Gangster's paradise: how organised crime took over Russia

Under Vladmir Putin, gangsterism on the streets has given way to kleptocracy in the state.

By Mark Galeotti

I was in Moscow in 1988, during the final years of the Soviet Union. The system was sliding towards shabby oblivion, even if no one knew at the time how soon the end would come. While carrying out research for my doctorate on the impact of the Soviet war in Afghanistan, I was interviewing Russian veterans of that brutal conflict. When I could, I would meet these afgantsy shortly after they got home, and then again a year into civilian life, to see how they were adjusting. Most came back raw, shocked and angry, either bursting with tales of horror and blunder, or spikily or numbly withdrawn. A year later, though, most had done what people usually do in such circumstances: they had adapted, they had coped. The nightmares were less frequent, the memories less vivid. But then there were those who could not or would not move on. Some of these young men collaterally damaged by the war had become adrenaline junkies, or just intolerant of the conventions of everyday life.

One of the men I got to know during this time was named Volodya. Wiry, intense and morose, he had a brittle and dangerous quality that, on the whole, I would have crossed the road to avoid. He had been a marksman in the war. The other afgantsy I knew tolerated Volodya, but never seemed comfortable with him, nor with talking about him. He always had money to burn, at a time when most were eking out the most marginal of lives, often living with their parents and juggling multiple jobs. It all made sense, though, when I later learned that he had become what was known in Russian crime circles as a "torpedo" – a hitman.

As the values and structures of Soviet life crumbled and fell, organised crime was emerging from the ruins, no longer subservient to the corrupt Communist party bosses and the black-market millionaires. As it rose, it was gathering a new generation of recruits, including damaged and disillusioned veterans of the USSR's last war. Some were bodyguards, some were runners, some were leg-breakers and some – such as Volodya – were killers.

I never found out what happened to Volodya. He probably ended up as a casualty of the gang wars of the 1990s, fought out with car bombs, drive-by shootings and knives in the night. That decade saw the emergence of a tradition of monumental memorialisation, as fallen gangsters were buried with full Godfather-style pomp, with black limousines threading through paths lined with white carnations and tombs marked with huge headstones. Vastly expensive (the largest cost upwards of $250,000, at a time when the average wage was close to a dollar a day) and stupendously tacky, these monuments showed the dead with the spoils of their criminal lives: the Mercedes, the designer suit, the heavy gold chain. I still wonder if some day I'll be walking through one of the cemeteries favoured by Moscow's gangsters and will come across Volodya's grave.

Nonetheless, it was thanks to Volodya and those like him that I became one of the first western scholars to raise the alarm about the rise and consequences of Russian organised crime, the presence of which had, with a few honourable exceptions, been previously ignored. The 1990s were the glory days of the Russian gangsters, though, and since then, under Putin, gangsterism on the streets has given way to kleptocracy in the state. The mob wars ended, the economy settled, and despite the current sanctions regime in the post-Crimea cool war, Moscow is now as festooned as any European capital with Starbucks and other such icons of globalisation.

In the years since meeting Volodya, I have studied the Russian underworld as a scholar, a government adviser (including a stint with the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office), a business consultant and sometimes as a police resource. I have watched it rise and, if not fall, then certainly change; I have seen it become increasingly tamed by a political elite that is far more ruthless, in its own way, than the old criminal bosses. All the same, I am still left with the image of that particular war-scarred gunman, at once victim and perpetrator of the new wave of Russian gangsterism, a metaphor for a society that would be plunged into a maelstrom of almost unrestrained corruption, violence and criminality.

In 1974, a naked body washed up on the coast at Strelna, to the south-west of Leningrad (as St Petersburg was then known). It had been floating in the Gulf of Finland for a couple of weeks, and was not a pretty sight. A series of deep knife wounds in the man's abdomen gave a fairly good indication of the cause of death. And yet, with no fingerprints and no clothing, and with his face bloated, battered and partly eaten away, there were none of the conventional clues for identifying him. There had been no missing-persons notification filed for him. Nonetheless, he was identified within two days. The reason: his body was liberally adorned with tattoos. The tattoos were the mark of a vor – the Russian

word for “thief”, but also a general term for a career member of the Soviet underworld. Most of the tattoos were still recognisable, and an expert on reading them was summoned.

Within an hour, they had been decoded. The leaping stag on his breast? That symbolised a term spent in one of the northern labour camps. The knife wrapped in chains on his right forearm? The man had committed a violent assault (though not a murder) while behind bars. Crosses on three of his knuckles? Three separate prison sentences served. Perhaps the most telling was the fouled anchor on his upper arm, to which a barbed wire surround had clearly been added later: the wearer was a navy veteran, who had been sentenced to prison for a crime committed while in service.

Equipped with these details, it was a relatively quick matter to identify the dead man as Matvei Lodochnik, or “Matvei the Boatman”, a former naval warrant officer who, 20 years earlier, had beaten a navy draftee almost to death. Later, Matvei had gone on to become a fixture of the underworld in the city of Vologda. The police never found out quite why Matvei was in Leningrad, or why he died. But the speed with which he could be identified attests not just to the particular visual language of the Soviet underworld, but also to its universality. His tattoos were at once his commitment to the criminal life, and also his CV.

Photograph: Arkady Bronnikov/Fuel, from the forthcoming book Russian Criminal Tattoo Playing Cards

The subculture of the vory (the plural of vor) dates back to the earlier, tsarist years, but was radically reshaped in Stalin’s gulags between the 1930s and 1950s. First, the criminals adopted an uncompromising rejection of the legitimate world, visibly tattooing themselves as a gesture of defiance. They had their own language, their own customs and their own authority figures. Over time, the vory would lose their dominance, but they did not disappear altogether. In post-Soviet Russia, they blended in with the new elite. The tattoos disappeared, or were hidden beneath the crisp, white shirts of a rapacious new breed of gangster-businessman, the avtoritet (“authority”).

In the 1990s, everything was up for grabs, and the new vory reached out with both hands. State assets were privatised, businesses forced to pay for protection, and as the iron curtain fell, Russian gangsters crashed out into the rest of the world. The vory were part of a way of life that, in its own way, was a reflection of the changes Russia went through in the 20th century. Organised crime truly began to come into its own in a Russia that itself was becoming more organised. Since the restoration of central authority under President Vladimir Putin since the turn of the millennium, the new vory have adapted again, taking a lower profile, and even working for the state when they must.

The challenge posed by Russian organised crime is a formidable one – and not just at home. Across the world, it trafficks drugs and people, arms insurgents and gangsters, and peddles every type of criminal service, from money laundering to computer hacking. For all that, much of the rest of the world remains willing – indeed, often delighted – to launder these gangsters’ cash and sell them expensive penthouse apartments.

Do the gangsters run Russia? No, of course not, and I have met many determined, dedicated Russian police officers and judges committed to the struggle against them. However, many businesses and politicians use methods that owe more to the underworld than to legal practice. The state hires hackers and arms gangsters to fight its wars (and there remain suggestions that criminals were used as agents in the attempt to assassinate Sergei Skripal in Salisbury this month). You can hear vor songs and vor slang on the streets. Even Putin uses it from time to time, to reassert his streetwise credentials. Perhaps the real question is nothow far the state has managed to tame the gangsters, but how far the values and practices of the vory have come to shape modern Russia.

A number of commentators have dubbed Russia a “mafia state”. It is certainly a catchy epithet, but what does it actually mean? To the Spanish prosecutor José Grinda González – a particular scourge of Russian gangs in his country – it means that the Kremlin (or at least the state security apparatus), rather than being under the control of the criminals, is a shadowy puppeteer making the gangs dance on its strings. The truth is more complex. The Kremlin does not control organised crime in Russia, nor is it controlled by it. Rather, organised crime prospers under Putin, because it can go with the grain of his system.

There is a very high level of corruption in Russia, which provides a conducive environment for organised crime. It is not just professional criminals who are exploiting the opportunities provided by Russia’s cannibalistic capitalism – state agents, too, are exploiting their own criminal opportunities in an increasingly organised way. In 2016, the police raided the apartment of Col Dmitry Zakharchenko, the acting head of a department within the police force’s anti-corruption division. There they found $123m (£87m) in cash: so much money that the investigators had to pause the search while they found a container large enough to hold it all. The assumption is that the money was not all his, but rather that he was the holder of the common fund of a gang of oboroten, or “werewolves”, as organised crime groups within police ranks are often known.

Putin has publicly acknowledged, time and time again, that corruption is widespread. However, after 18 years of his rule, we have seen little evidence that he has ever intended more than a public show of resolve and a periodic purge of officials who serve as disposable scapegoats.

The connection between the elite and the gangsters usually revolves around mutually profitable relationships – but these relationships can also fall apart in spectacular ways. Take the case of Said Amirov. From 1998 onwards, Amirov ran the city of Makhachkala, the capital of the North Caucasus republic of Dagestan, as his own political-criminal fiefdom. It took a special person to control what was arguably the most unruly city in Dagestan, itself in many ways the most unruly republic in the Russian Federation. Amirov seemed virtually indestructible, in every sense of the word. He survived at least a dozen assassination attempts, including one in 1993 that left him in a wheelchair after a bullet lodged in his spine, and a rocket attack on his offices in 1998. Just as importantly, he appeared politically unassailable. Despite continued allegations of brutality, corruption and crime links, he saw out four Dagestani leaders and three Russian presidencies.

Said Amirov, the don of Dagestan. Photograph: Sergei Rasulov/AP

For 15 years, Moscow had been happy enough to let Amirov build his fiefdom, because at least he kept it disciplined, and posed no overt challenge to the centre. When the state finally decided to move against him, in 2013, it had to consider the strength of his local power base. His arrest was like a raid in hostile territory, spearheaded by Federal Security Service (FSB) special forces brought in from outside the republic, backed with armoured vehicles and helicopter gunships. Such was the concern about his sway over the local authorities that Amirov was immediately airlifted to a Moscow prison along with 10 other suspects.

Why did Moscow turn against Amirov? He appears to have fallen foul of the powerful Investigative Committee – the organisation Putin uses to prosecute and repress his enemies – thanks to his involvement in the 2011 murder of one of its regional heads. This was not about seeing justice served so much as settling a score. Amirov was sentenced to 10 years in a maximum security prison colony, and stripped of his state awards (including some, ironically enough, given him by the FSB). This was unprecedented for one of the Kremlin’s former local strongmen, and a cautionary tale for other local kleptocrats. The very attributes that once seemed to make Amirov such an admirable local proxy – his skill at managing the complex politics of Dagestan, his ruthlessness, his network spanning both the underworld and the legitimate world, his industrial-scale corruption, his acquisitive ambition for himself and his family – all had become liabilities.

The modern Russian state is a much stronger force than it was in the 1990s, and jealous of its political authority. The gangs that prosper in modern Russia tend to do so by working with rather than against the state. In other words: do well by the Kremlin, and the Kremlin will turn a blind eye. If not, you will be reminded that the state is the biggest gang in town.

I remember once talking to a Russian entrepreneur whose business seemed to mainly involve unloading poorly made counterfeit CDs on to the market on behalf of some Ukrainian gangsters from Donetsk. When asked about how he felt about working in organised crime, he airily waved the suggestion away: “It’s all business, just business.”

A key characteristic of organised crime in today’s Russia is the depth of its interconnectedness with the legitimate economy. Unpicking dirty from clean money in Russia is a hopeless task, not least because in the 1990s it was next to impossible to make serious amounts of money without engaging in practices that were ethically questionable at best, and downright illegal at worst.

During that time, murder was a depressingly common way of resolving business disputes. The notorious “aluminium wars” of the early 90s, for example, saw thugs occupying factories, a string of murders and lurid accounts of organised-crime activity across the metals industries. Recent research suggests that the contract killings related to those wars likely numbered in the thousands.

Since the 90s, though, the overt role of gangsterism in most of the economy has been declining. As the former mob lawyer, Valery Karyshev, wrote last year: “The wild 90s have gone into history … Many legends of the criminal world, whom I knew personally, are now in the ground. Contract murders have become fewer, although there are still shoot-outs, even in the centre of the capital. The racket has disappeared in its hard form, although there are kickbacks and raids. Now, business does not solve its conflicts with the help of bandits and red-hot irons, but in the courts.”

“Raiding” – the seizure of assets and companies through physical or legal coercion – remains a serious problem, but it depends less on violence than it did in the past. One British-based businessman told me that in 2009 he had had to fly to Moscow at a moment’s notice on two separate occasions because of attempts to steal one of his properties. The first time, thugs appeared at the door and marched their way past the security guard. The businessman had to call in favours from the local police on order to have them thrown out. The second time, though, the raiders came in the form of lawyers and bailiffs, bearing documents alleging that the property had been signed into their possession in order to discharge a (non-existent) debt. Whereas getting rid of the thugs took a few hours and, I suspect, a moderate bribe to the police chief, dealing with the legal challenge took weeks, and large amounts paid out in legal fees and illegal inducements.

This does not make the new gangster-businessmen champions of the rule of law. They appreciate a degree of predictability within the system, and also – now that they are rich – a state apparatus dedicated to preserving property rights. However, they are also well aware that an honest, well-functioning police force and a dedicated, incorruptible judiciary would be a serious threat to them. As a result, they have a strong interest in preserving the current, compromised status quo.

Just as the Russian language has become colonised by many borrowings from criminal slang, so too have regular Russian business practices become suffused with underworld habits and methods. Corporate espionage, bribery, and the use of political influence to swing contracts and stymie rivals remain commonplace, and continue to connect the worlds of crime and business. Likewise, the new generation of crime bosses are more likely than ever also to be active within the realms of legitimate and “grey” business.

An underworld economy as extensive as Russia’s inevitably develops a complex array of service industries and market niches. In the 90s, the first and most obvious need was for thugs and leg-breakers. For more sophisticated purposes, not least assassinations, organised crime gangs looked to sportsmen and martial artists – many of the first gangs came from sports clubs, such as the weightlifters and wrestlers who formed Moscow’s Lyubertsy gang – or to current and former police and military personnel.

The notorious Alexander Solonik (nicknamed “Alexander the Great” or “Superkiller”) was a former soldier and member of the riot police who became a killer for hire, specialising in assassinating well-guarded gangsters. He later confessed to three such murders. He also became something of a legend, thanks in part to the story of him fighting his way out of a police station in 1994, killing seven security officers before finally being overpowered; and, in 1995, being one of the very few people ever to break out of Moscow’s Matrosskaya Tishina prison.

Solonik worked for a wide range of criminal groups, some of whom were direct rivals. This was not considered to be a problem, just a reflection of the free market of the Russian underworld. However, when he escaped from prison and fled to Greece, where he began to set up as a gang leader in his own right, he became a player rather than a service provider. He lost his neutral status, and in 1997, one of the gangs with whom he had previously been associated killed him. Solonik knew full well what he was doing, but in modern Russia it is sometimes difficult even to know if you are

working for the gangsters. The assassination of organised-crime boss Vasily Naumov in 1997 came as a particular embarrassment to the St Petersburg police: it emerged that his bodyguards were members of one of the force's elite rapid-response squads, moonlighting and apparently engaged legitimately through a front company. We still do not know for sure whether they even knew quite whom they were protecting.

This represents just one of the many ways criminals are able to buy services from state agencies. Other services include wiretapping by the security agencies, and more trivial options, such as paying off an official for the right to place a flashing blue emergency-services light on your car. Such lights, known as migalki, are a bone of contention for many Russian motorists, and are widely abused by officials, business people and gangsters in order to allow them to run red lights and generally evade traffic rules. Recently curtailed, they nonetheless epitomise a culture in which cash and connections can buy a degree of impunity.

Some of the cybercriminals and cybersecurity experts that the gangs employ also work for the government. Most, however, do not. Hackers themselves rarely fit the model of organised crime, as their structures are generally collectives. Instead of becoming members of gangs, they tend to be outside consultants, hired for specific jobs.

The increasing sophistication of criminal operations, especially their shift towards white-collar crime, has created a need for financial specialists, to manage their own funds and also their economic crimes. The most infamous remains Semyon Mogilevich, who has established for himself a distinctive role as the mobster's money manager of choice. One of the FBI's most-wanted fugitives and the subject of an Interpol red notice international arrest warrant, Mogilevich has been indicted on money-laundering and fraud charges but is living comfortably and openly in Moscow. As a Russian citizen, he is safe from extradition. (He is also a citizen of Ukraine, Greece and Israel.)

Hired killer Alexander Solonik, aka 'Superkiller'. Photograph: Tass/PA Images →

Mogilevich's 20-year career laundering and moving money for numerous organised crime groups – in the process making himself indispensable to many of them – provides perhaps even greater security for him than any bodyguards or body armour. Too many powerful people need his services, and too many fear the secrets he carries. Indeed, when Moscow police arrested him by accident in 2008 (at the time, he went by the name Sergei Shnaider), I heard from several police officers that the commander in question received a ferocious dressing down for landing the government with an embarrassing dilemma: how to release him without looking weak or foolish? He was eventually arraigned in a closed court, and the case was dismissed for lack of evidence.

That Russian organised crime has spawned such a complex service economy says much about its scale, sophistication and stability. In the process, the old vory are dying out, at least in their own terms. Once, if you wore a criminal tattoo to which they felt you were not entitled, you ran the risk of having that patch of skin forcibly removed with a knife – if you were lucky. Now, no one cares: you just pay to get inked. Crime was once something that defined people, that set them off from the rest of society. Now, it is just another route to power and prosperity within that society, and the customs that were there to keep the vor subculture separate and distinct no longer have meaning or value.

A vor I once spoke to bitterly complained that "we have been infected by the rest of you and we are dying", but the infection has passed both ways. Many of the organising and operating principles of modern Russia follow the lead of the underworld. Maybe it is not that the vory have disappeared so much as that everyone is now a vor, and that the *vorovskoi mir* – the world of the thieves – ultimately won.

This is an adapted extract from The Vory: Russia's Super Mafia by Mark Galeotti, which will be published by Yale University Press on 10 April 2018, priced £20. To order it for £17, go to guardianbookshop.com or call 0330 333 6846. Free UK p&p over £10, online orders only. Phone orders min. p&p of £1.99.