

Global Cosa Nostra

Ever since Grandpa died, the family has been at war. The godfathers of organised crime in Russia are locked in a ferocious battle to fill the power vacuum left by Aslan Usoyan, a.k.a. Grandpa Khasan, the boss of bosses shot dead in a Moscow restaurant in mid-January.

by Cecilia Tosi

According to ‘ancient’ rules hewn by criminals in the prisons and gulags of the Soviet Union, the mafia’s new leadership is chosen at a *skhodka*, a plenary meeting of the highest ranking bosses, the *vor-v-zakone* (thieves-in-law). Yet ever since Usoyan’s death, the meetings have failed to yield results, in part because the list of participants is continually changing.

Indeed, in today’s mafia it’s hard to determine who rightfully belongs to the criminal elite. Until the early 1990s, the *vor* coronation had to be held in prison, and the elders only conferred the status on the ‘worthiest’: those who showed the greatest resistance to pain, fiercest hatred of the police and total contempt for all things legal.

Then with democracy came deregulation. The mobsters were free to do business above ground and many young men started buying *vor* positions without ever having set foot in prison. Nowadays, every criminal clan has these second-generation members, whom rival gangs use to discredit their enemies. Which is why the *skhodka* often resemble Partisan meetings where one boss tries to seize power from another, sometimes even spiralling into bloody shoot-outs between the guests.

To avoid bloodshed or (admittedly rare) police raids, in recent years the *vor* have been organising their meetings abroad, taking advan-

tage of the substantial criminal network they’ve built up worldwide. In February, for example, a big meeting was held in Athens, where a big-shot boss, Lasha (“Rustav”) Shushanashvili, was serving time. Shushanashvili was not only able to organise the meeting from jail (where it appears they’ve also built him a swimming pool and a gym), but he also assured the participation of his godfather of choice.

In fact, according to Spanish press reports, Georgian gangster Zajhar Kalashov (known as Shakro Jr.) took part in the meeting by video conference call from a prison in Teixeira, Galicia, and was elected to lead the organisation. His fellow *vor* chose him because they thought he’d be coming home after being released from jail by this summer. But it seems that Kalashov would rather stay in Spain than serve the 18-year prison sentence awaiting him in Georgia.

For now, Kalashov wields his power by masterminding clashes between rival groups, backing clans with the greatest chance of winning. Only it’s not easy to predict the victor now that the cards have been shuffled with Usoyan’s death. Before, there was only the historic rivalry between Usoyan and Tarel (“Taro”) Oniani of Georgia, two heavyweight mafia bosses worth \$2 billion (€1.5 Bln) each. Today, however, war has broken out among Usoyan’s heirs.

The power struggle actually began in 2010, when Oniani’s men tried to kill Usoyan. He survived but was wounded and decided not to take any more chances. Holed up at home, communicating with the outside world via his 30 mobile phones, he had no choice but to delegate public relations to his two most trusted henchmen: Dmitry (“Miron”) Chanturia and Eduard (“Osetrina”) Asatryan. It was the beginning of the end.

In December 2010 a *skhodka* was convened in Greece, but neither Usoyan nor Oniani at-



GALERIA PRESS/RIA NOVOSTI/РИА НОВОСТИ/РИА НОВОСТИ/РИА НОВОСТИ

Police forces patrol the centre of Moscow, close to where Aslan Usoyan was wounded. The heads of the mafias in Russia are fighting over who will take over from the dead mafia boss.

tended. The other bosses solved numerous problems on their own and labelled the meeting a success precisely due to the very absence of Usoyan’s who tended to stir up conflicts which most of the mobsters saw no need for. A “young” opposition faction comprising both Georgians and Slavs began to take foot, calling for a new broom in the upper echelons of the syndicates.

From Spain, Kalashov joined the dissenters, but once again he turned to an ‘elder’, bringing Oniani back into the fold. Together with the Georgians, he wrote a *malyava* (criminal letter) that called for a moratorium on all of Usoyan’s appointments, meaning those he had chosen to be *vor* could no longer lay claim to the status.

Revolt was in the cards, the only thing missing was the trigger. In January, Usoyan was gunned down outside an exclusive Moscow restaurant.

His death was welcomed as a liberation, especially by his henchmen, who began an acquisitions *and* election campaign. Chanturia set a bounty of five million dollars on the head of one of the men suspected of murdering Usoyan and started eliminating members of the opposing faction, killing some of them and getting others arrested.

He also tried to convene a *skhodka* in Dubai, inviting 300 bosses, but what with the arrests and those not too keen, only a handful of *vor* turned up in the Arab Emirates. He therefore decided it was a better bet to turn his attention



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to the businessmen and commercial ventures previously under Usoyan's control. This is when Chanturia runs up against his old colleague Asatryan, who had fallen out with Usoyan in 2012 but had kept his old 'rolodex' of contacts. Asatryan knew all of Usoyan's business partners and has begun recruiting them.

In just two months, tensions grew sky high between the two former associates. On March 23, Asatryan invited his enemies to a reconciliation meeting at a garage he runs near Moscow. The two factions came armed to the back teeth. Asatryan had his son, a *vor* since the age of 23 even though he has no legitimate claim to the status, and 30 other men with him. Chanturia turned up with 50 gangsters. A fight broke out, with punches and bullets flying.

Asatryan's gang fared worse; his men were decimated. So is that the end of it? Chanturia hopes so and is working to become a leader, but his rival still hasn't given up. Today, Asatryan is very tight with the Georgians and is gathering support among Oniani's associates.

The big absentees in this power struggle are the Slavs. Caucasians – Georgians in particular – currently make up 80% of the active *vor* members, while the actual Russians, those who started to make money 20 years ago, no longer stoop to this kind of child's play. They've become respectable businessmen, cleverly investing their dirty money in legal activities. *Skhodke* meetings in garages are beneath them. And honour among thieves has lost out to untold billions. **E**

E The Russian police take notes next to the body of the victim of an attack by a mafia murder squad in the centre of Moscow last January.