Violent Youth Groups
in the Tatarstan Republic of Russia

Abstract
The article presents the main findings of research on violent youth groups conducted in the Tatarstan Republic of Russia as part of the international EU FP6 project, Society and Lifestyles (2006-2008). It is argued that youth criminal gangs are gradually losing their “place” in the arena of non-institutional activities and they are being replaced by skinhead groups which have become more and more active during past years.

Keywords: criminal gangs, nationalist groups, skinheads

Introduction
Violent youth groups have long been the subject of social research in the western world, unlike in the former USSR, where issues related to youth violence, especially violent and criminal youth groups, were tabooed. It had been proclaimed that such activities can only be witnessed in Western Capitalist societies but not in Socialist ones; thus organised youth groups were not mentioned in Russian literature on juvenile delinquency before 1980 or were considered “informal groups”. Few studies on gangs that appeared in the late 1980s-early 1990s were mainly focused on legal and criminological aspects of gangs (see, for instance, Prozumentov, 1993; Bulatov & Shesler, 1994 and others). The first ethnographic study was started in 1989 by Alexander Salagaev and a group of sociologists working in the Laboratory of Sociology at Kazan State University. This research is still on-going, and a great amount of ethnographic material on Russian gangs operating in the Volga area was collected during its 15 year-duration (see Salagaev, 2001; Salagaev & Shashkin, 2001 and 2002; Shashkin & Salagaev, 2002 and 2003). Several ethnographies were done later in Lyubertsy, a Moscow region (Ovchinskiy, 1990), Ulyanovsk (Omel'chenko, 1996; Pilkington & Omel'chenko, 2002), Ulan-Ude (see Badmaev, 2002) and some other cities. Recent studies that include ethnographic data are mostly focused on topics adjacent to gangs, for example, prison culture in Russia (Oleynik, 2001) or organised crime and violent entrepreneurship (Volkov, 2002).
In contemporary Russia, youth violence has become an irregularity, not only that of the so-called Kazan type gangs but also of other informal groups, mainly skinheads. Russian skinheads appeared in the early 1990s and, by the mid-1990s, they became more organised and powerful (Tarasov, 2006). In recent years, the number of violent acts and crimes committed by skinhead groups has increased enormously (Verkhovsky et al., 2008).

One of the Russian regions, where study of youth criminal gangs and violent nationalist movements bears special attraction, is the Tatarstan Republic. This is due to the fact that Tatarstan is the place where the “Kazan phenomenon” of youth-organised delinquency originated. Moreover ethnically the population of Tatarstan is composed of almost equal groups of Russians and Tatars, the latter being Sunni Muslims. And finally, the Tatarstan Republic is widely known as engaged in a long-going struggle for greater autonomy within Russia and as a formerly strong Tatar nationalistic movement. Thus this article presents the main results of the research on youth criminal gangs and skinheads conducted in Tatarstan within the framework of the Society and Lifestyles project.

Methodology

The research plan developed within the framework of the SAL project involved the following questions:

- What is the current state of youth criminal gangs in Tatarstan?
- How does it differ from criminal gangs of early 1990s?
- What is happening to youth criminal gangs in terms of organisation/activities?
- What are the peculiarities of nationalist violent groups in Tatarstan?
- Is there any connection between youth criminal groups and youth nationalist groups?

The research employed the synthesis of subculture theory with different contemporary theoretical approaches to the study of youth deviance, involving use of the following:

- Labelling theories (Lemert, 1951; Becker, 1963 and others), which explain the way certain people and groups are labelled as “folk devils” and “troublesome youth”
- Social problem construction theories (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977; Ibarra et al., 2003), which explain how the social problem of youth deviance (criminal activities/nationalistic activities) is constructed in the mass media and then is passed to political discourse
- Representation theories (Hall, 1992; Spivak et al., 1988) which explain
the way image is a reflection of social reality that starts to affect the social groups portrayed via such an image (e.g., young criminals are portrayed as vandalising property and thus they start to do it)

- Otherness (Simmel, 1950; Aho, 1994; Keen, 1986; Foucault, 2003) and Dangerization theories (Lianos & Douglas, 2000; Garland, 1996; Melossi, 2000) which introduce the concept of “alien other” connected to various social panics and problems (e.g., young nationalists as modern “others”).

A total of 20 interviews with members of youth gangs and 30 interviews with members of youth nationalist groups were conducted. Research methods also included an analysis of the mass media which was used to understand how Russian newspapers construct the image of a skinhead/Russian nationalist.

**Results**

The main result of the research on gang members shows that currently the idea of being a gang member is not as popular as it used to be. Current economic growth and end of the chaos era of the early 1990s, when it was easy to privatise property by means of violence, as well as the active combat against gangs by law enforcement bodies, largely reduced the scale of the gang movement in Russia. Gang members state in the interviews that they experience difficulties in earning a living due to gang membership and many would like to quit. Nevertheless, for many of them, a gang is a kind of recreational opportunity which helps them to feel as part of a group. Gang members nowadays became more tolerant toward the “other”, especially toward the “neformaly” (“informal youth”, a term which is generally used to refer to non-violent youth subcultures) movements including punks, hippies and others. They state that they are against racist ideology. Being a gang member means using violence which they often boast about regarding different cases of “heroism” in street fights and “wars” among gangs. Nonetheless, street fights which were once quite widespread have nowadays substantially reduced in their numbers and scope (Safin, 2007).

We believe that “Kazan-type” youth criminal gangs became largely known and widespread in other cities of the former USSR not only due to social and economic factors but also as a result of moral panics formed by the local media which published articles about youth violence in 1985-1988. One of the results of the research on the mass media related to youth criminal gangs shows that newspaper messages of the late 1980s tended to demonise not only criminal youth groups but youngsters in general (Makarov, 2007).

A main finding of the research on skinheads shows that their identity is very ambivalent and mixed with other youth subcultural trends, especially football
fans and punks. RNU is nowadays under pressure by law enforcement bodies, and several movement leaders are in custody. There are fascist and anti-fascist skinheads in Kazan, who normally oppose one another, though they may unite to take part in organised fights between football fans of different cities. All skinhead movements that exist in Kazan seem to be a kind of fan club for teenagers who nowadays do not want to participate in the more extreme and violent subculture of gangsters (“gopniki”) though they still find it necessary to somehow take part in some kind of violent acts. Being a skinhead is perceived largely as some fun game, since only a few members of the movement are aware and in favour of skinhead ideology. The skinhead subculture of Kazan very much depends on the inheritance of Kazan-type gangs which makes these groups criminal rather than ideological. Results suggest that the criminality of skinheads is less obvious, and the ideology which generally is considered a main feature of skinhead movements is far more backward in comparison with that of the traditional, “Kazan-type” criminal gangs (Salagaev, Makarov & Safin, 2007; Salagaev, Makarov, Shashkin & Safin, 2009).

The media analysis which was done to understand the portrayal of nationalism and skinheads in newspapers suggests that issues related to Russian nationalism generally have negative connotations (“Russian fascism”, “racism”, “chauvinism”). There is also a “positive” discourse on nationalistic issues (“love of Motherland”, “protection of Russian interests”) though it does not oppose the negative one. Hence two discourses mix and reinforce one another thereby resulting in a false perception that the “love of Mother Russia” means hatred of the “Other” and anti-migration attitudes. The negative discourse by the mass media, we think, is accepted as a "model for action" by skinheads and nationalists in Tatarstan, and their self-presentation is a result of the local reinterpretation of the main images attributed to “Russian nationalists” by the mass media (Dushin & Salagaev, 2008; Dushin, 2008).

Recommendations for policy makers

The recommendations listed below are based on the research results and dedicated to different governmental agencies as well as NGOs connected to youth issues.

1. It is necessary to separate youngsters engaged in delinquent activities into two categories: active and “stubborn” members who are determined to continue their delinquent careers and those members who are “interested” in such activities due to ideological and other reasons. First category members normally unite delinquent groups and shape their delinquent activities (they can be called “ideologists”), whereas second category members just follow the first category (“followers”). As far as law enforcement agencies are concerned, first category members must be isolated from society, whereas the rest of the members must be given possibilities
for institutional activities. Practically this means labour possibilities for youth (lest they should try to gain money by means of criminal activities) and forming a Government-controlled nationalist or conservative youth party that would politically protest against migration and such without reverting to violent means.

2. The mass media typically constructs a negative image of certain youth groups. For instance, newspapers may describe criminal gangs in such a way that will make them seem attractive to young people. A “wrong” description of skinhead activities may provoke “copy-cat” hate crimes. It is therefore necessary to establish good information and to exchange views between journalists, government officials and law-enforcement agencies to avoid provoking moral panics and stigmatising youth groups as well as to measure carefully the extent of information that should be disclosed on such sensitive topics.

3. Policy makers should learn how to deal with nationalism-related topics. Most often such topics in political discourse are banned as “politically incorrect”, and the problems existing in interethnic relations are left “unnoticed”. There must be open “arenas” which allow all concerned individuals to discuss such issues freely with the participation of policy makers, that is, to allow radically-minded groups to become part of institutionalised activities, not illegal ones. This recommendation applies to societies where nationalistic parties and movements are prohibited. In our opinion, nationalistic groups must be allowed access to “communication points” where they can share their views with government representatives and heads of ethnic diasporas. This will allow easing tension between migrants and the host society since, quite often, nationalism and ethnicism arise as a result of foreigners behaving “wrongly”. On the other hand, propaganda on tolerant behaviour must take place among members of the host society.

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Alexander L. SALAGAEV
Center for Analytic Studies & Development, ul. Gvardeyskaya, d.16b #301, 420073 Kazan, Russian Federation. E-mail: salagaev@mail.ru

Alexander S. MAKAROV
Center for Analytic Studies & Development, ul. Gvardeyskaya, d.16b #301, 420073 Kazan, Russian Federation. E-mail: makarov@tsair.ru

Rustem R. SAFIN
Center for Analytic Studies & Development, ul. Gvardeyskaya, d.16b #301, 420073 Kazan, Russian Federation. E-mail: safrus@mail.ru

Received 15 January 2009
Accepted 30 April 2009

Alexander L. SALAGAEV
Alexander S. MAKAROV
Rustem R. SAFIN

Smurtinės jaunimo grupės Tatarstano Respublikoje (Rusijoje)

Santrauka
nusikalstamų grupuočių ir skinhedų grupių elgesio bruožai, analizuojami šių grupių panašumai ir skirtumai, taip pat jų atspindžiai žiniasklaidoje.

Straipsnio autoriai pateikia rekomendacijas valstybinėms institucijoms, susijusioms su jaunimo problemų sprendimu. Rekomendacijose aptartamos įvairios jaunimo, ištiraukusio į nusikalstamą veiklą, charakteristikos; atkreipiamas dėmesys į nacionalistinius jaunimo iššūkius; kritiškai apibūdinama žiniasklaidos veikla, susijusi su jos teikiama informacija apie grupes.

Tyrimas atliktas remiantis 20-čia interviu su jaunimo nusikalstamų grupuočių nariais ir 30-čia interviu su jaunimo nacionalistinių grupių nariais; taip pat naudota žiniasklaidos tekstų analizė.

Raktažodžiai: nusikalstamos grupuotės, nacionalistinės grupės, skinhedai.