

Vu d'ailleurs...
Chronique

Les Cahiers du CEREN démarrent à l'occasion de ce vingt-huitième numéro une chronique : « Vu d'ailleurs... », permettant de diversifier les points de vue sur un thème très discuté.. La réflexion proposée ici a été recueillie et analysée par notre collègue Paul Sanders.

**Vadim Volkov, violence management and the problem of credible
commitment in Russia**

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Vadim Volkov is a Russian sociologist at the European University in Saint Petersburg, an academic institution considered to be among the vanguard in the renewal of the social sciences in post-Soviet Russia. He attracted much attention with the publication of his study *Violent entrepreneurs: The use of force in the making of Russian Capitalism* (Cornell University Press, 2002). Like so much good research the idea for *Violent entrepreneurs* departs from a simple real-life observation that Volkov made on his way to work in 1997, while passing by the headquarters of the regional Saint Petersburg Anti-Organised Crime Directorate (RUBOP). What struck him was the physical and behavioural likeness of the law enforcement operatives with the members of the organised crime networks they were supposed to be combating. The stockiness of the men coming in and out of the RUBOP building or staging *strelki* (meetings) across the city, their dress code, hair-cuts, verbal and non-verbal communication, the type of vehicle they used - all these attributes suggested communalities or at least pathways between the two groups which went beyond mere coincidence. Surely, conventional, state-biased paradigms such as 'organised crime' or 'mafia' could not account for this phenomenon. The paradox, pointing to a situation where the usual dichotomy between 'legal' and 'illegal' no longer holds, has also not escaped many puzzled Westerners, but few have been able to draw conclusions as apt as Volkov's.

With the benefit of hindsight it is not difficult to see that the Soviet state - as its Tsarist predecessor - was essentially a weak state, despite all the trappings of military and political might. Held together by an ailing party-state, the vested interests of a small elite, the spectre of an external threat and a formidable repressive apparatus, the edifice disintegrated when the Pandora's box of reform was opened and when Gorbachev let loose the genie of enterprise freedom in 1987. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Yeltsin's anticommunism and his embrace of ultra-liberalism did little to resurrect state power, quite to the contrary. While this was clearly intentional and policy-driven, Volkov contends that the rest was a "story of unintended consequences"; for the massive downsizing of the state created an institutional vacuum, the effects of which were ultimately unpredictable. Following from the state's effective renunciation on its monopoly of violence and the return to the 'natural state', the institutional shortcomings were now counteracted by the emergence of private protection agencies - many of them racketeers, others originating in the former law enforcement, police and security services. Volkov rejects the terms 'mafia' and 'organised crime' for their phenomenological and analytical inadequacy, and prefers to describe this business as a new, unregulated 'industry', the 'industry of violence and its management'. By doing so, Volkov avoids narratives of 'deviance' and 'communist legacy' to account for Russian anomie, espousing instead an economic-institutional approach which replaces the redundant framework of the ubiquitous 'economic man' with that of the return of the 'predatory man', a concept he borrows from Thorstein Veblen. Based on a public-private and legal-illegal matrix, Volkov develops four classifications for these violence-managing agencies: private and illegal (organised crime), private and legal (private protection companies), state and illegal (units of state police and security forces acting as private entrepreneurs) and public and legal (the state).