

The Invisible Fist: Russia's Criminal Predators Against Markets and Themselves

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How big and how real is the Russian mafia? I propose to treat it as a sociobiological object that occupies a place in food chains, with its proper morphology and metabolism. This theoretical approach allows us to understand, for example, how the tough habitat of a glacier lake might sustain a Loch Ness monster--but only as an elusive and small population.

How do we study the Russian gangsters who are mostly secretive creatures, arguably many of whom are man-eaters? Very much like the hypothetical Nessy--by applying theoretical tools to circumstantial evidence: the numerous published accounts of sightings (by journalists, lawyers and policemen), by interviewing the people with whom they are or were in direct contact (dissidents who spent time in prisons with common criminals, businessmen who pay protection rents, friends and neighbors), and overall by reconstructing the dynamically evolving institutional environment--the food base and the ecological niches, if you wish.

Evolutionary Historical Parallels

Behind the fog of modern myth-making about the mafia we discover not a single hellish monster but whole classes of varied life-forms occupying a hierarchy of ecological niches which range from scavengers and parasites to pack-hunting predators and highly specialized saber-tooth killers. In addition, this animal kingdom is rapidly mutating as the denizens collectively exhaust their environment and compete among themselves. Three outcomes are possible in any situation of environmental exhaustion: migrate elsewhere and find new herds of the same prey; simply go extinct; or struggle to adapt by developing new strategies and food preferences.

The best-positioned predators at the point of exhausting their food base would have to follow the evolution of early human societies by shifting from the adventurous joys of hunting to the labors of pastoralism. Pastoralism is indeed a wonderfully adaptive system that has sustained many tribes over centuries--but without leading to any further stage of evolution. It is a sustainable dead end of social progress.

We further know from history and anthropology that pastoralists are doomed to defend their herds against roaming predators, other pastoralist tribes, and, eventually, against

imperial tax collectors. That is why historically herdsmen invariably were fierce tribesmen, whether the barbarian Huns or the Wild West Indians and cowboys. Before the arrival of gunpowder empires in early modern times, the world's major security problem for thousands of years was the periodic demographic and institutional explosions of steppe nomadic confederations. These predators raided and overran the more complex and prosperous sedentary states no less regularly than the epidemic explosions of microbiotic parasites such as smallpox and plague.

The Default Option: From Empire to "Shadow State" to Roaming Pirates

These parallels suggest a pattern well known from history. After the collapse of the great empire, former Soviet territories may indeed evolve into the sustainable breeding ground of warlord organizations that, similar to pastoralists such as the Mongols, Vikings or Masai, would normally content themselves with a limited exaction from their herds/businesses. This is, in fact, the (perhaps temporary) normalization of rackets suggested by the data of Vadim Radaev.

But inevitably the ratio of parasitic elite to the feeding base would reach its limits, and the relatively stable existence turns into catastrophic explosions. Such explosions may be precipitated by the dramatic expansion of the feeding base (as happened in 1988-1993 with the massive stealing of Soviet state assets) followed by a sudden decrease in the food base--an economic crisis. Succession struggles among the chieftains invariably would be the catalyst of explosive mutations and, if the outside walls prove permeable, conquering outbursts. Some Genghis Khan may appear to unify and lead his hordes. Vadim Volkov charts a very worrying trend of bandits (i.e., purely violent war chiefs) coming in the stead of ritualistic "shamans"--the old, code-bound and relatively non-violent Thieves within Law (*vory v zakone*).

This will likely happen by default, i.e., without a purposive action intended to shift the present trajectory into the alternative pattern of strengthening both the Russian state and society. We must pay very serious attention to the trajectory of African countries after decolonization, which for a couple decades enjoyed a politically tumultuous but relatively stable existence, sustained by foreign aid and by plundering local resources. The corrupt African "shadow states" began collapsing one after another in the 1990s, with internal depletion and the end of Cold War competition for the Third World. The exhaustion of African shadow states brought into being such anomic predators as the Liberian and Congolese guerrillas, the Somali militias, and the pirate captains in Sierra Leone. African warlords have only a limited possibility to splash into core areas of the world capitalist economy (mainly via France as the former metropole). However, the Russian mafiosi, as everyone seems to fear, would be much harder to contain.

Anti-State Moral Institutions

Both the feeding base and the lineage of contemporary organized crime in Russia date back to the Brezhnev era. The corrupt privatization of the Soviet state, which is the feeding base, ripened during the seventies and burst into the open when in 1988-1990 perestroika undermined the old state controls. In those years the common mantra of Soviet liberal intelligentsia and Western advocates of lightning conversion to capitalism was that the shadow market is just the market waiting to be legalized. This was willful sociological ignorance. Although the height of state repression is usually thought to be the Stalinist gulag, under Brezhnev perhaps as much as every fifth adult male spent time behind bars, mostly for crimes such as drunken swearing, car accidents, and manipulating planned economic indicators. The harsh and hypocritical experience of the Soviet penitentiary system developed in its prisoners the durable dispositions of mutual solidarity against state-imposed rules as a matter of moral choice. Soviet prison culture supplied both the elementary blocs and the institutional framework of post-communist organized crime. The weapon of the weak grew into a veritable bludgeon.

The custodian of the prison survival code was an occupational hierarchy of individuals who had fully devoted themselves to criminal careers, especially their uppermost group called vory v zakone, which is best translated as the Lawful Thieves--the Law being, of course, the informal prison "notions," or ponyatiya. This caste consisted of genuinely charismatic men who assumed the full prestige and power alongside the vagaries and burdens of being the upholders of tradition, keepers of the community chest, examples of correct and (if necessary) heroic behavior, plus adjudicators of conflicts within the inmate population.

Every underworld of organized crime emulates the noble code found in the civilization to which the criminals belong. The Japanese yakudza abide by the samurai warrior code (bushi-do); the Chinese Triads are modeled on popular Taoist secret sects; the Sicilian Mafia is an example of the Mediterranean agrarian clientalism and honorable banditry; the various ethnic criminal syndicates found during the last century of US history normally emulate the business club relations of the dominant Anglo Saxons. The Russian Lawful Thieves are essentially holy men (starsy) taken almost directly from the popular Orthodox cult. (The precedent was first set by narodniki, the professional revolutionaries of imperial Russia.)

It is very important to stress that Lawful Thief is a caste-like rank held by several hundred men dispersed all over the former USSR. It is not a centralized organization, nor even an order. It is an institutional design embedded in local culture and is best suited to survival in the conditions of highly repressive, large states like tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union.

The Invisible Fist

With the spectacular weakening of the Soviet state after 1988 and the simultaneous emergence of rich nourishment in the form of perestroika-era "cooperatives" and the first dubiously legal millionaires, should we be surprised by the vast explosion in the population of criminal parasites and predators? The process even entailed social protest by the young proletarian males from the marginalized areas (be it exotic rural Chechnya or the industrial slums in the environs of Moscow, Baku, Leningrad and other large cities). From 1990-1994, the arrival into the criminal (semi-) underworld of new cohorts, many of them without prior prison experience, created a gold rush situation--cut-throat market competition where most actors were newcomers and few norms or institutions regulated the field. This was when the honorable caste of Lawful Thieves was hit hard by the invisible fist of volatile markets.

Volkov describes this as a generational change from thieves to bandits or, to use his apt term, the "new violent entrepreneurs." In terms of classical Weberian sociology this may be qualified as the transition from the traditional "medieval" authority to the modern pragmatic rationality of capitalist accumulation. In a fundamental sense, this was precisely the dream transformation advocated by rapid market reformers. The actors themselves hated it, but at first could not even realize what hit them. By the mid-nineties the epidemic of assassinations and gang wars--which claimed the lives of dozens of prominent thieves and many hundreds of common gangsters--was increasingly blamed on the super-secret death squad of the KGB (or something of the kind), which according to popular gang folklore is romantically called the White Arrow (Belaya Strela).

Embedding Volatile Markets

In time, however, empirical practice led most Russian gangsters to identify their impersonal enemy--not secret police, but the excess of organized gangs that led to stiff competition and therefore the replacement of old prison norms and values with new capitalist-oriented pragmatic rationality. In Moscow, previously the site of major gangland bloodshed, the rate of criminal assassinations has declined after 1995. The same seems true of other major towns, St. Petersburg being an exception. (This may account for the differences between my and Volkov's analyses.) We are apparently witnessing the processes in economics called cartellization and the exclusion of newcomers. This helped to restore the power of Lawful Thieves, whose authority was recognized even by many independent bandits. Evidence for this comes from interviews with businessmen from the towns of Moscow, Krasnodar and Yaroslavl who have been in continuous direct contact with Russian mobsters due to the nature of their businesses (usually small enterprises with immediately accessible cash such as gas stations, small shops and liquor kiosks). The conclusion is further corroborated by the information about trends in prison conditions collected by the Moscow Center for Prison Reform led by Dr. Valery Abramkin.

The institutions have become more pragmatic and adapted to new functions. The major expenditures of the criminal community chest (vorovskoi obschak) are now the regular protection payments and one-time bribes to police, state officials, politicians and lobbyists, lawyers and even journalists--rather than the support of imprisoned comrades.

Future Prospects

The Russian state is stronger and more resilient than its current pessimistic portrayals. Its less repressive paternalistic institutions, what neo-liberal critics condemn as "entitlements," are supported by the daily practices and social expectations of the population. The recent political campaigns of Russian governors, now truly the leading faction of power elite, quite clearly demonstrate that Russian society is moving towards some kind of benevolent despotism that will seek to internalize (but certainly not abolish) the volatile post-communist markets within a culturally-sanctioned hierarchical framework.

The Russian mafia will do its best to find its relatively humble place within this picture. Of course, the Lawful Thieves and other avtoritets may fail. But they have learned the hardest way that chaotic, anchorless markets--despite the occasionally fabulous profits--could be worse than Soviet prison life.

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