

International

Scores arrested as police in six EU states swoop on Russian mafia

Georgian gang boss among those held in Barcelona

Crime HQ said to be Spain, with tentacles in Europe

Giles Tremlett Madrid
Luke Harding Moscow

The scale of the Russian mafia's activity in Europe was dramatically exposed yesterday when police forces in six EU countries arrested scores of suspects allegedly involved in drug smuggling, money laundering, arms-dealing and contract killing.

Hundreds of police in Spain, France, Italy, Austria, Switzerland and Germany swooped on dozens of sites, arresting 69 people, most of them Russians and ethnic Georgians. The biggest group was apprehended in Spain, where 24 suspects were detained in the cities of Barcelona and Bilbao, and the province of Valencia.

The head of the gang was named as Kakhaber Shushanashvili, a known crime boss in Georgia. He was held in Barcelona.

"These people were prepared to kill if necessary and accepted tasks of that nature," an anonymous Spanish police source told El Pais newspaper.

The investigation started in April 2009, requiring tight police and legal coordination across half a dozen European countries. It targeted "people of an eastern European origin, notably Georgian and Russian citizens", according to a member of the Swiss public prosecutor's office. Most of those arrested were thought to be foot soldiers in an extensive network stretching from Turkey across central Europe to Ireland and even Britain, but headquartered in Spain.

"This was a group that operated in various countries," the El Pais police source said, adding that the mafia was involved in money-laundering operations in Spain's corruption-riddled property sector. The cash was laundered through small businesses set up in Spain.

Spanish police have carried out a series of major operations against the Russian mafia during the past four years. Among those who have been detained is Zakhar Kalashov, accused of being a senior mafia boss. Kalashov is on bail, awaiting sentence after a money-laundering trial that was carried out under tight security and ended in December.

Spanish investigators complain that the courts have been too ready to grant bail



Masked members of Ertzaintza, the Basque regional police, carry boxes containing documents seized during the raids in Spain Photograph: Miguel Tona/EPA

to the numerous alleged Russian mafia members they have detained. "We had gained a lot of prestige in Europe for our operations against the Russian mafia and these decisions have thrown part of that work into the dustbin," the El Pais source complained.

Alleged leaders of the Tambovskaya-Malyshevskaya criminal group are among those to have been released from jail on bail in recent times.

The raids are the latest stage of an ongoing investigation into the Russian mafia in Spain, which began in 2005 with the arrest of 28 suspects.

The former head of Russia's Interpol bureau said Spain was a particularly strong magnet for the organised crime groups that mushroomed following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

"At the beginning of the 1990s there was crazy money. The mafia started investing

heavily in Spanish property. Very soon a whole mafia colony had sprung up in Marbella, including corrupt bureaucrats," Vladimir Ovchinsky said.

Ovchinsky said there was a clear connection to Georgia, with most of the Russian mafia gangs active in Europe made up of ethnic Georgians holding Russian passports. Around two-thirds of the mafia godfathers currently in Russian jails are of Georgian origin, he said.

Ovchinsky said that the Russian mafia operated globally and was heavily involved in property deals and the use of offshore companies. As well as Marbella, they had settled in Nice and Miami, he said. They were also active in Britain. "You just have to look at the Inland Revenue figures. There were 300,000 transactions in London last year in which houses worth more than £1m changed hands," he said. "Work it out."

Blow to Sarkozy as Socialists lead regional poll amid voter apathy

Kim Willsher Paris

Supporters of President Nicolas Sarkozy rallied around him yesterday, denying that the drubbing of France's ruling party in the first round of regional elections was a sign of public dissatisfaction with the French leader, and arguing that the opposition Socialists' victory was clouded by a record number of voters abstaining.

Less than half of the electorate turned out to vote in Sunday's polls.

"The big winner was abstentionism and this destroys the arguments of the left who wanted to turn this election into an anti-Sarkozy referendum," said a minister, Nathalie Kosciusko-Morizet.

The regional polls are the last significant ballot before the presidential election in 2012, and come as Sarkozy's popularity is at an all-time low and unemployment has risen to a 10-year-high.

Some 53.65% of the electorate abstained - more than 14% up on the abstention rate of 39.16% in the 2004 regional elections.

The interior ministry said the Socialists, led by Martine Aubrey, had won 29.5% of the votes in the first-round ballot, with Sarkozy's Union for a Popular Movement at 26.2%, and Europe Ecologie, a coalition of environmental groups, on 12.5%.

There was a surprisingly strong result for the far-right Front National, led by Jean-Marie Le Pen, which won 11.55% of votes nationwide, including a record 20.29% of votes in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region - its highest ever in a first round regional ballot. In 12 of the 22 mainland French regions, the party won more than the 10% necessary to go through to the second round.

"These scores prove that Le Pen is a

good trademark," said the party's 81-year-old leader after the vote. "They said the FN was defeated, dead, buried, but it has shown that it is still a national force."

No party won a first-round majority in any region and negotiations to form coalitions have started in preparation for the second, deciding round on Sunday.

"This is a record low score for the centre-right and they have a problem in that they have no reserves for the second round," Brice Teinturier, the deputy director of pollsters TNS-Sofres, told France 2 television. "The UMP is in a very unfavourable position. The Socialists and their allies have a majority."

Opinion polls are predicting that the

53.65% **The percentage of the electorate that abstained in Sunday's polling - more than 14% up on the abstention rate in 2004**

Socialists and their allies could win 21 mainland regions, with only Alsace in the east being held by the UMP.

In 2004, the Socialists and leftwing allies won 24 out of the 26 regions, 21 of which are on the mainland, four overseas - French Guiana, Réunion, Guadeloupe and Martinique - and Corsica. Only Alsace and Corsica went to the right.

The result was a personal triumph for Aubrey, daughter of the former European commission president Jacques Delors, who has struggled to maintain unity among various leftwing factions within her party. She said the French had "wanted most of all to express their wish for a more just and a stronger France".

Russia ignoring ecological impact of Olympic projects, says UN

Associated Press Moscow

The UN's top environmental watchdog has criticised Russia for ignoring the effects of several construction projects for the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi on the region's wildlife.

The UN Environment Programme says in a report today that impact assessments by Moscow "did not take into account the cumulative ... effects of the various projects on the ecosystems of the Sochi region and its population".

The Black Sea resort of Sochi is under the spotlight as it takes the torch from Vancouver as the next Winter Olympic host. As constructors begin building facilities from scratch, environmental activists say the ecosystems have already suffered irreversible damage, and bird and bear habitats have been destroyed.

The Russian government says it has taken the concerns on board and accuses the activists of trying to sabotage the games as a public relations stunt.

The UNEP report was based on the

body's trip to Sochi in January, which involved visits to sites considered sensitive along the construction path of a road and rail link that connects coastal facilities with ones in the mountains.

The WWF and Greenpeace Russia say the chief environmental threat is to the Mzymta river, which the communications link is set to follow. Thousands of beech trees have been felled to clear the path for the link.

UNEP also said Sochi organisers were procrastinating on political decisions that would mitigate and compensate for the unwanted environmental fallout of the games. "The mission observed that decisions taken at the political level ... are taking too long," the report said. It cited such projects as the enlargement of Sochi National Park and the creation of new protected areas along the Black Sea coast that would host migratory birds.

The WWF and Greenpeace recently suspended their co-operation as consultants for Olympstroy, the state-run constructor, in protest that their concerns were being ignored.

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2nd Call for Experiment Proposals

- Publication Date: March 16th, 2010
- Deadline: April 30th, 2010 at 17:00 (Brussels time)

This call for experiment proposals is related to the EU-funded Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) project ECHORD (European Clearing House for Open Robotics Development, Grant Agreement Number 231143).

The aim of ECHORD is to strengthen the knowledge transfer between scientific research and industry in robotics and to stimulate their cooperation. In the context of ECHORD, small-scale projects, so-called "experiments", will be conducted, which will use state-of-the-art robotic equipment. The research community, enterprises and robot manufacturers are asked to submit experiment proposals.

Three scenarios for likely future robot use have been defined to outline the scope of the research work to be performed in the experiments: human-robot co-worker, hyper-flexible cells, and the cognitive factory. The focus of the second call for experiment proposals is on the second scenario, the hyper-flexible cells.

More information including the full call text can be found on the web site www.echord.info



Lessons from the slums of India
Making British pupils think like university students.
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