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War Disrupts Ukrainian-Russian Mafia Bond

By Joshua Melvin for AFP

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A man, 59, using Kirim as a pseudonym, talks to an AFP journalist at a cafe in the southern Ukrainian port city of Odesa. **Oleksandr Gimanov / AFP**

Sitting at a cafe in the Ukrainian port of Odesa, a local smuggler drew on his cigarette as he explained how the war has disrupted long-established underworld ties between Russia and Ukraine.

"The vast majority of Ukrainian criminals took the side of Ukraine," said 59-year-old Kirim, who spoke on condition that he be given a pseudonym.

"But there are also those who continue to cooperate with Russia," he noted, speaking only once a waiter had delivered the coffees and left.

The cross-border network of drugs, guns and people trafficking that developed between Ukraine and Russia from the rubble of the Soviet Union had been considered one of the

world's strongest.

Those links have been disrupted but persist.

When Moscow's troops attacked Ukraine in February 2022 it resulted in the severing of a smuggling highway that ran westward for hundreds of kilometers toward Europe from the border with Russia.

Organized crime operations between the two nations — sharing cultural, linguistic and historic links — had flourished since the 1990s along with vast corruption.

"This was one of the tightest criminal ecosystems in Europe. They were one and the same," said Tuesday Reitano, deputy director at the non-profit Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.

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'Patriotic' criminals

The war threw up physical barriers, in the form of frontline combat and checkpoints, as well as rage over the massive destruction and suffering the invasion inflicted.

"The us-against-them sentiment has been strong in Ukraine, so that even criminals feel patriotic," said Reitano.

Kirim identified himself as a patriot and claimed to have cut 100% of his smuggling ties with Russians, while noting that some criminals have put money toward the war or charity efforts.

Some have also reportedly joined fighting on the front, but Reitano noted that criminals can use war to try to rebrand themselves or win leniency from authorities in exchange for support.

Another Odesa underworld operator also said he is a patriot who refuses to work with Russians.

However, 40-year-old debt collector Alexandr, another pseudonym, said the criminals' code bars any cooperation whatsoever with the state, which he described as fundamentally corrupt.

"I don't want to fight for them [army], but I will fight for my city," he added, sipping his second late-morning beer and wearing aviator sunglasses.

Both self-identified Odesa underworld associates said that Ukrainian security services had told criminals to lay off their activities when Russia invaded, and welcomed information on Russians.

Some have apparently not followed the advice.

Ukraine's security service told AFP it "neutralized" in spring 2022 a powerful criminal group in Odesa, which had cooperated with the enemy and "terrorized and intimidated locals."

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'Odesa is Odesa'

As the war broke out, figures in high-level, international organized crime groups left Russia and Ukraine for Central Asia, the Gulf States and elsewhere.

"We know that there is still plenty of cooperation between the underworld of Russia and the underworld of Ukraine outside of Ukraine," said Reitano.

Europol also pointed to the very high likelihood that gangsters from the two nations are continuing to work together.

The agency noted there is never just one route for smuggling, so shutting down one does not definitively staunch the flow of contraband, and international crime groups are diverse as well as agile by definition.

"They look at the profits and even with the war, they continue their criminal business, and they look for the best opportunity," said Catherine De Bolle, the agency's executive director.

"We do not see at the moment a split between the Russian and Ukrainian mafia," she added.

Whether it is with Russians or not and despite the war-imposed barriers to their rackets — the criminals are still at work on the port city's streets.

"Nevertheless, all this goes on. Odesa is Odesa," Kirim the smuggler said with a very slight shrug.

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