

Russian mafia jewelry

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The story of the Russian mafia in Spain and the detectives who spent years trying to bring them down. Katarzyna Bogdanska Among the rich sophistication who came and went from their seaside villas on the Spanish island of Mallorca, there was something that didn't quite fit the Russians who lived in a neoclassical mansion on the avenida Portals Vels. Tall and powerfully built, with a flattened nose and gray, short cropped hair, it looks more like an aging boxer than an international businessman. Most days, wearing a T-shirt and sweat pants, he drives up to the local wharf in his senior model's Mercedes - he saved Bentley for trips with his wife and stopped by his favorite restaurant. Taking the table at the water's edge, he ordered a tapa and look at the boats, muttering in his mobile phone a hoarse, Slavic whisper. To hear more stories about features, see our full list or get the Aum iPhone app. Soon the police began to wonder about Gennady Petrov. He and his family were clearly Russian, but their passports were Greek. They seemed to have a lot of money and spend them in unusual ways. The real estate agent reported that Petrov paid the contractor to build a tunnel to the sea from another house he owned in the area. Then there was an incident involving two Russians who were arrested while they were scouring the upscale shopping center. The suspects didn't speak, even after police found a bomb in their car. But detectives eventually determined that the men were hooligans who flew in from Frankfurt to track down another Russian businessman who was apparently involved in an argument with Petrov.The authorities soon discovered that Petrov was indeed a former boxer and, by all accounts, a high-ranking figure in one of Russia's most influential criminal organizations, Tambovskaya. In Spain alone, he has accumulated at least \$50 million in real estate and business. In addition to his island hideout, he is said to have controlled a global network of legal and illegal activities ranging from jewellery stores and extortion rings to the sale of Soviet MiG-29 fighter jets. But even Petrov's enterprises did not prepare Spanish investigators for what they heard when they started listening to his phone calls. At one point, Petrov called a senior justice official in Moscow to complain that the Russian shipyard had fallen behind on the construction of a new yacht ordered by Petrov. According to a confidential Spanish report on the conversation, the Russian official promised to go to the shipbuilder with some of his boys and show him a lot of love. A few days later, another Spanish wiretap caught two of Petrov's associates laughing at how Russian security agents had spooked the shipbuilder. The yacht is back on schedule. In hundreds of phone calls intercepted a year before Petrov's arrest in 2008, Spanish investigators listened to how the mafia boss communicated with the powerful criminals and high-ranking officials in Vladimir Putin's government. During one trip to Russia, Petrov called his son to say that he had just met with a man who turned out to be Russia's defense minister and that they had sorted out the land deal, the sale of some planes and the scheme of investing in Russian energy companies. Will you join the government? - joked with Petrov in another conversation to Spanish investigators. I bought a suitcase to keep all the bribes you get. Petrov seemed to relish the irony, but said he was pleased with Putin's continued political control. At a time when Russian intelligence and criminal activity have become a pressing issue in the United States and Europe, the Spanish investigations of Petrov and other Russians give a remarkable insight into how some of the most powerful mafia bosses, both in Russia and abroad, acted. Building on connections that sometimes date back to the last years of the Soviet Union, more sophisticated mafia leaders survived gang wars and repressions to amass extraordinary wealth and influence, while remaining almost as respectful of Putin's power as the oligarchs he helped create. Instead of simply bribing police officers to facilitate their activities, bosses such as Petrov have established themselves as business partners, money launderers and investment scouts for high-ranking officials who have themselves amassed significant fortunes. Western security officials say. This relationship, in turn, allowed criminal authorities to expand their participation in legitimate business and political activities related to the Russian government. In some cases, the mafia is also believed to have been used as a weapon of Russian state power: possession weapons for special services, killing enemies or conducting a political head-to-head operation. However, the blur of the lines between state and criminal activity is of new importance as Russia works more aggressively to undermine its adversaries in Europe and the United States. In Spain, such fears have been particularly heightened by the current crisis over the independence campaign in Catalonia, where Russian news and social media have recently been accused of spreading misinformation to stoke separatist fervor. Russian mobsters have been operating in the region for years, Spanish officials say, working to build influence among Catalan politicians and businessmen, as well as to take advantage of the rivalry between Catalan and national law enforcement agencies: interviews with more than 20 Western law enforcement and intelligence officials, including Spanish investigators, who for the first time publicly and in detail described Russian cases, as well as a review of thousands of pages of court cases and investigative documents, reveal the interaction of gangsters, tycoons and politicians in Russian energy networks at countries and abroad. Mafia ties with Russian Russians and especially with regard to the security services, have led Spanish officials to fear for their national security as well as for law and order. If you're someone important to the mafia in Russia, you don't work on your own, said Juan Rueda, a former Spanish police commander who led many investigations. Another senior police officer added: There is always a shadow of the security services behind them. Over the past decade, Spain has cracked down more systematically than any other European government, jailing bosses and soldiers and confiscating tens of millions of dollars in cash and assets. Prosecutors issued indictments or arrest warrants for high-ranking Russian government and business figures, and named other suspected allies in organized crime. But the anti-mafia campaign has not always been successful. Many court cases have dragged on for years. Impressive police operations have sometimes yielded scant results. And the bandits, as a rule, were not intimidated. Neither you nor your laws are capable of fighting us, one Maserati driving boss who was known as the Beast, growled at the officers who arrested him. Petrov was among dozens of high-ranking gangsters from the former Soviet Union who settled in Spain between the 1990s and 2000s. By the time he was arrested in 2008 in his elegant Mediterranean mansion, authorities had mapped out a network linking some 40 criminal groups in Spain to murders, kidnappings, extortion, looting, and drug and arms trafficking in the former Soviet Union and Europe. They also helped to uncover a worldwide network for profit laundering. Gennady Petrov sat down at the table with his associates (Courtesy of the Spanish police). The first wave of criminal expatriates arrived in Spain in the 1990s. Many of them were fleeing the street wars that engulfed their country after the collapse of the Soviet Union; others hope to protect their growing fortunes and take advantage of the growing criminal opportunities of the globalizing world. The diaspora was multi-ethnic - Russians, Georgians, Ukrainians, Armenians, Jews. Veteran mobsters known as vory v zakone, or thieves in law, included tattooed ex-prisoners who survived gulags or made their bones in black markets. Other bandits served in the KGB or the Soviet military. Still others went through the Soviet sports system as boxers, wrestlers or weightlifters; together with their muscles, they often brought useful connections with the old communist elite. Like Italian criminal clans or Colombian drug cartels, the mafia took their names from their hometowns. (Tambo St. Petersburg was founded by men from the Tambov region in western Russia.) And along with other global gangsters, they have established footholds abroad: in smuggling centres such as Stockholm and Istanbul; financial centres such as London Cyprus, as well as in major cities including Budapest and New York. As a new breed of criminal telecommuters, they needed more than access to offshore shell companies and bank secrecy havens: Andorra, Switzerland, Cayman Islands, Seychelles.Spain was particularly tempting. Along the southern coast of the Mediterranean, mobsters are insinuating in a colony of retired Britons and resting Germans. In closed communities near Valencia, they settled in Russian enclaves complete with newly built Orthodox churches. Spain's fast-growing economy, driven by tourism, real estate, construction and finance, offers ample opportunities for money laundering. Well-heeled lawyers and financial advisers were readily available. Another attraction may have been that the Spanish police were preoccupied with other problems. Although the country's long struggle against Basque terrorism is waning, Latin American drug traffickers have established Spain as their main gateway to Europe. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Spain also faced one of the most active al-Qaeda networks on the continent, the threat of which became tragically apparent after the Madrid train bombings that killed 191 people in 2004.Among the first investigators to praise the Russian threat in the 1990s was Rueda, the low-key commander of a small unit fighting organized crime by the national police. The son of clerks in a national steel company, he grew up in the industrial city of Aviles with a little sense of peace outside Spain. He investigated the cases of Italian mobsters and Latin American drug traffickers, but quickly realized that Russian criminals are different, starting with his strategic restraint in committing crimes on Spanish soil. It wasn't easy, Rueda recalled. They killed, kidnapped and robbed, but in Russia. At first we made a lot of mistakes. We spent time looking for links to drugs, but we couldn't find them. But in March 2003, Rueda caught a break. Investigators of the paramilitary Civil Guard learned from a Russian informant that Mr. Kalashov, a Georgian boss suspected of having ties to Russian intelligence and operating near the southeastern port city of Alicante, was preparing to celebrate his 50th birthday in a grand style, flying to a big party of guests from Moscow on a private jet. On the appointed day, plainclothes officers watched limousines descend the coastal road into a secluded hotel with fountains blurring over the beach. Officers did not temporarily install microphones, but hidden cameras later showed grainy images of Kalashov in a black suit, with a bodyguard hovering nearby, who was on the side of who is who of the post-Soviet underworld. Kalashov, one of the most powerful mobsters from the former Soviet Union ever convicted in the West, sits in a Madrid courtroom during his trial in 2009. (Juanjo Martin/Reuters) A whistleblower later helped police officers piece together what had happened. Bosses have drawn up plans to expand their operations in the dividing territory and approving initial joint investments in coastal real estate. How To The 1957 Apalachin summit in upstate New York, a gathering of mafia dons who showed coordination between seemingly rival crime families from across the United States, the birthday made it startlingly clear to Spaniards that they were against formidable enemies who were willing to work together. Investigators realized the scale of what was happening, said Julian Lopez, a criminology professor who wrote a book about the Russian mafia, and who these people are. By that time the mafia had already begun to establish themselves in Catalonia. One accused Georgian gangster opened a number of restaurants around Barcelona's famous Las Ramblas promenade, in what investigators said was part of a scheme to launder money and cultivate the local elite. The venerable football team of FC Barcelona has hired the head of the security service, who turned out to be a convicted Georgian drug dealer. Underworld suspects have also surfaced as representatives of a major Russian oil company, Lukoil, who offered to join a Spanish firm to open 150 gas stations in the area. The deal eventually failed, but information from Spanish and Russian law enforcement agencies, cited in court documents, suggests that organized criminals linked to both Lukoil and Russian spy agencies planned to use the deal to launder illegal funds. Lukoil, which is now a large multinational firm, denies any connection to organized crime. But those fears also prompted Spanish officials to block an attempt in 2008 by Lukoil and Gazprom, another giant Russian company, to acquire interest in Repsol, Spain's largest energy company. Spanish leaders fear a possible loss of control over the national energy sector, law enforcement officials said. An FBI expert on the Russian mafia, who came to train Spanish police in 2004, warned them that he had seen Russian organized crime groups follow a similar approach to infiltration into Eastern European countries. I told them that the Russian presence was one of the stages of the process, said retired special counsel Robin Ghazawi. They first come hidden with a certain degree of legitimacy with the aim of infiltrating society. They corrupt politicians, judges, police officers, banks, industry, different cities. By the time you figure it out, it's too late. But acknowledging the threat was only the first step. There were few Russian-speaking translators and Russian-speaking informants. The campaign against Islamist militants has consumed huge resources. Mafia investigators even found it difficult to convince prosecutors appointed in their cases to seek court permission to wiretap. These investigations were so new that the anti-corruption prosecutor's office worked only on economic crimes that used as evidence, Rueda said. Wiretaps have been seen as tools more for drug cases. The Spanish police also cannot count on real cooperation on the part of the Russian authorities. In some cases, investigators and prosecutors have come to believe that their Russian in fact leaks information about Spanish mafia cases of suspects and tries to undermine their persecution. At one point, Rueda entered a shouting match with the diplomatic attache of The Russian Federal Security Service, the FSB, and ordered him to leave the police department. He hated me with passion, Rueda recalled. They wanted to know to participate, but we didn't allow them because we couldn't trust them. The idea of prosecuting complex, far-nosed crimes does not seem to be new. But the judges were clearly unenthusiastic to go after the Russians, of whom they knew little. When the Civil Guard presented the case to the magistrates early, seven dismissed it before one finally agreed to open a formal investigation. They just don't understand the world, Lopez said. In June 2005, the police finally launched raids on homes and businesses from Marbella to Barcelona. They froze about 800 bank accounts, confiscated property and detained 28 suspects - Russians, Georgians, Ukrainians and Spaniards. But the big fish escaped. Kalashov was out of town; Another boss from Georgia, Tanel Oniani, managed to escape from Barcelona by boat just before swooping on his bright mansion, apparently after being warned by a corrupt Spanish policeman. Vitaly Izgilov, a screaming, foul-mouthed gangster known as The Beast, returned to his criminal activities almost as quickly as posting bail, police said. (He was later arrested on new charges pending prosecution in the first case.) If the fugitives were intimidated, Rueda saw no sign of it. Georgian law enforcement officials told him that Oniani had threatened to kill Spanish investigators. But in the spring of 2006, Rueda heard about another birthday party. This time the quest of honor was to be Vyacheslav (Little Japanese) Ivankov, a brass mobster who in the early 1990s cut the strip through New York, reportedly living in a Trump Tower apartment and dressing up as Russian John Gotti. U.S. authorities found him guilty of extortion and deported to Russia, but a decade later he was a free man, looking forward to celebrating in Dubai with a parade of other kingpins. Rueda spent weeks preparing a secret operation with the help of law enforcement officials in several countries. When the celebrities left the party in a luxury hotel, emirati police arrested Kalashov on a Spanish warrant. Extradited back to Madrid, he was eventually convicted of money laundering and sentenced to seven years in prison, which was one of the most important convictions of an overseas gangster from the former Soviet Union. But the Spanish struggle did not end there, is considered the most dangerous inmate in the country's prison He bombarded the courts with appeals, repeatedly planned to flee and did everything he could to corrupt any officials with whom he could contact, investigators said. In 2012, the FBI issued an official warning that the Mafia was willing to spend a million dollars to bribe a Spanish official to free Kalashov, according to a confidential FBI document. Still seeking Russian help, in June 2006, the prosecutor's office turned to Alexander Litvinenko, a gregarious former FSB officer who lived in exile in London. After being granted asylum in the UK, Litvinenko became an outspoken critic of Putin, denouncing corruption and human rights abuses in two books. He also advised British and Spanish intelligence services (as well as Russian businessmen and European companies) and seemed to have experience of special value to Spanish investigators: He knew first-hand about Kalashov's work on military intelligence in Chechnya, and Oniani himself was arrested in 1992, but was released by corrupt high-ranking officials, he said. Meeting in London with the Spanish anti-mafia prosecutor Jose Grinda, Litvinenko claimed that the Russian mafia, like its oligarchs, is almost organically intertwined with the state. The patronage system, in which both operated, is rooted in an alliance that Putin and other KGB veterans formed with criminal figures in St. Petersburg at the beginning of Putin's political career, Litvinenko said. The partnership developed as Putin consolidated his power and Russian criminals expanded their reach. Litvinenko's theory was that Putin and the intelligence services took over, manipulated and absorbed criminal gangs, Grinda said in an interview. Spanish anti-corruption prosecutor Jose Grinda Gonzalez speaks to a Catalan autonomous police officer. (Pau Barrana / AFP/Getty) Grinda, a bearded workaholic with a dry sense of humour, persuaded Litvinenko to testify against his mafia in Spain. But just months later, a star witness died of an excruciating, near-public death after being poisoned with radioactive material slipped into tea at a London hotel by two men believed to have been hired by the FSB. A British investigation later concluded that the operation was probably approved by Putin himself in response to Litvinenko's accusations against Russian officials and his cooperation with British and Spanish intelligence services. Newspaper photos of a dead former spy being taken from a hospital bed have shocked Spaniards. But the evidence that he may have been killed on the orders of the Russian government has given a new sense of confidence in their work. We accepted the idea that the world of the Russian mafia is like this, Grinda said. But it is true that the case made other people think that this gentleman told the truth, because now he was dead. Spanish investigators still have a big Russian target in front of them in Gennady Petrov, a hulking ex-boxer in Mallorca. What they found in the shared files Intelligence and law enforcement agencies were more than enough to get their attention: Petrov started as part of the crew of former athletes of the Tambo gang and served a six-year prison sentence for money laundering, extortion and fraud. Known as the Grey Cardinal, his rise was tracked by the political ascent of Putin, who left the KGB in 1991 and moved into local politics in St. Petersburg when underworld figures were brazen there. Granted by Spanish police, the Tambov swashbuckling boss, Vladimir Kurnarin, was known as the Night Governor for his involvement in nightclubs, strip clubs, and racket protection. He was one of the many victims of mafia wars of the time, losing his right hand and almost his life in a shootout in St. Petersburg in 1994. However, his gang has built an empire that extends beyond traditional rackets in legitimate industries such as real estate, banking and energy, according to investigators and court documents. Among the latter were the St. Petersburg Fuel Company, which in 1995, by the decision of the then vice-mayor Vladimir Putin, was granted the exclusive right to sell gasoline in the city, according to Spanish court documents and other sources. Petrov's faction in the gang also came into conflict with Kurnarin at the time, but did not win. Petrov fled with his wife and children to Marbella,000, using fake Greek passports to gain a European residence, court documents show. In 1998, Petrov moved with his family to the Mallorcan city of Kalvich, followed by a handful of his Russian associates. While Petrov's children attended private school, studying English, Spanish and local Mallorcan, their father set about buying real estate and business. Reznik had bought Petrov's first home in Mallorca and installed it as a normal holiday, home to fine wines and expensive art. Reznik and Petrov chatted together, worked together and once entertained another visiting Russian politician on a gangster yacht, the documents show. In Spain, Petrov and Reznik used the same secretary, the same lawyer and the same financial adviser, the documents said. They had a private jet, rented by one of Petrov's companies, to go back and forth to Moscow in style. Court documents show Reznik as the most frequent flyer on the plane, which also stopped in Kiev, Frankfurt, St. Petersburg, Zurich, Verona and Naples. The Spanish indictment accuses Reznik of working at the highest levels of government in Russia on behalf of Mr. Petrov and his organization. And in recorded conversations Petrov spoke with Reznik and about him as a partner and friend. According to one of the phones, Petrov said he and Reznik would meet to discuss that Petrov's enemies would put in jail in Russia, according to the prosecution documents. The intercepts indicated that Reznik was more cautious in his phone conversations, but investigative documents suggest that at some point he referred to Petrov as a boss and leader. Resnick responded to his indictment by insisting that the Spanish police were simply embarrassed. His lawyers presented evidence that the man who called Petrov a boss was another Slavik, the man who testified under defense, saying he did call. Reznik claimed in court documents that he had met with Petrov only in and had no idea at the time that he was the boss of gangsters from his hometown. The accusations against Mr. Reznik are completely unfounded and savage, Joaquin Burkhalter, a lawyer for the Russian politician in Madrid, said in an interview. We are used to cases in Spain where major operations against groups considered to be Russian organized crime end in nothing, or only half of the defendants are convicted. During his visits to Russia, Petrov often moved around Moscow in an armored vehicle accompanied by bodyguards armed with machine guns and grenade launchers, the documents show. He also received protection from Nikolai Aulov, a police general and high-ranking Interior Ministry official, whom he paid to distract from the investigation, remove compromising information from government databases, order arrests of rival bandits and appoint allies to useful positions in the security forces, according to court documents. In a kind of crowd role-turning, the general also supplied muscle visiting the gangster when needed, the documents show. Aulov also apparently liked to communicate: during the year Spanish investigators recorded 78 calls between him and Petrov, 74 of which were placed by the general. Petrov's highly paid friends came at a price, according to documents from the Spanish investigation. For example, in exchange for services such as providing confidential law enforcement information or relaying communications to the country's special prosecutor, the documents show that he paid for a house, a car, office computers and even dental bills for a senior prosecutor. In June 2008, the Spanish authorities made their move by driving to Petrov's villa and taking him away in handcuffs. Around Mallorca and on the Spanish mainland, they arrested about 20 other people, seized \$17 million in cash and confiscated two yachts. It will take another seven years before the Spanish authorities have to issue a final pre-trial indictment against 27 suspects accused of criminal association and money laundering. Reznik was the only government official charged, though authorities later issued international warrants for others. About a dozen other officials, including former Defense Minister Serdyukov, were also named in the indictment as mafia accomplices, but were not charged. Police officers escort Gennady Petrov after his arrest on the island of Mallorca in 2008. (Dani Cardona/Reuters) The Russian government's main response to the accusations was to deny them and file motions asking Spain to cease its prosecution powers and turn cases to Russian justice. Putin's head of anti-drugs, Viktor Ivanov, publicly defended his deputy, General Aulov, telling The Guardian that he had simply used Petrov as a source of operational information. Representative rejected the suggestion that Putin himself was associated with organized crime as beyond the realm of reason. After years of procedural delays, a trial has been scheduled in Madrid Petrov, now 70 years old, is unlikely to be present. In 2010, his powerful Spanish lawyers placed him under house arrest with \$800,000 bail. Two years later, the court granted him permission to travel temporarily to Russia to visit his sick mother. He first returned to Spain as needed, but then took a second tour journey and disappeared. Russian officials have taken no steps to send him back. The Spanish authorities do not expect to see him again. With money, - Petrov once said to his son - something can be corrected. In 2009, police searched the office of a 76-year-old lawyer from Marbella suspected of money laundering. When police entered, the lawyer threw a one-page document off the table, crumpled it and began chewing, police said. The ragged paper that the detective forced him to spit out opened a new path for Spanish investigators, leading them to a group of suspected money laundering suspects in Barcelona.Last year, Spanish prosecutors took the case into a new sphere, accusing a high-ranking Ukrainian oligarch named Dmitry Firtash of being the boss of a money laundering operation. Firtash, who is based in Vienna, was also once a business partner of Paul Manafort, a former Trump campaign chairman who worked extensively for pro-Russian politicians in Ukraine and was charged last week with money laundering, conspiracy and other crimes by special counsel Robert Mueller III. But on August 30, an Austrian court rejected Spain's extradition request, and ruled last week that her prosecutors had not provided enough information against Firtash. (The businessman still faces possible extradition to the U.S. on charges that he paid \$18.5 million in bribes through U.S. intermediaries to win a mining concession in India.) The U-turn amid speculation that the Spanish authorities had overdone it signaled a new phase for anti-mafia investigators. The apparent presence of Russian mafiosi in Spain has begun to wane, although some remain particularly dangerous. Last year, police heard a call from an arrested Georgian kingpin using a contraband phone to order the murder of Grind, the lead prosecutor in Russian affairs. It was the third such threat against the prosecutor, who has details of police safety. Grinda pressed, pursuing money traces, which, according to investigators, showed connections between the underworld and powerful Russian oligarchs. The judge finally dismissed the case this year after a decade of investigation. But in October, the Spanish anti-mafia team conducted the largest operation in recent years, arresting the accused boss of the Russian mafia and Alexander Greenberg, a brilliant Russian expatriate, who became the owner of the city's football team in Marbella on charges of laundering at least \$30 million through the team and other businesses. The Spanish authorities' intentions were reflected in what European and American officials, officials said, aggressive actions of Russian special services and Russian-sponsored Internet trolls and hackers to exacerbate political divisions and separatist tensions in the West. In Catalonia, where the separatist-led government is trying to declare unilateral independence from Spain, Spanish authorities say Russia's hand is behind the wave of recent online misinformation about the crisis. For Russian criminal interests, it was a familiar area: in 2011, the Catalan government never appointed a lawmaker as its chief police officer, who was later convicted of taking bribes from a Russian developer and accused of money laundering. Senior law enforcement officials in Madrid warned them. After almost a decade of preparation, the Spanish prosecutor's office is preparing for a trial in the Petrov case in February next year. But the moment can be anti-climatic. Petrov, who is said to be ill, cannot be tried in absentia under Spanish law. The most famous defendant may be his friend Resnick, a lawmaker who said he would come to Madrid to clear his name. The remaining defendants will be mostly accused Spanish accomplices. However, investigators said they are glad to have foiled the mafia, even if bosses remain out of reach. These cases are like a long-distance race, Grinda said. We tell them: not here. We don't want you here. 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