

Criminal Networks Are the Kremlin's Not-So-Secret Weapon

By [Avesta Afshari Mehr](#)

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A view of the Moscow Kremlin. **Sergei Vedyashkin / Moskva News Agency**

The usage of criminals and wider organized crime groups by Moscow is nothing new. The 2007 [cyber attacks](#) against Estonia were organized by proxy groups associated with Putin's administration. The Kremlin's tight bond with the criminal world, far from being a series of isolated incidents, represents a deeply entrenched system of cooperation with multiple benefits for Moscow.

At its core, this collaboration is born out of mutual necessity. For the Kremlin, criminal networks offer a ready-made infrastructure capable of executing covert operations with a degree of deniability that conventional state agencies can seldom match.

These groups, with their financial resources and networks established across Russia and the West, have become indispensable tools for advancing Russian interests abroad. In return, they gain [protection](#) and legitimacy from being intertwined with state power — patronage that

enables them to thrive despite the risks inherent in their work.

By developing this relationship, the Kremlin blurs the line between statecraft and criminal enterprise. Moscow's [reliance](#) on these groups means that criminal actions are, in many cases, state-sanctioned even if they never bear the official stamp of government involvement. This strategic ambiguity not only protects Russian leadership from direct accountability but also allows them to pursue objectives that might otherwise be off-limits under international law. This agreement thus reinforces a powerful cycle where criminal ingenuity meets state ambition, ultimately serving as a potent combination for projecting power and influence on the global stage.

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A significant perk of this cooperation lies in the financial channels it opens up. Organized criminal organizations are [infamous](#) for moving large sums of money across borders and laundering funds. These activities provide the Kremlin with access to so-called black cash that fuels various state operations, especially covert ones. This funding mechanism allows Russia to bypass the conventional financial scrutiny imposed by international bodies and sanctions, thereby sustaining its strategic initiatives even under economic pressure.

Not to mention how the operational expertise of these criminal networks has been utilized to support a range of clandestine activities. Beyond cyberattacks and assassinations, their [skill set](#) extends to information warfare, smuggling and even manipulating political processes in foreign states. It is difficult for state bureaucracies to act with such efficiency and ruthlessness, particularly in environments where the Kremlin wishes to avoid overt military or diplomatic engagement.

For example, in Ukraine, several investigative reports have suggested that criminal elements with alleged ties to Russian intelligence have been involved in orchestrating smear campaigns against pro-Western politicians, creating a climate of fear and uncertainty ahead of key elections. Similarly, local criminal networks in Moldova have been accused of using economic pressure — through illicit money flows and bribery — to launder money and [influence](#) political groups favorable to the Kremlin to stifle the country's moves to strengthen ties with the European Union.

In the Baltic states, there have been indications that Russian-linked groups have employed a mix of financial coercion and behind-the-scenes lobbying to sway local politicians, ensuring that governments remain either sympathetic to Moscow's agenda or too divided to counteract it effectively. Thus, by embedding criminal operatives within these operations, Russia not only enhances its capabilities but also insulates itself from direct repercussions.

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Lithuanian prosecutors linked the [May 2024](#) arson attack on an IKEA store in Vilnius to the GRU. The attack was allegedly designed to intimidate Lithuania away from supporting Ukraine and involved intermediaries — criminals as opposed to official GRU agents — that provided the necessary cover for such a high-risk operation.

This incident explicitly demonstrates how criminal elements are mobilized for specific, short-term tactical gains. It serves as a stark reminder that while the true power of this alliance lies in its long-term systemic benefits, the occasional high-profile sabotage remains part of the Kremlin's diverse strategies.

Ultimately, the relationship between the Kremlin and organized crime is not simply a series of sporadic encounters, but a carefully cultivated, strategic partnership that enhances Russia's operational capabilities on multiple fronts. Through an agreement between state power and criminal enterprise, the Kremlin gains access to a pool of financial, operational and political resources that would be difficult to secure through traditional state mechanisms alone.

This intricate cooperation demonstrates a critical and unsettling aspect of modern geopolitics: the criminal underworld has transformed into an extension of state power. It is a model that allows Russia to maintain a semblance of plausible deniability while engaging in activities that challenge the very foundations of international law and order.

As the global community grapples with the ramifications of this alliance, it is clear that it is essential for both policymakers and security experts seeking to counter its influence to understand this relationship. The line between legitimate statecraft and criminal enterprise is becoming more vague, creating challenges that extend well beyond the realm of traditional security concerns.

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