



by Anna Politkovskaja

EDITORIAL



**M**oscow, February 2003. A thunderbolt rips through a calm sky: President Putin has named Nikolai Ovchinnikov as new Interior Ministry undersecretary and head of the main organised-crime department (GUBOP). Ovchinnikov is a modest, unknown Duma MP who never speaks out, has never taken part in the law-making process and appears to be politically inert. And he is not even from St Petersburg, which is in itself a thoroughly respectable criterion in the current policy of nominations.

Ovchinnikov gave an interview immediately after his nomination. He would do his best to merit the President's confidence and saw his duty as being that of "reducing corruption to a minimum" and ensuring that "the healthy component of society" would no longer be hostage to "the actions of a minority of criminals". Noble intentions: there's nothing to be said. So why did so many people in the Urals burst out laughing?

To start with, it should be mentioned that the President's choice was not a casual one. The man got the position because it inevitably had to happen in Putin's Russia.

But let's start from the position. How high up is it in the State hierarchy and why does it merit so much attention? In Russia, heading the fight against organised crime is not a job like any other. It is a key post in the power structure, first of all because organised crime (the Mafia) is an everyday phenomenon for us and is grounded in an unprecedented system of corruption. You can't do anything without money and you can do anything you want if you've got money, as they say there.

Secondly, it's a job whose importance has grown along the way. One unsinkable man, who managed to stay



afloat through the Yeltsin as well as the Putin era; one of the top bureaucrats and power brokers in Russia is Vladimir Rushailo, former Interior Minister and now Secretary of the Security Council. Rushailo took the first steps as head of the fight against organised crime, and once he became minister he continued to cultivate his old interests, strengthening the sector he had initially managed as much as possible. He hired more staff than any other department and gave them full powers (including the possibility of using force without prior authorisation), thereby setting them apart from the other police forces, and obviously promoted his own men – his colleagues in the fight

\_Below: Vladimir Rusalyo, former Interior Minister and currently head of the Security Council, with President Vladimir Putin. Rusalyo multiplied the number of staff in his department, giving them ample powers and promoting his men to the highest levels of government. There are now a large number of them in the most important ministries



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against the Mafia – to the highest ranks of government. As a result, there are a large number of Rushailov followers in the most important ministries today, a number comparable only to that of the Petersburgians (those who worked with Putin in St Petersburg and followed him to Moscow) and the Chekists, the successors of the KGB (now called the FSB), where Putin also worked.

As for Ovchinnikov, his nomination seemed to be worthy of respect and bureaucratically irreproachable. Ovchinnikov appeared to have deserved his position. Going by his CV, Ovchinnikov had been a police officer before he entered the Duma, working for the regional police for 30 years before becoming Chief of Police in Yekaterinburg – which is not a city like any other, but rather the “capital of the Urals”, the hub of the eponymous region and its most industrialised area. When Yeltsin in his time had invited Russia’s various regions to “take all the sovereignty they wanted”. Serious plans had been proposed for the creation of a Republic of the Urals with Yekaterinburg as its capital. Being head of the Yekaterinburg police therefore meant being famous nationwide, as the Urals are synonymous with mineral resources, the iron and steel industry and a natural and industrial heritage capable of sustaining any country.

Yekaterinburg is also the historical headquarters of one of the biggest Mafia organisations in the former Soviet Union and modern-day Russia, the so-called Uralmash organisation. Willingly or unwillingly, the city’s top policeman found himself up against the organisation.

It is true, however, that there is a lot of missing information on Ovchinnikov’s official résumé, some of the most important information, i.e.: what kind of police chief was Ovchinnikov? What did he handle? Which of the mafiosi did he hunt down? Which ones did he establish contact with? What were his triumphs? Which of the local public officials enjoyed his support? And, therefore, what kind of city was

Ovchinnikov's Yekaterinburg, and what has become of it today?

It is obviously not my intention to describe how the regional policeman Ovchinnikov was appointed to the Emyrean heights of the capital. What I am interested in is a phenomenon of Russian daily life called corruption. What is it? What mechanisms is it based on at the national level? What is the new mafia of the Putin era like? How does it manage to get hold of the most important positions? To sum up, can we get an idea of the nomination policy of Putin and his administration starting from the nomination of Ovchinnikov as champion of the fight against the Mafia?

It won't be a short story... 

**Anna Politkovskaja**, an inconvenient journalist, was shot dead in Moscow on 7 October. She used to say: "I live life, and I write what I see". It took Vladimir Putin a few days to condemn the killing. This text is an extract from the book Putin's Russia (*La Russia di Putin*, published in Italy by Adelphi).