

The Tragedy of the Age-Old Kremlin-Vor Alliance (Op-ed)

From Stalin to Putin, the Kremlin's mutually beneficial ties to Russian gangsters go way back.

By [Mark Galeotti](#)

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Vladimir Putin **Marina Lystseva / TASS**

The current geopolitical tussle between Russia and the West has impoverished our debate. Too often, it replaces nuanced understanding with snappy and snarky sound bites.

One example is the description of Russia as a “mafia state.” As if that can encapsulate the complex, sometimes hostile or cooperative relationship between Russia’s rulers, spooks, population and gangsters. Nonetheless, since 2014, the ties between mafia and state have certainly become closer.

For generations, there has been an unusually close connection between the underworld and

"upperworld" powers. Stalin carried out bank robberies and piracy with mobsters such as the infamous Simon Ter-Petrossian — or “Kamo,” as he went by in criminal and revolutionary circles — in part to raise funds for the Bolshevik revolution.

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The Cheka political police recruited bandits, and later Stalin would coopt *vory* — “thieves,” members of the professional criminal subculture — to be the enforcers, foremen and even guards of the Gulag slave-labour camps.

In the twilight years of the Soviet Union, organized crime was part of the connective tissue holding corrupt Party officials and the barons of the black market together. And in the anarchy of the 1990s, the distinctions between mobsters, entrepreneurs and officials were often more theoretical than real.

Of course, when the little-known Vladimir Putin was campaigning for the presidency in 1999–2000, he promised law and order, and many believed him. I spoke to one *vor* who took to keeping a packed suitcase under his bed in case he had suddenly to head to the airport ahead of an arrest warrant.

But he never had to.

In hindsight, given Putin’s crucial role in the St. Petersburg mayor’s office as its ambassador to the city’s underworld, and the powerful Tambovskaya crime group in particular, we should not have expected him necessarily to take on the gangsters.

Instead, he domesticated them. The word went out, routinely communicated through earnest conversations between criminals and the police officers meant to arrest them, that there was a new social contract.

Criminals could continue to be criminals; the police would continue to police them. But if at any point the *vory* looked as if they were posing any challenge to the state, then they would be treated as enemies, and life would get very hard. The criminals adjusted very quickly to this new world, one in which the state had reaffirmed its status as the biggest gang in town.

During the Second Chechen War, the Chechen gangs across Russia largely abandoned Chechnya to its fate. And more generally, the indiscriminate car bombings and drive-by shootings, such a feature of the wild 90s, and symbols of a state unable to control its streets, ended.

Occasionally, individuals were deemed to have become too big for their boots or embarrassingly prominent, such as Tambovskaya kingpin Vladimir Barsukov (Kumarin) or Said Amirov (Said the Undying) the notorious mayor of Makhachkala. Then the state would swoop in with deliberate overkill, commandos leaping from helicopters to a chorus of sirens, in a piece of law-enforcement theater to remind everyone of the power of the state. The state did not seem to consider organized crime a priority, so long as it knew its place.

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Over years of talking to Russian police officers and investigators, I have been heartened and impressed by the number who clearly wanted to do their jobs. They may take a small bribe for a small service here, turn a blind eye to a minor infraction there. Ultimately, though, many wanted to tackle the gangsters.

But the corruption still to endemic in the state, and the tight links between criminal, business and political elites, especially at the local level, mean that the major criminals are, unless they arouse the ire of someone higher up the pecking order, pretty much untouchable.

As a result, many of the law enforcers confine themselves to targeting middle-ranking criminals, whom they at least have a chance of convicting, rather than major players who are safe beneath their *krysha*, their protective roof of corrupt favors and mutual assistance.

Until 2014, the relationship between the Kremlin and the kleptocratic Russian elite on one hand, and the gangsters on the other, seemed to be getting more tenuous. Putin might still occasionally use some underworld slang to demonstrate his tough-guy credentials, but the days when senior figures of the business and political elite would openly hobnob with gangsters had largely passed. Furthermore, the *vory* had lost their old, gulag-chic identifiers of tattoos and leather. They were becoming a new breed of white-collar gangster-businessman.

The new age of geopolitical tension may be reversing that trend and bringing Kremlin and crooks closer together again. In his bid to make an impoverished Russia punch like a great power, Putin has created what I call a mobilization state.

This is not totalitarianism. There is still independent business, free journalism and civil society. But at any time they may be asked — and in Godfather style, this is a request that cannot be refused — for favors in the name of the state. This also applies to the gangsters.

We have seen hackers pressed into service as footsoldiers of cyberwar and espionage. Gangsters charged with assassinating Chechen fundraisers in Turkey. Smugglers “taxed” to provide secret funds for political operations in Europe. The list goes on, as once again the Kremlin turns to criminals as instruments of its rule.

This is not a “mafia state” with its implication that either the gangsters run the government, or that the government controls the underworld.

Instead, it is simply the latest example of the corrosive way that successive regimes have tried to use organized crime as a tool of statecraft, not realizing — or perhaps not caring — how much the *vory* have gained from this pernicious alliance.

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