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## Organized Crime: Political Survival Strategies and Post-Soviet Implications

### **Introduction**

Although Soviet organized crime groups heavily limited their interactions with state and business elites, changes in their codes increasingly allowed for collaborations in response to political environments that these groups considered threats. As a result, changes in codes can be perceived as a political survival strategy, which resulted in the eventual formation of an autocratic winning coalition consisting of organized crime groups, business elites, and state officials. This coalition contributed to post-Soviet states such as Russia and Ukraine being classified as mafia states. Therefore, organized crime groups' willingness to adjust to changes in the political environment facilitated their ability to merge with state and business elites, which has had a long lasting impact on post-Soviet states, including implications for the current Ukraine War.

Organized criminal activity generally increases around "turbulent times," as they seek to profit from legal and political gray areas (McCarthy 70), (Orlova 1). As such, Soviet organized crime groups changed their rules and codes in response to events that threatened their existence. In the Soviet Union and post-Soviet states, organized crime groups profited by providing "either illicit goods and services or licit ones in an illegal fashion" and by increasingly engaging in state corruption (Orlova 2). For example, they changed their codes following the Soviet era "Bitch Wars," in order to ensure their own survival in the Stalinist system (Lonsky 12). Organized crime

groups again changed their code as the Soviet Union collapsed to ensure their survival in spite of changing political and economic contexts (Lonsky 12, 14-15) (Varese et al 157). However, these code changes encouraged the formation of a “winning coalition” between organized crime, business elites, and the state, characterized by “stronger loyalty and support among coalition members,” (Holcombe 2004). Additionally, autocratic winning coalitions tend to benefit from policies that do not encompass the preferences of the overall constituency (Holcombe 2004). Instead, the overlap between national interests and organized crime interests indicates the emergence of mafia states (Naim 2012).

Generally, in autocracies, winning coalitions are small, which leads to “stronger loyalty and support among coalition members,” (Holcombe 2004). When the Soviet Union collapsed, organized crime groups absorbed Soviet soldiers, police and security service officials who were suddenly unemployed, and formed alliances with state officials, which eventually included Putin and “his KGB allies,” (Orlova 5) (Belton 87). Due to insufficient institutions, organized crime groups took over some state functions, allowing them to form ties with business and political elites forming a “new ruling class...composed of organized crime members and former party apparatchik,” (Shelley 57). In this way, weak institutions and the general availability of opportunities encouraged alliances between organized crime and business elites as well as state apparatuses.

Autocratic winning coalitions directly benefit members with private goods, which can be seen from organized crime groups benefiting Soviet leaders, and collaborating with Post Soviet leaders such as Putin. In these cases, “the welfare of leaders and the welfare of citizens require different policies,” (Holcombe 2004). This coalition subsequently imposed order, not for the overall constituency, but rather for themselves (Belton 87). Therefore, the winning coalition

stayed in power through following their code and appeasing each other, without having to appease the overall constituency (Holcombe 2004).

The collaboration between state officials and organized crime contributed to both Russia and Ukraine being classified as mafia states (McCarthy-Jones & Turner 1198). While both states have officially implemented anti-corruption laws and have allegedly attempted to crack down on organized crime, these attempts are undermined due to the groups being embedded in the state through their winning coalition. As mentioned above, organized crime increases during “turbulent times,” which is reflected in the increase in illicit arms deals and human trafficking resulting from the Ukraine War (Orlova 1 (“4 Continental Overviews and Results” 2023). Both Russia and Ukraine have been classified as mafia states, which has implications for the code that organized crime groups follow during the war, especially if these groups form part of their respective countries’ winning coalitions. This has impacted the conduct of certain organized crime groups during the Ukraine War, which is discussed further in the final section of this paper.

This paper will discuss the consequences of two incidents in which Soviet organized crime groups changed their codes in response to perceived existential threats: internal conflict during Stalin’s rule and the collapse of the Soviet Union. There will be a discussion on the consequences of organized crime groups’ survival strategy, with an emphasis on increased collaboration with business and political elites in the 1990s. This will be followed by a section discussing the impact that the winning coalition had on mafia state formation. Both Russia and Ukraine will be discussed in more detail in respective sections. Finally, the implications of the mafia state winning coalition will be analyzed in the context of the Ukraine War.

### **Codes, Coalitions, & Consequences: 1940s-1950s**

In the early Soviet era, organized criminal groups initially restricted their collaboration with the state, but eventually relaxed limitations in order to ensure their own survival, which culminated in the formation of a winning coalition when the Soviet Union collapsed. The “criminal fraternity” expanded during the early Soviet era, however during World War 2 there was an internal conflict between factions due to disagreement over the restrictions on collaborating with the state. One faction was willing to break the rules against collaborating with the state because prisoners who served in the Red Army could reduce their prison sentences and gain benefits, while the “traditional” faction followed the code regarding state collaboration and refused the trade-off (Varese et al 160), (Lonsky 12). This internal divide led to the “Suka Wars” or “Bitch Wars,” lasting from 1948 through 1954, which nearly wiped out the vory-v-zakone, which was Russia’s largest mafia group (Lonsky 12). Due to the significant damage caused by disagreement over state collaboration, the group changed its code, and subsequently allowed for some collaboration with authorities (Lonsky 12).

Organized crime groups survived Stalinist state repression by adapting to “the new circumstance by slightly altering its rules,” while continuing to hold “a firm opposition to wholesale collaboration with the authorities,” (Varese et al 160). For example, one of the concessions made was that “vory could become team leaders and barbers in camps,” because leaders could decide on workloads and food rations, allowing him to determine “the fate of his comrades,” while barbers could access “razors and scissors, valuable weapons in time of war,” demonstrating that changes were made to increase group members’ chances of survival (Varese et al 157). Additionally, criminals were able to evade incarceration by forming “strong connections to the official power structure, the Communist Party, and its spreading bureaucracy,”

which allowed them to take advantage of the change in rules to further ensure the survival of groups in spite of incarceration and internal conflicts (McCarthy 58). They would similarly change their code in the 1990s, allowing them to “accumulate wealth and engage in a limited way with law enforcement,” to account for privatization and political transition in the early 1990s, marking an era of increasing collaboration (Varese et al 160).

### **Codes, Coalitions, & Consequences: 1990s**

Organized crime groups’ codes were changed again to ensure they survived the collapse of the Soviet Union. This allowed organized crime groups to collaborate with state and former state officials, business elites, and profit from the new system. The nature and degree of these collaborations ensured a symbiotic relationship between organized crime groups, business elites, and the state, forming a winning coalition in which members stayed in power by appeasing each other, not the general constituency (Holcombe 2004). Due to changes in organized crime groups’ rules, and the subsequent merge between state and criminal interests, post-Soviet nations such as Russia and Ukraine can be categorized as mafia states (Naim 2012).

Overall, organized groups such as “the fraternity of the vory” changed their codes in order to “adapt to a changing environment,” and increase their profits and ensure their survival (Varese et al 160). Generally, criminal organizations face existential threats when there are changes in laws, technology, as well as “transformations in legal and illegal markets and emergence of criminal competitors,” (Varese et al 143). The Stalinist era and the 1990s were turbulent eras in which there were changes in laws and markets, which could pose threats to the survival of organized crime groups. Arguably, the biggest threat that Soviet organized crime groups faced was the “state transformation in the 1990s,” not Stalin’s regime, as the economic and political transformation at the time of the Soviet Union’s collapse allowed multiple actors to

compete for previously “absent economic opportunities (Varese et al 143-144, 160). The changes in organized crime codes allowed these groups to benefit from privatization processes, and led them to form alliances with business elites, creating part of the winning coalition.

Alliances between organized crime groups and post-Soviet business elites resulted from changes in the formation of part of the winning coalition. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, “it was unacceptable to accumulate properties,” and cooperation with the state was far more limited (Varese et al 157). With the collapse of the Soviet Union, basic government functions like dispute settlement, property protection, “either disappeared or were hopelessly inefficient,” allowing organized crime groups to step in and consolidate their power by “filling every state and nonstate void,” (McCarthy 58). Therefore, legal and political gray areas provided organized groups with opportunities to “accumulate immense wealth, and to spend it on goods and services” that were previously not as accessible (McCarthy 70), (Varese et al 157). For example, organized crime groups changed their codes to benefit from weak property rights laws, business and tax regulations, and criminal justice institutions during the privatization process by engaging in legal and illegal markets (Lonsky 2-3, 14).

Overall, “turbulent socioeconomic and political environments are likely to increase the magnitude of corruption,” and organized crime, including violence (Orlova 17). An estimated 40,000 enterprises were controlled by organized crime by 1993 in Russia, indicating the scope of their involvement in the business world (Shelley 59). This is reflected in the increased involvement of businesses in violent incidents. At the time, most homicides attributed to organized crime groups were not “random but associated with business people’s trading partners or connections with the criminal world,” such as people who failed to pay protection money or participated in illegal operations (Shelley 58). Additionally, the “Great Mob War” of the 1990s

led to deaths of criminals as well as legitimate businessmen, demonstrating blurred boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate sides of post communist economies, (Lonsky 23). As a result, “the winners of the Great Mob War were Russia’s new businessmen,” which demonstrates that economic success in Russia was tied to affiliations and connections with organized crime (Lonsky 23).

Organized crime groups’ rule changes also allowed them to take advantage of weak institutions in order to form a winning coalition with state and security officials. Collaboration with state entities was far more limited before the collapse of the Soviet Union, however organized crime groups increasingly provided funding and protection for politicians and state figures (Varese et al 157) (Lonsky 23). For example, Russia’s “fledgling legislature” failed to pass laws controlling organized crime, which allowed for further collaboration and increased corruption, and demonstrates the role that weak institutions played in the process (Shelley 57). Additionally, the connection between organized crime groups and the state deepened when these groups began to fund political campaigns. For example, Russian parliamentary elections in 1993 received funding from organized crime groups, while subsequent parliamentary members had close ties to these groups (Shelley 57). The extent of collaboration is evident as there was a lack of mafia driven violence against politicians, law enforcement, and judges, which is attributed to their “widespread collusion,” beginning in the mid-1990s (Lonsky 22, 23). Therefore, changes in organized crime groups’ rules and the presence of weak institutions incentivized direct collaboration with politicians.

Changes in organized crime rules and increasing political involvement facilitated the direct ties with state officials. This contributed to both Russia and Ukraine to be classified as mafia states after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In mafia states, criminals can “co-opt and

recruit individuals in ‘powerful positions,’ and vice versa (Kupatadze 29). Their “interest in cooperation is mutual,” as both sides benefit from cycles of impunity and information (Kupatadze 29). The Soviet Union’s collapse left government workers either unpaid or unemployed, incentivizing “thousands of KGB agents...to work for organized crime groups,” which left states like Russia “without a functioning state police and created another vacuum that organized crime could exploit,” (McCarthy 58, 59). Consequently, organized crime groups used former KGB personnel to bolster their ability to provide paid protection, which was a factor that led Yeltsin to refer to Russia as “the biggest mafia state in the world,” in 1994 (McCarthy 59).

Winning coalitions between organized crime, business elites, and state figures were facilitated by rule changes, and led to Russian and Ukraine’s classification as mafia states. In general, mafia states are countries that are administered like criminal organizations where leaders head “a network of family and friends who make private gains from state action,” or states that cooperate with organized crime groups (McCarthy-Jones & Turner 1198). Kupatadze argues that mafia states are characterized when there is state capture by organized crime groups, criminalized elites, or a combination of these groups (30). In mafia states, the lines between the legitimate “upperworld” and the “underworld” become blurry, creating gray areas of operation for all involved (McCarthy 70), (Kupatadze 35). This is a symbiotic system in which legitimate political and economic sectors are forced to depend on “monopolies and networks of organized crime,” (Kupatadze 31). Therefore, in mafia states, national interests, and the interests of organized crime groups merge (Naim 2012). Finally, mafia states are generally authoritarian but may have a range of political practices, such as an outright authoritarian president that suppresses all opposition, or a system with the illusion of democratic practices (McCarthy-Jones & Turner 1198). Therefore, despite differences in their democratic classifications, both Russia



and Ukraine can be classified as mafia states due to the formation of winning coalitions that include organized crime groups, business elites, and state officials (McCarthy-Jones & Turner 1197, 1195). This alliance contributes to Russia's classification as an autocratic mafia state (McCarthy-Jones & Turner 119). Therefore, post-Soviet mafia states emerged due to the presence of a winning coalition that resulted from organized crime groups' survival strategy responding to the Soviet Union's collapse (Naim 2012).

### **Mafia State Formation: Russia**

Although organized crime groups have formed part of Russia's autocratic winning coalition, they are no longer the dominant governance structure and are not the central figure of the coalition. Generally, the winning coalition, characterized by strong loyalty among the members, ensures policies that benefit members rather than the welfare of Russians overall (Holcombe 2004). Due to the non-negligible overlap between national and organized crime interests, the formation and endurance of Russia's winning coalition has led it to be a factor in its classification as a mafia state (Naim 2012). As Russia's state structures and government officials consolidated their own power, organized crime groups ceased to be the primary enforcement and governance structure, as was common in Russia's anarchic period in the 1990s, (Orlova 3), (Galeotti 55). Organized crime groups may have conceded some power to limit challenges from the formal government in order to ensure their own survival while maintaining the coalition, which allowed them to benefit from impunity.

Groups like Russia's Solntsevo Brotherhood are "above all else, a business," and understand that their survival depends on how well they handle their business, which includes balancing the interests of the rest of the coalition (McCarthy 71). While Russian organized crime groups and the state are not one and the same, they are part of a "set" which includes oligarchs

(McCarthy 76). Organized crime, state officials, and oligarchs can be considered “subsets”. Generally, Russian organized crime encompasses overlaps between these subsets, which change overtime (McCarthy 76). As the lines between the subsets shifted, dominance shifted from organized crime to the state, namely Putin. However, the preferences of all members of the winning coalition continue to impact Russia’s institutions and markets.

In the 1990s, Russian organized crime groups began to intertwine with the state, creating “gray areas” in Russia’s political sphere, which were characterized by the overlapping activities and interests of “some ‘former’ Russian spies, some oligarchs...” and organized criminals (McCarthy 63, 66-67, 70). Notably, Russian security personnel became actively involved in international business and other public sectors (McCarthy 67). Also, Putin “allowed top F.S.B. officials...” to engage in business by acquiring stake in oil, retail, finance and telecommunications companies, leading to the F.S.B to become a “business” itself, and “no longer just a police organization,” (McCarthy 67). This allowed for certain business interests to be prioritized since they had “the power of violence...troops and intelligence equipment,” (McCarthy 67). The overlapping interests that state security officials, businessmen, and organized criminals shared defined the beginning of the winning coalition as it incentivized them to remain loyal to each other in order to benefit from the burgeoning economic and political opportunities. This is especially true considering some people fall under multiple categories. For example, intelligence officers who used their power and ability to use force and violence to embed themselves in this system have been called “siloviki,” and have been estimated to make up about ¼ of Russia’s political elite (McCarthy 68). Some siloviki currently hold power in the Kremlin and while some top figures in Russian business circles are believed to have formerly been KGB agents (McCarthy 68). Due to their overlapping interests, and in some cases

overlapping positions, they have remained “proponents of a dominating role for government in the economy,” causing a long-term impact on Russian markets and shifting the economic central power to the government and away from organized crime groups (McCarthy 69). The rest of the section delineates how Soviet organized crime groups initially formed their winning coalition in more depth, shifted away from being dominant in the coalition to ensure their survival in the Russian political system, and explores the implications this has had on contemporary Russia.

Following the Soviet Union’s collapse, widespread mistrust in the state and democratic reforms, weak enforcement mechanisms, and high corruption rates also allowed the Russian mafia to fill in gaps left by the “institutional vacuum,” (Orlova 4). Former soviet soldiers, security service personnel and police officers who were suddenly unemployed, or lost prestige found new opportunities in the mafia-dominated system, as organized crime groups benefited from their experience and information (Orlova 5). Therefore, in the first few years following the Soviet Union’s collapse, organized crime groups in St. Petersburg formed an alliance with Putin and “his KGB allies,” (Belton 87). As such, Russia’s mafia at the time was characterized by the involvement of people who had “past or present connections to the state’s control agencies,” (Orlova 5). For example, this kind of alliance facilitated the Tambov, St. Petersburg’s most powerful organized crime group at the time, took over the city’s fuel and energy business by monopolizing the sea port and oil terminal, which led to a merger between criminal, political, and business interests (Belton 97-99). Additionally, “Putin seemed to be central” in the negotiations that facilitated this takeover while KGB leaders such as Cherkesov became links between local government officials, security services, and organized crime (Belton 99, 186). Cherkesov also was a key player in Tambov’s monopolization of St. Petersburg’s sea port (Belton 186). This demonstrates the role that intelligence and security officials played in

organized crime groups' power consolidation in the 1990s, and how their interests converged. Given that between 1998 and 1999, one of Tambov's leaders had a 2.2% share in Bank Rossiya, the alliance between organized crime and "Putin's KGB men" were running St. Petersburg and subsequently the country "in their own interests," (Belton 558).

By 1995, organized crime had embedded itself in "all government levels," (Shelley 56). This diffusion was projected to limit the democratic transition, impact human rights, and emerging markets, as "domination by the communist party...[was] being replaced by" organized crime (Shelley 56). Putin "has increasingly begun to come to terms with the fact" that his power over Russia depends on his ability to deal with organized crime groups due to "Russia's culture of rampant corruption," (Galeotti 64). As the early coalition was formed between people affiliated with the KGB, organized crime, and Putin himself, as seen in the Tambov case, this demonstrates the extent of loyalty and impunity resulting from and driving the coalition.

In the 1990s, "mafia territories" experienced increased violence against businessmen, criminals, and state security officials as well as judges, however there was no change in violence directed at politicians (Lonsky 4). When there was a lack of conflict between organized crime groups, they attempted to keep lower profiles due to their presence as "extra-legal governing" bodies, they in some cases provided a form of public safety, but if their authority was challenged by other powerful groups, there was an increase in local crime (Lonsky 5). While the "all-powerful mafia groups" dominated as power brokers as the Soviet Union collapsed, they have been arguably "replaced by corrupt state officials," (Orlova 3). Boris Yeltsin implemented some institutional reforms during his presidency, however it promoted "crony capitalism" that benefited a small group in return for their political support, (Orlova 3). Therefore, the institutions following the Soviet Union's collapse also facilitated the formation of a small winning coalition

that matches the characteristics of an autocratic winning coalition. By forming these connections and taking over government functions, “challenging the state monopoly on violence,” organized crime groups gained political power and access to state institutions, (Orlova 5). For example, in Russia's 1993 parliamentary election, some candidates received campaign funding from organized crime groups, which demonstrated a merger between legal and illegal power structures, (Orlova 5).

While Russian organized crime groups do not “own” Russia, they have “exploited opportunities to cultivate strategic alliances,” which is particularly evident in their involvement in the legitimate business sector (Galeotti 54). Solntsevo and other organized criminal groups moved into banking, which brought them closer to oligarchs, increasing the opportunities for them to collaborate as their interests merged (McCarthy 73). The extent of these powerful alliances can be demonstrated by the Kremlin’s acknowledgement that in 1995 Russian organized crime controlled around 40% of Russia’s economy (Galeotti 54). Russian organized crime was characterized by “its close, incestuous relationship with Russian business,” however by the early 2000s, some large Russian firms were beginning to move away from this in order to merge into the international business community, which was reflected by some of the high-profile organized criminals who “after all, are generally also businessmen,” (Galeotti 67). Therefore, there was a shift away from overt violence, transitioning the dominance in the coalition toward the more legitimate side of the coalition. Therefore, while Russia’s early post-Soviet underworld was characterized by overt “protection racketeering, contract killing and turf wars,” by 2005 its characteristics began to shift to accommodate the stabilizing political system (Galeotti 55). As such, organized crime networks became larger and more mature, and “more professional,” while eliminating smaller groups that had “emerged in the freewheeling

days of the early Russian state,” which bolstered the winning coalition’s dominance (Galeotti 55).

Putin’s strategy was “a state-building programme intolerant of the kind of open anarchy that was rampant in the 1990s,” signifying that in some sense organized crime groups again evolved in order to survive the political environment around the (Galeotti 55). As a result of this strategy, while organized crime groups continue to be involved in criminal activities such as drug and human trafficking, “the most important criminal godfathers” were engaged in legal or “largely-legal” sectors as of 2010, (Galeotti 55). This demonstrates that they were willing to shift in their strategies to accommodate the state’s preferences in order to continue benefiting from the coalition and avoid crackdowns. Additionally, even though they did not fully “own” Russia, they continued to have significant influence through “violent entrepreneurship,” which is the ability to transform “coercive muscle into economics power,” demonstrating their willingness and ability to accommodate Russia’s evolving system following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Galeotti 57), (McCarthy 71).

Organized crime groups’ strategy of adjusting to the political environment to continue to survive and profit appears to continue to work in their favor. For example, while Putin claimed he was going to target organized crime, there has been “no abatement,” and there are signs of “greater interconnectedness between organized crime and the legitimate economy,” (Orlova 10,11). Putin and state officials have overtaken “oligarchs and mafia leaders as key members in the Russian system,” while organized crime groups are now “less violent and less interested in acquiring political power,” and focus instead on economic and social opportunities (Orlova 10, 11). However, their interests and preferences continue to overlap, incentivizing certain subsets to remain loyal, which in turn keeps the post-Soviet winning coalition in place. For example,

Russia's Criminal Code was amended in 2019 to target organized crime groups but it has had very little impact due to the high level of corruption (Orlova 11). Therefore, both personal relationships and informal power "mean more" than institutions in Russia, demonstrating the loyalty within the winning coalition continues to be a decisive factor in surviving and retaining power, even if the balance of power shifted from organized crime's favor to that of Putin rather than any organized crime group that dominated the system in the 1990s (Orlova 11).

Corruption and lack of enforcement of anti-organized crime laws have allowed the winning coalition's members to maintain their alliance, contributing to Russia's classification as a mafia state, which continues to impact Russian institutions. Following the 2019 amendment and some minimal changes to Russia's Criminal Code intended to target organized crime, there has been little success in abating organized criminal activity in Russia (Orlova 6). For example, Russia passed a law in 2009 to specifically target leaders of criminal groups, however "recorded crimes attributed to organized crime "decreased five-fold" between 2008 and 2017, accompanied by a decrease in recorded economic offenses (Varese et al 154, 155). It is unlikely that this represents a real reduction in criminal activity. Instead, it demonstrates the criminalization of elected institutions, and the increased ability to conceal crimes (Varese et al 155). Therefore, despite Putin's assertion that he would crack down on organized crime, there is little evidence to demonstrate any substantial effort, as prominent leaders are usually released after brief periods (Varese et al 154). Prosecution remains largely focused on lower level criminals rather than high-level criminals with ties to economic crimes, indicating an impunity for members of the winning coalitions (Orlova 6). Former members of the coalition, including oligarchs, who have challenged Putin have been jailed, resulting in no anti-Putin oligarchs

remaining in Russia (Orlova 6,7). Therefore, while there is an appearance of anti-corruption, they have only been targeted because their loyalty to the rest of the winning coalition was weak.

Organized crime groups' ability to adapt to institutional changes at the time of the Soviet Union's collapse and evolve in their business approach facilitated collaboration with state and private actors, creating a winning coalition. This set conditions for overlapping interests as well as the possibility of blackmail, which increases the incentive to remain loyal in order for all members of the coalition to continue to benefit from mutual protection and impunity. While organized crime shifts its strategy in order to continue to survive in Putin's political system, their interests and national interests converged, allowing Russia to be classified as a "mafia state" (Naim 2012). In fact, the initial collaboration between people affiliated with the KGB and organized crime was a factor that led Yeltsin to call Russia "the biggest mafia state in the world" in 1994 (McCarthy 59). Although organized crime groups no longer dominate Russian cities as they did in the 1990s, the lines between criminal, business, and state "subsets" continue to blur and shift, which has had implications for organized criminal activities in the Ukraine War, which will be discussed in the final section of this paper (McCarthy 76) (Shelley 56).

### **Mafia State Formation: Ukraine**

Ukrainian organized crime groups, like those of Russia, were able to survive the political transition of the 1990s because they adapted to changing conditions and formed alliances to maintain power. Soviet-era policies and weak institutions led to legal and economic gray areas that gave organized crime groups an advantage and ability to increase their own power by engaging with business elites and expanding illicit markets. The subsequent corruption and blackmail system also incentivized collusion between the state and organized crime, while insufficient legal frameworks encouraged business-organized crime collaboration, leading to the



formation of a winning coalition similar to Russia's coalition. Overall, Ukrainian organized crime groups followed a trajectory similar to that of Russian organized crime groups, as their respective states "shared common features," including a "crisis of authority and law," and a disruption to the economic system (Williams and Picarelli 103, 104).

Soviet era policies led to the formation of weak institutions and state capacity, which in turn contributed to the formation of the winning coalition as it gave organized crime groups an opportunity to exploit businesses. The Soviet Union suppressed "any legitimate economic enterprise," and in its later years engaged in "tacit condoning of various forms of illegal economy," leading both Russian and Ukraine to be "ill-prepared for the development of free market economies in terms of legitimate entrepreneurship," which gave organized crime networks being more prepared to exploit the new system (Williams and Picarelli 103). Ukraine in particular was targeted by the Soviet Union's attempt "to stamp out any tradition of economic enterprise," through forced agricultural collectivization and other policies, which complicated its post-Soviet attempt to develop a market economy (Williams and Picarelli 103). Therefore, Soviet policies created conditions that were advantageous for organized crime, and gave them an opportunity to collaborate with business elites after the Soviet Union's collapse.

During its transition in the 1990s, Ukraine's legal framework was not sufficient to combat organized crime, leading to around twenty amendments to the Criminal Code to address these groups (Williams and Picarelli 104). However, there was little enforcement for these laws, and regulations for the new market, particularly a lack of "legal debt collection" and dispute arbitration, allowed "organized crime groups to become a surrogate for government authority" by providing protection for businesses and enforcing debt collection, similar to the alliance formed between Russian organized criminals and business elites (Williams and Picarelli 104). By

forming an alliance with business elites, Ukrainian criminals were able to create a “seamless web between the licit and illicit,” similar to the formation of Russia’s “gray areas,” (Williams and Picarelli 104), (McCarthy 70). Ukrainian businessmen were considered to be both accomplices and victims in increasingly ruthless crimes committed in the business world, which also reflects Russia’s case, as many of those killed in the Great Mob War were legitimate businessmen (Williams and Picarelli 104), (Lonsky 23). The two most common activities associated with Ukrainian organized crime include contract killings and money laundering. Most of the time, contract killings are associated with cases of businessmen resisting organized criminal infiltration, extortion attempts, or who have failed to pay off debts, indicating the importance of the business sector as well as maintaining loyalty in the coalition (Williams and Picarelli 117).

By the early 2000s, Ukraine’s “shadow economy” was suspected of making up about half of its overall economy, including both informal and illegal activities, proving the coalition to be a lucrative structure (Williams and Picarelli 106). One of the most prominent “businesses” that Ukrainian organized crime groups have engaged in has been arms trafficking. Ukrainian organized crime groups have been deeply involved in arms trafficking since the Soviet Union collapsed, which has continued to encourage both corruption as well as tax fraud (Williams and Picarelli 112). When the Soviet Union collapsed, mostly private defense companies and ministries were involved in illegal and unregistered arms trades until the Ukrainian government combined them into a state owned enterprise (Williams and Picarelli 112). Despite this move, organized crime groups became more involved in the trade, with a study from 2001 indicating that “official state-run arms transfers” only accounted for about 20% of the arms trades (Williams and Picarelli 112). Ukrainian organized crime groups have been accused of engaging in arms transfers with groups in active combat, and with colluding with Russian criminal

networks, negatively impacting its attempts to reform itself and appear credible as a democracy (Williams and Picarelli 113).

Organized crime groups' willingness to increasingly collaborate with the state further contributed to their survival in the post-Soviet transition. During the Soviet era, organized crime had "been little more than a nuisance" that was often exploited by the state, however after the Soviet Union's collapse, organized crime groups became increasingly powerful, with the potential to challenge the state and ability to collude "with key members of the political elite," including security personnel (Williams and Picarelli 103). Ukraine's post-Soviet political structure also facilitated the formation of the winning coalition and incentivized a loop of corruption.

Ukraine's post-Soviet state building strategy was ironically an emulation of the Soviet Union as it concentrated power in ministries in Kyiv instead of Moscow, which facilitated "opportunities for corruption and rent-seeking behavior," through the formation of a concentrated bureaucracy (Williams and Picarelli 108). The high level corruption was subsequently "emulated at lower levels," resulting in organized crime being able to "operate at virtually every level of political life from national to local," and create "vertical alliances" with politicians and bureaucrats to compete with "rival coalitions of similar players," leading to the politicization of organized crime groups, and the criminalization of Ukraine's political system (Williams and Picarelli 108, 109). The formation of these coalitions allowed former party members to become involved in corruption and organized crime in order to benefit personally "from criminal activity on one side and the resources of the state on the other," (Williams and Picarelli 109, 110).

The state's "permissive" attitude toward corruption further facilitated the alliance between organized crime groups and the state (Darden 68). Corruption levels peaked following the post-Soviet transition, indicating that the state could not enforce the law "and had been captured by an oligarchy of private interests," (Darden 67). High corruption levels in Ukraine stemmed from the post-Soviet organized crime, state, and business coalition, which incentivized the state to enforce or not enforce policies depending on the coalition's preferences rather than those of Ukrainians overall (Holcombe 2004). Ukraine's "political-criminal-business troika" contained "key people in the three sectors and...some figures straddling" the sectors (Williams and Picarelli 110). While the West increasingly demanded a centralized state that could counter corruption and implement market reforms by the end of the 1990s, the state used informal mechanisms such as blackmail as an "essential element" in establishing its political control, indicating that it had developed its own gray areas of operation, similar to Russia's (Darden 67). In order to use blackmail to its advantage, state leaders had to have a "permissive attitude...toward corruption," indicating that there was a willingness to engage with organized crime to begin with (Darden 68). The scale at which the state's permissive attitude impacted the level of corruption and organized crime-government collusion can partially be seen through bribery rates. Given that 33% of criminal proceeds were spent on bribery in the mid 1980s, and it rose to about 50% by the early 2000s, demonstrating that state permissiveness of corruption increasingly facilitated organized crime groups to survive in Ukraine's new political structure (Darden 68) (Williams and Picarelli 110).

Ukraine's blackmail and surveillance system further incentivized the maintenance of the winning coalition, and further contributed to Ukraine's classification as a mafia state. Ukraine was able to easily institutionalize state blackmail because it "inherited an extensive surveillance

apparatus,” indicating another way that Soviet structures contributed to the formation of the winning coalition. In Kuchma’s blackmail state, business elites who opposed the regime were “stripped of their assets and placed under arrest,” signaling the importance that Ukraine’s state leaders placed on loyalty, which mirrors aspects of Russia’s winning coalition, (Darden 69). Additionally, the surveillance structure provided criminalized leaders with the ability to use information and intelligence to sustain the blackmail state and the coalition’s reliance on loyalty (Darden 69).

Similar to the Russian case, Ukrainian organized crime groups employed “former intelligence and special forces personnel” who could give them “more sophisticated methods of intimidation and elimination,” (Williams and Picarelli 106-107). Using former security personnel likely bolstered the state’s ability to resort to blackmail to benefit the coalition. Kuchma’s surveillance and blackmail system was a means to ensure “compliance with hidden directives” and a way to sustain “elite cohesion,” or maintain the coalition as the system allowed “him to stay in power,” and retain “remarkable leverage within the country,” (Darden 70). Therefore, since there was collusion between leaders and state capture by criminalized elites, Ukraine could be classified as a mafia state at that time (Kupatadze 30). Considering that part of the corruption stemmed from collusion between organized crime and leaders, and incentivized loyalty between the coalition, this further demonstrates that Ukraine was a mafia state due to the formation of the coalition (Kupatadze 30).

Similar to Russia’s case, organized crime and state collusion led to a system of mutual loyalty in exchange for benefits such as impunity and protection, characterizing part of the winning coalition. For example, in the early 1990s, Ukraine’s Ministry of Interior’s directorate in charge of countering organized crime “had been compromised,” and subsequently established

“protection for criminal gangs,” demonstrating a coalition between the state and organized crime groups (Williams and Picarelli 100). Reportedly, even when criminal organizations were targeted, leaders could be tipped off in advance, indicating the importance of information and loyalty in Ukraine’s winning coalition (Williams and Picarelli 100). Due to rampant collaboration between the groups, it was evident by the early 2000s that organized crime played a role in delaying Ukraine’s “transition to a democratic polity and a free market economy,” by engaging in considerable corruption and violence, as well as acts that discouraged foreign direct investment (Williams & Picarelli 100). Although Ukraine sought to increasingly align itself with the West following the Soviet Union’s collapse, corruption resulting from the initial post-Soviet winning coalition continues to influence the state. Corruption in Ukraine has been an “extremely destructive factor,” impacting the efficiency of its institutions, legal and democratic procedures, which have negatively impacted the “quality of life” of Ukrainian citizens (Niebytov et al 248). Overall, corruption incentivized by the formation of the winning coalition, has delayed Ukraine’s democratization processes, particularly those that guarantee citizens’ rights (Niebytov et al 249).

The formation of the winning coalition, paired with the state’s criminal activity, led to Ukraine’s classification as a mafia state, impacting its democratic transition. Despite attempts to counter organized crime, the presence of a winning coalition including these groups has limited the success of reforms. Currently, the “state apparatus” is considered to be Ukraine’s “main socio-legal regulator,” responsible for enforcing law and order and guaranteeing citizens’ rights and freedoms, especially as Russia continues its “armed aggression,” (Niebytov et al 253). Ukraine’s primary anti-corruption measures include “socio-economic development and implementation of administrative reform,” that encourage the rule of law and civil society formation, (Niebytov et al 252). While Volodymyr Zelenskyy was elected in 2019 after running

on an anti-corruption platform, and passed reforms to control organized crime, it was “at best...a half-finished clean-up” (“How the War Split the Mafia” 2023). Additionally, while Ukrainian data from 2006-2015 indicates a rapidly declining rate of crimes associated with organized crime, the data may not accurately reflect rates due to law enforcement agency corruption levels (Shostko 146). As such, deep-rooted corruption resulting from the formation of the winning coalition continues to impact Ukraine, particularly after Russia’s invasion in 2022.

Given that “turbulent socioeconomic and political environments” increase corruption and organized criminal activity, the onset of the Ukraine War may present lucrative business opportunities for “political-criminal-business troika” (Orlova 1, 17), (Williams and Picarelli 110). Therefore, while Ukraine has found support from the West in the decades after the Soviet Union’s collapse, especially after Russia’s invasion, the coalition and prior classification as a mafia state continues to have implications for the state during the war.

### **The Ukraine War & Organized Crime**

In order to survive the Ukraine War’s social, political, and economic impacts, organized crime groups have to alter their strategies. These changes will help them maintain their coalitions, particularly on the state-side. They may also change their business approaches and focuses, not only to survive, but to make higher profits, similar to changes made in the 1950s and 1990s. The political, social, and economic instability stemming from the Ukraine War have created more opportunities for organized crime groups in both countries (Orlova 17).

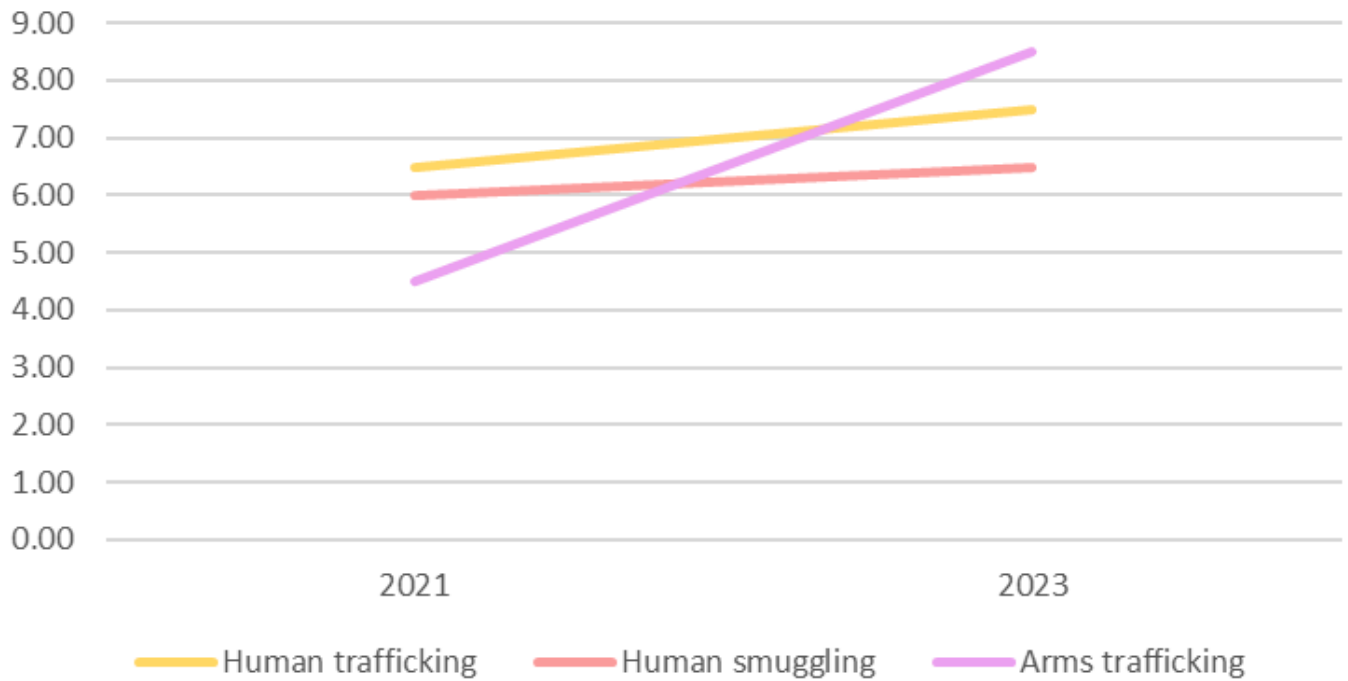
While conflict and subsequent “social dislocation” creates opportunities for organized crime “and their white-collar collaborators,” the nature of the Ukraine War may also interrupt established partnerships between Russian and Ukrainian criminal networks (“How the War Split the Mafia” 2023). Overall, organized crime groups are capable of taking advantage of changing

environments and can be very adaptable (Orlova 16). While the number of organized crime groups in Ukraine decreased between 2021 and 2022, this may be due to a decrease in the state's investigative capacity, not the success of recent anti-organized crime and corruption reforms ("New Front Lines" 1). As such, groups on both sides of the war have been able to continue to benefit from state and business connections and corruption, evidenced by increases in organized crime related activities such as human trafficking, human smuggling, and arms trafficking.

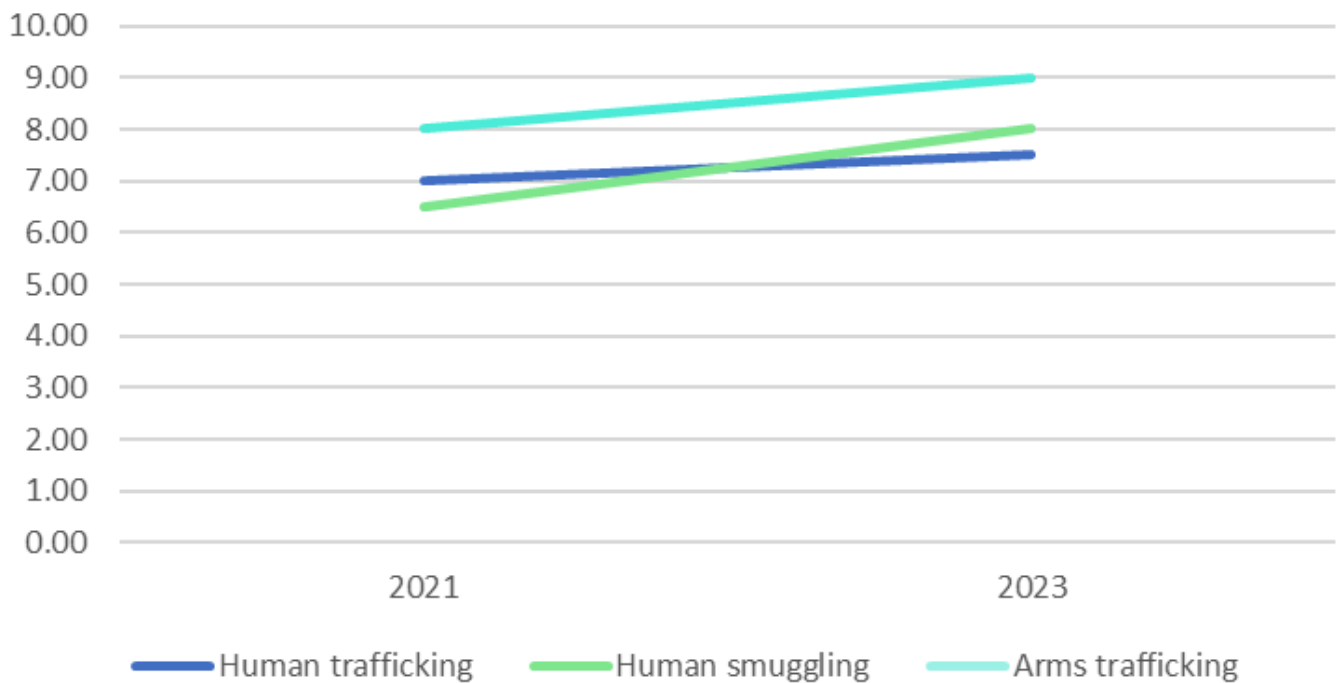
When comparing data on human trafficking, human smuggling, and arms trafficking from 2021 and 2023, both Russian and Ukraine moved up in relative to other European countries. As of 2023, they are tied for the highest human trafficking rates in Europe ("Global Organized Crime Index" 2023). In terms of human smuggling, Ukraine moved from fifth to first place, while Russia moved from 11th to 7th in Europe. In regards to arms trafficking, Ukraine maintained the highest rate between 2021 and 2023. Russia jumped from the 15th to the 2nd highest rate of trafficking in Europe between 2021 and 2023 ("Global Organized Crime Index" 2023). These changes in rank demonstrate that organized crime groups experience interruptions and barriers to many of their usual networks and businesses, they have quickly been able to adapt. Data from the "Global Organized Crime Index" published in 2023 demonstrates increases in these activities from 2021, before the war's initiation, and the most recent data as of 2023, demonstrated in the graphs below.



### Russian Organized Crime Activities 2021-2023

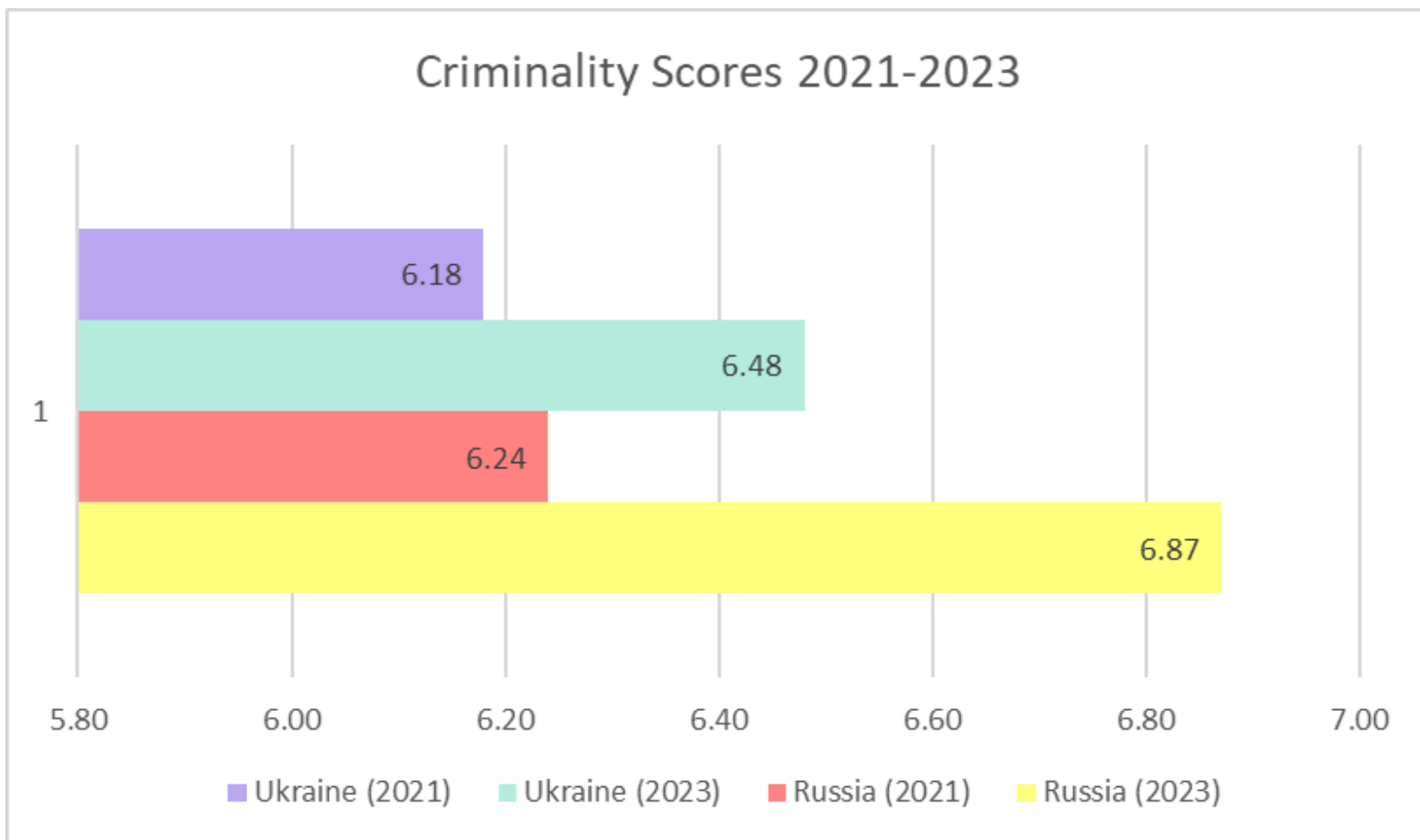


### Ukrainian Organized Crime Activities 2021-2023



These graphs depict data taken from “[Global Organized Crime Index 2023: A Fractured World.](#)”

Ukraine’s increase in human smuggling is higher relative to that of Russia, which is largely attributable to avoiding enlistment requirements. Human trafficking attributed to both nations has increased due to the large number of displaced and vulnerable groups. Arms trafficking has increased in both, but overall experienced a higher jump in Russia, possibly due to sanctions, leading to a higher reliance on organized crime and state collaboration.



While both countries’ criminality scores have increased, indicating an overall surge in organized criminal activity following Russia’s invasion, Russia’s overall score has increased more significantly than Ukraine’s. (“[Global Organized Crime Index 2023: A Fractured World.](#)” )

The war has increased the profitability of collusion between the state and organized crime. Putin has acknowledged that corruption continues to be a problem in Russia, which will likely be exacerbated due to the “expansion of the shadow economy” resulting from war related sanctions against Russia (Orlova 12). Since these sanctions have presented opportunities for organized crime groups to generate profits, it is likely to bolster their coalition during the war to some extent. For example, “the state has intensified links with organized criminals that were already established,” by requiring Russian criminals outside of the country to deposit some of their profits in “black accounts” that Russian spies use to “cover their operating costs,” (“How the War Split the Mafia” 2023). Corrupt authorities facilitate organized crime in Russia as the war progresses. For example, customs agents and border guards enable smuggling across the Russian border, which has become more profitable due to sanctions (Orlova 17). This increased profitability due to the war has incentivized “even greater cooperation between organized criminal entities and state officials,” (Orlova 17). Reportedly, thousands of weapons ranging from “aging AK-47s...to the latest assault carbines,” go missing from Russian military arsenals and factories, creating a saturated illicit weapons market (Galeotti 58). In previous conflicts, such as the 2008 war with Georgia, it is possible that interest groups in the Kremlin who advocated for war were part of groups that could benefit from trafficking operations in the region (Naim 2012). Available data has demonstrated that there has been an increase in arms trafficking, which may imply that some interest groups in the Kremlin may be benefitting from these activities as they did in 2008 (“Global Organized Crime Index” 2023). At this time, it is unlikely that the Russian government will “crack down on the corruption of loyal elites,” which will likely further incentivize collaboration with organized crime (Orlova 18). Therefore, due to the profitability of

the alliance, the post-Soviet coalition between organized crime, business elites, and state officials will likely persist in Russia in spite of disruptions caused by the Ukraine War.

In Ukraine, the war has disrupted some organized crime, but has also presented opportunities for groups that have been able to adapt to the circumstances. Ukraine's enlistment has limited the underworld's recruitment and manpower, while martial law has impacted a certain range of criminal activities ("How the War Split the Mafia" 2023). Interestingly, patriotism may offset this effect. Patriotism has been identified as a factor that may indirectly benefit organized crime groups as it increases the probability of recruiting demobilized soldiers, ("New Front Lines" 17). In past conflicts, Ukrainian and Russian organized crime groups have been accused of collaborating in arms trafficking, however due to alliances with their respective states, these collaborations may be suspended (Williams and Picarelli 113). Additionally, Ukrainian groups who had significant relationships with Russian counterparts have begun to shun them, as they do not want to be perceived as traitors ("How the War Split the Mafia" 2023). Additionally, Ukrainian organized crime groups overall feel threatened by potential Russian annexation as it would impact their prison system and connections ("How the War Split the Mafia" 2023). For example, Ukrainian prisoners in territories occupied by Russia have been warned that "joining the Wagner Group" would break their code ("New Front Lines" 16). Therefore, they are incentivized to suspend collaboration with Russian groups, not necessarily out of just patriotism, but also to ensure the survival of their coalition with their respective states. In this case, there has been reinforcement of the organized crime code in order to strategically maintain alliances with the state and continue to profit.

Due to interruptions in their business with Russian groups, they may shift toward different industries overall that are more profitable during wartime, such as human smuggling.

Data from the “Global Organized Crime Index” indicates an increase in multiple illicit activities, such as human trafficking, human smuggling, and arms trafficking following the onset of the war (“Global Organized Crime Index” 2023). For example, an estimated 8,000 people have been caught attempting to sneak out of Ukraine, indicating the establishment of a temporary industry that would profit Ukrainian organized crime groups, as they reportedly charge between €5,000 and €10,000 per person (“How the War Split the Mafia” 2023). There have been 245 reported cases of bribery to border guards in instances of human smuggling, with many more most likely going unreported (“New Front Lines” 24). Given the amount of displaced people due to the war, organized crime groups may also profit by increasingly engaging in human trafficking, “especially sexual exploitation” (“New Front Lines” 26). Although the war has impacted and interrupted their activities to some extent, organized crime groups have been able to change their business strategies to ensure their own survival through the war.

In general, regions in which there is a frozen conflict, permanent war, separatism create “favorable conditions of unimpeded transnational organized crime,” because a government has a lower capacity to regulate processes that counter transnational organized criminal activities (Zahorodnii et al 427). The onset of the war has hindered some criminal activity, such as drug trafficking from east to west Ukraine, however other activities like arms trafficking have increased (“New Front Lines” 18-19). In 2017, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine stated that there were about 1 million legally registered firearms with about half of them being used in professional settings, however the total number of weapons in Ukraine outnumbered the population (Zahorodnii et al 428). Ukrainian organized crime groups engaging in firearm trafficking involve “active military personnel of various levels,” indicating some collusion between some parts of the state with organized crime in at least this illicit sector (Zahorodnii et al

428). Part of the weapons trafficking network includes transportation from military depots to places of war. Additionally, theft of weapons and military equipment from military units including control systems, navigation and communications systems stolen directly from military depots in 2018, with the amount of stolen equipment projected to increase at the time (Zahorodnii et al 429). Interestingly, of the weapons that the West has supplied to Ukraine, there have been relatively few reported missing, with only one verifiable instance of a weapons system smuggled from Ukraine to Russia (“New Front Lines” 21). If it is in the state’s best interest to appear capable and credible in order to continue to receive assistance, blatant theft of western equipment would detract from their goals, so illicit networks may target non-Western weapons to traffic in order to maintain the coalition.

### **Conclusion**

Organized crime groups have proven to be resilient power brokers in post-Soviet states through their ability to adapt to changing political, social, and economic environments. They have been willing to change criminal codes to accommodate shifts in power to ensure their own survival. In doing so, they have incentivized merges between the legitimate sectors and the underworld in post-Soviet states. Changes in their code have increasingly allowed collaboration with the state and the accumulation of wealth, which led to a deeply entrenched alliance with rising leaders in the 1990s as well as economic elites (Lonsky 12), (Varese et al 157). This incentivized corruption which mutually benefited all parties, ensuring the formation of a winning autocratic coalition in Russia and Ukraine.

Soviet era policies and weak institutions contributed to the formation of these coalitions. While external factors facilitated the formation of these coalitions, the catalyst was organized crime groups’ willingness and ability to adapt to their changing environments in order to ensure

their own survival. Their success contributed to states like Russia and Ukraine's classification as mafia states, as the profits generated from the maintenance of the winning coalitions incentivized the criminalization of the elites, and deep merges between the state, private sector, and organized crime.

Finally, the Ukraine War has posed both threats and opportunities for organized crime groups on both sides of the war. While it has obstructed collaborations between Russian and Ukrainian organized crime groups, the groups have ensured their survival by exploiting certain illicit sectors and reaffirming their alliances to their respective states, thus ensuring the maintenance of their coalition, their survival, and increasing criminal activity (Williams and Picarelli 113).

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