

Where Does the “Mafiya” Come From?

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It is always a treat to talk to my Western journalist colleagues about the Russian mafia. They start drawing little squares, with connecting lines between them. “This is the ‘Big Boss,’ this is the ‘boss,’ and this is the ‘captain.’” Looking at this vertical diagram from the bottom up, I ask in surprise: “What are you talking about? The Communist Party?”

Or they ask: “Is there a mafia head who rules from Vladivostok to Brest?” Glancing at the map on the wall, remembering the last time I had to fly on three separate airplanes to get from Moscow to Kamchatka, I answer negligently: “You can’t even always make a telephone call from Moscow to Kaluga. How could just one person rule the mafia in this country?”

Of course I am joking. Or almost. Many of my foreign colleagues know quite a bit about the Russian mafia. But they are the ones who know our history, who have lived here for a long time and understand that the differences in our political systems are not just something politicians dreamed up in their spare time.

About seven years ago I published an article in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* with Alexander Gurov, at that time an almost unknown employee in a militia institute, who then became head of the Interior Ministry department charged with fighting the mafia. Our article, which introduced the concept of “mafia” into the virginal picture of Soviet propaganda, provoked a flood of letters to the editor. The idea of mafia had been around a long time, and, as if the light had been turned on after a period of darkness, people started seeing it everywhere.

“The director of our institute is in the mafia.” “The local police is the mafia.” “Everyone who lives in the next building is in the mafia.” These were the kinds of letters we were getting then. I just could not understand it. It was impossible that thousands of people had gone out of their minds over an article in the newspaper. The reason finally dawned on me after a chance encounter at the domestic airport Domodedovo. My plane had been delayed. I was wandering around, feeling that someone was watching me. I went out onto the street and a man followed. “I recognize you from television,” he stammered. “You are not looking in the right places. The mafia is in the *raikomy* (local Communist Party committees), and the heads are in the Kremlin.” It finally dawned on me why so many letters had been addressed to our editorial offices. It was not that people were imagining the mafia everywhere. They just did not know what else to call what they were seeing around them: a harsh system that crushed human feelings, in which you could not dispose of

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your property as you wished, or even control when *not* to dispose of your property, or have control over your choice of lifestyle, or even over your own thoughts, and in which injustice had become the norm. Just like in those Italian films where the laws of the criminal family superseded human laws.

It was a criminal gang that seized power in 1917, and then perfected the system.

“The Fords and Rockefellers . . . are small fry compared to our officials, who have the capital of a whole country.”

Who could imagine a better “godfather” than Stalin, who bound his cohorts to him with blood? And was not the NKVD, the precursor of the KGB, a band of gangsters, causing terror in the whole country, like bandits somewhere in Palermo? Specialists date the appearance of the first organized

criminal clans in the USSR from the end of the 1960s, when, in the wake of Khrushchev's thaw, the fingers of the system unclenched just a bit, when bureaucrats became a bit braver, convinced that the Big Boss would not return. That is when that three-tiered edifice known as our own Russian mafia began to take shape. The second tier was filled with underground businessmen who wanted to make money. In the third level were the gangsters who ran the rackets. But the first floor was reserved for the bureaucrats. The underground “businessmen” had to spend two-thirds of their income to pay off the bureaucrats, who were protected by the system.

Where is he now, my friend Valera? I met him in 1981, the last year of the long Brezhnev era, when even the endless amount of jokes about the elder leader could not lift the universal boredom in the country. Of course, not everyone was bored, at least not all the time. One evening in Leningrad a friend decided to introduce me to a man who had his own “business.” Valera, this “businessman,” appeared by the hotel in a shiny black Mercedes.

Who could afford a Mercedes in 1981? A bureaucrat, perhaps? God forbid—the economic police would be on him in a second. A Party worker? It would be frightening to contemplate—he would be dragged before endless committees. A teacher? An engineer? No, only a person somehow connected with the mafia. As the Brezhnev period was ending, people who knew how to make money were coming up from the underground. Corruption by then had reached such heights that it was possible to bribe your way out of any situation.

Valera invited me to come see his “business” the next morning. It was in a suburb. We climbed to the second floor of a wooden building to an empty room filled with bookcases. Valera did something to a bookcase, and suddenly it swung open, revealing another room behind it, where five or six young men were sitting at sewing machines. “They're making Jeans,” he said. Not just jeans, mind you, but “American” jeans, judging by the stack of “Levi” and “Lee” labels lying on a shelf. He and I talked all day. From time to time he would say: “Sometimes I think—the hell with it!”

His life, as I understood it, was very difficult, since, although his jeans sold for a high price, his overhead was pretty high as well. “I go to the fabric factory and bribe the director, then to the dye factory and bribe the chief engineer. When I transport the stuff, I have to bribe five or six traffic cops, and the police inspector, and if the

local prosecutor is hanging around, then I have to bribe him too. The first secretary of the local Party committee, when he has guests, demands that I feed and entertain them. And the guys I have working for me have to live, too.” Then he added: “But I have to pay the most to the ones who sign all kinds of permission papers . . .” When we said good-bye he asked sadly: “Do you know when this horrible life will end?”

I never saw Valera again. A few months later I learned that some kind of gang had raided him—either the forerunners of today's racketeers, or else competitors. His “business” was destroyed, his Mercedes burned.

Where could all these people be today? Valera might have created an official company. Or maybe it has already been burned down. Or else the racketeers to whom he gave protection money became his official guards, and then bought the company from him (this is a common story).

The director of the factory, if he is bright, has already privatized it, and if he is brighter still he has established a joint venture. The police inspector, if he is crafty, has been promoted, and now gets higher bribes—probably in dollars. The former first secretary of the local Party committee has probably found himself a comfortable niche in a joint venture—he did not feed and entertain all those guests with Valera's help for nothing. Those who burned his Mercedes could have gone a number of ways: at the beginning of perestroika they could have engaged in serious racketeering on a professional level; now they have probably opened a firm as a cover, and are spending their vacations on Mediterranean cruises. All the capital they brought to their new lives from the old system is dirty. Even Valera, with whom I sympathize: Is it legal to sew labels from foreign firms onto your own products?

This is the ambiance in which the real mafia operates nowadays. Today's mafia is not those who before made their money in jeans. And not those who burden down firms. And not even the bribe-talking policeman. It is another type altogether. The same as before—the ones who had the power to sign documents giving someone the right to do something. As Valera once said: “The ones who sign all kinds of permission papers.” Or the ones who can get such signatures. And if it used to be that these signatures would release a kilometer of denim fabric to poor Valera, now they are giving out licenses to export oil, uranium, and precious metals. A woman whose husband works close to Yeltsin told me that if her husband can organize the signature of the three top persons in the government on a license to export oil, his commission will be \$50 million.

Our bureaucrats, who used to walk around in locally made suits have straightened their shoulders and in a split second have traversed the path from communism to capitalism, and all without raising a finger. The Fords and Rockefellers, with their inherited capital, are small fry compared to our officials, who have the capital of a whole country.

Once I told an American friend who understands what is going on in our country: “Maybe this is the way things should be. Maybe it will be at first like Australia, when convicts were sent there, and just look how things turned out!” He answered: “There's just one difference. There the sheriffs were honest and the shepherds were gangsters. Here, it seems, it's the other way around.”