

Criminal Ethos of Russia:

The Great Western Dilemma of Fighting New Generation Warfare

by Egidijus Čiūtas

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of Putin, Russia institutionalized a criminal world and employed it as another instrument of national power. It was talentedly interconnected with the major instruments of national power: Diplomacy, Military, Economic and Informational sectors. President Putin offered a social contract to the Russian underworld: they were allowed (and sometimes encouraged) to continue their activities as long as they understood that Putin was the new boss going forward, and this fact cannot be challenged. The underworld complied,¹ thus gaining the back-up of the Russian government in return.

In order to set an effective criminal agenda (or join efforts with other instruments of power), understanding how the criminal world thinks and operates is a necessary requirement. The one who wants to rule criminals has to think, act, and behave like a criminal. This trait cannot be trained; it can only be acquired by spending a lengthy number of years in this type of environment. The Soviet Union was the system which featured the most criminal characteristics in breeding, accepting citizens and indulgent to a criminal culture. “One needs to have lived in that solitude without tranquility, that prison without leisure that is called Russia, to appreciate all the freedom enjoyed in other European countries, no matter what form of government they have chosen,” wrote French Marquis de Custine, in his book about Russia in 1839. The “Prison of Nations” narrative was one of the main arguments for a revolutionist movement in Tsarist Russia. Paradoxically, this narrative was inherited by the Soviet dissidents later on. Russians, like none other, are capable of employing the underworld: prison culture is massively spread throughout the post-Soviet space; the Russian government is ruled by *siloviki*, the political clan of former agents of secret services; and, all levels of corruption are flourishing throughout the country. This mixture created the perfect match, causing utterly immoral and insolent Russian behavior in internal and international scenes. Herewith, the inertial and fragmented west, adhering to existing international treaties, norms and dogmas, lacked the ability to identify and react in a timely fashion to covert activities of malign influence, thus provoking Russia to further actions in any sphere short of security or control.

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A 2013 Russian article, “*The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations*,” became iconic in the west because it explained or made an attempt to explain the new Russian way of war. The Chief of the Russian General Staff, General Valeryj Gerasimov, expressed his understanding of the trends of the world’s operational environment by stating that the lines between war and peace tend to blur and the template of future wars is unknown; thus the role of nonmilitary means are exceeding the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness.² The Russian government perceived this as a rising legitimate condition to unleash unprecedented malign potential, the most innovative and dynamic, although covert part, of the so-called Russian *New Generation Warfare*.

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The conflict in Ukraine was the perfect proof of how maximized ambiguity and leveraged non-attribution activities can benefit to reaching strategic goals. The concept of *New Generation Warfare* has evolved from a prevailing Russian national criminal mentality and is enabled by the given opportunities of the new world environment. The open democratic nature of the West and the different western cultural perception of war has given Russian the necessary space for the freedom of maneuver in the Grey Zone.

To understand the essential source of Russian potential in the Grey Zone well, origins of how the criminal ethos was forged throughout centuries requires critical analysis. Although psychological and anthropological aspects

of the Russian criminal mentality are out of the scope of this paper, they remain crucial to Western military scholars for further research of possible operational environments. The Russians are well aware of western type analysis, which is one of the reasons why their covert and deceptive activities have been so effective. Focusing on techniques and procedures instead, without knowing the broad cultural context, might be misleading and allow for drawing the wrong conclusions. The ability to study the mind has always been an Eastern strength,³ but the emergence of a conditional understanding that Russia has globally unleashed its criminal potential, pushes the Western world to revise their ethical dogmas and democratic standards in order to effectively counter new threats.

Origins of Russian Criminal Mentality⁴

The Russian criminal mentality originates from long-lasting oppressive regimes that caused massive imprisonment of the society and unintentionally built a very resilient underworld, whose culture transfused into all social levels of Russia. The Russian criminal world was continuously challenged for more than a century, survived through three different regimes, and irreversibly penetrated the DNA of the Russian nation. The origins of this criminal mentality can be traced back to imperial Russia,⁵ when overcrowded imperial prisons bore a secret movement of thieves, the rudiment of the secret underworld system, which eventually acquired the name “Thieves World” (*Vorovskoj Mir*).

For ages, everything in Russia belonged to the Tsar, the highest monarch, so stealing became a noble deed and a form of protest against the oppressive regime.⁶ With the absence of a neutral intellectual community, which could have served as a moral compass and moral counterbalance, favorable conditions for a romanticized attitude towards the criminals within the oppressed society developed. Naturally, criminals became

one of the main powers in the Russian revolution. When the Bolsheviks brutally seized power in Russia, massive numbers of criminals escaped the prisons and were a significant part of the bloody revolution. They subsequently infiltrated the institutions of the new government and contaminated policy-making, law enforcement, and the secret services with the criminal mindset. Unleashing the aggression for national needs, a new power challenged and contested the meaning of freedom and equality, as the age-old differences between political freedom and economic equality sharply divided society. During this cultural ambiguity, the distinction between what was acceptable and what was unacceptable became blurred and confused. Cheka, with its successor organization NKVD, created a large prison system, the so-called Gulags, which imprisoned around 18 million Soviet citizens during the period of 1928-1953. Political and criminal prisoners were kept together in most penitentiaries, with much authority unofficially delegated to the criminals to run the prison system. The Thieves World, having roots from imperial times obtained a strict structure in the prisons. They developed their own honor code, called *Ponyatya* (concepts) and a specific jargon, called *Fenia*. The code emphasized loyalty to one another and resistance to the government. The central tenets were:

1. Do not inform on one another
2. Do not cooperate with the government
3. Share profits equally with everyone⁷

Inmates of Gulags, more than ten percent of the overall Soviet population, were forced to obey criminal concepts, so eventually, *Ponyatya* and *Fenia* became part of the Soviet folk culture.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, criminals had the most potential to take advantage of the opportunities of privatization, legal anomie, and state incapacity.⁸ In the chaos of a collapsing empire, a number of secret services and armed

forces members resigned and joined the organized crime gangs, bringing professional knowledge and significantly increasing criminal capabilities. Many convicts, ignoring one of the foundation criminal rules, even sought governmental positions to acquire immunity from prosecution on a national and regional level,⁹ also providing a *kryshka* (literally “roof,” referring to political protection in *fenia*) to the underworld.¹⁰

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The fall of the Soviet Union and increased globalization processes generated additional new opportunities. Russian criminals were among the first to take full advantage of globalization. Bold, relatively well-educated, creative, and having no moral restrictions, they soon became a global phenomenon and a challenge for international law enforcement. From the nightclubs of Budapest to the finance houses of London, apocryphal tales and official reports alike began to warn of a coming age of Russian gangster dominance.¹¹ The Strict *Vorovskoj Mir* honor code faded, but accents remained and served as a basic guide of the Russian underworld. *Panyatji* and *Fenia* became common traits that effectively let criminals from different parts of the former Soviet Union cooperate. Post-Soviet organized crime became a power, able to proactively identify and seize opportunities in economic, political, and a number of other spheres.

Criminal Ethos of New Generation Warfare

The long years that forged Russian criminal mentality played a major role in the natural evolution of the *New Generation Warfare* concept. New era environment emerged as globalization, technologies, and enhanced

informational coverage enabled this concept for effective employment. The uncontrolled Russian organized crime rampage has been changed since Putin came into power. The highly criminalized Russian state flipped the balance of interpenetration of the criminal underworld and the political upper world with the ability to conduct vertical criminal integration for national purposes.¹²

Putin allegedly started using Russian-backed organized crime (RBOC) groups to pursue his interests both at home and abroad, including smuggling arms, assassinating political opponents, earning “black cash” for off-the-books operations, conducting cyberattacks, and supporting separatist movements in Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine,¹³ and preparing the hybrid battleground in the Baltics.¹⁴ The organized crime groups formed a large quasi-intelligence agency for the Kremlin, acting as “political Trojan horses” that use their money to “undermine morale, compromise officials, and weaken Western resolve.”¹⁵

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The Russian government, having historical possession of the criminal gene in itself, nationalized the RBOC and managed to use it in unprecedented innovative and effective fashion, unlike the other governmental sectors. Skillfully combining criminal techniques and capabilities (dirty money, smugglers, killers etc.) with other instruments of national power, using ambiguity and leveraging non-attribution, Russia has demonstrated a high level of mastered *New Generation Warfare* in the swift seizure of the Crimea and waging the undeclared war in eastern Ukraine. Criminal ethos became the general line of so-called *New Generation*

Warfare, which effectively joined the official and unofficial efforts of malign influence towards Western democracies.

The main idea of this paper is not to assess techniques and procedures or the means that might be employed by Russia to reach their strategic aims. The conflicts in Ukraine and Syria and covert activities in the West illustrated that, depending on the situation, the least possible and predictable course of action can be chosen. Too deep of a concentration into details and operational patterns might be misleading. Essentially, the effective employment of malign influence and hybrid activities has allowed Russia to redefine the term of *war* and prove that it is no longer the final resort option, rather it can be a continuous way of Russian foreign and internal policy.¹⁶

The *New Generation Warfare* concept helps Russia to conceive of and to create a “hybrid” mix of different instruments of warfare, and employ greater speed in shifting from one mode of war or emphasis on a given instrument of power to another. The criminal ethos of Russia enables them to easily “catch off balance,” and surprise opponents; the same with violating international and bilateral treaties, and its own officially declared national norms and laws. The existing Russian establishment will never admit they are not following ratified legal acts. Confessing would be analogous to cooperating with law enforcement according to the criminal codex of the underworld, violating one of the main rules of the prison. This would result in losing the credibility and respect of their own population and rival elite clans. Putin definitely cannot afford this.

Western Ethical Dilemmas

“For too long, some nations have looked the other way in the face of these threats. Russia brazenly and implausibly denies its actions, and we have failed to impose sufficient costs.”

– Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster
Former Security Adviser to POTUS, 2018

The construct of the Western world creates favorable conditions for Russian malign influence. Old democracies, being open by nature, base their relations on consensus, possess multiple gaps that contain security vacuums, and are vulnerable to domestic political changes. Russia is most capable to operate within those gaps. The democratic construct of western nations does not justify fighting an undeclared war, and it is not perceived as a possible option for an official political entity. The West had faced numerous ethical dilemmas in fighting terrorism at the beginning of the twenty-first century. That war has left disputable moral scars, since the legal basis did not always match real military action. Russia, unlike terrorism, is a worldwide recognized state that has the vote in the United Nations and multiple other main world organizations, is treated as an international actor, and which is supposed to comply with commonly agreed rules. The dichotomy of global recognition versus prevailing criminal mentality gives the advantage to Russia, since it has no moral limitations in breaking commonly agreed rules.

According to Carl von Clausewitz, war is the realm of chance, which makes everything more uncertain and interferes with the whole course of events.¹⁷ The Russians are getting that chance on the battlefields of which existent Westerners do not have a real appreciation. Together with the huge support of the Russian population (hatred towards West) and the governmental reason to fight historical

opponents (civilizational schism),¹⁸ it creates a very balanced Clausewitzian paradoxical trinity of war (passion-reason-chance). The great restrictions of nuclear and conventional war are only playing in favor of Russia because the West has the greater potential to employ these strategic assets.

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The great Western dilemma of containing Russian’s malign influence and countering hybrid threats is the organic structural incapacity to reduce democratic standards, when there is no obvious emergency. The democratic way of conducting policy relies entirely on the population; if people do not feel threatened, they will never show sufficient support to the aggressive political decisions related to decreasing human rights or limiting the freedom of speech, or similar freedoms, especially if it is related with a possible decrease of living standards (waging war always does that). Opposing political forces (in this context usually they are being manipulated from Russia) are ready to use the opportunity to seize the electorate, using counter rhetoric, and accusations of a governmental conspiracy. One of the biggest challenges to the West lies in the secrecy of *New Type Warfare* – threats are indicated by very sensitive and vulnerable intelligence networks. Most of the information has to remain highly classified in order to maintain the capacity to continue to gather more data. That puts Western politicians into a great quandary: being unable to share information with the population, they cannot use it to get support for unpopular decisions. The political opposition and professional Russian propaganda only deepen this impasse. Subsequently, governments have to solve other multiple dilemma (a number

of them might also be covertly sourced from Russia) until their agenda gets overloaded, and consequently a deeper analysis into the problem has to be omitted. Identified ways of countering Russian malign influence, such as decreasing exports to Russia, increasing the control of the informational sphere, banning so-called Russian journalists, limiting money of unknown origin, limiting money laundering, increasing control of the cyber sphere,¹⁹ and many others, require gigantic resources together with non-democratic solutions, that the West so far cannot afford.

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Containing Russian malign influence seems to be the only option, but so far it has not worked effectively and has served more as self-assurance to the “old democracies,” than the real containment of Russia. The ineffectiveness of Western countermeasures has two main reasons. First, imposing sanctions means joining the “cat-mouse” game, where all the conditions for flourishing Russian criminal ethos are set. Historically, wangling was the main way of getting things to the Soviet population. Russians throughout their history acquired the skills of how to get everything that is forbidden. Finding new, covert and overt ways for how to get production, opened new Russian channels of trade, increased the resiliency towards the West, and helped to acquire new capabilities for the Grey Zone.²⁰ Second, the West can hardly perceive Russian eternal strength to mobilize the society. The strategic capacity to tolerate the decrease of living standards is literally inexhaustible in Russia. For the Russian people, the idea of belonging to a great power is so intoxicating,²¹ that they proudly accept Putin’s imposed illusory social contract and willingly trade personal comfortability for the sake of

rebuilding their imperial pride. Periodic and successful military adventures outside Russian borders help to keep this illusion valid. Stopping Russia’s malign influence is complicated not only because of century’s forged resiliency of this country, but also because of Western generic inability to reduce democratic standards for the sake of ambiguous aims.

Conclusion

The ages’ forged Russian criminal ethos appears very suitable for conducting aggressive politics in today’s operational environment. A prevailing prison mentality in a vast majority of Russian society supports their government’s utterly amoral and opportunistic activities across the globe. Combining this quality with the elements of secrecy, the Kremlin possesses a formidable capacity to act with the widest strategic latitude, with stealth, and speed.²² The criminal history of the nation is the main reason that allowed Russia to acquire the newest instrument of national power, the underworld. The phenomenal employment of criminal networks in close combination with economic, informational, military, and political tools appears to be very effective. Russia has stopped Western expansion toward the East (Georgia and Ukraine), gained the respect and support of its own populace, and created the illusion of being a superpower, all with minimal resources. It is the natural evolvement of the Russian way of war - the concept of *New Type Warfare*. Enabled by technological advances and progressively increasing global processes, Russia has acquired a well-balanced way to conduct aggressive politics. While confronting the West, but being limited in nuclear and conventional factors, Russia has been finding ways to leverage hybrid tools to ensure its own strategic purposes.

The Western perception of war does not allow treating Russian’s malign influence as an act of war, thus neutralization of this type of threat has been complicated. Secrecy and

manipulative character in the Grey Zone limits the ability of democratic countries to involve their electorate in the decision-making process and to consolidate the population for unpopular decisions. The annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Eastern Ukraine should have been a warning shot across the bow of the West, a message, written in blood, that the old ways of doing business are over.²³ But the inertia of the West is very slow to acquire the pace to strengthen its coordinated resolve, and is seemingly always staying a few steps behind the always hungry and eager Russians. The West just does not want to lose the sacred belief in the power of dialog and consensus. While the West wants peace and Russia wants victory, the initiative remains on the aggressor's side. **IAJ**

NOTES

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