

# **It takes two to tango: The state and organized crime in Russia**

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## **Abstract**

The article analyses the evolution of the state–organized crime relationship in Russia during the post-Soviet transition. Using a case study conducted in Tatarstan, which included interviews with criminal gang members and representatives of law enforcement agencies and analysis of secondary data, it argues that instead of a pattern of elimination or subjugation of Russian organized crime by the state, we see a mutually reinforcing ensemble which reproduces the existing social order. While both the strengthening of the state and organized crime actors’ own ambitions led to their increasing integration into political structures, a complex web of interdependencies emerged in which actors from criminal networks and political authorities collaborated using each other’s resources. This fusion and assimilation of members of the governing bureaucracy and members of an aspiring bourgeoisie coming from criminal backgrounds were as much the result of consensus and cooperation as of competition and confrontation.

## **Keywords**

Gangs, post-Soviet transition, Russian mafia, Russian organized crime, social order, state–crime relationship, violence, violent entrepreneurs

## **Introduction**

Relations between the state and agents of organized illegality in post-communist Russia have been subject to many different interpretations. Among these, two key narratives can be identified. In the first narrative, the collapse of the Soviet state led to a period of social chaos and lawlessness, in which criminal networks were able to convert their capacity for violence into economic profit. They established their own systems of private protection, the so-called “roofs”, *kryshi*, and competed with the weakened state as agents of violent regulation. But over a period of ten to fifteen years after the start of market reforms, the rising state power managed to crush its rivals. The state fought off competition from agents of organized private violence

(“violent entrepreneurs”) through prosecution, integrating them into the state apparatus by appointment, or forcing them to reconfigure themselves into law-abiding private security agencies. Those criminal leaders who had not been killed or incarcerated became legal businessmen and parliamentarians (Volkov, 2002, 2014). In this narrative the state is credited with restoring what Weber called a “monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (Weber, 1978: 54). The triumphant state, the mighty Leviathan, eliminates opposing forces of violence and restores social order. Violent entrepreneurs leave the scene, at least as active subjects of history.

As the contours of the new order grew clearer, however, it became apparent that the system of authority that emerged as Russia came out of transition was far from the Weberian model of rational bureaucratic authority with the rule of impersonal law. Rather, according to the second narrative, in the absence of effective democratic control the representatives of state power themselves behave in a manner akin to that of a gang or mafia, using formal and informal coercion and exploiting their administrative positions for private material accumulation. In the course of transition, it is argued, the state in Russia and some other post-socialist countries was captured by a coalition of predatory elites or one specific kleptocratic clan, or mafia quasi-family, centred on the country’s leader (Dawisha, 2014; Ganev, 2005; Hellmann et al., 2000; Magyar, 2016; Solnick, 1998). On the road to power, the elites acted in tandem with organized crime groups. Having won control of the state, they now wield their power over these groups, making them assist the elites in advancing their goals (Kupatadze, 2012, 2015; Rawlinson, 2009). In this narrative, the rising Leviathan comes to dominate the underworld, turning it into its servant.

These narratives portray the state as either a strong institution of central authority or a coalition of predatory elites that annihilates or subjugates its rivals. Both narratives also assume that members of organized crime networks aspired primarily to illegal material accumulation, to making economic profit which they largely achieved by monopolizing control over the illicit economy and providing protection services to legal entrepreneurs. But, having made great strides in the 1990s, by the beginning of the 2000s their plans were thwarted by the rising bureaucracy. They had to choose between prison and co-optation into the state, not unlike the famous fictional trickster Ostap Bender, the hero of two satirical novels by the Soviet writers Il’f and Petrov. Bender, once all his plans to become magnificently rich had collapsed, decided in the end to join the “winning” side and re-qualify as a state housing manager.

This article, in contrast, argues that both narratives overlook the continued existence of multiple collaborations and alliances between agents of licit and illicit power, and develops a

third narrative. I suggest that what we can see in Russia, rather than the state's monopoly on violence or the subjugation of organized crime by a political elite, is reciprocal assimilation between state and organized crime. This Leviathan is not a homogeneous colossus, but a highly adaptable structure in which intertwined networks of legality and illegality work in concert in officially sanctioned and non-sanctioned ways; a relationship that sustains and supports the existing system of power. The strategic interactions of the state and organized crime, and their resulting entanglement, contribute to the reproduction of social order.

Additionally, the members of organized crime networks, rather than dedicating themselves to their criminal careers through creating their own monopolies of violence and reluctantly submitting to the sovereign power of the state, have pursued wider projects of social mobility, which has led to their increasing assimilation into the networks of mainstream power and prestige. Many leaders and rank-and-file members of criminal organizations developed strategies that straddled criminal and non-criminal career opportunities. They built relations of favour and exchange with political authorities and joined party machines, all the while retaining their access to illicit opportunities.

In the ensemble of power that has emerged in Russia, the state leads the dance while criminal organizations are a willing and active partner. Here we see two semi-autonomous groups that are mutually dependent; share broadly the same ideological horizons and aspirations; mobilise resources that are useful to each other; and recognise their mutual resource dependence. The groups are not equals, as, unlike society-based power networks, the state is stronger due to its privileged access to material resources (through taxation and an ability to distribute assets) and symbolic resources, and is able to use the socially sanctioned official law (Migdal, 2001). But the state chooses to embrace the more cooperative representatives of organized crime, even as it represses the rest, since criminal organizations have access to private violence and illegal expertise which the state either lacks or is unable to use freely for fear of undermining its public legitimacy. At the same time, the criminal organizations eagerly follow the state's lead in the name of gaining symbolic power, administrative resources and protection.

In this paper I analyse the evolving processes of strategic interaction between state and organized crime that have led to their assimilation. To illustrate this I use the case study of criminal gangs in Tatarstan. I begin by outlining the key theoretical and conceptual approaches and the methodology of the study. I move on to discuss the strategies of the members of criminal groups in relation to political authorities, developing from segregation towards integration with the state, while at the same time retaining access to their violent resources and

criminal expertise. I conclude by discussing other examples of alliances between agents of state and agents of organized crime and violence.

### **Theoretical and conceptual approaches**

The literature on organized crime tends to address relations between the state and illegal actors through the lens of opportunistic corruption, infiltration and subversion of state institutions (Rose-Ackerman, 1999; Williams and Godson, 2002). There is, however, a growing body of global research that shows that criminal actors can collaborate with the state in territorial systems of regulation and create overlapping social orders (Arias, 2006; Briquet and Favarel-Garrigues, 2010; Schneider and Schneider, 2005). Both can be involved in “concurrent governance”: co-operating in elections, sharing economic interests and creating overlapping systems of power, in which, as in the case of the Calabrian ‘Ndragheta, “one individual serves in different functions and for different interests” (Sergi, 2015: 43, 50). In Russia, research conducted in different geographical areas has also shown that representatives of the state can be linked in overlapping orders and interpenetrative networks with members of organized crime groups and other illicit formations (Favarel-Garrigues, 2010; Galeotti, 2007; Holzlehner, 2014; Ries, 2002).

In explaining how these collaborations developed in the course of post-socialist transition, I borrow from Bayart’s (1993) Gramscian analysis of the quest for hegemony that drives heterogeneous groups, caught in the process of rapid reconstitution of the structures of social inequalities and power, towards “reciprocal fusion and assimilation” (Gramsci et al., 1971: 221). Writing about the postcolonial African states, Bayart described how sections from a variety of pre-existing traditional formations, ethnic groups and previously subordinate classes, as well as members of state-based political elites, each pursuing their quest for hegemony, moved to form integrated power structures. Drawing on Gramsci’s notions of “political society” (i.e., the state) and “civil” society (i.e., an “ensemble of organisms commonly called ‘private’” (Gramsci et al., 1971: 12)), as being co-extensive and forming an “integral state” (see the discussion in Thomas, 2009), Bayart refers to the “mechanisms of ‘straddling’ in the process of accumulation” (Bayart, 1993: 163).

In post-socialist Russia this process of reciprocal fusion and assimilation between the representatives of the political and the civil society, in which I include criminal “trust

networks” (Tilly, 2005)<sup>1</sup>, evolved in a societal context of transition from socialism, rather than from colonialism, and was influenced by historical legacies of much stronger statehood (Engvall, 2011). There are, however, important similarities. In the Russia of the 1990s–2000s, as in many African states in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and especially during neoliberal structural adjustment programmes, we can talk about the years of opportunity, brought about by the weakening of the central state and collapse of the previous social and political structures, as well as the emergence of massive rewards in the process of privatizing state property. This, and the space of inter-societal linkages that opened up as members of both the political authorities and sections of previously subordinate groups pursued their projects of material accumulation and social advancement, facilitated often spectacular social mobility for people who, prior to the reforms, could be classed as “sub-proletarians”, and among them members of criminal groups (Derluguian, 2005: 309; Volkov, 2002: 125). The mobility projects launched by members of Russian criminal networks drew them towards forming greater interdependencies with state actors who were pursuing similar projects, albeit using different resources, and towards greater integration into the system of political power, without necessarily abandoning their specific criminal competencies and access to private violence.

The evolution of strategic interactions between state and criminal networks can be analysed on two different levels: individual and collective. Bayart (1993: 149, 322 n.78) uses the Gramscian notion of the “molecular process” of fusion and reciprocal assimilation when he talks about individuals from previously opposing backgrounds entering the dominant class—via personal networks, exchanging favours and economic opportunities, and joined membership in charities and political parties—and eventually being integrated into the highest levels of state bureaucracy. On the level of collective behaviour, Tilly provides a categorization of the bottom up strategies that can be adopted by trust networks (such as mafias, secret

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<sup>1</sup> Organized crime groups are commonly seen as antagonistic to civil society, see the discussion in Shelley L (2006) Organized crime groups. "Uncivil society". In: Evans AB, Henry LA and Sundstrom LM (eds) *Russian civil society: a critical assessment*. Armonk, NY; London: M.E. Sharpe, pp.95-109. I agree with those authors who argue that in Russia organized crime has emerged as one of the strongest form of private social organization outside the state and can be seen as a form of civil society. See, for example, Levinson A (2004) Grazhdanin, gde u vas tut grazhdanskoe obshchestvo. *Neprikosnovennyi Zapas*, 34(2), <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2004/34/lev7.html>. Available at: <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2004/34/lev7.html> (accessed 10 December 2015).

societies, diasporas, religious orders, etc.) in relation to the state.<sup>2</sup> These are the strategies of *concealment, dissimulation, clientage, predation, bargaining, enlistment and dissolution* (Tilly, 2005: 104). These strategies fall under the broader categories of segregation, negotiated connection and integration. While Tilly saw the relationship between the state and trust networks as fundamentally competitive, he outlined different strategies that the state can use—from repression to toleration and facilitation of trust networks’ activities (Tilly, 2005: ch.5). In what follows, I discuss how the criminal trust networks moved from segregation to integration into the state using some of the strategies identified by Tilly. I also outline the process of reciprocal assimilation between criminal leaders and state representatives and the interdependencies that emerged as both sides pursued their quest for hegemony.

### **The study**

Among the Russian regions, Tatarstan is relatively unique in terms of availability of data on the transformation of organized crime groups from the Soviet period to the present day. In this autonomous republic, currently one of the most prosperous regions in Russia, there has long been a presence of violent youth street organizations, some of which developed entrepreneurial strategies during the time of late socialism and later became part of complex organized crime structures (Salagaev, 2001, Stephenson, 2015). From the early 1990s, Tatarstan became infamous for its criminal gangs (*gruppirovki*), which combined youth street gangs, the so-called “streets” and their alliances, and extra-territorial criminal business networks affiliated with the *gruppirovki*’s leaders, the *avtoritety*.

The gangs and their histories and practices of violence have been an object of investigation by Tatarstan sociologists and representatives of law enforcement bodies since the 1980s. In this article I rely largely on this secondary data and present some of the results of my own study conducted in Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan. My research included 32 semi-structured interviews with members of different *gruppirovki*, conducted in 2005. The interviewees were all male, seventeen to thirty-five years old, of Russian and Tatar ethnicities. They came from a range of social backgrounds and had different positions in gang hierarchies. The project also involved interviews with representatives of local law enforcement bodies,

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<sup>2</sup> For a study of state–organized crime relations in post-Soviet Georgia that employs Tilly’s analytical framework, see Slade G (2013) *Reorganizing crime: Mafia and anti-Mafia in post-Soviet Georgia*. Clarendon studies in criminology 1st edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

including the police and the State Prosecution Service. Additional research in 2011 involved follow-up interviews with gang members and police experts in Kazan.

Gang research presents many potential problems in terms of access and developing trust (Rodgers, 2007). In this study the initial contacts were made by members of the Kazan research team (who lived in areas with high gang presence) via friends and neighbours of gang members. Access to other participants was obtained via students from the university where two members of the research team, Alexander Salagaev and Rustem Safin, worked, and through further snowballing. While some of the interviewees were personally known to the research team, they were all guaranteed anonymity and were assured that neither they nor their gangs would be identified in the transcripts and research outputs. Interviews with members of law enforcement bodies brought mixed results, as some interviewees talked readily about the histories of the Tatarstan gangs and their past interactions with the police, but were sometimes reluctant or evasive when discussing the current state of affairs. The use of secondary data helps to fill the gaps and triangulate the results.<sup>3</sup>

### **From segregation to negotiated connection**

While interactions between the state and organized crime can be traced back to the Soviet era, they acquired a major transformative impetus when Russia embarked on the road towards market capitalism. This is when members of political society and criminal trust networks in the civil society, now sharing the same cultural horizons of social advancement through material success, developed new collaborations and interdependencies.

The main agents of organized private crime and violence in post-Soviet Tatarstan evolved from territorial peer groups of young people. Although most were involved in the ritualized defence of local territory rather than acquisitive crime, establishing their social orders on the streets and segregating themselves from the state, some of these groups had already shifted to entrepreneurial activities in the 1970s and 1980s, when a vast shadow economy emerged in the Soviet Union (Grossman, 1977). They began to provide protection services to illicit Soviet entrepreneurs and developed their own criminal operations under the cover of the corrupt members of the local police (Stephenson, 2015: ch.1).

Although there is evidence of state-crime collaborations at the time, which is sometimes taken as the origin of a legacy that influenced later post-Soviet practices (Handelman, 1994;

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed discussion of research methodology see Stephenson S (2015) *Gangs of Russia: from the Streets to the Corridors of Power*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Sokolov, 2004), a defining feature of the gangs' relations with members of the Soviet state authority was that they did not open up opportunities for the conversion of proceeds of crime into legitimate wealth. Nor could gang members become assimilated into mainstream networks of power and prestige. They continued to live in their modest buildings in working-class areas of the city, and kept their official work- and college-related positions (Ageeva, 1991). Similar strategies of *concealment* were pursued by representatives of illicit networks in other areas of Russia. For example in St Petersburg people who protected illegal distribution chains in the Soviet shadow economy continued to work as factory labourers, or door staff and waiters in bars and restaurants, or to study in vocational colleges (Vyshenkov, 2011), adhering to their official professional identities for fear of prosecution, either for their illegal activities or simply for lacking official jobs and thus being designated as "social parasites".

All of this changed with the start of the market reforms, as revolutionary new opportunities for social mobility suddenly appeared under rapidly developing capitalism. With the massive growth in new possibilities for securing access to wealth in the course of the privatization of Soviet state property in the 1990s, gang members' criminal activities became more than a source of additional money to supplement their factory wages or college stipends (especially as these could now go unpaid for months on end). While some came to rely on their gangs in order to earn money for basic necessities, the more ambitious saw them as a way to join the ranks of the rich "new Russians". In a sense, they responded to the hegemonic ideas of success through material accumulation that had penetrated Russian society from top to bottom. As one interviewee, who joined a gang with his friends in 1992, said: "We wanted to rise together. Everybody who could was making serious money at the time, and we did not want to be left behind" (Nikita, 42 years old, interviewed in 2011).

Using their trust networks and access to the resource of collective violence, the Kazan gang members started "rising together" by demanding tribute from local entrepreneurs in return for protection. Similar strategies of accumulation were developed by other post-Soviet violent entrepreneurs and organized crime groups (Humphrey, 1999; Varese, 2001; Volkov, 2002). All of Kazan became divided into gang territories, with both small and large businesses having to pay tribute to the *gruppировки*.

Many representatives of the police force pursued similar economic strategies of accumulation assisted by violence. As M., a long-serving representative of the investigative department of one of Kazan's police districts, put it when interviewed in 2005: "At the time, Orgsintez [a local chemical plant] fed so many lads from Zhilka [a Kazan gang]. And how many cops fed off it!" Similar practices of police predation existed all over Russia (Favarel-



Garrigues and Le Huérou, 2004; Taylor, 2011). State power networks and illicit networks coexisted and competed with each other in activities in which violent enforcement overlapped with material accumulation.

The capacity to offer protection was, at least initially, tightly bound with territorial control (Varese, 2001; Volkov, 2002), and the first negotiations soon developed between actors of organized violence from criminal and state structures regarding the boundaries of each other's power, and the weight of private violence against state officials' capacity to enforce the law. The state officials were largely forced to tolerate the predatory activities of criminal organizations. M. recounted the following episode, involving representatives of Zhilka:

At the beginning of the 1990s I used to have my own company. Four people came to my office and started saying that they lived there, that this was their territory and that I should pay them. I told them: if you can protect me from the largest gangs in Kazan—Khadi Taktash, Kvartala, Tsentralnye—then come to me, and I will pay you. But I have a different proposition. You can ask me for help when you are incarcerated, and I can help you to get your sentences reduced.

Over the course of the 1990s the power of state law enforcement was progressively strengthened. In spring 1993 a decree, “On extraordinary measures for combating crime”, was signed by Tatarstan's President Shaimiev, giving the police the power to detain members of organized crime groups for up to 30 days, and introducing other measures to strengthen the police response to gangs (Safarov, 2012: 29, 30, 49). Naked intimidation and forced compromise soon gave way to a different set of relations, that of “*clientage*: acquiring protection by intermediate authorities” (Tilly, 2005: 104), where the local police repressed those gang leaders who refused to cooperate, while facilitating the business operations of more amenable gang leaders.

The gangs sought to present an acceptable front and also increasingly practiced what Tilly called “*dissimulation*: feigning conformity by adopting some available public identity, but minimizing both compliance and visibility of internal operations and resources” (Tilly, 2005: 104). For example, the 29<sup>th</sup> Komplex, from Naberezhnye Chelny, established a charitable foundation for the support of the city police, through which members of *gruppirovki* supplied the police with cars—some were registered in the names of individual police officers—and paid bonuses to the most distinguished officers. In return, officers facilitated the gang's operations, and “certified” the legitimate identities of its leaders as business people or even

members of law enforcement. For that purpose, one of the 29<sup>th</sup> Komplex leaders, Yuri Eremenko (Erema), received a certificate of honour signed by the head of the Moscow police department, while another leader, Adygan Saliakhov (Alik), possessed a very useful document that certified that he was an officer of the Moscow UBOP (Department for Combating Organized Crime), a document that helped him to get out of trouble with more law-abiding local officers (Udovenko, 2008). Up to 30 percent of Zhilka's common fund was spent on "financial support" for the police and "public relations", with the money channelled through companies controlled or owned by the gang (Nafikov, 2012: 161–63).

By the mid-1990s, having amassed significant economic resources via protection rackets and other criminal business, gang leaders began to move into the management structures of the companies they protected and to acquire legal property away from the local turf. Zhilka, for example, had shares in, or outright ownership of, two Kazan banks, a helicopter plant and a glass-making factory in the neighbouring Mari El Republic. The *gruppirovka* also had interests in the pharmaceutical company Tatkhimfarmpreparaty, the insurance company Ingosstrakh-Volga, and the construction materials company Stroiplast, as well as the Avtovaz automobile plant in Tolyatti (Beliaev and Sheptitskii 2012: 227).

For their part, high-ranking public officials were also involved in the appropriation of assets on a massive scale, which was accompanied by large-scale fraud and intimidation of competitors, non-corrupt members of the law enforcement bodies and investigating journalists (Murtazin, 2007; Udovenko, 2008).

This was the context of "*bargaining*: establishing relations with major political actors on the basis of mutual contingent consent" and *enlistment* on behalf of the state (Tilly, 2005: 104). The leaders of the gangs and the state officials exchanged criminal expertise and administrative resources in various illegal schemes that allowed both sides to accumulate material assets and fight off threats to their interests. For example, the leaders of 29<sup>th</sup> Komplex participated in money-laundering operations in the neighbouring Udmurtia Republic together with the deputy chair of the republic's Council of Ministers and members of the Ministry of the Interior (MVD), the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) of the General Staff of the Armed Forces (Udovenko, 2008). Eduard Tagirianov, the leader of Banda Tagirianova, another *gruppirovka* from Naberezhnye Chelny, was hired as a financial manager by the Russian state company Gazprom to "facilitate" their transactions as an expert in various shady financial schemes. Violent services were also provided in exchange for administrative protection and business opportunities. It was also Tagirianov who was asked by the deputy governor of Lipetsk Oblast (where Tagirianov had business interests) to send his

gangsters to intimidate the *Novaia Gazeta* journalist Igor Domnikov, who had been investigating administrative corruption in the region. Tagirianov's men beat the journalist to death (Sokolov, 2016).

While criminal protection rackets in Russia have gradually been legalized in the form of private security agencies (some run by the gangs themselves) or taken over by the FSB and the police (Taylor, 2011; Volkov, 2002, 2014), new opportunities for joint illegal accumulation have emerged. Criminal organizations, together with state officials, have been involved in transfers of assets through corrupt or outright illegal business expropriation, fraudulent registration of companies, and changing beneficiaries of offshore trusts that accumulate financial capital flowing from Russia into offshore jurisdictions and then re-investing it into legitimate business. Organized criminal groups in Tatarstan provided expertise and violent resources in support of these operations (Nafikov, 2012: 179–180).

### **Integration into the state**

Towards the end of the 1990s the state office became the biggest producer of wealth in Russia. As Derluigian put it, “the state, for those who enjoy privileged access to it, has become the best and biggest source of economic profits and private protection” (Derluigian, 2005: 141). Violent entrepreneurs made active attempts to become integrated into the political structures of the state by developing interpersonal ties with its representatives and becoming involved in “locally consequential long-term activities” connecting them to state organisations, forming various public associations and achieving personal incorporation into state power (Tilly, 2005: 117).

Criminal leaders and members of state authorities became involved in various practices of sociability, such as eating and drinking in bars and restaurants together, and sharing male fraternizing experiences (particularly such traditional Russian social rituals as relaxing together in the sauna or visits to each other's country houses to drink vodka and barbecue). At the trial of one Tatarstan *gruppirovka* leader, the aforementioned Eduard Tagirianov, an embarrassing photo emerged of him drinking in a sauna with a city prosecutor (Postnova, 2006).

Gang leaders and both serving and former state officials exchanged personal favours and job opportunities. For example, Zhilka hired Vladimir Baranov, an ex-deputy head of criminal investigation in the Kazan Department of the Interior. After leaving the police, Baranov became the director of the Usadskii alcohol factory, controlled by Zhilka (Safarov 2012: 310–11). In their turn, members of the police helped *avtoritety* obtain contacts among

state officials to help their business and that of the companies they protected, and helped young gang members enter police colleges and university law departments (Salagaev et al., 2006).

The ultimate prize for the upwardly mobile leaders of organized crime networks was, however, state office itself. From the beginning of the 2000s gang leaders were increasingly trying to join the state bureaucracy and the party machines. Attempts by *avtoritety* to integrate into the state by acquiring political office had already begun in the 1990s, but yielded mixed results, with some *avtoritety* supported in their endeavours by representatives of the state authorities, while others were stopped in their tracks (Safarov, 2012; Salagaev et al., 2006). These efforts intensified when, from 2001 onwards, prosecution rates in Tatarstan increased for those *avtoritety* who attempted to retain autonomous power from the state (Stephenson, 2015: 85–86).

To enter networks of mainstream power, gang leaders opened charitable foundations, sponsored movies and city festivals, donated money to children's homes and built public sports facilities.

In the words of M., the previously mentioned police investigator from Kazan:

I know an *avtoritet* from “Pervakovskie” [*gruppirovka*], R., who is building a sports complex in his territory... He is using his own money, and the complex is open to all young men, not just those from his *gruppirovka*. It does not bring him any profit. I would have understood if they were doing boxing, but no, they play hockey. Then there is this State Duma deputy, A., he is also an *avtoritet*, he has a heart of gold. When money is needed for some local activities, the district administration always turns to him, and he gives money for the veterans, children, pensioners and the rest.

Through joint participation with state officials in various public events and ceremonies, charity work and shared membership in prestigious non-governmental organizations and foundations, as well as holding intersecting business interests, the gang aristocracy was being assimilated into the legitimate networks of prestige and influence, into the elite proper.

The process of integration, however, did not lead to the dissolution of criminal networks, the final stage of integration according to Tilly (2005: 104). Many *gruppirovki* leaders succeeded in moving into prestigious social circles, becoming lawyers, heads of corporations or members of the Tatarstan and Russian State Parliaments (Stephenson, 2015: 82–83) But, having become legitimate professional or business people or been accepted into political machines, they could still have recourse to private violence. Both representatives of the police

and rank-and-file gang members confirmed that while the leaders were no longer involved in the criminal business on the day-to-day level, they continued to control it via intermediaries (lower-level *avtoritety* and supervisors). According to M.,

The leaders may belong to the state structures, or be parliament deputies. A real leader of a *gruppyrovka* always keeps himself at some distance, and he controls his *gruppyrovka* via his [intermediaries]. The rank and file may have no idea who the real leader is. They may have an official leader who is not very rich, who may be struggling to buy a car or tracksuit pants. But if he is told by seniors to put pressure on a competitor's business, or beat the hell out of somebody, he will use a gang-run security company or just the lads from the streets.

Similarly to *avtoritety*, some members of youth territorial gangs tried to launch careers in legitimate political circles while maintaining gang membership. In the 2000s, careers in state organizations became the most desirable for Russian youth (Kallioma, 2009), and membership in state-sponsored youth movements seemed to offer the best prospects for acquiring useful social connections and achieving social mobility (Hemment, 2015). Some of the gang interviewees began to develop connections with political parties, attending meetings of the pro-Putin United Russia and other parties that, in their minds, had good electoral prospects.

Eighteen-year-old gang member Radik, who, when interviewed in 2005, was studying taxation at university (alongside being an enforcer in the gang's illegal gaming business), spoke about a friend. This young gang member used to go to meetings of the regional branch of United Russia: "This lad cannot string two words together properly. I asked him, 'Why do you need all this?' and he explained that he was developing useful connections." Twenty-nine-year-old businessman Aidar, one of the *avtoritety*, said: "I don't like any of the parties but would personally go for United Russia, if they had a decent position available, as it's a strong party with a promising future."

Youth gang members also reported that they tried to be careful with their violent and criminal endeavours, concerned that their data might be entered into police databases on organized crime groups, which would prohibit them from applying for coveted jobs in the public sector or hinder potential political careers.

Legal and criminal careers were intertwined. In a recent case, according to a Tatarstan police investigation, S., an active member of "Molodaia Gvardiia" (Young Guard), a youth wing of United Russia, organized a racketeering gang-cum-social movement ostensibly fighting against illegal gambling. The gang received protection money from an organized

criminal group that ran illegal gambling networks across Tatarstan. In a conversation with one of the leaders of this group, recorded by the police in the course of their surveillance operation, S. said that he had to be careful who he dealt with, as he was also pursuing an official career (Murtazin, 2015).

While some people with criminal backgrounds attempt to gain political office, others are co-opted into the system of governance for, rather than in spite of, their criminal resources. As Sukharenko points out having analysed some of the recent criminal cases involving the regional elite, its representatives sometimes deliberately bring people with criminal connections into government structures in order to use their violent resources in illegal schemes. As criminal actors are co-opted into the local and regional assemblies, or are used to provide informal services, a “corporate-style merger of politics and crime is taking place”. While state office holders treat their administrative positions and powers as profit-making assets, and their own activities as business, they delegate the protection of their interests to affiliated criminal structures. For example, they use violence and intimidation to prevent business people who are not associated with their patron-client networks from obtaining government contracts, or illegally appropriate businesses on behalf of government administrators. At the same time, political office helps business people with criminal backgrounds to protect their economic interests (Sukharenko, 2014: 47).

In other words, the straddling of social positions of the members of legitimate and criminal elites around the political pole of the state creates a situation in which the regional state office holders can use both legitimate and illegitimate means to accumulate material resources and reproduce their hegemonic positions in the system of power.

There is evidence of many similar collaborations between state authorities and agents of organized private crime and violence across Russia, and of the reciprocal assimilation of criminal leaders and state officials within local and regional power structures. One such example is Kushchevskaja in the Krasnodar region, where gang leaders combined their criminal activities with official positions in the local authorities and built a web of illicit ties extending to Moscow, where, according to the Russian opposition sources, senior officials in the State Prosecution Service and their families were involved in joint business with the families of the criminals. The Kushchevskaja gang regime provides a striking example of the coalescence of power networks, as the criminal gang’s leadership became fully integrated into the local elite not just on the official, but also on a personal level. The leader of the gang, Aleksander Tsapok, was a close friend of the head of the local police force’s Department for the Struggle against Organized Crime (UBOP), who became godfather to one of Tsapok’s

children. Tsapok was also a deputy on the local council and even participated, as part of the regional delegation, in the inauguration of President Medvedev in Moscow. He also aspired to academic esteem, and became a Candidate of Sciences in Sociology. At the same time, he and his gang were busy expropriating land from local farmers and racketeering business people, sending their enforcers to rape, maim and kill as necessary. With the police providing protection to the gang, it provided in return its violent resources to the officers to assist them in their own predatory entrepreneurial activities (Anin, 2015; Kostiuhenko, 2015).

## **Conclusion**

Violent entrepreneurs were not involved in an existential battle with the state that they were destined to lose. The process that I have outlined here is not one of elimination or subjugation of agents of organized private violence by a dominant state, but of “the equivocal interpenetration and mutual reinforcement” of state power networks and illicit networks co-existing in civil society (Bayart, 1993: 163).

While both the strengthening of the state and criminal actors’ own ambitions led to their increasing integration into political structures, a complex web of interdependencies emerged in which actors from criminal networks and political authorities collaborated using each other’s resources. This fusion and assimilation of members of the governing bureaucracy and members of an aspiring bourgeoisie coming from criminal backgrounds was as much the result of consensus and cooperation as it was of competition and confrontation.

I have shown that criminal trust networks moved from segregation towards integration into the state, but these networks did not reach dissolution, which according to Tilly is the final stage in integration. Russia’s “robber barons” did not universally turn into exemplary capitalists or law-abiding bureaucrats, as some analysts had predicted, nor did they become the dominant force in Russian society (Williams, 1997: 5–7, 27). Instead, members of criminal groups were able to retain access to illegal resources and develop dual career structures, straddling positions of authority in both criminal and state formations. Criminal and state actors protect each other from economic competition and political challenges, jointly using their respective resources to reproduce the existing social order.

Other examples of state-crime collaborations include organized prostitution networks run with active participation of the police. According to Alexander Kondakov, who conducted a survey of sex-workers in St. Petersburg in summer 2015, this business exists not despite but because of the protection and security services of state law enforcement, which are provided privately to the criminal groups involved. In his opinion, “this is a typical contribution of state

officials into any organization of such [illegal] business. Mafia business is impossible without participation of the state” (Al'bats, 2016).

Organized crime groups are themselves only part of a multitude of private agents of violence involved in “private-public enforcement partnerships from below, grounded in illegal practices and based on complementary competencies” (Favarel-Garriguez, 2015: 620). These also include nationalist vigilantes or football hooligans who team up with the police to act against political opposition, or former policemen and ex-military personnel who use their private violent resources and informal expertise to enforce judicial decisions. In other words, the systemic entanglement of state and illegal actors and networks is a defining feature of the Russian social order at all levels.

And so, as the state and criminal networks continue to be locked in their tight embrace, the image comes to mind of two tango dancers sliding across the stage. They move with impassive faces, not looking at each other, but nevertheless in perfect unison, with their eyes fixed on the same horizon. And though it may seem at times that each is trying to overpower the other, this is simply part of the dance.

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