

Organized crime as a tool of Russian hybrid warfare*

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Abstract

While hybrid warfare has been widely discussed in academic circles since the mid-2000s, it emerged as a key topic in security studies after the Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. Its significance is underscored by the strategic documents of the European Union. This paper explores the link between hybrid warfare and organized crime, focusing on how Russian hybrid operations leverage regional organized crime networks. Using qualitative research methods, it employs comparative analysis and a SWOT assessment within the framework of the Gerasimov Model to illustrate the role of organized crime in hybrid operations. The findings suggest that the Russian Federation strategically integrates local criminal groups into modern warfare, particularly in specific phases of the Gerasimov Model. The study is structured into three main chapters, accompanied by an introduction and a conclusion that highlights the main findings. The first chapter reviews relevant literature, incorporating insights from Russian and Western experts such as Frank Hoffman, Sergey Chekinov, and Sergey Bogdanov. After a brief review of the employed methodological framework, the third chapter conducts a comparative analysis of the operational environments in the Baltics (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), Ukraine, and Moldova followed by an application of the Gerasimov Model to perform a SWOT analysis, evaluating the strategic use of organized crime in Russian hybrid warfare.

The novelty of this research lies in its unique focus on organized crime as a tool of hybrid warfare, an area largely unexplored in international literature.

KEYWORDS: Russian Federation, organized crime, hybrid warfare, SWOT analysis

Organized crime as a tool of Russian hybrid warfare¹

1. Introduction

After the annexation of the Crimea, Russian hybrid operations have evolved into one of the most acute threats in the European and the Post-Soviet regional security complexes. Their significance is supported by the extensive literature on hybrid warfare as well as the actions of European decisionmakers. For instance, the European Parliament and the Commission issued a joint communication on combatting hybrid threats.²

In this article, we highlight a currently unexplored aspect of Russian hybrid threats, namely the utilization of organized crime networks in new generation operations. Using SWOT analysis and operational environment analysis based on primary and secondary sources, we aim to confirm that organized crime serves as a tool in Russian hybrid warfare, especially in the framework developed by Valery Gerasimov (2013).³ Also, we seek to identify the specific phases of hybrid warfare where criminal organizations can be employed.

2. Theoretical background

Given the complex relationship between organized criminality and hybrid warfare, it is necessary to understand the theoretical frameworks of both. In the following, we review the literature related to these topics separately, drawing on works authored by Russian and Western representatives in the fields of military and law enforcement sciences.

2.1. A theoretical overview of the concept and characteristics of Russian hybrid warfare

The phenomenon of hybrid warfare gained prominence in scientific literature after the turn of the millennium, due to the increasing significance of non-conventional threats. „New Wars” are characterized by networks of state and non-state actors, as well as the control over societies, replacing traditional power exertion over territory (Kaldor, 2013). These features align with the tendencies observed in hybrid conflicts.

The definition of the term „hybrid war” has been one of the most debated issues in 21st-century military science, underscored by the diversity of terminology and descriptive frameworks used

¹ This study is based on the authors' research submitted to the *37th National Student Research Conference 2025* competition in Hungary.

² Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats – a European response.

³ Army General Valery Vasilyevich Gerasimov has served as the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation since 2012. His article, *The Value of Science Is in the Foresight*, originally published in the *Military-Industrial Kurier*, has become one of the most cited works in hybrid warfare research. Some experts consider it the foundation of the so-called "Gerasimov Doctrine."

by the global scientific community. For instance, Western sources apply the term „hybrid” to express the novel nature of warfare (Dominioni and Ambrosetti, 2020). Before General Gerasimov’s speech in 2017, a variety of terms were employed in the Russian scientific discourse to describe 21st-century warfare, including “information”, “net-centric”, and “new-generation” warfare (Göransson, 2021, p. 85; Chekinov and Bogdanov, 2013).

The term “hybrid warfare” was first introduced by Nemeth (2002) as a “modern form of guerrilla warfare,” suggesting an asymmetric character dominated by non-state actors. In contrast, Frank Hoffman (2007) emphasized the polymorphic nature of hybridity, expanding the definition to include traditional state actors from the international community. Supporting Hoffman’s perspective, the last decade has demonstrated that hybrid operations provide state actors with an effective and cost-efficient method to achieve their objectives on the global stage (Tursyn and Turuntayeva, 2024, p. 10-19).

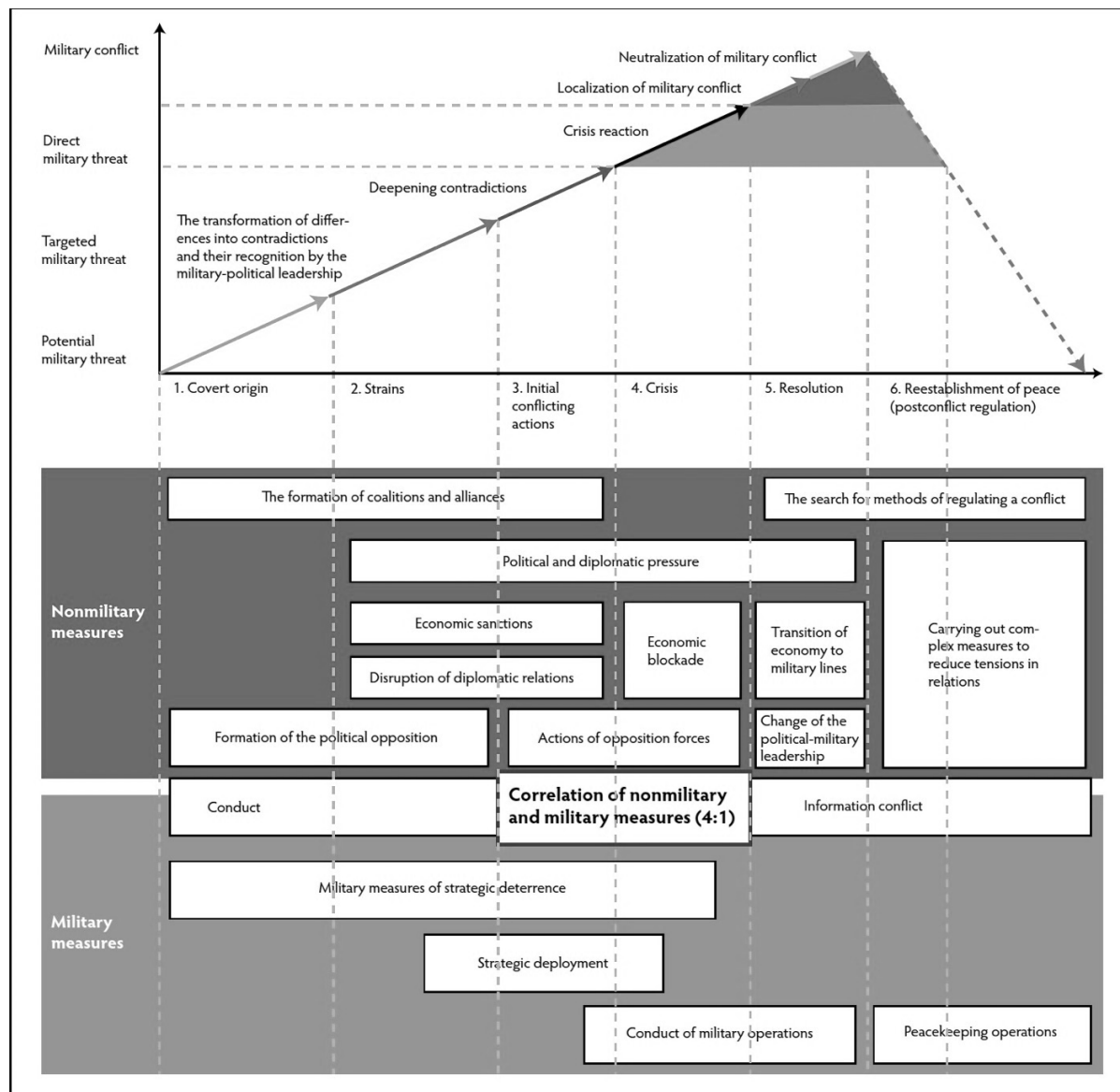
Despite the diversity of actors, the fundamental objective of hybrid and conventional warfare remains the same: “to compel our opponent to fulfill our will”, as stated by Clausewitz (1874), which is achieved by novel tools in the former. In extreme cases, this may lead to the loss of a state’s independence and its sovereignty in terms of international law.

The complexity of military and non-military means in warfare has been an organically developed part of Russian military thought, as demonstrated by Kennan’s political warfare as well as active measures and reflexive control (Kennan, 1948 cited in Monaghan, 2019, p. 88; Kukkola, 2023, p. 3-4). The combination of tools is well represented in the works of Sergey Chekinov and Sergey Bogdanov (2012a, p. 12), who suggest that political, diplomatic, economic, military, and non-military means should be used in synchrony, under the state coordination. The role of non-conventional tools is highlighted in the model by General Gerasimov (2013).⁴

⁴ Following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, some Western experts, influenced by Russia specialist Mark Galeotti’s 2010 article, began interpreting General Gerasimov’s principles as a doctrine. However, Galeotti and other researchers have questioned this interpretation, arguing that Gerasimov’s study was not intended as a doctrinal framework. Despite these concerns, the term “Gerasimov Doctrine” has become firmly established in academic discourse. In our research, however, we view the process outlined by Gerasimov not as a doctrine but as a model—a stylized representation of reality.

Figure 1

The Gerasimov Model (Gerasimov, 2013)



The predominance of non-military means is also evident in Hoffman's (2007) theory. According to Hoffman (2007, p. 29), in hybrid conflicts, additionally to conventional and irregular tools, as well as terrorism, the aggressor utilizes criminal activities "to sustain the hybrid force or to facilitate the disorder and disruption of the target nation." Thus, criminal activity facilitates an optimal operational environment for the aggressor, characterized by societal chaos and the erosion of the legitimacy of the adversary's political leadership.

The social element is also evident in the works by Chekinov and Bogdanov (2017, p. 41), where they argue that modern warfare no longer crosses the threshold of conventional war but seeks to fragment societies. This, along with the objective of provoking a legitimacy crisis, justifies

incorporating societal destabilization into the definition of hybrid warfare, as it often manifests in criminality.

Gürer and Strat (2023) further support this claim, emphasizing that criminal groups represent a force capable of destabilizing states, often collaborating with authoritarian regimes. The destabilizing potential of these organizations is exemplified by corruption, which, when institutionalized, makes the state vulnerable to systemic complicity from the lowest to the highest levels (Galeotti, 2023, p. 910). This process is accompanied by a radical decline in public trust in political leaders, potentially resulting in legitimacy crises that contribute to the creation of a favorable operational environment for hybrid actors (Schumacher, 2012, p. 3-37). In summary, the reviewed literature highlights the unique nature Russian hybrid operations, which stem from their sociopolitical aspects. By undermining the legitimacy of the targeted state's leadership, the aggressor can impose its political will on the adversary. It is therefore unsurprising that this step has a crucial role in the Gerasimov model. This justifies incorporating criminality into the definition of hybrid warfare, as its socially disruptive nature can contribute to the erosion of the legitimacy of hostile political leadership.

2.2. A theoretical overview of the concept and characteristics of organized crime

Organized crime is an uncontrollable, threatening reality in the life of human communities (Chamberlin, 1931). The nature, dynamics, and diversity of such crimes seem limitless, among which drug trafficking, arms trafficking, and human trafficking (including the sexual trafficking of women and children), as well as money laundering, are the most prevalent. No area of the world is immune to these dangers, as there will always be those who, within the web of money and power, satisfy demands for illegal, prohibited goods and services. This demand is particularly true for arms, drug, and sex worker trafficking (Fickenauer & Voronin, 2001). The mentioned crimes often come with "supporting activities" such as violence and corruption, the systematic use of which facilitates criminal activities (Hauck & Peterke, 2010). The greater the physical, psychological, and social harm they cause, the more dangerous their activities become to society (Gurov, 1995; Voronin, 1998). Public order and safety deteriorate, which weakens citizens' subjective sense of security.

Ensuring human and constitutional rights, upholding freedoms, meeting community needs, and establishing security in both public and private spheres can sometimes seem like distant, even utopian ideals. Nevertheless, it remains the state's duty to provide the necessary conditions, facilitate their exercise, and guarantee their realization (Emberi Jogok Egyetemes Nyilatkozata, 1948; Morsink, 1999). In our accelerated world, the laws of the jungle prevail, forcing states

to balance cooperation with partial autonomy while relinquishing absolute individualism. This balance is essential for establishing a solid foundation upon which strategic goals can be realized (Domokos and Kecskés, 2006). Regardless of where we live on the planet, whether in a global superpower or a small nation-state, we must face threats stemming from the darker side of globalization. These dangers jeopardize lives, physical integrity, and exercise of rights worldwide (Maslow, 2013). Among the most pressing challenges are environmental degradation (climate change, natural disasters), rapid population growth (social polarization, inter-country debt traps, unstable regions, the black market), and the rising internationalization of crime. From organized crime and terrorism to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, cybercrime, drug trafficking, corruption, and human trafficking, these global threats demand urgent attention and collective action.

The definition of organized crime remains a subject of extensive debate among scholars and law enforcement professionals to this day (Finckenauer and Voronin, 2001).⁵ Smith argued that a phenomenon rooted in stereotypes cannot meet the fundamental criteria for definition-making. Any attempt to create a unified definition would either overlook key circumstances or fail to exclude irrelevant ones (Smith, 1971). In his view, contemporary scholars should move beyond rigid logical definitions and instead explore the various dimensions and interpretations of the concept from multiple perspectives. For Smith, the real question is not how to define organized crime, but rather which historical, economic, sociological, psychological, philosophical, and theological forces contribute to its emergence (Smith, 1975).

What theoretical foundation, then, offers the most suitable approach to understanding organized crime (Smith, 1982, pp. 358-386)? Smith's partial truth lies in recognizing that uncovering the latent aspects of organized crime can be significantly aided by interdisciplinary research. Studies from fields such as law, economics, sociology, and psychology not only yield insights within their own domains but also enhance our broader understanding of organized crime as a social phenomenon—ultimately aiding in both its analysis and potential control.

The term 'organized crime' has two distinct etymological meanings. On one hand, it refers to the systematic generation of profit through power and illegal activities. On the other, it denotes the stereotypical notions of 'gangsters,' the 'mafia,' or 'mafia-type organizations' as previously described (Woodiwiss, 2000, pp. 1-10).

⁵ Organized crime is a very harsh term that has become part of the vocabulary of many politicians and the public. It is often used without a clear reference point, while in reality, it is a phenomenon with very vague and indeterminate content. This lack of clarity significantly affects the relevant academic debate surrounding it. (Hauck, P. and Peterke, S., 2010, pp. 407-436)

American researchers, particularly Smith, and members of the Wickersham Commission made significant contributions to the understanding of organized crime, not only in their home state but also across other continents.⁶ The Commission defined organized crime as a distinct social structure involving a wide range of criminal activities within a complex framework. Rather than impulsive acts, these crimes result from long-term conspiracies designed to seize control over key sectors of society—economic, judicial, and political—to generate immense profits. This hierarchy- and conspiracy-based definition remained dominant until the 1960s, during which organized crime posed a serious threat to local governments, damaged the reputations of police officers and lawyers, infiltrated legitimate businesses, and eroded the integrity of a free society (Woodiwiss, 2000, pp. 1-10).

Until the 1980s, during the transitional period, organized crime was primarily understood as a collection of distinct criminal groups. However, earlier research has since revealed that organized crime operates more like an army of criminals—far more diverse and integrated than previously believed (Woodiwiss, 2000, pp. 1-10). Its complexity lies in its distinction from smaller, loosely connected networks; rather than consisting of just a few individuals, it functions as a large, hierarchical organization. These groups employ highly structured operations, secret codes, and trained personnel, mirroring the efficiency and organization of legitimate enterprises (Williams, 2001).

The sociological research aimed at uncovering organized crime began in the 1990s. According to Borai (1992, pp. 12-20), organized crime generally involves a hierarchical relationship of at least three individuals engaging in criminal activities, who commit crimes within the organizational structure through a deliberate division of labor, concealing illegal transactions with legal activities, and consciously using flexible criminal technologies and methods. During this period, Hallmacher argued that organized crime does not exist as a single, monolithic entity but rather as multiple organizations operating alongside one another, each functioning with varying degrees of independence (Hallmacher, 1986, p. 239).

According to Kovács (2017, pp. 82-161), modern organized crime is defined by several key elements. It consists of a developing group with at least ten members, structured hierarchically in a pyramid-like system. Within this structure, roles are clearly divided among organization, task allocation, decision-making, management, and execution. The group's bonds are lifelong,

⁶ The Wickersham Commission was established on May 20, 1925, by Herbert Hoover [1874-1964], the President of the United States. The commission, led by Attorney General George Wickersham (1858-1936), was tasked with reviewing the criminal justice system of the United States and formulating recommendations for the protection of public order, with particular emphasis on organized criminal groups (Wright, 2013, pp. 1199-1217).

and its operations are funded through both covert and overt illegal activities, aiming for material gain as well as political and economic influence. Similarly, Strompf (2016, pp. 27-54) describes specialized criminal organizations in the 21st century as hierarchical and highly structured, with clearly defined roles and a strong emphasis on secrecy in their operations. Consequently, the evolving definition of organized crime highlights its socially disruptive nature, which can be significantly exploited during Russian hybrid operations. The covert, gray-zone characteristics of organized crime—along with its social, economic, and political influence—align closely with the phases outlined in the Gerasimov Model, as will be illustrated in the following chapters.

3. Methodology

To analyze the role of criminal networks and organizations in Russian hybrid warfare, we must establish a methodological framework that aligns with our hypothesis and research question. In the following section, we outline the methods used to address this complex issue.

Our hypothesis posits that organized crime can be effectively integrated into Russian hybrid warfare. Building on this premise, our research question seeks to identify the specific phases of the Gerasimov model in which organized crime plays a role.

As previously mentioned, our research is grounded in the theoretical framework introduced by General Valery Gerasimov (2013). Although Gerasimov's 2013 article does not provide a detailed timeline or structure for hybrid warfare, the operational phases and elements offer a useful foundation due to their schematic nature.

Additionally, analyzing such operations requires an understanding of the broader strategic environment in which they unfold. In recent years, the most advanced manifestations of hybrid warfare have been observed primarily in Russia's near abroad, particularly in Ukraine, Moldova, and the Baltics (Rácz, 2015; Całus, 2023). Consequently, this study also focuses on these regions.

To address theoretical challenges of transnational organized criminality, this study adopts the concept of "Russian-based Organized Crime" as formulated by Mark Galeotti (2017, p. 3.). As a result, our analysis focuses on local criminal groups and networks, operating in the Baltic states, as well as in the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

Within these definitional frameworks, we employ qualitative methods based on primary and secondary sources to test our hypothesis and address our research question.

First, we conduct a comparative analysis of operational environments to identify the fundamental differences between the Baltics and the Ukraine-Moldova region, thereby

determining the region-specific factors that influence the effectiveness of hybrid operations. Given that the relationship between organized crime and hybrid warfare has not been previously examined in this way, we have developed unique analytical criteria for assessing these environments, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Operational Environment Analysis

Criteria for the analysis of operational environments
Geostrategic position and countermeasures against organized crime
<i>Russian foreign policy stance and objectives in the region</i>
<i>Geographic determination and position in international organized crime networks</i>
<i>International and domestic measures for countering organized crime</i>
Characteristics of local organized crime networks
<i>Origins</i>
<i>Profile</i>
<i>Internal structures and geographic distribution</i>
<i>Embeddedness – state and business sectors</i>

Second, we apply SWOT analysis to evaluate the potential utility of local criminal networks in hybrid operations across these regions. Originally developed in business sciences, SWOT analysis identifies strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with a given strategy or entity—in this case, the involvement of organized crime in hybrid warfare (Leigh, 2009, p. 115-140).

While SWOT analysis offers a comprehensive overview, it also presents methodological limitations, for instance its inability to assign weight to different factors, which is particularly relevant in the context of the hyper-centralized Russian political system (Szenes, 2023, p. 29). The latter limitation also extends to source selection. Since this study primarily relies on open-source materials in English, Hungarian, and Russian, it is crucial to acknowledge potential biases, particularly regarding Russian official narratives. The clandestine nature of organized crime and its likely covert ties to Russian state institutions further complicate data reliability, introducing potential distortions in the available information.

4. Discussion and results

4.1. Comparative analysis of the operational environments

The investigation of operational environments in Ukraine, Moldova and the Baltic region reveals clear regional differences in the structure and activities of organized criminal networks, as highlighted in Table 2. These distinctions significantly influence the extent to which such organizations can be utilized in local hybrid operations.

First, the roles of these regions in Russia's foreign policy agenda differ markedly. This distinction is rooted in the fact that while the Baltic states' Euro-Atlantic integration is irreversible—albeit susceptible to obstruction—Ukraine and Moldova's NATO and EU accession can still be prevented.

The Baltic region's "gateway" status is also evident in its role within international criminal networks, which manifests both physically and virtually due to smuggling routes and money laundering structures.^{7,8} Until 2022, Ukraine and Moldova played a similarly significant role in transnational human and drug trafficking, particularly in the flow of heroin from Afghanistan due to their position between East and West, however, the 2022 invasion disrupted these dynamics, creating uncertainty (Racovenau, 2024, p. 164-168; Felbab-Brown-Garcia, 2024).

Efforts to combat organized crime play a crucial role in both regions. Strategic documents from both regions emphasize the importance of tackling organized crime, but their approaches differ. The Baltic states primarily view it as a law enforcement issue, whereas Ukraine and Moldova see it as a broader societal threat, despite their relatively underdeveloped legal frameworks (Wilson, 2021).

The social embeddedness of organized crime predates the dissolution of the Soviet Union and deepened with the emergence of a "national underworld" in both regions, although their different evolutionary paths post-independence. In the Baltic states, Russian criminal groups migrated into the region, sparking internal rivalries, while in Ukraine, adaptation to new borders was a more pressing challenge than internal competition (Pullat, 2004, p. 35-36; Williams-Picarelli, 2001, p. 109-140).

⁷ 2023 data of the Global Organized Crime Index (OCI) demonstrates that human and drug trafficking is flourishing in the Baltic region, which results in a 0.5 average increase in the Organized Crime Index of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

⁸ Banks (such as Swedbank, Danske, SNORAS, or Ukio Bankas) in Baltic countries played a key role in the notorious Troika money laundering scandal, which involved billions of laundered dollars, for example used to corrupt former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich (Pataccini, 2024). Despite the Baltic states' efforts to counter foreign influence in their financial sectors, a dominance of financial services specialized in high-risk clients can be observed in the region, which maintains its transit role in international money laundering structures (Pataccini, 2020).

The primary activities of these criminal networks align with their roles in international markets, as both regions serve predominantly as transit zones (Lill, 2012, p. 63; Williams-Picarelli, 2001, p. 112-117). As previously noted, this has led to the dominance of human, arms, and drug trafficking. However, in the Baltic states, money laundering is a central activity, whereas in Ukraine and Moldova, it serves a more auxiliary role (Gołębiowska, 2021, p. 1-2; Williams-Picarelli, 2001, p. 114).

This transit function is also reflected in the geographic distribution of criminal organizations, which are most active along border areas, which overlap with regions heavily populated by Russian minorities (Kuritevegus Eestis, 2022; Lithuania in figures (edition 2023), 2023; Reģistrēto noziedzīgo nodarījumu skaits valstspilsētās un novados, 2023; Williams-Picarelli, 2001, p. 120-132).

The development trajectories of these criminal groups further influence their internal dynamics: in the Baltic region, hierarchical decision-making, and conflict resolution mechanisms, such as the Ühiskassa institution, have been observed, whereas in Ukraine and Moldova, these processes tend to be more localized (Kärstrand & Jonsson, 2007, p. 5; Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2023, p. 10). Despite these differences, both regions have seen the emergence of sophisticated, elusive criminal networks operating in the "gray zone," demonstrating increasing adaptability.

The latter facilitate the penetration of criminal groups into state structures and the business sector, though the extent of this varies between the two regions. While the Baltic states have experienced high-level corruption cases and extensive money-laundering schemes, these connections remain less overt and explicit than in Ukraine and Moldova (Juska-Johnstone, 2004, p. 346-359; Shelley, 1998, p. 648).

In summary, despite significant differences in their geostrategic positioning and organized crime networks, both regions have been or could become targets of Russian hybrid warfare. Therefore, any assessment of the role of organized criminal groups in hybrid operations must consider the unique characteristics of each region.

Table 2*Comparative analysis of the operational environments*

Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania	Criteria	Ukraine and Moldova
Geostrategic position and countermeasures against organized crime		
“Gate towards the West” – Increasing and deepening influence on domestic politics, hindering and delaying the further deepening of Euroatlantic integration (Galeotti, 2019)	<i>Russian foreign policy stance and objectives in the region</i>	„Parts of the Near Abroad” – Sabotage Euroatlantic integration with a wide range of hybrid tools (Szenes, 2024)
“Gate towards the West” – Physical-material (transnational smuggling routes– trafficking of drugs and human beings – shifts caused by the war in Ukraine) and Virtual (money laundering structures – access to Western financial structures)	<i>Geographic determination and position in international organized crime networks</i>	Strong connections with Russian and Central Asian networks prior to the 2022 invasion, the latter raised concerns and caused decoupling. Internal divisions, future cooperation remains uncertain.
Specific sectoral strategies, although lacking comprehensive interpretation of organized crime as a threat – focus only on law enforcement aspects. Previously regional cooperation (including Russia), since 2022, under EU coordination	<i>International and domestic measures for countering organized crime</i>	Specific sectoral strategy in Ukraine, integrated into the National Security Strategy in Moldova – whole-of-society and comprehensive approach in both cases, although with shortcomings Cooperation under EU coordination, though its efficiency remains questionable
Characteristics of local organized crime networks		

Following the independence, formation of „national underworlds” along the immigration of criminal groups from the former Soviet Union, Consolidation, and sophistication after a period of rivalry	<i>Origins</i>	After the independence, formation of „national underworlds” along the preservation of previous internal dynamics, followed by sophistication and penetration into state structures
Transit Region – smuggling and money laundering (leveraging the geostrategic position and the embeddedness in both business and state sectors)	<i>Profile</i>	Transit Region – Smuggling (due to geographic position and economic characteristics), money laundering as a facilitating activity
Hierarchic character (<i>Ühiskassa</i> as a platform for conflict resolution), followed by adaptive, fluid, grey zone networks. Mainly operative in border regions (Russian-speaking population) and port cities (such as Narva and Klaipėda)	<i>Internal structures and geographic distribution</i>	Local groups, followed by adaptive, fluid, grey zone networks – conflict resolution on local level (often involving corrupt authorities – e.g., Odessa) Operative mainly in the South and the East (Russian-speaking population), partly in the West
High-level state-wise after the Millennium, little information is available on the current situation. Embeddedness into business life remains high-level: money laundering scandals during the last decade	<i>Embeddedness – state and business sectors</i>	High-level in the state sector, despite countermeasures against corruption and organized crime (for instance, the case of Vladimir Plahotniuc in Moldova) Interconnectivity between organized crime networks and business life: business in the grey zone

4.2. SWOT analysis

4.2.1. Strengths

The strengths largely stem from the established structures and distinctive operational characteristics of organized criminal networks in the examined states.

A key factor is the transit nature of these regions: the prevalence of human, drug, and arms trafficking underscores their ties to Russian criminal groups that may be influenced by the Kremlin’s interests (Galeotti, 2023, p. 912).

This connection is further reinforced by the geographic distribution, especially the presence of organized criminality in regions bordering Russia that are dominated by a Russian-speaking population. This proximity provides Moscow with a direct channel to exert influence over these groups.

Cultural and linguistic ties further solidify these connections. Many of the mentioned criminal groups share historical links with Russian criminal networks as they had operated within a unified state structure before the fall of the Soviet (Galeotti, 2023, p. 4). Their transition to transnational networks did not sever these ties; rather, it preserved key connections, a shared criminal culture, and the continued use of Russian as a common language.

Another strength is that these criminal organizations are entrenched in their local environments, and have long functioned independently, even without the Kremlin's support. This autonomy presents an advantage for Moscow, potentially reducing its financial burden when seeking to exploit these groups.

Beyond their independence, the operational capabilities of these networks are also prevalent. Their strengths stem from their ability to embed themselves within state and business structures. Smuggling, for example, provides extensive local knowledge, particularly of border vulnerabilities. Meanwhile, their involvement in sophisticated white-collar crimes facilitates infiltration into state institutions and the corporate sector. This access allows organized crime figures to exert influence over policymaking.

Flexibility is also crucial. These groups primarily operate for profit rather than ideological alignment, making them highly susceptible to Kremlin influence. This dynamic has only intensified in the post-Soviet era: following the decline of the *vory v zakone* era, organized crime abandoned its previous anti-state stance, largely due to the implicit social contract offered by the Putin regime (Dresen, 2011).

Moreover, the covert nature of these organizations is also important. This clandestine nature is a defining characteristic of organized crime across various legal, sociological, and criminological frameworks, as secrecy is fundamental to their survival and effectiveness, making it well-suited for the initial phases of the Gerasimov Model. This is demonstrated by criminal groups' involvement in the annexation of the Crimea (Idris, 2022, 1-26).

4.2.2. Opportunities

Many of the opportunities are closely tied to the strengths of utilizing criminal networks.

One of the most significant opportunities lies in the infiltration of local criminal organizations into political structures, enabling them to exert political influence. This dynamic is closely

linked to the interaction between political and legal dimensions, where weakening legal security undermines the foundational pillars of state governance. Such tactics can be leveraged at multiple stages of the Gerasimov Model.

During the first and second phases (covert operations and their intensification) these connections can be used for intelligence gathering or even facilitating and empowering political opposition. In the third phase, these networks can actively support pro-Russian political forces, as depicted by the case of Ilan Șor's mafia-styled network in Moldova (Gavin, 2024).

The increasing sophistication of local organized crime presents an attractive opportunity for the Kremlin, especially considering their influence exerted through legitimate businesses. A prime example is Vladimir Plahotniuc, who owned multiple Moldovan television channels and other media outlets, which functioned as key platform for Russian propaganda (Dumont-Solis-Zaleski, 2023).⁹

Social influence can also be reinforced by the geographical distribution of criminal groups, mainly in Russian-speaking minorities. This penetration is especially useful in the third phase of the Gerasimov Model, when opposition forces become actively engaged.

Beyond their social influence, the core activities of criminal networks present additional opportunities. For instance, arms smuggling can be instrumental in arming political opposition groups or separatist movements, a key factor in the fourth, escalatory phase of the Gerasimov Model. Human trafficking, on the other hand, can be exploited at both tactical (covert movement of individuals) and strategic (overwhelming state institutions through mass migration) levels (Odynets-Cassidy, 2024).

Money laundering is another key opportunity, as it allows Russian economic actors to gain influence within national banking sectors, crucial in economic warfare. The latter is a key aspect of Russia's hybrid operations against the West, as the Baltic region serves as a virtual channel for accessing Western financial structures.

Finally, another opportunity lies in the gaps within national legal frameworks. Shortcomings, caused by the lack of comprehensive approach in the Baltics and the underdeveloped nature of Ukrainian and Moldovan legislation, create vulnerabilities that Moscow can exploit, weakening state resilience.

⁹ Vladimir Plahotniuc is a businessman and a former prime minister of the Republic of Moldova, charged with fraud and leading a criminal organization due to his involvement in the Moldovan banking fraud in 2014. (Radio Free Europe, 2020)

4.2.3. Weaknesses

Alongside the numerous strengths and, it is essential to elucidate the weaknesses the Kremlin must consider when employing criminal networks.

First, the use of organized crime in hybrid warfare is diplomatically questionable and directly violates international law via the Palermo Convention, which Russia ratified on May 26, 2004.¹⁰ While the war in Ukraine has demonstrated that international legal consequences are not a significant deterrent for Russia, the diplomatic ramifications of such violations still represent a weakness.

Another significant challenge lies in the fluid and fragmented nature of criminal organizations. Previously, organized crime structures in Estonia operated under a loose umbrella organization known as *Ühiskassa*, but since its dissolution, criminal networks in the region have become decentralized (Berendson, 2016). This fragmentation means that the Kremlin must individually secure the loyalty of each criminal group, a process that is both time- and resource-consuming. Furthermore, this decentralized structure raises concerns about control. Compounding this issue is the profit-driven nature of organized crime, which means that the Kremlin can only secure cooperation from these networks through specific concessions or financial incentives—often contingent on the success of the operation. Such arrangements create an unstable foundation for collaboration.

Finally, it is important to note that the Kremlin's ability to engage with organized crime networks in the examined regions is largely dependent on intermediaries—other groups that serve as conduits for Russian influence. This dynamic reduces the perceived risk for these criminal organizations in refusing cooperation with Moscow, further complicating the Kremlin's efforts to integrate them into its hybrid warfare strategy.

4.2.4. Threats

The risks are closely linked to the weaknesses previously identified, often directly resulting from them.

One of the risks is the lack of control over criminal networks. While maintaining oversight of these groups is already crucial in the first four phases of the Gerasimov Model, it becomes even more significant during the de-escalation stage. In the fifth phase, political and military leadership is replaced, and as stability is restored, the criminal organizations previously utilized lose their relevance, potentially even becoming liabilities for Moscow. This is especially

¹⁰ United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime

problematic if the new government, despite being under strong Russian influence, becomes corrupt and allows local criminal groups to gain political leverage, often at the expense of the Kremlin's interests.

Another major risk is the potential for these criminal groups to grow too powerful. This can complicate the consolidation process if their uncontrolled expansion prevents them from being pushed back into the gray zone of illicit activity. Additionally, the fragmented nature of local organized crime structures increases the likelihood of internal rivalries, which, in turn, weakens Moscow's ability to control the escalation, meaning a crucial vulnerability in strategic planning.

Beyond issues of control, the reliability of local criminal groups is also a concern. Given their profit-driven nature, these organizations are not necessarily loyal to Russia, hence they can just as easily be swayed by the opposition if offered better financial incentives. As highlighted in a report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (2023) about the war in Ukraine, these groups tend to align themselves based on business interests rather than political ideology.

Finally, while the legal shortcomings in the targeted countries have been mentioned as an advantage for Moscow, it is important to note that both regions are part of an extensive international law enforcement cooperation, coordinated by the European Union and Europol. The intelligence-sharing mechanisms within this framework pose a serious risk to the Kremlin, as they could disrupt the activities of Russian-linked criminal groups and create diplomatic complications. Furthermore, there is growing political will in the examined countries to combat organized crime and corruption, suggesting that existing legal gaps may soon be addressed. This effectively places Russia under a time constraint: delaying the use of criminal networks in hybrid operations increases the likelihood that targeted countries will have already strengthened their legal and law enforcement mechanisms to counteract such threats.

Figure 2

SWOT analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
• Transit regions and activity along borders – direct connections with Russian criminal organizations – Channel for the Kremlin • Cultural connections and Russian as an operational language • Lack of novelty, resulting in self-sustaining structures • Profile and types of activity: familiarity with local characteristics and penetration into state and business structures • Flexibility: advantages derived from the lack of ideological commitment • Covert nature – attribution and accountability issues	• International illegality and its implications regarding diplomacy • Fragmented and decentralized character: group-by-group cooperation is time- and resource-intensive. • Profit-oriented character as a risk of control over criminal organizations • Indirect relationship between local criminal groups and Moscow as a matter of concern
Opportunities	Threats
• Penetration into domestic political structures – Assertion of interests and intelligence gathering. • Sophisticated and grey-zone activities – Influence within the economic and information dimensions of security • Geographical distribution: penetration into Russian-speaking minorities in parallel with the erosion of state presence • Activities and profile: Smuggling of arms and human beings as a means of exerting pressure, money laundering as a tool of influence. • Shortcomings within the legal environment – the low-level resilience of target states	• The decrease in significance of employed criminal organizations throughout the phase of de-escalation. • The potential gained influence of local groups: risk of rivalry or forcing them back to the gray zone. • Problems of reliability: business interests might override alliances. • Anti-organized crime political will: the risk of time pressure caused by the governmental intention of address legal gaps and the success of international cooperation

5. Theoretical comparison of research findings

Our newly established findings support and reinforce numerous studies asserting that the Kremlin employs organized criminal groups in its foreign policy. These groups engage in intelligence gathering, corruption, money laundering, and other disruptive activities. Such elements were recently uncovered during covert operations in Latvia, as well as in Spain, Israel, and Germany (Wither, 2020) (Galeotti, 2024).

Unfortunately, Serbia and Hungary are no exceptions. In Serbia, the Kremlin's influence has long been a cause for concern. Similarly, Hungary witnessed several instances of organized crime-related settlements, money laundering transactions, and political influence linked to criminal organizations in the early 2000s.¹¹ Additionally, Serbian organized crime groups played a role in the failed 2016 coup in Montenegro, which sought to prevent the country's NATO accession (Galeotti, 2024).

Unsurprisingly, states have historically leveraged criminal networks, even before the era of hybrid and fourth-generation warfare. For example, under Milošević's presidency, criminal networks were embedded within government structures to secretly influence the population and undermine the legitimacy of target states for Serbia's strategic advantage (Grubač, 2008; Pešić, 2007). This tactic was considered pioneering in the 1990s, as it was both deniable and highly effective (Long, 2024). As analyzed in this study, similar hybrid operations persist in the 21st century.

Consequently, it is undeniable that organized crime maintains a special relationship with the state and the most influential political parties, ensuring social prestige and influence while remaining clandestine and avoiding prosecution (Štrbac, 2016). This embeddedness is further exemplified by Professor Kutnjak, who has repeatedly highlighted how state authorities not only fail in their duty to combat organized crime but also assimilate and transform structurally, formally, and even in their very nature, mirroring criminal organizations (Kutnjak, 2018).¹²

In conclusion, the use of organized crime as a tool of state strategy is well-documented in both Serbian and international sources. This theoretical foundation aligns with Russia's approach to hybrid warfare, demonstrating Moscow's intent and actions to achieve strategic objectives abroad, as analyzed in this article.

¹¹ For example, Semion Mogilevich, a key financier of organized crime in Russia—who maintained a network of corrupt agents and clients—built a business empire that thrived across Europe, further consolidating his power. He was arrested in 2008 but released the following year, sparking significant controversy.

¹² For instance, Professor Kutnjak introduced the term 'code of silence' to describe the implicit agreement among police officers not to report corruption when it involves a colleague. This is particularly problematic as it enables the concealment of the excessive use of force and other abuses, ultimately threatening the integrity of the justice system—the foundation of a democratic society (Kutnjak, 2008).

6. Conclusion

The aim of our research was to validate our hypothesis that organized crime—specifically, the criminal networks within a target country—can serve as an effective tool in Russian hybrid warfare. To deepen this analysis, we posed a research question focusing on the specific phases of the Gerasimov Model during which such entities could be employed. The findings of this study strongly support the hypothesis through several key results.

First, establishing the theoretical framework clarified that Russian-style hybrid warfare fundamentally seeks to undermine the sovereignty of targeted states. According to the Gerasimov Model, this is achieved by delegitimizing political leadership through a range of cross-sectoral tactics, with the ultimate objective of installing political forces aligned with Russian interests. The need to manufacture a legitimacy crisis naturally justifies the use of organized crime as a hybrid tool, given its destabilizing potential and its ability to blur the lines between state institutions and criminal enterprises—particularly in the post-Soviet space.

Next, by analyzing the operational environment, we identified key regional factors that influence the feasibility of utilizing local criminal networks in hybrid operations. Several characteristics support their use, including the transit-oriented nature of the examined areas and their roles within international crime networks, which establish indirect links to Russian organized crime—and, by extension, the Russian state. Additionally, the adaptability and covert nature of local criminal groups, their deep entrenchment in both state and business structures (to a lesser extent in the Baltics, but significantly in Ukraine and Moldova), and gaps and shortcomings of national policies targeting organized crime all contribute to their potential effectiveness.

In the third phase of our research, we conducted a SWOT analysis to highlight the advantages of integrating local criminal organizations into hybrid operations—many of which resulted from the operational environment analysis. The findings reinforce the hypothesis that these networks can serve as valuable instruments for the Russian Federation in executing hybrid warfare strategies.

However, the SWOT analysis also exposed notable risks, particularly regarding cost-effectiveness. While criminal networks may offer strategic advantages, their utilization within the Gerasimov Model raises concerns about long-term control and sustainability.

The research question was addressed through the results of the SWOT analysis, which demonstrated that organized crime networks are most effective in the first four phases of the Gerasimov Model. This aligns with Russian military thought, according to which generating

chaos is an integral part of the escalation period, as criminal organizations are particularly well-suited to facilitate a chaotic environment (Davydenko, 2024).

In contrast, the fifth and sixth phases require de-escalation, which brings into question Moscow's ability to control these criminal groups. While their role in escalation is undeniably valuable, their presence during the consolidation phases introduces significant risks that must be carefully managed.

Moreover, hybrid warfare relies on the simultaneous application of multiple tactics, meaning criminal networks must operate alongside other methods to ensure strategic synergy and synchronization. This is crucial from a broader theoretical perspective, as the objective of hybrid warfare is not to render a state completely dysfunctional since a failed state could ultimately pose a threat to Moscow itself.

Ultimately, this raises the critical question: is deploying criminal networks truly a cost-effective strategy for the Kremlin? And if so, at what price can Moscow maintain control over the criminal groups it chooses to exploit?

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