

REORGANIZING CRIME: MAFIA AND ANTI-MAFIA IN POST-SOVIET GEORGIA (2013)

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This book aims to explore and help understand the resilience of criminal groups and the success of state intervention (in this case the nation state of Georgia) in reducing the influence of organised crime. What had took place in Georgia post collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 which in Gavin Slade's view had turned it from 'a quintessential, organised crime-ridden post-Soviet republic to no country for made men.'

Use the term 'mafia' and most of us will automatically default to mainstream literature and movie sources such as Mario Puzo's 'Godfather' and the Italian-American films of Martin Scorsese. Use the term 'Russian Mafia' and again the default position belongs to films like 'Goldeneye' and 'Lord of War.' Thus while the notion of a mafia and what it is comes easily to us in populist terms when it comes to academia some scholars have argued that the use of the term mafia can obscure more than it can enlighten. The rejection is based on the fact that the multi-application of the term to many concepts (particularly so in the post-Soviet era) that 'mafia' becomes everything and nothing. Gavin Slade defines mafias for his purposes as autonomous entities that pursue a monopoly on protection provision services based ultimately on force within a given territory. Post-Soviet Georgia's thieves-in-law (of which more later) are therefore recognisable by this definition through their involvement and immersion in organised crime.

Georgia declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. This new found independence according to Slade set Georgia on a course of violence, decline and impoverishment as conflicts and civil war broke out. Eduard Shevardnadze, former first secretary of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, was invited to run the country in 1992 and by 1995 had negotiated a temporary end to conflicts. His control was always tenuous and relied on granting autonomy to regional 'strongmen' in return for their loyalty. As the state retreated one group, the thieves-in-law took full advantage. With their origins in the Soviet gulags this group had what Slade calls a: 'carefully cultivated reputation as honourable outlaws within Georgian society based on a mythologised past.'

By the 1990s they were acting with a great deal of impunity, had infiltrated the legal economy and such was their political influence at times they appeared more powerful than the government. This state of affairs began to change in 2003 when Shevardnadze was ousted in a non-violent coup which became known as the Rose Revolution. The new regime led by Mikheil and his United National Movement (UNM) pastry challenged the strongmen, purged the state of corrupt officials, built new prisons and adopted a zero tolerance attitude to all crime.

How did the thieves-in-law fare under this new regime? They failed to adapt to the change in mood and as Slade identifies they had low levels of resilience to what was in effect a state attack on them. Put very simply the thieves-in-law did not adapt to a new social and economic reality and the adaptations and adjustments they made paradoxically left them open and vulnerable to what turned out in the end to be a successful state attack.

So what does this book tell us? Well, for the researcher interested in attempting to emulate such a large and I would add complex study, the research methodology is very well laid out and dotted with some interesting cultural insights such as the fact that very few of the interviews were recorded because: 'in a post-Soviet country such as Georgia, voice recorders do not elicit positive responses.' Whilst the book is very good in making a case for explaining what happened in Georgia Slade is wary of extrapolating the conclusions to other countries which are struggling with extra-legal governance providers such as Southern Italy, Colombia, Jamaica and Mexico. Especially the latter where there isn't the same evidence that hard line state intervention has caused organised crime to decline - rather the opposite with some of the drug cartels seemingly to be growing stronger. Instead he offers the view that there are many variables for understanding why and when criminal organisations change or fail to change. I do think though that there is some cross reading to be done here with other organised crime groups and this work can contribute to a greater understanding of what is a global phenomenon of differing proportions.

In 2012 Mikheil Saakashvili's UNM party was ousted by Georgian Dream who declared an amnesty and released thousands of prisoners despite warnings from the UNM that such a move would bring about the return of the thieves-in-law. There is no sign of that happening up to now but what is interesting is the legacy lessons learned from the time of the UNM. Georgia's economy was liberalised with a privatisation agenda, Saakashvili declared executive powers which drew greater control of affairs to himself and unemployment and the accompanying poverty and inequality remained at stubbornly high levels. And whilst the criminal justice system was overhauled to root out corruption the courts remained largely unreformed and mistrusted by the public. The prison population grew as the anti-mafia policy took hold with many citizens drawn into the net which is not surprising given the passage of laws which made it an offence to be suspected of mafia association. Ironically then, one of Strang's telling conclusions is that whilst the belief persists that the state is unjust and there is no social stigma to having been in jail then the alternative extra-legal governance providers, like the thieves-in-law for example, will always find themselves in demand and an outlet for what services they have to offer.