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Under Their Roof: The Normalization of Organized Crime in Post-Soviet Russia

1. Introduction

Over the course of the Soviet Union’s existence, the government’s inability to provide for its citizens forced them to obtain necessary goods through non-official means. The shortages of products necessary for everyday life created opportunities for speculators to profit from the scarcity of these basic items. An illegal, secondary “shadow” economy gradually emerged in which individuals provided goods and services that the Soviet state could not. This shadow economy flourished during the economic decline of the late Soviet era, allowing criminals to join together and form organized crime groups informally known as the “Russian mafia.”

By the 1980s, the failing economy of the Soviet Union was in dire need of reform. General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev introduced a series of reforms meant to transition the country to a market-type economy. New laws designed to encourage the growth of new privately-owned businesses created economic instability and resulted in “perpetual shortages of goods, justification for hoarding, stealing, cheating, bribing, and a general lack of legal recourse in the face of commercial disputes.”¹ The rapid enactment of these often contradictory new laws created confusion for Soviet legal institutions. The state’s judicial system could not effectively enforce the new business laws, and the state’s banks were failing. In the face of economic and legal disarray, organized crime groups began to offer their protection to both legal and illegal entities. The mafia fulfilled multiple roles that the failing government could not. As the instability worsened during the collapse of the Soviet Union and the full transition to a market economy in the newly-established Russian Federation, ordinary citizens increasingly depended

¹ Serio, 137.
on the services provided by the mafia for their everyday needs. As a result, organized crime soon became normalized in Russian society.

Journalists and scholars have discussed the phenomenon of organized crime in Russia from a variety of perspectives. Criminologists in the West have traditionally sought to explain the structure and functioning of organized crime groups through the use of various models. Federico Varese’s landmark study *The Russian Mafia: Protection in a New Market Economy* was among the first to analyze the mafia’s rise to power in Russian society. Following the example of similar studies of the Sicilian mafia, Varese applies the “enterprise model” of organized crime to the Russian context. First articulated by Dwight C. Smith, the enterprise model conceptualizes organized crime groups as enterprises led by rational entrepreneurs who care about the profits and continuity of their business.² In contrast, Russian criminologists’ studies of domestic organized crime, such as those by S. D. Belotserkovskii, G. K. Vardaniants and D. V. Bondar’, have tended to focus on developing legal and social policy methods to curb the growth of organized crime groups. Despite the considerable amount of literature on Russian mafia, however, journalists and scholars have neglected to fully explore the consequences of its normalization in society. Varese’s application of the enterprise model explains the mafia’s actions in Russia with the assumption that legal and illegal businesses function in similar ways. The enterprise model fails to explain the general acceptance of organized crime as a fact of life in Russia among even politicians and law enforcement. Few works take into account the key role that this normalization of organized crime plays in determining its continued presence in society. This paper argues that it is the normalization of the Russian mafia during the early post-Soviet

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² Smith, 335.
period that has allowed it to continue its activities to the present day, causing Russia to be seen
as a corrupt country ruled by crime.

2. Normalization of the Mafia’s Control

The Soviet state under Stalin’s leadership was characterized by a heavily regulated central government with a planned economy. Soviet citizens were accustomed to lacking basic consumer goods, including clothing and food. The scarcity of these items only became more severe during World War II and its aftermath. During the Red Army’s wartime occupation of the Baltic states, Finland, Poland, and Ukraine, Soviet soldiers marveled at the relative material prosperity of these capitalist societies and rushed to buy consumer goods that were unavailable in the Soviet Union. The soldiers sent their newly-acquired foreign merchandise to their families back home, and soon the black market was inundated with cheap bicycles, wristwatches, boots, and basic food items such as eggs and butter. This “illegal informal market” gradually developed into a shadow economy that “provided the goods and services that the state sector considered unimportant and did not produce in sufficient quantities.” The shadow economy continued to thrive into the late Soviet period, when the state economy gradually steeped into a decline. The government implemented subsidies to maintain strict control over the prices of consumer goods, creating a significant budget deficit and inadvertently encouraging the growth of the shadow economy.

Upon his appointment as General Secretary in 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev introduced his policy of perestroika (restructuring), a comprehensive plan for reforming the troubled Soviet economic system. In May 1987, Gorbachev “legalized private trade, and private businesses and

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3 Johnston, 35–36.
5 Goldman, 171.
6 Blasi, Kroumova, and Kruse, 18.
Although this initiative was intended to relax controls and move the country towards a market economy, the abrupt transition created confusion between the different sectors of government. Indeed, during this transition, law enforcement was unable to adequately maintain control. Gorbachev had previously banned all private trade in 1986, and the police were thus accustomed to arresting buyers and sellers on the street. In the wake of Gorbachev’s legalization of private trade, however, it was difficult for law enforcement to determine whether an individual’s private business was legitimate, especially considering that businesses previously working underground were now able to operate legally.

Gorbachev’s efforts to reform the Soviet system instead contributed to its collapse. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the government of the newly-formed Russian Federation quickly moved to expand free trade and fully transition the country to a market economy. However, as Mark Galeotti notes, this had a significant impact on the rise of organized crime:

The new Russia was born bankrupt and in crisis, overshadowed by the fear of a Communist resurgence, which helps explain the heedless privatisation campaigns which transferred so many public assets into the hands of the corrupt and the criminal—it seemed more important to transfer resources from the State’s hands than ask too many questions about their new owners. Organised crime was able to capitalise on the new opportunities and, freed from the fear of the State or the need to pander to Party bosses who put a premium on the semblance of public order, could do so openly.

The state’s rapid privatization policies directly helped organized crime groups assume positions of power in Russian society. State and local governments were complicit in dealing with organized crime as they attempted to stabilize the economy. In 1992, Gavriil Popov, then mayor

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7 Goldman, 172.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
of Moscow, stated this explicitly: “The situation in the country is so critical that the more people do business, the better. Therefore I accept all entrepreneurs, be they mafiosi or former party members.” ¹¹ This provided an opportunity for the mafia to assume control of the fragile structures that were in place. The extent of the mafia’s expansion into Russian society was widely reported on during this period. A 1991 police investigation claimed that “organized crime controlled banks, stock exchanges, hotels, and commercial enterprises in most Russian cities.” ¹² Similarly, the front page of the newspaper Izvestiia on January 26, 1994, reported that the “Russian Mafia controlled 70 to 80 percent of all private business and banking.” ¹³ The mafia engaged not only in normal criminal behavior, such as drug and weapons trafficking, but in legal business practices as well. Many Russians did not feel immediately threatened by organized crime. Entrepreneurs, for example, preferred working with the mafia to navigating the official bureaucratic channels: “the Mafia usually took only between 10 and 20 percent off the top of profits,” making cooperation a more cost-effective option for doing business.¹⁴ The mafia’s intervention in business actually served as protection from widespread state corruption and extortion, such that by the late 1990s, many businessmen reported that “the combination of bribes and official tax rates, if paid, would approach 100 percent of profits and sometimes more.” ¹⁵

The mafia soon became an integral component of the normal functioning of the business sector in Russian society. Taking advantage of the economic and legal instability of post-Soviet

¹¹ La situación en el país es tan crítica que cuantos más negocios haga la gente mejor será. Así que acepto a todos los empresarios, ya sean mafiosos o antiguos miembros del partido. Popov, 62. This and all subsequent translations are provided by the author.

¹² Blasi, Kroumova, and Kruse, 115.

¹³ “Rossiiskaia mafiia sobiraiet dos’e na krupnykh chinovnikov i politikov,” 1, quoted in Goldman, 169.

¹⁴ Goldman, 21.

¹⁵ Ibid.
Russia, the mafia paved the way for normalizing its presence and acquired the means to deter any efforts to remove it from its position of power. By the end of the decade, it was possible to claim that organized crime groups could “collect debts, settle business disputes, at times help businessmen obtain special credits, and have even shown the ability to restrain their demands and take into consideration the ups and downs of the economy.”  

The normalization of the presence of the mafia in various sectors of everyday life posed serious problems for law enforcement. Organized crime groups contributed to local community infrastructures, funding “the construction of hospitals and schools as a form of insurance against collaboration of community members with law enforcement.”  Similarly, “many organized crime figures in Russia sponsor[ed] sporting events and [were] associated with philanthropic groups,” whereas the banks under mafia control “contribute[d] to educational and other community projects on a regular basis.”  Just as entrepreneurs preferred cooperating with the mafia to working within legal structures, everyday citizens considered the social safety net provided by the mafia a better alternative to the unreliable services offered by the state. The government and state law enforcement were soon forced to acknowledge their inability to limit the pervasive presence of the mafia in everyday life. President Boris Yeltsin faced public resistance when he announced a series of measures designed to make it easier to target and arrest suspected mafia members in 1994. Rather than prosecute mafia members against the wishes of an uncooperative public, the state authorities decided it would be more convenient to simply accept the continuing presence of organized crime. In 1995, rather than combat the mafia,

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16 Varese, The Russian Mafia, 189.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
Moscow mayor Iurii Luzhkov chose to tax the mafiosi in order to fund the construction of public works.\textsuperscript{19}

The mafia became normalized in Russian society not only by providing social services to the public, however. Organized crime groups furthered their interests through the use of violence. Vardaniants and Bondar' emphasize the role of physical violence in their study of Russian organized crime:

In the broadest sense, organized crime is usually regarded as a form of illegal business and therefore it is defined as a form of economic enterprise carried out using illicit means associated with the threat of using physical force or its application, extortion, corruption, blackmail and other methods, as well as the use of illegally produced goods and services.\textsuperscript{20}

The mafia maintained its influence by setting “limits on illegal behavior and controlling disruptive activities that the law cannot.”\textsuperscript{21} Organized crime groups tend to use violence against clients who fail to comply, competing organizations, and legal institutions.\textsuperscript{22} Violence then “creates fear in competitors or law enforcement, respect in the criminal market in which it develops, and feelings of strength and power within society,” thereby allowing the organized crime group to maintain its own semblance of order.\textsuperscript{23} This criminal form of order, if exercised long enough, eventually becomes generally accepted as a fact of everyday life.

\textsuperscript{19} McCauley, 286.
\textsuperscript{20} В наиболее широком смысле организованную преступность принято рассматривать как форму незаконного предпринимательства и в этой связи организованная преступность определяется как одна из форм экономического предпринимательства, осуществляемая с помощью противозаконных средств, связанных с угрозой применения физической силы или ее использованием, вымогательством, коррупцией, шантажом и другими методами, а также использованием незаконно произведенных товаров и услуг. Belotserkovskii, 66–67.
\textsuperscript{21} Lyman and Potter, 79.
\textsuperscript{22} Jiménez Serrano, 29.
\textsuperscript{23} …generar miedo ante sus competidores o fuerzas policiales, respeto en el mercado criminal en el que se desarrolla y sentimiento de fortaleza y poder en toda la sociedad. Ibid.
Furthermore, the functioning of organized crime groups can resemble networks, partnerships, or patron-client relationships.\(^{24}\) Organized crime is a complex system of organized criminal groups, their relations, and activities.\(^{25}\) Criminal business activity is dominated by those who exchange information, connect with people in power, such as government officials, and have access to a network of individuals that can offer economic and political support for their enterprises.\(^{26}\) In economically depressed communities, organized crime can also provide social mobility to those who would otherwise not have such opportunities.\(^{27}\) By providing these services, the mafia can serve as a “community reference group,” bringing more community members into its network.\(^{28}\)

These processes result in a symbiotic relationship between organized crime and the community. “Organized crime’s role in providing assistance to the community in its major functions while taking advantage of opportunities provided by the community makes organized crime a functional community institution,” thereby normalizing its presence.\(^{29}\) In societies marked by political and economic uncertainty, the need “for contemporary social, political, and economic structures” makes organized crime “a simple, fundamental fact of community life.”\(^{30}\) By existing “as a massive social network, organized crime is interconnected with numerous segments of a community and provides opportunities for political, social, and economic participation.”\(^{31}\) The mafia engages both ordinary people at the community level as well as

\(^{24}\) Lyman and Potter, 72.
\(^{25}\) Организованная преступность — это сложная система организованных преступных формирований, их отношения и деятельности. Belotserkovskii, 10
\(^{26}\) Lyman and Potter, 72.
\(^{27}\) Ibid., 76.
\(^{28}\) Ibid.
\(^{29}\) Ibid., 78.
\(^{30}\) Ibid.
\(^{31}\) Ibid., 79.
people in positions of power. Through these relationships, the mafia’s “dirty” money becomes “clean,” creating a more favorable climate of public opinion and ensuring that the mafia’s power remains well established.\textsuperscript{32}

3. Control over the Economic Sector

Once the mafia became normalized in post-Soviet Russia, it grew faster than businesses did, acquiring more capital, and, therefore, more influence.\textsuperscript{33} Since the mafia aimed to “produce, advertise and sell protection in conflict with the state,” it operated on those “transactions and agreements where protection is either inefficiently supplied or cannot be supplied at all by the state, especially in transactions in illegal goods.”\textsuperscript{34} Through this, criminal organizations began to steadily gain ground within the businesses and banks of their local regions, until these institutions and the mafia became inseparable.

An important part of the mafia’s dealings with businesses is the concept of \textit{krysha} (roof)—protection.\textsuperscript{35} The term is used to describe a range of services, from protection against competitors to aiding in tax evasion and finding investment opportunities.\textsuperscript{36} To be considered a good \textit{krysha}, a mafia group must not only provide protection from other criminals, but also provide other services, ranging from “debt recovery to an inside track on whom to bribe within the local authorities to get things done.”\textsuperscript{37} Therefore, private protection from the mafia implied the “defense against the extortion of others, against petty delinquency, justice and the settlement of commercial differences” the state and other legal institutions were unable to enforce.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{32} Voronin, 60.
\textsuperscript{33} See Goldman, 179.
\textsuperscript{34} Shvarts, 367.
\textsuperscript{35} Varese, \textit{The Russian Mafia}, 7.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 59.
\textsuperscript{37} Shvarts, 367.
\textsuperscript{38} Oleinik, 226.
Moreover, because the mafia managed to infiltrate the legal system, it was able to effectively get around the numerous laws in place. Until 2001, “a prospective entrepreneur had to obtain the signatures of at least 250 officials, visit between twenty and thirty different offices, and obtain fifty to ninety clearances.”39 The process of opening a business took at least six months, and because “there were so many laws to satisfy, it was almost inevitable that one law would conflict with another.”40 Jewelry stores, for example, “were obligated by the police to have barred windows, which however violated the fire laws.”41 Rather than appeal the issue in court or hire a lawyer to handle it, “the most common solution was to pay off a government official or ask the mafia to intervene” by using intimidation or coercion.42 The barriers to entering the market only strengthened mafia control as businesspeople saw them as more efficient and dependable than the courts and other law enforcement agencies.

Although citizens could resolve commercial disputes in arbitration (abitrazh) courts, the system was “inefficient in enforcing its decisions.”43 In 1996, “45 percent of the shopkeepers in Moscow said they needed to use the courts but did not because they did not trust them,” signifying their lack of faith in the judicial process meant to protect their assets.44 Simply going through the legal process would not ensure that their property or businesses would be protected. Since the complex process of enforcing a sentence often ended in failure, the most effective way of setting a conflict between businessmen was through a strelka (literally: little arrow), a meeting in which disputes are settled with violence.45 Oftentimes, entrepreneurs would obtain a ruling

39 Goldman, 181.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Shvarts, 374.
44 Goldman, 66.
45 Varese, The Russian Mafia, 69.
from arbitrazh courts and then use other means to enforce it. Depending on the matter at hand, the issue would be resolved through coercion or violence, as Genadii Chebotarev, deputy chief of the organized crime division of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, noted:

Quite often, we hear that a businessman fell victim of criminals and when we the police start investigating who issued the “contract” for “the hit,” it appears that it was another businessman. So it transpires that businessmen are “feeding” the bandits, extortionists and racketeers.\(^{47}\)

The mafia, known for its use of violence, was employed to honor rulings from arbitrazh courts to deter and eliminate competition. Oligarchs, for example, used the mafia to kill their business opponents and put their competition out of business rather than dealing with the competition through conventional means.\(^{48}\)

The mafia’s frequent recourse to violence also made its services an attractive option for banks, which often struggled to collect debts from debtors. Mistrustful of the inefficient and corrupt judicial system, banks often turned to the mafia to attract and protect their assets. In such cases, organized crime aided in “recovering bad debt for established banks.”\(^{49}\) Although banks could appeal to arbitrazh courts, fearing that the debtor would instead file for bankruptcy, other avenues were also explored:

That is why banks operate in an unofficial way. They assign the task of recovering debt to an especially reliable and competent brigadir [protector], who adjusts his tactics depending on the situation. For example, in one case, he simply scares the person; in another, he physically “strains” him. The debtor is taken out of town (to the cemetery, to the forest, or by the river), beaten, threatened, and beaten again. In another case, the debtor is forced to apply for credit to another bank, in order to return money to the bank who hired the brigadir. This debtor is doomed to receive soon the visit of the brigade of the other bank.\(^{50}\)

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\(^{46}\) Shvarts, 374.

\(^{47}\) Varese, *The Russian Mafia*, 70.

\(^{48}\) McCauley, 286.

\(^{49}\) Varese, *The Russian Mafia*, 69.

\(^{50}\) Ibid.
The banks considered this violent process an effective means of securing their interests. Through its operations and subsequent control over “many of Russia’s notoriously under-regulated banks,” the mafia became a major user and provider of money-laundering services.\textsuperscript{51} The mafia’s engagement in money laundering is representative of its pervasive presence in both the legal and illegal spheres of society, as much of the revenue generated by organized crime could pass “through or into seemingly entirely legitimate businesses and investments.”\textsuperscript{52} The mafia could then also function as “a third-party laundry for other criminal groups, thanks to its ability to work through the Russian state and private banking systems, up to a quarter of which are reckoned to be under its control.”\textsuperscript{53}

4. Criminal Activities in Politics

\textit{Mafia Involvement with Law Enforcement}

During the post-Soviet period, rather than uphold the law and protect citizens from crime, the police often worked directly with the mafia. This relationship between organized crime groups and law enforcement only further normalized the presence of the mafia in society. This was partly a result of the fact that “in many cases the relationship between thug and cop had developed through the normal course of life.”\textsuperscript{54} Policemen and mafiosi often lived in the same places and knew the same people, blurring the distinction between criminals and law enforcement.\textsuperscript{55} Overworked and underpaid, police officers often struggled to support their families and looked for additional sources of income.\textsuperscript{56} Many police officers collaborated with the mafia, such as those in the city of Tol’iatti, where “officers as high-ranking as a lieutenant

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{galeotti} Galeotti, “The Russian ‘Mafiya’: Consolidation and Globalisation,” 60.
\bibitem{ibid1} Ibid., 61.
\bibitem{ibid2} Ibid., 60.
\bibitem{serio} Serio, 259.
\bibitem{ibid3} Ibid.
\bibitem{ibid4} Ibid.
\end{thebibliography}
colonel [were] involved in racketeering and rumoured to be behind the murder of colleagues that threatened to expose their activities.”

Ordinary citizens’ awareness of the relationship between the mafia and law enforcement only further convinced them that the police could not be trusted.

The continuation of Soviet-era laws only further hindered Russian law enforcement’s efforts to fight criminal organizations. Many activities that were required for a market economy to function efficiently “remained illegal or unprotected by legislation; other activities that [were] considered unlawful according to Western norms, such as organized crime, [were] not specifically prohibited.” Under Soviet law, police had the right to detain anyone deemed suspicious. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the lack of adequate laws rendered Russian law enforcement unable to pursue organized crime groups. The United States justice system, in contrast, can specifically target organized crime through federal laws such as the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act. Although Russian police could arrest felons caught in the act of committing a crime, “the lack of Western-style conspiracy laws” made it impossible to prosecute the criminal leaders “so long as they did not participate directly in the crimes.”

Mafia Dealings in Politics

The mafia was able to effectively use state laws to its advantage and infiltrate the structures of power. Russian law specifies that “members of the Federation Council and deputies

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58 Voronin, 59.
59 Ibid.
60 18 U.S.C. §§ 1961–1968. The RICO Act allows the leaders of a criminal syndicate to be tried for the crimes they ordered others to carry out.
61 Ibid.
of the State Duma possess immunity during the whole term of their mandate.”62 Thanks to the lack of laws explicitly prohibiting individuals with criminal records from holding public office, “approximately eighty candidates with criminal records ran for seats in the national Duma in the December 1995 elections.”63 Many of these candidates subsequently won those positions by either “buying off or physically threatening others off the ballot.”64 Once in office, mafia members could then participate in law-making decisions that furthered mafia interests. These “criminal syndicate representatives, who diligently blocked or watered down any significant anti-crime legislation,” damaged the state’s authority and hindered the establishment of effective laws.65

Thanks to wealth acquired from illegal ventures, the “political power of organized crime [was] poised for future growth because criminal groups [had] the resources to fund candidates in elections at the local and national levels.”66 As a result, the mafia was able to undermine the electoral process. Officials and legislators who were involved with or paid off by the mafia “impeded the introduction of legislation that might circumscribe organized crime activity.”67 From 1993 to 1996, the “legislative framework needed to combat organized crime—including banking laws, regulation of securities markets, insurance laws and such specific measures as laws against corruption, organized crime, money laundering, as well as provisions for a witness protection program—[was] impeded by corrupt legislators.”68

63 Goldman, 184.
64 Ibid.
65 Voronin, 57.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
Russian people and keep their campaign promises, politicians chose instead to follow the orders of the criminals who bribed them.

5. The Mafia’s Activities Today

As a result of its normalization in the 1990s, the Russian mafia is currently thriving and is considered to be among the largest criminal groups in the world.⁶⁹ The Solntsevskaia Bratva, a large mafia group operating in Moscow, has amassed revenue of $8.5 billion and controls about one hundred small and medium-sized enterprises.⁷⁰ As is characteristic of the Russian mafia, this organization is highly decentralized and consists of 10 semi-autonomous “brigades” that operate under a 12-person council that meets regularly in different parts of the world to pool their resources and administer their funds.⁷¹ Many mafia groups have expanded their operations internationally; experts believe Russian organized crime groups deal in weapons, drugs, money, and natural resources in almost seventy countries.⁷²

The Russian mafia has built networks of allies and contacts spanning across Europe and other parts of the world. While these contacts are often used to further their agenda, they are also often employed by the Russian government.⁷³ Since Putin’s first presidency, gangsters have been allowed to continue their operations “so long as they understood that the state was the biggest gang in town and they did nothing to directly challenge it.”⁷⁴ Once they agreed, there was a shift in the way criminal groups operated: “indiscriminate violence was replaced by targeted assassinations; tattoos were out, and Italian suits were in.”⁷⁵ Now, senior figures in these

⁶⁹ Varese, Mafia Life, 106.
⁷⁰ Ibid.
⁷¹ Ibid.
⁷³ Galeotti, “Crimintern: How the Kremlin uses Russia’s criminal networks in Europe.”
⁷⁴ Ibid.
⁷⁵ Ibid.
organized crime groups are “far removed from street-level criminality and instead operate as investors and brokers within legitimate and illegitimate economies.” The creation of this new social contract resulted not only in an “institutionalization of corruption and further blurring of the boundaries between licit and illicit; but the emergence of a conditional understanding that Russia now had a ‘nationalized underworld.” Since then, the mafia has engaged in assassinations to protect its partners working in the government. The Magnitsky Affair remains perhaps the most prominent case of the Russian government’s direct involvement with organized crime in the last decade. In 2008, Sergei Magnitsky, an auditor at a Moscow law firm, discovered massive fraud committed by tax officials and police. After reporting the information to the authorities, he was himself arrested on suspicion of tax evasion and subsequently died in custody in 2009. Since then, key witnesses have gone silent, and some of them have been injured or died under suspicious circumstances. Many have speculated that the mafia was responsible for the death of Magnitsky as well as the silence of potential witnesses—a testament to the widespread belief of the mafia’s close relationship with the government.

In addition to this, because Russia is “engaged in a geopolitical struggle with the West but lacks the economic and soft power of its adversary,” its leaders consider its close ties to organized criminal networks “an obvious asset.” Criminals in the employ of the Russian government have been suspected of assassinating Chechen rebels in Turkey as well as of conducting cybercriminal activity targeting the government systems of Georgia, Ukraine, and

76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
78 “Q&A: The Magnitsky affair.”
79 Ibid.
80 “Magnitsky affair: Mystery over Russian’s death in UK.”
81 Ibid.
82 Galeotti, “European Security Concerns Bring Russian Mafia Back onto Agenda.”
states in the European Union. In 1994, Boris Yeltsin warned the public that Russia was becoming “a superpower of crime”; today, “Vladimir Putin appears to be courting that very same status, but in a profoundly different way, regarding Russian-based organized crime abroad not as a threat or an embarrassment, but a potential opportunity.” This shift in the Russian government’s attitude toward organized crime groups suggests that the process of normalization has only become more complete as Putin enters his fourth term as president.

6. Looking Forward

The organized criminal groups that emerged as a means of satisfying the basic material needs of Soviet citizens in the perestroika era not only remained a permanent fixture of post-Soviet Russian society, but expanded to permeate nearly all aspects of everyday life. Organized crime embedded itself in the economic, legal, and political spheres, allowing the mafia to evolve and continue to operate to the present day. The Russian criminologist V. I. Tret’iakov’s definition of organized crime accurately captures the nature and extent of the Russian mafia’s infiltration into society: organized crime is

carried out in all spheres of activity in society, bringing financial profit, including from the legalization of criminal income, providing its own means of protection against social control, including corrupt associations with representatives of state authorities and local self-government to the point of penetrating the power structure.

Although Russian organized crime remains less powerful than its other, more established counterparts, such as the strictly-hierarchized Italian Mafia and the Japanese Yakuza, “the

83 Ibid.
84 Ibid.
85 … осуществляемой во всех сферах жизнедеятельности общества, приносящей финансовую прибыль, в том числе и от легализации криминальных доходов, обеспеченной собственными средствами защиты от социального контроля, включая коррупционные связи с представителями органов государственной власти и местного самоуправления вплоть до проникновения во властные структуры. Tret’iakov, 31-32, quoted in Vardaniants and Bondar’, 171–172.
flexible and diffuse structure of the [Russian mafia] makes it very responsive to new threats and opportunities and impossible to ‘decapitate.’”

Thanks to this loose structure, the Russian mafia “will continue to spread wherever they see opportunities [and] consolidate their power where they can, coexisting with indigenous criminal groups where they must.”

Since other gangs operate in similar ways and have formed under similar conditions, studying the Russian mafia can prove useful in efforts to prevent the creation of mafia-like organizations in other parts of the world. For instance, two predominantly Latino gangs, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the 18th Street Gang (M-18), have raised concerns among policymakers in the United States and in Central America. Reports suggest that “these gangs are engaged in criminal enterprises normally associated with better organized and more sophisticated crime syndicates.”

Originating in the United States, MS-13 and M-18 “may develop the capacity to become organized criminal enterprises capable of coordinating illegal activities across national borders,” such as in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. These Central American countries, which have endured “a long history of armed conflicts and/or dictatorships,” are characterized by the instability that is necessary for organized crime to penetrate the social structure and overrun local legal institutions. MS-13 and M-18 have already expanded their activities to include “more serious criminal activities, such as drug trafficking, drug smuggling, money laundering, alien smuggling, extortion, home invasion, murder, and other violent felonies.”

Although law enforcement groups have adapted their tactics to combat these groups’ wide range of activities,

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87 Ibid., 63.
88 Franco, 1.
89 Ibid., 5.
90 Ribando Seelke, 22.
91 Ibid., 23.
the “gangs have developed into more sophisticated military and business organizations.”\(^{92}\) As a result, Central American governments “appear to have moved away, at least on a rhetorical level, from repressive anti-gang strategies.”\(^{93}\)

MS-13 and M-18 have begun to capitalize on societal instability to assert control in a manner reminiscent of the Russian mafia’s rise to power in the 1990s. These gangs have “been involved in the extortion of residents, bus drivers, and business owners in major cities throughout the region” by demanding protection fees.\(^{94}\) The near-normalization of these transnational gangs as a part of everyday life in Central American societies could soon follow the example of the Russian mafia. Using the Russian mafia as a point of comparison, policymakers can study the social conditions that contribute to the normalization of organized crime and develop new methods to curb the growth of these nascent transnational gangs.

\(^{92}\) Ibid., 25.
\(^{93}\) Ibid., 19.
\(^{94}\) Ibid., 24.
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