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PRESS RELEASE

NEW REPORT WARNS OF RUSSIA'S WEAPONIZATION OF ORGANIZED CRIME

*A report launched today by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime entitled **Gangsters at War** by Mark Galeotti warns of Russia's growing use of organized crime as an instrument of statecraft.*

In its confrontation with Ukraine and the West, the Kremlin is using all available means at its disposal. This includes the instrumentalization of Russian-based organized crime to carry out political objectives. Mark Galeotti, author of several books about Russia including *Downfall: Prigozhin, Putin and the New Fight for the Future of Russia*, (2024) describes this as "criminal warfare".

The threat manifests itself by state actors colluding with criminals (in Russia and abroad) to carry out cyber attacks, influence and information operations, assassination, arson and intimidation, busting sanctions and laundering money. Even migration has been weaponized as traffickers are encouraged to move migrants across borders to foment political instability.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has increased Moscow's engagement with the underworld, for example to help circumvent sanctions by smuggling licit products that contain dual-use microchips and to help move money (including through cryptocurrencies). The expulsion of Russian diplomats from Western embassies has increased Moscow's reliance on criminal groups to gather information and intelligence and to do the Kremlin's dirty work abroad such as carrying out sabotage, disinformation and assassinations. In some cases, these jobs are also being subcontracted to local criminals.

Even after Russia's aggression against Ukraine will stop, links between security services and criminal groups will be hard to break. "The criminals appreciate the security and opportunities provided by the new alliances, and the security officers consider the gangsters not just useful instruments but also partners in enrichment", observes Galeotti.

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Galeotti warns that the state-crime alliance “*will have serious implications not just for Russia’s neighbours and antagonists, but for the country itself*”. One scenario that he puts forward as part of a chapter on “dark futures” is that the Kremlin could seek to impose tighter control over those aspects of the underworld that it finds useful or even set up criminal enterprises of its own.

To counter-act this growing threat, the report makes a number of recommendations:

- Recognize and treat the nexus between state and criminal actors as a threat to national security and not just a criminal justice challenge;
- Ensure better cooperation between law enforcement agencies and the intelligence community;
- Devote sufficient resources to counter-acting the threat on the understanding that this is a type of warfare;
- Cultivate closer links and more positive relationships with the Russian diaspora to gather more information and reduce the risk of criminal infiltration in such communities;
- Carry out targeted operations to disrupt the activities of Russian-based criminal groups and their proxies (including in cyberspace), cut their money flows, reduce their links to Russia.

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