy-making in return; in other words, whether these are really two-way conversations. Drawing on a series of interviews with practitioners in Russia as well as abroad, this article aims to gain some sense not so much as to whether organised crime

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[1]Conversation with former Russian diplomat, Moscow, April 2015.

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groups can be both agents for other actors and actors in their own right—that is generally accepted—but with what effect, and under what circumstances.

Testing this hypothesis, though, is hardly an easy task: not only does it entail considering underworld activities, which are by definition covert, it also requires addressing their motivations, an even murkier issue. In order to move beyond simply analysing existing materials, I conducted interviews mostly in 2020 with a collection of ten Russian experts and practitioners (largely serving and former law-enforcement or prosecutor personnel) and a separate array of 11 Westerners (with a similar background). The Appendix provides more specific information for the sources otherwise identified as A1–10 and B1–11. The respondents were chosen on the basis of an initial pre-existing connection, and then by soliciting further suggestions from those individuals. Given the challenges of conducting interviews in a time of coronavirus, most interviews were carried out remotely, using whichever communications platform the respondent was most comfortable using and considered the most secure. The interviews were semi-structured, starting with some standard questions that had been communicated in advance and then following lines of enquiry that arose in conversation. These engagements ranged from a single 20-minute conversation in the shortest case to an hour-and-a-half, followed by another hour in the most prolix.

Obviously, these numbers do not allow for any serious quantitative analysis of what was a mix of personal knowledge and belief. Instead, though, these interviewees provided a series of assessments based on a range of experiences and perspectives that, when taken together with open source primary and secondary accounts, were the basis for a certain level of inference, especially when consensuses emerged—as they did—between Western and Russian sources.

That said, it is also worth noting what is not being covered. The organised crime under discussion here is the traditional form, gangs involved in a range of illicit businesses with the use of deception and coercion. Although many corrupt officials operate in organised networks, they are generally not considered 'organised crime' so much as, in the classic definition, 'crime that is organised' (Schelling 1984, p. 180). Thus, issues of corruption and *reiderstvo* or 'raiding' (the abuse of the courts to seize assets illegally) (Krylova *et al*. 2021) are not addressed, especially as they are largely phenomena encountered inside rather than beyond Russia's borders. Likewise, although cybercrime is inevitably touched upon, in the main this is carried out not by traditional organised crime groups but by separate structures, often fluid in membership and activity, who are more likely to be affiliated with gangsters or occasionally hired by them than to actually be members of their gangs (Lusthaus 2013; Wall 2015). As such, while undoubtedly of considerable importance both in the Kremlin's covert overseas operations and in the wider dynamics of Russia's relations with the West, the hackers and ransomware operators follow rather different patterns and codes and deserve an article to themselves.

Criminal–state relationships

Much of the literature on crime–state relationships imagines this as either a symbiotic or competitive one. There is a plausible and well-established strand that sees organised crime, street gangs and bandits as potential states. Charles Tilly famously posited that 'war making and state making—quintessential protection rackets with the advantage of legitimacy—qualify as our largest examples of organised crime' (Tilly 1985, p. 169).

Mancur Olson (2000) drew a thought-provoking comparison between the ‘roving bandit’ who is a predator with little incentive to form connections with his prey, let alone see them prosper, and the ‘stationary bandit’ who has seized control over a region and anticipates retaining it for some time; thus, he has a reason to see it develop and comes to assume certain functions of government, including protecting his subjects from roving bandits. In both cases, criminals are effectively proto-states.

Alternatively, Diego Gambetta (1993) presented ‘mafias’ specifically as providers of non-state protection in circumstances in which the state itself was unwilling or unable to offer this basic service to its citizens. His study was of Sicily, but Varese (2001) then aptly applied it to Russia in the ‘wild 1990s’. In other contexts, Shaw and Reitano (2015), amongst others, have looked at Africa and the way political and criminal elites can cooperate to create ‘protection economies’ able to extract rents through market and territorial control. If the Tilly and Olson approach is that criminals can become states, and Gambetta’s and Varese’s that they can fill vacuums when states are weak or inefficient, and Shaw’s and Reitano’s is that they can supplement corrupt elites who lack effective control resources, what then of strong and established states with powerful coercive resources?

Here—and specifically, yet not exclusively, relevant to Russia under Vladimir Putin, when state capacity was considerably restored—four broad models tend to apply. The first is the ‘mafia state’, in which the formal state apparatus and the structures of the underworld have essentially fused (Harding 2012; Snegovaya 2015). Whether the assumption is that organised crime has become a subsidiary of the Kremlin or, conversely, that the political leadership is beholden to, or essentially made up of gangsters, the contention is that, in Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s words, ‘today, Russia is not just an authoritarian state, it is a state that has been taken over by the mafia’.[2] Drawing on Giorgio Agamben, Rigi (2012) calls this a ‘corrupt state of exception’ wherein legality has simply become a spectacle masking untrammelled, organised plunder.

It is hard to argue that endemic corruption is not present at the very apex of the Russian system. Corruption is the abuse of office for personal gain, while organised crime is, at its most basic level, planned and coordinated criminal activity by people working together on a continuing basis who are outside the formal authority structures of the state (Finckenauer 2005). Russia is, surely, a kleptocracy (Dawisha 2014). Yet while this begins to stray into the realms of semantics, if we adopt the commonly understood definitions, while a kleptocracy may involve crimes that are organised, that is not the same as ‘organised crime’. Even the ‘absence of a shared normative understandings of power and sovereignty’ (Morris 2018) speaks to a much more chaotic, fragmentary reality than a coherent ‘mafia state’.

Conversely, there are those, especially official Russian sources, who present the relationship as wholly antagonistic, of a struggle between a law-based state and illegal actors (Kolokol’tsev 2019). What individual cases or corruption and complicity there may be are essentially nothing more than examples of the fallibility of humans and institutions

[2]‘Khodorkovsky Calls Russia “Mafia” State at “Citizen K” Venice Screening’, *France 24*, 1 September 2019, available at: https://www.france24.com/en/20190901-khodorkovsky-calls-russia-mafia-state-at-citizen-k-venice-screening, accessed 15 October 2020.

on an individual basis, and no different than that experienced in any state. It is certainly true that there are many honest and determined investigators, prosecutors and judges, and a very real tally of criminals arrested and punished. Nonetheless it is difficult to argue that corruption and collusion are not also significant problems for Russia, which does mean that the struggle against serious criminality is often half-hearted or severely constrained. As a British National Crime Agency staffer put it, 'the state is committed to fighting organised crime, right up to the point where that becomes embarrassing or dangerous to anyone at the top of the system—and every police officer knows that'.[3]

Between these two polar extremes are two more nuanced positions. The first is that endemic and institutionalised corruption means that while the state as such is committed to the struggle against organised crime in principle, in practice it is vulnerable to structural complicity from top to bottom. As a result, law enforcement becomes a contested space, not simply between police and gangsters but between the imperatives of applying the laws and monetising them. In the words of a Dutch police officer, 'the trouble is that a minority of corrupt officers—and I do believe it is a minority—can make a great deal of money by undermining their own system',[4] a view strikingly echoed by a Russian counterpart: 'It sometimes feels as if the better we do our jobs, the more chances there are for someone higher up the chain of command to make money by betraying us'.[5] There is much to be said for this perspective of a system torn between professionalism and duty, on the one hand, and venality and cynicism on the other.

A final perspective, and one that has particular bearing on the question of cooperation outside Russia's borders, is that of negotiated power; that it is not only venal individuals within state structures but also the state itself that permits and uses an informal market for illicit services. This is not because of any systemic interconnectivity, nor even a philosophical commitment to undermining the law-based state. Rather, it is entirely a matter of situational pragmatism, in which 'a complex web of interdependencies emerge[s] in which actors from criminal networks and political authorities collaborat[e] using each other's resources' (Stephenson 2017, p. 411). Following Williams (1995), Cockayne (2016, p. 22) suggests that criminals' 'interest in politics is not so different from the interest of legitimate business entities' in that they lobby for outcomes to their advantage. When the state has a higher price of admission and demands certain services as the price for being able to lobby, then groups possessing a more strategic perspective may choose to comply. Certainly, there is no reason to assume the Kremlin would be fastidious about such deals. A serving Russian diplomat hinted at this when he said that officials 'from certain state organs are assessed based on whether they accomplish their targets, not how they do so'.[6] A Czech police officer was less circumspect: 'The Russians will do whatever it takes to get the job done'.[7]

[3]Interview B2, British National Crime Agency officer, London, February 2020.
[4]Interview B6, Dutch police officer, now on secondment to the European Commission, online, March 2020.
[5]Interview A1, serving police officer, Moscow, online, March 2020.
[6]Interview A8, desk officer, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, online, March 2020.
[7]Interview B10, senior Czech police officer, Prague, June 2019.

The crime–Kremlin connection

Defining the full nature of the links between the Russian state and underworld is beyond the scope of this article, which seeks instead to explore one specific aspect of this issue, important both on its own terms and also as a case study. Nonetheless, before focusing on the potential role of the underworld on Russian state operations abroad, it is still necessary to set the context, in particular, to look at the scale and breadth of connections, and how they form, survive and become mobilised.

Despite a barrage of general allegations, any actual evidence of direct relationships between gangsters and office-holders tends to be at a local, not national, level. For example, although scholars such as Dawisha (2014) have documented significant and plausible claims that, when he was deputy mayor of St Petersburg in 1994–1996, Vladimir Putin dealt with figures such as Vladimir Barsukov (also known as Kumarin), now in prison for his activities as a key figure within St Petersburg’s Tambovskaya crime network, it appears that ties were severed when Putin went to Moscow. Where there may be connections between national government or even economic leaders and organised crime, it is likely that they are managed at arm’s length, through proxies.

Instead, at a local level, while relationships are less overt than in the 1990s, when criminal figures and politicians would openly consort, there seems to be more scope for overlap between these worlds. As a retired Russian prosecutor put it, ‘you go to some small city way “out there”, and you find that the head of police’s daughter is married to the mayor’s son, and the mayor’s brother works for the biggest local thief. It’s all one big family’.[8] Certainly there is no absence of evidence of such corrupt local cabals, but—although it is difficult to prove a negative—there appears no evidence that they influence national policy on a meaningful level, except insofar as they are able to subvert Moscow’s decrees and evade its scrutiny, and in the process undermine that policy, just as happened, albeit in a different way, in Soviet times (Staats 1972; Clark 1993).

This also seems to be the pattern in business and social ties. On a national level, for example, verifiable connections appear to take place far from the top of the system, kept at arm’s length through local connections and subcontractor chains. Organised crime was certainly involved in aspects of the construction of the Sochi Winter Olympics venues; for example, forcing local property owners to sell and vacate needed land, and in ‘labour ganging’ migrant construction labour (Ghosh 2013; Shaw *et al*. 2015). The ultimate beneficiaries were figures such as the Rotenberg brothers, childhood friends of Putin, who received contracts worth US$7 billion relating to the project (US Treasury 2014). However, despite extensive investigations by Russian anti-corruption activists, journalists and Western agencies alike, no direct connection between the two has been demonstrated. Rather, in the words of a Europol officer who had investigated the issue directly, ‘Everyone knows what is going on, but it happens somewhere far down the chain of command’.[9]

That said, there is an inglorious tradition of criminals being used as agents by the security and intelligence services. The tsarist Okhrana employed them as informants and agents

[8]Interview A9, retired department head, Prosecutor’s Office, online, April 2020.
[9]Interview B4, Europol officer, European Serious Organised Crime Centre, online, March 2020.

provocateurs, just as the Bolsheviks allied with them to raise funds (Zuckerman 1996). The Soviet security agencies employed black market *fartsovshchiki* (black market spivs) and moneychangers to spy on foreign visitors.[10] As will be discussed below, connections between the intelligence and security communities today are also extensive and evident, and they are driven largely by mutual benefit. For instance, a retired Russian police officer recounted a case from the mid-2000s in which a fraudster also involved in money laundering had to be released because the 'organs' (*organy*)—the usual euphemism for the security agencies—had him listed as a confidential informant. This police officer added that he 'still didn't know if it was because he was paying someone off, or genuinely providing information'.[11]

The upshot is that organised crime may have considerable influence at a local level, but strikingly little at the national. To call key politicians, oligarchs and the like 'mafiosi', as still happens, is to misuse the term and misunderstand the processes. Instead, the key point is that there is a social contract in place and has been since 2000: gangsters have no blanket immunity from law enforcement (although they often buy themselves protection from police and other state structures) but not considered enemies of the state—a much more dangerous position—so long as they do not appear to be challenging the established power structures.

Conversations

It is hardly the case that criminals have not been used as assets by various states before (Cockayne 2016). However, Russia does seem to have a particular affinity for this tactic, in part because, since 2014, Putin has in effect created a mobilisation state, wherein any individual or entity, legal or not, can be required to act in the interests of the state, and in part because this is very much an 'adhocracy' where institutions and formal positions matter much less than the ways in which one can be useful to the state (Galeotti 2019). The result is a blurring of boundaries between state and non-state, legal and illegal. A quintessential example is Viktor Bout, whose career spanned the worlds of legitimate arms dealing, illegal arms trafficking and intelligence work (Farah & Braun 2008).

However, with the successful use of criminals as proxies in Crimea and Donbas, and the associated need—as the Kremlin sees it—to mobilise any and all national assets in a struggle to preserve Russia's place in the world and its distinctive political and cultural forms, the temptation to make use of organised crime appears all the greater. The case seems to be that there is a relationship between the Russian state and organised crime, evident in its activities below, but that these are essentially pragmatic (rather than ideological), individual (rather than routine) and initiated by the government.

This requires, in whatever form, the 'conversations' alluded to at the start of this article. The irony is that there is no particular mystery as to whether they take place, as the Russian press is full of accounts of police officers or other agents of the state sitting down with

[10]'"Za takie progovory smikh sudei sudit' nado!"—kak v SSSR menyali zakon radi rasstrela prestupnikov', *Pravo*, 1 April 2016, available at: https://pravo.ru/process/view/127498/, accessed 11 June 2020.

[11]Interview A5, retired senior police officer, online, March 2020.

criminals, in detention or not, to define the bounds of acceptable practice. In some ways, this is an evolution of the ‘prophylactic conversations’ (*profilakticheskie besedy*) used in particular by the KGB in the 1970s, namely, interventions to try and redirect actual or potential dissidents by warning them that they were being watched and encouraging them in alternative directions (Smylakin 2011).

This is, though, not always a response to an immediate situation. Following Putin’s ascent to the presidency in 2000, after an election campaign that had featured tough rule-of-law rhetoric, he actually offered the underworld a social contract that could be defined as a proscriptive rather than prescriptive process, in that the Kremlin made it clear—largely through meetings between police and security officers and criminals (Galeotti 2018b)—what was not permissible, not least open and indiscriminate violence on the streets and anything else that posed a challenge to the state. Particular examples include the Second Chechen War (1999–2009), when Moscow was able to deter Chechen gangsters from supporting their rebel compatriots back home, as well as the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics and 2018 FIFA World Cup, when criminals were warned off targeted foreign guests. For example, Guram Chikhladze, widely seen as controlling much of the organised pickpocketing in Moscow, was detained before the World Cup and warned that it was time he and his gang took a ‘holiday’ (Vershov 2018).

Retired Russian police officer A4 recalled being involved in a *skhodka*—an underworld meeting, a ‘sit down’ in mafia parlance—where he was actually required to mediate a dispute between gangs, with the threat that whoever refused to accept his ruling would be arrested, in order to prevent an armed conflict.[12] If the goal is stability more than strict legality, then this also helps explain why so many well-known criminal leaders are often able to avoid prosecution for so long. Removing them does not eliminate their criminal structures. Instead, it typically precipitates struggles for succession that can often be violent and bring with them greater risk of opportunistic turf wars as rivals seek to seize territories, markets and assets. For example, the death of Aslan ‘Ded Khasan’ Usoyan in 2013, came close to triggering a nationwide criminal struggle (Zheglov 2013). Thus, stability is best attained by permitting existing leaders a degree of impunity, so long as they ensure that their organisations follow the ‘rules of the game’ established by the Kremlin.

As and when necessary, this implicit social contract is regularly reinforced by the demonstrative arrests of figures deemed to be in breach of it or otherwise problematic. Barsukov was arrested and prosecuted in 2007, for example, when his status and high profile began to be embarrassing for the local administration and for the presidency (Frolova & Nadezhdin 2019). Said ‘Roosevelt’ Amirov, the infamous mayor of Makhachkala, was arrested in 2013 after he had engineered the murder of an Investigations Committee officer (Sergeev 2015). Tariel ‘Taro’ Oniani was arrested after the murder of his rival ‘Ded Khasan’ to damp down a potential mob war (he was later deported to Spain) (Sharapov 2019). In each case, the arrest was a deliberate exercise in overkill—to arrest Barsukov, for example, some 200 elite police

[12]Interview A4, retired police officer and former deputy head of a regional anti-organised crime unit, online, March 2020.

commandos were deployed and he was airlifted straight to Moscow—precisely to maximise the demonstrative effect.

A global phenomenon

After all, Russian and Russia-based organised crime would appear to be a tempting foreign policy instrument for the Kremlin for several reasons. First of all, it is widespread. Like Italian and Chinese organised crime, Russian crime has moved with diasporas, and not only that of Russian and other Slav populations but also Chechen, Georgian and even Armenian, communities that are strongly represented in Russian-based crime networks (Galeotti 2018b). Criminals represent only a tiny fraction of the diaspora community but have nonetheless been encountered widely, from New York to the Spanish Costa del Sol, from Israel to Germany (Finckenauer & Waring 1998; Varese 2011).

Beyond that, functional 'outposts' have emerged along key trafficking routes, largely to manage and maintain them. Examples include Helsinki and the Finnish–Russian border, Stockholm and the Balkans. In Berlin, for example, Russian-based gangs are—occasional media hype notwithstanding—a small minority of the city's underworld but considering the city's role as a continental hub for both drug and people smuggling, these representatives are disproportionately active, powerful and well-connected. In addition, Berlin has a substantial Chechen criminal presence, which operates alongside the Russians, sometimes in collaboration, sometimes wholly separately, sometimes in competition. A German security officer, for example, alluded to the difficulty in knowing whether 'today the Chechens were the Russians' enemies or their partners'.[13]

This reflected the way that Russian-based gangs internationalised with unprecedented vigour in the 1990s (Galeotti 2018b). In part, this was about the opportunities to be found overseas, in part concern about what might happen back in Russia, making it imperative to acquire contacts, businesses and assets abroad, just in case. Interest on overseas expansion was maximised by the active overtures of foreign criminal groups seeing opportunities of their own in Russia, especially Italian and Chinese gangs in the west and the east of the country, respectively, and later Latin American ones, too. An Italian police officer noted ruefully that his countrymen 'gave the Russians their first contacts in the bigger criminal world, as soon as the Soviet Union broke up'.[14]

Attempts at foreign 'conquest' in the 1990s, especially in Central Europe, all failed: this kind of 'mafia migration', as a deliberate and viable model, is simply not viable (Varese 2011). This unsuccessful empire-building model was succeeded by the new model, that of the 'merchant adventurer' who established relationships with criminals abroad not through coercion and threat but by the offer of goods and services. In many ways, this evolution mirrored the succession within Russia of criminal leadership, from the old-school tattooed '*vory v zakone*' ('thieves in law') to a new generation of *avtoritety* (authorities), hybrid gangster-businessmen with little concern about the old traditions and cultural norms. A few gangs, especially those of Georgian and North Caucasus origin,

[13]Interview B7, retired German veteran of state security structures, online, July 2020.
[14]Interview B8, Italian carabiniere, online, March 2020.

continue to operate at street level, such as the Moscow-connected Georgian Kutaisi 'clan', which was targeted in 2013 by coordinated arrests in Italy, the Czech Republic, France, Hungary, Lithuania and Portugal.[15] Such groups are very much a minority today, though. Instead, Russian-based criminal networks became partners, clients and/or suppliers of local organised crime, especially in providing criminal goods and services in high demand, such as Afghan heroin, Russian methamphetamines, cybercriminal expertise, trafficked women and money laundering.

As a result, even where they are not visible on the streets, they may well have extensive presence and contacts. The Russian gang that was broken in the Portuguese 'Operation Matrioskas', for example, invested dirty money into struggling European football clubs to launder proceeds from crimes at home and to run and rig illegal betting operations in Portugal, Austria, Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Moldova and the United Kingdom.[16] In the process, it established partnerships with local gangs in most of these countries.

Some of these groups have effectively divorced themselves from Russia. For example, of the ethnically Russian gangster-expats in Spain, some, such as the representatives of the Moscow-based Taganskaya group, targeted in Mallorca in 2013 in 'Operation Dirieba' (Bohórquez 2016), are still closely tied to their home networks. Others, though, have essentially migrated, moving their families and assets out of their homeland (Hirschman 2010; Rotella 2017).

The groups particularly prone to being instrumentalised by Russia are, obviously, the former, who still have strong personal and professional connections back home. Often, these expat-gangsters are essentially local *filialy* (branches) or simply elements of supply chains that stretch to and through their homeland. As a result, they are vulnerable to pressure, or simply—something visible in 'upperworld' business, too—proactively seek to please the regime to avoid pressure or acquire political capital. Some of these groups may well not even be ethnically Russian and are simply dependent on business there; thus, they are equally susceptible to being co-opted or coerced. As a Western counter-intelligence officer put it to me, in a conversation in 2016, 'so long as [the criminal's] balls were in Moscow, the Russians could always squeeze'.[17]

Criminals as agents

When co-opted or coerced, what can gangsters do for the Russian state? According to a British law-enforcement officer with direct experience of investigations into such operations, 'sometimes low-end grunt work, sometimes specialist skills'.[18] Above all, they appear to be pressed into service as additional, sometimes arm's-length auxiliaries to

[15]'Hard Blow Against Russian-Speaking Mafia', *Europol*, 19 June 2013, available at: https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/hard-blow-against-russian-speaking-mafia, accessed 11 June 2020.

[16]'Police Dismantle Russian Money Laundering Ring Operating in the Football Sector', *Europol*, 4 May 2016, available at: https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/police-dismantle-russian-money-laundering-ring-operating-in-football-sector, accessed 11 June 2020.

[17]Conversation, London, October 2016.

[18]Interview B1, British National Crime Agency officer, London, January 2020.

the intelligence services as they conduct espionage and more direct 'active measures' operations abroad, primarily so far in Europe.

The first category of 'active measures' includes assassination and intimidation. Operations that have been conclusively or plausibly attributed to Russia-based criminals working on behalf of the Russian state include the 2019 murder of erstwhile Chechen fighter Zelimkhan Khangoshvili in Berlin, whose alleged killer was convincingly shown to be a convicted gangland killer with recent links to the Federal Security Service (*federal'naya sluzbha bezopasnosti*—FSB), and the killing of alleged Chechen terrorists in Istanbul in 2014, which the Turkish security service blamed on criminals from Moscow, again hired by the FSB (Shishani 2016).[19]

The second category is hacking. Although the most serious Russian state hacking operations are handled by its own operatives, criminal hackers have been induced to provide 'surge capacity' for mass and brute force attacks such as those launched against Estonia in 2007, Georgia in 2008, and Ukraine in and since 2014 (Borogan & Soldatov 2012; Lokot 2017). Indeed, known hackers have been recruited into the FSB (Rozhdestvensky *et al*. 2017).

Third, influence operations abroad require at least some level of funding, and this can often be a point of vulnerability, if foreign political actors are connected with 'Kremlin gold'. To this end, intelligences agencies 'tax' the gangsters for so-called *chernaya kassa*, 'black account' operational funds with no apparent connection to the Russian state. This is done either simply by coercion, or else in return for lenience. For example, the cigarette smuggling ring under investigation by Estonian Security Police officer Eston Kohver when he was kidnapped by an FSB snatch squad in 2014 (Roonemaa 2017) was being 'taxed' in this way, while a Russian gang operating out of Turin was, according to source B8, 'expected to put 10% of its profits into an *obshchak* [common fund] that was being managed by someone connected with the SVR, for what seemed to be political uses, either in Italy or elsewhere'.[20]

Fourth, criminals are often by definition experts at crossing borders unhindered or undetected. From time to time, such border penetration skills appear useful for the intelligence services. In 2010, for example, the deep-cover SVR agent known as Christopher Metsos disappeared in Cyprus as the US authorities sought to secure his extradition. A consensus amongst respondents who expressed a view on this (A8, B4, B5) was that he was smuggled off the island by people traffickers to Greece, where the SVR took over the rest of his exfiltration home.

A fifth 'service' offered by criminals is that of corruption and influence, although when criminal money is being invested to buy strategic interests or even influence, it is extremely difficult to know whether this is for their own interests or to any degree prompted by the potential value of such positions to state actors. While Western media and security services raised many examples, from property near military bases in Finland (Ellehuus 2020) to investment in potentially important business sectors—in 2014, it emerged that

[19]'Identifying the Berlin Bicycle Assassin: Russia's Murder Franchise (Part 2)', *Bellingcat*, 6 December 2019, available at: https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2019/12/06/identifying-the-berlin-bicycle-assassin-russias-murder-franchise-part-2/, accessed 7 December 2019.

[20]Interview B8, Italian carabiniere, online, March 2020.

internationally wanted criminal Semen Mogilevich owned 30% of Sweden’s Misen Energy AB through a front company (Stack 2014)—no consensus has emerged how far, if at all, this should be added to the list. Nonetheless, both the German security service veteran (B7) and the European investigative magistrate (B11) interviewed raised this independently as an area of concern.

Finally, criminals have been pressed into service in low-level, low-value surveillance missions in the Nordic and Baltic states and in Germany. In Estonia, for example, cross-border smugglers, typically trafficking untaxed cigarettes, have been identified by the authorities as a key source of minor Russian intelligence assets, pressed into service either in return for free passage across the border or in return for not being prosecuted (Jurvee & Perling 2019).

What is striking is that, in most of these cases, these are essentially tactical missions carried out either where conventional intelligence assets are overstretched or, sometimes, where the criminals have particular capabilities. They never seem, with the possible exception of less-critical assassinations—the Litvinenko and Skripal operations, it is worth noting, were high priority, and thus appear to have been handled ‘in-house’ by intelligence officers (Owen 2016; Pierce 2018)—to be the first choice. In the words of the British Home Office staffer, ‘the Russian IC [Intelligence Community] doesn’t use them if it has a choice’.[21] After all, extra capacity and perhaps some deniability are bought at the cost of a degree of professionalism and security. The security services do not trust criminals; regular diplomats do not want anything to do with them; criminals do not care about either of them.

Blowback: criminals as actors

Conversely, is there evidence of the criminals being able to bend policy to their will, as one would expect from a ‘mafia state’? The Kremlin’s efforts to prevent the spread of Magnitsky laws and an unwillingness to cooperate more fully in international law enforcement could be considered such, although this is likely more connected with the interests of rich and powerful Russian businesspeople and a general anger at what are often framed as ‘Russophobic’ laws.[22] Certainly, a European magistrate, who had a fairly jaundiced perspective of the Kremlin in general, affirmed, ‘of course the big crooks aren’t going to help us catch the small crooks—honour amongst thieves!’[23] However, rather than an attempt to protect gangsters, this is really more likely both to shield oligarchs and political figures within the elite and, at least as much, a furious response to what is genuinely seen as a prejudicial, Russophobic piece of legislation. Italian magistrate B9 reflected on the problems he encountered when politicians on both sides became ‘excited’ and how this slowed down what otherwise could be sometimes perfectly cordial and effective cooperation with his Russian counterparts at the Prosecutor General’s Office.[24]

[21]Interview B3, British Home Office staffer, London, January 2020.

[22]‘Oglasili chast’ spiska’, *Interfax*, 12 April 2013, available at: https://www.interfax-russia.ru/view/oglasili-chast-spiska, accessed 15 August 2021.

[23]Interview B11, European investigating magistrate, online, March 2020.

[24]Interview B9, retired Italian magistrate, online, April 2020.

Likewise, most problems experienced by Western agencies in law-enforcement cooperation with Moscow are unlikely to be the result of deliberate Russian attempts to protect Russian criminals in general. First of all, Western countries share at least some of the blame for these problems, as both Russian and Western respondents agreed that they have increasingly become less willing to share relevant intelligence with their Russian counterparts. Secondly, this actually gives the Russian state less traction than it otherwise might have: before 2014, it is clear that while there was genuine intelligence-sharing, it could be selective, allowing the Kremlin to learn of Western investigations and to choose when to protect criminals. Now, it has largely lost this option. Finally, it is clear that there is still a degree of cooperation, as demonstrated by the high levels of Finnish–Russian collaboration or the extradition of Oniani to Spain in October 2019 (Barshev 2019). Indeed, a St Petersburg-based police officer was very positive about cooperation with the Nordic countries overall, which might reflect shared practical interests or those nations' own desire to maintain such links, while there was a general agreement amongst interviewees that requests for information through mutual legal assistance treaties could be effective.[25]

Rather, corruption and, occasionally, the scope to do favours for Moscow have allowed organised crime networks to often operate in ways that actually may challenge or undermine the interests of the Russian state. The continued existence of industrial-scale money laundries facilitate the illegal capital flight that Putin has denounced and tried to reverse, for example (Trickett 2018). Furthermore, their presence contributes precisely to a hostile and problematic narrative about Russia as not just a corrupt state but a corrupting one, which is a challenge not just for the state but for Russian business and other interests.

There is also evidence of the degree to which interaction with criminals has deepened an already-serious propensity towards corruption in the foreign-facing elements of the state. This is a story as old as Vanka Kain, the eighteenth-century bandit who became an informant and ended up corrupting his handlers (Akelev 2018). There is always the risk that the handled becomes the handler, or at the very least that his way of life and the methods he uses to achieve his ends become too great a temptation for civil servants.

Generally, of course, this is evident at the relatively low level. Russian military intelligence asset Sub-Lieutenant Jeffrey Delisle, while plundering Canadian and allied intelligence databases from the HMCS Trinity fusion centre, was also being required to find out what the Royal Canadian Mounted Police knew about Russian gangsters operating there, presumably so that someone in his reporting hierarchy could sell on that useful information (Stewart 2013). Likewise, one could point to the plot uncovered in Argentina in which members of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' diplomatic courier service were involved in smuggling shipments of cocaine to Europe (Weiss 2020). As A9 put it, 'the more operative personnel [*operativniki*] are exposed to crime and corruption, especially if they are not specially trained and conditioned, the more they risk being themselves corrupted by it'.[26]

[25]Interview A2, serving police officer, St Petersburg, online, March 2019.
[26]Interview A9, retired department head, Prosecutor's Office, online, April 2020.

Conclusion: a tactical threat and a strategic symptom

Boris Yel’tsin may once have (in)famously declared that Russia was becoming a ‘superpower of crime’,[27] but do criminality and superpower go together? Undoubtedly, the mobilisation of criminals does represent an increasingly visible tactical asset for Russia. It allows it to surge its capacity quickly, operate covertly in ways and at scales its intelligence agencies otherwise could not, and mobilise additional forms of ‘dark power’ (Galeotti 2018a) through corruption, suasion and local underworld alliances.

However, this is a relatively minor aspect of Russian overt and covert operations abroad, arguably less significant than its use of mercenary companies such as the Wagner Group (Reynolds 2019), and certainly vastly less so than strategic economic champions such as Gazprom, Rosneft and VTB (Svoboda 2019). Furthermore, while the often-embattled and embittered diplomatic corps may not feel it, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Ministerstvo Inostrannykh Del’*—MID) still outguns the mafia when it comes to foreign relations. Interestingly, while a serving Russian diplomat said, ‘we are now powerless, at the bottom of the heap’,[28] the rather patrician A7—who had been downbeat in much of our conversation—nonetheless said, ‘although [Foreign Minister Sergei] Lavrov is no longer much heard, we are still the country’s crucial interlocutor with the rest of the world; we may not choose the music, but we still decide how to play it’.[29]

Nor should we assume that the Kremlin’s calculations are that much influenced by organised criminal interests, especially when compared with those of sometimes-shadowy corporate structures such as Rosneft with its desire to protect its position in Venezuela, for example (Khachaturov 2020), or Evgeny Prigozhin, the founder of the mercenary group Wagner, and the political technologists (defined by Wilson (2011) as the practitioners of the ‘industry of political manipulation’) and security officers he is deploying to Africa (Weiss & Vaux 2020), or nationalist-Orthodox businessman Konstantin Malofeev, who was sanctioned in the West for his direct support for the intervention in Donbas prior to the February 2022 invasion (Laruelle 2019, pp. 203–4). In short, again to quote A7, ‘it is not that criminals play no role in Russian non-diplomatic activities abroad, but there is a very specialised, very minor, very operational role’.[30] Former German security officer B7 concurred: ‘Moscow uses the criminals, but as disposable assets’.[31]

In fact, the Kremlin only very rarely seems to be at all interested in seeking to protect gangsters and their interests. Occasionally, this is done as part of a general and essentially symbolic pushback against perceived Western ‘Russophobic’ narratives. Otherwise, in the few specific cases where it actively spends diplomatic capital to defend criminals, it is more likely to be shielding intelligence assets or missions. The Russian government was

[27]‘Yeltsin: Russia a “Superpower of Crime”’, *Associated Press*, 7 June 1994.
[28]Interview A8, desk officer, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, online, March 2020.
[29]Interview A7, retired diplomat, Moscow, June 2019.
[30]Interview A7, retired diplomat, Moscow, June 2019.
[31]Interview B7, retired German veteran of state security structures, online, July 2020.

extremely active in trying to prevent the extradition from Thailand to the United States of arms dealer Viktor Bout, for example.[32] However, Bout is widely considered to have been an intelligence asset of considerable value rather than just another arms dealer (Schmidle 2014). Likewise, for four years Moscow fought to keep alleged cybercriminal Aleksei Burkov from being extradited by Israel to the United States; it has been suggested this could be because he was 'some kind of cybercrime fixer or virtual bad guy Rolodex for the Russian government' (Krebs 2019). In other words, this would simply be the usual intelligence agency practice of safeguarding assets and securing whatever information they may have, regardless of their cover identity.

Of course, the insights provided by the specific interlocutors who contributed to this study can only present a limited picture of an inevitably complex and largely covert situation. Nonetheless, an interconnection between underworld and 'upperworld', characterised by antagonism in principle but a willingness to reach agreements when mutually beneficial, is a long-standing feature of Russian politics and society, one that, in fact, predates the Soviet collapse. Thus, the growing use of organised crime as an instrument by the Russian state in recent years reflects not a substantive change in practice so much as an increase in scale and intensity and a greater ambition as to how these instruments can be used. As such, it is best seen as the product of three interconnected trends, which can only be sketched out here, yet have characterised the general drift towards confrontation and a willingness to challenge international norms that predates but has certainly become more marked since 2014 and the annexation of Crimea and intervention in Donbas.

The first trend is that, despite growing tensions with the West, Moscow is keenly aware of Russia's relative weakness and thus the need to embrace asymmetric methods that play to its strengths and the weaknesses of its antagonists. The capacity of the Russian authorities to bring pressure to bear on certain Russian-based criminal organisations operating in the West and the capacity of these organisations to conduct activities supportive of Moscow's agenda represents an asset it appears to feel it cannot ignore.

The second, interrelated, trend is an increased willingness by Moscow to use methods seen (including by its own diplomats) as breaking international norms, because of a wartime mentality driven by a sense that it is locked in an existential political struggle. In the words of former presidential administration staffer A6, 'these are not normal times, to the men in power. This is war'.[33]

Third is the consequent adoption of a 'mobilisation state' approach in which all 'loyal' Russian individuals and organisations must accept the duty of, from time to time, being called on to serve their country's needs. This is not totalitarianism and is perhaps best characterised as selective and temporary conscription. In this respect, the criminals are no different from the bank VEB being required to provide a berth in its New York office for

[32]'Prigovorennyi k 25 godam tyur'my v SShA Viktor But: vragy ne stdaetsya nash gordyi "varyag"!', *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, 6 April 2012, available at: https://www.kp.ru/daily/25864/2830338/, accessed 14 July 2016.

[33]Interview A6, former staffer, Presidential Administration, Moscow, February 2020.

an SVR officer (Department of Justice 2016) or coal companies forced to ‘launder’ coal illegally imported from Donbas, even at the cost of their own profits.[34]

Those ‘conversations’, then, between the representatives of upperworld power and their underworld counterparts, are distinctly asymmetric. The former do not care about or trust the latter; the latter will do the minimum necessary to placate the former, while seeing how they can turn the situation to their advantage. However, so long as criminals depend on the tolerance of the state, and so long as the state is desperate to maximise its capacity to conduct active measures, the conversations will presumably continue.

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Appendix. Interview respondents

This is a complete, indicative list of the respondents. In some cases, respondents requested more confidentiality than others or the use of particular identifiers, as indicated by the use of quotation marks.

Group A: Russian

A1: Serving police officer, Moscow, online, March 2020.
A2: Serving police officer, formerly working organised crime cases, St Petersburg, online, March 2019.
A3: Retired judge, Moscow, online, April 2020.
A4: Retired police officer and former deputy head of a regional anti-organised crime unit, online, March 2020.
A5: Retired senior police officer, online, March 2020.
A6: Former staffer, Presidential Administration, 'duties relating to international affairs', Moscow, February 2020.
A7: Retired diplomat, Moscow, June 2019.
A8: Ministry of Foreign Affairs desk officer 'personally involved in one major transnational crime issue', online, March 2020.
A9: Retired department head, Prosecutor's Office, online, April 2020.
A10: Researcher, Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) Academy, Moscow, March 2019.

Group B: Western

B1: British National Crime Agency officer, London, January 2020.
B2: British National Crime Agency officer, London, February 2020.
B3: British Home Office staffer, London, January 2020.
B4: Europol officer, European Serious Organised Crime Centre, online, March 2020.
B5: 'Retired FBI Special Agent with personal experience working Eurasian organised crime cases', online, March 2019.
B6: Dutch police officer, now on secondment to the European Commission, online, March 2020.
B7: Retired German veteran of state security structures, online, July 2020.
B8: Italian carabiniere 'with experience running an investigation of Russian mafia activities', online, March 2020.
B9: Retired Italian magistrate, online, April 2020.
B10: Senior Czech police officer, Prague, June 2019.
B11: 'European investigating magistrate involved in major Russia-related investigations', online, March 2020.