

Mauro Cerbino  
coordinador

Volumen I  
Más allá de las pandillas:  
violencias, juventudes y resistencias  
en el mundo globalizado



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# The different faces of Russian street gangs\*

Dr Svetlana Stephenson\*\*

To paraphrase Marx and Engels the spectre of the gang that is now haunting Europe seems to be no less threatening than the spectre of communism was once for the bourgeoisie. The gangs, which appear to exist everywhere –from Paris and London to Moscow and Budapest– are presented in public discourse as manifestations of archetypical evil. They breed and multiply; they seduce the innocent; they threaten all that is good in society; and the only possible strategy to fight them is to eradicate them, while trying to save those unfortunate individuals who live their lives in close proximity to the ‘possessed’, i.e. their neighbours, friends and families. Gang suppression strategies, gang injunctions, gang ASBOs –a whole arsenal of measures, many imported from the US, is now being deployed in an effort to deal with the threat (Hallsworth, 2011).

In this messianic battle, however, it is easy to lose touch with reality and become oblivious to the fact that there is no such thing as ‘The [evil] gang’. Firstly, this falsely monolithic construction covers a plethora of

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groups and associations. The ‘gang’ can be a street peer group, a territorial fighting formation, an illicit entrepreneurial organization or a criminal association. Secondly, the gang is not some socially isolated and pernicious entity, a parasite feeding on the social body. Gangs share many elements of the local cultural traditions. They can be a part of the wider social regulation in their neighbourhoods, and in certain social ecologies and historical periods can come to accommodations with a variety of non-state and state agencies. A systematic comparison of gangs with different *modus operandi* can help to provide a more nuanced understanding of these complex social institutions, and to prevent misguided and harmful strategies for dealing with them. In this chapter, I will set out this argument using the case-study of street organizations in the Russian cities of Kazan and Moscow.

The evidential basis for this paper is as follows. I use the results of a research project conducted in Kazan and Moscow in 2005-7, which involved interviews and focus groups with active members of different types of street social organizations. In Kazan the project team conducted 32 in-depth interviews with active members of organized entrepreneurial gangs aged 17-35, all male (although some of the gangs are mixed, the vast majority of gangs have only male membership). In Moscow we interviewed 23 members of the street territorial networks, aged 12-17, male and female. The membership of these groups is younger than that of Kazan gangs, and includes girls and young women (although young men represent the core). Access to interviewees –gang members– was achieved using the snowballing technique, building upon initial contacts with street youth, as well as the local residents, friends, neighbours and former school-mates of the researchers. In Moscow we also conducted six focus groups with members of territorial groups (all of these groups were conducted in the school for juvenile delinquents in the South-East region of Moscow)<sup>1</sup>. We also interviewed former mem-

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1 Apart from the author, the project team included Aleksander Shashkin, Aleksander Salagaev, Rustem Safin and Rustem Maksudov. The project was funded. The school is an ‘educational institution of a closed type’. It belongs to the Moscow city department of education. Its students are referred to it by courts for minor offences (mainly hooliganism and theft), as an alternative to criminal punishment. By Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation.

bers of street organizations; local young people who were not members; teachers, parents and school psychologists; and representatives of the police (militia) and the State Prosecution service (Prokuratura) in both sites<sup>2</sup>.

### **Kazan Gangs: Autonomous Ruling Regimes**

The city of Kazan is the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan, part of the Russian Federation. It is situated on the Volga river, about 800 kilometres from Moscow. In Russia, a later modernizer, the tradition of violent youth territoriality, street-by-street, area-by-area fights and honor battles is traced by many anthropologists to archaic village culture, where these fights were an important part of male socialization (Bernshtam, 1988; Shchepanskaya, 2001). As in other areas of Russia, both rural and urban, the cultural imperative for young boys was to spend time on the streets, with their mates, play and fight, and support each other against attacks from strangers. Kazan street peer networks, formed by young men and reinforced by common threat and conflict (cf.: Thrasher, 1927) were sites of togetherness, reciprocity and unmediated communication. While Thrasher talks about such associations as gangs, to use Victor Turner's definition, they can be seen as *communitas*, unstructured communities arising out of experience of liminality, such sharing a rite of passage (1992, 1995).

The development of the Kazan gangs in their modern incarnation, as agents of economic and social power in their neighbourhoods, started between 1970 and 1975, when youth territorial groups found a role as violent enforcers in the shadow economic markets. This period saw the appearance of shadow producers (*tsekhoviki*) in the Soviet Union, when managers of state companies began 'off-the-books' production and distribution of goods. The new unregulated economic sector needed its structures of informal protection and enforcement, and these were provided by the so called *thieves-in-law* (a closed society of professional

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2 For a detailed discussion see Stephenson (forthcoming).

criminals) (Gurov, 1990; Salagaev, 2001). Young boys and men, brought up in the culture of tough masculinity, and involved in the networks of solidarity and reciprocity, and in some cases also having informal leadership, were a highly valuable resource for the *thieves-in-law*, who turned into 'violent entrepreneurs' (see Blok, 1974; Volkov, 2002), agents using violence for economic gains. Some of the local youth groups became 'violent entrepreneurs' themselves, fighting off the efforts of the thieves to use them. The groups developed structures of leadership, internal discipline and started to use weapons. Other youth groups, who did not want to be subsumed by expanding entrepreneurial gangs, organized into more rigid structures, fighting to protect their territory from 'annexation'. This process mirrors the history of the American street gangs, where some gangs emerged not just as spontaneous youth organizations, but were also organized by adults – businessmen, racketeers or politicians (Wacquant, 2006), or developed in order to protect their territory from new violent groups.

At the end of the 1980s, the Soviet Union went through a deep crisis, associated with economic liberalization and the end of the one-party state. Kazan's economic sector, especially the key employers (military production companies) was hit very hard, and young men began to find that transition into industrial jobs held by their fathers was no longer attractive, nor even viable. Many young men began to develop 'alternative careers' in the informal and illegal economy. It was at this time that new co-operative businesses and private enterprises were also emerging. A vast array of entrepreneurial activities suddenly opened up at street level (outdoor markets, small stalls and kiosks, parking lots, street drug trade and prostitution). State law enforcement was highly ineffective and corrupt, and could not guarantee safety for the businessmen or enforce business deals and obligations. Many of the existing street gangs moved to control the economic opportunities on their local turf, taking 'dues' from people involved in the street-level economy. New groups were also formed for the same purpose. The same period saw a violent division and re-division of the city territory.

By the mid 1990s, following these gang wars, the Kazan *violent entrepreneurs* managed to establish domination in their local areas and form what I would call 'autonomous ruling regimes'<sup>3</sup>. The gangs put other par-

ticipants in the street space, both economic agents and non-gang young people into a variety of situations of dependency, collecting ‘protection money’ and dues. In the process, the structure of the group, its self-presentation and the normative organization of violence changed considerably. The gangs developing age-based social stratification, structures of recruitment and promotion, strong normative codes of conduct, and turned themselves into sovereign agents in the neighbourhoods. At the same time the essence of the gang as *communitas*, a street fraternity sharing collective identities and vision of the world, remained, despite the emergence of more formal structures of leadership and subordination<sup>4</sup>. The members were expected to spend much of their leisure time together, come to regular meetings, give altruistic support to other members of the gang in case of need and be ready to sacrifice themselves to the gang’s cause.

Other features of the gang in its earlier incarnation as a peer group (such as attachment to the territory, tight links with the local community, its patriarchal culture) have also remained. All these legacies proved to be highly functional for the gang’s new role as the local autonomous ruling regime.

### The Kazan gang as a local institution

The social basis of the gang is the local territory. The gang is even called ‘the street’ (*ulitsa*). Different gangs are commonly named after the area in which they are formed (Mirnovskie, Shaturovskie, 56<sup>th</sup> quarter, Sotsgorod, Telestudiya, etc.), and their members are called the ‘lads’ (*pat-sany*). The gangs are ethnically mixed, reflecting the mixed and highly assimilated local population<sup>5</sup> and tend to be young men from the age of

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3 This is similar to Italian mafia families, which, according to Letizia Paoli, have remained *communitas* in their essential features, while developing vertical structures of subordination (Paoli, 2003).

4 Although there is police evidence that Tatars are overrepresented in the gangs (Salagaev and Shashkin, 2005, p.155).

5 This is similar to the changes in the social composition of Italian mafia families from 1950s - 1970s, although one difference is that mafia members must have no personal or family links to the police (Arlacchi, 1986).

16-17 up to over 30s with the leaders (the gangs' founding fathers) reaching up to 50. They have substantial memberships, up to 300 people in some areas. Younger boys from the age of 13, who are involved in the local street peer groups, have contacts with the gangs who they aspire to join, but as yet cannot be accepted as formal members.

According to local experts, before the mid 1990s gang members tended to be young men from working class backgrounds, school drop-outs and delinquents. But over the years, as the gangs became institutionalized in the neighbourhood, they started to attract young men from well-off and highly educated families. The majority of our interviewees were university students or graduates. Many came from the families of businessmen, doctors, lawyers and the police<sup>6</sup>. While far from all the parents were aware of their sons' gang involvement, some knew and indeed encouraged it. We were told of occasions when parents gave the young men money to enable them to meet their obligatory contributions to the common fund, *obshchak*, so that they could continue to be in the gang and avoid sanctions for non-payment.

The gang became an institution that locals could turn to if they became victims of crime, committed by people outside the area, whose permission was needed if somebody wanted to open a small business in the neighbourhood, and whose leaders sometimes participated in community projects, building local mosques and churches, providing money for organized events and celebrations, or 'sponsoring' the local police.

### The gang's structure

The gang is a hierarchical structure with age-bounded cohorts (there are typically three or four age groups) and a ruling elite –the veterans of over 30 years of age– 'the authorities' (*avtoritety*). Each gang has a leader, who retains this role for life, unless he is incarcerated or dies. The gang also elects a 'supervisor' who monitors all the cohorts, apart from those in the

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6 The disjunction between the low status of these boys at school and a high status in the street context is reminiscent of Cohen's (1955) analysis of delinquent subcultures.

highest age group. He is present at all gang meetings and is expected to spend a lot of time observing the rank and file. Each cohort has its own supervisor elected by the next oldest age group from its ranks. The younger lads are controlled more rigidly, and are often punished by their supervisors (fined, beaten up and even expelled from the gang) for various violations of discipline: for example, non-attendance at meetings, non-contribution of money to the common fund, fights with their mates. Transition into higher strata, and to higher status in the gang, is predicated on age and on merit, assessed by a person's behaviour in crisis situations, his bravery and wit, his willingness to support other members of the gang, and his business qualities. The capacity for extreme violence, often a prized quality in other gang ecologies (Yablonsky, 1962; Anderson, 1999), is not a quality that the Kazan gangs value or encourage. On the contrary, people who engage in gratuitous violence are expelled from their 'street'. Every two to three years the gang recruits new members, forming a new stratum, with existing members moving up to more senior groups. There are no initiation rituals, but gang members check each recruit's reputation in the neighbourhood and test his understanding of the gangs' norms of conduct (*ponyatiya*).

Every gang has regular meetings (*skhodniaki*) where business is discussed and at which they give money for the common fund. According to our respondents, these meetings are often very brief affairs (lasting as little as 25-30 minutes) but attendance is obligatory, and if a lad misses one without a reason, he can be punished.

The gangs' rules demand that the punishment is fair and predictable. If a lad violates the group discipline he is usually punished by being marched through a row of older lads (but no more than 30 people), each of whom strikes him with their fists (but never legs) on the head or the upper body two or three times. Sometimes the lads are fined, but it is prohibited to punish for the same act twice (for example, by combining physical and material punishment).

Although the group is hierarchically structured, it can still be described as a fraternity, a closed male society with strong interpersonal bonds and essential equality of status. All members belong to an honoured category of the lads and are entitled to respect and considerable

autonomy –provided that they follow the discipline and rules of the gang. The older lads are not allowed to exploit the younger ones, nor to punish them without a good reason, humiliate them or appropriate their common fund. All the lads have a right to have their own patch (*delyuga*) –for example, a kiosk, gaming parlour or market stall– from which they can extract individual income (although they have to pay tax on it to the common fund). The older *avtoritety* make sure that the younger lads have access to the street productive resources, notwithstanding the fact that their own business interests may be no longer associated with the street.

The solidaristic nature of the gang is very well illustrated by the way that the common fund is collected and spent. All members contribute a weekly or monthly sum, plus up to two thirds of the personal income gained from gang-related activities. The fund is collected by the cohort's supervisor who can then allocate it for a variety of needs. The gang fund supports limited social security (help to incarcerated members or their relatives, payment for medical treatment, money for funerals); legal protection (bribes to police officers and investigators, payment to lawyers, payment of fines) or business needs of the gang (money for investment, petrol and car hire for when the lads go to organized fights or mediation meetings with rival gangs). Nobody can use the fund for any other purposes, and embezzlement from it is punished very severely and leads to exclusion from the group.

### The code of conduct

Having developed from a relatively disorganized *communitas* of street peer groups, the gang becomes a type of what Victor Turner called normative *communitas*, an association bound by a moral code and a system of group rules (Turner, 1992, 1995). The discourse of the lads is saturated with references to these rules, or 'notions' (*ponyatiya*). They are invoked when the gang members talk about fights (they need to be seen as fair), or about their behaviour in their own group, their public self-presentation, speech acts and manner of walking and dressing. The notions are extremely important for the group, because they make it a

strong and disciplined unit, capable of successful domination in the world of the streets. They make it possible to develop successful businesses. But above all, I would argue, the notions underpin the social order of the streets, where the lads are positioned as the aristocracy, a closed and morally superior group entitled to subjugation of other groups and appropriation of their resources.

The norms and notions of the gang in its previous incarnation –i.e. those associated with construction of the dominant masculinity (toughness, bravery, quick reaction to possible provocation) as well as the imperative to stand for ones' mates– remain in place. The imperatives of a traditional patriarchal culture are related to the prohibitions on attacks against women and children, or old people, or even prohibition to attack a young man if he walks his girlfriend home (although this notion, we heard, is becoming a thing of the past). The lad must not engage in gratuitous and extreme violence. He should not attack anyone without a reason (although, as the lads admitted, the reason can always be found). These moral prescriptions associated with the traditional construction of the dominant masculinity are not unique to the gang, but form a part of a wider Russian culture (Kosterina, 2006) , and this explains the ease with which the gang recruits local young people –they already implicitly 'understand the notions'.

What makes the gang's code of conduct specific is the fact that it supports the gang's self-production as a status group, the ruling stratum on the street. Weber's analysis of a status group as differentiated from other groups on the basis of prestige, honour or religion (Weber, 1946) seems highly appropriate for this social organization. While religion plays little role in the everyday lives of the lads, the imperatives of prestige and honour are paramount.

The borders of the status group are clear cut and diligently maintained. The lads belong to an exclusive society, and should be never confused with the subjugated commoners –*lokhs* or *chukhans*– or other youth groups (*cherts*). There are considerable anxieties about not being taken for a commoner, or displaying behaviours which are attributed to the latter. For example, the gang's rules demand that a lad should never be seen to be morally hurt or upset by someone's actions (such vulnerability is an

attribute of *lokhs*). He should never be the victim of extortion nor give in to pressure. If somebody calls him a *lokh* or a *chert*, he has to fight. Sometimes potential new recruits are tested by being called *lokhs* by the gang members. If they do not fight, they are turned away. Some economic activities are prohibited for a gang member: he cannot trade (this would make him into a member of the subjugated group), but he can control or own the business of other traders (for example, market traders or increasingly, drug pushers). A more bizarre prohibition is that a lad cannot be a transport conductor –this is humiliating for him and the street.

Being sovereign agents in their own territory, the lads would only accept parity of status with members of other territorial groups. “With some of them we are friends, with some we are enemies... The lads make war and peace, but in any case, they are lads, and you can only deal with them” (Nosok, 27 years). Other young people, and their ways of life or subcultural styles, are of no interest to the lads. Talking about other youth groups, 19-year old Tadjik says: “We don’t care about them. The question is –who belongs to this or that group? If a lad from the street plays in a rock band, he does not stop being a lad. And if a *chukhan* does not have long hair or black leather clothes, he will not become a lad.” Summarising the lads’ attitudes to non-affiliated young people, 17-year old Almaz says, “We do not respect them, they all live like dummies, without notions”. The non-affiliated youth are objects of domination, and in practical terms can be subjected to extortion or racket, not because of their style of clothes or social backgrounds, but because they are a priori inferior to the lads. The lads themselves do not identify with any youth subcultures, and while many of them are interested in football and support specific teams, they do not participate in football-related violence. There is no warfare against members of other youth groups (rather than competing gangs) and the gangs do not attack people simply because they belong to a specific group, such as ethnic or racial minorities, or walk into the gang’s territory. Younger members may start individual fights with someone who they think did not show them enough respect, but overall the gang does not define any other groups, except competing gangs and the police, as enemies. As twenty-six year old Ispug said, “We do not like those people

who try to prevent us from doing our business. This includes the cops, who, under the pretext of following the law, deprive the streets of protection opportunities” [*kryshevanie*].

### The gang’s criminal economic activities and violence

One of our interviewees, twenty-four year old Ruslan, characterized the key aim of his group in the following way: “Once we have won our place under the sun, we have one aim: to work, and to keep on working”. This entrepreneurial ethos was shared by most our interviewees. Work consists of offering protection to businessmen, mediating in disputes, and personal and group investment into small business. With the youngsters controlling small scale economic operations, the leaders move to control (and increasingly own) large businesses, such as networks of supermarkets, agricultural holdings, and large-scale drug business.

Violence (or its threat) is an essential resource for this illegal business, and the group cultivates what Volkov calls a “reputation for resolve, or other qualities enabling effective control of possible threats” (2002: 71). For the gang to remain a successful enterprise, it must, as many of our Kazan interviewees stressed, become a recognized force in the city. It can then enjoy an influx of new members, expand its business interests and deal more successfully with the demands of the city authorities and law enforcement agencies.

As I have already mentioned, when they were busy ‘winning a place under the sun’ the gangs were involved in serious violence, but from the mid 1990s the gang wars subsided. The gangs try to control their younger members (who may have violent tendencies) and resolve conflicts peacefully. Once the gang has become an established force in the city, the actual use of violence becomes less necessary and even counterproductive for the group’s interests. Ruslan reported that “we do not fight that often, we try to live quietly and make money. Those youngsters who provoke fights and are looking for trouble, get expelled as elements harmful for the street. So if nobody touches us, we will not get at them. Otherwise of course, we fight and fight very violently”.

The pacification of gangs has also been noted by many of the agents of law enforcement. As M., a representative of the city police said, “The gangs now act in a more reasonable, more intelligent way. There are no more demonstrations of brute force”.

### **Collective fights**

The gang tries to limit any uncontrolled aggression by its members and avoid being dragged into confrontations with other gangs. Fights with other streets are regulated by the need to have a reasonable pretext for violence (such as retaliation for previous assault or response to verbal humiliation) and by prohibition of the use of guns and knives. Nevertheless, conflict between individual members of different gangs or collective disputes over business can easily flare up, and can lead to organized warfare, normally involving the ‘soldiers’ from the younger age cohorts. These conflicts are often resolved through negotiation between the leaders, but if these fail, the younger lads will drive into the territory belonging to the rival gang and attack as many of the gang members as possible. This involves obtaining ‘intelligence’, the addresses of the local lads, and finding the ways to catch them unawares at home or on the street. It is not uncommon to take ‘hostages’. These days (unlike the more violent early periods of the gang’s development) the aim of these wars is to settle scores and demonstrate the gang’s strength, not to kill or maim their adversaries. Sometimes, however, violence overflows and in the heat of the moment the lads can seriously injure or even kill their enemies.

As far as local the non-affiliated youth are concerned, the imperative for the lads is to avoid violence (apart from the cases where their status as local rulers is questioned). The role of the lad as a member of the territorial ruling regime is performed through specific self-presentation. The notions demand that the lad should be careful about what he says. One of the rules is ‘the lad said – the lad did’, meaning that the intentions, claims and promises should have direct and immediate consequences. The lads are not allowed to make empty displays of weapons, and having

produced a knife or a gun should be prepared to use it. This acts to limit the use of such weapons in conflict.

Successful performance of the membership of the ruling regime makes it possible to create discursive domination over the victim, rather than use physical violence. Thus, it is considered to be highly important for the young people to be able to get what they want through the use of verbal techniques ('to be able to speak properly') Gang members are very proud of their capacity to construct the 'right' interaction without the use of physical violence in order to make the victim 'voluntarily' part with his money or possessions (see also Salagaev and Shashkin, 2002; Volkov, 2002) . This capacity means that the threat of legal sanctions for assault or robbery is reduced, and the gang can proceed with its normal business.

### The gang and wider society

The gang is not the only power institution in the neighbourhood. While the lads' have almost total control over the local street space, gang members also study in schools and colleges, and interact with the police and employers in the legal sector. Gang members try to inscribe themselves both within their own 'alternative' order and the larger social order in a way that makes it possible for them to successfully navigate both worlds.

For example, in their role as students, the members do not perform their gang identities in a negativistic or aggressive way, and try to play by the rules set by the teachers and lecturers. This seems to be in sharp contrast with young gang members in some American schools, who consistently challenge the school authorities (Garot, 2010), or with the rebellious and negativistic subculture of the English working class lads described by Paul Willis (1977). The Kazan lads' behaviour in schools was described by O., a Kazan high school teacher, in the following way:

I'll tell you that a true gang member, who has a place in the gang's structure, is never rude [to teachers]. He is politeness itself. He will always say 'hello', will help you carry heavy things. Although it's all obviously a 'performance' for the external audience, he will attend all the classes, so that

*de jure* he will not break the rules. You try to prove that he is doing something wrong outside school...If you challenge him, he looks you openly in the eye and says, prove that I am doing that. And you ask the whole class and they will all confirm that he does nothing wrong.

Similarly, while there is no love lost between the gangs and the police, there is a mutual appreciation of the limits of each institution's power. For example, M., a long-serving representative of an investigative department of one of the police precincts, told us about his negotiations with a gang:

I used to have my own company [sic] , and four people came to my office and started saying that they live there, that this was their territory and that I should pay them. I told them: if you can protect me from the largest gangs in Kazan –Khadi-Taktash, Kvartaly, Centralnye– then come to me, and I will pay you. But I have a different proposition. You can ask me for help when you are incarcerated, and I can help you to get your sentences reduced. One of them was from my area, he recognized me and they just got up and went, and I saw no more of them.

Police use their contacts with *avtoritety* to control low-level criminality and violence of the younger gang members, and this becomes an important tool of crime control (alongside more 'traditional methods' of arrest and prosecution).

Another informant, N., district police investigator, explained:

We know them, they know us, and if something happens, then the older members of the gang are sitting in my office, and I tell them firmly: "Listen, lads, you must solve the problem, if you do not solve it, I will solve it myself. But then I will not look at who of you is right and who is wrong, I will close your shops, take your cars to the car pound and then you'll be trying to get hold of me for years". This normally works and they say themselves: "Fine, we will solve the problem, everything will be all right.

Moreover, while most of the younger gang members have little interest in what goes outside the life of their area, some are actively building political connections. Eighteen year old Timur told us about his mate, also a young gang member, who goes to the meetings of the regional branch of

the country's ruling party, 'United Russia': "This lad cannot string two words together properly. I asked him, why do you need all this? And he explained that he develops useful connections". The older *avtoritety* are frequently represented in the local democratic bodies and even in the Russian Parliament. But equally, the gangs' resources and networks are seen as highly important for the lads' future. Almost all of the gang members we talked to planned to combine legal careers (in government, business, law, or on construction sites) with continued involvement in the life of the criminal fraternity.

### **Moscow: Territorial Elites**

Like other Russian cities, Moscow has a tradition of youth street socialization, which takes place in peer networks of various levels of organization (Gromov, 2009). Some areas host youth territorial groups, which reproduce themselves from generation to generation. Boys and young men of school age spend time together in the courtyards of residential blocks of flats and 'defend' the local territory from outsiders. While older Moscow residents remember the whole of the city being divided into different groups' territories, nowadays these groups tend to be concentrated at the outskirts of the city, in residential projects built in the 1970s-1980s for working class people recruited by the Soviet industrial planners to work at the local factories. This pattern of territoriality confined to the city periphery seems to be characteristic of large urban settlements in Russia, although in small and medium-sized towns territorial groups tend to be geographically more dispersed (Golovin and Lurie, 2008).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s many of the Moscow groups started developing on similar lines to those seen in Kazan, transforming themselves into 'violent entrepreneurs', developing racket and protection networks. This was particularly the case in the depressed Moscow suburbs of Lyubertsy and Solntsevo (Gromov, 2006). But by the 2000s, with the growing economic prosperity in the Moscow region, these groups started to disintegrate and their members (those who survived the violent gang wars) turned to legitimate or semi-legitimate activities.

In 2005-7, when we conducted our research, Moscow youth territorial groups were largely engaged in what would seem to be 'recreational violence', attacking passers-by and harassing their weaker peers for money or mobile phones. But the violence was far from purely anarchic and situational. It had its organization and logic, but unlike the Kazan gang's violence, it was not aimed at being sovereign agents in their neighbourhood, but, I would argue, at reproducing the lads' status as a core reputational group. They see themselves as members of an honourable male group, forming the core of street sociability in their neighbourhood and feeling superior to those young people who do not participate in their street pursuits. Coming from working class backgrounds, they may lack resources to succeed in the formal structures of the society (such as education or employment), but when it comes to controlling social interactions in a courtyard, park, street and other local arenas, it is they who have an upper hand. Their street power is sustained not by their individual fighting prowess or knowledge of a violent 'code of the street', but by their membership of the privileged peer group.

### **The network as a local institution**

Street networks in Moscow typically comprise several friendship groups of six to eight members living in the same block of flats or blocks of flats from the same or neighbouring courtyards. The core contingent of the friendship groups are aged from thirteen to seventeen.

The members of territorial groups in Moscow (who, like their Kazan peers, also call themselves the 'lads'), hang out together on the streets in the warm time of year, or in underground cellars and lofts during winter, listen to music, go to football matches or the cinema, make trips to local forests to enjoy a barbeque in the summer or go skiing in winter. Little boys and sometimes girls from the age of seven or eight ('the little ones') can affiliate themselves to the network, although they are not considered real members, and they do not take part in collective practices of violence. Unlike ethnically mixed Kazan gangs, contemporary Moscow networks tend to be composed of ethnic Slavs. This does not mean that young

members of ethnic minority groups are not present in these territories. On the contrary, as the housing prices in these peripheral areas of Moscow are relatively low (at least compared to more central areas), they have attracted significant migration, particularly from the Caucasus and Central Asia, creating inter-ethnic problems. But, while members of other ethnic communities increasingly live side by side with the lads in their blocks of flats, according to our interviewees, they cannot normally become members of their groups.

Unlike members of Kazan gangs, Moscow lads not only sustain close relationships with other members of their street groups, but actively socialize with their classmates and young people from other areas. Many have strong identifications with football teams, and participate in football-related violence. However, their predominant identities and concerns are territorial, linked to the 'defence' of their local turf.

While the members of the Kazan gangs come from a variety of social backgrounds, Moscow territorial groups unite young people from predominantly working and low class backgrounds. Although peripheral to the booming Moscow economy and largely deprived of access to the prospects of spectacular enrichment which possess many Muscovites' imaginations, the local communities where these territorial networks took root cannot be called excluded or seriously deprived. In the 1990s, with the economic crisis and collapse of law and order following the end of the Soviet Union, some of these territories lost much of their industrial base and became seriously criminalized. But by the beginning of the 2000s, with economic recovery and increased power of the Russian state, mafia activities had largely subsided, as had group crimes committed by teenagers (Nurgaliev, 2006). As a prosperous city with very low levels of official unemployment throughout the 2000s (under 1%), Moscow seems to present sufficient opportunities for mainstream educational and labour mobility. Our young interviewees were generally optimistic about their chances of either going to university or getting jobs as skilled manual workers, with a common aspiration for young men of becoming car mechanics or opening their own car service stations. In any case, for young males, the period of Army conscription (between 18 and 20 years at the time of our fieldwork) presented an almost inevitable precursor to adult life.

Most of our interviewees were poorly integrated into society by the system of education. Almost all were psychologically alienated from school, where they struggled academically and where they felt the odds were against them. Many missed weeks and months of school. For the time being their main habitat was the street. Here they could prove their worth and learn important social competencies which they felt would serve them well in the later life, turning them into 'true' men able to stand up for themselves.

### Group's structure

Unlike the youth territorial ruling regimes of the Kazan type, the Moscow networks have no strong social organization (although some have informal leaders), no distinctive age stratification, no organized entry or exit, and no obligations to pay money into a collective fund, nor do they follow the same norms of internal discipline.

The Moscow network seems instead to be a classic case of Turner's spontaneous *communitas*. Our interviewees described the culture of sociability and solidarity existing among street youth, and the normative requirement for a young man to be part of a street network (instead of spending his time doing homework and following the prescriptions of family and school). In the interviews and focus groups young people emphasized the following imperatives for a lad's behaviour: "A normal lad should always have friends in the territory where he lives", "He has to have a group", "A lad can't run away if his friends are in trouble. He has to rush to help his friends if he sees that they're in trouble. If he pretends that he can't see anything, he's not a lad". "A lad doesn't lie, doesn't snitch. He doesn't help the police".

Similarly to the Kazan gangs, concern about respect towards other members of the territorial network, including the younger lads ['the little ones'], was expressed in many interviews: "One shouldn't humiliate others, be they older or younger". "If you can do something yourself, you don't ask a little one. Let's say there is a pack of cigarettes, and he's sitting over there, and you tell him, "Go get me the cigarettes". That's wrong. If an older guy sees this, he'll hit you. You must respect the honour of oth-

ers and their dignity”.

While feeling that they were the members of the reputable core of the local youth, the lads despised the young men who do not join their street groups and back down from fights, the so called *botanists* (a category similar to the American ‘punks’ or ‘herbs’ (Wilkinson, 2003). The status of the lads as members of the core youth group in the street is confirmed through their treatment of *botanists*, who are almost never subjected to physical assaults, but who can be humiliated, harassed and also in some cases forced to pay ‘tribute’.

### **Territorial peer networks as street elites**

The Moscow lads see themselves very much as the masters of the local streets. They ‘police’ their piece of turf, courtyard or district, fight with their ‘enemies’ and intruders from other areas, and in doing so act upon the ageless prescriptions of how a male of their age group should behave outside home. Moreover, they place a high emphasis on collective rules of ‘respectable’ violent conduct and specifically, on verbal rather than physical techniques of intimidation. Far from the imperative to prevail individually over randomly picked victims, their violent practices are guided by the aim of the reproduction of their collective dominance in the local space. As the interviews showed, this is reflected in their socialization into the rules and prescriptions of violent conduct, their categorizations of appropriate enemies, their self-representation as a local youth’s reputational community, and developed repertoires of performative violence.

The Moscow lads’ groups, I suggest, can be categorized as territorial groups seeking elite status. This leads to quite specific violent practices, which are different from those of the delinquent peer groups seeking situational domination by any means available described by Anderson (Anderson, 1990, 1999) and Katz (Katz, 1988), or from the organized gangs of Kazan using violence for the purposes of sustaining their sovereign control over their neighbourhoods.

The lads’ collective identity construction as the representatives of the local turf becomes juxtaposed to that of the ‘enemies’. Young people who

are members of youth subcultural groups (for example, punks or rappers), members of other street groups, or visible homosexuals can all be designated as enemies and subjected to violent attacks. Ethno-nationalist discourse is an important part of the construction of “us” and “them”, and people from Central Asia or the Caucasus become suitable victims for the lads. These people (lumped together under the designation of ‘blacks’) are also associated with transgression and pollution. They, it is claimed, intentionally violate Russian customs and traditions, have a higher birth rate than the locals and will soon outnumber the latter, and they allegedly bring drugs into Russia and corrupt its youth (it is worth noting that many of the lads we talked to habitually consumed drugs themselves).

The lads also develop defensive obsessions and fears of the outside. In interviews and focus groups they explained that one or two people coming from a different area may be or may not be attacked depending on the mood of the local lads. But any sizeable group risks sanctions – “they may come back home without money, without mobile phones, and beaten up as well”. Increasingly, young people from exclusive residential developments built on the borders of the lads’ own turf are seen as the lad’s enemies. The lads resent the intrusion of affluent outsiders into their territories, and attack them to show ‘who is the boss’.

The lads perceive themselves as collective masters of the streets. Their ownership of the local territory is sustained through effective performances that are meant to show people with ‘subordinate’ masculinity (Connell, 1987), the *botanists* and *lokhs*, that they are marginal to the local street community. As with their Kazan counterparts, the Moscow lads achieve this through their self-presentation, particularly through specific verbal skills. This is how the lads, participants of a focus group with 16-17 year old boys, described their use of such conversational devices in such encounters:

“You can talk to a guy for five minutes and he will give you everything, and he won’t even go to the police”.

“Say you see a guy standing there drinking beer. You’ll have a cigarette, but you’d still go to him and ask for one. And you will pretend you are upset, you urgently need money because somebody is not returning their debt. And you’ve lost your mobile phone. Let’s sell yours, and tomorrow

we'll get you the money back. You must understand, mate, shit happens. He's not comfortable, but after you talk to him for 20 minutes, he gives you his mobile phone, and you leave him your phone number, which isn't real".

"I sit and talk to him, and I can see from his reaction that he is nervous. And I say, 'Come on; give me your mobile phone. I'll get it back to you in an hour'. He doesn't know what to do, and I draw a line –that's it. I need it now." And he gives me his mobile phone. I take it and walk away with it."

"I tell him, give me the money; I'll give it back to you tomorrow. He gives me the money, and tomorrow I'll tell him to get lost. He'll become a 'sufferer' [a passive victim, liable for further extortion] forever".

### *The code of conduct*

Like the Kazan gangs, the Moscow lads also follow certain normative prescriptions, although the role of the 'notions' in their lives seems to be much more limited, and mainly relates to their self-construction as the core status group among the local youth. While their hegemonic masculinity needs to be constantly confirmed, they also have to establish some semblance of 'fair play', at least on the level of post-hoc justifications and rationalizations. There has to be some parity of forces for an honourable victory over enemies. For example, it is not considered proper for ten youths to attack one, to fight with women or children, or to start a fight with those who are physically weaker, the *botanists*.

Nevertheless, we heard of frequent occasions when such attacks do happen. No sanctions exist for violation of any normative prescriptions, except for stealing from one's mates, living them in trouble or snitching to the police –in these cases beating and expulsion from the group inevitably follows. The weakness of normative brakes on violence is inevitable as the street unit obsessively looks for the 'Other', and enemies are found from the available territorial, ethnic and cultural groups. Sometimes a minimal marker of an 'alien' identity it is enough to mobilize aggression. For example, as Russian young men often perform their street masculinity by walking and drinking beer from a can or a bottle,

this practice can mark them as suitable enemies. If a guy walks with a can of beer in his hands in an alien territory, he risks being attacked.

“Let us take E., for example. He is the leader in the 1<sup>st</sup> micro-district. He would not try to get at a twelve-year old. If somebody is walking home from school with a briefcase, he would not touch him. But if a guy from outside the district walks with a beer in his hand looking all clean, then he would tell him, Let me stain your clothes a little. And so it [violence - SS] starts...” (Andrei, 14 years).

### **The lad's criminal economic activities and violence**

Sharing many of their pursuits with mainstream youth, the lads were also involved in criminal and violent activities. Some of them sustained their street lifestyle by petty crime (mainly through stealing and shoplifting). The nature of crime was primarily social rather than economic –any money ‘earned’ by delinquency was quickly spent on playing gaming machines and on beer, alcohol and marihuana, consumed together with friends. The lads stole cars –sometimes to sell for tiny sums of money to local criminals, but often simply for fun, to do some joyriding and then abandon the vehicles.

While criminality was generally episodic and was not displayed by all the groups or their members, everybody was involved in violent control over their neighbourhood. This included intimidation of the non-affiliated youth, and warfare, aimed to ‘protect’ their territories and prove their elite status on the streets. Some of the lads extorted money, watches and mobile phones from other young people (non-affiliated local youth and outsiders who ‘intruded’ into the local territory). Others were not involved in any acquisitive crime and only participated in fights. Unlike in Kazan, there are no institutionalized neighbourhood gangs that recruit young people for organized crime. For most of the lads street crime, if it happens at all, is inseparable from the overall goal of reproduction of the group as collective masters of the street. Young men use it to confirm their power in their area, demonstrating the right to dictate the rules of behaviour to other participants of the street space. Street victimization is

only partially oriented towards material gains, being an instrument of sustaining the group's territorial domination (see also Dowdney, 2005; Hallsworth, 2005; Rodgers, 2009).

This social nature of crime was perhaps best expressed by fifteen year-old Alexei, who, answering my question, how to qualify the fact that his group made passing teenagers give them their mobile phones, and broke open game machines, said: "There were no criminal acts on our part. One can say that this was bad behaviour. We grow up, and with time absorb something from the street. Unlike the kids who walk the streets with their Mums. There are given everything. And us...When we have no money, we must think of something". The fact that 'bad behaviour' may constitute criminal offence does not negate the fact that for the young people this behaviour is contingent on their street way of life. It allows them to continue their collective street existence. The bad behaviour is supposed to stop when they grow up, become adults, start work and family and leave the street groups.

### Collective fights

One of the key cultural practices of the Moscow lads is arranged combat –a ritual where members of different territorial groups meet to stage a fight under certain conditions and limitations.

There are frequent occasions in the lads' lives when one or several of them become outnumbered by members of a street group from a different area. Such a situation may be resolved without paying a high physical cost or becoming dishonoured by running away. The young men can fall back on their status as members of an honourable caste of 'warriors' and request parity of forces with the members of a different territorial group. They might make a case for postponing the fight to a future date, when the balance of forces would be fairer. As 17-year old Mikhail said, "If I am caught on my own in enemy territory, I wouldn't want to be beaten up. I'd say, listen, I am on my own, and there are several of you. Let me get together with my lads and we will sort it next Sunday".

Apart from being a way to resolve individual confrontations, arranged combats are used by different street groups to test their strength, settle

disputes or confirm territorial boundaries. In Moscow as in many other Russian urban areas, these fights tend to take place in neutral areas or, in a trope reminiscent of medieval culture, on a bridge over a river separating two areas, or, in winter, on a frozen river (Golovin and Lurie, 2005).

Arranged combat limits the risks and dangers of violent confrontations. While neither a *botanist*, nor, say, a young punk or a rapper (people who do not belong to the 'master' caste) can make such a case successfully, the members of the street elite group can be allowed by their opponents to postpone the fight and turn it into a staged form. The lads agree in advance on the approximate number of fighters and whether weapons (such as chains, clubs or knuckledusters, but never guns or knives) can be used. The friends of the lads often come to watch the fights and record them on their mobile phones (later these videos end up on YouTube). The fight is turned into a festivity which celebrates violence and unleashes collective emotions and energies.

Arranged fights are perhaps the only events in the life of a territorial group in which a young man must participate. If he is summoned to such a fight, he must have a very good reason not to come; otherwise his reputation can suffer irreparably. Apart from being away at the time, a mother's illness is the only acceptable excuse.

The Kazan gangs never engage in staged collective fights (although the older members remembered such events), which they see as pointless and 'childish'. Their warfare moved away from such archaic rituals. Apart from anything else, the Kazan lads would not want to be publicly seen in large numbers having fights, as this would put them under risk of prosecution which is bad for business. Nevertheless, the Kazan gangs' periodic military operations and the arranged combats of the Moscow groups' serve similar aims: strengthening of solidarity bonds within the groups, mobilization of the lads for the defence of each other's and collective honor, and confirmation of the territorial boundaries. In both cases, agreed-upon rules of collective fights limit violence to more controlled and ordered forms (Bloch, 1986; Ben-Ari and Fruhstuck, 2003; Girard, 2005; Collins, 2008).

## The territorial networks and the wider society

As I have already mentioned, the lads tend to do badly at school. They are often viewed by teachers and school psychologists as stereotypical young delinquents. It would be wrong, however, to describe them as somehow marginal or socially excluded. In fact they are over-included in the local space, where all their most important interactions take place. They participate in ground-level social regulation, but unlike the Kazan gangs, they have little real power. While being a core street status group, they have no influence or authority apart from the situational control over local *botanists* and *lokhs* or ‘intruders’ coming into the lads’ territories.

The lads are not the only agents of violence in the territory. There are other formal and informal power structures there as well. The lads try to establish ‘good’ (often meaning corrupt) relationships with representatives of the local police force. Far from challenging police authority or openly ‘disrespecting’ the representatives of law and order, some lads proudly reported their ‘friendship’ with junior policemen and boasted of the fact, that if they are arrested and taken into a police station, their mates or older members of neighbourhood networks will be able to arrange their release.

For all the poetry of violent endeavour, the cult of masculinity, risk and spontaneity, the lads orientate themselves very well among the different vectors of violence transecting the urban environment, and they try to move carefully between them in order not to get into trouble. However much they may want to have a joy ride in an expensive foreign car, they would rather steal a cheap Lada than risk crossing a rich car owner, who may have ‘real force behind him’. They also avoid making trouble in the city centre. As participants of focus groups reported, “There are many racketeers in the centre. There is big money there. That is why it’s tougher there”; “You never know who you may come up against there”. They only travel to the centre of Moscow to have fun, go to a cinema or a bar or play in gaming arcades. Thus, violence is territorially bound, with the lads attempting to control their piece of turf without challenging other power regimes.

## Conclusion

As Mike Davis has argued, contemporary gang studies often avoid looking at the complex realities of street organizations and fail to explore their histories. He points out that while gangs indeed share a “generic logic –the informal ownership of the street through a local monopoly of force”, specific configurations of these informal spatial monopolies remain occluded by the tendency of mainstream criminology towards overgeneralization and pathological representation of adolescent street cultures (Davis, 2008: xii). With some notable exceptions (for example, Rodgers, 1999; Kontos et al., 2003; Brotherton and Barrios, 2004), current gang literature lacks a systematic examination on the gangs as solidaristic social organizations, whose existence is not limited to instrumental pursuit of criminal ends and/or destructive violence.

The literature on street violence tends to view violence as an individual resource, used by sections of disadvantaged youth living in low-income areas to compensate for the lack of mainstream opportunities and achieve street reputation, status, or access to limited goods. Low-class young men are seen to mobilize violence in a project of individual identity construction, to displays of dominant masculinity and campaigns for respect. Street violent actors are also commonly seen as profoundly individualistic, fatalistic and displaying distrust of anyone else on the streets (Messerschmidt, 1993; Barker, 2005; Mullins, 2006).

Even for Elijah Anderson, who explicitly posited the existence of the ‘code of the street’ in US ghetto areas, the main focus of such a code is seen too as affirmation of individual reputation and respect rather than any collective projects. Individuals must observe the code in order to avoid being victimized and get access to scarce goods. As Anderson argued, in the predatory culture of the streets, those who subscribe to its ‘code’ “tend to approach all persons and situations as part of life’s obstacles, as things to subdue or to ‘get over’. To get over, individuals develop an effective ‘hustle’ or ‘game plan’, setting themselves up in a position to prevail by being ‘slick’ and outsmarting others” (Anderson, 1999: 37). Ultimately, through cunning and ruthless behaviour, ghetto youth ensure their individual survival.

The case-studies of Moscow and Kazan street organizations have demonstrated that in both cases young people pursue projects of collective reproduction. The lads follow the imperatives of traditional masculine socialization which dictate the need for young boy to grow up as a part of collectivistic structures, participate in street brotherhoods and learn mastery over violence in the group context. While masculine socialization presupposes aggressive displays of domination, in the process of socialization in established street cultures, the lads acquire the ability to avoid extreme confrontations and use cultural knowledge –rules of self-presentation, including manners, talk etc.– in order to prevail without using excessive and unnecessary force. Other practices described in this chapter –participation in violent rituals such as arranged fights and organized warfare– serve to regulate street interactions and may act to reduce the threat of extreme violence.

In certain historical situations, when, as occurred in Russia in the 1990s, the state loses its capacity to create effective systems of law and order, and ordinary citizens experience life as profound social crisis (Shevchenko, 2009), the street gang may become one of the few institutions united by immediate bonds of solidarity and trust. As Hesse explained when writing about the Sicilian mafia,

Because of the weakness of the coercive machinery of the state there is an absence of a legal order and of the sanctions which lend dependability and durability to relationships in heteronomous groups. But this lack has no bearing on the possibility or stability of relationships in autonomous groups whose norms are not sanctioned by public law... The bonds within these primary groups or informal groupings are felt clearly and as an obligation (Hesse, 1992: 37).

The ability of street organizations to sustain close personal bonds and collective identities, coupled with their capacity to manage violence, allows these groups to become agents of economic, social and political power in their neighbourhood, and participate in power-sharing with state institutions. This requires reconfiguration of the gangs' practices and a much stronger self-organization. Non-instrumental street violence, directed at categorically defined enemies, such as ethnic minorities, members of

youth subcultural groups or people of different economic status (which is a feature of Moscow territorial networks) loses its currency for Kazan-type entrepreneurial gangs. They have their sights fixed on placing their groups at the heart of larger political economy and systems of social regulation. This requires control over excessive violence to which younger members may be prone, and accommodation with a range of formal institutions, from the police to schools and universities.

As we have seen, over the last 40 years, Russian street social organizations have developed very different structures, and *raison d'etres*. Some have remained street peer groups, aspiring to be reputational youth elites. Others have moved to become 'violent entrepreneurs' and autonomous ruling regimes. This proves that there is no such thing as 'the gang'. Young people's organizations are historical agents, reacting to, and influencing, the wider re-configuration of social order.

Any interventions with the 'gangs' need to take account of the group's specific characteristics. While for some young men their street associations are a part of their transition to adulthood, others see them as vehicles to alternative careers and social mobility. For the control agents to use the same repressive sledgehammer to all of these groups would be totally misguided. Also, the 'war against gangs' may even inhibit scenarios where more effective control can be achieved over the gangs' criminality and violence through negotiation rather than engaging in a destructive spiral of violence, persecution, incarceration and more violence.

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