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'Gangland' Writer Sees Russia's Shifting Underworld

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“Gangland St. Pete: Journalist”

From gang wars to the avalanche of counterfeit goods, this is the transition that St. Petersburg's criminal underworld has made over the past two decades, according to Andrei Konstantinov, a prominent Russian writer and journalist. The author of the hugely popular crime series "Banditsky Petersburg," or "Gangland St. Petersburg," and other detective novels, Konstantinov is also currently serving as an adviser to the governor of St. Petersburg.

Speaking at a "Meet the Writer" session at the Hotel Indigo St. Petersburg Tchaikovskogo, Konstantinov shared unique insights into the transformation of the criminal world, which he has been researching and monitoring since 1992. The "Meet the Writer" evening was organized by St. Petersburg's Ideas For People Club.

"During the 1990s, which became known as 'Banditsky Petersburg,' between 5,000 and 6,000 people were killed," Konstantinov said. "In comparison, the military campaign

in Afghanistan took about 14,000 lives."

As Konstantinov points out, 20 years ago, Russia needed fighters, strong people who would be able to manage the chaos amid the agonizing, poorly prepared economic reforms and political instability. "Where the state was failing to do the job, the gangsters came and seized the power," he said. "Now, the country needs lawyers and economists, and the criminal patterns have changed. Some of the former mobsters have received good education and there has been a shift in roles: We can now see some of the ex-mobsters at plum positions in large companies, where they provided a 'cover' or 'protection' 15 or 20 years ago."

"Organized crime today is primarily associated with the production of counterfeit goods, and it is everybody's goal to avoid a conflict. To compare, back in the gangland era, counterfeit vodka was essentially a poison and provided a ticket straight to hell; now the cheap counterfeit stuff, from bags to food, is meant to go unnoticed by the customers," Konstantinov said. "A solid half of goods in most shops today are counterfeit — and indeed to flourish in this fake goods business, one has to enjoy a solid 'protection' from the state officials."

Konstantinov's investigative work began in 1992 when he published a series of reports in the local daily newspaper Smena. Organized crime was rampant, with contract killings in St. Petersburg commonplace.

"The newspaper's management was reluctant to hire me: They suspected that I was in some way affiliated with the security services because I graduated from the Oriental Studies department at the St. Petersburg State University and worked as a translator for the army, including three years in Libya," the writer recalled. "In the end, they did hire me, but they firmly refused to let me cover politics. I knew nothing about the economy, and I had very little competence in culture and the arts. I have hated sports since my childhood and so the only topic that was left was crime — and it also happened to be vacant, as no other writers appeared to be interested."

When the first edition of Konstantinov's first book, "Banditsky Petersburg," came out in the mid-1990s, it was used as a handy manual for businessmen and politicians alike, as well as anyone who needed to navigate the murky waters of the seemingly gang-like business and political scene in the city. The demand for the chronicle has been impressive, with the sales of various editions exceeding 2 million copies.

The book's stinging title, "Gangland St. Petersburg," soon became a humiliating nickname for the city as gang wars raged across town. The nickname stuck, and it was used heavily across Russia by the critics of the city's government, which was incapable of combating organized crime efficiently.

"Gangland St. Petersburg" is also the name of popular television series, loosely based on Konstantinov's crime fiction stories, which hit screens in 2000. At the time, Konstantinov was frequently accused of being responsible for concocting the image of St. Petersburg as the criminal capital of Russia.

A lot of people would come up to him to tell him off, saying things like: "Is it really that much fun to indulge in all things dirty?"

"That was so unfair. Blaming me for writing a popular book about crime is just as pointless as accusing Mikhail Kalashnikov of making a weapon that became one of the most internationally established Russian brands," Konstantinov said. "The truth is that we simply did a good job. And I, for one, am not the slightest bit ashamed."

Asked about the changing pattern of organized crime in Russia and if events are ever going to be as thrilling and brutal as they were in the early 1990s, Konstantinov said that the social and political changes are irreversible.

"The major reason behind what seemed like an unstoppable series of shootings in the streets of St. Petersburg, and the firm grip of criminal clans over local business, was that post-Soviet Russia was a very weak and unstable country," Konstantinov explained. "The authorities were unable to control society, and criminal gangs assumed that role, providing 'protection' for businesses from other clans. Now, the Russian state is perhaps even excessively strong. But this means it will not allow, under any circumstances, any gangs to replace it or perform the functions of the state."

The gangland phenomenon began to die around the year 2000, he said. "The time of in-your-face street killings is not going to come back because the country's political and business environment has changed. It is a bit of shame, though, that law enforcement agencies played such a modest role in fighting this."

For a year now, Konstantinov has been working as an unpaid adviser to Georgy Poltavchenko, the St. Petersburg governor. "I had been originally offered a full time job as the head of the Culture Committee of the city administration but I turned it down: It is essential for me to keep the liberty in what I do from making my own decision to deciding my own working hours," Konstantinov said. "But when I was later approached with the proposal of an adviser role, I agreed because essentially it creates no limitations for me and it makes my voice and opinion heard when the governor finds it necessary."

These days, Konstantinov's professional interests are shifting from organized crime to history. His most recent project is the launch of a new history magazine, "Vash Tainy Sovietnik" (Your Secret Adviser), which is dedicated to the history of St. Petersburg.

The magazine's first issue has just been released and covers a series of intriguing topics.

"With the magazine, our goal is not to make a scientific kind of publication: We want to offer entertaining and engaging reading for those who have an interest in history and, ultimately, our ambition is to get more and more people curious and excited about the history of St. Petersburg and the many hidden stories and secrets that the great city contains."

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