Post-Soviet organized crime is often analyzed as a homogeneous phenomenon. All of the post-Soviet successor states face serious organized crime problems but very significant regional differences exist which challenge any efforts to address it as a uniform phenomenon. Moreover, the distinct successor states have different capacities and political will to fight the problem ensuring that regional differences will grow over time.

Almost all the countries of the former Soviet Union have extortion rackets, casinos, prostitution rings and illegal drug trafficking but in certain regions particular crimes predominate. In regions devastated by civil war and/or the collapse of the Soviet state support system, organized crime is more concentrated in certain types of illicit activity. For example, in the Caucasus, arms trafficking is a central activity of organized crime whereas in Kyrgyzstan organized criminals engage predominantly in drug trafficking. In Central Russia, the Far East and the Baltics, where the legitimate economy is more intact, organized crime is less concerned with these two forms of criminal activity; its criminal activities are tied more closely to the legitimate economy.

The endemic corruption and shadow economy of the Soviet period are now being transformed into the contemporary problems of organized crime and corruption. Their metamorphosis is shaped by a multiplicity of political, economic, geographic, cultural factors, the overarching legacy of the Soviet period and the years of post-Soviet transition. The diversity of contemporary post-Soviet organized crime is also explained by contacts with international crime groups and

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1 For a discussion of this by V.M. Episov see A.I. Dologova and S.V. D’iakov, eds., Organizovannaia Prestupnost’ Vol. 2 (Moscow 1993) pp. 56–63.
traditional factors contributing to the rise of organized crime such as strategic ports, presence of significant ethnic minorities and longstanding trade routes.\textsuperscript{2}

As the centralized controls of the authoritarian Soviet state are lifted, regions are developing distinctive political, social and economic features. The observed diversity of organized crime in Russia and the successor states mirrors the visible changes occurring in all aspects of post-Soviet society.

The conventional wisdom is that post-Soviet organized crime is a transitional phenomenon responding to the absence of legal norms in a period of profound property redistribution.\textsuperscript{3} Organized crime fills the void left by the collapse of Soviet power and the weakness of the successor states. According to this perspective, organized crime will become much less threatening when legal norms are adopted to accommodate the market economy.

This article challenges this view suggesting that the legacy of the Soviet period and the deliberate policy decisions of the Gorbachev and Yeltsin governments in Russia and of the new governments of the successor states have also been important determinants of post-Soviet organized crime. The current diversification and flexibility of post-Soviet crime groups suggests that the phenomenon will not rapidly disappear once the initial transition period is over. Many criminals and their organizations have adapted to their countries and will develop in tandem with the successor states.

1. The Diversification of the Organized Crime Phenomenon

European Russia has dominated discussions of post-Soviet organized crime. Yet Russia itself is an enormous country which spans two continents. The crime problems of Asian Russia are very different from those of Moscow and St. Petersburg which possess a disproportionate share of Russia’s capital resources and contacts with the West.\textsuperscript{4} Russia’s crime problems have many distinguishing features which set them apart from those in the Baltics, Central Asia and the Caucasus.

1.1. Within Russia

Different parts of non-European Russia face different problems. Ekaterinburg, in the Urals, is an important transshipment point for the illicit cargoes of organized


\textsuperscript{3} See for example, J.A. Leitzel, ‘Corruption in the Russian Transition’, Ellrasia Economic Outlook (1996) pp. 1.7–1.8.

\textsuperscript{4} For a discussion of regional differences see V.S. Ovchinskii, Strategiia Bor’ by s Mafiei (Moscow 1993) pp. 52–71.