

The Argentine Cocaine Scandal Is Just the Tip of a Russian Iceberg (Op-ed)

The embassy cars and diplomatic flights are reminiscent of wilder times

By [Mark Galeotti](#)

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Handout / Reuters

It can be depressing how often Russian reality sounds like a script from a thriller.

Twelve suitcases of cocaine worth some 40 million euros (\$50 million) found in an embassy school in Argentina. Drugs smuggled in diplomatic flights. A sting. A cast including a shadowy Russian security officer and an Argentina cop of Russian extraction.

Sadly, this is no piece of fiction but a reminder that the criminal instincts of the 1990s never really disappeared and that for every Russian official genuinely trying to do his or her job, another is busy trying to monetize the access, immunity or privileges the post offers.

This is, after all, the essence of kleptocracy: corruption at the top breeds corruption through the whole system.

Although the Russian state is not above cooperating with organized and transnational crime, this does not appear to be an example of the kind of covert "black account" operations that saw cigarettes smuggled into Estonia and Middle Eastern people traffickers "taxed" in the name of gathering intelligence and raising operational funds for further deniable operations.

Had that been the case, it is unlikely the ambassador would have turned to the authorities, or that the authorities would have cooperated in the investigation. Rather, this is a good old-fashioned case of crime under the cloak of official privilege.

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Back in the 1990s, naval supply ships sailed from Kaliningrad to St. Petersburg, their decks crammed with cars stolen across Europe, confident that they were exempt from customs controls. Army bases, out of bounds to the regular police, became extraterritorial havens for drug factories and workshops turning out counterfeit goods. Diplomatic pouches from Central Asian embassies bulged with heroin and antique rugs. Police evidence lockers became virtual gangster supermarkets.

That kind of flagrant abuse of office was once a perhaps inevitable result of the collapse in living standards and morale in that miserable decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union. But it also reflected — and worsened — the declining authority of the state. When Putin came to power in 2000, he was committed to reversing its disintegration.

The gangsters were told to lay off the indiscriminate street violence that made it look as if the state could not protect its people. Officials began to realise that there was a new code — not that the days of corruption were over, but that a degree of discretion and restraint was now required.

This was not a cleansing of the system, but it was a renegotiation of the social contract, a redefinition of the acceptable bounds and etiquette of corruption. This social contract of the elite appears to be under pressure.

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The economic slowdown since 2014 and uncertainty about the future of both the country and the regime have created a climate of renewed short-termism and predatory corruption. Businesspeople are reporting that once again they are facing extortion demands reminiscent of wilder times.

Besides, the "little thieves" feel a palpable resentment towards the "big thieves." Second-hand, I heard about the interrogation of a corrupt official who used the opportunity to rail against his minister and his friends, and to express his anger that he and not they were under arrest. "It's not fair," he concluded, "that I'm not big enough to be safe. But what else could

I do?"

After all, it is not just that bad examples come from the top, so too do corrupting pressures. In the case above, the official's boss had started to demand payments from him on pain of transfer or demotion. And why? Because his boss was likewise putting the squeeze on him, and so on up the hierarchy.

It is not only the buck that stops at the top, it is also the ruble.

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Meanwhile, high-profile anti-corruption cases are widely regarded — with reason — as little more than attempts to take over rackets and take down rivals.

The working assumption among the investigators in Argentina is that the drugs were likely part of a deal where Russian gangsters swap Afghan heroin for Latin American cocaine. This is a depressingly everyday example of the globalization of Russian-based criminal networks — The involvement of embassy cars, diplomatic flights and government personnel, though, is a depressingly everyday example of the renewed corruption of Russian officialdom.

So long as the rank and file can look up at the apex of the power vertical and feel their masters are crooked to the core, many will be looking for whatever opportunities they can find.

Mark Galeotti is head of the Center for European Security at the Institute of International Relations Prague and author of the forthcoming 'The Vory: Russia's super mafia' (Yale). The views and opinions expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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