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A NOTE ON THE MAFIA AND RUSSIAN POLITICS

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In the coming years there will be much debate about why most observers were slow or unable to perceive that the viability of the Soviet system had long been declining, and that the USSR was, from 1989 onwards, showing clear signs of fragmentation. But surely one broad reason for this failure is that many of them held views not very different from those expounded in After Brezhnev. To put it simply, the book's authors maintained that while the Soviet regime faced numerous problems, including popular and intellectual discontent, its leaders were determined and experienced men who had, using the Party and police apparatuses, skillfully divided, cowed, or bought off all sections of the population, and would anyway act firmly to suppress any dissenting political or ethnic group that might emerge.

Why then did the USSR break up? Let me summarize my views succinctly, . . . A small group around Gorbachev concluded in the early 1980s that increasing economic
stagnation posed a medium-term threat to the party’s rule. From 1985-86 the group tried to generate economic dynamism through economic and political reform. The economic reforms caused dislocations, shortages, inflation, and increased popular discontent. The political reforms soon escaped from the Kremlin’s control, because they released longstanding popular discontent that was more widespread than the leadership anticipated. Sharpened by deteriorating economic conditions, by official manipulation of trumpeted new freedoms such as free elections, and by brief, periodic political crackdowns, much of the disaffection was channelled into both anti-Union emotions and local nationalisms. These were, in large measure, at least implicitly anti-communist, and proved to be very potent. When the pro-Union forces staged a desperate rally in August 1991, it was too late, and they unwittingly precipitated the USSR’s almost instant demise.

This brief summary does not mention what has probably been the most powerful and pervasive component of late Soviet and post-Soviet government and politics - the close, clandestine, delicately calculated relationships between officials and organized crime groups known loosely as "the mafia". So, since the mafias are scarcely mentioned in most textbooks and most scholarly research - their nature and activities being difficult to document - a few paragraphs about them are needed here.

Few, if any scholars from the non-communist world can have read and pondered Arkady Vaksberg’s book The Soviet Mafia, without having had to rethink some of their long-held assumptions about the Soviet system. Vaksberg shows how the long latent symbiosis between the interests of political bosses and underworld bosses at all levels made rapid strides during the increasingly corrupt Brezhnev era. The underworld provided the officials with goods, cash, and other services. And the officials provided the underworld kings with

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5 Hence Gorbachev’s numerous references, first to Lenin’s statement that communist parties which had perished in the past had done so because they had not had the resolve to face up to and correct their weaknesses, and second to the fact that the USSR would not enter the 21st century “in a manner worthy of a great power” unless it seriously reformed itself.

6 NCSEER Note: Later in the chapter from which this excerpt is taken the author discusses the violent crackdowns in Tbilisi, Baku, and the Baltic SSRs.
immunity from arrest and some influence on policy-making. Probably few officials, especially at high levels, have formally belonged to a mafia (as opposed to one of the traditional patron-client hierarchies sometimes known as political mafias). But any official who takes decisions inimical either to overall mafia interests, or to the vital interests of a particular mafia, is likely to find himself subject to strong pressures to reverse them. The mafias - usually headed by men who built their followings in prison and operate an honor code - position themselves within easy reach of the core of the political system. Overall, Vaksberg concludes, writing in 1990, "any leader who supports the system is inescapably upholding the mafia as well, even if he is bursting with a sincere desire to finish it off. This is an objective and inescapable fact of political reality. In this sense, as long as Gorbachev remains a defender of the present political system, he will ipso facto remain a defender of the mafia."

The central interests of the mafias are political stability and monopoly prices for their goods and services. Also important, but perhaps less continuously, are the opportunities that may occur to increase their geographical turf or the range of goods and services they can provide. And when the chance came in 1987 - thanks to Gorbachev's lifting of an unprecedented number of controls on the economy and foreign travel - to increase dramatically their turnover and their networks of foreign business partners, mafia groups naturally took it. This chance more than compensated for the accompanying decrease in political stability. However, this decrease soon became worrying, and officials began to respond to mafia pressures both to crack down on political opposition, and to provoke inter-ethnic clashes, the most bloody being those that led to the Armenia-Azerbaidzhan war. The clashes provided good pretexts for clampdowns, some of which are discussed later in this chapter. They were intended to shore up the political status quo.

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8 On all this see ibid., chapter 10.
Prolonged political instability has thus presented the mafias with both challenges and opportunities. Apparently most of them (at least in Moscow) did not support, but, rather, opposed the attempted hardline coup of August 1991. They presumably saw that the Union's collapse was inevitable, and that their interest lay in promoting a smooth transition to post-Union conditions. And since Russia became independent in December 1991, they have had a field-day. By 1993-94, however, a divergence of interests was seemingly opening up in their ranks. Some elements have been concerned primarily to strip the assets of the state, sell them on the world market for high profits, and then, when anti-mafia forces threaten to take power, escape abroad to mansions already purchased in the West. These people have naturally wanted to maintain for as long as possible the conditions of Yeltsin's rule, which have been well suited for maximizing their profits: open frontiers, economic near-anarchy, easily corruptible officials, and an almost impotent government that, not surprisingly, is unwilling to resist the mafias that dominate its decision-making, and therefore jails no mafioso of any consequence.

On the other hand, different mafia elements have acquired major assets in Russia - banks, businesses, big houses, enterprises - and would like to go on enjoying their use. For these people the growing political instability has become more threatening than it has been for the first group, and for two reasons. First, if an anti-mafia government were to take over, it could easily prosecute or simply kill them, and confiscate their assets. And second, even if this does not happen, once political and economic anarchy passes a certain point, other dangers arise, notably those of local, populist vengeance and of assets losing their value and having to be written off. So these people have - rather as the mafia did in 1988-91 - developed an interest in the government becoming more authoritarian - to make their often ill-gotten assets politically and legally more secure, and to try to reverse the dangerous trends towards outright anarchy.