

'Russian Mafia' Abroad Now 300,000 Strong, Journal Says

By [Paul Goble](#)

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VIENNA — After avoiding any use of the term "Russian mafia" in the last few years, law enforcement personnel in Europe and elsewhere are now speaking about it again, noting that it includes "up to 300,000 people" and dominates the criminal world in many countries around the world, according to a Moscow investigative journalist.

In Monday's [Versiya](#), Ruslan Gorevoy says law enforcement personnel in many countries — including Spain, Greece, Hungary, Italy, France, Mexico "and even the United States" — have been surprised by how "confidently" criminal groups consisting of people from the former Soviet Union now dominate their national criminal worlds.

Indeed, the Versiya report continues, the Russian groups, which include "up to 300,000 of our compatriots," have succeeded in pushing aside local groups and establishing their own "spheres of influence" to the point that they no longer need to "clarify relations with the help of arms."

Gorevoy describes some of the most notorious cases involving Russian organized criminal groups abroad before using interviews with Russian officials to suggest some more general conclusions. He recalls the discovery that drug traffickers were using submarines to move their product from South America to Mexico.

These submarines, he points out, "were purchased as scrap metal" from a Ukrainian firm that was involved in decommissioning Soviet diesel subs, then repapered in the Romania city of Konstanz before sailing across the Atlantic. While they were ultimately discovered, it is impossible to say how many tons of drugs they carried or even what the situation is today.

The U.S. Navy, he notes, has taken great pride in reporting its interdiction efforts in this regard, but knowing the abilities of Russian criminal groups, Gorevoy continues, "it is possible" that such vessels may still be playing a role. The tone of his article suggests that he personally would not bet against these groups.

In Spain, he explains, Russian criminal groups control 90 percent of the drugs and illegal arms flows and were involved in the murder of Paddy Doyle, a leading Irish criminal who was operating there. His death and the ensuing trial led to the publication of numerous articles about Russian organized crime.

Russian officials have been dismissive of much of that coverage. Pavel Krasheninnikov, the head of the Duma's legal affairs committee, told Gorevoy that "certain groups may have an ethnic character [there], but this still does not provide the foundation for claims about the presence of a specific national mafia of this or that country."

Poland, Gorevoy continues, was "the first country of Europe into which organized crime from Russia began to penetrate," pushing out — together with criminals from Ukraine and Belarus — Romanian and Albanian criminal organizations that had dominated the situation there before the Russians arrived.

The Polish police have not been able to "liquidate" Russian organized crime, and "according to certain data, at the present time" there are as many as 20,000 Russian criminals operating in that country, making it, in numerical terms at least, "the largest Russian criminal diaspora in the world."

But it would be a mistake to focus only on Poland or Eastern European countries like Romania and Hungary, where the Russian criminal presence is large. Over the last decade, the Russian mafia has reached around the world, including Australia, where it has been involved in electronic crime, Singapore, London and various countries in the Western hemisphere.

Interpol, the international police agency, does not maintain the kind of files that allow for an even approximate assessment of the number of Russian criminals operating abroad. But last year, the National Prosecutor of Italy concluded that there are "up to 300,000" criminals from Russia operating in other countries.

One of the largest or at least most profitable activities of Russian criminals abroad, the Italians said, is money laundering, with the Russian mafia "laundering" funds in the United States, Marianas and Guam. In addition, they added, Russian criminals are charging Mexican drug lords 30 percent for laundering drug profits from sales in the United

States.

In Italy itself, prosecutors reported, "representatives of the Russian mafia in 2008 formed an alliance with local [criminal groups, including the Cosa Nostra]" and took under joint control "practically 100 percent of the agricultural enterprises of Italy and at the same time practically all shippers, both international and domestic."

The German newspaper *Suddeutsche Zeitung* reports, citing sources official and otherwise, that there are approximately 160,000 Russian criminals in Europe, compared to 70,000 of Italian origin, 40,000 of American background and 37,000 from Asian countries. The Russians have corrupted at least some officials in order to cover their tracks, the paper said

The Munich paper's Rudolph Himelli said that "Russian mafiosi are better organized and permit themselves to commit the boldest crimes, remaining in practice unpunished," crimes that are "of a completely different order of magnitude than those committed by Turkish immigrants or criminals from countries in Eastern Europe," including illegal arms sales to Libya and Iraq.

Vladimir Zhirinovsky, the flamboyant head of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia and vice speaker of the Duma, says that none of this information justifies any suggestion that there is a Russian mafia operating abroad let alone implying that Moscow is somehow responsible for it.

"Yes," Zhirinovsky acknowledges, "people from the republics of the former USSR really occupy an important position in the international criminal community, and in recent years this position can even be called a dominant one. But here is one 'but': Many of these people already have been living abroad for a long time" and have exchanged Russian passports for foreign ones.

Consequently, he continues, they are now "more the representatives of Western and not our culture." Indeed, the LDPR leader insists, "the fact that these people left Russia may testify only that our law enforcement organs do not allow them to make their way" in their homeland, while the police in other countries are not as successful.

That argument may convince some Russians or provide a justification to some in the West who would like to ignore this issue, but Gorevoy's article suggests that Zhirinovsky's claims will not be persuasive to justice officials in Europe or elsewhere who on a daily basis have to combat a larger and more active Russian mafia.

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