

## FEDERICO VARESE

Svetlana Stephenson  
GANGS OF RUSSIA

From the streets to the corridor of power  
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Radik Galiakberov was, until 2002, the self-styled Godfather of Kazan, a city in Central Russia with more than a million inhabitants. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Radik's gang emerged as a significant force in this historic town, controlling firms, factories, shops, restaurants, nightclubs and banks. He even controlled dog fights, a children's publishing house and two cemeteries. His forte was the illegal economy, where he was involved in drugs and prostitution. Sex workers were forbidden from drinking or taking drugs; those who disobeyed were beaten mercilessly, and he kept the most beautiful women for himself. He fought his way to the top of Kazan's criminal world by duping and murdering internal rivals and leaders of smaller gangs. Scores of people went missing, but their bodies were never found over the twenty-year period of his reign. Finally, Galiakberov was sentenced to life imprisonment in 2002, during a Maxi trial lasting two years. He is kept in the most notorious prison in Russia, the Black Dolphin.

A violent and sly man, Galiakberov liked to portray himself as a wise Don Corleone. He learned the dialogue of *The Godfather* by heart and often recited it to his subordinates. He also did his best to emulate the dress code of Don Corleone, by wearing the kind of dark suits, long coats and striped ties seen in Francis Ford Coppola's film – over a bulletproof vest. He spoke like Marlon Brando. To make himself more credible, he even projected his jaw.

Galiakberov might have taken his love of the Italian mafia too far, but in her landmark study, *Gangs of Russia: From the streets to the corridors of power*, Svetlana Stephenson finds an analytical similarity between the two types of organizations: like the mafia, gangs in Russia are woven into the fabric of society. They have roots in the community and instead of challenging the established order, they reinforce. Most gangs nonetheless subscribe to a complex home-grown code of conduct (in Russian, *poniatia* – literally, “concepts”) rather than imported filmic models. As one respondent tells Stephenson, “it took many years to understand it all”. Stephenson, who has conducted extensive fieldwork since the end of the 1980s in Kazan, has pieced together the principles that govern the lives of gang members. They boil down to a few key ground rules: avoid being equated with common people; keep cool; behave with dignity; be loyal to the gang. Some jobs, such as that of bus conductor, are looked down upon and should be avoided. To be called a “trader” is a deep insult. A fundamental principle is to be true to your words: “what the lad says, the lad does”.

Who are the lads? One would expect them to be members of minorities or marginalized groups. On the contrary, Stephenson finds that most of her interviewees had finished high school, were studying at university (in some cases, medicine and law), or held professional jobs. They do not come from broken homes and are in steady relationships. Many are married. Some even belong to political parties, such as the pro-Putin United Russia, and have relatives working for the police. Over time, a

number of them become respected businessmen and even local politicians.

The desire to be part of a quasi-kinship group emerges from the interviews as one reason why people with such profiles join a street gang. The central motivation, though, is that gangs provide a form of everyday protection. The new generation of gang members, Stephenson writes, “think of themselves of capitalist entrepreneurs”, and believe that the gang can help them achieve financial success. They also receive help with everyday personal conflicts, including threats from thugs and other criminal groups. State institutions in Russia seem to have given up on offering universal and fair protection to all citizens. Indeed, an influential advisor to Putin has argued that organized crime provides a degree of social order and, if removed, “chaos will ensue”. Hence young people invest in a multiplicity of social networks to navigate everyday life. The gang is just one such avenue.

Stephenson concludes that such gangs provide protection “first and foremost” against themselves, but her evidence suggests that some genuine benefit and assistance is supplied, both to members and businesses, in securing loans, avoiding taxes, fighting off competition, recovering debts and collecting information about clients and partners. Yet these benefits are not a right to which one is entitled, even after dutifully paying off the gang. As with the mafia, the gang's protection can be withdrawn and given to others, and the people living in such a world cannot take Don Corleone to court for breach of contract. This is where the deep injustice of a mafia society lies. In the final analysis, there is no equilibrium in the nightmarish world masterfully described by Stephenson: gang leaders often get carried away, committing “excessive” violence and victimizing innocent bystanders. Radik Galiakberov might have liked to portray himself as a wise Don Corleone, yet he was a dangerous and erratic man. If Russia wants to do justice to its people, it must promote the rule of law, rather than condone the law of the jungle.