



RUSSIAN LAWFARE AND OTHER MALIGN INFLUENCE OPERATIONS IN SPAIN

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INTRODUCTION

Relations between Russia and Spain at the end of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries were not a priority for either of these countries. They were not completely friendly: Spain is a member of NATO and took part in the sanctions campaign against the Russian regime after the invasion of Ukraine in 2014. On the other hand, they did not become directly hostile, and their relationships could be called “favorably neutral.”¹ Spain continues to trade with Russia, and the export of clothes, olive oil, wine and some other products that have not been subject to “import substitution sanctions” is worth mentioning. Spain also imports oil from Russia. The countries continue cooperating in the military sphere: for instance, Spain recently provided its ports for Russian military ships for the needs of Russian military operations in the Middle East. In addition, tourism is developed (or was, before COVID-19 struck), and a significant number of citizens of the Russian Federation own real estate in Spain and show business activity.

Some citizens of the Russian Federation who have chosen Spain as their main place of residence are representatives of organized crime. Having settled in Spain, they have not retired at all, but, on the contrary, have developed a wide network of criminal business.

Until a certain point, Russian actors (affiliated with both the state and the underworld) did not carry out large-scale interventions in the activities of the Spanish

democratic institutions. However, the onset of the crisis associated with the escalation of separatism in Catalonia provided them with an opportunity not only to interfere on the state level in Spain but also to destabilize the development of the European Union as a whole.

The malign influence of the Russian regime on the democratic and market institutions of Spain, is most clearly reflected in several areas of public life. First of all, it concerns the provision of Russian organized crime in Spain. Representatives of the Russian criminal community, deeply integrated into the power structures of the Russian regime, have resided continuously in this country since the 1990s and influence trade, launder money, and involve representatives of Spanish politicians and officials in corruption relations. To provide comfortable conditions for their “business,” the Russian criminals need to work simultaneously in two main directions.

On the one hand, they need to establish cooperation between the police and the judiciary in the criminal law sphere in Spain itself. On the other hand, they need to constantly maintain close cooperation with the power structures of the Russian Federation (for example, the head of the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation is a protege of the Russian mafia in Spain). This, among other things, allows them to have a “safe airfield” in Russia and to receive the necessary official conclusions about themselves and their activities from the Russian authorities. They successfully use such judgments and certificates to prove their innocence in Spanish courts.

Since the greatest threat to the activities of the Russian mafia in Spain is the development of European integration, they put most of their effort into obstructing the democratic progress.

1 Alexander Dunaev, “Why Spain Doesn’t Fear the ‘Russian Threat,’” Carnegie Moscow Center, March 5, 2018. <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/75698>

OVERVIEW OF RELATIONS BETWEEN SPAIN AND THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Relations between Spain and Russia have traditionally developed in the most comfortable format for the latter. As some researchers rightly point out: "Spain drive toward closer relations with Moscow has been made within and outside the EU."² For Russia since the beginning of the 2000s, the development of relations with the European Union as a supranational organization has been a great difficulty. First of all, in our opinion, this is due to the inability to understand the essence of the EU integration method, the nature and structure of relations between the organization and its members. Thus, the foundation of relations between the Russian Federation and the EU remains the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement.³ It was supposed to terminate in 2007, but instead, it has been automatically extended every year to the present. A draft of a new treaty was being prepared, but negotiations were unsuccessful.

Meanwhile, bilateral relations were thriving. The Spanish government has consistently supported Russian attempts to build a new "multipolar world" and attempts to counter US "hegemony." This was especially pronounced during the government of Jose Luis Zapatero.⁴ Spain presented itself as the 'heart of Europe' and developed closer relations with France and Germany. In addition, Spain was more actively included in the work of the Second Pillar of the European Union. Russian-Spanish relations have developed in the field of combating the threat of terrorism, cultural cooperation, and other areas important to the Russian Federation. At the same time, Spain supported the international policy of the Russian Federation; mutual visits at the highest level were regularly made.

Like Russia, Spain still refuses to recognize the independence of Kosovo, even after the decision of the Inter-

national Court of Justice⁵ (among EU countries only Slovakia, Greece, Cyprus and Romania hold this position), although this has to do more with Spain's own problem with separatism, rather than with Russian foreign policy. Support for separatism in Spain is a particularly important area of activity for Putin's regime. Unable to do this openly, Russia acts with the help of its criminal representatives and, apparently, with the help of its special services.

It is significant that Spain, together with Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, and Portugal, was opposed to sanctions against Russia for the invasions of Russia in neighboring countries.⁶ In these countries, Russia's informal influence is very strong.

In general, Spain acted as a full-fledged partner of Russia. There are several main aspects worth discussing: the cooperation in the fight against terrorism and regional security (this was especially evident in the 2000s, after 9/11), economic cooperation, mutual investment, and cultural exchange.

Mutual trade relations developed rapidly. Spanish companies entered Russian markets, Russian companies invested in the Spanish economy and exported natural resources. Russia became the second, after Saudi Arabia, oil exporter to Spain. Russian tourism has become a significant phenomenon: by 2010, more than a million Russians visited Spain every year. In 2008, Gazprom tried to conclude a deal to acquire 20% of the Spanish energy company Repsol. A major share in Repsol could increase Russia's weight in Latin America's energy market, where most of the company's oil and gas production was centered.⁷

Spain only reluctantly supported EU sanctions against Russia, which had limited economic impact on Spain. Some of Spain's food exporters were affected,

2 Maxine David, Jackie Gower, and Hiski Haukkala, eds., *National Perspectives on Russia: European Foreign Policy in the Making?* (Routledge, 2013), 111.

3 "EU-Russia partnership and cooperation agreement 1994," *Official Journal of the European Communities* (November 28, 1997): L 327/3, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:21997A1128\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:21997A1128(01))

4 Maria Shagina, "EU Sanctions Policy Towards Post-Soviet Conflicts: Cases of Crimea, Eastern Ukraine, South Ossetia And Abkhazia," *Revista UNISCI / UNISCI Journal*, no. 43 (Enero/January 2017); and David, Gower, and Haukkala, *National Perspectives on Russia*, 109.

5 Hannah Jamar and Mary Katherine Vigness, "Applying Kosovo: Looking to Russia, China, Spain and Beyond After the International Court of Justice Opinion on Unilateral Declarations of Independence," *German Law Journal* 11 no. 7-8 (August 2010): 921-922, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/german-law-journal/article/applying-kosovo-looking-to-russia-china-spain-and-beyond-after-the-international-court-of-justice-opinion-on-unilateral-declarations-of-independence/8A9AAA20549A0A2A70611F43090CCB56>

6 Shagina, "Eu Sanctions Policy"

7 Giles Tremlett, "Gazprom seeks 20% of Spanish oil group," *Guardian* (US edition), November 4, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2008/nov/14/oil-russia-gazprom-spain-repsol>

but leading exports⁸ were not included in Russia's counter-sanctions.⁹

In the military sphere, Spain's policy towards Russia is somewhat inconsistent. On the one hand, as a member of NATO and the EU, Spain is taking part in strengthening its military presence in Eastern Europe. First of all, this concerns the Baltic countries.¹⁰ On the other hand, Spain provides Russia with the opportunity to take full advantage of its Ceuta base in the Mediterranean.

In 2016, eleven members of the European Parliament, including representatives from the Baltic states, Poland, and the Catalan politician Ramon Tremosa, filed a High-Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini request for the Ceuta naval base. In particular, they were interested in whether she knew that these naval operations were "the key to maintaining the position of the Russian army in Ukraine," emphasizing that this could violate EU sanctions against Moscow. "The frequency with which Russian navy ships call into the port—at least 10 times a year—have turned the Spanish exclave into the main base of the Russian fleet in the western Mediterranean. The Russian army has an official base in Tartus (Syria), although its ships have also docked in Maltese and Greek ports."¹¹ The supply of Russian warships brings significant revenue to the Spanish treasury, Russia systematically uses this base to refuel its vessels to date, which causes indignation among representatives of the UK and the USA.¹² The only exception was 2017, when Russia itself withdrew a request for three warships.¹³

8 "Russia's import in 2017," The Observatory of Economic Complexity, <https://oec.world/es/profile/country/rus/#Exportaciones>

9 Dunaev, "Why Spain Doesn't Fear 'Russian Threat'"

10 Aurora Mejía "Spain's contribution to Euro-Atlantic security," The Elcano Royal Institute, http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_es/zonas_es/defensa+y+seguridad/ari60-2017-mejia-spain-contribution-euro-atlantic-security

11 Miguel González "Ceuta: an unofficial Russian naval 'base' in the Strait of Gibraltar? Right-wing groups in the US and UK criticize frequent stopovers in the Spanish exclave," *El Pais*, March 28, 2016. https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2016/03/28/inenglish/1459157481_130448.html

12 George Allison "Spain complains about British military while refuelling Russian warships," *UK Defence Journal*, (June 2019), <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/spain-complains-about-british-military-while-refuelling-russian-warships/>

13 "Russian warships: Spain says refuelling request withdrawn," *BBC News*, October 26, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37779204>

RUSSIAN MAFIA IN SPAIN

In the early 1990s, a significant number of representatives of the Russian criminal world chose Spain as their main place of residence. It would be an exaggeration to say that this was due to Spanish corruption or other objective reasons. It can be assumed that the determining factors were, on the one hand, the climate (the most influential Russian mafiosi came from cold St. Petersburg and its environs), and on the other, positive image of Spain in the Russian collective historical memory. Spain (unlike, for example, France) is associated with the image of masculinity—which is also a painful issue for the rigid hierarchy of criminal circles in Russia. At the same time, Spain is associated with Ernest Hemingway, which for the Soviet Union of the 1960s (namely, the childhood and youth of the influential representatives of the criminal world), was a cult hero and, in a certain sense, a symbol of freedom. On the whole, the most likely reason for choosing Spain as one of the main countries where the Russian criminal world is based abroad was a combination of random factors and a generally positive image of Spain in Russia.

The most influential criminal group in Russia by the end of the 1990s was the *Tambov-Malysh* organized crime group. It remains so to the present; however, its members have changed their official statuses, from bandits to business representatives and large lobbyists.

They were a part of a criminal structure that was located in Spain since 1996 and consisted of immigrants from Russia who already had a criminal record or were under a trial either in Russian Federation, US, or other EU countries. Residing in Spain, they controlled the activities of the respective criminal groups in their home country. According to the records of the preliminary investigation No. 321/06 of the Spanish Prosecutor's Office, these activities included murders, arms trafficking, extortion (under duress), fraud, document forgery, communications, bribery, illegal transactions, smuggling, drug trafficking, crimes against the Treasury, fraudulent decapitalization of companies, beatings and threatening conditions. The profits obtained through these illegal activities were sent to Spain with the help of legal and financial consultants, who eventually became a part of the *Tambov-Malysh* criminal group. As stated in the records, their "main goal in our country is to conceal illegally obtained funds by legitimizing them and integrating them into the regulated financial system by increasing the authorized capital of "companies" and inter-partner loans, financial transfers from / to offshore zones and investments in other coun-

tries, for example, to Germany.”¹⁴

The central figures in the investigation of the Spanish prosecutor’s office were Gennady Petrov, Alexander Malyshev, Vladislav Reznik (a member of the Russian State Duma since 1999) and dozens more. The community leaders, Petrov and Malyshev, have been directly associated with Vladimir Putin since he was deputy mayor of St. Petersburg for external affairs. The materials of the Spanish case contain retellings of wiretapping of dialogues between the participants of this criminal group. Among other things, there is a conversation between Viktor Gavrilencov (one of the leaders of the Velikiye Luki criminal group) and a certain “Sergey,” which took place in 2007. They discuss investments in the Spanish economy, possible problems from the “blue” (FSB of the Russian Federation), especially logistics, and this phrase also slips into the conversation: “Victor says that there are several hotels in Alicante, Putin’s house is not too far from here, in Torrevieja.” *The Insider* conducted a special investigation into this matter and found out that, according to the memoirs of local residents, in 1994 Putin came to Torrevieja and stayed there in the La Mata area.¹⁵ At that time, Torrevieja was the “Russian capital in Spain,” this was the place where the shootings took place, and “the money was carried in backpacks.” According to *The Insider*, it was in this city that the deputy mayors of St. Petersburg, Vladimir Putin, Alexey Kudrin, and Mikhail Manevich (assassinated in 1997¹⁶), and their “partners,” through controlled companies, acquired several real estate properties. Both Russian and Spanish specialists were involved in these operations, and the then leader of the criminal community of St. Petersburg Viktor Kumarin (Barsukov) controlled the money laundering process. Subsequently, after a fierce struggle, control over most of Kumarin’s area of responsibility was seized by Petrov. Kumarin went to prison, where he remains to the present.

A lot of investigations are devoted to the analysis of the materials of the Spanish prosecutor’s office, and the activities of Petrov and his entourage. In particular, he

was involved¹⁷ in the appointment of Alexander Bastrykin as the head of the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation, Igor Sobolevsky as his deputy, Anatoly Serdyukov as the Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation and many other personnel decisions in the Russian Federation.¹⁸ Spanish mafiosi constantly supported communication with partners at home.¹⁹

The work of the Spanish prosecutor and investigative journalists²⁰ from all over the world was not left without attention. In particular, in the January 2018 report from the Committee on Foreign Relations of the United States Senate, more than half of the chapter on Spain is devoted to the activities of Petrov and his colleagues.²¹ The report uses the Sebastian Rotella study published in *ProPublica* as one of its primary sources.²² Spanish prosecutors met with Alexander Litvinenko, a former Russian intelligence officer. Litvinenko was to advise Spanish investigators and share information on the activities of the Russian mafia in Spain. As an officer of Russia’s intelligence services, Litvinenko specialized in working with organized crime and apparently possessed a lot of classified information regarding Russian organized crime in Spain. However, Litvinenko was killed before he could testify at a trial. As was told in an inquiry by the UK’s House of Commons the

14 *Fiscalia Especial Contra La Corrupción Y La Criminalidad Organizada*, Protocols of the preliminary investigation No. 321/06, <http://www.compromat.ru/files/51434.pdf>

15 Anastasiya Kirilenko, “Dom sen’ora Putina. Den’gi merii Peteburga otmyvalic’ v Ispanii?” *The Insider*, November 9, 2015, <https://theins.ru/korrupciya/15823>

16 “Gangland-Style Slaying of Russian Official” *New York Times* By Associated Press, Aug. 19, 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/08/19/world/gangland-style-slaying-of-russian-official.html>

17 Anastasiya Kirilenko, “Dom Russkoy Mafii: ‘tolik’ ‘sasha’ ‘tsar,’” *The New Times* November 30, 2015, <https://newtimes.ru/articles/detail/104858>

18 Anastasiya Kirilenko, “Mafiya na goszakaze. Kak novye kremlevskie oligarkhi svyazany s prestupnym mirom,” *The Insider*, July 2, 2015, <https://theins.ru/korrupciya/10407>

19 Anastasiya Kirilenko, “Primaya liniya s Tambovskoy OPG. Kak mafiya druzhit s glavoy Sk, ministrami I prochim okruzheniem Putina (proslushki),” *The Insider*, November 6, 2018, <https://theins.ru/korrupciya/125116>

20 Sebastian Rotella, “Gangsters of the Mediterranean. The story of the Russian mob in Spain—and the detectives who spent years trying to bring them down,” *The Atlantic*, November 10, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/11/russian-mob-mallorca-spain/545504/>

21 “Putin’s Asymmetric Assault On Democracy In Russia And Europe: Implications For U.S. National Security,” A Minority Staff Report Prepared For The Use Of The Committee On Foreign Relations United States S. Doc. No. 115-21 (January 10, 2018), <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalRR.pdf>

22 Sebastian Rotella, “A Gangster Place in the Sun: How Spain’s Fight Against the Mob revealed Russian Power Networks,” *ProPublica*, Nov. 10, 2017, <https://www.propublica.org/article/fighting-russian-mafia-networks-in-spain>

order to kill Litvinenko was “likely approved by Putin.”²³ Jose Grinda Gonzalez, Spain’s leading law enforcement expert on Russian organized crime, told *ProPublica*, “We had accepted the idea that the world of the Russian mafia was like that. But it’s true that the case made other people think this gentleman had told the truth because now he was dead.”

During an investigation into the activities of the Petrov’s gang, the Spanish law enforcement authorities were able to find a large amount of evidence showing that “that they named over a dozen of them in the indictments, including the former defence minister.”²⁴

Petrov was arrested in 2008 during a major operation by the Spanish authorities against Russian organized crime, which ultimately led to the pretrial indictments of 27 suspects on charges of creating a criminal community and money laundering. Among the main actors of the criminal group was Vladislav Reznik, a senior Duma member and member of Putin’s United Russia party, and the indictment alleges that he operated at “the highest levels of power in Russia on behalf of Mr. Petrov and his organization.”

Before the start of the trial, Petrov left Spain and settled in Russia. Russian authorities did not take any action to return him to Spain. Moreover, they interfered with the investigation by sending false information to Spain or using opportunities to delay the process. Thus, the consideration of the Petrov case lasted more than ten years.

Nevertheless, despite Petrov’s flight, the investigation continued in 2008. In 2009, while pursuing a lead from the case, Spanish police entered the office of a lawyer suspected of money laundering, only to see him grab a document from his desk, crumple it up, and begin to eat it.²⁵ The document, after being forcibly spat out, led investigators to a new group of alleged money launderers in Barcelona who have suspected ties to Kremlin-linked organized crime.²⁶ The efforts of the Russian mafia in Spain were aimed at creating an effective and secure

23 An inquiry by the UK’s House of Commons concluded that order to kill Litvinenko was likely approved by Putin. United Kingdom House of Commons, “The Litvinenko Inquiry: Report into the Death of Alexander Litvinenko,” at 244 (March 2015), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/493860/The-Litvinenko-Inquiry-H-C-695-web.pdf

24 While mentioned in court documents, the officials were not actually charged.

25 Rotella, “Gangsters of the Mediterranean;” and Rotella, “Gangster Place in the Sun”

26 Rotella, “Gangsters of the Mediterranean;” and Rotella, “Gangster Place in the Sun”

money-laundering machine in Catalonia. Representatives of Russian organized crime, themselves and through the experts they hired, have for years strengthened their influence on Catalan politicians and businessmen. One important tool for this disruptive influence was the use of rivalry between regional and national law enforcement agencies.²⁷

Grinda’s investigation has been so productive and informative over the years, that it garnered the attention of the FBI who reportedly directed years ago that an FBI agent was to be embedded into the Spanish investigation to obtain further information with regard to Russian organized crime and corruption.²⁸

Thanks to the efforts of Jose Grinda, the investigation into the activity of the Russian criminal network in Spain entered the international level:

Criminal activities including drugs, counterfeiting, extortion, car theft, human trafficking, fraud, fake IDs, contract killing, and trafficking in jewels, art, and antiques. This was done on an international scale. Not just in Russia. Solntsevskaya²⁹ has also demonstrated active cooperation with other international criminal organizations, like Mexican mafias, Colombian drug cartels, Italian criminal organizations (particularly with the Calabrian ‘Ndrangheta and the Neapolitan Camorra), the Japanese yakuza, and Chinese triads, among others.³⁰

Then one of the most senior leaders of the Russian criminal world, Zakhariy Kalashov (“Shakro the Young”) was taken under arrest.

If the fugitives were intimidated, Rueda [a former

27 “Putin’s Asymmetric Assault On Democracy In Russia And Europe: Implications For U.S. National Security,” A Minority Staff Report Prepared For The Use Of The Committee On Foreign Relations United States S. Doc. No. 115-21 (January 10, 2018), <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalRR.pdf>

28 Martin Sheil, “Is Russian Organized Crime the link between the Danske Bank money laundering scandal and the Novichok poisoning of ex-Russian spy Sergei Skripal?” *Medium*, Sep 20, 2018, <https://medium.com/@sheil51/is-russian-organized-crime-the-link-between-the-danske-bank-money-laundering-scandal-and-the-cc431f1c2de6>

29 Criminal group from Moscow. Many members of this group were arrested in Spain in 2017. “Two Main Russian Mafia Groups Dismantled In Spain With Europol’s Support” *Europol Press Release*, September 28, 2017, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/two-main-russian-mafia-groups-dismantled-in-spain-europol%E2%80%99s-support>

30 Melissa Rossi “Spain’s Robert Mueller takes on the Russian mob,” *Yahoo News*, January 19, 2018, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/spains-robert-mueller-takes-russian-mob-202248019.html>

Spanish police commander] saw little sign of it. Law-enforcement officials in Georgia told him that Oniani [Tariel Oniani—one of the leaders of the Russian criminal world] was threatening to kill Spanish investigators [...] Rueda spent weeks preparing a secret operation with the help of law-enforcement officials from several nations [...] in what was one of the most important convictions overseas of a gangster from the former Soviet Union. But the Spanish fight did not end there. Kalashov, considered the most dangerous inmate in the country's prison system, bombarded courts with appeals, plotted repeatedly to escape, and did his best to corrupt any officials he could reach, investigators say. In 2012, the FBI passed along a formal warning that the mafia was prepared to spend a million dollars to bribe a Spanish official for Kalashov's release, a confidential FBI document indicates.³¹

After several unsuccessful attempts to assassinate the prosecutor, in 2017, the representatives of the Russian criminal world started to spread a rumor about Grinda allegedly being a pedophile through a Spanish lawyer.³² In one of the interviews Grinda quoted a Spanish saying coined by the king of the Colombian narcos Pablo Escobar, *plata or plomo*, which literally translates to "silver or lead": "Do you know what I mean if I say plomo or plata? With them it is like this: either take the plata, the money, or there is civil death."³³ Fortunately, the process on charges of pedophilia against the prosecutor was not started, but in 2017 after French police intercepted a phone call from a Georgian mafia member ordering a hit on Grinda, he started using bodyguards to protect himself and his family.³⁴

Despite all the efforts of the investigation, the accused were acquitted. During the process, the name of Vladimir Putin sounded many times and his direct relationship with the accused was not in doubt.³⁵

The result of the trial of the Russian mafia in court can be an example of disruptive Russian influence that destroys the institution of justice and the inevitability of punishment. A massive team of lawyers and other professionals acted with the direct support of Russian law enforcement agencies. The Spanish court was obliged to accept the findings of Russian law enforcement without criticism, a priori recognizing the conclusions of the Russian authorities as real. (Possibly this follows from the spirit of the agreement on legal assistance between Russia and Spain in 1996).³⁶

As a consequence, the Spanish judges even acquitted two defendants who acknowledged themselves to be guilty of money laundering and organized crime, Mikhail Rebo and Leon (Leonid) Khazine, stating the court is allowed to do so.

Spanish investigators complained to *El País* that courts have been too ready to grant bail to the numerous alleged Russian mafia members they have detained. "We had gained a lot of prestige in Europe for our operations against the Russian mafias and these decisions have thrown part of that work into the dustbin."³⁷

These drawbacks of the Spanish justice system can be clearly illustrated by Petrov's case. The Spanish judges seem to have such faith in the reports of Russian FSB that any information provided there undermines all investigation efforts. As mentioned in *Transborder Corruption Archive*, "the Spanish sentence pretends that Petrov was not involved in organized crime, based on two reports from the Russian FSB and several more letters from different Russian law enforcement bodies, as well as on the conviction for defamation of a Russian media outlet for linking Gennady Petrov and Ilias Traber to organized crime."³⁸

31 Rotella, "Gangsters of the Mediterranean"

32 Rossi "Spain's Robert Mueller"

33 Il Fatto Quotidiano "Mafia russa, su Fq MillenniumM l'intervista esclusiva al giudice Grinda: C'è Mosca dietro le accuse di pedofilia contro di me" June 13, 2017, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2017/06/13/mafia-russa-su-fq-millennium-lintervista-esclusiva-al-giudice-grinda-ce-mosca-dietro-le-accuse-di-pedofilia-contro-di-me/3655094/>

34 Rossi "Spain's Robert Mueller"

35 Anastasia Kirilenko, "The top man says he'll consider it." Vladimir Putin in wiretapped calls of Tambovskaya gang, *The Insider*, April 27.04.2018, <https://theins.ru/uncategorized/100981?lang=en>

36 "Dogovor mezhdru Rossiyskoy Federatsiey i Korolevstvom Ispaniya ob okazanii pravovoy pomoshchi po ugovnym delam. Moskva, 25 marta 1996 goda. Ministerstvo yustitsii RF," <https://to14.minjust.ru/ru/dogovor-mezhdru-rossiyskoy-federaciyey-i-korolevstvom-ispaniya-ob-okazanii-pravovoy-pomoshchi-po>

37 González "Ceuta: unofficial Russian naval 'base'"

38 Transborder Corruption Archive; "Sentence, Troika criminal case, Spain," October 19, 2018, <https://tbcarchives.org/sentencia-operacion-troika/>

INTERVENTION IN THE CATALAN REFERENDUM

However, the troubles of the leaders of the Russian criminal world in Spain did not end there. They turned out to be participants in Russia's interference in the referendum in Catalonia.

Gennady Petrov was involved in financing radical parties. It seems reasonable to assume that he did this not so much on his own initiative, but rather at the request of his partners in Moscow. And in 2013, the Catalan regional government appointed Xavier Crespo, a former mayor belonging to the Romano Codina i Maseras (CiU) party, to the post of security secretary, which controls the Catalan police.³⁹ The appointment was cancelled when intelligence services in Madrid provided evidence that Crespo was involved in money laundering, and in 2014 he was charged with bribery from Petrov. As it was discovered during an investigation known as Operation Clotilde, the CiU also received money laundered by Russian crime syndicates through Catalan banks and shell companies.⁴⁰

Part of the CiU teamed up with two left-wing parties to form a coalition that held a referendum on the independence of Catalonia from Spain on October 1, 2017. The referendum has been advancing for many years on domestic political, cultural, and economic issues. Still, it also gave Moscow many opportunities to develop a result that would weaken one of the central EU states. And now there is growing evidence that the Kremlin, at least through state-owned media, has launched a large-scale disinformation campaign aimed at a referendum.

The U.S. State Department reported that

Russian state news outlets, such as Sputnik, published a number of articles in the run up to the poll that highlighted alleged corruption within the Spanish government and driving an overarching anti-EU narrative in support of the secessionist movement. These Russian news agencies, as well as Russian users on Twitter, also repeatedly promoted the views of Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, who has taken to social media to call for Spanish authorities to respect the upcoming vote in Catalonia. Spanish newspapers have also reported that Russian bots attempted to flood social media with controver-

sial posts in support of Catalanian independence prior to the referendum.⁴¹

In November 2017, the Instituto Elcano research center published a report by Mira Milosevich-Juaristi on Russia's alleged role. They registered a 2,000% increase in Russian digital activity related to Catalonia during September that reflected another Russian attempt "to influence the internal political situation of another country, to sow confusion and to proclaim the decline of liberal democracy."⁴²

According to the report, the main goals of malign influence in Catalonia were the following:

- Discrediting Spanish democracy and alienating Spain from its EU and NATO partners;
- Destroying credibility of European institutions and sowing confusion;
- Compromising the liberal order created and maintained by the US;
- Distracting the attention of Russia's own citizens from internal problems.

The work of Russian communications media, including RT, Sputnik, Russia Beyond the Headlines and many state TV stations, social networks (Facebook and Twitter) by trolls (online profiles created to disseminate pre-fabricated information), bots (dissemination of information by autonomic processes) and sock puppets (online profiles created with the objective of generating and transmitting false news)⁴³ loudly declared itself to the world and various political and expert communities have developed a large number of recommendations to combat fake news.

It is important to note that Catalonia's gaining or not gaining independence was by and large indifferent to Russian propaganda channels. The main goal was to balance the Catalan events in the public mind with the "referendum" in Crimea and thus push Europe's public

41 Chris Sampson, "Introduction" in *Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe Implications for U.S. National Security* (Simon and Schuster: 2018), <https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Putins-Asymmetric-Assault-on-Democracy-in-Russia-and-Europe/Chris-Sampson/9781510739888>

42 Mira Milosevich-Juaristi, "The 'combination': an instrument in Russia's information war in Catalonia," The Elcano Royal Institute, November 11, 2017, http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/defensa+security/ari92-2017-milosevichjuaristi-combination-instrument-russia-information-war-catalonia

43 Milosevich-Juaristi, "The 'combination'"

39 Martin Arostegui, "Officials: Russia Seeking to Exploit Catalonia Secessionist Movement," VOA News, November 24, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/officials-russia-seeking-exploit-catalonia-secessionist-movement>

40 Arostegui, "Officials: Russia Seeking to Exploit"



Demonstration in Bilbao in solidarity with Catalonia's independence referendum, 2017

Photo: Dani Blanco / Argia, <https://www.argia.eus/albisteak/argazkiak-milaka-lagun-bilbon-gure-esku-dagok-deituta>

opinion to the idea of lifting international sanctions from Russia.⁴⁴

At the end of 2019 Spain's High Court, the Audiencia Nacional, opened an investigation into the alleged activities of a group linked with the Russian intelligence service during the 2017 Catalan breakaway bid.⁴⁵

The Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, said that some media organizations seem obsessed with bringing back "a half-forgotten issue,"

and she talked about "an anti-Russia campaign."⁴⁶

Apparently, not only the Russian disinformation forces and representatives of the criminal world, but also the Russian special services took part in the Catalan campaign. A Spanish court has already sentenced members of extremist groups⁴⁷ to plan various acts of violence.⁴⁸ Representatives of Russian special services, including

44 David Alandete "How Russian news networks are using Catalonia to destabilize Europe. Media stories in English, Russian and German equating crisis in Spain with conflicts in Crimea and Kurdistan," *El Pais* September 25, 2017, https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2017/09/25/inenglish/1506323273_063367.html

45 Óscar López-Fonseca and Fernando J. Pérez, "Spain's High Court opens investigation into Russian spying unit in Catalonia. Judge Manuel García-Castellón is probing whether an elite military group known as Unit 29155 carried out actions aimed at destabilizing the region during the separatist push," *El Pais*, November 21, 2019, https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2019/11/21/inenglish/1574324886_989244.html

46 María R. Sahuquillo, "Russia denies interference in Catalonia or in Spain's domestic affairs. A week after it emerged that the Spanish High Court is probing the activities of an elite military group, the Foreign Ministry is talking about an anti-Russia campaign by the media," *El Pais*, November 29, 2019, https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2019/11/29/inenglish/1575016033_266352.html

47 Rebeca Carranco and Marta Rodríguez, "Authorities in Catalonia clear protests on AP-7 freeway near Girona. Supporters of independence for the northeastern region have been trying to block the road, which links Spain with France, since Monday," *El Pais*, November 13, 2019, https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2019/11/13/inenglish/1573644554_106668.html

48 Reyes Rincón, "Prosecutors uphold prison requests for Catalan separatist leaders. Oriol Junqueras faces 25 years in jail for his involvement in the 2017 secession drive after four months of hearings that did not alter the legal teams' positions," *El Pais*, May 20, 2019, https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2019/05/30/inenglish/1559199477_834254.html

agents of GRU Unit 29155, could take part in coordinating and supporting the activities of these organizations.

The investigations of malign Russian influence will bring more evidence. Unofficial sources increasingly point to the direct impact of Russian intelligence services in Spain. We can safely assume that Russia uses Spain as a “recreation center” and “operational space” for Russian security services. In the course of official and journalistic investigations of the murders in Britain by the representatives of the Russian authorities, it became possible to conclude that the special GRU unit 29155⁴⁹ was responsible for these acts. It is still impossible to undeniably confirm the direct connection between this unit and the Russian mafia, but new evidence gives more reasons for this. For example, an agent of the Unit 29155 “Fedorov” (Denis Sergeev) visited Catalonia just before the referendum.⁵⁰

“While the referendum did not result in Catalonia’s independence from Spain, it showed that Spain is a growing target of the Kremlin’s malign influence operations. Spain can strengthen its resiliency by studying the experiences of and cooperating with other similarly-targeted European countries, and the U.S. government should take steps to help shore-up ongoing effort.”⁵¹

EXTRADITION PROBLEMS AND PROBLEMS OF COOPERATION

The Spanish authorities had trouble handling thriving Russian criminal groups, the population of which was steadily growing in Spain since the 1990s when citizens of the former Soviet Union started arriving in the country, residing primarily in three areas: Costa del Sol, Valencia (including already mentioned Torre Vieja), and the Catalan coast. In his article on transnational organized crime in Spain, Carlos Resa Nestares claims that weak government and administrative institutes of Russia and general reluctance of Russian authorities to cooperate were the primary reasons why attempts to stop growth

of Russian mafia influence were unsuccessful: “In many cases, the Russian mafias take advantage of the lack of co-operation of the Russian police with Spanish investigations. The collapse of governmental structures, which has decimated the police force, is one reason for this lack of co-operation. Others are the pervasive corruption which plagues the Russian police as well as their spotty training in new types of criminality.”⁵²

It is obvious that it was the refusal of the Russian investigation to cooperate with the Spanish investigating authorities that later became the main official argument justifying the difficulty of investigating the activities of Russian criminal groups and officials all over the EU.

So, for example, this argument is regularly used in the Indictment of the Special Prosecutor Against Corruption and the Organized Criminality to the Court.⁵³

It can be concluded with certainty: the Russian prosecutors are directly (at least passively) opposing the Spanish investigation. The case of Taniel Oniani clearly demonstrates the level of Russian cooperation. In June 2005, Oniani fled to Russia just hours before he was to be arrested in Spain, and in April 2006, despite the fact that he was wanted by the Spanish authorities, Russia granted him citizenship. Obtaining Russian citizenship is a complicated and bureaucratic procedure. However, in Oniani’s case, it went surprisingly quickly. It is doubtful that Oniani was just lucky, and Jose Grinda Gonzalez alleges that such a generous gesture from the authorities suggests “an example of Russia putting crime lords to work on behalf of its interests.” Grinda is also sure that the Russian Interior Ministry and the FSB were protecting Oniani even while he was held in prison. Later, in June 2009, following Oniani’s arrest in Russia, Spain requested his extradition for charges related to Operation Avispa. However, the Russian authorities denied this request, claiming it was his Russian citizenship that prevented extradition. As Grinda concluded, “A virtue of the Russian government is that it will always say and do the

49 Michael Schwartz. “Top Secret Russian Unit Seeks to Destabilize Europe, Security Officials Say,” *New York Times*, October 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/08/world/europe/unit-29155-russia-gru.html>

50 López-Fonseca and Pérez, “Spain’s High Court opens investigation”

51 “Putin’s Asymmetric Assault On Democracy In Russia And Europe: Implications For U.S. National Security,” A Minority Staff Report Prepared For The Use Of The Committee On Foreign Relations United States S. Doc. No. 115-21 (January 10, 2018), <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FinalRR.pdf>

52 Carlos Resa Nestares. “Transnational Organized Crime in Spain: Structural Factors Explaining its Penetration,” in *Global Organized Crime and International Security*, ed. Emilio C. Viano, 47-62, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330288240_Transnational_Organized_Crime_in_Spain_Structural_Factors_Explaining_its_Penetration

53 *Fiscalía Especial Contra La Corrupción Y La Criminalidad Organizada*, Protocols of the preliminary investigation No. 321/06, <http://www.comproamat.ru/files/51434.pdf>

same thing: nothing.”⁵⁴

Despite the efforts of Spanish authorities to investigate and prosecute illegal activities of Russian criminal groups and eliminate the effect of their malign influence on internal affairs, the results are still underwhelming. As stated in “Defining and Prosecuting Transborder Corruption,” “a major problem preventing European law enforcement bodies from investigating transborder corruption is the absence of agreements on legal assistance between Russia and European countries.”⁵⁵

In conclusion, it is safe to say the Russian authorities are directly affiliated with criminal groups in Europe. With their help, they launder their incomes, provide themselves and their loved ones the opportunity to live comfortably in developed countries. In addition, as it has become clear recently, criminal groups, together with the Russian special services, are systematically working on destroying the institutions of democracy and justice. This activity so far is proceeding quite successfully and with impunity.

54 Luke Harding, “WikiLeaks cables: Russian government ‘using mafia for its dirty work.’ Spanish prosecutor alleges links between Kremlin and organised crime gangs have created a ‘virtual mafia state,’” *Guardian* (US edition), Dec 1, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/01/wikileaks-cable-spain-russian-mafia>

55 Harry Hummel and Christopher Starke, “Defining and Prosecuting Transborder Corruption,” in *Failed in Action Why European Law Enforcers Are Unable to Tackle EU-Russian Transborder Corruption*, EU-Russia Civil Forum. Expert Group “Fighting Transborder Corruption,” Report, 2017, 8-11, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322519997_Defining_and_Prosecuting_Transborder_Corruption