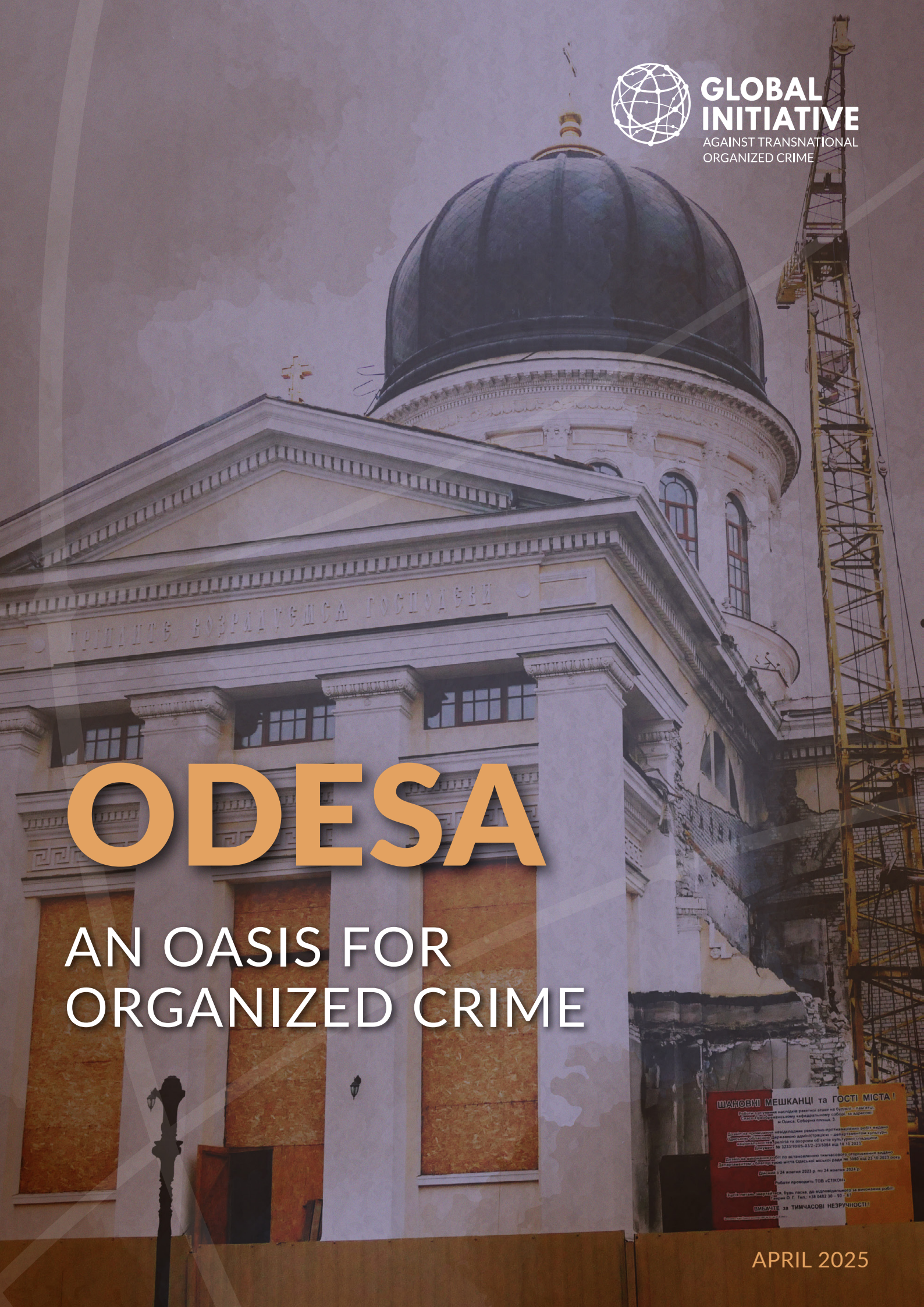

GLOBAL INITIATIVE
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

ODESA

AN OASIS FOR ORGANIZED CRIME

APRIL 2025

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INTRODUCTION: A CITY OF TWO FACES

The ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine has left its mark on Odesa. Since the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)'s last fieldwork in the city in May 2023 – when we found a tense but relatively untouched city – Odesa has become a target for Russian air strikes. In addition to scores of private homes and apartment blocks, over 50 of the city's cultural assets had been hit as of November 2024.[1] The extensive damage to the Cathedral of the Transfiguration made global headlines in July 2023, while a 19-storey hotel in the port is now a blackened shell.[2] Bulky diesel generators rumble outside the city's restaurants and cafes, signalling yet another power cut as a result of damage to Ukraine's power grid.

Yet, in other ways, the war seems further away than before. The machine-gun nests and blockades that once barred the way to the famous Potemkin Steps have been removed, and locals can once again stroll in Stambulskyy Park. Restoration of the cathedral is underway.

The money has come back too. Businesses from all over Ukraine have moved to Odesa,[3] and salaries and property prices have risen for the first time since the invasion in 2022.[4] The city centre is busy at night, the restaurants full. In sharp contrast to the years immediately following the invasion, it was reportedly impossible to book a hotel room in the summer of 2024.[5] Apart from the sudden shock of an air strike, the war feels far away. According to one volunteer working in the sphere of veteran rehabilitation, when active soldiers come to the city on leave, they are shocked by the normality of life.[6] Another military volunteer was more scathing, saying the city was 'morally degrading'. 'It is fed up with the war, and doesn't care who is in charge, so long as it's quiet,' he said.[7]

Perhaps the most significant economic change has been the reopening of the region's sea ports, allowing Odesa to once again export grain and other goods. Although not without risk – during the GI-TOC's visit in September 2024, Russia launched a missile strike against a grain ship in the port of Odesa, and the frequency of such attacks increased significantly in the following months[8] – the Black Sea is now a viable route for trade, thanks to Ukrainian operations in 2023 that rolled back the de facto Russian blockade. Ukraine's grain export volumes have almost returned to pre-invasion levels – a remarkable achievement given that Ukraine's other major ports (Kherson and Mykolaiv) remain largely out of action and Mariupol is under occupation.[9]

The two faces of Odesa: the port hotel, scorched by a Russian strike, looms behind the Potemkin Steps, now cleared of barricades and open to pedestrians. *Photo: supplied*

These relatively stable and prosperous conditions – at least for a wartime city – have proved a boon for organized crime and corruption after a difficult period following the Russian invasion. As shown in our report 'Port in a storm: Organized crime in Odesa since the Russian invasion,' Odesa in 2023 was still a city in shock. Known as the 'most criminalized city' in Ukraine, it had seen trade and tourism disappear, while law enforcement had become much more powerful as a consequence of martial law – all of which reduced the space for organized crime and illicit markets to operate. The Russian invasion had also created a 'patriotic divide' between prominent local criminals and the powerful Russian mafia, which had traditionally held a strong foothold in the port and other profitable businesses in the city and wider region.[10]

After this period of uncertainty, crime in the city has re-emerged, updating its rules, switching to other illicit activities and capitalizing on the return of big money to Odesa. As a result, this Black Sea city has bounced back as a wartime 'oasis' for legal and illegal business alike. This report identifies a number of organized crime trends in and around Odesa that have emerged, or re-emerged, since our previous 2023 report on the city's criminal dynamics.[11]

Key findings

- Despite strict governmental control, Odesa's criminal underworld has morphed into a 'free city' model where different groups coexist – anyone can do business, as long as they do not interfere with others. This has reduced friction between Odesa organized crime groups and newcomers from Kharkiv and Dnipro involved in conscript smuggling, grain exports and scam call centres. Latest signs point to this fragile balance as being only temporary.
- There has been no significant return of Russian organized crime to Odesa, indicating that that the 'patriotic' split of the underworld that took place in 2022 still held.
- The curfew has made traditional forms of night-time crime, such as burglary, problematic for groups who formerly specialized in such activities, notably ethnic Georgian criminal groups. Many low-level operators have left to practise their trade elsewhere in Europe, but more influential Georgian criminals have turned to call centres, leading to violent competition over skilled recruits.
- Odesa's large internally displaced population, and the city's resurgent sex trade, have increased the risk of trafficking for vulnerable women.
- Despite the curfew, trade in sex and drugs is thriving. Illegal taxis transport sex workers and drugs through the city in collusion with rogue volunteer units. Concerns over this unregulated 'security' economy may have been the driver for a crackdown in 2024 that dramatically reduced the number of volunteer units.
- The reopening of Odesa's port has seen grain re-emerge as one of the city's most lucrative economies – and the scams have not been far behind. In some cases, fraudsters have stolen hefty cash payments for grain through falsified documents, but other schemes are more sophisticated. Front companies have enabled mass tax avoidance, with the shadow economy estimated at 30–40 per cent of the grain market.
- Reconstruction in 2025 presents the next major corruption risk, with considerable domestic and international implications.

ORGANIZED CRIME TRENDS IN 2024

In the GI-TOC's 2023 report on organized crime in Odesa, the most marked change in the criminal underworld was the rift between Russian and Ukrainian groups in the city.[12] During our subsequent visit to the city in 2024, none of our interviewees said there had been any meaningful return of Russian organized crime.[13] One source confirmed that Khalid Musayev – an Odesa-based Chechen *avtoritet* (a criminal 'authority') who was investigated for collaboration with Russia in the early days of the invasion and placed on a wanted list by authorities in 2022[14] – was still abroad and living in the UAE, despite media claims he had been arrested in Dubai in December 2023 and was awaiting extradition.[15] His return would potentially be seen as a major indicator of the resurgence of Russian criminal influence. There are some indicators that he may be trying to do so, according to local police sources.[16] These sources said there had been an attempt by Musayev to re-establish his influence with law enforcement, but the offer was rejected and it seems unlikely that he will be able to return.[17]

One source hinted more generally at the possibility of rapprochement between Russian and Ukrainian organized crime in the near future, which would have serious consequences for criminality in the south of Ukraine and the wider region.[18]

But Russia has been projecting its influence in the region in other ways. Echoing a trend seen in the 2024 wave of arson attacks in Europe, Russia has, according to media reports, allegedly recruited individuals (sometimes petty criminals, others ordinary civilians) through Telegram to burn military vehicles and infrastructure.[19] There is also evidence that suggests Russia may have retained sleeper agents in the territory: in September 2024, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) announced that it had apprehended an armed group of Russian GRU agents preparing to conduct an armed operation.[20]

Mirroring a pattern seen in the rest of the country, synthetic drugs are a mainstay of the drug trade in Odesa, being produced and sold in the region.[21] According to a law enforcement source, locally produced synthetic cathinones called 'salts', which include alpha-PVP (street name 'flakka'), are now the most prevalent drug category on the Odesa market.[22] At least five large laboratories were reportedly shut down by law enforcement in the city and surrounding area in 2024, which were mostly exporting synthetics to Eastern Europe (particularly Poland, Germany and Lithuania) through a popular postal service. The quantities were considerable – up to 300 grams of alpha-PVP in one parcel, or around 30 000 doses.[23] The couriers sent the drugs from different locations, never using

A military car burnt out in Odesa, after Russia recruited a local through Telegram to commit the act.
Photo: National Police of Ukraine

the same place for long. Some of the drugs were sent to the front line in eastern Ukraine, where they were met and received by fighting units.[24] Cocaine from Western Europe has also found its way to Odesa, reinforcing the trend reported in previous GI-TOC reports that Ukraine has re-emerged as a consumer market for the drug.[25]

The next section highlights four key trends in Odesa that show how changes in the political economy of organized crime and corruption in the city have shaped the development of illicit markets.

The 'free city' of crime and conscript smuggling

As described in the GI-TOC's previous report on Odesa, the city's criminal class has long valued a peaceful business climate, with violence used only when strictly necessary.[26] Criminal groups in the city will often prefer to use non-lethal traumatic weapons in conflict situations, despite having access to much heavier weaponry.[27] This is not entirely a matter of criminal self-regulation, but a stipulation of the SBU, the most powerful law enforcement agency in the city.[28] It closely monitors the local organized crime ecosystem for any signs of heightened activity, and swiftly moves to quash any trouble. A source from the agency said that another aspect of keeping the peace in the city is an aggressive approach to any attempts to start or maintain any Russian-related political or business dealings.

Significantly, those in charge of organized crime in Odesa do not live there.[29] The city is a no-go zone for criminal kingpins, partly in consequence of the 2021 sanctions list drawn up by the National Security and Defence Council, which stripped the 'thieves in law' or 'thieves under a code' (*vory v zakone* in Russian; *zlodiyi v zakoni* in Ukrainian[30]) of their Ukrainian nationality, froze their assets and barred them from entering the country.[31] But it may also be a result of the natural inclination (common to many illicit industries) of bosses to distance themselves from the ground operations, especially after the Russian invasion created additional risks.[32] As a consequence, Odesa is run by remote control, by *vory* living abroad and their 'watchers' running matters predominantly from prisons and detention centres, where they have access to mobile phones and use various connections on the outside (see box below).[33]

'Watchers'

A 'watcher' is, in *vory* terms, a criminal authority who is empowered to resolve matters related to the jurisdiction of the *vory* and is responsible for the criminal landscape in specific areas of the city, in camps, detention centres or individual cells. He is appointed by a *polozhenets* (situationist) who is a *vor*'s lieutenant.

The watcher in a prison ensures that the *vory*'s laws are observed, acts as a mediator between the prison administration and the inmates, resolves conflicts and manages the common fund (*obshchak*), which criminals pay into to cover expenses for those in their association. There may be several watchers at one correctional facility who answer to a *polozhenets* appointed by a *vor*. A *polozhenets* acts as the main authority in the *vor*'s territory during the latter's absence. ■

While outright gang warfare is rare, the struggle for control is real. One of the region's most influential actors, according to media reports, is the Georgian vor Mindia Goradze, nicknamed 'Lavasogly Batumsky'.[34] Mindia was sanctioned by Ukraine's National Security Defence Council in May 2021 and has formerly been on INTERPOL's most wanted list.[35] In 2018, he was sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment in absentia by Georgia on charges of being a criminal authority, and was also arrested in Turkey on weapons charges that same year.[36] Mindia had attempted to return to Ukraine in January 2021, but failed due to a ban on his entry.[37] But as charted in our previous report, even in exile he continued to exert influence over Odesa in 2023, and the situation appears to have remained unchanged in the subsequent 18 months.

Now once again living in Turkey, Goradze remains a key figure not only in Odesa, but across much of southern Ukraine.[38] On the ground, his interests are reportedly linked to the Azeri organized crime group in the city.[39] However, this group's control is limited to certain areas of crime, specifically theft and extortion (including in the penitentiary system), and notably excludes drug trafficking in the region, which has 'a whole different hierarchy', according to a law enforcement officer from Odesa.[40]

As of late 2024, there was no 'kingpin' of Odesa.[41] According to a journalist with knowledge of the underworld, a meeting was held in Istanbul in April 2023 that brought together many high-ranking criminal figures with an interest in Odesa.[42] At the meeting, it was reportedly decided that Odesa would not become a battlefield, but a 'free city', without an overarching watcher. Under the agreement, criminals would be free to work in the city, but couldn't trespass on someone else's territory, or they would be branded an 'outcast' at future meetings. The only condition was that anyone working in Odesa would make a 'decent' contribution to the *obshchak*.[43] While the GI-TOC was unable to verify the details of this particular meeting, such criminal *skhodkas*, or meetings, are a well-known mechanism for resolving criminal disputes and working out common policies.[44]

The smaller number of local groups may have made it easier for criminals to coexist, removing the need for an overarching watcher. Due to the heavy military and law enforcement presence, only three significant organized crime groups remain active in the Odesa region. The first is reportedly led by Oleg Popescu (aka 'the Romanian'), who has been influential since the 1990s and has been the subject of an INTERPOL Red Notice. The group with which he has been associated was notable for carrying out contract killings.[45] The second group is formed of ethnic Gagauz, which traditionally have engaged in agricultural crime, such as theft of machinery, forcing farmers to grow marijuana and selling stolen fertilizer.[46] These two crime groups are concentrated in the region of Bessarabia, to the south-west of Odesa city. The third is an organized

crime group that was originally ethnic Azeri in identity, but has now expanded to include other nationalities, which has been linked to the Georgian *vor* Mindia, according to a journalist.[47] Of these, only the Azeris remain solely engaged in 'pure' criminality; the other two groups have diversified into licit businesses alongside their illegal activities, including investment in the grain economy through silos, agro-industrial enterprises and legal grain trading, claimed a local journalist.[48]

Conscript smuggling has become a major source of illegal income since the full-scale invasion. In the Odesa region, the Palanka border crossing into Moldova and the Bessarabia region (a gateway to Romania) were both cited as 'windows' for military-age men to escape Ukraine. The Romanian is reported to have become a major player in conscript smuggling on the border with Moldova, from the Vinohradivka checkpoint to the Reni (Giurgiulesti) checkpoint, as well as controlling the Romanian border.[49] To arrange the crossings, his organized crime group allegedly shares the profits with border guards in Izmail and farmers living near the border, whose land is sometimes used for the crossings. According to an investigative journalist, the average income from an active 'window' is about US$100 000 per month. The other avenues for conscript smuggling, from the Starokozache checkpoint to the Vinohradivka checkpoint, are reportedly controlled by criminal actors in the Gagauz group.[50]

FIGURE 1 Control of the border for smuggling conscripts is divided between organized crime boss Oleg Popescu (the 'Romanian'), who oversees the Vynohradivka–Giurefiulesti section (red), and the ethnic Gagauz (Vynohradivka–Starokozache; green). The official border crossing point of Palanka is also a major gateway.

Demand for this service appears to have increased, if the price is any indication, perhaps driven by Ukraine's new mobilization law, which broadened the definition of those eligible for conscription, and the heavy-handed tactics used to find and enlist men on the street. In early 2024, prices reportedly started at US$7 000, but by September 2024 had doubled to approximately US$15 000. One journalist claimed that some conscript smugglers were handing their clients over to law enforcement in order to help meet quotas on apprehended attempted escapees, although the arrangement also dictated that those caught would only pay a fine.[51]

Organized crime has not been the only one making money out of dodgers. After the 2023 scandal involving the regional head of military enlistment (who was found to have accumulated hefty assets in Ukraine and Spain, allegedly as a result of bribes for facilitating draft dodging),[52] another corruption scandal broke in 2024 involving a judge in the town of Bilhorod-Dnistrovskyi. The judge was found to have issued over 1 000 decisions confirming the status of individuals as single parents, exempting them from military service and allowing them to go abroad, in exchange for bribes ranging from US$1 500 to US$3 500.[53] There have also been numerous cases of law enforcement, doctors and other officials facilitating the escape of men of military age.[54]

Arms trafficking: 'a stinky business'

At first glance, Odesa might seem like a natural hotspot for arms trafficking. There is an abundant supply of trophy weapons from the front line and prices have also fallen: one journalist put the price of an AK-47 at US$700, or US$500 each when buying a batch of 10; another source estimated the price of an AK-47 as US$700–US$1 000, with a grenade available for around €12 (although prices can fluctuate wildly, with one case of an F-1 grenade being sold for US$100–US$150).[55] In our report on arms trafficking trends in Ukraine in 2023, an AK-47 averaged between US$1 000–US$1 500, with wholesale discounts only available in Kharkiv, close to the front line.[56]

As in other parts of the country, grenades are commonly found in police seizures in Odesa, usually in small quantities.[57] Probably the largest trafficking incident in Odesa in 2024 involved a suspect who sold machine guns, cartridges, hand-held fragmentation and rocket-propelled anti-tank grenades for a total of US$10 000 in two separate transactions before being arrested.[58]

An RPG seized from a car in Odesa in February 2024, along with grenades, ammunition and two AK rifles. *Photo: Odesa Regional Police*

'Criminal groups have always been armed to the teeth – and now they have even more.'

But as many sources confirmed, the retail market for illegal weapons is in fact very limited: one source estimated that 90 per cent of the weapons brought in are not sold; the only sellers are the military or their relatives, who are usually caught. The SBU continues to treat weapons trafficking as a high priority, and it is widely believed within the underworld that cross-border arms trafficking – referred to by criminals as a 'stinky business' – disrupts the peaceful working environment by attracting the attention of law enforcement agencies around the world.[59]

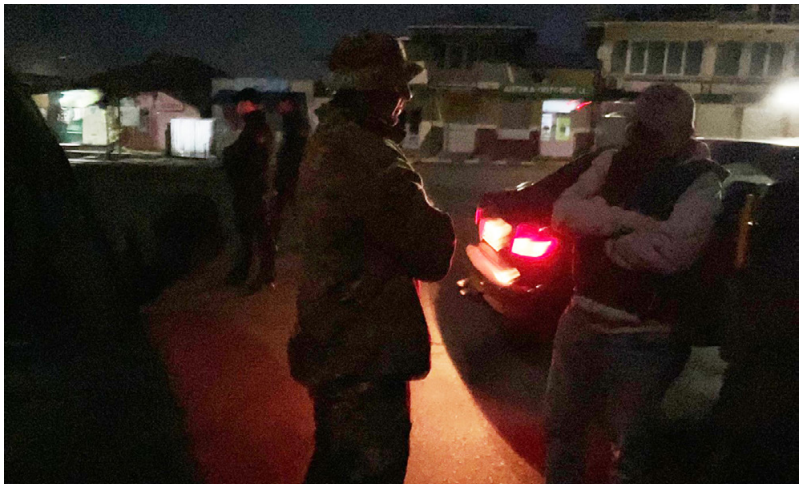
Similarly, there appears to be little appetite to export weapons from Odesa's ports, which have been implicated in weapons trafficking in the past. One interviewee said that it would be 'very, very hard' to do so at present, given the attention being paid to the movement of weapons within the country and activity in the ports.[60]

However, although the retail arms market in Odesa may not be flourishing, weapons are omnipresent: 'everyone has a weapon – it's a fact,' said the commander of a volunteer unit in the city.[61] In addition to civilians and military personnel stashing trophy weapons away, volunteer units can also readily access weapons directly from the military in exchange for humanitarian aid.[62] Criminal gangs in the city, particularly ethnic Azeri and Armenian gangs, are also '100 per cent' stockpiling weapons, according to the volunteer commander, who added that the same was true in Bessarabia, where criminal groups 'have always been armed to the teeth – and now they have even more[.] Every self-respecting ethnic minority [organized crime group] wants a sub-machine gun.'[63] One organized crime group was cited by another source as actively acquiring weapons, although the source was of limited reliability.[64] Local organized crime groups consider a possible future peace deal with Russia as a turning point for reasserting their influence in the city and the region. This may result in tension and conflict, with weapons and muscle being a serious argument in a possible fight for control over territory and lucrative businesses.[65]

But while right now some criminal groups in Odesa may be restrained in their use of weapons, civilians may be less so: as the commander reflected, 'If you get insulted, you're prepared to blow the guy up, and yourself. That's the mentality here'.[66] In the previous GI-TOC report on arms trafficking in Ukraine, we documented the increase in incidents of weapons and explosives being used in domestic conflicts and civilian contexts, particularly by soldiers who may be suffering from trauma or substance abuse.[67] Domestic violence rose by 80 per cent in 2024 compared to 2023, with 60 per cent of perpetrators being military personnel.[68] One man reportedly threatened to blow up his wife with a grenade after she criticized his drinking; another made the same threat when his wife said she wanted a divorce.[69] The ready availability of weapons can also make situations of mental strain, whether war-related or not, more deadly, as witnessed in June 2024, when a man committed suicide with a grenade in a public park in Odesa.[70]

Curfew workarounds and the switch to call centres

The war has accelerated the demise of several of Odesa's traditional illicit markets. With container imports still limited, the 7-Kilometre Market – once a hotbed of counterfeit and excise fraud goods – has withered.[71] The curfew has also imposed a hard limit on criminal activity between midnight and 5 a.m. Since December 2023 there has been no criminal penalty for breaking curfew, only a fine, but stopped cars and pedestrians may be subjected to a search and questioning.[72] In addition, men of military age risk being forced to attend the military centre if caught.



Volunteer units on duty during curfew, Odesa, September 2024.
Photo: supplied

These conditions have led some criminals to adopt new ways of working. Some sex workers, for example, have reportedly switched to working during the day.[73] An interviewee told of a new car theft scheme, reportedly run by the Azeris, in which car owners were contacted on Telegram and offered the chance to buy their stolen car back for a proportion of the retail value. Once the price had been agreed, the 'buyer' would go to a place where they would find the vehicle with the keys in the ignition.[74] While this may be an economy of effort, it also reduces criminal exposure in moving and selling stolen cars in a city experiencing increased law enforcement scrutiny. In 2023, a new local organized crime group also attempted to keep criminal activity contained, breaking into a retirement home and spending the entire curfew period there, torturing their victims until they obtained their financial information. The criminals were quickly apprehended.[75]

But if moving around the city under curfew presents a challenge, it is not an insurmountable one. For example, one conscript smuggling scheme used an ambulance to transport clients to the border during curfew under the guise of transporting patients.[76]

In terms of the city's night economy, a key enabler has been Odesa's volunteer units, the number of which grew considerably in the wake of the full-scale invasion. These units perform numerous tasks in the city and region, including delivering humanitarian aid to the military, manning checkpoints and enforcing the curfew. Some of these volunteer units have sought to use their special powers for criminal purposes, with rogue volunteers providing the logistics for Odesa's resurgent vice economy. According to one investigative journalist, high-level drug dealers use volunteer patrols to transport drugs and sex workers around the city at night. Another media report accused law enforcement officials of transporting sex workers across the city.[77] Illegal night taxis (which charge very high fares) also meet the demand. In one instance, an illegal taxi driver admitted buying an ID card from a volunteer unit, which would allow him to operate during curfew.[78] During our fieldwork, there were signs that the state was cracking down on this unregulated 'security' economy by reducing the number of volunteer units, with plans to leave only one in each city.

For other criminals, however, the constraints of martial law were merely an impetus to expand into new areas. Georgian organized crime in Odesa had long specialized in burglary, car theft and street crime – activities that were vulnerable to the curfew. Faced with this new reality, many of the Georgian bosses and ordinary criminals have either gone to ground or left for other European countries. According to a source close to law enforcement, all remaining ethnic Georgian organized crime groups in the Odesa region were in a 'dormant' state in late 2024. Of the three main bosses, one had left for Germany and another for Turkey, while one remained in Odesa, although his group has been reportedly inactive since the beginning of 2023.[79]

However, some Georgian organized crime figures have diversified into white-collar crime, namely scam call centres – a highly lucrative business that can be run from self-imposed exile. As in Mexico, where drug cartels have become involved in scam call centres,[80] these criminals can provide the necessary investment to set up a call centre – between €50 000 and €100 000, according to several sources – and the muscle to police the market. To set up a call centre in Odesa, an entrepreneur must secure a 'roof' from a member of the underworld, or they will be targeted. ('Roofing' is the provision of protection for a business, including an illegal one, from interference by government, law enforcement agencies or criminals, for an ongoing fee.) Geography is no obstacle: an unauthorized entrepreneur in Spain trying to set up a call centre in Ukraine, for example, might find their car burnt out or receive a beating.[81] The source also suggested that certain powerful law enforcement agencies may be involved in protecting, and profiting from, the call centre business.

The growth of this form of crime has been extraordinarily rapid. One police officer who has worked extensively to dismantle call centres said that he first encountered them in Mykolaiv around 2018. Fraudsters were relatively crude in their approach, scamming people who were seeking to buy cars below market price. They mixed a cold-calling approach with a person-to-person aspect: a customer would be invited to go and sign a contract before transferring half the sum to the 'seller', after which they would never hear from the seller again.

The rudimentary nature of these scams, which were easy to detect and shut down, gave little indication of what was to follow. 'I didn't take it seriously,' said the police officer regretfully. But the pace of change has been swift. Since the Russian invasion, scam call centres have become one of the most prominent illicit activities in Ukraine, with transnational reach, complex corporate structures and international investors.[82]

The city of Dnipro in eastern Ukraine is widely regarded as the epicentre of call centres in the country, but Odesa is also a major player. For the most part, call centres in Odesa operate in plain sight, renting premises in business centres, often in desirable locations on the shoreline, and investing in good equipment. It is estimated that at any one time there are at least 15 to 20 call centres in the city, each employing an average of 20 to 30 people (although they can be much larger).[83]

'Imposter' scams – where scammers pose as bank, law enforcement, government officials and even relatives – are a key scamming technique in Odesa,[84] and have become increasingly sophisticated, with scammers obtaining victim's financial details from the dark net before initiating the scam.[85] But Odesa is also seeing a rise in scams that cultivate potential investors until they transfer large sums of money – a practice known as 'pig butchering' in South East Asia.[86] First, the scammers obtain databases of investors who may be willing to take a risk for a high return. Over time, these investors are persuaded to make initial trades. To prove their credibility, scam call centres create professional-looking websites where investors can see their assets appearing to grow rapidly. At a certain point, however, either the trades start losing value or the call centres stop communicating. We were told of one case where a Czech national, targeted because of his history of playing the stock market, was fleeced of €120 000.[87]

The revenue can be huge. One call centre, which targeted victims in Ukraine, Moldova, the US, Italy, the UAE and the Czech Republic until it was dismantled in November 2023, made between €150 000 and €200 000 a month (although overheads were also high, with salaries costing €50 000 a month).[88] A law enforcement officer recounted how a crime boss who ran 10 call centres was reportedly given, as a birthday present, the day's takings from all the call centres under his control – half a million dollars.[89] Cryptocurrencies are commonly used to launder the proceeds.

With so much money to be made, it is perhaps not surprising that there have been conflicts between rivals over the most precious asset of all – personnel. Call centres require a specific profile: young people who speak foreign languages and are able to gain the trust of their victims in order to persuade them to divulge sensitive information (such as credit card details or computer logins) or transfer money. Potential employees are recruited from universities, among other places, and are usually screened with a polygraph before being hired, and again on a regular basis, to prevent infiltration by law enforcement.[90] But once hired, they are well paid. Although their basic salary is relatively low, approximately US$300–400 a month, they can earn many times that in commission. A top earner can make up to US$10 000 a month.[91]

As in the corporate world, there are attempts to poach talent from rivals and strong incentives offered to remain – although these can involve physical violence against the employee attempting to switch sides or leave the company. In Odesa, a serious conflict emerged in 2023 between the Odesa clans and those who had moved in from Dnipro.[92] In another case, a Georgian involved in the call centres reportedly physically abused an employee who stated he wanted to leave the company.[93]

Taking down these centres is complicated work. Call centres keep records, but these must be quickly secured during a law enforcement raid to prevent them being destroyed by the employees. The servers used are generally located abroad and, to prosecute cases, Ukrainian law enforcement requires victim testimonies, which are hard to obtain given the international reach of the scams, language barriers and the protracted nature of international cooperation among law enforcement agencies.

The grain game: cash, shell companies and sanctioned smugglers

Many feared that the reopening of the city's port would bring a resurgence in the illicit trafficking of drugs, contraband and other goods that was present before the invasion, but there has been little sign of this.[94] Possible dampeners on the illicit trade may be the increased law enforcement presence around the port as well as the sluggish resumption of container imports.[95]

However, trade in one commodity is booming – grain. Ukrainian exports began to pick up in the early months of 2024 and have remained strong.[96] From July to September 2024, volumes of wheat, barley and rye exports rose dramatically compared to the same period in 2023; corn exports have also increased.[97] The sea ports of Odesa region have seen most of the activity, accounting for nearly 80 per cent of Ukraine's agricultural exports in August 2024, as volumes through the Danube ports of Reni and Izmail declined.[98]

In an effort to avoid taxes, many grain operators have used cash to conduct the trade.[99] This has required the establishment of sophisticated schemes in which organized crime has spotted an opportunity. In one scheme, scammers reportedly use forged documents to trick drivers into handing over cash received for grain shipments, which can be as much as €100 000 per load (see Figure 2). Some grain farmers say they have been scammed three or four times.[100] Reportedly, even local police have got in on the activity, extorting grain transporters in exchange for not being subjected to unwarranted stops and traffic offences.[101]

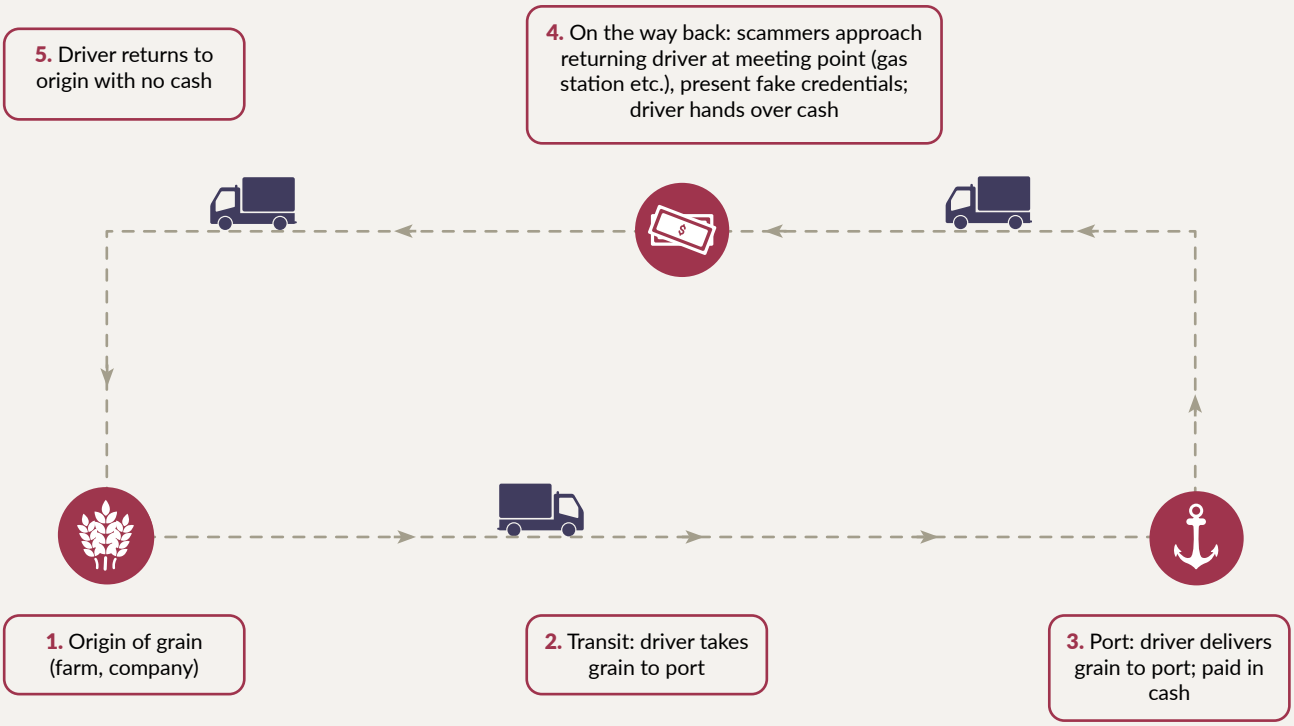


FIGURE 2 The grain cash scam: scammers use forged documents to trick drivers into handing over cash received for grain shipments.

But with so much money to be saved by avoiding tax, grain operators feel that using cash is worth the risk. Although the practice is not new – the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project conducted an investigation into grain companies avoiding tax after the 2022 invasion[102] – the increased volume of trade through the ports has made the crime more lucrative.

Although convoluted in practice, the theoretical tax avoidance scheme is simple. Shell companies are used to buy, move and sell the grain, generally involving cargoes of between 5 000 and 30 000 tonnes. Given that the price of grain between mid-August and mid-October 2024 averaged about UAH7 900 per tonne (US$190),[103] this translates into cargoes worth between US$950 000 and US$5.7 million. The shell companies are often quickly dissolved once their work is done, leaving the foreign exchange earnings from the sale of the grain outside Ukraine, and therefore safe from Ukrainian tax officials.

The number of such shell companies has increased dramatically, illustrating the rapid growth of such practices. According to a law enforcement official involved in tax affairs, in 2022, 30 per cent of the companies involved in the grain trade were fraudulent, but by 2024 this figure had reached 70 per cent.[104] This grey economy is taking a heavy toll on Ukraine's budget. For example, the SBU estimated the financial losses after dismantling just one such scheme in 2023 at hundreds of millions of hryvnias.[105] In total, this shadow grain economy accounts for 30–40 per cent of all grain exports and cost the Ukrainian state US$3 billion in lost taxes in the two years to May 2024.[106]

To combat this situation, a new law came into force on 1 July 2024 aimed at ensuring the timely return of such earnings, establishing a 14 per cent VAT rate (which exporters can reclaim if they can prove that the foreign exchange earnings are back in Ukraine within 90 days) – although curiously cancelled the order only five months later.[107] In August 2024, the government also attempted to tackle the practice of cash trading by imposing minimum prices on exports, although this had not been enacted at the time of writing.[108] A crackdown by the Bureau of Economic Security (BEB) resulted in UAH800 million (US$19.4 million) in taxes due being paid between May and September 2024.[109]

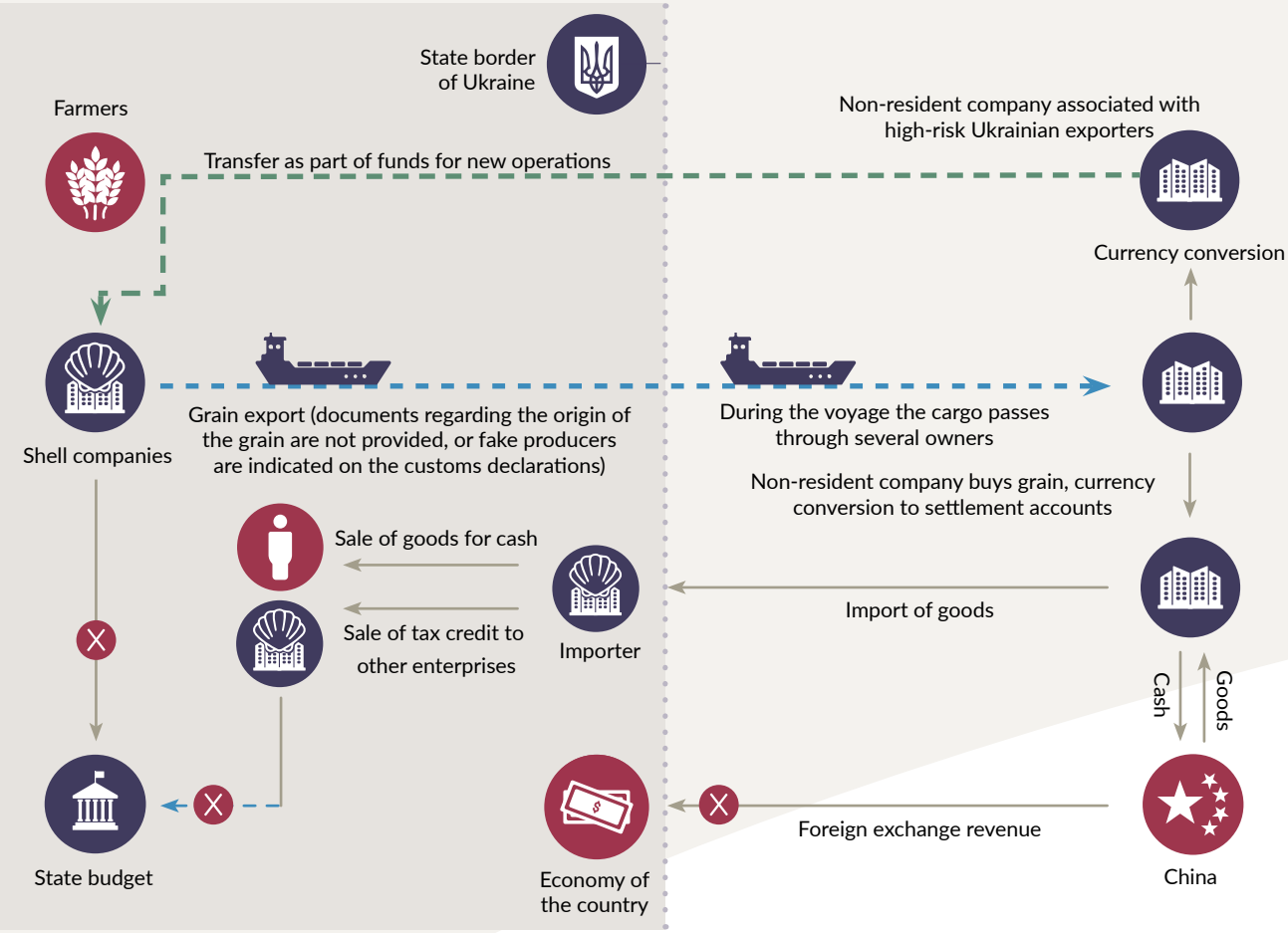


FIGURE 3 The 'black grain' scheme: offshore shell companies are used to buy, move and sell grain, depriving the Ukrainian state of millions in tax revenues.

SOURCE: Bureau of Economic Security

More worryingly, increased attention paid by law enforcement to these tax avoidance schemes is reportedly merely clearing the playing field of small actors, allowing Vadim Alperin – once described as a 'godfather of smuggling' by President Zelensky and included on the 2021 sanctions list of the top 10 Ukrainian smugglers – to control a significant part of the grain trade through Odesa.[110] One journalist claimed the tax agency also plays a role in the scheme, authorizing grain exports by companies tied to Alperin, the SBU, the Defence Intelligence of Ukraine (HUR) and others, and vetoing the rest. 'The BEB, customs and tax [agency] are acting as hunters of the small guys, and they leave the big fish [untouched],' explained the journalist.[111] This official regulation has also reportedly prevented a Dnipro organized crime group from entering the grain market, which it attempted to do in 2024.[112]

Alperin's connection to grain is widely implied, but not legally proven. In April 2024, he was allegedly linked to the grain exporter Agiros (sanctioned on the same day as Alperin)[113] and the grain terminal Olympex[114] (which has seen large embezzlement related to grain),[115] but the connection was based on anonymous industry testimony, and not legal or financial links.

But given that the terms of Alperin's April 2024 sanctions prohibit him from directly engaging in any economic activity in Ukraine, such direct evidence is likely to be scarce.[116] Instead, as with the shell companies that handle grain, there are intermediaries and connections. For example, in the auction of a factory in Odesa, all of the members of the supervisory board were reportedly linked to Alperin through companies or business connections – the implication being that such influence would allow him to secure the valuable asset at well below market price.[117]

And while there is no legal proof of the existing grain scheme, Alperin is currently in the midst of another court case that bears some striking structural similarities: as the former head of Odesa customs and a high-level official of the Federal Tax Service, he stands accused of creating a criminal organization that worked to import goods at an undervalued price. The criminal trial is ongoing and Alperin has yet to plead to the charges. He was released on bail in December 2019.[118]

LOOKING AHEAD

Odesa may have experienced a period of relative calm, but the history of the conflict would suggest that things can change quickly. In October 2024, Russia deployed 16 ships to the Black Sea, seven of which carried Kalibr cruise missiles.[119] The frequency of air strikes on the city also increased dramatically, with several ships hit in the port and numerous casualties.[120] In a troubling warning, former vice president of the European Commission Josep Borrell claimed in October 2024 that 'the grain export problem is back'.[121] Should Russia overturn the maritime gains made by Ukraine in 2023 and regularly target the city and port, life in Odesa, particularly around the grain market, will once again change profoundly.

Grain today, reconstruction tomorrow

The return of the grain trade has given Odesa an economic boost, although it remains to be seen whether this will continue in 2025. But if grain was the story of 2024, it is reconstruction that will likely be the prize for criminal interests in 2025.

Restoration underway at the Cathedral of Transfiguration, Odesa, September 2024.
Photo: supplied

And there are expected to be major construction and reconstruction projects coming to Odesa this year. The finance ministry's list of construction projects scheduled to begin in 2025 includes the restoration of four of Odesa's war-damaged heritage sites: the Odesa Art Museum, the Literary Museum in Gagarin Palace, the Museum of Western and Eastern Art, and the Regional Philharmonic Building. The first three projects are costed at UAH320 million (US$7.7 million) each, and the latter at UAH380 million (US$9.2 million). [122] The government of Italy is supporting the restoration of these sites, the Cathedral of the Transfiguration (€2 million) and a general plan for developing the city with a three-year €45 million package.[123]

Projects to repair and improve the region's infrastructure have much higher values: a 400 kV substation is expected to cost UAH 10.3 billion (US$250 million), while the construction of eight

wastewater treatment plants has been budgeted at UAH14.6 billion (US$350 million). Roads may have less startling ticket prices, but have long been a magnet for corruption: collectively, the budget for road repairs in the region as itemized in the finance ministry's list total UAH547 million (US$13 million) – an attractive proposition for embezzlement.

The warning signs are already there. Even before the invasion, the region's construction record was troubling, with numerous accusations of high-level corruption in the industry, along with a plethora of smaller schemes, and little seems to have changed in these dynamics.[124] In 2023 and 2024 there were numerous cases of contracts being awarded to companies with little or zero capital and short corporate histories.[125] Officials have not shied away from embezzling reconstruction funds to repair private homes or infrastructure damaged by Russian aggression.[126]

While such cases may sometimes involve fairly small amounts of money, the political cost of such actions is immense, both at home and abroad. People in Odesa are used to (if not accepting of) corruption around construction, but corruption in reconstruction brings out a special ire.[127] Such schemes also risk undermining international confidence and support for Ukraine's reconstruction goals. As is so often the case in Ukraine, the launch of well-designed tools (such as the Digital Restoration Ecosystem for Accountable Management, known as DREAM) seems to have little impact on corrupt actors, who continue to use tried and tested schemes to win contracts and embezzle funds.[128]

A damaged building in the Bilhorod-Dnistrovky district to the south-west of Odesa. Funds to repair the damage were embezzled by a group established by the official in charge of the reconstruction.
Source: Odesa Prosecutor's Office, https://t.me/odesa_prokuratura/447

Human trafficking: a reservoir of vulnerability

While some have enjoyed the relative peace Odesa is experiencing, there are many living in straitened circumstances who may be easy targets for human traffickers.[129] Some of the most vulnerable populations in Odesa are the approximately 240 000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) who have arrived in the region since the start of the full-scale invasion, including some 130 000 in the city.[130] These people face not only economic insecurity but also the emotional trauma of dislocation and memories of life under Russian occupation.[131] This population is also arguably the most vulnerable to human trafficking: according to a mid-2024 report by Ukrainian NGO Caritas, 55 per cent of human trafficking victims who had contacted them in the past year nationwide were IDPs.[132]

Odesa is making great efforts to assist IDPs, but the region has a poor track record when it comes to human trafficking.[133] One at-risk group may be Odesa's sex workers, with the sex industry has resurging as the city's fortunes have changed. Many sex workers who left Odesa after the invasion have returned, along with sex workers from Dnipro and Kharkiv, who relocated due to the security situation in those cities.[134] These women, especially the IDPs, will face increased risks, as will IDPs who turn to the sex trade as a means to support themselves and their families. Risks will manifest in different degrees according to the clientele these women serve, from elite escorts, who generally have more control over their interactions, to women working the Kyiv–Odesa highway, who are frequently assaulted.[135]

These risks may not be confined to Ukraine. Before the invasion, Odesa was an origin point for trafficked women who were sent to Europe and elsewhere to work in the sex trade, and there are signs that this trend is returning. In 2024, for example, the region saw two cases of women being recruited for the sex trade in Kazakhstan and Italy.[136] Girls have also been transported to Romania for forced labour on farms, and coerced into claiming benefits and handing them over to their traffickers.[137]

Elections: a desire for change

In late 2024, the talk of the town was of impending elections. No one was sure when they would be held, but many political candidates had already begun organizing their parties, hiring strategists and planning campaigns.[138] There was also a palpable sense of uncertainty about the outcome, although it was generally believed that Zelensky's Servant of the People party would not fare well.

At present, the political balance of power in the city is complex. There are conflicting accounts of the power of Oleh Kieper, who was appointed governor of Odesa in May 2023 and is also closely affiliated with the presidential office. One SBU source said that Kieper had been appointed to protect the grain market – a claim backed up by a BEB source, who said that he had gathered the BEB tax and customs agencies to work through issues and signed an order in August 2023 to check the legality of the origin of grain and ensure that customs declarations were submitted 10 days before the loading of any vessel.[139] However, according to a local journalist, Kieper had no influence over most of the key agencies in Odesa – only over the police.[140] As with the criminal ecosystem, this lack of hegemony may have been intentional: 'To ensure Kieper does not assemble a fiefdom,' said the journalist, 'there are counterweights.'[141]

One such counterweight may be the embattled mayor of Odesa, Hennadiy Trukhanov, who continues to display remarkable political staying power. Cited in several corruption scandals and detained in May 2023, Trukhanov continues to provoke controversy. In June 2024, the mayor was caught up in a scandal over generators donated by Germany and Italy, which were originally intended for hospitals but allegedly found their way into places belonging to friends and acquaintances of the mayor, including a car wash, a restaurant and private homes.[142] The mayor has denied the allegations, but a criminal investigation has been launched.[143] Friction has also arisen between Kieper and Trukhanov over the move to 'Ukrainianize' Odesa's streets and heritage sites named after prominent Russians. Trukhanov, who was notably pro-Russian before the invasion, has opposed the policy, with Kieper responding that 'if anyone really wants to stroll along streets with imperial/Soviet names, there is Moscow and Ufa, not Ukrainian Odesa'.[144]

Talk of elections, however, may come to nothing. According to the current guidelines, elections will be held six months after the end of martial law, which will not happen until the war is over. It is not inconceivable, however, that Zelensky, under growing public pressure, could change the rules to allow an election to be held, although such a move would require plans to be made about the voting rights of serving military personnel and Ukrainians abroad.

The unusual absence of a power centre in Odesa – in both the criminal and political worlds – is, of course, temporary. The mounting eagerness of local actors to hold elections is just one of the signs that such a power vacuum cannot and will not remain for long. The government in Kyiv also understands this and is trying to walk the thin line between the most prominent forces in Odesa, careful not to tip the balance. Holding an election now would be extremely counterproductive for Kyiv: its grip on power would be likely to falter, with uncontrollable consequences for this key region.

The criminal world, a major player in Odesa represented by various local and international actors, is also uneasy and anxious to try to secure its influence over current and future reconstruction funding. For the time being, the increased presence of the military and law enforcement is still suppressing criminal activity. The question is, for how long? As the money returns to Odesa, so does the potential for criminal conflict to secure overall control of lucrative revenues, and this may lead to a fundamental reshaping of the underworld.

Whatever the future holds, Odesa has once again demonstrated its extraordinary ability for illicit money making. With ever-changing schemes and plots, it can truly be called an oasis for crime on the Black Sea.

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