The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Running From the Wild 2000s

By The Moscow Times

November 30, 2010

The phrase "the wild '90s" was coined by then-President Vladimir Putin in 2007, on the eve of parliamentary and presidential elections. At the time, the Kremlin's political strategists were trying to distance the administration from the turbulent period under former President Boris Yeltsin. But will the 2000s also be remembered as wild? And if so, who will be distancing themselves from whom?

Krasnodar Governor Alexander Tkachyov recently acknowledged that every district of his region has criminal gangs similar to the one that massacred a dozen people in the village of Kushchyovskaya on Nov. 5. "Unfortunately," he said, "such gangs exist to varying degrees in every city in the region. Some have more of them, some have fewer, but they're present ... and their lines of support stretch up to the regional level." That's a rare admission from a governor, but it would be naive to believe that other regions do not have the same problem.

In another recent case, the police chief and his deputy in the Vladimir region town of Gus-Khrustalny were temporarily suspended because local residents wrote to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to complain about rampant crime in the city. Economically depressed cities in the Urals such as Nizhny Tagil have serious problems with drugs, not only because the locals

want to shoot up, but because drug dealers have strong ties to local officials and police. In the Chelyabinsk region town of Miass, the situation is so bad that hundreds of thugs wielding metal pipes and baseball bats can be called into action at almost a moment's notice. The peculiar relationship between the authorities and criminals in the Far East is such that former crime bosses have become political leaders and vigilante groups such as the self-proclaimed Primorye Partisans wage guerrilla warfare from the woods. In the Moscow region town of Khimki, inconvenient people are regularly beaten to within an inch of their lives.

We are deeply concerned that the Russian police have stopped performing their primary function — ensuring public safety. The tragedy that happened in Kushchyovskaya could have happened almost anywhere, and it shows that this problem cannot be isolated to a single public institution. Law enforcement agencies, the authorities and criminal business interests have become tightly intertwined. That commingling looks different from place to place, to be fair, it doesn't always manifest itself as the savage mass murder of 12 people. Extortion in Moscow is different from how it's done in Kushchyovskaya, and criminals shaking down business in the Far East have different methods than their "colleagues" in the North Caucasus. But despite the economic gains of the past decade, despite the years of stability and the government's power vertical, criminal business interests continue to enjoy a wide range of opportunity.

The "banditry" of the 1990s is being repeated. Low levels of social development and education, severe poverty, the breakdown of morals, and so forth are all creating a supply of ready labor for criminal interests.

It is entirely possible for criminal businesses to evolve — to grow in scope, to acquire new property, and to come to the realization that it is more advantageous to make money legally. That's exactly what happened to some of the businesses that got their start during "the wild '90s." In a normally developing society, the overall presence of legal business grows, criminal businesses become marginalized, and the use of gangland-style methods to resolve disputes gradually becomes ineffective.

That process has been very slow to take hold in Russia.

The gang operating in Kushchyovskaya was large, it owned property, and one of its leaders was even a deputy in the local legislature. And it should come as no surprise that the gang continued to use violent methods, since the current leadership has not made public safety a priority. Strong-arm methods not only work well in modern Russia; they inspire others to adopt the same tactics and become criminals.

The public has also failed to make strong enough demands that businesses clean up their act. That demand must be expressed through personal standards of behavior as well as through political action that would enable society to fight criminal forces, corruption and widespread injustice. But the current system only grants political license to the leaders at the very top. Ordinary citizens cannot, do not want and are afraid to try to influence the decision-making process.

But for now, presidential elections still exist in Russia. And for the upcoming elections, neither Putin nor President Dmitry Medvedev will be able to distance himself from the other by referring to the past decade as "the wild 2000s." The ruling tandem is perceived as a

unified whole. In fact, according to the Levada Center, 84 percent of Russians believe that even after stepping down as president, Putin continues to exert significant influence on the political life of the country. For that reason, all official references will portray the 2000s as a wonderful and stable period of economic prosperity — however divorced from reality that may be.

This comment appeared as an editorial in Vedomosti.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/11/30/running-from-the-wild-2000s-a3378