

**Mafia and Anti-Mafia in the Republic of Georgia:
Criminal Resilience and Adaptation Since the
Collapse of Communism**

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Abstract

'Thieves-in-law' (vory-v-zakone in Russian or kanonieri qurdebi in Georgian) are career criminals belonging to a criminal fraternity that has existed at least since the 1930s in the Soviet Gulag. These actors still exist in one form or another in post-Soviet countries and have integrated into transnational organised criminal networks. For reasons yet to be explicated, thieves-in-law became exceptionally prevalent in the Soviet republic of Georgia. Here, by the 1990s, they formed a mafia network where this means criminal associations that attempt to monopolize protection in legal and illegal sectors of the economy.

In 2005, Mikhail Saakashvili, the current president of Georgia claimed that 'in the past 15 years...Georgia was not ruled by [former President] Shevardnadze, but by thieves-in-law.' Directly transferring anti-organised crime policy from Italy and America, Saakashvili's government made reform of the criminal justice system generally and an attack on the thieves-in-law specifically a cornerstone of the Rose Revolution. New legislation criminalises the possession of the status of 'thief-in-law' and of membership of criminal associations that constitute what is known as the 'thieves' world' (qurduli samkaro). Along with a sweeping reform of the police and prisons and a 'culture of lawfulness' campaign, Georgian criminal justice reforms since 2003 may be seen as the first sustained anti-mafia policy to be implemented in a post-Soviet country. It also appears to have been very successful.

The longevity and sudden decline of the thieves-in-law in Georgia provides the main questions that the following study addresses: How do we account for changes in the levels of resilience to state attack of actors carrying the elite criminal status of 'thief-in-law'? How has this resilience been so effectively compromised since 2005? Utilising unique access to primary sources of data such as police files, court cases, archives and expert interviews this thesis studies the dynamics of changing mafia activities, recruitment practices, and structural forms of a criminal group as it relates to changes in the environment and, in particular, the recent anti-organised crime policy.

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List of Abbreviations

AOCU-T = Anti-Organised Crime Unit Tbilisi, Special Operations Department,
Ministry of the Interior Affairs

AOCU-K = Anti-Organised Crime Unit Kutaisi, Special Operations Department,
Ministry of the Internal Affairs

PA = Presidential Archive

MVD-A = Archive of the Ministry of the Internal Affairs

R = Respondents in expert interviews, numbered 1 to 44

MIA = Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia

OSCE = Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe

ESI – European Stability Initiative

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1. The *Kanonieri Qurdebi* in Georgia

'A prison cell in which there are no thieves is reminiscent of a desolate island where the victims of a shipwreck drag out a pitiful existence and, in anticipation of a rescue vessel, eat each other.'

Nodar Dumbadze, *White Flags*, (1988, p. 184)

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the small Caucasian¹ republic of Georgia became embroiled in separatist and civil wars, and political and economic breakdown. In the midst of this a Soviet era criminal elite grouping known as thieves-in-law, *kanonieri qurdebi* in Georgian or more famously *vory-v-zakone* in Russian,² gained a strong influence. These career criminals were romanticised, viewed as honourable, steely men, an alloy of the Soviet Gulag prisoner, known as the *blatnoi*, and the Caucasus mountain outlaw, the *abrag*. And, just as in Soviet Georgian writer Dumbadze's prison cell, they were also perceived as a source of stability, arbitration, and enforcement.

¹ The term Caucasian as used throughout this text refers to the geographic region around the Caucasus mountains and has no racial connotation.

² In English 'thieves-in-law.' This is a literal translation. 'Law' refers to the criminal set of rules that the thieves lived by. Other suggestions for an English translation include 'thieves-professing-the-code' (Serio & Razinkin 1994) which is more accurate in meaning, but rather unwieldy. I will use the Georgian term as this is mainly what Georgians call them. Russian terms are also sometimes used which have the same meaning such as *zakonniki*, or other Georgian expressions such as *ramkiani qurdebi* – 'thieves-in-the-frame'. As the focus will be on Georgia, I will use *kanonieri qurdebi* or *qurdebi* to refer to members of this criminal status group. In the singular in Georgian this is rendered *qurdi* and *qurdebi* in the plural. However, when discussing the problem of thieves-in-law more generally as a Soviet phenomenon I will use the English 'thieves-in-law' to denote the fact that on the general level they hailed from many different nations and ethnicities.

In June 2003, just months before being overthrown in a peaceful usurpation known as the Rose Revolution, Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze, presiding over a government session in Tbilisi allegedly admitted: “thieves-in-law have eaten the country.” Yet Shevardnadze himself had come back to Georgia in March 1992 after he had been invited to head a new government by an eminent *qurdi*, Jaba Ioseliani, who at the time was part of a ruling triumvirate who had overthrown the democratically elected first President of newly independent Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia (Wheatley 2005; Zurcher 2006; Areshidze 2007).

Now Shevardnadze was responding to the news that a prominent exiled *qurdi*, Taniel Oniani, had been instrumental in freeing three United Nations’ workers who were being held hostage somewhere in the Kodori Gorge in western Georgia. Shevardnadze’s plenipotentiary in the gorge, Emzar Kvitsiani, was proud to announce his connections with the ‘thieves’ world’³ and his rescue methods to the press (Devdariani, 2003). Indeed, Kvitsiani was familiar with this criminal world as his nephew Bacho Arghvliani was an initiated *qurdi* and together they had been pursuing their own aims on the border with the breakaway region of Abkhazia using the unruly paramilitary organisation *Monadire* (‘Hunter’), formally subordinated to the Georgian Defence Ministry (Edilashvili 2006).

This vignette from 2003 is intended as a snapshot of political life in independent Georgia prior to the Rose Revolution of November that year. The *kanonieri qurdebi*, initiated made men of a fraternity that headed criminal groups providing protection and dispute resolution, had become very prominent within society in the competitive and violent environment of 1990s Georgia. The country had gone through a turbulent decade of economic decline and war (Zurcher 2006; Goltz

³ This is known as *qurduli samkaro* in Georgian and *vorovskoi mir* in Russian. It may be thought of as a social institution with defined roles, norms and traditions that the thieves-in-law control. I will use the English term ‘thieves’ world’ for simplicity.

2006; King 2008). Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s Georgia appeared to be a 'weak' state, along those dimensions identified as constitutive of 'stateness' (Buzan in Holsti 1996, chapter 5).⁴ As one analyst put it (Legvold 2006, p. 12): 'whatever the contrasts in emphasis, nearly all Georgian analysts understand the core of the country's security problem to be compromised statehood.' The government in the capital Tbilisi had lost control over swathes of the territory, administered one of the most corrupt countries in the world (Transparency International, 2003),⁵ and had an empty budget to work with. The foundation of the state, the monopoly of legitimate violence, had splintered. Armed militias and organised crime had proliferated and the provision of protection by the state had become undependable. 'Institutions, including those expressly designed to provide security, have so weakened, have been so corrupted, and have so become the preserve of families, clans, and special interests that they no longer have the strength to defend either the individual or the country from harm' (Legvold 2006, p. 6).

Recent reports suggest there may be as many as 1,000 thieves-in-law operating in the post-soviet space (Glonti & Lobjanidze 2004). In recent years, as relations between Georgia and Russia have got frostier, Russian newspapers repeat the fact that 33% of all these criminals are of Georgian origin (Utitsin 2006; Vorosobin 2006; Dalnilkin 2006). One article puts the number at 1,200 thieves, 65% of whom hail from Georgia (Kalinin 2001).⁶ This makes them the most heavily represented ethnicity of all the post-soviet thieves-in-law, slightly ahead of the

⁴ According to Buzan, stateness comprises three elements. Firstly, there is the physical basis of the state; the territory that it controls, the population, the resources and wealth. Secondly, there is the actual institutional expression of the state; the machinery of government, the laws, offices and bureaucracies. Thirdly, there is the idea of the state; the historical, national, ideological and/or traditional narratives that frame the state in a legitimating discourse and naturalise authority and power relations.

⁵ In 2003, Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index places Georgia 124th from 133rd in the world with a score of 1.8 from 10.

⁶ Other experts are sceptical of such numbers. Varese (2001) believes that numbers would be in decline by the late 1990s and Serio (2008) put the total number of thieves-in-law much lower.

Russians. This is a curious fact given that Georgia is a country of less than 5 million people and made up less than 2% of the entire Soviet population. Yet it seems corroborated by the Georgian Interior Ministry's own information of 2003, that registered 349 thieves-in-law of Georgian origin (Glonti & Lobjanidze 2004; AOCU-T 2008). Of these, 315 were Georgian ethnically; the remainder were born in Georgia though were not Georgian per se.⁷ In recent times some of this number have cropped up in the news in casinos in Moscow, in shoot-outs in Siberia, at the centre of prison riots in Tbilisi, on fake passports in Ukraine, and as far a field as the entertainment and construction industries on the Costa del Sol, Spain.

Perhaps with this in mind Georgian Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili mentioned the Georgian *qurdebi* in the same breath as the Italian and American mafias, claiming that the *qurdebi* were a 'headache for the whole world' (Novyi Region, 2006) This appears to be hyperbole, yet the last few years have seen increasing numbers of police raids on Georgian crime groups throughout Europe. The Spanish security services have launched at least two big operations against criminal groups of Georgian origin in the last five years (Special Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office Spain, 2005). Recently, over 60 people, associated to the 'Georgian Mafia' were arrested throughout Europe accused of operating a criminal ring that engaged in armed robbery, burglary, extortion, and money laundering (Oxford Analytica 2010). Meanwhile, in Russia, Moscow is at the centre of a running gang conflict between two factions of Georgian *qurdebi* that has seen hits carried out around Europe (Kommersant 2009).

A significant reason that so much *qurdebi* activity has been recorded recently outside of Georgia is the policies of new President Mikheil Saakashvili's

⁷ The most represented ethnicities were: 20 Armenians, 9 Kurds, and 3 Greeks.

administration. The Rose Revolution of November 2003 led to fresh parliamentary and presidential elections in which Saakashvili was swept to power with over 90% of the vote (OSCE 2004a). Saakashvili's United National Movement landed a majority in parliament in relatively free and fair elections (OSCE 2004b; ESI 2010). With a strong mandate the new government had a window of opportunity for reform. An overhaul of the criminal justice system was a priority and destroying the institution of *kanonieri qurdebi* became a cornerstone of this. New legislation was passed, the terms *kanonieri qurdi* and *qurduli samkaro* (thieves' world) entered criminal law. The fact of being a *qurdi* or being associated with them was criminalised. Arrests were made across the country.

Despite this state attack the Georgian criminal world did not appear to respond effectively.⁸ The main apparent act of resistance, a prison riot in facility no. 5 in Tbilisi in March 2006, threatened to spread across the country. Special Forces eventually put down the riot with the loss of seven prisoners' lives (Anjaparidze 2006; Civil Georgia 2006). The government produced evidence that the riot was organised by an exiled *qurdi* and framed the episode as a last attempt of the 'criminal authorities' to take back the country from the Rose Revolutionaries (Slade 2007). Independent observers such as the Ombudsman have doubted this version of events however, suggesting instead that the riot had not been an overarching conspiracy but was down to general discontent and ignited by government provocation (Public Defender of Georgia 2007).

Nevertheless, by June 2006, according to the Interior Ministry and parroted by the Prison Service, there was not one *qurdi* left in freedom (Lenta 2006; Prison

⁸ This judgement is based on the claims being made by the Georgian government as to the all-pervasive nature of the *qurdebi* and is elaborated on in chapter 6. It is interesting to compare the criminal response in Georgia to that of Italy when very similar reforms were made. In Italy, key judges were assassinated and cities bombed following the Anti-Mafia Commission of 1992.

Service 2006). Many had fled the country to Russia and Ukraine. By March of 2007, in his state of the nation address, Saakashvili declared (President's Office 2007):

The backbone of the system of crime bosses has been broken.... some of the people who sat in this room said that the parliament of a little independent Georgia would hardly be able to do something that Stalin himself was unable to do. I would like to report to you today that...dozens of crime bosses have faced trial and have been isolated from the public.

Saakashvili's reference to Stalin was almost certainly deliberate. The thieves-in-law are believed to originate in the Gulag of the 1930s (Solzhenitsyn 1974; Chalidze 1977; Shalamov 1994; Applebaum 2003). I now present a very short overview of the existence of these criminals up to the end of the Soviet Union in order to acquaint the reader with the historical backdrop of the modern day Georgian anti-mafia policy.

1.1 A Very Brief History of Soviet Thievery

In the expanding camp system of the Soviet Union under Stalin, thieves-in-law constituted a criminal fraternity that topped prisoner hierarchies. Such hierarchies had existed prior to the Soviet Union. In this system there had been a category for thieves (*vory*) but this had not been high-ranking and had had 25 sub-categories (Oleinik 2003, p. 64). One of these sub-categories, *urki*, eventually came to top the hierarchy as penal society restructured itself after the revolution. Thieves-in-law (*vory-v-zakone*) became the title for those that were initiated at the top of the prisoner hierarchies and many aspects of the *urki* culture were assimilated. The '-in-law' part of the name referred to a code of honour the thieves lived by. The most important

tenets of this law were (Serio & Razinkin 1994, p.1; Varese 2001, chap. 7; Glonti & Lobjanidze 2004, chap. 7):

- A thief-in-law must never work or have ever worked in or outside prison
- A thief-in-law must not take a wife, start a family or maintain family ties
- A thief-in-law must not collude with the state in any form
- A thief-in-law must contribute to the criminal common fund (known as the *obshchak*)
- A thief-in-law must be honest with other thieves
- A thief-in-law must be dedicated to the thieves' idea
- A thief-in-law must attract new recruits, especially from among the youth
- A thief-in-law must control his prison and impose thievish jurisdiction there, known as 'turning it black.'

From these main rules, many other rules followed concerning such things as how to play cards and how to behave with prisoners of other ranks. Other aspects reinforced the idea of an exclusive fraternity with clear social boundaries. These rules framed the social practices of the thieves' world. Below I briefly describe some of the most important of these practices. These are: the *obshchak* (communal fund), *skhodki* (thieves' courts), *koronovanie* ('crowning'), *razkoronovanie* ('uncrowning'), and *malyava* (dissemination of information). More detailed accounts can be found in Varese (2001), Volkov (2002), Oleinik (2003) and Glonti & Lobjanidze (2004).

Obshchak: this is the communal fund kept in order to provide mutual aid to those members of the group who are either ill or in prison. The *obshchak* can be collected on many levels up from communal cell level, to the level of the prison

barracks, the prison itself, whole towns and regions of countries. The funds are often extorted from ordinary prisoners and citizens. Established thieves-in-law should contribute from the funds they acquire however. In principle, the *obshchak* may not be used for personal enrichment. The funds must be kept by a trusted party who need not always be a thief-in-law. Misuse of the funds carries heavy punishment up to death. The *obshchak* represents what might be called a ‘social insurance’ for made men.

Skhodki (or *skhodniaki*): the thieves’ gatherings or courts (Varese, 2001) in which decisions are taken. Decisions are often made on accepting new members as thieves-in-law, disputes are settled between thieves, and business matters are worked out. In the past, these meetings often occurred in prisons. In the present day, they may also take place in restaurants, and hotels and can have dozens in attendance or much fewer. Usually one thief is responsible for its coordination and its proceedings including responsibility if infiltrated by the police.

Koronovanie (crowning; in Georgian this is known as *natvla* or ‘baptism’): the ritual of becoming a thief-in-law. An initiation ritual involves a thieves’ gathering (*skhodka*) and the use of a system of referencing, examination of candidates and voting by those present. If successful, an oath is taken to the brotherhood by the recruit and new tattoos engraved on the body of the newly consecrated - most famously by depicting an eight-point star on either shoulder. ‘Baptism’ or ‘crowning’ requires the recommendation of two already crowned *qurdebi* and the consent of all present. In the past and to some extent in the present it involved being renamed by being given a nickname.

Razkoronovanie (‘uncrowning’, also known as *razsvechenie* or ‘desanctification’): the decision to take the title of *qurdi* away from someone. This

may involve physical punishment. It must be agreed upon by all present at *skhodka* and be justified somehow. In some cases, a thief may uncrown himself based on good reasons such as ill health or old age.

Malyava (also known now as *vorovskoi progon*): historically this was literally the paper where information would be written to be distributed to the rest of the thieves' world to let the decisions taken at *skhodki* be known. This is a practice of information dissemination and it is an important part of the coordination of the thieves' network and the recognition of newly-crowned or uncrowned thieves-in-law.

Members of the thieves-in-law rank and their closest associates were known as the *blatnye*, the main carriers and developers of the penal subculture. The various ranks from top to bottom were given colours called *masty*, meaning 'suits' as in cards.⁹ Once initiated, thieves-in-law were formally equal in status and networked with each other in recruiting and initiating new members, pursuing punishment and 'uncrowning' those thieves-in-law that had committed transgressions of the thieves' code. The values, rankings and rules of the thieves' world were reproduced from camp to camp.¹⁰ Individual reputations and status were mobile and transfer from camp to camp would not result in the need for reproofing oneself. Moreover, the *malyava*, the system of communication and directives, allowed individual thieves-in-law to have a reach beyond their own prison. Thus, working on the White Sea Canal in the early 1930s, Dmitrii Likhachev (in Chalidze 1977, p. 54) described 'a system of

⁹ It is widely believed that the Soviet authorities, to repress the political prisoners and control the camps, created the fraternity of the thieves-in-law. This has never been proved decisively. It is also possible that new hierarchies formed for purposes of stability, order and self-preservation in the chaos of the new Soviet penal regime (see Varese, 2001)

¹⁰ Kaminski (2004) finds similar aspects in the grypsmen subculture in communist Polish prisons. He puts this down to the institutional environment where camps were laid out over open spaces and prisoners often lived in communal barracks and therefore had the opportunity to spread a common set of values. Gambetta (2009) adds that it also created an incentive to do as a mechanism to reduce conflict as open space and greater interactions tended to breed violence.

“collective beliefs” that is remarkably uniform among criminals with different ethnic roots.’

There are many accounts of the structure of the thieves-in-law hierarchy in the prison (Gurov 1995; Oleinik 2003; Dolgova 2003; Glonti & Lobjanidze 2004). The thieves always top the hierarchy but have men below them, known as *avtoriteti* or ‘authorities’. According to Oleinik (2003), at least since the 1980s authoritative criminals known as *smotryashchie* in Russian, *makarulebi* in Georgian, or ‘overseers’ in English who look after the thieves’ interests have come into existence. The overseers are the direct representatives of the thieves-in-law. They might look after the *obshchak* in a cell or prison, manage access to and support in the prison hospital, and supervise card games.

The overseers also direct the activities of those tasked with doing the will of the thieves, known as *shesterki* (literally ‘sixers’) or caretakers, collecting money and resources, carrying out punishments, and creating disturbances if directed to do so. The *shesterki* were usually members of a larger group: those that supported the thieves and refused to work, known as *horoshlaki* in Russian or in Georgian *kai bichebi* literally, goodfellas. Below these are various stripes of lower caste prisoners. There are those called the *muzhiki*, ‘peasants’ or ‘workers’, who did not support the thieves’ law, engaged in work and were often exploited. Below that are the *kozli*, literally ‘goats’, who have no standing as prisoners and might be whistleblowers or colluders with the regime. At the bottom are the *opushennie* such as homosexuals, known as *petukhi*, literally ‘cockerels’, and paedophiles who were considered the lowest rank of prisoner to be disrespected and used by the others.

Myriad rules formed regulating behaviour between and amongst the different ranks, concerning many aspects of prison life including where people slept, who they

ate with, and the use and ownership of belongings. The thieves-in-law, overseers, caretakers and goodfellas were all considered as living *po ponyatiyam* in Russian or *gagebashi* in Georgian, that is, ‘in the understandings’. The ‘understandings’ are the thieves’ code of honour; their law. The lower level workers, goats and cocks were distinguished as lower level ‘suits’ and not ‘in the understandings’. Figure 1.1 shows these relationships based on Glonti & Lobjanidze (2004, p. 163) and Dolgova (2003, p. 355-356).

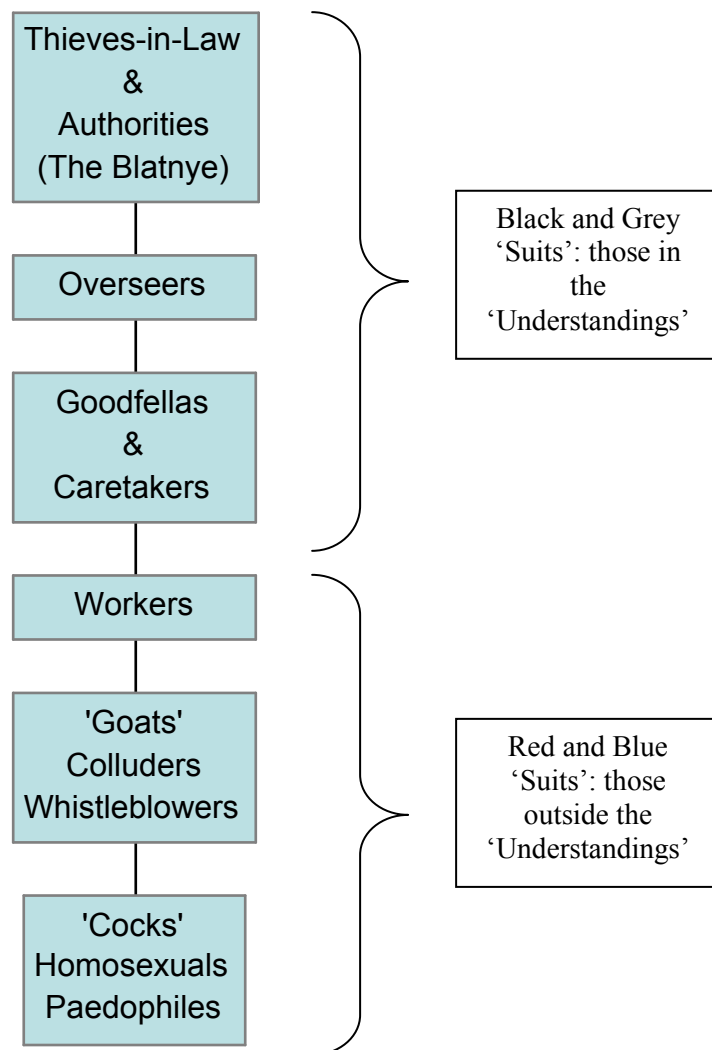


Figure 1.1: Prison Hierarchy

The period up to the 1940s represents a time when the thieves' world maintained a uniform character with distinctions, whether along ethnic lines or otherwise, subsumed by a common obedience to the thieves' code. However, following the end of WWII the uniformity of the thieves' world began to crack apart, shaken to its very foundations by the war itself. Requiring extra manpower to halt the Nazis' onslaught in Operation Barbarossa, Stalin released prisoners from the camps.

Those thieves-in-law that went to the front to fight the Nazis were accused of betraying the original thieves' code that forbade collusion with the state and were termed 'bitches'. The so-called Bitches' War (*such 'ya voina*) that ensued between the traditional thieves and those 'bitches' that had broken the code virtually destroyed the criminal fraternity following WWII. It was not just this conflict that weakened the thieves however. The internal contradictions and inflexibility of the thieves' own code made it difficult to sustain it in a time of turmoil. Glonti and Lobjanidze (2004, p. 33-41) suggest that this time of scarcity led to the over-extortion of the prison labourers, the *muzhiki*, who then increased their resistance to the *blatnye*. Furthermore, the massive influx of combat-hardened arrestees that moved into the camps following Stalin's post-war paranoia created groups who tended towards the bitches as opposed to the traditional thieves also known as *zakonniki*. The bitches' collusion with camp authorities also won them influential friends in the administration who were not opposed to eliminating the influence of the *zakonniki*.

Following WWII changes to the criminal code hurt the thieves-in-law further. State ownership of property meant that thievery was a crime against the state and could be harshly punished, and the 4th June 1947 order of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet 'On the strengthening of criminal responsibility for stealing,' worked as a pretext to have many thieves executed (Ibid p. 37). The dawn of de-Stalinisation did not initially halt the attack on the thieves-in-law. By 1956 ITK-6 (a correctional labour camp) had been set up in the northern Urals at Solikamsk that was intended to hold only thieves-in-law in order to separate them from the bulk of ordinary prisoners. Thus, by the end of the 1950s, the institution of thieves-in-law had been so weakened that it had almost ceased to exist.

Yet, as Chalidze stated in 1977 (p. 34), ‘despite official claims, the underworld has survived to this day, especially that sector of it known as the thieves’ world which deserves to be regarded as a social institution since it has its own internal cohesion and ethical code.’ However, by this later Soviet period ‘the collective system of beliefs’ described by Likachev had begun to break up along ethnic lines. By 1985 the Interior Ministry of the Soviet Union had noted an ethnic distinction and ongoing struggle between the Slavic thieves and the Georgians (Glonti & Lobjanidze 2004, p. 125). A major factor souring relations was the respective attitudes to the thieves’ code. Georgians had become willing to start families and create dynasties, acquire wealth and own property (Serio & Razinkin 1994, p. 2) The main mention of this difference is the references (Ibid; Volkov 2002; Oleinik 2003; Glonti & Lobjanidze 2004; Utitsin 2006) to the 1982 *skhodka* (thieves’ gathering) in Tbilisi in which the Georgian thief-in-law Jaba Ioseliani advocated that the thieves move into business and politics in an attempt to maximise state capture by criminal groups. This was rejected by the Russian contingent present, and most notably by the respected Russian thief Vas’ya Brilliant, who adhered to the old norms and way of doing things. Ioseliani did not listen to Vas’ya and instead very much followed his own advice, eventually leading to his dominant position in Georgia by 1992 having usurped the President, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, in a coup.¹¹

Though it would be wrong to see a complete break between the thieves-in-law of the Slavic north and the thieves of the Caucasian south, the criminal world eventually introduced new terms for those Georgians who bore the title thief-in-law but did not live by the original thieves’ understandings. They became known as *apel’siny*, ‘oranges,’ or *lavrushnniki*, laurel leaves. Some may have even simply

¹¹ Some of the details of Ioseliani’s life are discussed in Slider (1997), Ekdahl and Goodman (2001) and Wheatley (2005). Ioseliani was a bank robber *qurdi* as well a PhD possessing expert on Georgian theatre.

bought the title from already made men.¹² As will be seen these developments play a central role in this study, however, the subjects of this study are not only the *apel'siny* but all those that made up the criminal fraternity of the thieves-in-law in Georgia: the *kanonieri qurdebi*.

1.2 The Kanonieri Qurdebi: A Research Question

The above brief overview of the present day situation in Georgia and the historical roots of the *qurdebi* was intended to give the reader some context to the research question that this study deals with. There is a simple observation to be made from the foregoing from which the research question emerges: the *qurdebi* have existed for a long time and that time period has seen some huge upheavals and social transformations. From Stalin's repressions to Saakashvili's present day anti-mafia campaign, many generations have passed and a lot has changed. Saakashvili's anti-mafia policy is not the first time that the *qurdebi* have been attacked. Yet it seems that on this occasion the state has been very successful. The level of resistance to the state's policies appears to have been minimal and the government has already declared victory. The question then that this study attempts to answer is:

'How do we account for the low levels of resilience to state attack of those criminal actors carrying the status marker kanonieri qurdi in Georgia since 2005?'

¹² This practice was not exclusively Georgian; there are cases of this outside Georgia (see Varese 2001, Lambert, 2003). However, the use of the new term *apel'siny* specifically for Georgians suggests that it was more prevalent amongst Georgians than elsewhere.

The rest of the study focuses entirely on this question. The study does not give any further description of the thieves' world or the history of thieves-in-law. Such accounts have already been given elsewhere, the best of these being Chalidze (1977), Glazov (1977), Gurov (1995), and Varese (2001). Furthermore, the study does not provide general background chapters on recent Georgian history and politics. These can be found in detailed accounts in Suny (1994), Wheatley (2005), King (2008) and Sullivan (2010).

Instead, the study will unfold in the following way: in the next chapter I will introduce the approach to understanding the resilience of organised crime groups that I have adopted and how this frames the structure of the whole study. In chapter 3 I go on to discuss the research methods I employed in pursuing an answer to this question, before producing the analysis itself in chapters 4-10. Chapter 11 then concludes the thesis.

2. Trust Networks: Understanding How Criminal Groups Change and Survive

The research question - '*how do we account for the low levels of resilience to state attack of those criminal actors carrying the status marker *kanonieri qurdebi* in Georgia since 2005?*' – is fundamentally concerned with understanding and explaining variation in resilience of the *kanonieri qurdebi* to state predation. This section therefore discusses the best way to theorise the *kanonieri qurdebi* and analyses the concept of resilience. The present chapter aims to construct the overarching theoretical framework for the study and act as a guide to the structure and progression of the subsequent chapters as well as giving clear definitions for key concepts and identifying the main variables of the study. I now turn to exploring how to conceptualise the *kanonieri qurdebi* before moving on to the concept of resilience.

2.1 Resilience of What?

The very grammar of the word resilience requires that we answer two initial questions: What is the resilience of? What is the resilience to? Below, I will briefly address these two questions. In answering these questions, a more primary, underlying question is evident: how is resilience best defined; what constitutes resilience? In terms of the first question – the resilience of what? – it will be argued

that the *qurdebi* are a mafia. This will be discussed in chapters 4 and 5 where it will be shown that the *qurdebi* attempt to monopolise protection and dispute resolution services, the essential function of a mafia. The very concept of mafia however is a loaded one which can obscure more than it enlightens (Serio 2008, chapter 1). Therefore, I employ the term in a very specific analytic sense. Mafias are defined here as autonomous entities that pursue a monopoly on protection provision services based ultimately on force within a given territory (Tilly 1985; Gambetta 1993).

The *qurdebi* then, as a mafia, are engaged in more than just organised crime where this means, as classically defined by Schelling (1984), the monopoly on the provision of some illegal good or service over a given territory in the underworld. A mafia is more fundamental than that. While it may engage in organised crime its main function is providing protection that even organised crime groups need to operate. This then would define the *qurdebi* by what they do. Mafias, on this view, are a subspecies of organised crime of which the key feature is the governance and regulation function performed in illegal and unprotected markets (Varese 2010). This argument suggests that the *qurdebi* are, essentially, in the same business as the state (Nozick 1974; Reuter 1985; Tilly 1985; Weber 1992). Yet, this view also suggests that mafias might be analysed as enterprises selling a service on the protection market (Arlachhi 1988; Gambetta 1993).

Emphasising one or the other aspect of the mafia has been criticised (Paoli 2003), as ‘there is nothing to stop an organisation from selling protection and being a governance structure at the same time’ (Franzini 1995, p. 57). Meanwhile, there are clearly other salient features to mafias such as the utilisation of corruption to manipulate state institutions (Anderson 1995) and the employment of centralised organisational structure (Franzini 1995; Leeson and Rogers n.d.). The attraction of the

protection-as-governance approach is that it brings the mafia down to a single essence. Any organisation that attempts to monopolise the sale of protection in illegal markets is a mafia; whether or not it is centralised or utilises state corruption might be important aspects of its functioning but these elements are not its *definitive* feature.

However, while functionally the *qurdebi* will be shown to be a mafia, they are also actors who must coordinate to achieve a degree of collective action. They must implement oversight, regulation and governance of the group of all those with the status marker *qurdebi*. The way the *qurdebi*, or any mafia, self-govern gives another perspective on what the *qurdebi* are. Following the work of Charles Tilly (2006), the *qurdebi* may be seen as belonging to a form of governance that Tilly terms ‘trust networks’. Trust networks, according to Tilly, should be juxtaposed with authoritative organisations such as firms or bureaucracies and collaborative institutions such as markets: ‘along with authoritative organisations and collaborative institutions, trust networks constitute one of the three main ways that humans organise valued, long-term, high-risk enterprises’ (Tilly 2006, p. 25). The key elements of the ideal type trust network are high barriers to entry and exit, and the placing of valued, long-term resources at the risk of malfeasance, mistakes or failures of others in the network. Trust networks demand a lot from participants in terms of conformity and obligations yet they help lower transaction costs, provide shared rights and increase security. Participants in the network enjoy access to communal resources and the benefits of social insurance against disaster and disability. In this sense trust networks operate to secure collective benefits just as authoritative organisations and collaborative institutions do.

However, trust networks constitute a different form of coordination and governance and operate through different mechanisms (Thompson 2003). Most

basically, authoritative organisations employ top-down authority, collaborative institutions such as markets are de-centralised and structured by the price mechanism. In contrast to these governance forms, trust networks depend to a greater degree on relations of trust, solidarity, and reciprocity in order to govern themselves. This follows the economics literature in which network forms of governance are juxtaposed with ideal type markets and hierarchies (Williamson 1983; Thorelli 1986; Burt 1995; Thompson 2003). In regulating collective action, networks that institute trust and solidarity can serve to achieve economies of scale, specialisation, and reductions in transaction costs, just like markets and hierarchies (Thorelli 1986).

Networks therefore are another form of organisation that, when activated, can reduce transaction costs through the arrangement of ties coordinated and governed by relations of trust. Tilly's trust network is further distinguished from other interpersonal networks by the following features that all strongly pertain to the *kanonieri qurdebi*: a) the relations between those in the network has a given name (e.g. Knights Templar, Freemasons, Cosa Nostra, Camorra) mutually known to its members; b) involvement in these relations gives all members some minimum of shared rights and obligations; c) members can communicate and represent their shared membership; d) members mark and police boundaries that separate them from the outside world (Tilly 2006, p. 44). The differences between trust networks and other governance types are laid out below:

Feature	Governance Type		
	Authoritative Organisation	Collaborative Institution	Trust Network
Ease of entry and exit	variable	easy	rare and costly
Control over pooled resources	concentrated	shared and collective	variable
Vulnerability to mistakes of others	medium	low	high
Stakes of exclusion	medium	medium to high	high
Ratio of horizontal to vertical ties	high	low	variable

Table 2.1: main features of governance structures

Adapted from Tilly, (2006 p.42)

In reality, most collective action exhibits characteristics of all three forms of governance and so trust networks may also have aspects of other types. Yet they can be clearly distinguished from the others in analytic terms. For example, compared to collaborative institutions trust networks firstly, put their members at a greater risk of the failures and malfeasance of others; secondly, operate more exclusively, drawing from a minority within the larger population with high barriers to entry into the network; thirdly, create high exit barriers from the network for made members making exit costly and rare; and fourthly, although trust networks to some degree employ coercion and capital (punishment and rewards) they always rely in the main on commitment mechanisms in structuring relations amongst members. Lastly, the costs of exclusion for members of a trust network are higher than in either authoritative organisations or collaborative institutions.

As will be clear in this study, the *qurdebi* display many of these defining characteristics of trust networks. The category is useful as it brings together two concepts, 'trust' and 'network,' that have always been pertinent to the study of organised crime and mafias. In his definitive study of the Sicilian Mafia, Gambetta (1993) argued that the dearth of trust in Sicilian society provided a market for mafia services, and this factor accounted for why the mafia had come to dominate on parts of the island. This leads to a curious question: in a low trust society why trust the mafia? Tilly answers this by employing the concept of trust in a relational sense, arguing that regardless of attitudinal dispositions trust is produced and inheres in certain forms of relationship where the stakes for trustworthiness are high (Tilly, 2006 p. 25). Thus, actors who coordinate in a network through relations that demand and produce trust inherently are at an advantage to those who are excluded from such networks as regards producing mutually beneficial collective goods. These benefits tie in trustworthiness amongst network members, especially if trust cannot be secured outside the trust network through the guarantees of a legal framework and state sanctioned punishments (Stefes 2006).

Similarly, scholars of organised crime have found a use in the 'network' concept. For example, for Morselli (2003, p. 386), organised crime groups comprise an informal network of patron-client relationships. Reviewing the organised crime literature, McIllwain (1999, p. 303) argues that the notion of networks is 'a common underpinning' of those conceptualisations of organised crime as organisations, patronage relations, or enterprises. 'Network' is being used in these accounts in a specific sense however. Ties between 3 or more actors can be called a 'network' but this is not analytically useful. Instead, 'network' in this study, as already mentioned,

denotes a *governance form* for regulating socio-economic coordination (Smith-Doer & Powell 1994; Podolny & Page 1998; Thompson 2003; Tilly 2006).

Thus, in summary, in terms of the question, the resilience of what, I am interested in the continuing existence of a group of actors who engage in mafia activities, yet who also invest in a specific social institution known as the thieves' world which consists of a set of preserved ritualised practices and status markers guided by a well-articulated, codified, yet fluctuating body of rules itself based on wider, more diffuse norms of behaviour. The symbols and narratives that frame the practices of this institution are a further constitutive aspect of the institution itself. The actors coordinate, reflexively identify themselves by a common name, maintain claims on each other in terms of rights and obligations, have shared trademarks of their collective identity and police the boundaries that separate them from others. These aspects are indicative of a specific form of social organisation known as trust networks.

Given that the *kanonieri qurdebi* fit this definition and maintained a viable existence for decades, we now need to deal with the other part of the research question regarding the decline in resilience and viability which seems apparent since the state attack in 2005. This implies the question: what is the resilience to? And what elements constitute resilience?

2.2 Resilience to What?

In terms of the question – resilience to what? – the study is interested in understanding how the trust network of the *kanonieri qurdebi* and the institution of the thieves' world into which its members are socialised have been resilient to a

variety of exogenous shocks that should have theoretically changed the dynamics of the institution and ultimately posed threats to its existence. Which shocks are these? They include such things as: the clampdown on ‘dangerous recidivists’ following the death of Stalin in 1953; the ‘bitches’ war’ between the old thieves-in-law and reformist thieves (bitches) in the Gulag; the clampdowns on the thieves-in-law following personnel changes at the top of the communist party in Soviet Georgia in the 1970s and 1980s when the thieves had already infiltrated the Soviet second economy; the catalytic changes to this second economy during perestroika; the collapse of the Georgian economy after the dissolution of the USSR; the wars between Georgia and South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the early 1990s and the civil war of 1993; the rise of new, violent criminal actors such as ‘*banditi*’ (Volkov 2002), and militias such as *Mkhedrioni* (see chapter 7); and the new ‘anti-Mafia’ policies adopted by the Georgian state since 2005.

All of these exogenous shocks presented challenges and threats to those actors carrying the institutionalised and recognised name of *kanonieri qurdebi*. Due to limitations of time and resources, the study has a narrow focus on the post-Soviet period and the immediately preceding time period, the 1980s and *perestroika*. Thus, the current thesis studies the resilience, or lack of it, to the Georgian state’s anti-mafia crackdown which began around 2005.¹³ The outcome or dependent variable to be explained then is the level of resilience at that time. It is now necessary to explicate the component parts of this variable and the extent to which it can be measured.

¹³ For details of the anti-mafia policy, see chapter 6.

2.3 *The Concept of Resilience*

Generally, resilience is defined as the ability of an entity to adapt itself and regain former attributes following shocks. The concept of resilience has long been utilised in the discipline of ecology. Ecologists have sought to turn this concept into an operationalisable and measurable variable in the study of ecosystems. Social and political scientists, for their part, have tried to transfer and apply the concept to socio-economic systems (Gunderson et al. 1995; Levin et al. 1998; Gunderson 2000). Various studies attempt to understand why some organisations or institutions persist through hostile environments while others fail or change completely (Hannan & Freeman 1984; Haveman 1992; Barnett & Carroll 1995). These studies employ the concept of resilience because, as opposed to that of persistence, resilience must be *of* something and *to* something. The concept of resilience, then, presupposes exogenous shocks or disturbances (Carpenter et al. 2001; Bouchard 2007). For an entity to be resilient there must be some risk from external turbulence despite which the entity persists. This touches on a closely related concept, resistance, defined in ecology as the magnitude of external pressure needed to bring about disturbance in an ecosystem in the first place. Resistance is an important component part of resilience according to Carpenter et al. (2001; Adger 2000). Along with resistance, these studies emphasise adaptive capacity and learning, and a degree of self-organisation as further essential elements in constituting the resilience of some entity to external disturbance.

A well-argued and clear appropriation of these ideas in the criminological literature is Bouchard's (2007) study of the resilience of illegal drug markets. Bouchard suggests that three elements should be measured to understand the resilience of these markets. These are vulnerability (that is, level of resistance) to

exogenous disturbances, elasticity in the supply of resources for recovery, and adaptation of structure to reduce vulnerability once a disturbance has impacted. For example, networks of actors on the drug market might gain protection from state attention through corrupt ties thereby lowering vulnerability to shock, have high elasticity in supply of potential workers for drug dealing due to low recruitment barriers, and adapt towards smaller and looser networks that are harder to seriously affect if impacted.

The argument follows then, using Bouchard's terminology, that to observe resilience in the case of the *qurdebi* we would need evidence of adaptations once shocked, low vulnerability and the maintaining of elasticity in supply of human resources. In terms of trust networks, Tilly (2006) also discusses four areas that he believes affect the survival of trust networks. These areas overlap strongly with the ecological construct of resilience. I turn to look at these now.

2.4 Four Key Variables in the Study of Resilience in Trust

Networks

The four variables that Tilly (2006, chapter 3) identifies as significant for the survival of trust networks are:

- 1) supply of resources or sustenance
- 2) external relations
- 3) maintaining boundaries
- 4) internal relations between a network's members

These four variables constitute resilience of a trust network and this study is structured around these four categories. As this is crucial for understanding what follows below I give a brief discussion of each area identifying their key components.

Sustenance: trust networks need to maintain a supply of resources to continue their activities. Fundamentally, this might refer to personnel, as mentioned below, but it can also refer to funding and the acquisition of assets. The *qurdebi* pool resources in the collective fund, the *obshchak*, and according to Tilly three factors are important in sustaining such communal assets. These are: connections with supply sources, level of sequestration, and amount of available resources. I will look at these aspects in more detail below with specific reference to organised crime.

In terms of organised crime groups and mafias, the most obvious example of such sustenance is the funds, favours, and benefits generated through the provision of protection and dispute resolution services. As Gambetta (1993) and Varese (2001) emphasise, the mafia should be an autonomous supplier of this protection and therefore maintain links with a diverse range of clients of whom they are independent. For the *qurdebi* this means handling a diverse portfolio of clients seeking protection or dispute resolution. Examples range from politicians looking to get out the vote, to gangs seeking protection, to businesses looking to enforce illegal cartel agreements. By maintaining such diversity the effects of uncontrollable external changes, such as deaths, a volatile economy, and political change can be reduced.

Furthermore, mafias need to sequester resources from their clients in the form of regular protection payments, shares in companies, or political favours, however over-predation can lead to draining their own lifeblood. Thus a balance needs to be struck.

However, mafias naturally sustain themselves better in an environment where there are greater available resources. This might mean a good economic climate for companies that the mafia can gain access to in order to extort or racketeer. However, whilst the mafia has an interest in maintaining conditions of mistrust, it is not beneficial to entirely discourage people from operating businesses as, in conditions of scarcity, competition and predation on a mafia, as a trust network, is more likely.

External relations: trust networks cannot be entirely isolated from the larger population they are embedded within. For one thing, the resources the trust network garners can be the target of predatory actors such as states or other violent trust networks. Therefore, nurturing ties with strategic actors outside the network can add to a trust network's viability. In ecological terms, it can increase resistance and lower vulnerability to exogenous shocks in the first place. In the study of organised crime relations with state actors are a key element in understanding how organised crime groups survive (Arlacchi 1988; Hill 2006; Schneider & Schneider 2003; Jacobs et al 2001). Thus, this is an important element that the study will address.

Maintaining boundaries: barriers to entry and exit in a trust network are variable. However, Tilly (2006) argues that a trust network is more viable when it retains exclusionary practices and maintains clear distinctions between inside and outside. This is important for bringing about a 'we' feeling and inducing commitment to the group. It is important in ensuring exclusivity and, through this exclusivity, the value of the membership. Maintenance of a collective reputation keeps membership of a mafia valuable as, for a mafia, reputation helps to reduce production costs by substituting for the actual use of direct violence (Gambetta 1993). An individual able to penetrate barriers to entry and become a mafia member reaps economies of scale in utilising the brand name of the mafia as a commodity that can be sold in the market

for protection and dispute resolution. Therefore, however, it is very important to ensure that only high-quality individuals are taken on, or only those who are genuinely deserving of the title that is bestowed upon them, as unqualified candidates can harm the collective reputation of the mafia brand.

Internal Relations: the structure of relationships, the incentives and rules of engagement, are important for the vulnerability of a trust network to external shocks and continuing viability. Tilly (2006) stresses areas where transformations can affect a trust network's survival. Firstly, members must maintain and preferably increase mutual attraction. This means shared backgrounds, norms, and identities can help in maintaining a trust network. An influx of people of different backgrounds might alter this balance. Secondly, a trust network is negatively affected by the formation of cliques or factions as this creates competing power centres that can cause internal conflict. Thirdly, trust networks are made up mainly of horizontal ties and lack strong centralisation, however rallying round a charismatic figure can, in the short-term, help trust networks survive if this increases commitment or allows decisions to be taken more speedily. However, in the long-term this can be damaging as reliance on one individual becomes precarious and personalised; as the network becomes more hierarchical, succession can become an issue and this also engenders the potential for conflict. Finally, as mentioned earlier, Tilly (2006) suggests that trust networks are characterised by a reliance on commitment as an incentive for members of the trust network to participate in the network's activities. However, where commitment is diminished and a trust network comes to rely on capital or coercion to achieve participation, the network can be crippled by short-termism, and the attractions of other sources outside the network that offer greater capital gains or stronger coercion can emerge as a threat.

2.4.1 Summary of Variables and Effects of Change

Theoretically for this study, resilience is the dependent variable and so the areas that Tilly identified above are better conceptualised as outcome variables fluctuating over time and constituting the attribute of resilience in a trust network to shocks from other actors, most primarily states and other trust networks. Below (Table 2.2) each variable is given with the effect of change in each on the survival of the trust network as Tilly (2006) sees it. It should be noted that variation can move in the opposite direction from the ones stated in the Table 2.2 as well, and this would have the opposite effect as the one given below:

Number	Variable	Theoretical Variation in Resilience
1	Boundaries: sharpening boundaries	+
2	External connections: increase in ties to powerful	+
3	Sustenance: increasing sequester of resources	+
4	Sustenance: enhanced connections with supply sources	+
5	Sustenance: increase in available resources	+
6	Internal relations: heighten mutual attraction	+
7	Internal relations: formation of cliques	-
8	Internal relations: centralisation around charismatic figure	+/-
9	Internal relations: reliance on only capital, coercion or commitment as incentives	-

Table 2.2: variables constituting resilience of trust networks and effects of change on survival
Key: + increase in resilience. – decrease in resilience. +/- variable effect on resilience.

Adapted from Tilly (2006 p. 60)

Whilst Tilly describes these changes and their perceived effects on the viability of a trust network he does not attempt to explain why change occurs. This study will describe the changes in these areas and their effects as well as taking each of these variables and attempting to uncover possible explanations for the changes that occurred in the case of the *kanonieri qurdebi*. Certain potential causal factors are identified from theory and discussed. These are:

- 1) Varying agency costs
- 2) Varying opportunity costs
- 3) Changes in the structure of economy
- 4) Competition in the environment
- 5) Size of the trust network
- 6) State policies towards crime and organised crime

As an in-depth case study, the thesis aims to reveal changes in the four elements (sustenance, boundaries, internal and external relations) of the dependent variable over time, present hypotheses to explain these changes and, where possible, test these. However, the study is in line with the organisational change literature in not assuming that change in the trust network is brought about by perfectly rational strategy in response to threats or by any overarching plan to increase resilience. Instead, there are many confounding factors that do not allow us to know exactly what drives changes.

Changes may be made to the fundamental core of an organisation such as its mission and authority structure, or to the periphery such as changes of personnel. The literature argues that there are two types of pressure that might induce such change: internal and external. The former concerns the size of the organisation, age (March 1981; Hannan & Freeman 1984) and momentum in the rate of change over time (Kelly & Amburgey 1991); the latter refers to changes in technology and competitiveness of the environment (Barnett & Carroll 1995). However, environmental pressures are neither necessary nor sufficient to bring about such changes. Changes can be made in response to threats, without the presence of any

threat, or on the basis of predictions about potential threats and possible shocks. However, inertia can also occur despite threats (Hannan and Freeman 1977; 1984).

Haveman (1992) lists a number of factors that can induce such inertia. These are both internal and external to the organisation. They include sunk costs, internal political wrangling, collective action problems and imperfect information. In terms of the latter, Hannan & Freeman (1984 p. 151) are unequivocal that where the environment is highly uncertain or changing quickly there is a high risk that enacting change will be deleterious for an organisation: 'learning and adjusting structure enhances the chance of survival only if the speed of response is commensurate with the temporal patterns of relevant environments.' Inertia is more likely to occur where organisational change is slower than environmental change. Yet this does not mean that inertia is an optimal strategy either, and change can still be beneficial even with imperfect information if there is an existential threat to an organisation (Haveman, 1992 p. 49).

In sum, there are many variable elements in explaining why an organisation changes and how this might affect resilience to shocks and survivability generally. Change is inevitably the product of agents acting within a bounded organisational and structural context. Whether the rate and depth of change is induced by threats or opportunities in the environment, and the level of risk of making a change involved, are all variable factors. As a case study of one trust network the research here will not be able to produce clear-cut answers as to the degrees of rationality and intentionality in driving change in the *qurdebi*. Instead, the thesis aims to, first and foremost, describe the changes, and where possible point to relationships between variables, suggest links and significant connections, and estimate potential causal effects, the size of such effects and the mechanisms underlying these.

Ultimately, by explaining variation in the four aspects of resilience the thesis aims to explicate how a decline in the *qurdebi*'s resilience to state attack occurred and make tentative conclusions regarding general principles in explaining the effects of anti-mafia policies, change and decline in organised crime groups and trust networks more generally.

2.5 Structure of the Study

I describe here where and how the study will deal with the aspects of resilience described above from chapter 4 onwards (chapter 3 deals with research methodology). What follows then may be seen as a guide to the structure of the study and the content of future chapters.

Chapters 4 and 5 – *Sustenance*: These chapters look at the *qurdebi*'s activities both during communist and post-communist times. Their activities are described and it is argued that the *qurdebi* operated as a mafia in both time periods taking up opportunities based on a dearth of trust. However, supply of resources in these two time periods was based on fundamentally different opportunity structures. In the Soviet period, the criminalisation of most capitalist activity created a large and diverse second economy that provided an important supply source for mafias involved in protection and dispute resolution. The post-Soviet epoch instead allowed capitalist activity but the weakness of the state fostered opportunities for mafias in the absence of securely protected property rights. It is argued that the post-Soviet period ushered in greater sources of sustenance and opportunities for growth. On the face of it, the increased availability of resources and diversity of supply should increase the viability of the *qurdebi*.

Chapter 6 – *External Relations*: I deal here with the affect of external relations on the *qurdebi*'s resilience. I plot the relations between the *qurdebi* and the state in recent times and examine the strategies employed by the *qurdebi* to fend off predatory attention. I then go on to discuss the changes in this relationship since the Rose Revolution in Georgia and argue that these are vital in explaining an increase in vulnerability and a subsequent decline in resilience.

Chapter 7 – *Boundaries*: here I show that certain changes have occurred in maintaining boundaries in terms of barriers to entry on recruitment. Barriers to entry appear to have been lowered in the 1990s with some people becoming *qurdebi* without the correct prison experience and some even just buying the title. I present certain hypotheses for why this might be the case and the data that support these and argue that such blurring of boundaries can have negative effects on resilience.

Chapter 8 and 9 – *Internal Relations*: these chapters deal with the first three aspects of internal relations laid out above: factionalism, centralisation, and commitment incentives. Chapter 8 looks at the changes in the structure of the *qurdebi* since the collapse of communism and identifies a growing trend towards a centralised factionalism. Possible explanations for this are explored and potential consequences discussed. Chapter 9 deals with the types of commitment inducing mechanisms that are produced in the thieves' world. It discusses the original law and the lifestyle it brought about, particularly how elements of the lifestyle created growing costs on exit as well as affective and normative ties to the thieves' world. Reviewing the changes in these elements the chapter suggests that some of these mechanisms have been

weakened and replaced by incentives for enrichment. It is suggested that this would have negative consequences for the viability of the *qurdebi*.

Chapter 10 - *Boundaries*: Drawing on survey data, secondary sources and interviews, this chapter argues that the thieves' distinction as a status group has plausibly been affected by the adaptations we have seen. It discusses the increasingly negative public attitudes towards the *qurdebi* and questions the ability of the *qurdebi* to maintain a coherent symbolic boundary as a reputable criminal elite.

2.6 Conclusion

This study then will plot the variation in the areas of sustenance, external relations, internal relations, and boundaries as constitutive of resilience to exogenous attack. The study attempts to portray the driving factors behind changes in resilience as opposed to just describing the changes. Though reference will be made to the immediate period before the collapse of communism where necessary, the focus of the study will be mainly the post-Soviet period. This period was a time of great upheaval in Georgian society, economy and politics. It was thus an unpredictable and uncertain time and the speed of change was fast. In conditions of uncertainty and swift change, a trust network's transformations and subsequent adaptations are even more fraught.

The next chapter moves on from these definitional and theoretical issues. I now turn to the practical, methodological process where I identify the specific research methods that were adopted to investigate the research question.

3. Research Design, Data Collection, and Analysis

'Social conventions are a perfect tyranny among the Georgians....Again and again I have arrived half dead at a village, tortured by a bad saddle...and I have been made to wait...for hours...while they prepared a feast...when I spoke of going to bed, I would learn, to my unspeakable horror, that they had gone to kill a sheep.'

Odette Keun, *In the Land of the Golden Fleece: Through Independent Menchevist Georgia* (1924) in Chetwin (2001, p. 182)

Such a negative and delicate phenomenon as organised crime makes it a tricky area to research and even more so in a foreign context. Not only is it considered to be dangerous, but from a practical point of view 'organised crime probably rates as one of the most difficult areas to collect data' (Rawlinson 2008, p. 353). It was therefore difficult to know where to start in 2007 when I began my PhD. I had, however, already had some experience in Georgia. In 2002 I taught English for three months in Tbilisi and I went back in 2006 to do an internship at an NGO precisely when the anti-mafia campaign was starting up. From this point, in principle, I should have engaged in the straightforward process of acquainting myself with this interesting area to research, thinking up a research question, utilising theory to make connections between phenomena and narrow my scope, and designed a research plan to be carried out. Unfortunately, it was never that simple. This chapter describes the research process itself. I try to do this in some detail to inform the reader how I got from my

area of interest to my research question, theory, design, data collection and analysis. I also offer this account as a constitutive part of the scientific enterprise of accountable, open research that may be, if necessary, replicated by others.

The chapter unfolds in the following way: firstly, I describe how I developed the research area and how this initial issue informed the research approach eventually taken. I then discuss the operationalisation and validity of concepts used before giving an account of the data sources used and how data was collected. The analysis of this data is then examined. Finally, I discuss limitations of the study, ethical issues, and how these impacted the eventual research design.

3.1 Developing a Research Question and Approach

Having an area of interest and funnelling this down into a workable research question and usable concepts was a torturous process. This was not helped by the topic or chosen research site. As an under-studied area of the world, research on Georgia tends to come from fields such as international relations, history and linguistics. It was unclear therefore, what exactly should be the right question to ask and what types of data would be available to answer any questions I might develop. Pressure on passing end of year qualifying tests precluded an immediate field-trip and the adoption of an entirely data-driven grounded theoretical approach. However, a dearth of secondary data and a lack of background knowledge limited the development of research questions and the identification of appropriate theory. At this point I was unsure if the research should be about hypothesis testing, explaining and generalizing or about creating theory and description. Many standard methods textbooks in criminology assume that 'social scientists already possess well-

developed, well-articulated, testable theories,' whereas 'nothing could be further from the truth' (Ragin 2004, p. 127).

I therefore conducted a pilot trip to Georgia for around six weeks in 2008. This proved to be very fruitful. On the basis of this trip, I was able to more fully understand the processes occurring in Georgia and develop a better sense of the research question I wanted to ask. I developed connections with key respondents, identified gatekeepers who could enable me to negotiate access to important primary, documentary, sources and was able to evaluate how realistic certain sources of data would be to tap. During and after this field trip my research question came more into focus. I was able to relate theory and literature better to the project and I developed a much more robust research design in preparation for a second, prolonged fieldtrip of over five months in 2009. The research question that was worked out and the type of data that was accessible suggested treating the *kanonieri qurdebi* in Georgia as a case study of the resilience of a trust network engaged in extra-legal activity.

Adopting a qualitative case study approach did not mean discarding the rule that 'non-statistical research will produce more reliable results if researchers pay attention to the rules of scientific inference' (King et. al 1994, p. 6) Such rules include primarily dealing with empirical observations, using falsifiable theory to guide what to observe as implications of theory, and making inferences about the unobservable, from both samples to populations and facts to concepts. Such inferential reasoning is always uncertain but can be employed probabilistically. This type of approach requires the careful selection of units of analysis and cases, observations, variables, and the definitions and measures of these.

Good case study research pays attention to such standards. However, such research does not necessarily follow all the rules of quantitative research design. A

clear issue is case selection. In case studies, researchers select cases deliberately rather than randomly. They often select on the dependent variable and choose no-variance designs where the dependent variable remains constant across cases or within a case. They might also alter, redefine, and reformulate hypotheses based on data rather than simply proving or disproving a proposition (Ragin 2004). However, this need not render explanations produced by case studies useless if the professed goal of the study is to build theory and explicate rich causal accounts, through analytical induction, of given social outcomes (Robinson 1951; McKeown 2004). This is especially important where an analytical problem needs eliciting and when causal processes are unclear (Collier et al. 2004). Though generalisation might be impossible from a statistical viewpoint, case studies can be compared and contribute to the understanding of complex phenomena in other contexts. ‘Case studies are often undertaken because the researcher expects that the clarification of causal mechanisms in one case will have implications for understanding causal mechanisms in other cases’ (McKeown 2004, p. 163).

Thus, in my case, in the beginning, based on my knowledge and experience, Georgia appeared to be a good ‘revelatory’ case (Yin 2002) for understanding the wider processes of the so-called ‘thieves’ world’ in the post-Soviet space, itself a subset of larger categories such as ‘organised crime’ and ‘trust network’. Following the pilot trip it was clear that the potential data to be collected precluded straightforward quantitative research design and time constraints meant that a comparative case study would be beyond the scope of the PhD. The within-case (Collier et al. 2004) or, singular case, approach makes generalising from Georgia to other countries that deal with thieves-in-law, or trust networks generally, difficult. In adopting the case study approach, a goal for the research then became to produce a

rich, analytic account that might produce further hypotheses and add to existing theory.

3.2 Operationalisation of Concepts

Before departing to the field for a second time I operationalised research concepts, elucidated variables to be studied, identified units of analysis, data sources and collection techniques, creating participant information forms and interview guides. This was a difficult process of working and re-working. The research design was adjusted and reformulated at different times, including in the field, in an ‘iterated dialogue’ with theory and data (McKeown 2004). The main approach adopted was an ‘embedded case study design’ (Yin 2002) with the trust network of the *kanonieri qurdebi* of Georgia as the main case and individual *qurdebi* taken as cases within that case.

The study was narrowed down to look mainly at the 1990s to the present day and, where relevant, the immediately preceding period of the late 1980s. Furthermore, I limited the research sites to two – Tbilisi and Kutaisi and the environs of these two towns. These sites should not be seen as case studies in their own right; they merely presented the most viable and data-rich locations for collecting the data needed. Both towns produced disproportionate numbers of *qurdebi* (AOCU-T 2008; see chapter 8) along with Sukhumi in Abkhazia, which unfortunately was not accessible as a research site due to the separatist conflicts. Tbilisi, a city of 1.2 million, is Georgia’s capital and access to the necessary experts, documentary sources, and archives could be found easier there. Kutaisi, a town of roughly 150,000, is the administrative centre of the region of Imereti, an area that produced a third of all of Georgia’s present day

qurdebi. My initial research trip had shown that data was also accessible there. Thus, the logic was that whatever processes were occurring or had occurred in the thieves' world in Georgia that may help answer the research question would be most observable and prominent in these two research sites.

Relative to other aspects of the research, the research question remained consistent from the time of the pilot field trip in 2008:

'How do we account for the low levels of resilience to state attack of those criminal actors carrying the status marker kanonieri qurdi in Georgia since 2005?'

In the language of variables, the outcome or dependent variable is the level of resilience of the *kanonieri qurdebi* once the anti-mafia policy was adopted by the Georgian government. Resilience was operationalised in terms of sustenance, external relations, boundaries, and internal relations. These were broken down into further components which vary over time (see Table 2.1, chapter 2). For example, the concept of internal relations encompasses the following processes: centralisation, faction formation, shared backgrounds amongst members, and a reliance on commitment rather than coercion or capital to incentivise members. Identifying independent variables and causal mechanisms that would explain changes in the elements of the dependent variable was an ongoing process throughout the research. Hypotheses were put forward, dismissed or kept as data was collected and analysed. The study focuses in on the following causal factors that emerged in the data:

- 1) Varying agency costs
- 2) Varying opportunity costs

- 3) Changes in structure of economy
- 4) Competition in the environment
- 5) Size of the trust network
- 6) State policies towards crime and organised crime

As mentioned (chapter 2), it is possible to work out hypothetical relationships between the variables, however, I did not set them out as clear propositions to be tested for a couple of reasons. Firstly, the number of variables here and their potential overlap and interaction makes for a large number of potential hypothetical relations. Secondly, due to the qualitative nature of the case study approach a more appropriate goal than hypothesis testing is to draw out the relationships between the variables, the nature and size of such relationships and the causal mechanisms underlying any effects being made. While some ideas about the general direction and nature of the relationships between the variables will be tentatively gleaned, the research is also intended to suggest new hypotheses.

As the theory developed over time, the focal points of the research changed and the data sources that would allow the necessary observations were revised. I followed King et al's (1994) advice and listed the types of observable implications from theory that should be expected during the fieldwork. For example, changes in boundaries was conceptualised as raising or lowering barriers to entry in recruitment processes, to know about such processes would require observations about individual characteristics of those becoming *qurdebi* over time. This could be done through access to police data, and this was deemed accessible as I had managed to negotiate access to such data during the first research trip. These observations might also be

gleaned through analysis of witness statements in court cases, this was pursued as a research strategy but proved to turn up very few observations.

3.3 Issues of Validity

In quantitative studies it would not be enough to simply operationalise the concepts contained in the dependent and independent variables, it is also necessary to state how to measure the concepts and what indicators might do this. In qualitative case studies this is not easily done. Instead of producing clear measurement indicators the process of operationalising concepts in qualitative research is about providing a more ‘sensitive homing device that sorts out salient elements and targets in on them.’ (Lincoln & Guba 1985, p. 224; Blaikie 2000, p. 38) Nevertheless, it is worthwhile for case study researchers to think through the validity of their definitions and use of concepts, testing their research design for validity and reliability (Adcock & Collier 2001; Yin, 2002; Hagan 2003 pp 264-265). Yin (2002) identifies four areas that case study researchers need to address: construct validity, internal validity, external validity and reliability.

Construct validity demands that the theoretical definitions adopted fit the actual phenomenon being researched. As described above, the concepts I employ are all broken down into further parts that are assumed to be manifested and observable empirically. One technique to ensure construct validity is to employ what Hagan (2003 p. 267) calls convergent-divergent validity tests whereby different data and techniques measuring the same concept converge on the same result, and the same technique on different concepts diverges in results. In using multiple sources, known as triangulation, it can be seen that we are truly testing what we want to test. In this

study, I collected data from multiple sources in order to generate more observations and find stronger relationships.

Internal validity requires that correct causal inferences are made. Alternative explanations should be considered, intervening variables brought in, counterfactuals constructed where possible. There needs to be a clear logic linking the data to propositions. In qualitative case study research there is no probability or *p* score to speak of, therefore there needs to be some criteria for judging the causal effect of a relationship and identifying the appropriate mechanism (Yin 2002). King et al. (1994) argue that it is better to have robust descriptive inference than weak causal inference. In case studies, collecting data from a range of sources can increase the confidence with which inferences about causation are made. In case studies, the key to making inferences lies in analytical (as opposed to enumerative) induction. This requires specifying ‘the necessary connections among a set of theoretically significant elements manifested...in the data’ (Mitchell 2000, p. 178). Thus, case study researchers suggest that while they cannot produce *p* scores of the confidence on which their conclusions are based, analytical induction can produce strong logical, rather than statistical, inferences to causal processes and general theory based on in-depth study of the case and an ‘unassailable’ reading of the processes observed (Ibid; Robinson 1951). As Mitchell (2000, p. 177) points out, however strong the relationship between two variables, establishing causation requires the extra step of identifying some unobserved mechanism. Therefore, case studies should attempt to generate as many observations as possible and employ well-developed theory to infer relationships between relevant phenomena, judge explanations for these relationships, and identify the operation of general principles.

External validity refers to the possibility of generalisation. Using case studies and qualitative research makes generalization to a wider population very difficult. Within-case studies that involve no comparison or variance on the dependent variable can only show necessary but not sufficient conditions and do not allow for good predictions to be made. However, by making the research design and analysis tight the case study can be tentatively generalised (Ibid. p. 177) though, as Cronbach (1975 in Lincoln & Guba 2005, p. 39) puts it, ‘when we give proper weight to local conditions, generalisation is a working hypothesis, not a conclusion.’ The research here then produces work that might contribute to other studies and allow comparisons with the necessary qualifications and statement of its limits as a single-case study. It can be placed within wider studies of organised crime and trust networks which can include a wide variety of phenomena from terrorist cells to utopian communities. Tentative comparisons might be made between the Georgian case and other post-Soviet cases. In carrying the research out in a clear and open way it may be replicated if generalization to a wider population is desired.

Reliability requires documenting all procedures during the research. Given the same conditions, the same answers should be found if these procedures are followed (Hagan 2003, p. 269). Towards this end I kept a research diary. I kept records of informal conversations and interviews as well as a separate database developed from documentary data collected. Ethical requirements dictate that these are kept safe and I am the only person with access to them. It is possible in the future, with the right permission, that all documentation, suitably anonymised, will be accessible if so wished.

3.4 Data Sources and Data Collection

The considerations of the correct approach, issues of validity, and time and place constraints were not taken in complete isolation of the data. As mentioned I conducted an initial trip that enabled a great deal of progress in designing further work in the field. I continued to collect data in the shape of secondary sources and correspondence with respondents outside of the field. The types of data influenced the research question and the approach to the research. I considered the following sources for data as realistic: expert interviews, police data, archival documents, court data, journalistic accounts, surveys, and an ethnography in a specific location within Kutaisi. However, within the context of the second research trip in 2009 the latter two research strategies would have been time consuming and I focussed my time on the first four sources. Decisions about narrowing and adapting the research design necessarily occurred in the field as, while some possibilities were cut off, others presented themselves. Below I go into depth about the two main sources of data: expert interviews and documentary sources.

3.4.1 Expert Interviews

In total 44 interviews were carried out with key respondents. The complete list, anonymised and with dates, is given in the bibliography. It included a range of people from unemployed citizens with connections to criminal authorities, to lawyers, to the former President, to criminal investigators and NGO directors. Naturally, it

would have been optimal to seek out interviews with Georgian *qurdebi* themselves either in prison or abroad. However, examiners advised me against this during the qualifying test stage of the PhD. Such a strategy would have created unnecessary risks. Furthermore, negotiating access to the highest security prison in Georgia would have been near impossible. Thus, I pursued less direct strategies.

As well as identifying and deliberately selecting some of the respondents myself, I also employed the sampling technique called ‘snowballing’ in the literature (Bachman & Schutt 2007) where this means taking direction from one interviewee to identify other potential respondents. This technique can point down dead ends and lead to privileging the views of a group of people who all share the same social field as each other. This problem, however, can be avoided to some extent by beginning the ‘snowball’ from a variety of unrelated sources. Furthermore, snowballing does not generate representative samples in any sense. It is difficult to know when your sample is big enough. As regards this, I used the saturation principle whereby as you find interviews with a certain group tend to stop generating new insights then a saturation point in the data is assumed.

Interviews were very rarely set up through cold calling. Using the snowball method usually meant someone else was able to make initial contact for me, to which I would then follow up through a telephone call in which a time and place were arranged to meet. Georgia is small and the people very sociable, people form tight networks and I often felt the research was carried along on such networking. Certain key informants proved important gatekeepers to such networks. I was therefore careful to cultivate good relations with such people as ‘experienced researchers uniformly emphasise the need to establish solid informal relationships with informants’ (Barrett & Cason 1997, p. 91). This was made easier by the ubiquity of

alcohol in most social occasions in Georgia. Many Georgians make their own wine and spirits, and often interviews could start and end with drinks. There were a few occasions where interviews were not granted until I had imbibed copious amounts of wine and engaged in the traditional Georgian art of toast making (Chetwin 2001). Adopting the openness of the local people, going along with sometimes exhausting drinking practices and unquestioningly accepting hospitality, established trust. I was keen to reciprocate this warmth by offering small gifts, Oxford pen holders, tie clips, a bottle of whiskey and the like, to some respondents. However, I was aware of the dangers of over-familiarity and the need to not put myself in harm's way at any time.

Personal connections and genuine friendly relations at times bore a lot of fruit. I was fortunate that on the basis of one interview I was able to 'piggy back' on the activities of the NGO Penal Reform International with whom I had developed good contacts. I accompanied their researchers on visits to four different prisons. This gave me an excellent insight into the condition of Georgian prisons and the difficulties of Georgian prisoners as well as the type of personnel running the prison. I was able to put questions to the prison governors, tour the prisons and, unfortunately rather limitedly, talk to the prisoners.

Interviews were mainly carried out in Russian or, with the younger generations, English. I have been learning Georgian for some time, however, this complex language related to no other except some dialects and tribal languages inside Georgia, proved very challenging to master without an intensive period in the language laboratory. Georgian was therefore used for meeting and greeting, key phrases memorised and used during toasts, and this in itself was often greatly appreciated. Although I would dearly have liked to have perfected Georgian I followed Devereux's (1993, in Barrett & Cason 1997, p. 18) advise: 'learning the

language is a “data collection exercise” in its own right, and the investment of valuable time and intellectual energy in acquiring this knowledge should be assessed alongside the imperative to collect other types of data.’ Given that most Georgians are fluent in Russian and many young people, who have taken to the heights of government as a deliberate policy of the Saakashvili administration, are learning English, I felt my time was better invested in other areas than language study. In only one interview, following the short war of August 2008 between Russia and Georgia, did the respondent strictly refuse to use his Russian on political grounds. On that occasion we were able to find a translator.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format. I made up differing interview guides to cover the type of questions I wanted to ask those working in law enforcement and non-governmental sectors. The questions asked were designed to be open-ended and elicit wide responses. Interviews could last as little as 30 minutes going on to 3 hours in one case. Many interviews were not tape-recorded. In many cases, after witnessing highly uncomfortable reactions, it was not even suggested. While this might negatively affect the accuracy of the record of what was said there is no doubt it increased the veracity and breadth of what was talked about during the interviews (Serio 2008, p. 51). Instead, in-depth notes during the interview were taken in a notepad and then written up on a laptop directly afterwards. In some cases, further meetings were made, and follow-up questions asked in order to clarify certain issues or develop new points that were emerging with the data.

The interviews were directed at gaining deeper knowledge of the processes that the research question touched on and gleaning data that could provide or remove support for certain interpretations and hypotheses that were emerging simultaneously from other sources. For example, police respondents were helpful in providing

examples of conflict amongst the *qurdebi* over the change in lifestyle and movement away from the thieves' code of honour, whereas academics and school workers could give their perceptions on support amongst young people for the *qurdebi* and what reasons might be for changes in this. These views were supplemented by further interviews and other data sources. Many more informal conversations took place that increased my understanding though went unrecorded except as notes in the research diary.

3.4.2 Secondary Data Analysis

'Secondary data analysis' is a term used by Bachman and Schutt to refer to a specific research strategy (Bachmann & Schutt 2007, p. 257) which Hagan (2003, p. 224) also refers to as 'unobtrusive methods'. It involves the collection of documentary data originally compiled for different purposes. Data can be collected from both primary and secondary sources. This became a big part of my research strategy. Particularly I sought out four areas: police sources, court data, archival documents and official publications.

Police sources were particularly useful and so I spent time developing contacts and searching out such information. I knew it was accessible as I had obtained some of this data from police sources in Kutaisi on my pilot research trip, in the form of detailed information on 79 *qurdebi* from the Imereti region. Lists of names and nicknames of thieves-in-law had been published before in Russia in books (Podlesskikh & Tereshonok 1995), however, obtaining this information directly from the police gave much more detailed and relevant data. On the second research trip, I made multiple trips to the Special Operations Department in Tbilisi and eventually

negotiated access to over 400 files. These were released on trust that the data would be used modestly, ethically and anonymised.

Police files have been held on those identified as *qurdebi* since at least the 1980s as the police data and archival sources showed. Police operatives working in local precincts collected information on criminal activities in their regions including names and details of people who had been ‘baptised’ or ‘crowned’ as *qurdebi* as well as locations and names of people who engaged in ‘discussing the thieves’ understandings’ or dispute resolution. The data from Kutaisi matched the Tbilisi files though the local files contained more information than the centrally held ones. I used only those files that referred to persons who had the *qurdi* title. All the files were compiled or updated in 2004, thus allowing a snapshot of the *qurdebi* directly before they were targeted by the state. I discuss this further when I talk later about data analysis.

On top of the police files I targeted the courts as a good source of data. My hunch was that, as had happened in Italy and America, with new laws permitting plea-bargaining and harsh sentences for those who were known *qurdebi* or their associates, some of the cases that involved the new articles of the criminal code that targeted the *qurdebi* might utilise state’s witnesses.

First though, I had to negotiate access to Tbilisi’s main city court. This was in fact very difficult: court records were not considered public record and were certainly not for photocopy or translation. Good personal relations in the Prosecutor’s Office helped me and some goodwill on the court’s part let me look at certain cases and even take some photocopies. Which cases exactly had to be specified in advance and it was not easy to know directly when and who had been tried under the new laws, specifically article 223/1 and 223/2 – membership of the thieves’ world and holding

the title *kanonieri qurdi* respectively. I eventually pieced together a list of such cases from the last three years. However, once I accessed the court files of these cases there were very few state witnesses and, generally, very little eye-witness evidence appears to be used in organised crime cases in Georgia. Mostly wire-tap evidence and police testimony is utilised in court. I later found out that Georgia has no witness protection programme and this might be considered a primary factor for the lack of witness statements along with a deep mistrust of the still politically dependent courts. The data I gained from court cases therefore proved to be less useful than hoped. It did however provide some interesting details of activities of some of the *qurdebi* which was useful for supplementing interview data with.

Thirdly, I spent whatever extra time I had looking in archives. I believed this was a useful thing to do for three reasons: firstly, I thought historical knowledge based on primary sources would help give context to the study; secondly, the interviews often referred back to anti-*qurdebi* policies pursued in the 1980s and the influence of the *qurdebi* at that time; thirdly, I was made aware by other researchers that the Georgian archives from the communist time were open and relatively welcoming compared to other post-Soviet states. I identified the major archives that might hold data on the topic all of which proved to be in various states of repair: the pre-revolutionary (1921) archive (undergoing much needed refurbishment), the KGB archive (un-catalogued and much of it destroyed by fire), the MIA archive (un-catalogued and unkempt), and the President's Archive (the archive of the Communist Party of Georgia – well organised and helpful). The KGB archive collected information mainly on political dissidents, and was therefore discounted, I could only access the MIA archive by stating in advance exactly which documents I wanted to see which I could only do for a few directives I had prior knowledge of. The

President's Archive had a contents guide and allowed photography of individual pages. This permitted me to look through relevant documents and record the contents of various files relatively quickly to be analysed later. The archival documents turned up some interesting data that I was able to use particularly concerning relations between the Soviet police and the *qurdebi* and the activities of the latter in the Soviet second economy.

Fourthly, I collected data from a range of other sources, these including official publications of the Prosecutor's Office, the Georgian Office for Statistics, the Ombudsman, NGOs such as Penal Reform International, Transparency International, Norwegian Mission of Rule of Law Advisers to Georgia (NORLAG), the International Republican Institute, and the Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA). The Transnational Crime and Corruption Centre (TraCCC) in Tbilisi collects newspaper articles on various topics including the *qurdebi* in Russian and Georgian languages. I was generously allowed to photocopy many of these. The Caucasus Research and Resource Center (CRRC) also does a tremendous job in compiling household surveys across the South Caucasus. By becoming a member online CRRC's large databases from 2004 onwards are downloadable and can be used in the SPSS statistical programme. The surveys contain a wealth of information on everything from attitudes to state institutions, to fear of crime, to earnings.

Lastly, I used certain internet resources that collect and maintain databases of press reports from Eastern Europe. The Eastview database was an important resource in this regard and can be accessed from Oxford. The pay-per-view Russian website primecrime.ru also proved to be a good source of up to date information. This website provides a news service which primarily reports on any events related to thieves-in-law across the post-Soviet space and maintains an archive of reports, lists of deaths

and trials, photographs and videos. These extra ‘unobtrusive methods’ supplemented the more direct research sources.

3.5 Data Analysis

The process of data analysis involves looking at the raw data and trying to make sense of it, linking together significant elements and looking for relationships between phenomena. In this stage a preliminary outline of an answer to the research question begins to emerge. The different sources of data required a variety of techniques for data analysis. I will take each one in turn.

I transcribed the interviews and used the qualitative data analysis program NVIVO 8 to organise and code the data. The coding of the interviews was mainly descriptive. The fact that the interviews had been semi-structured aided this process. The coding system followed a ‘chunking’ strategy, (Miles & Huberman 1994, p. 52) categorising the interview data along the conceptualisations of the variables, extracting and categorising, for example, data on the supply of human resources (recruitment) and boundary maintenance and then analysing the relationship between these. The approach then to coding was top-down, seeking to support or reject preconceived, theoretical ideas about relationships between variables, as opposed to developing inferential and explanatory codes where the theory emerges from the coding (Ibid.) Records of informal conversations and observations from the field were also referred to in this qualitative data analysis process in the form of notes, but these records were not formally included in the coding scheme.

The archival material was sifted through and relevant and revealing information relating to specific questions, particularly on resources and sustenance

and external relations, was incorporated into the thesis. A similar process was carried out regarding reports of NGOs and various press news databases.

While this was quite an exhausting process, the most extensive and time-consuming task involved pulling together the police files from Kutaisi, Tbilisi, details from court cases, previous published lists of thieves-in-law, and news reports to create a database with as much detail as possible of all the known *kanonieri qurdebi* from Georgia. Evidently, all these sources did not present data in an amenable way for comparisons, data had to be extracted and compiled manually. In essence, the case study of the Georgian *qurdebi* took on an ‘embedded’ (Yin 2002) design: individual *qurdebi* made up a further unit of analysis and were taken as cases. For each individual case various variables from the data sources were attributed. These included: date of birth; nickname; place of birth; registered residence; current location; education level; year ‘baptised’; ‘baptised’ by who; number, type and place of convictions; known activities; and close working contacts. Selecting only those cases with sufficient data to be worth including, I had 278 cases to work with. Naturally, there was often data missing for certain cases on certain variables thus not always making tests between variables easy. Nevertheless, this sample of Georgian *qurdebi* was representative in the sense of covering 80% (N=349) of those known Georgians with the criminal title *kanonieri qurdi*. By statistical standards however, it is a small number for running robust tests.

The data was originally compiled in Excel and then transferred into SPSS for the purpose of testing certain ideas. Most fundamentally, the data was used to look for indicators of change over time. This was done by splitting the cases into cohorts based on the age individuals were baptised as *kanonieri qurdebi*. The cut off points were based on theoretical considerations of when changes in socio-economic and political

conditions might have brought about transformations and produce distinctions across groups of *qurdebi*. Individuals were placed in cohorts based on when a *qurdi* was ‘baptised’ or ‘crowned’ and already had experience of the thieves’ world. This was estimated at 24 years old. For the purposes of this analysis it is an age around which we may reasonably assume (based on the data available) that the cases were being ‘baptised’ or were already *kai bichebi* (goodfellas living according to the thieves’ understandings) and living the thievish life.

The first cohort were ‘baptised’ as *qurdebi* in the post-Stalin period (1953-1971) in Georgia when cronyism and corruption had become deeply embedded. The second cohort takes in the period 1972-1981; this is the bulk of Shevardnadze’s time as First Secretary (1972-1985) during his anti-corruption drive and ‘liberal’ economic policies such as the Abasha Experiment in 1973 that allowed private ownership and trade on small landholdings long before *perestroika* in 1985. The third cohort takes in the period 1982-1991. This extends from the famous 1982 *skhodka* in Tbilisi, in which Jaba Ioseliani reoriented *qurdebi* activities more towards business, through Gorbachev’s *perestroika* and the liberalisation of the Soviet economy right up to the collapse of the Union and the independence of Georgia declared in April 1991. The fourth cohort were all ‘baptised’ from 1992 onward. This cohort became *qurdebi* during an extreme transition period: Georgia’s wars with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the move to a full capitalist economy during which GDP massively dropped, and widespread illegality and state collapse. It goes up to Shevardnadze’s stabilisation of the situation at the end of the 1990s and the eventual Rose Revolution in 2003.

Cohort groups were then compared on a number of indicators such as criminal careers, movement and location, and presence of nicknames. Non-parametric group comparison was also made across space to uncover whether some processes were

confined to certain locales. A spatial analysis of the cases suggested certain dynamics and distinctions between groups from different areas. The Kutaisi files provided enough data on connections between actors to perform a very basic social network analysis using the UCINET 6 software (see chapter 8). This identified, *inter alia*, levels of centralisation and factions of actors.

The results of the secondary data analysis and interview coding can be found in the following chapters. I now turn to the limits of the research design and data.

3.6 Limitations

It is important to limit the claims that can be made for a within-case study that relies on certain types of data sources and there were some clear structural limitations to my research design. I identify potential pitfalls in the data but argue that the sources used, when questioned, triangulated, and supplemented with other data can be treated as valid.

Firstly, it is clear that the interviews privilege the perspective of law enforcement to a greater degree than any other single perspective. This was partly a problem of the snowballing technique. Police tend to know each other well and one respondent easily becomes a gatekeeper to another. It was also partly a problem induced from the nature of the research question. Simply, it was harder to find regular citizens to go on record and talk about their experiences than those in law enforcement. People who had in-depth knowledge, such as the ex-wife of a *qurdi*, talked off the record and could not be recorded as an official interview or used in the study.

The weight given to the law enforcement perspective stems to some degree from the political situation in Georgia. The law enforcement bodies are undergoing a resurgence: new personnel walk the corridors of new buildings in new uniforms, some have just returned from educational trips to the UK or the US. There is a definite confidence present. Furthermore, the young administrators in the Ministry of the Interior or the Prosecutor's Office want to talk about their achievements. Police can often give highly detailed and convincing accounts of the activities and structure of the criminal world. However, the data is coloured by the fact that the source comes from a specific life and work trajectory. Meanwhile, ordinary citizens are scared by the growing prevalence and ease of setting up wiretaps and worried that the new legislation on organised crime can be used against anyone who mentions the *qurdebi* positively. However, defence lawyers and NGO workers often have the confidence to give the alternative view and these networks were also tapped into for the research.

I partly got around these issues by drawing all respondents into talking about their own life experiences outside their official capacity. Police respondents, it should be remembered, are also normal members of society. In Georgia, many have not been in the job long and have common experiences of the effects of organised crime on an every day basis. Indeed, some confided their own attraction to the criminal world before they became police. A similar approach was used in interviews with people in other official positions whether as civil servants, headmasters or NGO workers. In every case, I was interested in personal experience as well as institutional positions on policy and opinions on legal issues.

Secondly, the data collected from the police and from the courts can be criticised as not objective fact. Including such sources is not without controversy. As Rawlinson (2008, p. 351) says, 'while law enforcement agencies can be useful

sources (assuming access is granted) their data have utilitarian functions that is to investigate and prosecute those suspected of organised criminal activities, thus providing at best only a partial view of organised crime'. Furthermore, Serio gives excellent examples from Russia of how such data sources can be seriously misleading. Why, he asks (2008, p. 57), when nobody in the West trusted Soviet sources would anyone start to believe Russian police sources? He gives real examples of how flimsy journalistic reports inform police reports which in turn become 'sources' to be used by journalistic reports down the line (Ibid, chap. 3).

These worries are well founded, however, they only apply in cases where it is not clear where the information has come from, or with clearly sensationalised accounts of organised crime. It also depends on the type of analysis you wish to conduct with the information. I was interested in documents that contained mundane facts about individual *qurdebi*, such as nicknames, place and date of birth, numbers of convictions and movements. Thus, while I concede that police and court data is unlikely to be value free, the types of aspects in the data that I picked up on would not necessarily be affected by such biases. Basic facts as to dates of birth, nicknames or year 'baptised' as a *qurdi* cannot be distorted easily in anyone's interest. The files do not contain any material that would be potentially incriminating. Of necessity all sources were treated sceptically and evaluated for their validity and utility towards the specific research question being pursued.¹⁴

¹⁴ Other information was not so useful to this end. For example, in a meeting with a barrister I was, rather generously, given a thick tome of documents in Georgian and Spanish. 'There's your thesis, right there,' I was told. It contained information produced in court about a far-reaching police operation by the Spanish police in 2005 involving a widescale money-laundering scam by some famous Georgian *qurdebi* that involved companies with bank accounts from Russia to Romania to Spain. While this information could be, at some time in the future, very useful, it was limited in answering the research questions I had set.

Similar concerns exist over the use of court cases. These data are pieces of evidence used to convict people, and, in a country such as Georgia with a politically dependent judiciary, this evidence and the charges involved could be disputed. In recognition of this problem, in the small number of cases I looked at I tried to discuss elements with the lawyers involved. One case for example involved a supposed *kanonieri qurdi*, however the confusion in the trial over his treatment by the judicial system led me to discount this case as evidence of anything. Thankfully, Georgia has had a very active, independent and conscientious Ombudsman in the most recent period to highlight such cases. Court sources therefore need to be judged on a case-by-case basis.

Archival sources should also be treated with care. In the case of Georgia, I was inclined to trust the sources I looked at. These were mainly documents of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia. These were all labelled 'secret' and not for public consumption. Some were directives highlighting problem areas to be dealt with by the various local soviets and officials. At the very least these documents show what the Party was interested in policy-wise. I also believe the documents represent accurate reflections of the problems facing the regime that it could not outwardly acknowledge. The Georgian files are full of documents on illegal second economy activity for example, which was indeed a very real problem by the 1980s.

It is important to ask then generally why a given document was produced and for whose benefit. As a matter of good procedure, this was done with NGO publications and news reports as well. News reports that contained substantive facts concerning a trial or conflict were favoured over opinion pieces and comment that can often appear about the thieves-in-law in the post-Soviet space.

3.7 Ethics

In carrying out a study into a sensitive topic ethical considerations were very important. Oxford University's ethical board are very stringent and it helped to go through the rounds of ethical clearance needed before embarking on the fieldwork. The main elements of this were ensuring that informed consent was given and that respondents were completely aware of what they were doing in giving an interview or giving up informational sources. I used participant information sheets written in Georgian that contained information about myself, the university, and the research project. I framed my research in the wider issue of the new criminal legislation on organised crime, and the place of the *qurdebi* as central to this. This presentation of the research was fundamentally aimed at making the research topical and interesting for the respondent. From there, often the respondent would touch upon the topic of the *qurdebi* unprompted. The information sheet stated that they could break off the interview at any time and gave them contact details in case any complaint arose. It also gives the right for the participant to request a copy of the thesis where their views have been represented and raise concerns if there are any. Unfortunately, on the basis of advice from examiners, I cannot give up too much editorial control on this issue and I have maintained ultimate control of what is included in the study. Interestingly, I found that the participant information form, with its assurances, phone numbers, email addresses, and visible Oxford University symbols put respondents at ease and probably inflated their opinion of my importance as well as providing the ethically necessary information.

As part of a further ethical procedure, I made up consent forms which involved ticking boxes that the respondent was aware of what they were participating in. This form required a signature. As with the tape recorder, I found that asking people from a former Soviet state to sign a formal looking piece of paper given to them by a foreigner asking about government legal reforms and organised crime did not prompt a good response. Thus, I did not use the content forms. Instead, I sent the participant information forms by email or through an intermediary prior to meeting or gave the respondent plenty of time to read this form at the beginning of the interview. I then asked for verbal consent that they understood the form and were happy to proceed. When institutions such as the court, the police or the archives gave up documentation, this was also done with verbal consent and in the case of the courts a form signed the information over to me.

Once the data was collected, I honoured the agreements I had made with respondents and those who gave up data. All data was stored safely on password protected computers and files. Physical documentation was stored in locked cabinets that could only be accessed by the researcher. All respondents were anonymised. Names were removed from data in creating the database. Minimal information is given about actual persons making identification impossible. There are those who, through their widespread renown, might be identified in the data but this is due to information that is already freely available in the public domain and anonymisation would make little sense as the individual in question is recognisable in any case. This is the case in only a few places.

3.8 Reflections

While the preceding sections might give the impression that the data collected and access granted was a smooth and inevitable process, reflecting on the research once out of the field it was clear to me the role of contingent factors and often luck in finding materials on what was essentially an underground phenomenon. In the field, I found myself submerged in a network of relations, pursuing potential leads and making split decisions about ethics, and where best to concentrate time and energy. To some degree I became oblivious to the multiple chance occurrences, happy coincidences, as well as the dead ends turned down and back tracking done. This all merged into what might be called ‘the research experience.’ Furthermore, adapting behaviour to the local culture becomes normal after awhile. However, it is clear that the end results are a product of all the chance opportunities as well as the dead ends, the networking, and behavioural adaptations that facilitated trust. Two anecdotes from the field will serve to illustrate this. I hope to demonstrate here the role of chance, instantaneous decision-making, and behavioural adaptation at crucial moments of the fieldwork that had massive repercussions for the type of work that was eventually produced.

Firstly, during the pilot fieldtrip in 2008 I had planned to visit Kutaisi to make initial contacts. However, having never been to this town before, in Tbilisi I became acquainted with a retired police major from Kutaisi who gave me a number to call once I arrived there, which after a long, hot minibus ride, I did. I was met by a burly retired police officer. Still thinking in terms of sociological research methods, I was hoping to sit down with him, present my participant information forms and take an interview. Instead, he drove me to a hotel on the edge of town. I assumed he had

perceived the need for me to have a shower and change clothes after the trip. Instead however, we entered through the back of the hotel straight into a room with 25 large, local men sat round a long table, midway through a Georgian *supra* (feast). As the room fell silent, I was handed a half pint of wine (quite a normal quantity in Georgia), introduced to a man whose birthday it apparently was and asked to toast him. While everyone sat quietly I stood with this one man, stumbled through a variety of heartfelt wishes that I had learnt at previous *supras* and downed the glass. This appeared to put me onside with the hosts.

We drank for around 6 hours. My host then, clearly drunk, drove me around town showing me some of the town's sights. Again, I couldn't find the courage to decline any of what was happening. Early the next morning and feeling worse for wear, my host burst into my room, told me to get up and off we went for beers ostensibly to cure aching heads. Feeling somewhat trammelled, I grew increasingly anxious that I wouldn't manage to turn the trip towards the purpose of the research, and we only briefly discussed what I was interested in. By lunchtime, we were sitting in a café drinking more beer. My host invited another police officer to join who brought his teenage son to meet me who, despite claims to the contrary, spoke very limited English. After more socialising at the table, my host brought the topic sharply round to my theme. Telling me he could help, and nodding in the direction of his colleague, he produced a number of compact disks, which he told me I could use but to return them to him. I agreed but had no idea what was on the disks and went back to Tbilisi feeling like the trip to Kutaisi had achieved very little but a sore bladder. However, I soon realised that he had given me detailed operational police data on *qurdebi* from Imereti. These files proved to be extremely useful.

Looking back, I believe it was not just hospitality that had led to such an intense and exhausting couple of days. I genuinely think that the two days had been a trust building exercise for the former police officer who naturally was not sure what some young foreigner wanted turning up in the thieves' capital of Georgia asking questions about organised crime. Those couple of days were a turning point though, I realised that the right approach to people could garner access to unique data sources and my experience in Kutaisi emboldened me to attempt a similar feat in Tbilisi with data gate-keepers in the police there, which eventually paid off. Without those days in Kutaisi I might never have even pursued police files as a data source, and without the willingness to carry along with events in the hope that something eventually would come out of it, I might genuinely have left Kutaisi with nothing on my first trip. This example then serves to illustrate just how contingent things can be in the field and how methodology and findings can be shaped by personal ties, openness to chance, and quick social learning on the spot.

The second example also comes from Kutaisi, this time on the second trip in 2009 when I was staying there for a much longer period with a local family. I was struggling at the time to make headway in the town. As a small and tight-knit environment, I found people knew before I met them who I was and what I was interested in and given the reputation of the town, people were often very cagey, or in some cases slightly mocking – jokingly introducing themselves with a thievish nickname for example. I was also struggling with the level of alcoholism amongst the locals. As in the example above, I knew that getting drunk with someone could help the research process, but this strategy is, of course, rather hit and miss. However, after one evening where I had got myself into a particularly heavy drinking session on a farm on the edge of town, I got a call from a man who claimed to be the nephew of

the one *qurdi* left in freedom in Kutaisi, an old, disabled man who had the nickname ‘Eyes’ and offered a meeting. I knew of this *qurdi* from the police files and the caller’s story was substantiated by my landlord. I was faced with a choice therefore whether to pursue this further. An interview with an actual *qurdi* in principle could be useful and an excellent source of data. However, I also had to consider the effect on this old man and the possible consequences of meeting with him – in such a small town would it draw unwanted attention to the respondent or to me? Could I trust the caller, who I had never met? And, if so, how much trust-building work (drinking) would I be expected to do? Again, I took a snap ethical decision that I should leave this line of inquiry.

This is an example of the types of decisions that I took regularly in the field which crucially shaped the thesis. There were times when data collection was simply not the sole purpose of activity and other considerations took precedent. Balancing priorities, always bearing ethical commitments in mind and my own stamina to pursue certain sources shaped what was collected and what went into this work.

I hope these examples have served to illustrate the often haphazard nature of doing research in a place like Georgia where life itself is incredibly social, lively, and spontaneous, where distinctions of public/private, formal/informal, personal/impersonal are constructed much differently from western Europe. The final study here is therefore very much a product shaped then by split decisions, personal networks, chance meetings, contingent trust, and often the limits of the researcher’s fatigue.

4. The Qurdebi as a Soviet Mafia

'Georgia has a reputation second to none...In form this activity may not differ greatly from what takes place in other regions, but in Georgia it seems to have been carried out on an unparalleled scale and with unrivalled scope and daring.'

Gregory Grossman on Soviet Georgia's second economy, *The Second Economy of the USSR* (1977)

In this chapter I focus on the activities of the *qurdebi*. I attempt to show that the *qurdebi* in their essence form a mafia and are not simply an organised crime group – a distinction that is explained below. Mafias, like other organisations, do not remain unchanged through time pursuing one specific goal within a set structure and culture. Instead they adapt to survive in competitive environments evolving their activities within residual structural and ideational frameworks (Gambetta 1993; Leeson & Rogers n.d.). According to Tilly (2006), changes in the availability and sequestering of resources, and the supply of those resources are vital for the survival of trust networks. In this chapter I look at what activities the *qurdebi* were engaged in before the collapse of the Soviet Union in Georgia. The following chapter then explicates their activities after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Drawing on archival evidence I argue that the *qurdebi* were already a fully-fledged mafia before the collapse of the Soviet Union and that therefore the essence of their activities remained rather constant before and after the collapse. The change from being a prison-based fraternity to a mafia operating in the second economy

outside the prison occurred sometime before the 1970s, but this is unfortunately outside the scope of the present study. Instead, this chapter discusses the later Soviet period of the 1970s and 1980s. The chapter argues that the Soviet Union's policies had created an illicit form of capitalist activity in the second economy unprotected by the state due to its illegality.

This will be contrasted with the post-Soviet period in the following chapter (Chapter 5). In the this latter period Georgia moved to a legal, full-blown, capitalist economy that allowed for property rights which, however, the state was too weak to protect. Thus, in both time periods a market for private protection developed, though for different structural reasons. The two periods then produced differing levels of resources and supply sources for the *qurdebi* to exploit and the later post-Soviet period simply represented a huge increase in this market.

Here however, I restrict the analysis to the Soviet period. I begin by discussing the theory of how mafias emerge and what they do, before discussing the Soviet period. I look at the Georgian second economy and the *qurdebi's* activities and roles in relation to this.

4.1 The Emergence and Essence of Mafias

The *qurdebi* existed both in the Soviet Union and in the tumultuous conditions of newly independent Georgia. It is necessary to draw out the similarities in what the *qurdebi* were doing in these radically different time periods and also the differences. I utilise theories of organised crime and the mafia here in explaining how the mafia emerge where conditions of low trust hold. In such conditions a mafia thrives off a demand for protection. The *qurdebi* are such a mafia. I will show that they are not

simply involved in organised crime where this term denotes any coordinated activity between two or more individuals that attempts to monopolise the production and distribution of a certain commodity in the illegal sector – drugs, prostitution, stolen cars, fake documentation, trafficking in humans and so on (Schelling 1984). Instead, as detailed below, the *qurdebi* arbitrate and enforce decisions, protect and extort from legal actors, and act as a vital lubricant for the cogs of organised criminal activity, lowering transaction costs for the actors involved and enabling trust relationships in a naturally volatile underworld. In short, the Georgian *qurdebi* are not an ordinary organised crime group, the *qurdebi* are a mafia.

The approach adopted here focuses on transaction cost economics. Two actors desire to trade with one another but due to asymmetric information are unable to know what they will gain from the transaction (Akerlof 1970; Williamson 1983; Gambetta 1993). Under certain conditions it is cheaper to incur the costs of bringing in a third party to the transaction and ensuring honesty through the potential for punishment of transgressions rather than not perform the transaction at all. Where the state is weak or unable to oversee and enforce agreements made, other actors, who must be able to demonstrate or signal their capacity to carry out punishment of dishonesty, may enter the transaction. This third party acts in an extra-legal capacity, and where this takes on an organised form and an attempt is made to monopolise this service over a given territory it may be termed an extra-legal organisation. The mafia is just one amongst many types of extra-legal organisation distinct in form from rebel groups, paramilitaries, terrorists and such like, as the mafia has no ultimate political goal (Varese 2010).

A Mafioso is in the first place an artist of extortion who acquires capital by selling protection through violence or the threat of force. So long as there is no

competition, the protection that the racketeer offers is from the danger that the racketeer himself represents to the buyer of the protection. It is in the racketeer's interest to protect a client from other extortionists that may arrive on the scene, thus the emphasis then shifts from the business of racketeering and extortion to the general sale of protection. This particular field of business however has a tendency to move towards monopoly; being second best in providing protection makes you highly unattractive to potential buyers, as protection is relative. The product being sold is dependent on the strength of others (Nozick 1974, p. 16). Furthermore, economies of scale dictate that once an actor has taken on the costs in setting up protection provision to one person, it is profitable to provide it to many persons. Thus, the consolidation of a monopoly of force by a handful of groups of violent 'protection-producing agencies' is the most likely outcome as may be seen in the classic case of the Sicilian Mafia.

The mafia then, is an alternative institutional arrangement to the state for the lowering of transaction costs as opposed to some sort of symptom of societal dysfunction. This approach to the mafia, developed mainly from the work of Diego Gambetta (1993), neatly sidesteps ethnic-cultural arguments that might be invoked to explain why mafias emerge in some places and not others and does away with historically variable arguments as to the 'criminal' nature of the mafia. In Georgia, as elsewhere in the post-Soviet space, more than one mafia emerged, of these the *qurdebi* network and their criminal groupings constituted but one.

The essence of the *qurdebi*'s functions is protection. The focus on protection has been criticised for not taking into account the full range of activities a mafia can be involved in (Nelken 1995; Paoli 2003). However it is meant here as the essence of all mafia activities: the multiple tasks the *qurdebi* perform and take money for are

derivatives of this protection function. Such tasks include dispute resolution, deterrence from victimisation and from other extortionists and competition, enforcement of contracts, and plain extortion. The common thread linking all these activities in all these sectors is the idea of protection provision. These activities can exist in many sectors within a capitalist economy, whether licit or illicit. Examples range from small businesses supplying consumption goods, to bigger enterprises making production goods, construction industries, transportation, as well as illegal markets such as drugs, gambling, smuggling and prostitution. As Gambetta (1993) asserts, the mafia in essence sells guarantees of protection in these areas. Thus a service such as arbitration or dispute resolution, a service that the *qurdebi* were heavily involved in, keeps at essence the idea of protection, for example, protection against defection on agreements or insurance on the validity of informal contracts.

Whether in dispute resolution, deterrence or other functions the service provided flows from the fact of having some sort of influence over the actors, what is usually referred to as a racket. In the post-Soviet space this is aptly captured in the metaphor of the *krysha* or 'roof'. 'Roofing' involves placing an entity under one's protection thus speaking to the idea of providing a broad protection service which might have various manifestations. For example, the corruption of the Soviet regime meant that the *krysha* could often be a high-ranking official who could protect illegal enterprises for a cut of the profits (Vaksberg 1991). Criminals typically found a niche for themselves in this arrangement in providing physical protection. In the criminal world itself the *qurdebi* held the top ranking status and so they themselves became the ultimate *krysha* for criminal groups who needed to protect against competitors or resolve disputes (Humphreys 2002).

One strength of this emphasis on market services for protection lies in the fact that it can be extrapolated and applied to mafia-like structures in any part of the world. Thus, Varese (1994) identified the combination of factors accounting for the appearance of a mafia and successfully applied this to show the mechanisms responsible for the emergence of the mafia in Russia. In Varese's seven-step model a mafia can emerge when:

- 0) a monopoly over property exists;
- 1) the monopoly is broken up and many private owners come into existence;
- 2) the increase in owners creates an increase in the number of transactions;
- 3) this in turn increases the demand for trust in transactions;
- 4) the state cannot meet this demand;
- 5) a market for private protection substitutes for the state and for actual trust;
- 6) a supply of potential providers of this protection is present.

Though these factors when brought together do not bring a mafia into being necessarily, they do ground the possibility for its emergence. Weak statehood and the other conditions stipulated by Varese are necessary but not sufficient for the emergence of a mafia. Thus, the argument does not rely on functionalist reasoning that explains the supply of protection simply by the presence of the demand for this service. The demand for protection may not be met by anyone. Other micro-level factors must be brought in then to explain supply, that is, why exactly actors become Mafiosi and why specific individuals formed a group to become a mafia in one place at one time. To be a mafia such groups, according to Gambetta (1993) and Varese (2001), must be autonomous suppliers of protection, they should not be reliant on one

client and specialise in this specific service as opposed to being internalised structures within businesses that operate on other markets.

This model of mafia emergence seems imminently applicable to post-Soviet Georgia. However, I will try to show in this chapter that the mafia, in the specific sense defined above, existed prior to the break up of the Soviet state's monopoly on property in Georgia. Before the collapse, the Soviet state only in theory held a monopoly on property which in Varese's model above prevents the increase in transactions and demand for trust-inducing institutions to lower the cost of those transactions.

A complete monopoly on property rarely exists in the real world. The Soviet state lacked such a monopoly for a number of reasons. Firstly, the state itself went through 'liberal' phases when some privatisation was brought in. By the 1960s, 10% of GNP was from legal, private sources, mainly in the agricultural sector (Feldbrugge 1989, p. 307). Georgia developed a larger private sector than most. Shevardnadze instituted the Abasha Experiment in 1973 that allowed certain degrees of private ownership on small landholdings with a percentage of the produce going to the state and a proportion remaining in private hands (Ekedahl & Goodman 2001). This came over ten years prior to Gorbachev's economic reforms known as *perestroika* which were to give over greater amounts of the economy to private business. Secondly, through over-regulating and criminalising a huge range of activity connected with private ownership 'tendencies,' as they were known, the state forced a great deal of private economic activity underground. In this space, which grew to huge proportions, illicit economic activity could not be regulated by the state by definition, and this created a demand for extra-legal protection in transactions.

The *de facto* lack of a state monopoly on property in the later Soviet period led to a demand for trust in transactions. Humphreys (2002, p. 109) argues that the main activity of thieves-in-law in the Soviet period was the inducement of this trust through the provision of protection, operating between the corrupt bureaucracy and the second economy businessmen known as *teneviki* or *del'tsi* who produced goods and services for the second economy. Humphreys also contends that competition amongst hooligans, gangs and other criminal elements to extort profits from the second economy was regulated by the presence of the *qurdebi*, who acted as the *krysha* from which a group could become recognised, gain reputation and operate successfully. Without a prominent criminal authority at its head, a protection racket would always be vulnerable to being forced out of a given market, territory, or area of the economy.

Plekhanov (2003) also suggests that the level of involvement of the thieves-in-law in the second economy went further than simple organised criminal activity but was something more akin to a mafia as I have defined it. According to Plekhanov, the second economy was a three-tiered structure with corrupt bureaucrats at the top, black market entrepreneurs in the middle and *qurdebi* on the ground floor, forming protective partnerships with the businessmen, that is, entering into business with them rather than simply racketeering or stealing from them on a one off basis. Plekhanov suggests that common prison experience facilitated ties between the bottom and middle tiers of actors.

For these reasons, proposition 0) in Varese's model does not hold for later Soviet Georgia. From the 1960s onwards Soviet Georgia is better seen as having already reached stage 1) and therefore 2) and 3) logically follow. In the Soviet case the state cannot meet the demand for trust in transactions (proposition 4) not due to weakness, as is implied in the original model, but because it is forbidden to do so by

its own law. Given this, propositions 5) and 6) follow so long as there is a supply of people with the resources to meet the demand for trust where the state fails. I submit that this supply was met in Soviet Georgia in some cases, though not all, by actors socialised in the penal subculture of the Gulag, the main counter-culture of the Soviet Union (Dobson 2009), of which the *kanonieri qurdebi* represent the most visible and organised part.

The rest of the chapter will show this and is structured as follows. The next section (4.2) attempts to show that Varese's propositions 1-4 can be applied to Soviet Georgia but that proposition 4 depends on the state's strength in regulation and criminalisation of private economic activity rather than weakness in protecting property rights. This leads me to argue that a mafia had indeed formed before the collapse of the Soviet Union in Georgia. Thus, section 4.3 goes on to show that the demand for protection in the Soviet second economy was in fact met by the *qurdebi*. I establish this by appealing to archival material that clearly shows Georgia's problem with this type of criminal and how this problem was manifesting itself at the time.

This chapter then establishes the pre-existence of a mafia in Soviet Georgia and the main methods of extracting resources for the *qurdebi* network. The chapter leads into chapter 5 which discusses the post-Soviet period. The effects of these changes on the resilience of the *qurdebi* to exogenous shocks will be discussed later at the end of chapter 5.

4.2 The Second Economy in Soviet Georgia

Corruption and second economy activities were vital in providing the *qurdebi* opportunities to increase their influence to act within the Soviet republic of Georgia as I will show. However, it is important to briefly discuss the size of the Georgian second economy as this gives a feeling for the extent of the activity and transactions that were unprotected by recourse to the law.

Soviet Georgia was one of the most corrupt republics in the post-Stalin period with a huge second economy and often singled out by the Communist Party as a place to be purged of its crooked elements. However, though this is often stated as a fact it is notoriously difficult to estimate the size of the second economy relative to other places. One method is to measure legal income per capita against income dependent variables such as purchased goods in state stores. For the whole of the Soviet Union, the correlation between these two variables declines after 1965 and disappears in the 1980s, suggesting income from other unrecorded sources (Grossman 1998, p. 39). However, it is difficult to say what this shows. The result may be generated from a lack of consumable goods in state stores by the 1980s rather than increasing informal income.

Other measures applied by economists in the Berkeley-Duke Occasional Papers on the Second Economy in the USSR involve a range of methods that give varying estimates. Treml (1992) computes labour inputs into private economic activity and suggests that 12% of time was given over to the pursuit of second economy activity in the USSR of 1979. Grossman (1991) uses household survey data from official and unofficial sources and estimates unofficial income of 50% of total income in Georgia and Azerbaijan versus 27% in Russia by 1989. Kaufmann and

Kaliberda (1996) calculate GDP growth against change in electricity consumption assuming that cases where the latter outstripped the former indicate second economy activity. However, these results only allow for a blanket estimate that suggests the second economy made up 12% of Soviet GDP as a whole by 1989.

Critiquing the latter study and combining the above approaches, Pyle and Alexeev (2003) combine these data sources and estimates. They arrive at a figure for the second economy as 22% of the GDP of the Soviet Union in 1989, with variation across republics. Adding in and scaling Grossman's (1991) household survey results to their findings, Alexeev and Pyle find that Georgia had the largest second economy in the Soviet Union along with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan with 33% of GDP produced by the illicit sector.

This result fits with common perception, contemporary opinion and historical studies of the Soviet Union. According to Ekedahl and Goodman (2001, p. 10), in terms of black markets Georgia was 'second to none,' with, says Lampert (1984, p. 372), 'the most notoriety' amongst Transcaucasian Republics. These republics have a 'special position' regarding corruption according to Feldbrugge (1989, p. 309) who adds, 'particularly Georgia'. Law (1974), Sampson (1987), and Grossman (1998) all also note the disproportionately high levels of corruption and misappropriation in Soviet Georgia.

Comparing all Soviet republics in terms of the size of the second economy Feldbrugge (1989, p. 309) finds that, 'rural Georgia tops the league with 32% of personal income derived from the illegal sector of the second economy.' Farmers could earn as much as three times their usual income from private plots. Suny (1994, p. 306) finds that Georgians were selling more produce on black markets than elsewhere writing that 'only 68 percent of fruits and vegetables produced in Georgia

in 1970 were marketed, compared to 88 percent in Azerbaijan and 97 percent in Armenia.’ In the same year, the average Georgian’s savings were twice as large as the Soviet average (Sunny 1994, p. 304). Jobs in the services sector were highly desirable as necessary services gave great opportunities to solicit bribes. Thus, by 1973, Georgia had the highest number of doctors per 10,000 people in the world (Ibid, p. 307).

Explanations in the above-mentioned studies as to the variations in second economic activity appeal mainly to cultural factors such as the tight-knit kin relations that facilitate the development of significant networks, nepotism as a moral value, and the lack of trust in the state. Mars and Altman (1983) take this argument the furthest however, suggesting that Georgian cultural values, such as competition (particularly in consumer habits), risk-taking, honour based on trust, and networking, are anathema to Soviet attitudes but dovetail perfectly with the attitude needed to both create a demand for a second economy and supply that demand. They argue (1983, p. 559):

‘[O]ther Soviet-type economies display the same kind of second economy practices, they too depend for much of their informal economic activity on friends of friends. But it is the degree to which networks in Georgia are institutionalised as a means of linking individuals through trust-based honour commitments that form the cornerstone of Georgia’s second economy. The difference may appear one of degree but it is based on a fundamental cultural distinction.’

The extent to which the difference may be simply one of ‘cultural distinction’ is not entirely clear however. There were political economic reasons why these networks were able to flourish and make Georgia so remarkable as a corrupt republic for contemporary commentators and for the central authority in Moscow. Firstly, following the death of Stalin in 1953, the Politburo in Moscow opened up the question of nationalities again with more autonomy given to local elites to manage

their own affairs and mild nationalism tolerated. In Georgia, Vasily Mzhavanadze lasted as first secretary from 1953 to 1972. These 19 years allowed the Georgian communist elite to become an entrenched local network of cronies. As Suny (1994, p. 306) puts it, ‘uninterrupted power for 19 years had given the post-Stalinist clique an almost completely free hand within the republic.’ The main reason for Mzhavanadze’s eventual removal ‘according to the recollections of many former communists of the time was the blossoming in the republic of negative trends: the abuse of public office, corruption, misappropriation of state and public property amongst other things’ (Rostiashvili 2002, p. 7).

Secondly, despite the Soviet march towards modernisation, Georgia remained one of the most rural republics in the Soviet Union by 1979 (Suny 1994, p. 296). Its climate and geography naturally geared the republic more towards farming, and illegal economic activity was more common in smaller organisations in the agricultural sector than in big industry (Lampert 1984, p. 378). In both cases the opportunities for collusion and clientelism were greater and corrupt networks easier to regulate.

Thirdly, Shevardnadze’s attempts to drive out corruption, as the republic’s Interior Minister and then as first secretary from 1972, were unsuccessful. Conviction rates did not increase massively though high-profile cases and a media campaign helped to spread the popular perception that reform was occurring (Rostiashvili 2002, p. 12). Instead, as a prelude to his support for Gorbachev in the 1980s, Shevardnadze at this time in Georgia proved himself to have liberal attitudes to economic reform. ‘He endorsed privatisation, giving rein to entrepreneurial spirit by allowing consumer enterprises to run semi-private lives and making Georgia the first republic to allow family ownership of small enterprises’ (Ekedahl & Goodman 2001, p. 18).

Shevardnadze himself (in Ibid) claimed, ‘our republic has been turned into a proving ground for economic experiments.’

Thus, in Georgia, the Brezhnev years (1964-1982) of economic stagnation produced black marketers known as *teneviki* or *del'tsi* of varying stripes including speculators (*spekulyanty-fartovshchiki*) and con-artists (*napyorstochniki*). There were also those that provided in-demand goods, the *tsekhoviki*, who controlled small, often illegal, enterprises (*tsekhi*) that either produced illegal goods on legitimate production facilities or siphoned off the legitimate goods intended for the state shops and instead sold them for private profit. An example of the *tsekhoviki* was discovered by the authorities in 1978 when one group operating at a fruit juice works in the Terdjola region made over half a million rubles through falsified documents by which they procured fruit, created a fake juice product and sold it through a trade network (PA, 14/117/331/24)¹⁵.

Another example comes from textile factory no. 4 in Tbilisi. The plant was opened in 1960 yet by 1968 large-scale embezzlement was taking place. That year 33 workers were tried for the misappropriation of over 1 million rubles worth of state property. The conspirators included the directors, engineers, accountants, the warehouse foreman, and supervisors of various units; 350 people were investigated in total. The method of embezzlement involved false accounting and the misappropriation of clothing made at the factory. Of the 33 who were brought to trial 12 were so-called *del'tsi*, businessmen or speculators, who ‘grouped at the factory’. According to the prosecutor’s report, the *del'tsi* were connected to salesmen who could sell the misappropriated goods in order to realise the profits (PA, 14/144/453/32-33). Remarkably, reports on the fight with crime for 1984, 16 years

¹⁵ Presidential Archive, hereafter, PA. The numbers stand for location in the archive - Holding/List/File/Page (*Fond/Opis/Delo/Stranitsa*)

later, include cases of analogous crimes using the very same method being carried out in the towns of Samtredia and Kutaisi amongst others. By 1984, the reports note (PA, 14/125/348/37-38), the *del'tsi* had made tight “business” connections’ in other Soviet republics where they engage in ‘various ruses and dubious trade deals.’

Speculators made money from the demand for scarce items by selling these products on the black market at a marked up price. The report on speculation for 1985 gave figures and examples of cases (PA, 19/127/329). The number of prosecuted cases of speculation was growing in Georgia year on year in the first half of the 1980s from 1,302 cases in 1981 to 1,586 cases in 1985. In-demand medical items could fetch handsome profits for speculators: one Binashvili of Kutaisi was sentenced to 6 years after selling a medicine for 365 rubles that would have otherwise gone for just over 10 rubles in a state shop. Sought-after fish products such as sturgeon and caviar could also fetch high prices on the black market as well as foreign goods such as Austrian bed sets and Japanese video-players and cassettes. Products could be obtained and transported between Soviet republics. A Georgian lady living in Moscow and maintaining contact with foreigners was able to repeatedly obtain boxes of beer, Italian chocolate spread, Danish biscuits and nuts and have them transported to Tbilisi to another lady through an intermediary, a Georgian lorry driver, who was often in Moscow on official trips. The intermediary also shuttled the proceeds of the activity back and forth before being eventually caught (PA, 19/127/329/23-24).

The above gives an impression of the depth and range of the second economy in Georgia and some detail as to the actual activities of the *del'tsi* and speculators. What should now be made clear is that the fusion of Soviet Georgia’s upper world and underground economies allowed predatory actors opportunities for parasitic behaviour. The Georgian ‘mafia’ at this time as Suny (1994, p. 326) describes it was

‘the complex network of entrepreneurs, politicians, and criminals that ran much of the second economy under the Soviets.’ This is similar to Vaksberg’s definition of the Soviet Mafia as being all those who protected illegal activities to appropriate state wealth and redistribute it amongst mutually interested cliques going right up to Brezhnev (Vaksberg, 1991). These definitions of ‘mafias’ are too broad to be meaningful however. A corrupt policeman or communist official may be able to protect an illegal enterprise from the attentions of the law but would not be able to easily protect against predation or cheating in transactions between the second economy actors themselves (Reuter 1985). Thus, I restrict my definition of the mafia to the bottom tier of Plekhanov’s (2003) schema discussed above: the criminal aspect, those with violent resources who could employ them in the sale of protection over a given area and operated as an alternative form of governance.

Such extra-legal governance may occur where two or more parties interested in making a transaction require a third-party enforcer and there is no recourse to any formal law. Reuter (1985) notes that two major consequences of the illegality of an economic activity is the non-enforceable nature of informal contracts and the agency costs involved in ensuring that nobody gives away the operation. These problems are manifest in the examples of second economy activity in Soviet Georgia above.

For example, the 33 workers in the textile firm example above conspired to rob the factory they worked for out of thousands of rubles. Such a large-scale operation with so many people runs a huge risk of defection by a whistleblower who may for example report the activity to either a clean or corrupt official who, in the case of the latter, would then be able to cut him or herself in with the threat of prosecution. The example of the speculators operating between Moscow and Tbilisi also provides coordination problems: how can the parties trust each other to deliver

the goods in the right quantity or handle the money correctly? What happens if a dispute arises? These cases suggest that there were market opportunities with those skilled in dispute resolution and with a willingness to use force to ensure an informal agreement was carried through.

However, it does not follow that someone will necessarily take up these opportunities. The presence of the *del'tsi* in the second economy and the unprotected cooperatives formed during perestroika do not by themselves give rise to mafia activities. There must be a supply of people with the necessary skills in dispute resolution and, fundamentally, in violence. In Soviet Georgia it seems that in some cases such people emerged from the penal subculture. These actors had been through an initiation ritual in prison and called themselves *kanonieri qurdebi* belonging to a criminal social institution with complex behavioural rules and norms known as the *qurduli samkaro* or 'thieves' world'.

The *qurdebi* as a criminal status-group had a competitive edge in providing protection. They already had many pre-existing assets - a brand name that communicated a reputation for respectable toughness, a code of honour that included prescribed sanctions and rewards, and rituals transferred from the Gulag subculture outside the prison walls. To some degree they were the main representatives of not merely a penal subculture but an anti-Soviet counterculture (Dobson 2009). The long history of the *qurdi* title going back to the repressions of the Gulag of the 1930s enabled them to build on an almost mythical reputation as disenchantment with the communist regime grew in the later Soviet period.

Moreover, they could offer an outstanding property that must have appealed to black marketers who, as we have seen, in some cases were operating across Soviet republics: the *qurdebi* already had established practices for transferring information

covertly across large distances. The difficulty in securely disseminating information is one of the biggest restraints on the growth of illegal enterprises as they cannot advertise openly or take on the agency costs of widening operations across distances (Reuter 1985). The *qurdebi* had dealt with such problems for decades and could bring this experience to the second economy. Though it was against the spirit of their original code, the *qurdebi* had clearly started to involve themselves in this second economy and had taken up a niche outside the prison camps. I now intend to show the link, based on archival sources, between the *qurdebi* and the Soviet second economy.

4.3 The Qurdebi in Soviet Georgia

The Stalinist days of mass imprisonment both before and after the Second World War unleashed certain consequences for subsequent Soviet leaders. In the first five years after Stalin's death four million prisoners were released from the camps and by 1960 the Gulag was a fifth of the size it had been on the eve of Stalin's death (Dobson 2009, p. 109). The influence of returnees was insidious. The subculture of the camps provided an alternative set of values and behavioural norms that some young people found attractive to emulate. It also had a direct impact through the increase in the commission of criminal acts and the organising of criminal groups. In the late 1950s crime was rising steeply and 'thieves-recidivists' as they were termed, were problematised with an official monograph on the subject published by Monakhov (1957). In 1959 the prosecutor of Cheliabinsk oblast in Central Russia wrote 'the danger of the recidivist...lies in the fact that he creates criminal gangs, which draw in people without previous convictions, particularly young people' (in

Dobson 2009, p. 125). These criminal gangs may well have been the beginnings of a Soviet mafia as I have defined it above and Georgia was not immune to its influence.

Once Shevardnadze had become First Secretary of the Georgian Soviet Republic in 1972 he made a point of addressing the pervasive problems of crime and corruption that had fomented in the previous decades. A resolution of the Georgian Central Committee from 1973 sought to strengthen the fight against theft. Reports on the results of these measures were submitted in 1980 and again in 1981. The report for 1981 cites continuing ‘complexity and laboriousness’ regarding the level of property crime and theft. However, improvements in the solving of criminal cases led to a greater rate of solved crimes between 1977 and 1980 (PA, 14/123/360/90). The report also declares that on the basis of the previous resolutions operative work had been carried out in order to compromise the ‘so-called thieves-in-law, and those who support the thieves’ traditions’ (Ibid, p. 89). In the course of investigating their lifestyles, connections, criminal intentions, and work status, 20 *qurdebi* had been arrested that year.

These *qurdebi* are mentioned in the report by name or nickname suggesting a special notoriety. They operated using organised criminal groups. Many of these groups were exposed on a large scale in Georgia in 1980. There were 798 groups uncovered and from those groups 1,664 persons convicted (Ibid. p. 96). The numbers are probably so large because they include those who conspired to misappropriate state property (*del'tsi*) but also groups engaged in burglary, robbery, armed robbery, and car theft. What constitutes a group is not mentioned but one concrete example of a group that committed 12 armed robberies, theft and burglary contained only three members (Ibid).

The problems with ‘group crime’¹⁶, as it was termed at the time, continued despite the government measures. By 1985, with Shevardnadze in Moscow, new First Secretary Jumber Paatiashvili was determined to make his mark on the criminal justice situation in the republic and held a hearing of the top brass of the law enforcement bodies of Georgia on the results of the fight against crime in the first quarter of 1986. In this period Paatiashvili had ordered the exile of *kanonieri qurdebi* from Georgia which according to one officer had succeeded:

‘[T]he fact that recently we have been able to rid the republic of many “thieves-in-law”, sending them to places of harsh climates and conditions has raised the prestige of our police force. Many letters, the result of surveying public opinion, bear witness to this. And it has again proved that prestige, respect – these are the heights we achieve by our work, by leading by example, by concrete investment in the Party’s plans for social transformation’ (PA, 14/127/330/52).

Another officer, the assistant head of criminal investigations in Tbilisi, reports that in the period, 50 criminal groups had been exposed with 120 people arrested in the capital city, having carried out more than 70 crimes (Ibid, p. 16).

These Georgian sources then attest that the *qurdebi* were members of and engaged in operating illegal criminal groups that committed robberies and theft. It is clear then that the *qurdebi* and their groups were indeed a potential supply of violent people who could, if they turned their hand to it, engage in mafia activities. However, simple robbery and theft are not on the face of it mafia activities though these activities would have provided an income stream in themselves, selling off stolen goods on the black market. However, these activities also added to the demand for effective protection. Once a crime has been committed, a *qurdi* can also offer a

¹⁶ In the language of the 1980s, ‘organised crime’ was not yet in use. Instead, reports of this time speak of ‘group criminality’ [gruppovoi prestupnost’].

service in the extra-legal pursuit of justice. Theft itself creates a market for protection where the state fails or is mistrusted.

Small desirable commodities of which there were shortages, jewellery, car parts and medicines for example, need to be fenced and trust is required for this. Moreover, a crime such as car theft leaves the car thieves with a headache: a large stolen automobile in a police state with a low rate of car variation and ownership makes getting rid of hot vehicles quickly desirable but troublesome. Thus, in Soviet Georgia, the owner would most likely be offered his car back to him, intact though not necessarily untouched, for a fee rather than the car being sold on (R40)¹⁷. In this case the *qurdebi* were renowned as intermediaries between the car owner and car thieves to the extent that even the police might use a trusted *qurdi* in ‘solving’ an embarrassing car theft quickly and effortlessly (R5).

In the above case the *qurdebi* engage in dispute resolution: bringing the criminal group into an arrangement with the car owner in which both are satisfied and can trust to be enforced (R17). The car theft and the transaction that follows represent a business opportunity to the *qurdi* in which he is in competition with law enforcement to help solve the situation in as favourable way as possible. Where the police are inefficient or made unattractive as an option due to the nature of the dispute, if, for example, the stealers threaten to destroy the car if the police become involved, the *qurdebi* might have certain advantages.

Here again, it is certainly the case that the *qurdi* himself can drum up business as a third party decision-maker and enforcer by ensuring, through his criminal connections, that there are plenty of disputes of this kind to be handled. However, other disputes may occur autonomously of the individual *qurdi* in other spheres. Such

¹⁷ ‘R’ stands for respondent. A list of all respondents can be found in the bibliography.

disputes if they are to be handled by a *qurdi*, must be of necessity outside the purview of the police, that is to say, illegal. As detailed above the Soviet period offered a whole range of activities connected to private enterprise that were criminalised. The criminalisation of most sorts of privately profitable activity created a large second economy that was a natural source of opportunity for both corrupt party bosses and would be mafia types. For example, in some cases that respondents reported, speculators operating over long distances used recourse to *kanonieri qurdebi* to promote trustworthiness (R9; R12).

Furthermore, the links between professional criminals and the *qurdebi* and the second economy are substantiated by archival documents from Georgia. A secret directive of the Interior Ministry from August 1982 (MVD-A, 0152/1982/2) states clearly that:

'those who maintain and lead the "thieves' traditions" in recent times are coalescing with "entrepreneurs" [del'stami] and with the embezzlers of socialist property, operating as guards and protectors. However, information on such people cannot always be found in the offices of the BKhSS [department for the struggle with embezzlement of socialist property and speculation].'

The tendency noted by the Georgian MVD in 1982, was again discussed in a Union-level directive of the MVD sent down from Moscow in 1985 (MVD-A, 0033/1985/2-3):

'Incidences of the coalescence [srashivanie] between criminal groups and major embezzlers of socialist property have been noted. Those who call themselves "thieves-in-law" act on their standing amongst criminal elements. With the goal of resurrecting criminal traditions, they create common thieves' stashes ("obshchaki"), hold illegal meetings – "skhodki", and are instrumental in the formation of tight groups of criminals.'

The document lays the blame at the feet of the workings of the Ministry of Interior (MVD) and especially the lack of cooperation between the police, prosecution, prison administration and the BKhSS, concluding that, ‘work is being carried out unsatisfactorily on detection and investigation of “thieves-in-law,” leaders and active participants of criminal groups in places of detention’ (Ibid, p. 4).

This last document complains about the organised criminal activity occurring in most parts of the Soviet Union from Central Asia to Moscow and Leningrad. Thus, it should not be supposed that Georgia was somehow unique in the problem of organised crime influenced by thieves-in-law. However, the argument follows that if the thieves-in-law of the Soviet Union were indeed operating off the back of the entrepreneurial tier of the second economy, then where these entrepreneurs were more active there also should have been more opportunity for and influence of the thieves-in-law. This follows Varese’s model which predicts that the greater the amount of free enterprise insufficiently protected, the more opportunities there will be for independent suppliers of protection. This was proved true as the racketeering that had been going on in the shadows of the second economy finally came out in the open when Gorbachev legalised certain forms of private economic activity, the co-operatives, in the late 1980s. The cooperatives became a major target of racketeers. One source (Jones & Moskoff 1991, p. 85) states that 75% of these new private enterprises in Moscow were racketeered.¹⁸

¹⁸ In May 1987, Gorbachev passed the Law on Individual Labour Activity that allowed a degree of entrepreneurship within the state-owned Soviet economy. In 1988 the Law on Cooperatives was passed permitting the ownership of private enterprises. By 1st of January 1990, 200,000 of these coops had been registered. The number of crimes related to the cooperative movement increased by 500 per cent in 1989. Often this type of activity took the form of protection racketeering or extortion and the complementary blackmailing and removing of competitors. The rise in violent crime was facilitated by dismissive police attitudes towards protecting ‘capitalists’, and the fact that many cooperatives were involved in economic crime and so could not turn to the authorities. Racketeers were pervasive, 75 per cent and 90 per cent of cooperatives in Moscow and St. Petersburg paid protection money respectively (Jones & Moskoff, 1991 p. 85).

A plausible footnote to this discussion then is that with a bigger second economy, and therefore more market opportunities for a protection-providing organisation - what I have called here a mafia - Georgia would have a larger share of such criminals involved in this activity proportionate to its size. This is surely a contributing factor in accounting for the number of thieves-in-law hailing from Georgia relative to the other Soviet republics, though of course it cannot be a sufficient condition as other countries with significant second economies such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan would also have strong mafias and, given their common Soviet past, greater numbers of thieves-in-law.

4.4 Conclusion

There appears to be a clear historical basis then for how Georgia eventually succumbed to the influences of the Soviet underworld once it reached independence in 1991. This was in large part due to an ever-increasing pool of resources from a growing demand for informal protection and dispute resolution from diverse sources expanding along with the second economy and unprotected private enterprise. There was in fact no monopoly on property in Soviet Georgia, private economic transactions between individuals were growing as the Soviet Union aged and these were unprotected by law not due to state weakness but because the transactions themselves had been criminalised. By the 1980s there was clearly a supply of violent individuals socialised by Gulag subculture who performed 'group crime' across the republic which, according to archival sources, involved the protection of second economy actors. Some heads of the criminal groups were identified clearly by this time as thieves-in-law. Following Varese's model the above suggests that a mafia had already

emerged before the 1990s in Georgia. I turn now to the post-Soviet period arguing that the coupling of a move to a capitalist system with the breakdown of the state resulted in an acceleration of the conditions that cause a mafia to emerge in the first place: an increase in transactions unprotected by the state.

5. The *Qurdebi* as a Post-Soviet Mafia

'In particular, [a qurdi] must be good at psychology, because his basic role is to be a third party in various disputes and misunderstandings, for this it is absolutely necessary to be good at dealing with people. It's not bad to be an educated person.'

Georgian *kanonieri qurdi* Antimoz (in Korchinskii 2008)

The collapse of the Soviet Union ushered in an era that has been termed Georgia's 'time of trouble' (Zurcher 2006). The country experienced 'unprecedented state collapse' (Legvold, 2006). The institutions of the state became demoralised and violence-wielding groups gained free reign in many parts of the country. The official economy virtually collapsed and complex patterns of patronage in the form of informal brokerage between regional power-holders and the central government became stabilised under Shevardnadze following his return to Georgia in 1992 (Wheatley 2005). Such a situation where the state had virtually abdicated and given up its monopoly on violence and its ability to extract resources from the population provides fertile ground for a mafia to emerge.

In Georgia criminal groups headed by *kanonieri qurdebi* and that, in essence, constituted a mafia was already in existence. However, it would be wrong to simply assert that the mafia in Georgia after the collapse of the Soviet Union was simply the

continuation of a well-defined 'Red Mafia' (Handelman 1995; Anderson 1995). The re-structuring of the economy and society allowed new mafia-like groups to emerge, and old ones to expand and adapt. Thus, just as with other behaviours carried over into the post-communist period, the *qurdebi*'s essential activities should not be conceptualised as somehow arising from communism or springing fresh from the new conditions of capitalist economic relations. As Lotspeich (1995, p. 564) writes of Eastern Europe, 'criminality may well rise because of particular features of the transition process combined with the persistence of past behaviour.' The post-Soviet era was marked by greater criminal activity, mafia wars and social breakdown, yet the violent actors that fuelled this were not somehow totally new creations but had emerged and adapted from the Soviet past (Karstedt 2003; Derluguian 2005).

The *qurdebi* were certainly not the only violent mafia actor to emerge into the post-Soviet present. Their most serious competition came in the shape of the new patriotic paramilitaries that formed in the wake of the Soviet collapse and secessionist struggles. The most prominent of these were *Mkhedrioni* and the National Guard run by convicted criminals. Indeed, *Mkhedrioni* was founded by a *qurdi*, Jaba Ioseliani. According to Wheatley (2005, p. 78) *Mkhedrioni* and the National Guard became 'mafia-type organisations that resorted to extortion to obtain their resources,' and had become rivals by November 1992. Both fundamentally moved into the *qurdebi* business sphere. I document in much greater detail the threat this caused to the *qurdebi* later (see chapter 7). For now, it is enough to note that the collapse of the Soviet Union and move to a market economy brought about a lot of competition for racketeering contracts.

Despite serious competition then, during Shevardnadze's time according to a government report (Prison Service 2006), 'influential *vory-v-zakone* [thieves-in-law]

divided most of the fields of activity as well as the country itself into exclusive spheres of influence....this network effectively integrated with state officials....most of Georgia's medium and small-scale businessmen were racketeered.' The *qurdebi* in the more stable later 1990s were able to push into many sectors of the economy and society. Despite the different structural conditions then an important argument here is that the essence of the *qurdebi*'s activities had not changed but simply expanded.

This chapter remains within the theoretical framework developed in the previous chapter. Below I describe the main supply of resources from the provision of services which were most basically the *krysha* (protection) and *garcheva* (arbitration or dispute resolution). I provide data on the various sectors where the *qurdebi* were active in both legal and illegal markets and where possible give concrete examples of these. I argue that the weakly protected property rights in a new capitalist economy increased the supply of resources and the diversification of their sources in contrast to the Soviet period.

5.1 Krysha and Garcheva: Practices of Protection and Arbitration

Racketeering in its classical form is the provision of protection to a physical entity or individual securing them from the unwanted approaches of the racketeer himself, other extortionists, and independent operators such as thieves and hooligans. As mentioned, in the post-Soviet space this racketeering is known by the Russian term *krysha*, or 'roof'. This type of protection still operates through selling guarantees, in this case a guarantee of deterrence against unwanted attention for a cut, known in Georgian as *tavi*. A *krysha* can also involve the provision of dispute

resolution and the enforcement of informal agreements. This practice is known in Georgian as *garcheva* and was an important function the *qurdebi* performed.

In principle, all criminal funds, from those taken as *tavi* from racketeered businessmen to the proceeds of low-level street criminals, are supposed to be pooled into the common fund, known as the *obshchak*, to be used by the *qurdebi* and their men. Supporters of the criminal world might pay into the *obshchak* entirely voluntarily. The degree of voluntarism is unclear however, as this might take the form of a type of tax regularly taken from citizens living within a confined territory (R22). This appears to be the case in the small village of Taglioni in the Gali district in the demilitarized zone between Abkhazia and Georgia where the *qurdi* Merab Okudzhava ‘regularly collected tribute from the residents of his region in the form of a regular sum of money’ (Prime Crime 2007). In an argument over collecting for the *obshchak* in March 2007, Okudzhava shot one of his potential contributors in the leg (Ibid).

A further aspect of a mafia is that they are autonomous from any one customer in the supply of protection, that is, a mafia group is not simply a group of violent individuals in the employ of a larger business organisation but stand alone as a self-governing entity that may offer its protection to whoever might require it (Gambetta 1993; Varese 2001). There are no cases in the data collected and analysed below where a *qurdi* was simply internalised within a *single* business. However, there are many cases where a *qurdi* protects a business by becoming a shareholder in private joint stock companies. The interests of the *qurdi* as a shareholder and the company he protects can be quite intertwined. There are also cases where the *qurdi* has his own company often in a relative’s name. These companies presumably have automatically internalized protection.

In many cases *qurdebi* racketeered some businesses whilst being shareholders in others. For example, a *qurdi* named A. from Chiatura in the Imereti region racketeered a wine factory and held shares in two manganese mining firms. Shareholding in this instance meant installing *avtoriteti*, or criminal strongmen, at the firms and ensuring the *qurdi's* share is looked after. Through this method A. also maintained a cut in protecting the production and distribution of the Borjomi mineral water and scrap metal which had become a big export commodity. Others have less complex business interests. Another Imereti *qurdi* simply protected a range of service providers including a betting shop, an optician and another company all located in the centre of Kutaisi (AOCU-T 2004).

Below I present a table that shows the business interests of 66 different *qurdebi* from across Georgia. Compiling and going through these files I recorded each mention of individual enterprises under the protection of a *qurdi* before attributing each enterprise to a specific sector of the economy. The numbers below are much lower than they would have been had every enterprise been listed for each *qurdi* which could not be done in every case. For example, one *qurdi* was described as having interests in many petrol stations, I coded this singularly as an interest in fuel retailing in the services sector as it was unclear how many individual businesses were involved. Otherwise, each case (N=182) represents a business that fell under the influence of the *qurdebi* as protectors against physical threat and/or business competition or as straightforward extorters. Furthermore in some cases the protection referred to in each case might be through a *qurdi* possessing shares. I have included a sector called 'organised crime' where this means areas of illegal activity being protected such as gangs committing car theft. There were a few cases of straightforward ownership usually by a *qurdi's* relative. For most *qurdebi* more than

one business interest was specified in the files and sometimes these interests transcended sectors. The information below was compiled by the police in 2004.

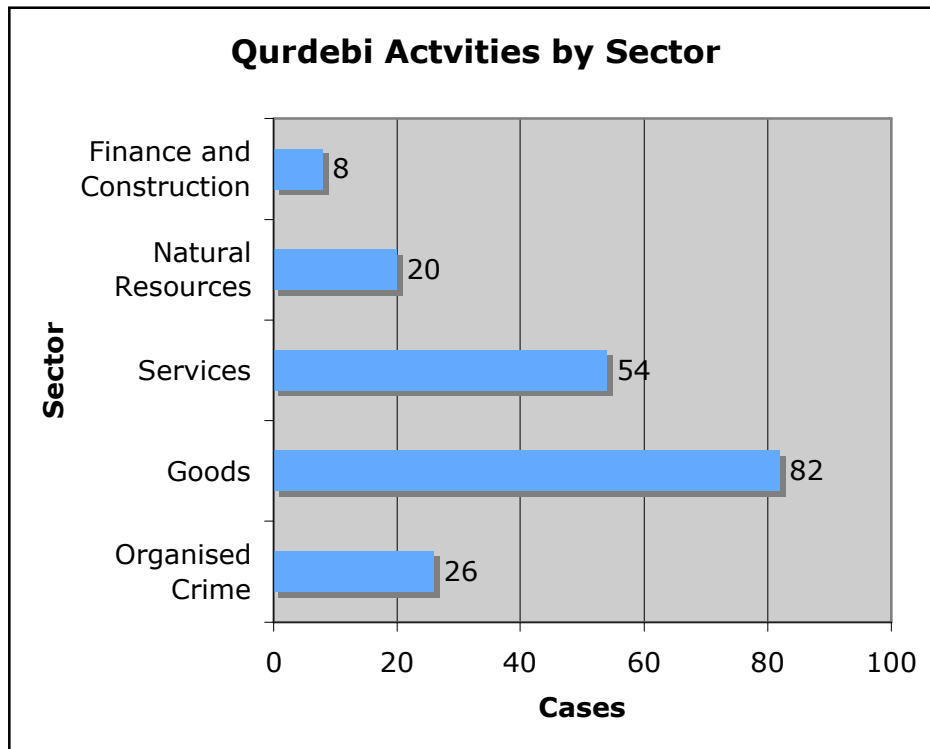


Table 5.1 to show enterprises protected by the qurdebi by sector

Source: AOCU-T & K 2004

The number of *qurdebi* that the police have adequate information on means that the above table is in no way meant to be exhaustive. However, it does give an indication of the areas in which the *qurdebi* were most active. It also shows that the *qurdebi* often involve themselves in more than one area and usually protect more than one enterprise. The organised crime sector, as mentioned, refers to the ‘protection’ or use of an organised crime group in committing illegal acts such as armed robbery and car theft. This represents an income source for many *qurdebi* and obviously links to

the protection function in that the operation of organised crime groups drums up business. ‘Goods’ refers to protection of enterprises engaged in the production, distribution and sale of both consumable and production items. This sector includes a wide range of businesses including supermarkets, market stalls, bakeries, a chicken farm, mineral water, jewellers, petrol stations, vodka and wine factories, tractor, car and crane production. ‘Services’ includes such things as casinos, car mechanics, mini-buses, hotels, bars, restaurants, sports (football and boxing), pool halls and local TV stations. The ‘resources’ sector refers to the exploitation of timber; the extractive industries, such as manganese, marble, and coal; energy (oil refining, distribution and storage of fuel); and many cases of the trade in scrap metal, which was an important Georgian export in the post-Soviet period. ‘Finance and construction’ refers to involvement with banks and construction companies.

The latter sector, finance and construction, has very few mentions in the data and tend to involve the most authoritative and well-known *qurdebi*. In terms of finance, perhaps this is because control of banks and building societies required political connections that only the biggest *qurdebi* had. The construction sector is more of a surprise. This industry entails multiple transactions between many players, and is usually an area susceptible to mafia penetration (Jacobs et al 2001; Schneider & Schneider 2003). There are numerous plausible explanations for low number of instances of the *qurdebi* in this sector. Firstly, while *qurdebi* might not be involved in a registered construction firm, they might have influence over firms supplying the industry with materials and thereby indirectly hold some sway. Secondly, it is possible that, like banks, big construction companies are linked to players in the government which might make them susceptible to extortion by very well-connected *qurdebi* only. Finally, in Georgia in the 1990s, it is unlikely that there was much

demand from the budget-less government itself for large-scale building projects and thus not many possibilities for mafia services in cartels for government tenders as has been recorded in Italy and America (Gambetta & Reuter 2000).

There are commonsense reasons we might suppose that trade in goods and services are so popular for the *qurdebi*. On the whole they represent the best value, lowest risk investment in providing protection and the most common type of economic endeavour undertaken by private individuals. They tend to be located at fixed addresses making it easier to divide up influence for the racketeers and reduce the risk of internecine conflict (Lavezzi 2008). They offer a safer bet than enterprises connected to natural resources whose outputs are necessarily scarcer and can therefore command greater profits making competition fiercer amongst the mafia when they do emerge. Furthermore, as with construction and finance, natural resources such as the lumber industry are often protected by the government (and in the case of 1990s Georgia likely racketeered by the state agencies) creating further barriers to entry.

Finally, areas such as kidnapping, trafficking and drugs can be lucrative activities to get involved in, and as we can see the *qurdebi* do involve themselves in this (the organised crime sector). Yet mentions of these activities were not as prevalent as might be otherwise supposed. This might be for a number of reasons. For one thing, it is possible that these activities are harder for the police to find out about and document. For another thing, it has been well-documented that illegal markets such as drugs represent big challenges compared to the simple racketeering of small and medium size enterprises in trade and services (Gambetta 1993, chap. 9). The drug market presents problems in terms of logistics and the danger of conflict over the large profits to be made. More broadly, drugs, prostitution and kidnapping draw attention to activities that may be seen as morally unacceptable in traditional

Georgian society. Carrying out armed robberies, extortion, kidnapping and supplying drugs can cause huge problems for a mafia's valued asset of reputation.

These issues might go some way to explain why the illegal or 'organised crime sector' as I have called it is not more prevalent in the data. Below I go into more detail as to the role of the *qurdebi* in the legal sectors such as trade in goods, services, natural resources, and so on before considering the activities of the *qurdebi* in the illegal sector.

5.2 The *Qurdebi* in the Legitimate Economy

In its basic form providing a *krysha* requires the control of a small number of business over a given territory (R5). Some small towns traditionally had one predominant industry which was often racketeered by a local *qurdi*. In Gurjaani in eastern Georgia, for example, this was the ice-cream factory whilst near the small town of Bolnisi the extraction of gold was racketeered (R9). This situation suggests an unequal distribution of objects amongst the *qurdebi*, however the mechanisms of the *obshchak* and the *skhodka* allow a form of redistribution amongst made men to some extent.

The racket in these cases in the main exists as a deterrent against petty crime and competing extortionists. The business gains security through association with powerful criminal actors with violent resources in the form of organised criminal groups at their disposal. The problem for the business in these cases is that just as the enterprise itself might be one of the only games in town, so a criminal group can easier monopolise territory in a small town than in bigger cities, and impose higher costs for protection. In essence, the business suffers from a lack of criminal

competition. So, for example, the police believe Gurjaani's ice-cream factory was paying up to half of its profits to the *qurdebi* (R10).

However, other examples suggest that those protected are not just extorted but gain some services for paying protection money or otherwise having close connections with *qurdebi*. For example, a criminal 'authority' [*avtoritet*] with connections to powerful *qurdebi* in Moscow demanded protection be given for an entrepreneur in the export-import business from extortion by two brothers 'Irakli' and 'Dato' in Kutaisi (Kutaisi City Court 2008). In this case at least it seems the protection could indeed be genuine. Furthermore, in competitive markets a business can gain from discouraging others from entering the market through the threat of their criminal protector and I will give examples of this below.

I will now provide more in-depth studies of protection in different legal sectors. I will look at protection of mini-bus routes and wholesalers to marketplaces as well as the informal enforcement of agreements concerning the payment of gambling debts and monies owned in the export of agricultural produce.

5.2.1 Mini-Buses

As Chu (1999, p. 57) has reported, in Hong Kong mini-bus route drivers would often invite the Triads to protect them. Routes that the Triads were attracted to were those that were lucrative, where there was a demand for their service due to disorganisation amongst the drivers, and where the route was easy to monitor and monopolise. In Georgia in the 1990s mini-buses were the only way to get around for those without a car. There were virtually no bus services and trains were slow and tiresome. Mini-buses operate between towns and within towns. They are often

overloaded with passengers carrying assorted personal belongings, goods to market, animals and plant life. Furthermore, the mini-buses simply pick up and drop off passengers wherever they choose. They are incredibly unsafe both in terms of the observation of rules of the road and the fact that over long distances in the 1990s a metal shell containing 20 people and winding a lonely road between Kutaisi and Tbilisi made a good target for armed robbers who would plant a member of their group on the mini-bus as it set off in order to inform the rest of the group of its progress easing the process of ambushing it (R36). Nevertheless, anyone who managed to get the money together to buy a Ford Transit van could set themselves up as a mini-bus driver. The problem then for those already in the market was how to ensure physical protection and to raise the very low barriers to entry high enough to stop others from appearing on their routes, in order to, in effect, create a cartel on the most lucrative roads.

The threats to mini-bus drivers then from both competition and physical intimidation made protection from the *qurdebi* more beneficial than in other spheres of business and it was an area where the *qurdebi* were heavily involved. The wire-tap records in one court case from Kutaisi involve a man who calls up a criminal authority, or *avtoritet*, to request help in finding a stolen minibus. The *avtoritet* agrees to find out what happened to it. The caller suspects a garage guard in the theft and asks for permission to deal with this guard and take him ‘out into the forest’. The *avtoritet* assents to this request (Kutaisi City Court 2008). Clearly the caller felt that he was covered by the *avtoritet*’s *krysha* to act in this case.

Finding a stolen bus is one thing but monitoring and securing mini-bus drivers over long routes are costly activities for a criminal group, as Chu (1999) notes. In the town of Zugdidi, the mini-bus routes were divided up by two *qurdebi* from the town

with each driver paying a small fee every day, perhaps as little as \$10, commensurate with the small fares (around 20c) for a ride through town (R22). The mini-bus drivers benefited to some extent from the *qurdebi's* presence in their market by regulating competition and providing physical protection and some appeared to actively support this presence. For example, in Kutaisi the arrest of a prominent *qurdi*, Alexander Imedadze, in 2004 created unrest. Several minibuses went missing and in response to this, the drivers went on strike. Kutaisi's vice-mayor immediately blamed the strike on pressure from those connected to the *qurdebi* noting that the routes in the city had been controlled by the *qurdebi* (Interpress 2004). However, it is of course possible that the strike action of the mini-bus drivers, rather than being indicative of the benefits they received from the *qurdi* and support for him, was due to the fear of not showing support for him.

On this point, it is worth underlining again however that though the *qurdebi* protected the mini-buses from other drivers and from problems with other criminals the drivers were often being simply extorted, that is, buying protection from the threat of the *qurdebi* themselves. One *qurdi* in Kutaisi organised robberies of mini-bus drivers until they came together to pay him the sum of 30 lari (around \$15) per day per driver for protection (AOCU-T 2004).

Long distance routes were easier to simply prey upon and extort rather than protect. According to a former prosecutor and regional governor, the *qurdebi* were involved in highway robbery themselves through controlling the hijacking groups (R36). Long distance protection could only be guaranteed against other criminal groups in the form of a convoy however this would be expensive to provide. The market for convoys in Georgia developed in the post-Soviet period though cases of the *qurdebi* being involved in this appear to be restricted to short-distance routes. For

example, the *qurdi* B. provided protective convoys at the Black Sea port of Poti for vehicles, including mini-buses, involved in transporting shipping cargo from the sea terminal to the town (AOCU-T 2004).

A convoy over a longer distance is probably a luxury a mini-bus driver does not make enough money to afford. However, at the Ergneti market on the border between Georgia and the *de facto* independent state of South Ossetia importers and wholesalers could, and in some cases had to, buy a protective convoy for their trucks on their way to Tbilisi. This particular case appears to have been run by corrupt transport police (Kukhianidze et al 2007). Perhaps these services were offered by corrupt state actors as these, due to their official positions, had an advantage over a criminal group in getting the truck or coach onwards to Tbilisi without being dogged by the attentions of the notoriously corrupt transport police who set up road checks at this time and extorted drivers passing through.¹⁹

5.2.2 Market Wholesalers

Deterrence from competition as a form of the *qurdebi*'s protection was also offered in the marketplace. In one case that was reported, it appears the *qurdebi* were not so interested in the division of territory of individual stores but in the wholesalers supplying the market with goods. In return for a cut of the wholesaler's profit the *qurdi*'s associates could ensure the sellers at the stalls and kiosks only bought a specific good from the protected wholesaler. Unable to find anyone to buy their

¹⁹ Kakha Bendukidze the former finance minister reports that a truck travelling to Tbilisi from Borjomi to distribute mineral water could be stopped by the corrupt transport police in excess of 50 times incurring bribery costs of \$100 and losing hours in time. REES Seminar, St. Antony's College Oxford, 25.01.10

produce, other wholesalers then found it difficult to enter the market. In this case the protection afforded to the wholesaler results in the stall-owner also internalising the protection of the wholesaler's patron.

For example, one family struck upon the idea of buying cheap fruit and vegetables across the border in Turkey in large amounts, importing by the carload and selling them for a profit in Tbilisi. However, finding buyers for their produce proved difficult:

'They went to the market place and they were bringing carloads of tomatoes for example, and no-one would buy them...the marketplace was controlled by a qurdi, or in some cases an official, or in some cases them both together...they controlled who could sell what, if you have a kiosk in the markets you only buy tomatoes from one guy who has a krysha from the qurdi...they used to call the thing being sold after the qurdi or official controlling the trade...for example, 'Mikho's tomatoes.' (R17)

The Kutaisi *qurdi* Imedadze, who protected mini-bus routes in Kutaisi, also maintained a protection racket on the stalls in the Imerti-2000 market and was responsible for distributing the funds from the *obshchak* from these activities. However, unlike the mini-bus drivers there is no mention of the market stall owners striking when he was arrested in April 2004 (Novosti-Gruzii 2004).

5.2.3 Gambling and Debt Collection

The collection of debts and handling of disputes is one of the most traditional activities of the *qurdebi* as originally this was performed by them in prison (Oleinik 2003). In a society with a weak banking system in which loans and credit are hard to obtain, disputes arise over debts and payments. This is especially true with gambling. An example comes from Kutaisi in 2007 when a large group of 'members of the

thieves' world' were uncovered under the new anti-mafia legislation passed in 2005. The case involved a group of criminals operating under the patronage of some *qurdebi* in Kutaisi racketeering betting shops and installing slot machines in locations in various towns and extracting a cut of the profits (Kutaisi City Court 2008; R29; R32). One of the activities was collecting the gambling debts owed. A creditor struggling to convince a debtor to pay what is owed may turn to a *qurdi* to help with the persuasion. The debtor on the other hand may similarly look for a *qurdi*'s services if he cannot manage to pay the debt and feels threatened.

One of the obvious issues here is neutrality in decision-making, that is to say, the outcome may depend on whose *qurdi* steps in, or whose *qurdi* is more powerful. Which *qurdi* disputing parties might turn to can also be in itself a cause for a dispute. In other cases, the two parties ask their separate criminal authorities for help and the two *qurdebi* then settle the issue and inform the warring parties as to their decision. Another outcome is for the creditor's *qurdi* to deal with the issue solely by cancelling the debt on the debtor's behalf on the understanding that the debtor has now transferred the debt in the form of an obligation to the *qurdi* who then effectively becomes the debtor's patron (R17). The *qurdi* in this case still owes the creditor, though there is little the latter can do about it. It is unlikely that the *qurdebi* themselves will go to war over small disputes and even quarrels over bigger decisions over territory and business can be resolved through nesting obligations that can be called on and utilised (R18). Furthermore, disputes between *qurdebi* can be resolved by the intervention of other *qurdebi* and the calling of a *skhodka* or thieves' meeting (R22).

In the case of the Kutaisi group, wire-tapping was used to uncover those who were racketeering the gambling shops and conducting informal debt collection. Some

of the wire-taps were placed on the phones of criminal authorities who at the time were inmates in Geguti prison near Kutaisi. The main decisions appear to come from the prison following discussions between the criminal authorities incarcerated there. These inmates gave instructions to actors on the outside. The court records show a variety of individuals performing various duties including debt collection, resolution of disputes of a fiscal and moral nature and protection of certain business interests against other extortionists. The main topic of the conversations focuses on the collection of debts owed and how this money can be extracted and to whom it should be paid. There are discussions about setting up more businesses in other towns and which local criminal authorities should be contacted. It is clear that part of the money taken through debt collection went to the communal *qurdebi* fund or *obshchak*: in one instance \$6,000 dollars is agreed to be paid (Kutaisi City Court 2008).

One of the main members of this criminal association operating in Kutaisi, D., was the relative of two prominent *qurdebi* who at the time were living in Moscow as by 2007 most *qurdebi* had been arrested or had fled the country. In discussions concerning protection money and conflicts over payment into the *obshchak*, the names of these two *qurdebi* were used suggesting that they were also involved over long distance in the activities of the group in Kutaisi. According to the court verdict (Ibid), ‘D. actively participated in the seizure of the amounts lost by different persons during gambling. For this purpose, he used the underworld authority of his step-brother...and his brother-in-law [both *kanonieri qurdebi*].’ D. might of course simply have been playing off the reputation of his relatives to achieve his ends without their real involvement. In another case a debtor is informed that he must pay 3,100 Georgian lari (around \$1,500) according to the decision of another famous *qurdi* living in Russia by the nickname of Boxer. It is difficult to know whether these names

are invoked as a way of strengthening the demand or if these famous *qurdebi* were in fact involved in the racket. Someone calling the bluff of the group might find out.

The operations of this group of criminals were cut short in November 2007. After lengthy surveillance work the police moved and 18 people were charged with belonging to the thieves' world and 'engaging in racketeering and terrorizing local businessmen' (Lenta 2007).

5.2.4 Herbal Exports

Effectively resolving an issue for two parties is in all the *qurdebi*'s interests as this is a good way of keeping business flowing and gaining information. Keeping a reputation for effective dispute resolution can mean that parties to a transaction invite a *qurdi* to settle it and in effect give up the details of their financial status. An example of this from Kutaisi is instructive. In western Georgia there are fertile lands for growing various types of agricultural produce, including herbs and greens such as dill and tarragon. Two businessmen involved in the export of these herbs to the market in Moscow got into a conflict over a payment of a substantial sum of money, \$8,000, owed to one of them (R19). They turned to a *qurdi* K. for help resolving the issue. K. was happy to arbitrate for a percentage agreed upon beforehand but once the dispute was settled the businessmen had evidently not anticipated what would happen next:

'K. asked them, "sorry guys, but where are you making so much money from?" and they told him about their herb business ... After that they found themselves paying \$2 for every kilogram to the qurdebi ... the qurdebi had no idea that people could make so much money from herbs! But when you are dealing with tonnes of it going to

Moscow to market and you are getting \$2 per kilo, it turns out it's not bad business...they controlled it here, at source in Kutaisi and on arrival in Moscow. It worked out the qurdi here took \$1 per kilo and another qurdi \$1 per kilo in Moscow.' (R29)

This case reveals certain interesting features, firstly that the businessmen turned to the *qurdi* to resolve their dispute, secondly, that dispute resolution evidently is a mechanism for the *qurdebi* to collect information on businesses (an aspect emphasised by others, see Reuter 1985, ch. 7), thirdly, that once the businessmen turned to the *qurdebi*, they had no choice but to allow them a regular share of the profits, and, finally, that even though the business crossed borders the transplantation of the Georgian *qurdebi* to Russia (see chapters 7 & 8) meant they had no problem dealing with the business at both ends. Though this looks like a case of straightforward extortion, we may suppose that the businessmen acquired some service for this fee as it is now in the *qurdebi's* interests both materially and in terms of reputation to make sure that the herbs are produced, exported and sold trouble-free.

5.3 The Qurdebi and Illegal Enterprises and Activities

The previous sections of the chapter gave examples of the functions of the *qurdebi* regarding legitimate businesses. Those activities often involved heading an organised criminal group that worked on the behalf of a *qurdi*. This section considers those examples that still utilise a criminal group but where there was no attempt to racketeer a legitimate legal entity such as a business. Instead the organised crime group makes profits through the straightforward commission of crime, and the *qurdebi* make profit from offering dispute resolution once the crime is committed. In the two examples I give - kidnapping and car theft - individual people and personal

property are targeted by a criminal group and the *qurdebi* offer dispute resolution and protection services after the fact. Here then I distinguish the monopolisation of rackets in legitimate industry from the monopolisation of a variety of illegal activities such as car theft, armed robbery, burglary, drug dealing, prostitution, kidnapping and hijacking. This distinction may of course be quite blurred in reality. An activity such as kidnapping may be used as a form of racketeering a legitimate firm. However, it may also be employed as an activity in itself that can be monopolised and exploited for criminal profit without any further goal. It may also not only be organised crime groups doing the kidnapping, as I discuss.

5.3.1 Kidnapping and Bride-Kidnapping

Unlike in Sicily where the mafia banned kidnapping due to the effect it had on its client base (Gambetta 1993; Paoli 2003), in Georgia kidnapping became widespread in the 1990s, not just by the *qurdebi*'s associates or unruly paramilitary groups but also by the law enforcement agencies. In the early 2000s, extremely controversial cases of businessmen being kidnapped and delivered to Chechen militants in the Pankisi Gorge were uncovered and a prominent journalist killed for reporting on it (Lomsadze 2005). When UN workers went missing in the Kodori Gorge in western Georgia the Georgian government turned to the prominent Kutaisi *qurdi* Tariel Oniani to find those responsible and to negotiate the workers' release, which he successfully was able to do. Perhaps his success was no accident; in some cases the kidnapping was organised by the *qurdebi* themselves and carried out by a criminal gang which then offers the services of the *qurdi* as a trusted intermediary to resolve the issue of ransom payment and safe release (R12).

The problem the kidnappers and the hostage face is essentially one of trust where the issue at stake is guarantees about what will happen if ransom money is paid and the hostage released (Gambetta 2009). The kidnappers need a commitment that if they release the hostage he or she will not seek revenge through legal action or in any other way. The hostage needs to know that if he or she pays the kidnappers they will not kill him or her in any case to preclude future revenge now that they have the money. A strong and authoritative intermediary can ensure the optimal solution for both parties through enforcing agreements made, that is, insuring against defection at a later date. In this way the kidnappers can get their money and have no further repercussions of their actions, and the hostage manages to stay alive. The *qurdebi* were able to fulfil this intermediary role, one that also offers protection in a sense. In this case, the *qurdi* protects the ‘contract’ rights of the two parties involved after they have made an agreement. Cases where a ransom is to be paid and release of the hostage assured provides an opportunity for the *qurdebi* to sell guarantees to both parties to ensure against future defection on promises made.

In Georgia, there is another type of kidnapping, known as bride kidnapping, which again provides an opportunity for a third party intermediary with a reputation for trustworthiness and a capacity for violent enforcement. This type of kidnapping is a historical and social phenomenon involving a man or group of men taking a woman, hiding her somewhere and then claiming her as a wife. According to tradition the family of the woman has to agree to the marriage if the kidnapping is successful and the woman herself has very little say. This practice was common in the Caucasus and Central Asia until the Soviet period when the communists attempted to ‘uproot’ such practices. The resurgence of the practice in the 1990s is indicative of the failure of this policy (Kokhodze 2006). However, in Georgia, which had undergone decades of

Soviet-driven modernisation, attitudes to the bride-kidnapping practice had changed in some areas of society. It was the disconnection in the 1990s between the resurrection of an old mountain tradition and these new more progressive, often urban, attitudes that created a niche for dispute resolution.

In the cases told by respondents the problem revolved round how to resolve a bride kidnapping and prevent a recurrence of it from taking place (R1; R16). In one case where a girl had been kidnapped by a young man, Shota, who was inclined towards the thieves' world the victim's family invited the respective families and a police officer they knew well to their house to mediate:

'The police officer assured us he would not arrest Shota, but actually this was nothing to do with the law but because it happened to be at the family's house and making an arrest at a friend's house would be shameful. Shota was told to write and sign a statement agreeing that he would not attempt a further kidnapping...The parents I think knew that Shota did not follow the same understandings [informal rules] as the police and a couple of days later they called another meeting and this time they brought a qurdi who knew the family. This time Shota was told to give his word not to attempt any more kidnappings. The qurdi heard this and stated that if the agreement was broken there would be consequences for Shota...however, Shota was known by some powerful criminal authorities and I believe it would have been difficult to punish him.' (R1)

Both kidnapping and bride kidnapping then also provided a market for dispute resolution. In the former case, once again, demand could be increased through the use of criminal groups doing the kidnapping in the first place precisely so a *qurdi's* mediation could be bought. The *qurdi's* job was then to ensure an enforceable agreement to the liking of both parties. Having resolved the dispute the *qurdi* could offer protection to stop a repeat of the kidnapping. In the case of bride kidnapping, it appears the *qurdi's* job principally was to dissuade young men from further attempts at stealing a bride after the fact.

5.3.2 Car Theft

As in the case of the herbs in Kutaisi, dispute resolution could be an important mechanism, inadvertently or otherwise, of collecting information on business activities in an area and knowing where demand might be strongest. Crime itself, by creating insecurity, could bring people to use the *qurdebi*'s services and one crime in particular often created a lot of work for them. This common dispute involves the stealing of cars. As mentioned in Chapter 4 this activity is performed by criminal groups with links to the *qurdebi* who often do not try to sell the car on but simply 'kidnap' it with the aim of returning it to its owner for a fee. Where respondents had had some dealing with the *qurdebi* personally this was often due to a stolen car. In many cases it was the victim who approached the *qurdi* in their locale, or someone who knew the *qurdi*, in an effort to recover the car. In other cases, along the lines of real kidnapping, a phone call is made and the victim is made aware of potential brokers who can arrange for their car to be returned. In one case a call was made to a local government official informing him of the theft of his car. He was therefore surprised to see his car still in the garage; evidently the gang responsible had not identified the owner correctly (R40).

In cases where things run smoother the amount paid might depend on the victims' relationship with the *qurdi*, one respondent who was well-known to the local *qurdi* settled with having just a car part – the CD player - taken as payment, and when he complained he was met with the response that 'the boys have to work for something!' (R17) Other times a fee might be agreed. One respondent had his car stolen in Kutaisi in 1995 but he did not go to the police:

'At that time you couldn't rely on them [the police], they themselves just used the qurdebi to get things done...instead I turned to my friend...he had contacts...Eventually he called and told me to meet him on a street near his house...we waited and some cars pulled up...we went over and then when I looked inside I recognised one of the guys, he was a qurdi....he asked me 'have you talked at all to the police?' when I said I hadn't this seemed to really satisfy him...he just said 'good, you have no need to go to the police, just come to us, we can help you'...After that the car was returned to me through my friend, but I lost \$400.' (R23)

In Zugdidi, the location of the town right next to the de-militarised zone with Abkhazia facilitated hiding stolen cars easily by taking them across the heavily guarded border. 'Everyone takes stolen goods across the border, because no-one can get it back for you from there. The Georgian police have no jurisdiction there so they can't do anything, once its there it's lost unless you have contacts' (R22). In on case a mini-bus had been stolen and taken to Gali across the border and the local Zugdidi *qurdi* had agreed to get it back for a fee of \$1,000 (R22).

Car theft also then appears to be an area where dispute resolution between the thieves and the owners is blurred with the more general sale of protection to stop the theft occurring in the first place. Again, the *qurdebi* exploited their position as criminal men of authority and could use criminal groups to increase demand for their services. The essence of these services, the sale of protection, had changed little since Soviet times.

5.4 Conclusion

The last two chapters have shown that the *qurdebi* had a multiplicity of goals and functions. However for definitional clarity and power these can be brought down to a single essence: the provision of protection over a given territory. On this view the *qurdebi* are in essence a mafia. They may well engage in other non-mafia activities,

such as legitimate business pursuits, but as long as they are also involved in the provision of protection and claim some sort of dominion of the areas where they provide this protection they may justifiably be seen as a mafia. This interpretation of their activities sees the *qurdebi* as distortions of, but essentially similar to, both enterprises and states: the mafia are market actors in the market for protection, but they are also providing extra-legal governance, regulating disputes, extracting taxes and claiming authority over areas of business and territory.

The mafia that existed prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union became one of the many forms of extra-legal governance that were able to compete for influence once the Soviet state collapsed. Rather than taking on a radically new form then, in Georgia the traditional mafia, headed by the *kanonieri qurdebi*, adjusted and continued on. The last two chapters have argued that the presence of the *qurdebi* in the Soviet and post-Soviet period can be explained using Varese's (2001) model (see chapter 4) but that the basis for the unprotected nature of capitalist transactions in the two periods radically differed. Capitalism with a weak state appears to present more opportunities to a mafia than a second economy in a strong socialist state. In the post-Soviet period the size of the economy and society that was left unregulated exceeded anything seen in the last days of communism. Demand for protection increased accordingly and therefore the numbers of actors competing to provide this protection was also fierce.

In terms of resilience, the activities of the *qurdebi* in the two periods provided resources and sustenance, an important element of resilience (Tilly 2006). In fact, the *qurdebi* in the post-Soviet period should be seen as a growing force with increased resources and a more diverse portfolio than ever before. However, while this would have in principle increased resilience to exogenous shocks, it also affected other

factors that impact resilience, such as changes in external relations, internal relations and commitment incentives and the boundaries of the trust network. I now take these elements in turn in the following chapters beginning with external relations.

6. Predators: the *Qurdebi* and the State before and after the Rose Revolution

“Our main export to Russia is not wine but kanonieri qurdebi.”

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, April 2009

The forerunner of the KGB, the OGPU, released Directive 108/65 on 8th March 1931, stating the need for the prison system to attract class-related proletarians and peasants who could then pressure ‘alien’, meaning political, elements in the Gulag (Emel’yanov 2006). Whether or not this document is the smoking gun that proves the involvement of the Soviet secret services in the creation of the fraternity of the thieves-in-law, popular perception and some scholarly studies (Tevzadze n.d) hold this as an incontrovertible fact. The Bolsheviks had been willing to use criminals for their own ends prior to the revolution of 1917 (Montefiore 2007) and this fact lends these claims some credibility. On this view, in return for help and cooperation in pressuring the politicals, thieves-in-law from the very beginning received privileges in the prison and outside it. Indeed, the police and *qurdebi* have been characterised as ‘natural allies’ (R7).

Whether true or not, such opinions create speculation over other aspects of the institution of the thieves-in-law. Perhaps the ‘in-law’ part of their name comes from their actual respect for state law? Why is the oath that was sworn on becoming a thief-

in-law so similarly worded and structured as the oath taken by those joining the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Oleinik 2003 p. 70)? Whatever the truth of the matter, from the very inception of the thieves-in-law the issue of the role of the state is present and this chapter is, at base, concerned with these relations.

The chapter also deals with the dynamic and sweeping changes to the criminal justice system that occurred after the Rose Revolution in 2003 and the coming to power of Mikhail Saakashvili and his United National Movement party. The reforms that were implemented specifically targeted the *kanonieri qurdebi* and appear to have been the result of a process of anti-mafia policy transfer particularly from Italy. Saakashvili, an American-educated lawyer and former Justice Minister, made criminal justice reform a priority of the post-revolution government. The government pushed through a raft of legislation combining anti-mafia laws with police and prison reform and a grassroots ‘culture of lawfulness’ campaign.

The main purpose of the chapter is to frame the reforms of the Rose Revolution against the backdrop of the links between the *kanonieri qurdebi* and the state in the time leading up to the revolution. This is vital for understanding the issues of resilience and adaptation with regards to the *qurdebi* as any trust network’s ability to survive depends on defending its resources and sustenance from predators and surviving the exogenous shocks wrought by stronger actors, in this case the state. Firstly, I discuss how other scholars have thought through the issue of state-organised crime connections and layout Tilly’s (2006) approach to state-trust network relations. Using this latter approach I, secondly, look at these relations in communist times, before thirdly, looking at the post-Soviet period, and finally discussing the Rose Revolution and the shape of relations between the *qurdebi* and the state in the present day.

6.1 Predation, Organised Crime and Trust Networks

For Tilly (2006), states and trust networks interact strategically with each other and employ varying techniques depending on their respective size and strength. When possible, the state will go after the resources of trust networks. As Tilly writes, ‘over the long historical run trust networks’ most persistent and effective predators have been duly constituted government agents who were just doing their jobs.’ (Tilly 2006, p. 86). Thus, the state may try to destroy trust networks but it may also try to co-opt them. Tilly suggests that there are three modes of control open to the state as regards trust networks. These exist on a continuum. They are:

- *facilitation*
- *toleration*
- *repression* (Tilly 2006, p. 104-105).

The actors in a trust network in their turn may employ their own ‘bottom up’ strategies to counter this. Tilly identifies seven such strategies, these strategies are:

1. *predatory* behaviour itself by the trust network;
2. *concealment* and simply hiding from the unwanted attention of the predator;
3. *clientage* or protection through the use a patron;
4. *dissimulation* or feigning conformity whilst continuing on regardless.
5. *enlistment* onto the side of the predator;

6. *bargaining* for direct and unmediated patronage with political actors;
7. *dissolution* of the network with or without the intention of resurrection in the future (Tilly, 2006 chapter 2 & p. 104).

Tilly identifies three levels of integration as possible outcomes of the top down and bottom up strategies between the state and trust networks:

- *segregation* from the state;
- *negotiated connection* to the state;
- full *integration* with the state.

Segregation would include such phenomena as secretive religious sects and monastic orders, while full integration includes the likes of pirates who become privateers, or private militias that are incorporated into state armies. The middle level, the common outcome of negotiated connection, refers to either patronage relations utilising middle level patrons in state institutions or brokered autonomy where rights and recognition of the trust network are provided for. Of the latter, Tilly gives the example of Jewish diaspora groups in southern Europe that were granted quarters in cities and autonomy from the local rulers.

Mafias make good case studies for observing such strategies. Fundamentally this is due to the fact that the state and mafia compete for the same resources, the extraction of material tribute from society in return for the provision of protection (Tilly 1985; Reuter 1985; Poggi 1990; Skaperdas & Syropoulos 1995). Studies of mafias in different parts of the world and at different times have employed a range of Tilly's (2006) bottom up strategies in negotiating an essentially competitive

relationship with the state. For example, the Yakuza appear to practice dissimulation in their engagement with the Japanese political machine, openly operating by government rules and filling in for the state where the government has wilfully given up authority yet surely still ready to use lethal violence in pursuit of its goals (Millhaupt & West 2000; Hill 2006).

Mafias have been defined by reference to their manipulation of state actors through corruption (Anderson 1995). In Sicily, ties between mafia and state throughout the 1980s appeared to employ a bargaining strategy with top-level politicians, a breach in the terms of which Cosa Nostra violently sanctioned when, in the 1990s, political results threatened the status quo (Jamieson 2000; Orlando 2001; Schneider & Schneider 2003). A similar situation existed in America. Jacobs et al (2001, p. 130) write that in New York:

'[A] symbiotic relationship between organised crime and the urban political machines insulated Cosa Nostra from sustained law enforcement investigations. That, at least, was the conclusion of the US Senate's 1950-1951 Kefauver Committee, whose hearings revealed friendly relationships between organised crime bosses and mayors, police chiefs, and politicians in many cities.'

Finally, whilst not fully-fledged mafias, Jankowski's (1991) study of American urban gangs shows strategies of clientage, dissimulation, and even enlistment - for example, in helping get out the vote for local politicians in return for favours - in negotiating the threat from the state.

However, mafias and states should be disaggregated as actors. Hill (2006) prefers to frame state-Yakuza ties as pragmatic, quid pro quo, and strategic, rather than as overarching policies of monolithic entities in interaction with each other (Hill 2006, chap. 7). Hill argues that, whether the mafia employs clientage with mid-level actors or bargains with main players in the political establishment, such relationships

between mafias and the state were not necessarily all-pervasive but in many cases limited to pragmatic arrangements by small groups or individuals at different levels. If widespread enough, pragmatic ties between state representatives and the mafia could aggregate to a state-level reluctance to implement anti-mafia policies, though such a process would also appear to be mediated to a large degree by other macro-level processes such as state strength, available resources and the ideological positioning of collective political actors such as parties.

For example, where the state is not strong enough to maintain a full monopoly on taxation, accommodation with the mafia might occur. In this case an agreement can be beneficial to both parties that might take the form of patronage or brokered autonomy for the mafia in their own territory (Celentini 1995a). Moreover, the state might calculate that an aggressive anti-mafia campaign might create a confrontation or push organised crime into other fields incurring greater costs than an ongoing toleration of the mafia's presence would (Celentini et al. 1995b). Thus, the cost incurred by the presence of the mafia must be weighed against the costs and benefits of an anti-mafia campaign.

I will argue below that while the *kanonieri qurdebi* do not possess a mechanism for implementing an overarching and uniform strategy amongst their members, certain trends can be observed as regards the employment of Tilly's bottom up strategies in interacting with the state. These have been most primarily predation on the state itself, clientage, and bargaining. For its part, the state, depending on the time period, has either attempted to destroy the *qurdebi*, or has reached compromises resulting in negotiated connection or integration into the state. Taken very generally, the later Soviet period appears to represent a period of clientage and negotiated connection through patronage of localised state actors. In contrast, the post-Soviet

period represents a time when the *qurdebi* were able to bargain with political actors and integrate in sectors of the state and economy to the extent that these existed during this transitional period. Finally, the period following the Rose Revolution and the wholesale state attack on organised crime has led to a reorientation towards predation as resistance to the state, concealment and dissimulation.

6.2 Mafia and State in the Later Soviet Period: Clientage and Negotiated Connection

Developing the insights from the above discussion I now return to the Georgian case. Here I start by looking at the relationship between the state and the *kanonieri qurdebi* before the Rose Revolution, with the intent of revealing the strategies of the state and *qurdebi* in relation to each other and the outcomes of ‘segregation,’ ‘negotiated connection’ or ‘integration’.

As has been shown, (chapter 4) the *qurdebi* were active in the Soviet second economy. In terms of the relationship between the *qurdebi* and the state, during this Soviet period a pattern appears to form where first secretaries are appointed as leaders of the republic and straightaway implement crime control measures that affect the *qurdebi*. As noted in chapter 4, Shevardnadze’s time at the head of the Georgian Soviet Republic (1972-1985) began with hard-hitting anti-crime and corruption policies and high profile arrests. Kukhianidze (2008, p. 220) argues that Shevardnadze’s drive did push the *qurdebi* out of Georgia to other republics. ‘This campaign was carried out in a very Soviet manner: police warned the thieves that if

they did not leave Georgia within one month then they would be jailed under different pretexts – drugs or illegal possession of weapons.’ This statement itself implies that the police and thieves were in some sort of contact in order to be able to communicate this threat. It also alludes to the deficiencies in the Soviet criminal code in dealing with ‘group crime’. Though the charge of ‘recidivism’ could be added to a conviction and sanctions increased, the Soviet authorities did not readily acknowledge the existence of organised crime and therefore *qurdebi* were convicted for related crimes such as illegal firearm possession or catch-all crimes such as hooliganism (AOCU-T 2004; Backman 2000).

Like Shevardnadze before him, Jumber Paatiashvili, the new First Secretary of Georgia in 1985 also cracked down on crime, arresting many *qurdebi* and utilising the Soviet prison archipelago by sending many *qurdebi* incarcerated in Georgia elsewhere in the Soviet Union. Former prison workers from both Tbilisi and Kutaisi made reference to this time period. ‘We had 1,800 people [in Geguti prison near Kutaisi] then. In 1985 we had 12 *qurdebi*, but exactly at that time they decided to send them out of Georgia’ (R25). Serio & Razinkin (1994, p. 2) state that by 1986 in Georgia 56 *qurdebi* had been imprisoned on the basis of a variety of minor crimes. Furthermore, in an echo of what was to happen in 2004, ‘the Central Committee made it clear that officials failing to carry out the assignment would be treated as law breakers themselves and dealt with accordingly’ (Ibid, p.2).²⁰

In 1987, the Central Committee noted the effectiveness of this policy of exiling the *qurdebi* in the increasing the work done by prisoners, noting that a 1985 Resolution of the Central Committee on discipline and legality in the correctional labour camps of Georgia and the intensified struggle with ‘thievish elements’ had led

²⁰ A report (ESI 2010) claims that a similar threat was made in 2004 regarding the tolerance of the *qurdebi* by local law enforcement.

to an improvement in the situation and an increase in those prisoners put to work from 85.2% to 95.4% with an increased output from 58.6 million to 73 million rubles (PA, 14/128/143).

Crime control policies at the republic-level do not however give the full picture. Under communism, being tough on crime and ‘negative tendencies’²¹ was rhetoric that pleased overlords in Moscow without necessarily having huge effects in Georgian society or on state-mafia relations once we disaggregate these actors (Rotiashvili 2002; see chapter 4). Shelley (2007, p. 53) states that the 1970s-1980s anti-crime and corruption drives ‘did more for the promotion of Shevardnadze’s career than the elimination of this deep seated phenomenon in Georgian society.’

Indeed, other archival sources from the Paatiashvili period suggest that the police maintained links with *qurdebi*. For example, a report made to the Central Committee by a high-ranking police official in 1986 stated explicitly:

‘It’s been said many times and I want again to declare it, that the main dereliction in our work has been the ineffectiveness in the struggle with those who maintain the thieves’ traditions, some of our officers relate to these scum with a special respect and even fear. Exactly because of this these elements easily create for themselves “irreproachable authority” becoming figures to be emulated for some unstable young people, drawn towards committing crime.’ (PA, 14/127/330/16)

This view had been expressed in 1985 at the Union level: ‘Some of them [thieves-in-law], through bribery and blackmail, have established criminal contacts with individual workers in the internal security structures, penetrated into the espionage agencies, extracted cover documents – certificates of disability and mental illness.’ (MVD-A, 0033/1985/2-3)

²¹ This was a term which often denoted corruption or illegal second economy activity.

Despite the fact that the thieves' law explicitly stated that members of the fraternity should have no contact with the authorities, it is clear that in the later Soviet period there was close contact between prison governors and the *qurdebi*. Such prisons were known as 'black prisons' which were controlled by the *qurdebi* in contradistinction to 'red prisons' which were free of *qurdebi* influence. According to one former governor (R20; see also Prison Service 2006):

'Governors of prisons received some sort of salary from the obshchak every month. If a governor was receiving such money then he certainly wasn't actually governing anything and the last word rested with those who gave him the money – that means, the qurdebi. And if we compare the word of the governor with the word of the criminal authority...the word of the qurdebi was much stronger...there were of course governors who didn't allow such a situation but they were very few.'

Some respondents emphasised here the personal and familiar element of connections with the *qurdebi*, even sympathy for the *qurdebi* they knew and had a working relationship with:

'[One] qurdi, he was my qurdi and I helped him. I made excuses to the prison governor. Because at that time [the 1980s] there was such an understanding – better my qurdi than your qurdi. You reached an understanding, it was mutual even trusting...it would be worse to have other qurdebi in your prison who you were not acquainted with.' (R25)

Similarly, interviews with serving and former police officers suggest that relationships between the police and the *qurdebi* could be cordial, but were often based on personal familiarity.

'[Qurdebi] had friendly and personal relations with the police. We knew each other and they could use this to protect their own backs. And for us the qurdebi could help with solving a crime...The qurdebi...had to purge their own ranks in order to get rid

of some members because they were suspected of collusion [with the police]. And how did they do that? Usually by selling out the suspected person to the police! So what did collusion mean for them anyway?’ (R2)

This statement is indicative of the pragmatic use of the thieves’ own code of honour for making accusations against rivals combined with the repressive apparatus of the state in order to jockey for position amongst the thieves themselves (Chalidze 1977; R10). It also points to a quid pro quo strategic interaction between the police officials and the *qurdebi* based on already existing social and personal ties between individual police officers or prison workers and *qurdebi* or their representatives. Other respondents also alluded to this (R4, R12).

Such statements also cast doubt on the lingering suspicion that the *qurdebi* and the police’s relationship during Soviet times went beyond mere cooperation or mutual respect to a deep-rooted conspiracy in creating and maintaining social control outside of prison (Tevzadze n.d.). This view gets aired as fact in an international NGO report: ‘promoting state-paid criminals to the status of heroes allowed the Soviet authorities one inroad into a population long suspicious of state powers’ (Godson et al. 2003, p. 10). The idea here is that the *qurdebi* were ‘planted’ in particularly socially disorganised areas such as inner city areas and worked tightly with the police (R16).

However, the testimony of respondents paints a picture in which the *qurdebi* conducted clientage on a micro level with individuals while aspects of the state tolerated and made use of their existence, occasionally repressing them due to political expediency. This pragmatism in relations between the *qurdebi* and the state continued into the 1990s. However, with Georgia entering its ‘time of troubles’ (Zurcher 2006) it became difficult to speak of a state at all and the opportunistic, situational relations between the now demoralised law enforcement, political actors and the *qurdebi* came more fully out into the open.

6.3 Clientage, Bargaining and Integration with State Structures in the 1990s

Whereas in the 1980s the *qurdebi* trust network had been prey for the state, by the 1990s the *qurdebi* were also one of the competing elements in society for the assets of the state. Moreover, the *qurdebi* were able to bargain more directly for political patronage at this time than in the past. The new government, led once again by Shevardnadze, had to grant special privileges to power groups inside and outside of the state (Christophe 2004). Kukhianidze (2008, p. 220) reports that:

‘Between 1991-2003, criminalization of the government was a very serious problem... “Thieves-in-law” who controlled shadow businesses through their nexus with corrupt government officials, used the widespread practice of penetration into the parliament of Georgia. This protected their illegal businesses through the adoption of corrupt laws and by “capturing” the state.’

Similarly, Darchiashvili (2006) found that, ‘there are cases when so-called “*vory-v-zakone*” review the results of certain elections. Some political leaders during their election campaigns visit them in their various corners of Georgia for support.’

Stefes (2006, p. 20) grounds the possibility for such state capture in the systemic and decentralised corruption that emerged in Georgia through the collapse of the previously centralised system of corruption under communism. The fragmentation of state authority meant that ‘coalitions of local and regional officials and crime groups successfully captured key economic sectors and undermined the formation of formal state and market institutions’ (Stefes 2006 p. 35). Organised criminals in Georgia offered a specialisation in violence in suppressing market competition for

well-connected entrepreneurs and former nomenklatura. In return for such services criminals acquired shares in businesses and infiltrated the state and economy (Stefes 2006, p. 83).

The bottom up strategies of the *qurdebi* trust network in the post-Soviet period resembled the use of bargaining for the right of recognition to openly participate in the economy and political life through development of horizontal rather than vertical, ties. Wheatley (2005, p. 80) writes that at this time local, former communist elites not only co-existed with criminal groupings but also began to offer access to political resources. This period then appears to represent a time of greater integration of the *qurdebi* with the remnants of the Georgian state than during communist times. This should be qualified however. This is also a time when the number of *qurdebi* also likely increased (see chapter 8) and not all of them necessarily made contacts in the Georgian state and economy. Many had already left the country having found themselves preyed upon in the post-Soviet period to a greater extent than during the communist times due to an unruly Ministry of the Interior and uncontrollable paramilitary groups (see chapter 7).

Indeed, the threat to the free operation of the *qurdebi* in Georgia in the 1990s was not from a concerted onslaught of state legislation and ideologically driven crime control directives as it had been under communism.²² Instead the threat of predation on the *qurdebi* trust network came from dysfunctional, localised remnants of a once burgeoning governmental security apparatus now unfettered by central authority and ideological constraint. Furthermore, there were increased pressures from other groups such as paramilitary formations such as *Mkhedrioni*. Evidently, as I discuss below,

²² There was, of course, legislation intended to deal with organised criminal activities such as extortion and the creation of armed groups but conviction and incarceration rates were low at this time and there was no coherent anti-organised crime policy as such.

many *qurdebi* were still practising clientage through buying off local police chiefs to be protected in case of conflict and left alone otherwise.

Akin to other processes, the clientage between the *qurdebi* and the police appears to have become more open in the 1990s. With the collapse of state capacity and continuing lack of legitimacy for state structures, different departments of the police, such as the transport police, became trust networks in their own right competing with criminal groups headed by the *qurdebi* in extracting rents from the population. ‘The police force in Georgia would itself come to resemble a large, centralised mafia-type organisation’ (Wheatley, quoted in Stefes 2006, p. 108). In this sense, the police could be the ultimate *krysha* or protection racket for the *qurdebi*.

A pre-Rose Revolution report (Darchiashvili & Nodia 2003) on the ‘power structures’ in Georgia stated that with Kakha Targamadze in charge of the Ministry of the Interior from 1995-2000 the ‘ministry was associated with the cigarette business and the control of retail and wholesale markets; its powers even extended to the oil business and other fields of commerce....during the first half of 2001, only 27.3 per cent of the petrol consumed was taxed’ (2003, p.12). As argued previously (chapter 5) the *qurdebi* were also involved in areas such as wholesale markets and petrol stations suggesting that they either worked with the police or came to an arrangement in maintaining competing business interests including funnelling up a cut of illicit business proceeds to the police. Indeed, one local analyst (Darchiashvili 2006, p. 109) reported that in the year 2002, ‘evidence indicates that the police, subordinated to the Ministry of Interior, has been continuing to tolerate the thieves-in-law and even cooperated with its representatives upon reception of regularly paid “taxes”’.

Respondents from the security sector concurred with this statement suggesting that the police had been patrons for criminals in the 1990s. ‘*Obshchak* [communal

fund] money went to the police - a tax was paid to the local police chief in order to act freely without fear of prosecution' (R6). In Zugdidi in Western Georgia, 'the *qurdebi* paid them [the police] tax, it was \$5,000 if a *qurdi* wanted to come here from Moscow for example and not be touched. There was a *makarubeli* [overseer] who collected money [in Zugdidi] right, so they used the money for this purpose. If a *qurdi* was coming here they would straightaway pay the police off' (R22). The relationship was mainly with the higher echelons of the local police departments however. 'As operational officers you couldn't touch them [the *qurdebi*]. I had that experience in Tbilisi, it didn't matter if you had something on one of them, they always had someone protecting them further up the police hierarchy...I was an officer from 1997 to 2004 and it was the higher rungs who were taking the payments' (R29).

A similar process of payment to administrators of prisons also took place in the 1990s up to the Rose Revolution. According to one prison governor, 'money was collected in the prison and outside of the prison as well, for the *obshchak*...Once money was collected and delivered to the prison...50% would go to the administration and the other half was taken by the *makarubeli* on the inside' (R26). The *qurdebi* used contact with the prison administration to get luxuries. In January of 2003, Ortachala Prison no. 5 in Tbilisi was raided including the cells of *kanonieri qurdebi*. Knives, Kalashnikovs, hand-grenades, mobile phones and drugs were confiscated (Novikov 2003). The *qurdebi* were able to live in much greater comfort on the inside:

'Concerning those facilities, colonies as they are called, it wasn't a jail but an open-type facility with living quarters for prisoners, with big rooms where they keep 120 people, when kanoneri qurdebi where in such facilities they never turned up in the big dormitories they had their own separate cell that they themselves did up, and what they had, you can say, was like an office much better than that of the governor.' (R20)

In return for such luxuries, the *qurdebi* helped keep control of the prison:

'Imagine in the prison there is a riot, the governor will ask the qurdi, what's going on there? The qurdi will say, right you whores, get back in your cells, you are upsetting my position here...if he can't calm the situation down, his position is lost. They won't let his wife come visit next time, or let him go for a walk.' (R18)

In the 1990s prison governors felt it was in their interests to use the *qurdebi* not least because of their small wages:

'[Turning to the qurdebi for help] happened. There was such a case, even a few times. What could we do? People weren't even getting a wage some of the time, the prisoners if they start rioting who's going to risk anything when they don't even get a wage? And it took a lot to bring in special forces.' (R21)

In summary some, though clearly not all, in the *qurdebi* trust network achieved tighter integration in the 1990s, others maintained a negotiated connection to the state based on a clientage strategy. In this period there was toleration and facilitation of the trust network by key state actors based on apparent commitment to each other. Integration between the state and the *qurdebi* was clearly on display as late as 2003 when the Georgian government's plenipotentiary in the Kodori Gorge utilised its connections with the *qurdebi* to rescue UN workers being held hostage, these connections were unashamedly reported by government representatives (Devdariani 2003). By this point the Shevardnadze government had started to become uneasy about the level of influence these criminal actors possessed. When Saakashvili broke with Shevardnadze in 2001 to eventually become one of the most important authors of the Rose Revolution a backlash against the *qurdebi* was soon to come.

6.4 Anti-Mafia and the Rose Revolution

According to key respondents (R39, R7), the anti-mafia policies implemented in Georgia in 2005 were outright ‘cut and paste’ copies of legislation from other countries. In particular, the US’s 1970 Racketeer Influenced Corrupt Organisations Act (RICO) was influential in the drawing up of legislation in Georgia. There are also clear replications of measures brought in by the Italian Anti-Mafia Commission, particularly Emergency Decree Law 306/8 of June 1992 that built on existing anti-mafia law 416bis, that were intended to seriously hinder mafia activities after the assassinations of the Judges Falcone and Borsellino at the hands of Cosa Nostra (Jamieson 2000). Lesson drawing from other jurisdictions was carried out through key advisors including a general prosecutor from the US, and major figures in the anti-mafia Sicilian Renaissance movement, most primarily former Palermo mayor Leoluca Orlando and Roy Godson of the National Strategy Information Center (NSIC), a think tank that had thought out a ‘culture of lawfulness’ programme based on the Sicilian experience of fighting the mafia.

Orlando was especially receptive to Georgians having twinned Tbilisi with Palermo and spent a period in Soviet Georgia in the 1980s when he had fled Sicily due to a threat to his life.²³ During his time there he noted cultural and historical similarities between Sicily and Georgia and wrote about his affection for the people in his autobiography (Orlando 2001, p. 136): ‘also a cocktail of different races and cultures, Georgia was in many ways similar to Sicily.’ From 2001, Orlando and other

²³ Orlando (2001) writes that his relationship with Georgia began when he discovered one of the first grammars of the Georgian language in a Palermo archive that had been written centuries earlier by a Palermitan monk.

prominent anti-mafia leaders from Sicily conducted exchange visits between Palermo and Tbilisi. The transfer from Italy was a process of lesson-drawing and emulation (Rose 1991; Dolowitz & March 2000). The main element taken by the Georgian administration was that reforms had to be implemented in unison. This was Orlando's key message. His often repeated metaphor of the two-wheeled cart, one wheel representing social, political and cultural reform, the other police and judicial reform, that must move together, received an enthusiastic reception in Tbilisi (Orlando 2001, p. 10-11; Schneider & Schneider 2003, p.160).

Below, I will briefly discuss those elements of the policy that directly impact on the discussion of the *kanonieri qurdebi*. These are: the anti-mafia legislation itself, the reform of the police and renewed trust in law enforcement, and a grassroots 'culture of lawfulness' campaign that centred on educational reform. The argument followed here suggests that firstly, the speed and nature of the legislation itself were effective in not allowing the *qurdebi* to adapt. Secondly, the police reform and general anti-corruption drive within the state and political circles cut off the possibility of continuing with clientage and bargaining strategies to gain patronage, as had been done in the past. Thirdly, educational reforms have been important in drying up the potential recruitment pool to the thieves' world. Finally however, it is emphasised that other strategies of survival from predation are available, namely retaliatory predation, concealment, and dissimulation.

6.4.1 Anti-Mafia Legislation

On December 20, 2005, Mikheil Saakashvili signed into force the Law on Organised Crime and Racket. This introduced slang terms, such as *kanonieri qurdebi*, *obshchak*, *garcheva*, *skhodka*, and *qurduli samkaro* that had been used for decades in the criminal underworld into Georgian criminal law. This law, article 223 of the criminal code, states: ‘1. membership of the thieves’ world [*qurduli samkaro*] is punishable by deprivation of liberty for a term of 5 to 8 years...2. Being a thief-in-law [*kanonieri qurdi*] is punishable by deprivation of liberty for a term of 7 to 10 years’ (Prosecution Service 2006). The thieves’ world is defined as a group of people who act on special orders defined/recognised by them with the aim of gaining profit through intimidation, threats, force, the promise of silence, or criminal dispute resolution (*garcheva*), that seeks the involvement of juveniles and encourages criminal acts by others. A member of this world is someone who recognises the criminal authorities and seeks to achieve the goals of the thieves’ world. ‘Criminal handling’ or dispute resolution is the settlement of a dispute between two or more parties by a member of the thieves’ world that can employ threats, force and intimidation. Finally a *kanonieri qurdi* or thief-in-law is defined as a member of the thieves’ world who administers this world and organises activities in accordance with the rules recognised by the members (Prosecution Service 2006, p. 12). Therefore, the prosecution of a *qurdi* is not only based on the recognised fact of someone being a *qurdi* but, in principle at least, also on them committing actions such as organising or issuing directives for criminal acts.

Furthermore, article 37 of the code of criminal procedure states the right of the prosecutor to request the confiscation of property if there is reason to believe that the property was obtained through a racket or through membership of the thieves’ world (Prosecution Service 2006, p. 13). This is considered one of the most important pillars

of the anti-mafia legislation as, in principle, it is designed to take away the material base of organised criminals (R12, R44). Along with these developments, plea bargaining was also introduced into the legal system initially to collect information and uncover high level cases of corruption and also to give an opportunity to the accused to pay back embezzled money to the state in return for lighter sentences. It has also been used in the attack on the *qurdebi* (R7).

The speed of the legislation caught the *qurdebi* that were left in Georgia by surprise; they were seemingly unaware of the content of the legislation and the danger that admitting to their status could be used against them in court (R43). The thieves' own code of honour dictated that to deny one's status was a serious breach that could be sanctioned by expulsion from the fraternity. In adapting to this unique piece of legislation some believe the *qurdebi* have relaxed the rules and can refuse to answer whether they are a *qurdi* or not (Prosecution Service, p. 14). Those close to the *qurdebi* such as relatives and associates also became guarded about commenting on who was a *qurdi*. However, in one case, this behaviour was met with anger by the *qurdi* in question, who was in exile in Russia, as he believed it was dishonourable to deny his status regardless of the punishment that could be meted out and duly told his associates to make it quite clear what his status was (R30).

The policy led to the imprisonment of around 30-40 *qurdebi* and many more 'associates'. As early as April 2006, the general prosecutor was declaring that there was 'not one *qurdi* left in freedom' (Lenta 2006) The tacit contract between the *qurdebi* and the state established prior to 2003 had been broken by the passing and implementation of the new laws. The state was no longer facilitating or tolerating the *qurdebi* but using out and out repressive tactics based on the coercive apparatus of the criminal justice system. One analyst summarises that: 'Georgian "thieves-in-law" are,

without exception, either serving their sentences in the Georgian prisons or fugitives in other countries. They failed to weather the anti-criminal policies of the Georgian government and lost their image as “untouchables”. Moreover they lost their long-standing control and influence in the prisons’ (Kukhianidze 2008, p. 130).

These apparent successes do need some qualification regarding the implementation of policies. For example, while confiscation of property is appealing as it adds an extra source of revenue for the state budget, ‘it is important that seizure provisions are framed in such a way as to prevent the law-enforcement community behaving effectively as bounty hunters’ (Hill 2006, p. 154). In Georgia, some suspect the overriding need to find money to start rebuilding the state was the primary motive of the criminal justice reforms. According to Areshidze (2007, p. 215) the confiscation of property and the demand for all embezzled money to be paid back to the state was used as a pretext for extortion: ‘the government was terrorizing its own citizens...this tactic was not very different from a mobster.’ This suggests that while anti-mafia policies work in transparent and accountable police forces in Europe and America once they are transferred to still relatively opaque repressive post-Soviet institutions, equipping them with extraordinary powers, worrying developments can occur in the implementation stage. However, from the security sector’s point of view, the ability to side-step apparently annoying procedural requirements or ignore internationally prescribed norms might also be seen as adding to the effectiveness of attacking allegedly dangerous criminals who have no recourse to question their treatment.

6.4.2 Police and Prison Reform

In remaking the relationship between the state and the *qurdebi*, perhaps the biggest obstacle was the problem of corruption in criminal justice institutions and the high regard that had been mentioned back in the 1980s that some police held the *qurdebi* in. As the Prosecution Service (2006 p. 14) stated: ‘the most difficult problem was the influence of the criminal authorities over the law enforcement structures. In recent years there were even incidents when a thief-in-law was threatening the officers of the criminal investigation department with dismissal from office.’ Reforming the police and the prisons was therefore a big priority. Reforms began as early as 2004 and were carried out with international assistance from Europe and America (Boda & Kakachia 2006). The main structural changes were within the Ministry of the Interior. Overall the Ministry was reduced in size from 40,000 employees to round 17,000 (Hiscock 2006). Around 15,000 old police personnel were fired; this was over half the nation’s police (Kukhianidze 2006). In place of the old police new people were brought in by means of a competitive recruitment system. The police now number 14,500 with a police to civilian ratio of 1:324. At the time of the Rose Revolution this ratio had been an incredible 1:78 (Kupatadze et al. 2007, p. 94).

The police were given new uniforms and their salaries raised. A police academy was set up. The old anti-organised crime and terrorism unit was reinvented and re-staffed as the Special Operations Department (SOD) with responsibility for investigating organised crime and the *qurdebi*. The infamous Soviet era institution of the Traffic Police who numbered some 2,700 men and acted as highway robbers throughout the country was disbanded (Kukhianidze 2006). A new Patrol Police replaced them. This new force took on responsibilities for order on the streets as well as traffic control. They were given new German cars and Israeli guns and investment

was made in police stations, equipment and information technology. A six week training program was created to verse new recruits in criminal law and the criminal procedural code as well as administrative and physical training (Khinitibidze 2006).²⁴

There have been significant gains made due to these reforms. One survey shows an incredible 75% of the public in 2006 to be satisfied with the police, up from 32% in 2000. This figure decreases to below 50% however for those who have actually used the police services (Bonvin 2006). Still, these figures are more in line with Western Europe and higher than the Central and Eastern Europe area which has a median 32% satisfaction level with the police (Caparini & Marenin 2005). Similarly, subjective feelings of insecurity have decreased since 2000 and perceived levels of corruption are much lower: 80% thought the police corrupt in 2000 compared to just 24.6% in 2006 (Bonvin 2006). The results have been positive, ‘what has been done so far gives a basis to suggest that [reform of the law enforcement system] will bring about the normalisation of the criminogenic situation in the country’ (Kukhianidze 2006).

It was vital to distance the police from the *qurdebi* and to create trust in government security structures. The question is one of faith and confidence in the new police to deliver; ‘as long as the Georgian police fail to inspire trust, the thieves may well retain some of their past influence’ (DiPuppo 2006). Thus, the Interior Minister at the time of the new legislation, Gia Baramidze, threatened police chiefs of any region that still had *qurdebi* operating in it within the month, with the sack (ESI 2010). Symbolism was also an important element in this. Baramidze’s successor,

²⁴ Other attempts to create a more democratic police force include the demilitarisation of the Border Police, moving the state’s Interior Troops to the Ministry of Defence, and the Ministry of the Interior’s decentralisation with regional headquarters given more independence. Lastly, a Financial Police was also established in the Ministry of Finance. These changes occurred simultaneously with strict oversight mechanisms such as the umbrella organisation, the National Police Directorate, to prevent corrupt practices in the Patrol, Criminal and Security Police from taking root.

Vano Merabishvili proclaimed at the beginning of the campaign against the *qurdebi* that, ‘we will confiscate from all thieves-in-law [*kanonieri qurdebi*] the palaces they built with their dirty money, and put police stations in their place’ (Gerzmava et al 2007). New police stations in the big, former houses of *qurdebi* now dominate the districts of Georgia’s towns.

The police reform precluded individual *qurdebi* from employing a clientage strategy to protect themselves from the new wave of attack by the central government. Similarly, the penitentiary department adopted reforms along the lines of the police reform, removing the once tight relationship between the prison administration and the *qurdebi*. Some prisons had an 80% turnover of staff, and salaries were raised 200-300% (R42). In January 2006, a process of removing *kanonieri qurdebi* from the rest of the prison population began. The Georgian government now holds *qurdebi* in a separate prison, no. 7, in Tbilisi, with much curtailed rights to visits, phone calls and mail. These measures appear to be copies of article 41 bis of the Italian penal code. All prison governors that had relations with the *qurdebi* previously were dismissed (Prison Service 2006 p. 13). A rigorous recruitment process was implemented. The clientage practised by the *qurdebi* previously was broken off. As one prison governor put it: ‘Before they could get anything in, drugs, women, phones, it was all possible the prison was absolutely corrupt. Now, we are talking, fresh bedclothes, fruit, tea, juice, nothing else, you won’t get anything into this prison now’ (R27). The combination of harsh legislation to put the *qurdebi* in prison, isolation once there, and all beneficial ties with previous patrons broken was ‘a double act – stop them in prison and outside it’ (R5).

6.4.3 Educational Reform

The ‘culture of lawfulness’ campaign began before the Rose Revolution in 2000, though many of the policies were only carried through after the revolution. It included the involvement of an internationally active NGO, the National Strategy Information Center (NCIS) based in Washington DC, and many of the elements of campaign had been tried and tested in other countries previously, specifically in Sicily. Following the Sicilian model, ‘educating for legality’ was introduced into the curriculum (Schneider & Schneider 2003, p. 265). A course teaching the principles of citizenship was introduced into Georgian schools encouraging tolerance, non-violence, and respect for the law. Part of the course brings policemen into the schools to talk to the schoolchildren. It also recommends viewings of the film adaptation of William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* and the Mafioso-turned-pentiti story told in the Hollywood film *Goodfellas* (Godson et al. 2003, p. 26).

Respondents, including three Kutaisi headmasters, students from schools in Kutaisi that had previously graduated renowned *qurdebi*, and representatives of the Ministry of Education suggested that these programmes have been positively received and positive normative orientations towards the *qurdebi* uprooted. One academic believes that this ‘change is not psychological so much as behavioural...they [schoolchildren] have the same attitudes but the incentives are no longer to act in line with those attitudes. There is no incentive now to be a *qurdi*. You won’t achieve anything with it....Schoolkids are the quickest in understanding what they want from life, what is fashionable and what is not. Now, they have pressure to study to achieve something’ (R6).

The educational reform should also be seen as part of the state's renegotiation of its relationship with the *qurdebi*. A central element of the *qurdebi*'s code had always been the attraction of youth to their way of life. As one respondent put it: 'the main goal for the *qurdebi*? Maintaining a legacy' (R2). The state then had to give some form of alternative to this and mobilise bias against the thieves' way of life. It is one of the wheels of Orlando's cart without which the *qurdebi* could still maintain a hold as ideal type criminals being persecuted by a fundamentally unjust state. Thus, as well as repressing the trust network through the use of coercive state machinery, it was necessary to dry up the potential recruiting pool and bring over young people to the side of the state and the law.

6.5 Strategies of Resistance

Georgian policy-makers followed Orlando's anti-mafia strategy closely. The educational reform was a direct attack on the reputation of the *qurdebi* and their popularity amongst young people. The new criminal legislation was incredibly direct, identifying the *qurdebi* by name, criminalising and stigmatising the status itself. The removal of corrupt police and prison officers removed the safety buffer that had once protected individual *qurdebi* from state attack. The speed and simultaneity of the reforms left little room for manoeuvre:

'I don't think the qurdebi really understood what was going on or the extent of the changes that were being brought in. They didn't get the legislation, we talked to them when they were arrested and...it was clear to us that they thought that normal service would be resumed, but the conditions and the way they are kept now is fundamentally different, they are being shown disrespect and it all happened too quickly for them to respond.' (R43)

The rules of the game for resisting the state had been changed. The strategies open to the *qurdebi* in avoiding predation had been reduced. Opportunities for clientage and bargaining had been minimised. The state was not interested in enlisting or working with the *qurdebi* with the exception of plea-bargaining in the court. I will show below that the *qurdebi's* options were to fight back and attempt their own predation of the state, conceal themselves, or else dissimulate dissolution of the trust network.

At a news conference in Tbilisi on 12 January 2004 Saakashvili vowed to take a tough line against prisoners preparing to riot in support of the *qurdebi*. 'We will shoot down the rioters. We will not spare bullets against them. I know that the criminal world will resist. But we are not afraid' (Civil 2004). Similarly, December 2005 was a particularly troublesome month as the government opened a new prison in Kutaisi intended to improve conditions and break up the hierarchies and patterns of interactions amongst the prisoners. On the 22nd a riot occurred in which the prisoners demanded phones and the return of the '*makarubeli*,' or thieves' overseer, suggesting that the removal of criminal authority figures from the prison had caused disruption to prison life (Regnum 2005a). Then on the 25th of that month, 8,000 prisoners (of a prison population of 13,000 at the time) declared a hunger strike in a protest allegedly instigated by the *qurdebi*. In response, the former head of the prison service Bacho Akhalia announced (Regnum 2005b): 'there will be no thieves' law in the prisons, all prisoners will subordinate themselves to the official rules.'

The biggest uprising seemingly against the new rules occurred in March 2006. A riot at Ortachala Prison no. 5 in Tbilisi was put down with the use of special forces and seven prisoners lost their lives. An alleged *qurdi*, Platon Mamardashvili, led the prison riot (Anjaparidze 2006). He later claimed that he had been duped by the police

and denied he had ever been ‘baptised’ as a *qurdi* (Public Defender 2007). Wiretaps showed that there had been telephone contact from Tariel Potskveriya a Kutaisi born *qurdi* based in Ukraine who was subsequently deported and brought before a Tbilisi court. There were apparent attempts to spread the riot to other prisons in Western Georgia (R38). The Georgian government framed the riot as a final attempt by the thieves’ world to destabilise the country and revert back to the original contract between the *qurdebi* and the state. The Chairman of the Parliamentary Judicial Issues Committee, Levan Bezhashvili implicated the political opposition. Saakashvili alluded to the fact that ‘Russian oligarchic capital as well as very serious local Mafia interests’ had been threatened by his anti-mafia policies (Slade 2007, p. 176).

The Ombudsman at the time, who visited the prison on the night of the riot, was unconvinced by these arguments. ‘It was not some insurrection or anything of the kind...the prisoners started creating a *shumok* [a noisy disturbance], there was little organisation to it, there was no attempted mass breakout or anything of this kind, just once it started Potskveriya was contacted’ (R43). Following this observation, a plausible line of argument may be that the changes to the prison administration and the movement and separation of the prisoners after the Rose Revolution created uncertain conditions in the prisons destabilising them and nurturing conditions for conflict and revolt. When this occurred, it did at times spread from prison to prison. It is still another leap from this, however, to the idea that the *qurdebi* were engaged in collective action across the penal estate as a means of resistance to the state’s attempts to repress them.

Instead, it is likely then that the state’s own anti-mafia actions had been successful enough to render Saakashvili and his government’s conspiratorial explanation of events such as the prison riots untenable. The speed of the Rose

Revolution and its harshness made it impossible for the *qurdebi* to coordinate and collectively challenge the state. Furthermore, as we have seen in the decade or so leading up to the revolution the relationship between the state and *qurdebi* was predominantly on a quid pro quo individual basis and the *qurdebi*'s own network had become loose, factionalised and fractious making retaliation harder still (see chapter 8).

The strategies left to the *qurdebi* then, other than complete dissolution, were concealment or dissimulation. Though on the face of it dissolution appears to have taken place there may be an element of dissimulation in this. Certainly, no prisoner can claim sympathies with the *qurdebi* without having their sentence added to (R26), and those who declare an allegiance to the *qurdebi* are allegedly targets of humiliation and degrading treatment (R3). Therefore, it makes sense to dissimulate any adherence or faithfulness to the old thievish ways. Yet, two to three years after the legislation, court cases are still being brought against alleged adherents of the thieves' world who remain in contact with *qurdebi* living in Russia and elsewhere (Lenta 2007; Georgian Times 2008; Interpress News 2010). Assuming that the charges against these people are fair, those involved in these cases might be seen as dissimulating, going along with the general anti-mafia sentiment of the day, whilst still adhering to the old norms of the thieves' world until found out. 'These are the same people who a few years ago respected the *qurdebi*'s tradition. I think you can't change the mentality so simply' (R6). Many in Georgia believe that the old ways of thinking and acting are still present and even drive opposition to the state (R17).

However, the easiest and most utilised strategy is concealment, which in the *qurdebi* case has taken the form of migration from Georgia. For those *qurdebi* who had stayed in Georgia the best strategy was to hide from the Georgian state abroad.

This appears to have become the predominant strategy. The number of *qurdebi* in Moscow has grown and the last few years have seen growing numbers of crackdowns in Spain, Austria, Greece and France where Georgian gangsters in groups often headed by *qurdebi* have been held (Europol 2005; Oxford Analytica 2010; BBC 2010).

The Georgian government has attempted to have many of its thievish compatriots deported back to Georgia to face charges of membership of the thieves' world and some requests have been successful. There have also been some intriguing cases where the Georgian authorities, for reasons unknown, have been uncooperative with their foreign counterparts in pursuing Georgian *qurdebi* abroad (Guardian 2010). Meanwhile, the government has also continually claimed that influential exiled *qurdebi* have attempted to foment trouble back in Georgia, supporting opposition rallies and intrigues against the government (Messenger 2009), including the Mukhrovani mutiny against the government in May 2009 (Civil 2009). An investigation has been started in Austria into allegations that Georgian organised crime groups were using Austria as a base to operate in and fund opposition protests in Tbilisi in the spring of 2009 (Crawford 2010). If true, perhaps this suggests that even concealed trust networks can still attempt predation if they feel threatened enough.

6.6 Conclusion

In summary, Table 6.1 below shows the changes in the relationship between the *kanonieri qurdebi* and the Georgian state and the outcomes from their changing interactions. As stressed previously, Table 6.1 should not be taken to suggest that the

state or the *qurdebi* should be taken as monolithic entities with overarching, collective strategies towards one another. The majority of the time relations were on a micro and personal level between individuals representing the state and the *qurdebi* network. While the *qurdebi* did coordinate at collective meetings (*skhodki*), and formally banned collusion with the state in their original code of honour, it cannot be shown that the *qurdebi* as a group had an enforced and uniform policy towards the state by the later Soviet period. However, the general tendencies in the relations between the state and the *qurdebi* can be observed as follows:

Time Period	State Strategy	Qurdebi Strategy	Outcome
Later Soviet	Toleration/ Repression	Clientage	Negotiated Connection
Post-Soviet	Toleration/ Facilitation	Clientage & Bargaining	Negotiated Connection/ Integration
Post-Rose Revolution	Repression	Predation, Dissimulation & Concealment	Segregation

Table 6.1 to show predominant relational strategies of the state and the qurdebi in Georgia over time

These relations are utterly central to the analysis of the resilience of the *qurdebi*. It is also a question that fascinates most Georgians. Many believe that the *qurdebi*'s resilience is due to the state needing them and therefore facilitating their existence, even creating them:

'Ask yourself, why now? Why have the government got rid of them [the qurdebi] now? Surely it's because the government don't need them anymore. They were necessary in the past...when you have an authoritarian regime they can't control aspects of life and they need this type of informal control. And when we had a non-functioning democracy after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was also necessary to have this type of social control in place, but now we have democracy, we have proper security, law enforcement, and less corruption, so we don't need these qurdebi anymore.' (R42)

Yet there was no great mutually beneficial deal between *qurdebi* and state. In fact, the state during Soviet times was surreptitiously attacking the *qurdebi* and what it termed 'group crime.' However, the relationship between the *qurdebi* and the state existed beneath the radar of these crime control policies. It was made up of individual level ties produced by familiarity in wider social networks and strategic interactions based on quid pro quo reasoning. Here, then, the often-cited tight-knit familial nature of Georgian society is useful to emphasise (Mars & Altman 1983; Suny 1994; Nordin & Glonti 2005; Kukhianidze 2006). The inter-connectedness of Georgian social life must surely have facilitated the clientage that the *qurdebi* practised in the 1980s and 1990s. The result of this local social reality was, on the whole, a negotiated connection between the state and *qurdebi* through patronage.

Individual *qurdebi* were able to shape their own relations with officials and civil servants throughout both the later and post Soviet periods. The state meanwhile, up to the Rose Revolution at least, lacked the type of dynamic and coherent anti-corruption and crime control strategy that would completely break the individual-level ties between the *qurdebi* and state representatives. In terms of this then, the singularly most important feature of the anti-mafia reforms pushed through by the Saakashvili administration was the turnover of personnel that had been enacted with the reforms of the police and the prisons. This must be seen as highly significant in making the *qurdebi* vulnerable to state shock and therefore lessening their chances of

surviving such a shock. Speed and simultaneity learnt from international best practice was met with little response by the *qurdebi* other than the wholesale abandonment of Georgia for other countries.

The move to concealment through migration in the criminal world might be completely explained by the effectiveness of the reforms combined with the harshness with which they were implemented. As an explanation this would be too simple however. In the next four chapters of the thesis, I take up an analysis of the dynamics, adaptations, contradictions and shortcomings in the thieves' world. This shows that the decline of the *qurdebi* and the success of the Georgian anti-mafia struggle is rooted in many other factors than post-Rose Revolution strength of law enforcement policies.

7. Fitting the Frame: Recruitment Practices and Adaptation

*“Such is the thief’s fate
Trouble follows him always
More than half his life
In prison he must spend”*

Lines from a popular Georgian song

“A thief should be in prison!”

Famous line of Captain Gleb Zhiglov played by Vladimir Vitsotskiy in the 1979 Soviet detective series *'Mesto Vstrechi Izmenit' Nel'zya'* ['The Meeting Place Cannot be Changed'].

The *qurdebi* have gone through huge social upheavals and economic traumas and, just as the rest of the population, have adapted to these new realities. In terms of these adaptations, the most basic grounds for the survival of any institution is in maintaining an influx of new, committed members. As Tilly (2006, p. 22) says: ‘both political regimes and trust networks...depend on a constant flow of new resources that supports their major activities and reproduces the structures making those activities possible...trust networks that stop recruiting new, committed individuals shrivel in no more than a single generation.’ Similarly, the literature on the ecology of organisations also suggests that a flexible supply of human resources is necessary to

survive exogenous shocks, a key component of resilience (Hannan & Freeman 1984; Bouchard 2007).

This chapter looks at the dynamics of recruitment to the *qurdebi* in a changing environment. I show the importance of the prison as a central feature of *qurdebi* recruitment practice, framing this in terms of candidates signalling necessary attributes. I then go on to plot changes in the use of prison as a costly signal that may be used for ‘screening’ potential candidates. I find that there appears to have been a decrease in the use of prison prior to initiation of new recruits. I argue that this is a significant change and a lowering of barriers to entry that is in line with other phenomena such as the title of *kanoneri qurdi* being sold by already made men. I then discuss possible causes of this change. I put forward a number of hypotheses that appear to be supported by the data available.

This chapter draws on interviews conducted in Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Zugdidi, as well as secondary sources. It also utilises police files on individual *qurdebi* from the Special Operations Department in Tbilisi and Kutaisi. I turn first however to the theoretical frame for this chapter, which utilises the insights of signalling theory.

7.1 Recruitment and Signalling Attributes

Recruiting to any organisation whether it is a business, an academic department or a football team involves issues of trusting that a candidate has the necessary attributes to add to the resources of the group. In the criminal world this is even more pertinent as a question; as Gambetta (1993) states, there are certain resources that a mafia needs which its members must to some extent provide. These

are first and foremost a capacity for violence, the ability to collect and manage information, to keep and maintain a good reputation, and to maintain good public relations by advertising yourself and your activities successfully (see Gambetta 1993, chapter 2). Thus, any potential recruit to a mafia must be able to add somehow to these resources. Having the right qualities is one thing but communicating this fact is fraught with difficulties in an underworld suffering from a deep deficit of trust due to the potential for infiltration by undercover police, whistleblowers or those who might not finally be up to the task.

Michael Spence (1973) gave the classic statement of the problem of signalling in economics when he analysed the issue of finding suitable employees in the job market. In signalling games, there is asymmetric information between two players. One, the signaller s , wishes to convince the other, the receiver r , that he possesses certain attributes, a certain level of productivity for example. What signal can s send that would be regarded by r as trustworthy, showing that s has the necessary attributes? Overcoming this problem in the workplace involves investing in certain signals agreed upon by convention over time such as educational qualifications. The mechanism by which this signalling works ultimately rests on the belief of the receiver of the signal that qualifications indeed are trustworthy signals of productivity.

Spence showed that this argument works regardless of whether a university qualification really enhances skills (Gibbons 1992; Hargreaves-Heap & Varoufakis 2004). Instead, high-ability candidates choose to go to university to signal their otherwise unobservable ability to future employers. This can only work however if low-ability candidates are unable to incur the costs of getting a given university qualification. Thus, there should be a cost differential between what someone with the

right qualities (the hidden krypton factor k) can afford to signal relative to someone who does not have the qualities needed (non- k) (Bacharach & Gambetta 2001). Ideally, the cost of the signal should be such that only the non- k candidate would find it prohibitively expensive. The relative cost of the signal to the k and non- k candidates is the discriminating factor between them. A signal that does not meet the cost discriminating condition, that is, one that can be produced cheaply for both k and non- k signallers, creates uncertainty as to the potential value for taking on the recruit (Spence 1973). Furthermore, where the cost discriminating condition holds, the costs the k signaller incurs should be relative to the potential benefits to both signaller and receiver making the production of the signal a rational thing to do. Those benefits in the job market are usually thought of as higher wages for the signaller, whereas the receiver gains the potential recruit's productive capability if the signalling works. Equilibrium is reached when the cost of signalling is prohibitively expensive for those who do not have the right abilities, putting them off attempting to acquire and send the signal, while the benefits of investing in the signal and utilising it are suitably high and the relative cost suitably low to make it worthwhile to those who do have those abilities.

Following Spence (1973) and Bacharach & Gambetta (2001) then, a signal is meant here as an action by a signaller (s) to raise the probability that the signal-receiver (r) assigns to the fact that the signaller is indeed the type of person he suggests he is. For r the question as to whether he or she can trust the candidate to do x is answered by whether the observable signals displayed actually are of the desired hidden krypton factor, k (Ibid).

However, while it is in the interests of the k candidate to create clear unambiguous signals of her qualities, it is also in the interests of the non- k candidate

to blur those signals and make them easy to mimic. A mimicker is a person manifesting the right signs in order to signal unobservable deeper qualities that are not in actual fact there. In the criminal world this happens to be a particular problem in terms of the mistaken recruiting of stool pigeons or undercover police (Gambetta 2009a).

In getting around such problems in the mafia, the costs placed on potential candidates are subject to the action of the made men themselves. The in-group can raise the barriers to entry by only accepting costlier signals as authentic indicators of character much as an employer might do by requiring master's level education rather than bachelor's. This might account for the Japanese Yakuza's practice of requiring candidates to chop off one of their little fingers. Still the employer does not want to make the signal too costly relative to the benefits the employee will acquire once hired, as then he or she will have no candidates for the job.

Another strategy for the mafia is 'imposing constraints of affordability on the mimic' (Gambetta 2009a) by harshening punishments for someone who is faking the necessary skills especially if they are working for the police. However, this is not a particularly cost effective strategy as punishing itself is an expensive activity that involves collecting information and taking risks (Ibid). Also it may be put into effect only after the fact, meaning the costs of hiring have already been taken on. Furthermore, punishment depends on the efficiency of the policing of the boundaries of the group; if this is not effective some opportunists might still slip through the net. Thus, putting the onus on the signaller to carry costs and produce clear, authentic, cost-discriminating signals is the best strategy for the employer, whether a mafia or otherwise. However, in the language of game theory, most signalling games are only semi-sorting. That is they mainly fail to separate perfectly the k signallers from the

non-*k* signallers (Bacharach & Gambetta 2001; Bliege-Bird & Alden Smith 2005). Equilibrium in these games is delicate. There may always be some fraudsters who get through.

This is all relevant to the *qurdebi* as I will show. In the remainder of the chapter, I look at the role of the prison as a signalling device for potential recruits. I show that historically the prison was a vital element in signalling criminal ‘productivity’ and ability to perform well as a future *qurdi*. Utilising police data however, I find that the use of the prison has diminished in the 1990s. The decline in the use of prison is augmented by other novel recruitment practices such as the buying of the *qurdi* title by potential recruits. I argue that although exogenous factors such as the weakness of law enforcement in part explain the decline in the use of prison experience as a signal other strong explanations include an increase in violent competition and increases in agency and opportunity costs for those who would otherwise police the recruitment practices of the *qurdebi*. I argue that these changes represent an important shift in ‘sorting’ potential candidates that might well have detrimental effects for the reputation of the *qurdebi* ‘brand’.

7.2 *Initiation and Trust*

In Georgia certain terms describe a young man’s proximity to the day of ‘baptism’ or ‘crowning’ as a *qurdi*. Firstly, the term *kai bichi* (goodfella) means someone who follows the *qurdebi* but who may or may not have any pretensions himself of becoming a *qurdi*. Secondly, a *momevali*, meaning literally ‘future’, is a *kai bichi* who has declared himself as living by the *qurdebi*’s code or understandings, known as the *gageba*, and is a shortening of the phrase ‘looking to the future’ which

takes the meaning of someone who is trying to become a *qurdi*. Thirdly, the term *ganapi* denotes someone whose candidacy is already being considered and is rendered in Russian as ‘*bez pyati minut*’, or ‘five to the hour’ with the connotation of when the hour strikes you will have the title. As one respondent put it (R19): ‘In general a young man, maybe 17 or 18 years old can announce that he is ‘looking to the future’, that is that he wants to become a *qurdi* and that he will live that life. In this sense they become a soldier so to speak, they act and work on behalf of the *qurdebi*, like a footman for them.’

Many of the ‘baptisms’ for which there is specific information take place in prison during the first or second conviction. For example, the ethnically Kurdish *qurdi* Sumbat Abasov was baptized in the Rustavi camp [*koloniya*] in 1990, during a seven year term for theft (*krazh*). His main recommender was the powerful Kurdish *qurdi* known as Ded Hasan; other attendees at the *skhodka* came in from outside the camp for the occasion (Prime Crime 2008a). Rustavi *qurdi* Lasha Tolstii was first crowned during a 6-month sentence in Tbilisi in 1979, at the young age of 18. This indicates that life experience and age by itself is not as essential as proving yourself in prison as Lasha it seems was able to do rather quickly. The trust in this young *qurdi* was well-founded as Lasha went on to collect three more convictions and amass 11 more years behind bars and is now a very influential figure in the Tbilisskaya group belonging to Ded Hasan in Moscow (Prime Crime 2008b).

Once time in prison has been served, a new recruit must go through an initiation ritual. The initiation process takes place at a thieves’ meeting, known as a *skhodka*, and in itself acts as a test for ensuring that new recruits are of high quality. The ritual process has been described well elsewhere (Varese 2001, chapter 7) however, the aspect of the *skhodka* that needs emphasising for the purposes of this

chapter is the role it plays in bridging the informational gap in terms of trusting the character and identity of a new recruit.

According to Gurov (1995), ‘the main purpose [of the *skhodka*] is to define the trustworthiness of the candidate to propagate the thieves’ idea amongst other law-breakers.’ In the process of the *skhodka* then it is important to establish the authenticity of the candidate. The method taken to achieve this is referral. Two or more recommendations are needed from made men. Through this method the recommenders are held responsible for the future performance of the would be *qurdi*, known as the *malyutka*, encouraging full checks before putting a recommendation forward and discouraging ills such as nepotism or the desire to insulate yourself through recruiting many of your own men. The recommending *qurdebi* prefer to know the candidate intimately, thus the recruit has ‘to follow along with them, spend time with them, show yourself, help the families, money, rent, they have to get to know you, if they don’t know who you are you can’t just become a *qurdi*, you have to have respect’ (R10).

Knowing someone’s character and, for a candidate, getting close to the *qurdebi* is most efficient in the prison environment. Information on someone is easier to acquire and behaviour easier to observe. In prison when someone is put forward for baptism a *ksiva* is passed round, a note with the *malyutka*’s qualifications written on it, the thieves’ version of a CV (Gurov 1995; Varese 2001). The process then proceeds along the lines of an interrogation, with questions put forward and the *malyutka* asked to justify past actions (R2). One *skhodka* reported in Samtredia in western Georgia involved a candidate who did not pass this test due to the presence of one *qurdi* who was the friend of a Kutaisi family whose daughter the candidate had had illicit relations with outside of wedlock. This evidently threw doubt on the

candidate's character and the doubting *qurdi* refused to give his vote to the candidate (R40).

Once all agree that the candidate is worthy the new recruit takes an oath of allegiance which according to some is very similar to that taken by Soviet Communist Party members (Oleinik 2003). The issue of trust comes across strongly in the oath. The oath, according to Gurov (1995, p. 106), is: 'I, as a goodfella [patsan], have taken the thieves' way in life, I swear, in front of the thieves that are present at the *skhodka*, to have nothing to do with the fraud of the Chekists.' This oath expresses one of the first traditional canons of the *qurdebi*'s law: to have nothing to do with the state. It also seems to express a deep anxiety about being infiltrated by the police (the Chekists). Problems of ensuring the authenticity of the new recruit are at the centre of the *qurdebi*'s initiation ritual then. So how can a young man who desires to become a *kanoneri qurdi* signal that his intention is true and strong and that he is worth making a made man? In the thieves' world, prison is the key.

7.3 *The Role of Prison*

Prison, as Gambetta (2009a) has stated, is an excellent 'screening device' for finding trustworthy partners for serious criminals. Undeniably, prison provides an excellent educational experience for a life of crime. Like schools that offer submersion courses, it perfects skills in argot, the reading of tattoos, and informal codes of behaviour. In the environment of the prison, personal information flows and tight connections form between inmates. This makes genuine prison experience very difficult to fake. Thus, prison experience can be used as a trustworthy signal of someone's criminal credentials. Prison experience meets the cost-discriminating

condition in signalling theory, as it is most definitely a costly signal for those that are not truly dedicated to the thieves' life. Few people would be willing to enter such a harsh environment for a prolonged period with the aim of becoming a *qurdi* without real commitment to this goal. Furthermore, numbers of convictions and length of sentences are measurable signals – the greater the length of time spent in prison the more dedication and knowledge of the thieves' code and informal behavioural rules a person is likely to have.

Prison also enables monitoring. For one thing it can be immediately known what crime someone has committed and this itself might act as a signal.²⁵ Behaviour in prison is easier to closely observe and ensure that rules are kept to. Such rules include the fact that *kai bichebi* should never work in prison, they should give to and collect for the common fund known as the *obshchak*, shun the undesirables in prison, have command of jargon and skills at card-playing. In pre-Rose Revolution Georgia, the *qurdebi* often controlled prisons (so-called 'black' prisons) thus making prison an intense environment where hiding character flaws or attempted imitation of desirable qualities could be easily picked up on. Indeed, the *qurdebi*'s 'representatives' in prison are called *makarublebi*, or 'overseers'. Traditionally *qurdebi* were crowned in prison, presumably after they had proved themselves there.

Prison experience is then an absolute necessity in the traditions of the *kanoneri qurdebi*, who are after all carriers of, and agitators for, a penal subculture. Time in prison was a prerequisite for becoming a *qurdi* (Nordin & Glonti 2005; R8).

²⁵ The data (AOCU-T & K) reveal that the far most prevalent article in the data for the first three convictions is for stealing (article 150), as well as hooliganism, drug possession, and arms carrying. Stealing of course allows one to live without working perhaps making it a necessary and respected crime for would be *qurdebi* forbidden as they are from undertaking gainful employment. Similarly, a charge of hooliganism in Soviet times was often for simply being unemployed or loitering on the street, again signalling a lifestyle choice upon arrival in prison. Harsher crimes such as murder do not figure presumably as these are not necessarily good signals unless committed in the right normative context for example, in aid of a *qurdi*.

The vast majority of *qurdebi* have been convicted and imprisoned at some point. The inevitability and even desirability of serving a prison term in Georgia meant that some young men, deciding on living the thieves' life, prepared themselves for the hard prison beds by sleeping on the floor at home (R29). Prison experience is vital for generating shared experience and trust in potential recruits, thus 'baptism' of new recruits should only occur after convictions have occurred. The data suggest this to be the case. The average first conviction age is 20 (N=67) whereas the mean baptism age is 24 (N=76) (AOCU-T 2004; AOCU-K 2004). Though this is a small sample it does suggest that baptism occurs only during or after a prison term.

Prison as a central feature of the *qurdebi*'s existence can make a smart signalling device for measuring someone's trustworthiness, capabilities and authority. However, as discussed theoretically above, prison, like university, works not by teaching specific skills but by being deliberately chosen by people to signal their greater suitability for a job to future employers. To what extent can the use of the prison be seen as a deliberate strategy and therefore a signalling device?²⁶ An answer to this involves restating the degree to which a prison term was very much anticipated by those who wanted to choose the thieves' life. Whether or not it was desired or looked forward to, it was seen as inevitable by anyone following the thieves' life in the Soviet Union. Potential *qurdebi* had to have refused to work or wear uniforms all their lives and this on its own would have been enough to be convicted in Soviet times for 'parasitism'.

Thus, while prison is forced upon a person by the state, in the Soviet Union this imposition was to no small extent brought about by the intentional choice of lifestyle taken up prior to this. All this is not to deny that there might be cases of

²⁶ I am grateful to Dr. Heather Hamill for bringing this question to my attention in a workshop on signalling theory at Nuffield College, Oxford, December 2009.

people going to prison completely unintentionally but then choosing to ingratiate themselves with the thieves only during or after prison. Such cases, it is true, might dilute a signalling system that solely relied on the fact of having been in prison. However, it is not being argued here that prison was the only signal for sorting candidates, but that accumulated prison experience was merely one of the most basic and important ones.

Other possible signals such as investing in the communal fund or *obshchak*, burning bridges with other social ties other than the thieves' community, a criminal history of the 'right' types of crime – murderers and violent criminals were unreliable and seen as a lower caste than the thieves - refusal to work or wear uniforms, and the ability to speak well and follow the thieves' code in disputes might all be seen as signals if it can be shown that they manage to cost-discriminate between those that have the skills and those that do not. For example, burning bridges with your family would be a cost-discriminating signal, while talking well and refusing to work would simply represent desirable features and skills to have rather than signals.

In summary then, the fact of prison experience is a cost-discriminating signal. This is true if it can be shown as I have tried to here, that for a criminal dedicated to the thieves' idea going to prison was an intentional signal required from all candidates as a basic prerequisite in becoming a *qurdi*.

7.4 Changes in the Use of Prison in Recruitment

The data show that the average number of convictions for Georgian *qurdebi* is 2.4 with a range of 0 to 9. The overall mean number of convictions is skewed downwards by those that have zero convictions. Once these cases are excluded mean

convictions stands at 3. It was unexpected to find any cases of zero convictions given the importance of convictions and subsequent prison time for becoming a *qurdi*. So an important question becomes: who was being baptised without having served prison time? Looking at this deeper I found that the differences in prison experience changed over time with the greatest change occurring after Georgian independence in 1991. Bringing together data from the police databases from Tbilisi and Kutaisi, I divided the cases (N=92) into four cohorts based on theoretical reflections of where changes might be expected due to alterations in the political order and socio-economic life of Georgia (for an explanation of this see chapter 3). Cases were placed in cohorts according to an estimate (based on the available data) of when a *qurdi* would have been baptised and spent some time living according to the thievish understandings. This age was 24. It is very likely that by this age most would have a conviction, have served time in prison and have clear designs on becoming a baptised *qurdi*. Table 7.1 shows that the vast majority of those *qurdebi* with zero convictions occur in one cohort.

Cohort	Number of Convictions									Total
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	8	9	
1952-1971	0	0	0	2	1	3	1	0	0	7
1972-1981	0	1	3	2	5	3	0	1	1	16
1982-1991	1	3	4	8	4	4	2	0	0	26
1992-2004	18	13	7	4	1	0	0	0	0	43
Total	19	17	14	16	11	10	3	1	1	92

Table 7.1: differences in numbers of convictions across cohorts

Source: AOCU-T & K 2004

Due to age it is to be expected that cases from the youngest cohort would have low numbers of convictions while older cohorts would have higher numbers and the results show this to be the case. However, the fact that so many from the youngest cohort became *qurdebi* without having prison experience is less expected.²⁷

Is it possible that the members of other cohorts had become *qurdebi* before spending time in prison as well thus making the 1992-2004 cohort no exception? Based on historical accounts and the centrality of prison in the thieves' world this is very unlikely, at least on to such an extent as is the case with the youngest cohort in

²⁷ The average number of convictions falls the younger the cohorts get. Mean number of convictions for each cohort is as follows: for 1952-1971 it stands at 4.4 (N=7), for 1972-1981 – 4.0 (N=16), 1982-1991 – 3.1 (N=26), 1992-2004 – 1.0 (N=43). A Mann-Whitney U test to test the difference of the scores between the two youngest cohorts, 1982-1991 (N=26) and 1992-2004 (N=43), shows that the variation cannot have been produced by random. The cohort effect is also strong ($r = 0.6$, $p < 0.000$). Naturally, with such small numbers this is a non-parametric test. However, despite these drawbacks the results suggest that the cohort effect on the variation in conviction numbers requires explanation.

my analysis. Respondents were adamant that prison was absolutely necessary to become a *qurdi*. One respondent drew parallels with the dissident movement; to show dedication to a cause prison experience was required (R17). Another, (R9), said: ‘in the past, if you hadn’t sat in prison there was no way you could be baptized, you couldn’t! In the past there was proper respect for these traditions.’ The data in the files also show that, of those *qurdebi* that have convictions, the first conviction age is around 20 across all cohorts, yet the age of ‘baptism’ was older, in the mid-twenties again for all cohorts. Thus, on average across cohorts the *qurdebi* that do have convictions and prison experience, acquire them before they attain their status.

Furthermore, all *qurdebi* should have a conviction simply based on their code of honor, which demands it. And, moreover, the younger cohort should have more convictions generally based on the data available. The average age in the year when the police reports were compiled - 2004 - of a member of the 1992-2004 cohort was already 30. Given that the mean age for first conviction across cohorts was around 20 years old, second conviction 24 and third conviction 28, we would still expect more of this cohort to have at least one or more convictions regardless of whether they were baptized before or after these convictions.

The most obvious explanation in understanding why so many *qurdebi* from this 1992-2004 cohort have no convictions is to consider that the authorities in the 1990s were relatively weaker than during Soviet times and levels of impunity were therefore higher. The Georgian criminal justice system was extremely weak after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The cost in signaling through prison experience is constituted by the actions of the state (Gambetta 2009b) and so changes in the capabilities of the authorities have consequences for equilibrium in the signaling game in sorting good candidates out from bad ones. However, this still does not alter

the fact that actors with no time in prison were still able to become *qurdebi*, a practice that would seemingly contradict principles strongly held in the thieves' world previously. Thus, this explanation also does not get to the heart of the matter. One of the main signals for screening candidates appears to become blurred in the 1990s. The reasons and consequences of such a change are examined in the next sections below.

7.5 Determinants of Changes in Recruitment: Hypotheses

Sorting signals grounded in the prison help the *qurdebi* infer as to the qualities of potential candidates and from the data presented above these appear to be in flux. The issue of declining amounts of prison experience is particularly important. Recruitment decisions taken on the basis of, for example, behaviour in the street environment is nowhere near as reliable as the prison for screening candidates and mistakes are more likely to be made. For those already made men prison time represents intense shared experience that facilitates the growth of trust. Prison is important in structuring the *qurdebi*'s recruitment practices therefore a reduction in this appears to represent a lowering of barriers to entry in becoming a *qurdi*. If this is the case then we might expect to see certain consequences of this. I will deal with this later in chapter 10. For now I turn to possible causes of these changes.

I propose two hypotheses that I will briefly explore in the rest of this chapter. Firstly, a normative change may have occurred where shifts in recruitment and specifically lowering barriers, were seen as necessary for whatever reason. I will show below that this hypothesis can be to some degree supported by the increasing levels of violence in the 1990s that forced a change in the *qurdebi*'s way of recruiting.

Secondly, the costs of the act of punishing wayward recruitment practices may

have changed increasing to the point where the benefits of punishing were outweighed by the costs (Ensminger 2001). It is in the interests of the would-be punisher to enact punishment only as a last resort and to use other policing methods such as cost-discriminating signalling demands on the would-be recruits to monitor boundaries (Gambetta 2009a). Thus the act of punishment is always costly but not invariably so. Costs may vary according to agency problems. Principals who want to punish may find that the cost has increased or decreased due to variation in the difficulties in obtaining information, passing a judgement and carrying out the actual punishment. Variation in costs to punishment could also consist in increasing or decreasing opportunity costs where this means that the act of punishing becomes more or less expensive depending on other opportunities missed whilst carrying out the punishment.

I show below that these two costs, agency and opportunity, may well have increased for potential punishers thus lowering incentives on policing the *qurdebi*'s boundaries. Now however I turn to the first hypothesis: that changes in recruitment were brought about out of necessity and that this shifted attitudes to lowering barriers to entry.

7.5.1 Competition

To answer the question of why barriers to entry decreased for new recruits for the cohort 'baptised' after 1992 we need to think of what distinguishes this period compared to the others. The first thing that should become immediately obvious is that 1992 is Georgia's first full year of independence from the Soviet Union. The 1990s onwards represent a brave new world compared to the other periods. Georgia

experienced state collapse and an economic decline incomparably worse than any other former Soviet republic (Wheatley 2005; Coppieters & Legvold 2006). The emergence of the market in a collapsed economy then, state weakness and huge amounts of civil strife mark out this period as being significantly different to what had preceded it in recent history. It is worth describing this in some more detail to get a feel for the proliferation of violence at this time.

Georgian society was hit by violent outbreaks as the Soviet Union disintegrated. Often these were along ethnic and nationalistic lines as in the conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia but there were also clashes based on political factionalism within the Georgian elite. Mass prison breakout in 1991, after the return of some of the most dangerous Georgian recidivists from Russia on the political demand of new elected President Gamsakhurdia, contributed to the increase of hardened criminals at large in society. Paramilitaries formed including *Mkhedrioni*, founded by the *qurdi* Jaba Ioseliani, and the National Guard led by Tengiz Kitovani, another figure with a criminal past.

By January 1992 these paramilitaries had played a decisive part in the overthrow of Gamsakhurdia in an armed coup and his replacement by a makeshift triumvirate that included Ioseliani and Kitovani. Shevardnadze, an internationally renowned peace broker in the cold war, was invited to head a government and returned in 1992. One interpretation of the invitation to Shevardnadze is that it was only on the condition that Shevardnadze accept Ioseliani's protection (Slider 1997; Ekedahl & Goodman 2001). In the 1960s, allegedly it had been Shevardnadze who had protected Ioseliani, now the order of things had been turned on its head.²⁸

According to Shevardnadze's biographers (Ekedahl & Goodman 2001, p. 265),

²⁸ Ekedahl & Goodman (2001) and Slider (1997) refer to a time when Ioseliani had been imprisoned in the 1960s but was helped by Shevardnadze who at the time was in charge of internal affairs in Georgia. In an interview, Shevardnadze himself did not substantiate these claims (R41).

‘without a power base of his own Shevardnadze had formed an unholy alliance of convenience with several anti-Gamsakhurdia leaders, particularly Ioseliani the “godfather” who had sponsored Shevardnadze’s return to Tbilisi.’

In the early 1990s then, Ioseliani’s *Mkhedrioni* and the National Guard had strong ties to power including Shevardnadze and some elements of the old nomenklatura who had helped set these groups up.²⁹ According to Zurcher (2006, p. 104), *Mkhedrioni* ‘was the weapons-bearing arm of private businessmen-patriots who put their private army at the service of the state’. This army obtained weapons from stashes once belonging to the Soviet Army.

Mkhedrioni and the National Guard proved unruly and both engaged in mafia activities. By November 1992 they were competing for resources to extort (Wheatley 2005, p. 72). *Mkhedrioni* had become a competitor to the *qurdebi* in the protection market: ‘in return for protecting enterprises... Ioseliani’s deputies took stakes in many of the private businesses that got started in Georgia in 1993 and 1994’ (Areshidze 2007, p. 35). The country lacked any overarching authority with a monopoly of violence. Instead the country was ‘divided into fiefdoms presided over by warlords and their private armies... Mafia gangs and paramilitary thugs roamed the streets and terrorised towns and villages; corruption and violence were rife’ (Ekedahl & Goodman 2001 p. 263).

In 1992 then, the first year of the period for baptising the youngest cohort of *qurdebi*, the country was at the height of its transitional turbulence, involved in armed conflict in South Ossetia and witnessing the armed overthrow of Gamsakhurdia in December 1991. It is remarkable to reflect on the fact that a *qurdi*, Ioseliani, by this point was practically running the country. One might expect this to lift the profile of

²⁹ Slider, (1997) suggests Guram Mgeladze the Chairman of the Georgian Agricultural Ministry was instrumental in helping set *Mkhedrioni* up.

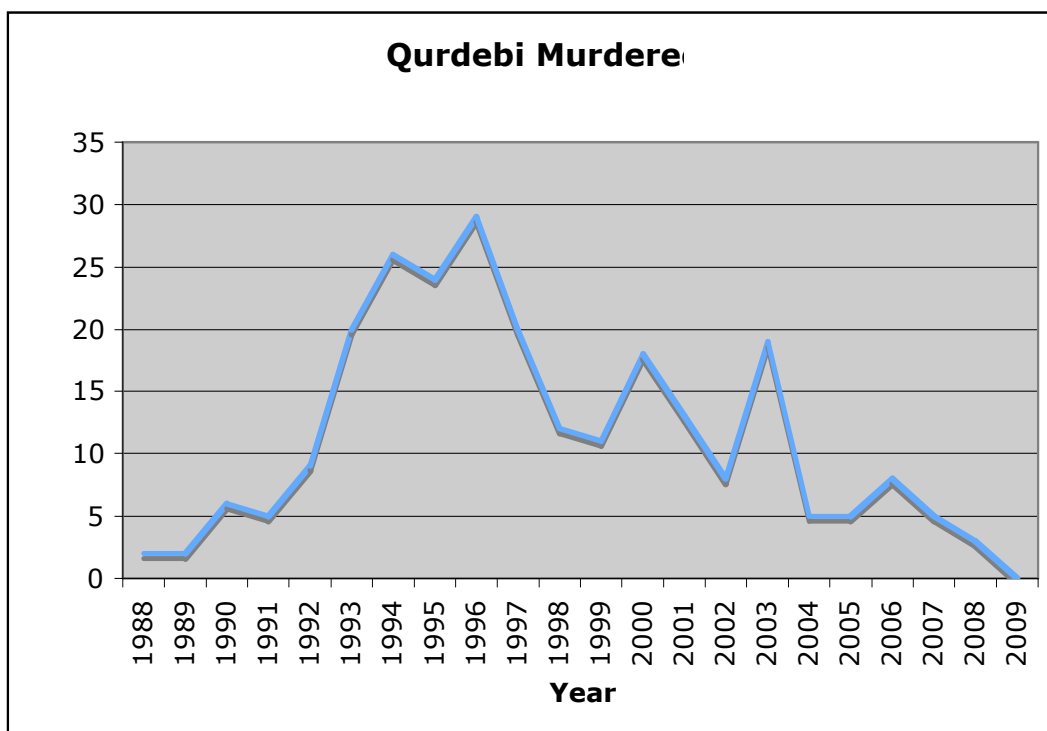
the *qurdebi* considerably. According to Ioseliani himself *Mkhedrioni* ‘was a patriotic organisation, but based on the thieves’ traditions’ (Ioseliani J. in Wheatley 2005, fn 20 pp 63-64), yet his unruly paramilitaries did not always respect the old ways of the *qurdebi*.

Arguably Ioseliani no longer needed the blessing or support of other *qurdebi* as he had created his own power base in the form of *Mkhedrioni*, which according to Ioseliani himself comprised 4,000 men nationwide (Wheatley 2005, p. 54). These men were often young and violent, and many had nothing but contempt for the *qurdebi*: ‘I knew one *qurdi* who was beaten by the *Mkhedrionisti* [members of *Mkhedrioni*]...it was such a scandal! These guys used to be untouchable.... For those young guys in *Mkhedrioni*, it was revenge. They remembered, maybe at some point they had had some conflict and the *qurdi* hadn’t resolved it in their favour or had had them punished, so when they had the chance they took revenge’ (R17). Whether or not Ioseliani had turned against his own criminal fraternity, he may well have been powerless to stop the competition with the *qurdebi* at this time. Wheatley (2005, p. 80) states: ‘other smaller criminal gangs (often referred to as “*Mkhedrioni*” but quite clearly beyond the control of Jaba Ioseliani...) dominated at local level, typically offering protection to local communities against marauding gangs.’

According to some, Ioseliani had relied on the goodwill of other *qurdebi* in rising to power and obtained resources for his goals, such as pursuing the war in Abkhazia (R39).³⁰ That goodwill had not been repaid. Another *qurdi*, Arsen Mikeladze, arrived in Tbilisi from Moscow to find out what was happening. Mikeladze’s assassination on that visit has been attributed to Ioseliani (R39). This

³⁰ There is nothing to suggest that Georgian *qurdebi* were not also Georgian nationalists who wanted to see a strong, independent Georgia. It has been reported in some places that the thieves-in-law of the Soviet Union did attempt to control nationalistic divisions as the Union moved towards collapse, and were not wholly successful (Glonti & Lobjanidze 2004).

would fit with a more general trend of violence towards the *qurdebi*. Various respondents attested to the fact that the *qurdebi* found themselves unrecognised by, and in competition with, *Mkhedrioni* not to mention threatened by the huge rise in violence generally in the republic. This is shown in Graph 7.1 that shows numbers of *qurdebi* killed between the years 1988-2009.



Graph 7.1: numbers of qurdebi killed between the years 1988-2009.

Source: AOCU-T 2009

Though the data does not go far back enough to compare the 1980s with the 1990s it does suggest a point in time when there is a sudden spike and then rather consistent high levels of killings of the *qurdebi*. From 1992 to 1993, the number of *qurdebi* killed jumps over 120%, from 9 deaths to 20. The deaths then climb

remaining high with the peak coming in 1996 when 29 *qurdebi* were killed. From this point on numbers drop and never gain the same levels. However, the *qurdebi* still endure spikes in the murder rate while Shevardnadze remains in power. After the Rose Revolution crackdown most *qurdebi* were either incarcerated or left the country, explaining the low number of killings after 2003.

The 1990s then ushered in a period of unprecedented levels of violence which, on the figures in the graph above, definitely touched the *qurdebi*. The year 1993 was precisely the year in which *Mkhedrioni* was pursuing a campaign of violence, not only in Abkhazia, but also across much of western Georgia. The war in Abkhazia had been started in late 1992 and with that going badly for Tbilisi, a low-intensity civil war between supporters of the former President Gamsakhurdia and the new government's forces led by Tengiz Kitovani and Ioseliani, had broken out in western Georgia in 1993 (Zurcher 2006). In an infamous incident, *Mkhedrioni* sacked the Mingrelian town of Zugdidi in Samegrelo as the ill-disciplined troops looted what they could to take back with them to eastern Georgia.

Some respondents from Kutaisi claim that a similar fate was avoided in that town, a couple of hours from Zugdidi, due to the intervention of the *qurdebi* who declared Kutaisi their town (R30; R19). This sounds plausible, as Kutaisi is a traditional stronghold of the *qurdebi*. Proportionately, Kutaisi has more *qurdebi* than any other town in Georgia. In the 1990s particularly, there were lots of new *qurdebi* emerging in Kutaisi. Whether or not the Kutaisi *qurdebi* really made an agreement with *Mkhedrioni* specifically on this occasion is difficult to firmly establish, the point holds however that the threats around this time were large enough and the murder rate growing quick enough to start recruiting new men and this might account for the high numbers of *qurdebi* from Kutaisi in the 1990s.

A high-ranking police respondent (R12) believes that the competition between *Mkhedrioni* and the *qurdebi* was particularly fierce in Rustavi and was mainly over control of property. The respondent also identified Rustavi and Kutaisi as places where inexperienced youngsters were being baptised without convictions. My data show only one such case for Rustavi, but eight or almost half the total cases of baptism without prior conviction, for Kutaisi. The respondent (R12) also identifies the reason for this practice, and in doing so the mechanism that ties the level of violence to the changes in recruitment practice: ‘at this point the *qurdebi* stopped being able to control people so they tried to bring people into the ranks – to gain support and to protect themselves from attack. By baptising someone, a *qurdi* must abide by the *qurdebi* rules which includes the forbiddance of hitting another *qurdi*, and murder is outlawed. So they started accepting more and more people’ (R12). The incentive to self-preservation, on this view, was the mechanism linking violent competition with the changing recruitment practices.

As shown in Graph 7.1 the *qurdebi* murder rate still grows even after *Mkhedrioni* was officially disbanded in 1995. The threats to the *qurdebi* then were not only limited to paramilitary groups, but also the varying stripes of hardened criminal who had started taking advantage of the state’s inability to prosecute criminal acts and the demand for protection within society. As has been well recorded in Russia (Volkov 2002), anyone with a stock of violent capital could try and start up a mafia group in the early 1990s. In the Imereti region, of which Kutaisi is the capital, the situation was particularly dangerous:

‘There was such chaos in places like Imereti...there was a group of armed robbers that was operating in Imereti between 1993 and 1996. They were just a peasant band of criminals. They were cruel, had no respect for anyone and that includes the qurdebi....Whatever they stole they would drink away that evening. It was a big

group, as many as 30 people, just stealing and beating....it was a threat to everyone and certainly the qurdebi couldn't control them.' (R19)

Such groups did not just represent an existential threat to the *qurdebi* but might also be seen as competitors in terms of recruitment. Young men might have been tempted to don a paramilitary uniform and set off for adventure and looting in Abkhazia with the National Guard or *Mkhedrioni*, or perhaps simply join any ragtag armed group that would take them on without asking for the same commitment or normative standards as the *qurdebi*.

These challenges then may have put strain on the *qurdebi*'s recruitment practices. Attracting violent individuals into the *qurdebi*'s ranks allowed better control of them through the controls on violence built into the thieves' code yet this risked corrupting the code itself through interaction with under-socialised individuals. The common logic of safety in numbers in times of conflict is also present. This strategy has been recorded in other places during mafia wars. For example, Paoli (2003) refers to the Cosa Nostra in southern Italy allowing an influx of new members during a conflict with other organised crime groups during the 1970s.

Another example, pertinent to this study, is being played out at the present time. In Moscow, two Georgian groups, one from Kutaisi and one from Tbilisi, are in serious conflict over territory and influence (see chapter 8). The Tbilisi group created a great deal of publicity when they baptised 10 new *qurdebi* in one day in prisons in Russia on the 6th November 2008, which incidentally, and surely not accidentally, coincided with the Soviet holiday for the police which is still celebrated in Russia (Criminalnaya 2008; AOCU-T 2008). This mass baptism can be interpreted as an attempted to strengthen the Tbilisi side against the Kutaisi group.

I now turn to the second hypothesis explaining a lowering of barriers to entry

in recruitment. This concerns the degree to which mechanisms of punishment were present to prevent abuses of the thieves' code with respect to recruitment practices. The execution of punishment may be variable due to larger costs accruing to the act of punishing or lack of information upon which to punish. Given the lowering of barriers to entry we might expect that costs of punishment increased and that this facilitated change. I will argue below that this, to some extent, appears to be what occurred following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

7.5.2 Agency and Opportunity Costs

Recruiting a young man without the requisite experience or knowledge of the thieves' world is a punishable offence; it is not something any honest *qurdi* would want to be associated with. Punitive sentences are passed at *skhodka*. A simple punishment that would still be a huge blow to a *qurdi*'s honour and respect is to be publicly slapped or beaten. The harshest punishment is of course death, but also for very serious offences a *qurdi* can be 'uncrowned' or 'de-sanctified' [*razsvechen*], that is have his title taken off him, sometimes known as to be 'beaten round the ears' [*byt' po usham*] (Gurov 1995, p. 109) or simply have his title removed for sometime, that is 'stopped' [*garcherebuli* in Georgian] or 'have the brakes put on' [*tormozit*, in Russian] - with a view to having it reinstated once he has redeemed himself in future. For example, the *qurdi* K. was 'stopped' for a few years after introducing a Russian as a *qurdi* when he in fact was not. Evidently such mistakes are threatening to the *qurdebi*, being able to read whether a person is truly a *qurdi* or not is just as important as reading whether a new recruit has the qualities to be a *qurdi*. K. was eventually reinstated after showing up to a *skhodka* in a restaurant whilst serving a prison term

(AOCU-T 2004).

The process of punishment is relatively expensive to the punishers in that it involves collecting information on people, calling a *skhodka*, attending the *skhodka*, bringing evidence forward, deciding on a punishment and carrying out that punishment. Thus, it is a measure of last resort. It is clear, moreover, that some *qurdebi* simply have greater authority to pass sentences on their brethren than others. The most authoritative *qurdebi* tend to be the older, more experienced ones. However, these more respected *qurdebi*, following the logic of converting reputational capital into economic power, also tend to be the ones who have the most vested interests in business and politics. During the 1990s they also tended to move out of Georgia as they were in a position to exploit new market opportunities elsewhere. These were in places such as the brash, anomic Russian cities of Moscow, Petersburg and Nizhnii Novogorod, the industry of the Don basin, and the big import-export markets of the Russian Far East. The problem this leads to is that although the older *qurdebi* are the most authoritative for means of passing judgement and sanctioning other *qurdebi* they are also precisely the ones for whom the act of punishing incurs greater opportunity costs (they have more business interests) and greater agency costs (they often operate from a long distance).

Turning first to the issue of distance and movement, possession of foreign passports is one indicator of whether the older generations moved more than the younger ones. In the early 1990s the Russian state implemented a policy of giving Russian passports to citizens of all former Soviet countries registered in Russia. Analysing passport ownership shows that age has a significant effect on possessing a foreign passport, where this was most often a Russian passport, though there were also a few cases of Ukrainian, Israeli and Greek passports. As well as possessing

Georgian citizenship, of the youngest cohort 1992-2004 (N=110), only 25% claimed a foreign passport, whereas, this figure stood at 63% of the 1982-1991 (N=88) cohort. From the 1972-1981 (N=57) cohort 72% claimed another passport, again usually Russian. Of the oldest cohort however, 1952-1972 (N=23), only 43% claimed a foreign passport.

Thus, it seems that the *qurdebi* who were most optimally positioned to take advantage of foreign citizenship and travel to the former states of the Soviet Union were those who were ‘baptised’ in the 1970s and 1980s, that is, in the two decades immediately before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Claiming foreign citizenship was evidently easier then for those who were experienced but not too old to still have real influence in the thieves’ world. The 1982-1991 cohort for example, had been ‘baptised’ for some years by the mid-1990s, spoke Russian, and most likely had prison experience that might well have been served in Soviet Russia. Moreover, the pattern for possession of a foreign passport almost fits exactly with the current residence of the Georgian *qurdebi*. Coding the data in the files into living in Georgia or not living in Georgia (which in most cases means Russia) a Chi-square test shows that there is a cohort effect on whether we would expect to find a Georgian *qurdi* abroad by 2004 or not as Table 7.2 shows.³¹

Cohort	Georgia	Abroad	Total
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³¹ It should be remembered that these figures are police data for the period up to 2004, following the Rose Revolution the total figure of those now abroad would have to be greatly revised upwards.

1952-1971	13	9	22
1972-1981	17	39	56
1982-1991	36	47	83
1992-2004	83	27	110
Total	149	122	271

Table 7.2: location of *qurdebi* in 2004 by cohort

Source: AOCU-T & K 2004

The difference across cohorts is significant ($p < 0.000$), the effect of which cohort a *qurdi* belongs to on whether they will be resident in Georgia in 2004 is of a medium strength (df 3, Cramer's $V = 0.36$). As with foreign passport ownership Table 7.2 shows that the two middle cohorts are more likely to live abroad.

Most of the movement appears to occur in the early 1990s. This may seem counter-intuitive. It may have been assumed that it would be easier to move within one country, the Soviet Union, than once that country had been split into many different ones. However, the Soviet Union was heavily restrictive on the movement of its citizens within the country for anything more than holidays and so it should not be so surprising that the collapse of the Soviet Union likely allowed greater mobility for some *qurdebi* though this mobility depended on a multitude of other factors as well. Such factors include numbers of contacts and levels of authority within the criminal world, which are to some degree a function of age. Age also determines the ability to take advantage of contingencies such as lax citizenship rules at the beginning of the 1990s.

The factors that facilitated the emigration of the older and more experienced *qurdebi* inadvertently created an increase in agency costs. Anyone who has become a

qurdi is bestowed with a certain power of decision-making constrained as this is within the institutional context of the *skhodka*. Once baptised, a *qurdi* can recommend and agitate for others to be baptised, decide how to use money from the *obshchak*, how conflicts should be resolved and so on. Simply put, when one *qurdi* (the principal) initiates another person he thereby endows another *qurdi* (the agent) with decision-making authority and takes responsibility for the future performance of the agent. Agency costs here are constituted by the divergence of interests between the principal and the agent. The principal in this case tries to limit this divergence by defining the appropriate interests of the agent and by monitoring his activities. The problem of agency costs is manifested by contract mechanisms that attempt to overcome such costs. For example, in the case of the *qurdebi*, as will be discussed elsewhere (chapter 9), commitment inducing mechanisms are employed to affect incentive structures preclude defection. A major mechanism for this is the use of status contracts where incentives consist in the exchange of honour and respect and where generalised reciprocity is emphasised in which future payoffs are indefinite and long-term (Paoli 2003). Such status contracts can only imperfectly mitigate agency costs however. Instead such contracts operate to lower the probability of the principal having to punish the agent and incur the costs that this represents.

However, there may be times when these punishment costs are necessarily incurred to keep the agent's actions in line with the interests of the principal. One such time might be when the agent-*qurdi* decides to become a principal himself and baptise someone new. As has been touched upon, due to the violent turbulence experienced in Georgia during transition it might be argued that it was in the principal's interests to lower barriers to entry and allow the agent to recruit whoever he likes. However, if the principal happens to be in Moscow then he is less likely to

pay as much attention to the problems of violent competition in Georgia unless his interests are directly threatened and, therefore, may still demand high barriers to entry. The agent may recruit anyway against this demand and with little regard to formal procedure. At this point punishment should ensue, however for the principal, living in faraway Moscow it is difficult to firstly, find out about the transgression and secondly, ensure that a corresponding punishment is successfully carried out.

This is a plausible scenario for what happened in Georgia. Those *qurdebi* remaining there felt an incentive to lower barriers to entry due to increased levels of violence. Those in Moscow may or may not have understood this need but in any case did not have sufficient incentive to stop it happening. Furthermore, during this period of wild capitalism the money to be made from the privatization process, especially in Russia, could be massive. Monitoring and punishment of younger *qurdebi* back in Georgia for corrupt recruitment practices would represent similarly massive opportunity costs for respected *qurdebi*. Money and time were being spent taking over big industries, casinos and banks rather than following what was going on back home.

Increased agency costs and opportunity costs suggest that *qurdebi* were less likely to monitor the recruitment practices of new *qurdebi* in Georgia. As Reuter (2005) writes, the principal's 'ability to control [the agent] is reduced when the agent is in a remote location....since [the principal] has weaker information and control of force.' This is borne out in the case of the *qurdebi* by the appearance of an extremely controversial practice: buying the title of *kanonieri qurdi*. Slang terms have emerged that are mainly connected to Georgian *qurdebi* and signify those who were never baptised 'thievishly' [*po vorovskomu*] but instead simply bought the title for themselves. These are *apel'sini* [oranges], *lavrushniki* [laurels] and *samozvantsi* [self-declarers]. A lot has been written about this with some commentators refusing to

believe that it ever occurred amongst the *qurdebi*. As one Russian police officer [*polkovnik*] put it (in Modestov 2008): “All this talk about titles being bought, *apel’sini*, and so on is complete nonsense. Buying the title of thief-in-law is forbidden. It’s not a position in the civil service, you know!”

Such scepticism is well founded. Future *qurdebi* pay into the *obshchak* prior to becoming *qurdebi* and this should not be confused with buying the title in the direct sense of paying a made man a significant lump sum for his personal use in return for a recommendation at a *skhodka*. However, according to the expert interviews conducted this practice did happen. One clear-cut instance involved a *qurdi* from Tbilisi who paid to another big name *qurdi* to get a recommendation for his younger brother to become a *qurdi* too. The police estimate \$50,000 was spent on securing this support (R5; R10).

There are many press reports that attest to this practice occurring also. One report cites a ‘young bandit’ paying \$300,000 for his title (Nikulina 1999). Varese (2001) also mentions instances of this in Russia, and this is corroborated by a Russian inmate quoted in Lambert (2003 p.111). This suggests then that the monitoring of thievish practices had similarly declined in Russia. This follows when we consider that it was mainly the profits to be made in Russia that increased opportunity costs on monitoring for the *qurdebi* in most instances and so, presumably, Russian *vory* also faced such costs on policing their boundaries.

The argument might be made that a candidate who invests a lot of money to acquire the title may still be signalling skills and dedication. The amount of money merely signals this dedication rather than the length of time in prison.³² The problem with this interpretation is that the thieves-in-law always purported to shun materialism

³² Again, I am grateful to Dr. Heather Hamill for raising this issue.

therefore buying the title is strictly against the rules. Offering large sums of money to be appointed to a normal job would similarly set off alarm bells, though it might very well signal a strong desire and dedication for the position in question. Signals are drawn from cultural milieus made up of conventions and symbols, in this way they are readable based on the consistent beliefs of the receivers as to their meaning (Gambetta 2009a). The signal of paying money in this case is not readable as a signal of anything criminal to the receiver in the context in which it is produced. Thus buying the *qurdi* title shows a corruption of the criminal institution rather than simply a switch in the method of signalling.

Certainly then, buying the title is no replacement, yet, for other traditional criminal signals such as a prison history. Buying and selling the title has been warned against by authoritative *qurdebi* (AOCU-T 2004), suggesting that this practice exists due to a lack of actual punishing of such transgressions. The fact that there has been discussion of the *apel'sini* problem at *skhodki* suggests that the *qurdebi* do indeed find this practice worrying. It can have serious consequences for the massively important asset of reputation (see chapter 10). From the Italian-American mafia, Gambetta (2009a, p. 206) gives the example of Frank Scalice who was shot to death for selling memberships in 1957. One press report (Nikulina 1999) strikes at the problematic consequences that has disturbed the older *qurdebi*: 'as noted by experts, in the main the title [of thief-in-law] is bought by Georgian ex-patriots [*vykhodtsi*]...the quantity of baptised criminals is growing, whereas the level of their authority in the criminal world is declining.' In chapter 10 I turn to precisely this issue of the *qurdebi*'s level of authority and reputation in the face of these significant changes to recruitment practices.

7.6 Conclusion

The precarious balance in maintaining barriers to entry at the right level despite exogenous pressures is evidently an issue for the *qurdebi* in Georgia. Equilibrium in sorting candidates using the prison relies upon a cost incurred to the candidate that itself relies upon the strength of the state to punish. When this strength weakens, the equilibrium is affected. Furthermore, other external pressures like increasing competition and internal changes such as increased agency and opportunity costs for would-be punishers distort outcomes and instead of a perfect sorting equilibrium a semi-sorting result occurs in which those without the right qualities may become made men. The possible explanations I have suggested for this should be explored further.

As Tilly (2006) argues, a blurring of social and symbolic boundaries is very dangerous for the viability of a trust network and certainly, while a lowering of barriers to entry was perhaps necessary in the short term, the long-term effects on the *qurdebi's* resilience are not so clear. A probable consequence is a negative effect on reputation. Substandard members may affect the overall high criminal status of the group and the reputation of other members through association which can be devastating for a competitive edge in the protection market and societal support for the *qurdebi* in general (see chapter 10).

However, the change in barriers to entry need not be permanent. Rising competition, opportunity and agency costs can be offset through other adaptations such as change in internal structure and organisation. I turn to this issue in the next chapter.

8. Between Networks and Hierarchies: Structure and Internal Relations

“Vor-v-zakone” ...is a particular category of criminal-recidivist characterised by two features: 1) steady “principled” parasitism; 2) organisation.’

Aleksander Gurov *Krasnaya Mafiya* (1995, p. 109)

Approaches to Russian organised crime often see an amorphous ‘criminal world’ or ‘organised crime system’ corrupting whole societies and generations (Sterling 1994; Oleinik 2003; Glonti & Nordin 2005). For Dolgova (2003), Russian organised crime is a qualitatively new phenomenon distinct from tightly bound criminal associations or criminal organisations in other parts of the world. Instead, it is a ‘complex system’ that has its own rules, security, courts, and politics. It attracts large sections of young people, structures society and affects wider social relations (Dolgova, 2003 p. 370). This hints at an all-powerful mafia-state peering out from behind the façade of legitimate power (Darchiashvili, 2006).

Perhaps this is not as fanciful as it may first appear, after all thieves-in-law see themselves as leaders of a wide-ranging, transnational criminal world. Dolgova (2003, p. 359) writes: ‘Interviews with 17 ‘thieves-in-law’ and ‘*avtoriteti*’ [criminal authorities] showed that they consider themselves the leaders not only of members of concrete criminal formations or of the criminal setting in prisons, but of a wider criminal world.’ Thieves-in-law existed throughout the Soviet Union, historically networked with each other and claimed it as a duty to spread the thieves’ idea. Yet the

notion that they effortlessly impose the morals of the criminal world and carve up and control parts of countries through criminal gangs committed to the thieves' understandings should be questioned. The thieves-in-law, like any club, organisation or community, experience problems of governance: coordination and regulation, boundary maintenance and monitoring. Organisational structure is an important mechanism for negotiating these issues however it may vary from time to time and place to place.

This chapter addresses the changing internal relations and structure amongst the *kanonieri qurdebi*. It is argued that processes of factionalisation and centralisation within factions have occurred. Certain hypotheses are developed to explain these changes and data put forward. It is argued, along with Tilly (2006), that these processes can have variable effects on resilience, affecting this negatively in the long term. First, however, I present the structure of the thieves' world outside prison as it is classically envisaged.

8.1 Traditional Structure of the Thieves' World Outside Prison

Hierarchies that developed in prison affected the structure of the so-called thieves' world outside prison. Figure 8.1 below (based on Glonti & Lobjanidze 2004, p. 163) shows how goodfellas (*horoshlaki* or *kai bichebi*), caretakers (*shesterki*) and fighters (*boeviki*) populated organised crime groups run by overseers (*makarublebi* or *smotryashchie*) on behalf of thieves-in-law. The thieves-in-law themselves sought out patrons in politics or law enforcement (see chapter 6) and networked with other thieves who in turn headed organised criminal groups (OCGs). Thieves-in-law

coordinated through the institutions of the communal fund, the *obshchak*, and thieves' 'courts' or *skhodki* over and above the individual actors.

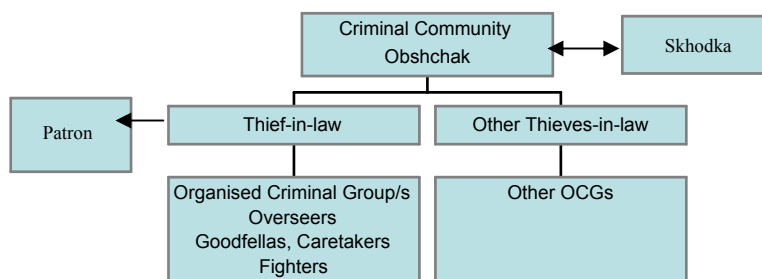


Figure 8.1: Structure of 'Thieves' World' outside the Prison

In this way the hierarchical structure of the prison community became reproduced outside the prison walls. On the outside, groups underneath the thieves-in-law looked more like structured mafias, with organised crime groups and brotherhoods (*bratva* in Russian or *dzmaoba* in Georgian) made up of goodfellas who were subordinated to criminal authorities. 'Overseers' look after the finances of the groups under the command of a thief-in-law and collected the dues for the *obshchak*. This chain of command is described elsewhere (Varese, 2001), and appears to resemble the hierarchy of a Sicilian mafia family. Unlike the Sicilian mafia however, those below the level of thieves-in-law are not considered 'made men', they have not been through any initiation ritual until they reach the highest rung. This is a distinguishing feature of the thieves-in-law; as opposed to a commission of bosses convened out of necessity due to conflict, thieves-in-law were a ready made network of made men that continued to formally follow the same set of rules, pool resources, convene and coordinate activities. This network of top-level thieves looks organisationally flat with every thief formally equal to any other and exhibits neither

the features of a traditional hierarchy nor a collaborative institution such as a market or labour union, but a trust network as defined by Tilly (2006; see chapter 2).

The problem with analyses that present the thieves' world as a hierarchically organised system with coordinated and networking bosses is that the picture is very static. It fails to look at organisational structure as something that is constantly impacted on by the environment and affected by other factors such as changes in size and complexity of the organisation. Furthermore, it fails to give an adequate discussion of coordination and control within the organisational structure as elements in flux and problematic. I now discuss the issue of structure, control and change with direct reference to the concept of trust networks and how this might be utilised in a discussion of organised criminals such as the *kanonieri qurdebi*.

8.2 Structure, Coordination and Transformations in Trust Networks

Tilly identified internal relations within the trust network as a major arena in affecting its survival. Internal relations may be seen as structural issues, dealing with questions of the establishment of 'rights, obligations, transfers of resources, shared activities, collective controls, and divisions of labour' (Tilly, 2006 p. 58). Cohesion in internal relations within a trust network is maintained by commitment mechanisms such as self-sacrifice to the collective good, investment in network ties, rejection of old identities for new ones and burning bridges with the outside world. Rewards and punishments may also be deployed to alter incentives and behaviour of participants (see chapter 9).

The coordination and governance of internal relations within a trust network however are threatened by such dynamics as factionalisation into cliques,

centralisation around a charismatic leader, horizontal ties becoming vertical and unequal, and attraction between members weakening. Furthermore, over-emphasising one type of incentive - capital, coercion or commitment - over and above the others can have negative consequences for the trust network. These types of transformations threaten the viability of the trust network, and also show how the network form of organisation acquires characteristics of authoritative organisations and collaborative institutions depending on the dynamics shaping the network. These dynamics are documented in Table 8.1 below where I have laid out changes in terms of their effects on the viability of the trust network.

Aspect of Network	Type of Change	Effects of Change
Internal relations	Decrease in mutual attraction	Decreasing viability
	Decrease in equality of ties	Decreasing viability
	Formation of factions	Decreasing viability
	Creation of charismatic centre	Increase in short-term viability, decrease in long-term
	Shift towards capital as incentive	Increase in vulnerability to competing opportunities for capital
	Shift towards commitment as incentive	Increase in vulnerability to ideological divisions
	Shift towards coercion as incentive	Increase in vulnerability to attraction of less coercive organisations

Table 8.1: internal changes in trust networks

Adapted from Tilly (2006 p. 60)

In utilising these theoretical insights, the *kanonieri qurdebi* are presented as a trust network in flux and so exhibit characteristics of other forms of governance and coordination over time. The subsequent discussion in this chapter focuses on two of the issues in Table 8.1: factionalism, and centralisation around charismatic characters within these factions. These issues indirectly touch on problems of mutual attraction and equality of ties in the trust network. The reliance on capital, coercion and commitment as incentives is dealt with in a subsequent chapter (see chapter 9). Shifts in the above features listed in Table 8.1 affect the survival of the *qurdebi* as a trust network. The way that the *qurdebi* organise, coordinate and govern themselves is a crucial aspect of their resilience and ability to survive. Yet Tilly (2006) only describes the changes and their effects on the viability of trust networks without fully explicating why they occur. Thus, as well as describing changes in internal relations this chapter utilises theories of organisational change in identifying possible explanations for explaining these changes. Firstly however, I identify the following trends: a move towards factionalism, and centralisation within these factions along with a subsequent decline in the equality of ties in the network.

8.3 Factionalism

In principle the *qurdebi* organise flatly, distributing ties equally and not deferring authority to a central figure. The practice of holding meetings known as *skhodki*, which allow matters to be discussed and voted on, attests to this. Gurov (1995) writes that, ‘there were no direct leaders. The organising and controlling organ

was the thieves' *skhodka*. This could be called by any one of the members of the community. The *avtoriteti* [those of criminal standing] used these to their advantage. *Skhodki* subdivided locally and regionally.' Furthermore, all ethnic or national distinctions between members were subsumed by subordination to the thieves' code that distinguishes people only on the degree of their surrender to the thieves' idea. Yet despite these democratic processes and ideals of equality before the thieves' law, the thieves' world was breaking up along ethnic lines as early as the 1980s. Before this, ethnic distinctions amongst the thieves-in-law had not been outstanding. According to some sources the thieves-in-law openly discussed and tried to resist factionalism along ethnic lines as nationalisms in the Soviet republics started to weaken the overarching power of the Communist Party (Glonti & Lobjanidze 2004, p. 121). As has been touched upon elsewhere (chapter 1) however, differences began to emerge amongst the thieves-in-law and these had been officially noted by the MVD by 1985 (MVD-A, 0033/1985). The Georgian *qurdebi* began to stand out from Slavic *vory* particularly in their attitude to the thieves' code.

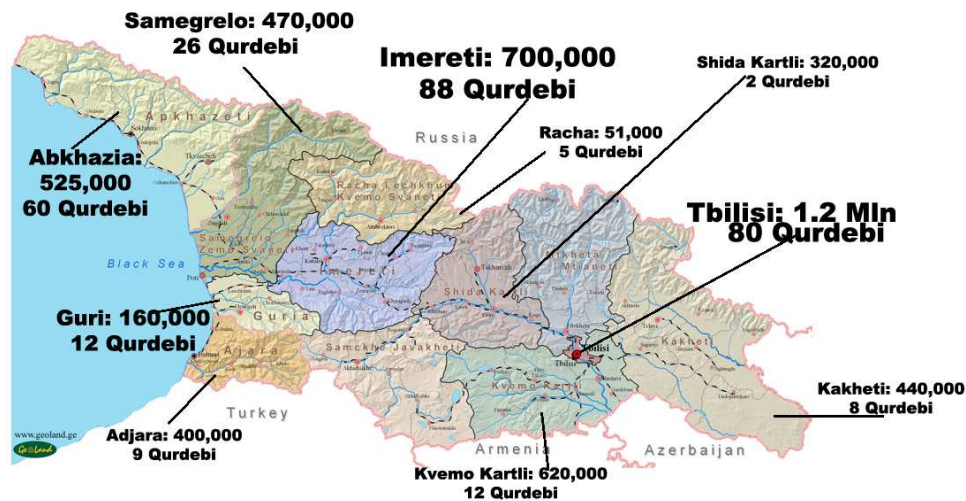
However, the Georgians themselves split again into territorially based cliques. When exactly these cliques became tight, noticeable distinctions is not clear; it is of course possible that they existed prior to the 1990s. However, these factions are in the present day very noticeable particularly now the *qurdebi* are outside Georgia and operating in Russia due to the post-Rose Revolution crackdown; these cliques are described as separate organised crime groups in the Russian press and are centred on renowned leaders (Kompromat 1999; Russkii Newsweek 2009). There are a number of indicators that can be gleaned from the data that point to factionalism amongst the Georgians, these are: the concentration of *qurdebi* from three main towns; the use of

locative nicknames to indicate membership to one of the factions from these towns; and the explicit conflicts between the groups. I will look at each indicator below.

8.3.1 Population Centres and Locative Nicknames

The three major Georgian groups operating mainly in Russia in the present day are known by their Russian nicknames: the Tbilisskaya, the Kutaiskaya, and the Sukhumsкая. These groupings or factions within the Georgian *qurdebi* base themselves on the Georgian towns of Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Sukhumi and their surroundings respectively. The latter is in the now *de facto* independent territory of Abkhazia and the *qurdebi* from this region are mainly ethnic Georgians who now live in Russia after the Abkhaz ethnically cleansed the Georgians from the region following the Georgia-Abkhazia war in 1992-1993. Indeed, *qurdebi* from Sukhumi have a much greater rate of transplantation to Russia than *qurdebi* from other parts of Georgia prior to the Rose Revolution in 2003 (AOCU-T 2004) and the 1992-1993 war most likely accounts for this. Tbilisi and Kutaisi are the two largest towns in Georgia and have both been capital cities at some point in Georgia's history.

Map 8.1 below shows the population of regions in Georgia and the number of *qurdebi* from each according to the police reports of 2004. Kutaisi is the capital of Imereti and Sukhumi is the capital of Abkhazia.



Map 8.1 showing populations by region and numbers of kanonieri qurdebi in each

Source: Anti-Organised Crime Unit, Special Operations Department, Tbilisi 2004

As can be seen from Map 8.1 Tbilisi, Imereti and Abkhazia produced the greatest numbers of *qurdebi* and this makes their local groupings the most noticeable and distinct in the present day. Other areas also produced their own factions, for example, Samegrelo, but the most coherent are those from Kutaisi (capital of Imereti), Tbilisi and Sukhumi. Curiously, some areas such as Kakheti produce hardly any *qurdebi* whilst other areas are over-producing. Kutaisi and the Imereti region in particular have a disproportionate number of *qurdebi* and this region is renowned in Georgia for being the most ‘thievish’. Kutaisi particularly, with one seventh of Tbilisi’s population, has two-thirds of the capital’s *qurdebi* number (just over 50 *qurdebi*) and roughly one *qurdi* for every 3,000 people compared to Tbilisi which has a ratio of 1:13,000. According to one Kutaisi-based lawyer (Dyatlikovich 2007), ‘here the criminal group was always considered strongest in the country, and local residents confirm that they have on every street their own *vor-v-zakone* [*kanonieri qurdi*].’ Indeed Kutaisi has a special reputation, the local prosecutor claims that: ‘there are

practically no businessmen, citizens, who are not disturbed by these people [the *qurdebi*]' (Day.az 2007). In Kutaisi, locals say that in terms of the thieves' world Odessa is the mother city, Rostov the father, and Kutaisi the son (R37). This refers to the historical claim that Odessa and Rostov were the first cities to nurture the thieves' culture. In the case of Tbilisi and Sukhumi the number of *qurdebi* might simply be proportionate to their size as they are both big towns.

The localism of the groupings is reflected in the use of locative nicknames. Of the 278 cases in the police files analysed, 33 have no nickname, 89 have a diminutive or such like which strictly speaking fall outside the definition for nicknames but are recorded in the files, and for 51 cases I could not deduce the origin of the nickname for certain. Ignoring the cases where the meaning is unclear, those which have no nickname or those where just the first name or diminutive is used, leaves 105 cases where the meaning of the nickname is clear. Of these then, locative nicknames were the most common. Of the 105 nicknames, 22% were locative against those nicknames describing psychological, behavioural or physical features in second place with 20%. Locative nicknames involve a first name and a Russian adjectival ending denoting a place name, for example, Rezo Tbiliskii (Rezo of Tbilisi), Gia Kutaiskii (Gia of Kutaisi), or Merab Sukhumskii (Merab of Sukhumi). The location referred to is a *qurdi*'s place of origin though it is not only the towns of Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Sukhumi that are represented, for example, Shalva Honskii comes from the small Imeretian town of Honi though this would probably affiliate him with neighbouring Kutaisi.³³

³³ Other nicknames: 20% of nicknames had connotations with behavioural, psychological and physical features, for example, Givi Nos (Russian for Givi the Nose), Givi Tolstii (Rus. Fat Givi) and Chichika (Georgian for Chirpy). In terms of behavioural traits it is not difficult to guess what Mususa (Ladykiller) and Romeo have a reputation for. Third, at 18%, were nicknames that made some variation on the name or patronymic of the person. For example, Khmelidze becomes Khmelo (sounding like 'hops' as in beer in Russian and 'dry' in Georgian) and the surname Bakiya becomes Bakha-Bakha. Fourth, at 13%, were animals including Gorila (gorilla), Shoshia (starling), Kvatiya (duck), Meliya (fox) and one otherworldly being, Chinka (demon). Fifth with 11% were those named after objects, such as Lursman (Nail) and Gocha Kurka (Gocha the Stone). In the main, the reasons behind these were hard to pin down but probably again have something to do with physical or psychological factors.

Those with locative nicknames, perhaps unsurprisingly, also tended to be the *qurdebi* in possession of foreign passports. Of the 23 with locative nicknames only 7 did not have a foreign passport. Having a locative nickname presumably enables mobile *qurdebi* to be recognised by where they are from and also which faction within the thieves' world they might belong to as this tends to be drawn up along geographic lines. Transplanting abroad, it is assumed that locative nicknames help to distinguish between Georgian groups operating outside their home territory.

8.3.2 *Internecline Conflict*

The level of competition between the groups points to the fact that they do indeed exclude each other and, thus, form factions. The Kutaiskaya and Tbilisskaya as of 2005 have continued a simmering conflict for a variety of reasons. A raid on a *skhodka* held in the Klyazminskoe region of Moscow in July 2008 detained just under 40 *qurdebi* who were, with the exception of a few Slavs, exclusively from the Kutaisi and Sukhumi regions with no one present from Tbilisi (Criminalnaya 2008b). The discussions at the *skhodka* were allegedly on the topic of gaining pre-eminence in the criminal world over the Tbilisskaya (Schwartz 2008; Criminalnaya 2008a). The conflict reached an apparent crisis point when the legendary Russian mobster Vyacheslav Ivan'kov, known as Yaponchik, was shot in Moscow in July 2009 and later died of his wounds in hospital in October 2009 (Glinsky 2009; Kruter 2009).

Some, such as Chinchila (little jug), are most likely connected with Georgian traditions of heavy wine-drinking. Sixth with 9% were those categorised as positions or functions within companies or hierarchies such as Batiya (gaffer), Cherman (chairman), Bugalter (accountant), and the rather more sinister Palachi (hangman) and one simply called Mafia. Five percent of nicknames were simply a patronymic or variation of this. Finally, 2% landed outside these categories including one Shishkin who we might assume was named after the famous 19th century Russian landscape painter whose works were popularised on the wrappers of a certain brand of confectionary during Soviet times.

Yaponchik had sided with the Tbilisskaya in their conflict with the Kutaiskaya and this set off fears of a new mob war in Russia between the Georgian groups (Galeotti 2009; Nasyrov 2009). The Kutaiskaya and Sukhumskaya are known to have better relations probably due to the personal working relationship between their two leading men (Russkii Newsweek 2009). I give the history of the conflict below, based on Spanish police data and Russian news reports, as an indication of friction that stemming from and solidifying the factions within the Georgian thieves' world.

Major conflict between the Kutaiskaya and Tbilisskaya appears to have taken on an open form by 2005. In that year, the central figure in the Kutaiskaya, Taniel Oniani, returned from Spain to Moscow after the Spanish police's Operation 'Wasp' targeted his activities there (Special Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office of Spain, 2005). As a consequence of this operation, Zakari Kalashov was arrested in June 2006 in Dubai on the request of the Spanish authorities. Kalashov is a powerful *qurdi* with connections with serious Russian organised crime groups such as the Solntsevo. A Swiss police report also connected him to legitimate companies such as Russian oil giant LukOil (Forbes Russia 2009; Guardian 2010)³⁴. Following Kalashov's arrest and Oniani's return to Moscow, Oniani clashed with Aslan Usoyan, known as Ded Hasan, who is a central leader of the Tbilisskaya, over control of Kalashov's business interests. On top of this, the conflict was allegedly fuelled by other elements such as competition over the trafficking of heroin through Moscow and sharing the construction market for the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics (Gondusov 2009; Kommersant 2009; Kruter 2009). As a result Yaponchik, who had just been released from prison when Oniani arrived back in Moscow, was called in to help resolve the conflict and he ruled in favour of Ded Hasan (Galeotti 2009).

³⁴ This report was cited as a reason to block LukOil from buying a large stake in Spanish oil company Repsol.

Both Oniani and Ded Hasan then called *skhodki* to make claims against the other and have each other ‘uncrowned’. The Tbilisskaya allegedly sent out a thieves’ order, known as *malyava*, which found its way into the Russian press. It was signed by Usoyan, Yaponchik and other authoritative *qurdebi* denouncing Oniani and calling for him to be dealt with ‘accordingly’ which most likely means death (Kommersant 2009). Some have questioned the authenticity of this order however. Then, in June 2009, Oniani was arrested and charged with the kidnapping and extortion of a businessman. A month later Yaponchik was shot and later died of his injuries in hospital in October; Oniani’s men have been blamed for the shooting by those close to the conflict. Since then the Tbilisskaya appears to have gained the upper hand. Oniani’s trial went ahead and he was sentenced to 10 years (Rosbalt 2010); his associates have been assassinated in various parts of Europe or have gone into hiding. However, at the end of 2010, an unsuccessful attempt was made on Usoyan’s life in central Moscow suggesting the conflict is far from over.

This story of conflict is indicative of how the territorial factions amongst the Georgian *qurdebi* are, in the present day at least, strongly solidified. The groups are known to cooperate and negotiate with each other yet the level of this cooperation depends on the circumstances and can move into conflict, as has been the case since 2005. The effect of transplantation to Russia and elsewhere on strengthening or weakening the factions is unclear however it is surely a factor. The above story detailing the recent clash has introduced the dominating figures of Tariel Oniani and Aslan Usoyan and has thereby hinted at the de-stabilising role played by centralisation, or as Tilly (2006) has it, the formation of charismatic centres in a trust network. It is to this aspect that I now turn.

8.4 Within-Faction Centralisation

The formation of clearly defined factions of smaller size is a structural change that might bring with it new forms of coordination. This section is concerned with looking at this issue and specifically the degree to which organisational changes have created hierarchies amongst the formally equal *qurdebi* and centralisation round strongmen within factions.

For all the professed equality of ties amongst the *qurdebi* this is rarely achieved in practice. Police respondents believe that there are rankings within the *qurdebi*'s relations, '*qurdebi* are in principle equal, but actually there are big differences between them in terms of status' (R9). However, according to the police, no *qurdi* will acknowledge these differences, no *qurdi* will stand up for anyone else upon entering a room for example. Other respondents backed up this viewpoint:

'Someone of my age, lived to be 50 or 60 and he's remained a qurdi all this time, well, it means he's a genuine qurdi, yes? And the other guy, 20, and he's a qurdi, well compared to me it doesn't have such meaning. If you know some young qurdi, you say, you are a baby, live as a qurdi 30 years or so and you'll have the same authority as me - if you can keep your name as a qurdi that is....' (R18).

This also speaks to the fact that the threat of expulsion or 'uncrowning' is constantly present, the *qurdebi* jostle for position in the network and are constantly looking to undermine and outdo one another (Chalidze 1977, p. 46). 'You think it is easy being a *qurdi*, but it isn't, they have to be so careful down to the littlest detail in what they say and what they do, because there is always someone out for them, they constantly try to remove each other's status and get rid of each other' (R10).

The threat of uncrowning in the network and the fact that some have more voice than others give an incentive to find a patron. This is because a potential patron ‘knows all the authoritative guys, he can gather a *skhodka*, sit you down...[so it’s good to] say, I respect you, I don’t need to take a cut from this shop, you take it...Then if you need something, he’s already on your side’ (R18). Taking on a patron leads to hierarchical structuring and lowering of equality of ties amongst the *qurdebi* however and for Tilly (2006) this is detrimental to the survival of a trust network.

This instituting of vertical ties has the danger of leading to centralization as patron-client relations within the network funnel upwards towards the most authoritative members. As we have seen, the Kutaiskaya and Tbilisskaya groups have become centred on two individuals: Taniel Oniani and Aslan Usoyan (Ded Hasan). According to Tilly (2006, p. 72), the creation of charismatic centres can increase commitment of members in a trust network. However, it can be detrimental to participation in day-to-day decision-making and management within the network. Furthermore, over-reliance on one individual can create problems during succession or when something bad befalls that individual. This can be seen in the case of Oniani who was arrested in June 2009 on kidnapping charges. This has left the Kutaiskaya as a group in a weak position relative to other groups in Russia and has led the press to declare Ded Hasan as the now most prominent ‘godfather’ of the Russian underworld (Russkii Newsweek 2009). Thus, concentrating power around a central figure can make the trust network more viable in the short-term though unstable in the long-term. In the next section, I look at the issue of centralization in more detail. Whilst the press reports suggest that the Georgian *qurdebi* factions are highly centralised, I will utilise police data and develop a network analysis to look at how centralised the Kutaiskaya faction is, and whether it itself is factionalised.

8.4.1 Network Analysis: Centralization in the Kuttaiskaya

I now try to present in a visual form the links between the central figures in one of the factions, the Kuttaiskaya, by turning to the data collected from the police files on the criminal contacts of *qurdebi* from Imereti and in particular of those from the town of Kutaisi. In the Kutaisi files, the data was not always complete. The files list contacts and in all cases these contacts were noted as ‘associates in crime,’ however the detail concerning the nature of the contact was variable. In some cases it might be a relative, or simply a member of an organized crime group. In most cases, it was stated whether the contact was a ‘so-called’ *kanonieri qurdi* or not, in some cases the data reported if the contact was a follower of the thieves’ traditions though not actually a *qurdi*. Naturally, the files often reported Kutaisi *qurdebi* as connected to each other as well as to *qurdebi* from other towns, and to ordinary people who associated with the individuals in committing crime. I limited my analysis to Kutaisi and this gave me 52 files to work with (AOCU-K 2004).

I tabulated contacts by listing all names mentioned in the files and marking their ‘associates in crime’. If B was mentioned as an associate in a file on A, I would add this as A’s contact and then compile the contacts from the file on B separately. If, in the file on B, there was a contact X for whom I possessed no information I would list X as a contact of B and unless X appeared in other files he would remain a periphery figure, if there was subsequently no file on X then he would be excluded from the network analysis. In this way, a core group was formed made up of those on whom there were police reports and their interconnections with each other. All of

these were initiated men, that is, they were all *kanonieri qurdebi*. I created a database from the files and put these into the social network analysis computer program UCINET 6 to visually represent how the network connected up and to test certain ideas about how the network might be structured (Sparrow 1991; Scott 2000; Coles 2001). The data enabled a focus only on ‘structural’ form and patterns across actors rather than ‘interactional’ components of the network such as the nature and strength of the relationships (Coles 2001). Furthermore, the extent of the network was defined by the police files and only focuses on relations between Kutaisi *qurdebi*, evidently the network in reality would span outwards getting larger and larger (Sparrow 1991).

Using functions to test the centrality of actors I was able to identify those actors with the highest number of contacts (known as actors’ ‘degree’), and also the brokers in the network, that is, those who act as middlemen for putting the actors in the network in touch with each other (‘betweenness’ – see Scott 2000). Furthermore, I was able to break the network down into interconnected sub-groups or factions. By using the ‘ego network’ function, I was able to redraw the networks in terms of the contacts of only a few actors at a time (Ibid). In this way I was able to break the analysis down to look at the contacts of the cohorts that were ‘baptized’ as *qurdebi* between the years 1982-1991 and 1992-2004 as well as factoring into the analysis the place of residence of the actors as it was then in 2004. For each of these networks I calculated the density to understand how tightly interconnected these networks are. Finally, I put the degree and betweenness scores for the actors back into the statistical program SPSS in order to analyse the results against other variables such as cohort, place of residence, and number of convictions.

Figure 8.2 below shows the interconnections between the *qurdebi* of Kutaisi as they relate to each other. Names have been removed and replaced with a letter V

for the Russian *vor* meaning thief-in-law; a number is given for each case (N=52) and a letter is given denoting which ‘baptism’ cohort an actor is from, that is in which period an actor was initiated into the *qurdebi* fraternity (see chapter 3 for a justification of the cut-off points): Cohort A = 1992-2004, B = 1982-1991, C = 1972-1981, D = 1953-1971. The size of the square or ‘node’ for each actor represents how well connected the actor is, that is, the number of lines connecting to that node. Using the ‘factions’ function the network splits into three different subgroups based on how densely interconnected the nodes are. The colours of the nodes represent which faction the actor belongs to, red, blue or black.

Firstly, this figure shows immediately that the Kutaiskaya group does not contain equally connected members. Secondly, there are dense collections of interconnecting nodes that suggest factions within the network. The faction function in the UCINET 6 programme produces an algorithm that calculates factions based on the density of ties between sets of actors and splits the actors based on the density of groupings uncovered by the algorithm. Here three factions were produced, each faction networks more with actors of the same faction than with others.

These factions fit with and are likely produced to some degree by conflicts between individuals within the Kutaiskaya that are described in the police reports. For example, at a thieves' meeting (*skhodka*) V9C in blue in the diagram was shot and wounded by another *qurdi* (not depicted in Figure 8.2) following an argument over the use of the communal fund (*obshchak*) for the purposes of a funeral. Consequently, this fight created divisions which centred on certain powerful individuals within the network. Certain members of the black faction including V31B and V41C supported the shooter in this conflict even though using a gun at a *skhodka* breached the thieves' code. This might have helped solidify distinctions between black and blue groups. Furthermore, V13B in red, is known to have a conflict with V6B in blue below over the latter's lifestyle, though V13B himself was criticized for his extravagant house. Thus, the sub-groupings represented above seem to correspond to information on conflicts within the network given by the police files.

The factions within the Kutaisi group also correspond to some degree with generational splits. Of those in the red faction (N=17) 65% are from the youngest cohort of *qurdebi*, that is, those that were baptized as *qurdebi* after 1992, whereas, of the blue faction (N=21), 76% were baptized before 1992. The black faction (N=14) is

split 43% after 1992 and 57% before. This suggests that age groups tend to network more with each other.

The factions also correspond to differences in transplantation, as the reds tend to represent those who stayed in Kutaisi and the blues those who moved to Russia. Of the *qurdebi* in Russia from this sample 52% are from the blue faction against 26% from the red faction. Of the *qurdebi* that stayed in Kutaisi 44% is from the red faction and 27% from the blue. This suggests that the younger *qurdebi* tend to stay put more (see also chapter 7), are usually the ones operating organised crime groups in Kutaisi according to the police (AOCU-K 2004), and network with each other more than with those who have left the town as might well be expected. Though conflict is present then, these factions should not be seen as being caused only by this but also other differences such as age and location that determine the network of an individual.

In terms of centralization, the network does not seem particularly centred on one particular individual and this appears to go against the argument that the *qurdebi* network broke into factions which then, as smaller units, became centralized themselves. However, the different cliques within the Kutaiskaya each have central characters, these are given below along with their centralization scores, which is calculated as the number of ties they have in the network:

FACTION	QURDI	NO. OF TIES	QURDI	NO. OF TIES	QURDI	NO. OF TIES
Red	V1A	10	V13B	10	V21A	9
Blue	V38B	14	V37B	13	V20B	12
Black	V31B	13	V41C	10	V47B	7

Table 8.3 to show top three qurdebi for each faction in terms of number of ties

Table 8.3 shows the central actors in terms of ties in the blue faction are better connected than those for other factions and seem to represent the most authoritative *qurdebi* within the Kutaiskaya; indeed these actors from this faction are the recognised leaders of the Kutaiskaya in Moscow. They appear to form a highly connected circle of actors at the centre of the blue faction. This circle includes the Kutaisi *qurdi*, Taniel Oniani, V37B. Those around him are very well connected, tend to operate in Moscow and are drawn from the older and most influential cohort that were baptised in the 1980s and had built up reputations before the opportunities that came with the collapse of communism. Those who, from other sources (Special Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office of Spain, 2005), are known to be close to Oniani also have high centrality scores, such as V20B and V23C, so it is perhaps plausible to see these actors as a central unit that the Kutaiskaya group as a whole revolves around. This idea is more plausible in the present day than it was in 2003 when the Kutaisi police reports were made. Greater competition and the complete move out of Georgia since the Rose Revolution might have made the Kutaiskaya even more centralised round Taniel Oniani as numerous news reports suggest (Kommersant 2009; Nasyrov 2009; Galeotti 2009, 2010).

It would be interesting to have network data for the Kutaiskaya in the present day to test this idea. Without it, we may still suppose that the cliques that formed from the original network of thieves-in-law across the Soviet Union have not maintained actual equality in ties and do indeed have hierarchies and degrees of centralisation. It is necessary however to note that degrees of centralisation are likely to be unstable and changing.

Overall then, the network analysis appears to follow the idea that the *qurdebi* of Kutaisi form an interacting faction of the larger *qurdebi* network which further splits into cliques. The Kutaiskaya itself has some degree of hierarchy but does not centralise exclusively round only one actor. The factions within the Kutaiskaya are also rather interconnected and these actors, despite their grievances, do coordinate at *skhodki* together.

I have so far given indicators based on primary and secondary sources that suggest the factionalisation and centralisation of the thieves' world in Georgia. The factors that might explain these aspects have yet to be explicated. In order to make an initial attempt at this, I next briefly discuss theories of organisational structure and change.

8.5 Determinants of Organisational Structure and Change

In the previous chapter it was argued that recruitment practices could be explained by the effects of competition and rising agency and opportunity costs on punishing wayward practices. The problems of competition and agency costs can be mediated however by altering organisational structure. It is argued here that the growing tendency towards factionalism and centralisation might be seen as a response to coordination problems in a changing environment that included growing competition, rising agency costs and shifts in criminal justice policy and the strength of the state. I first turn to the latter point, suggesting that changes in patterns of imprisonment might go some way towards explaining factionalism, before turning to

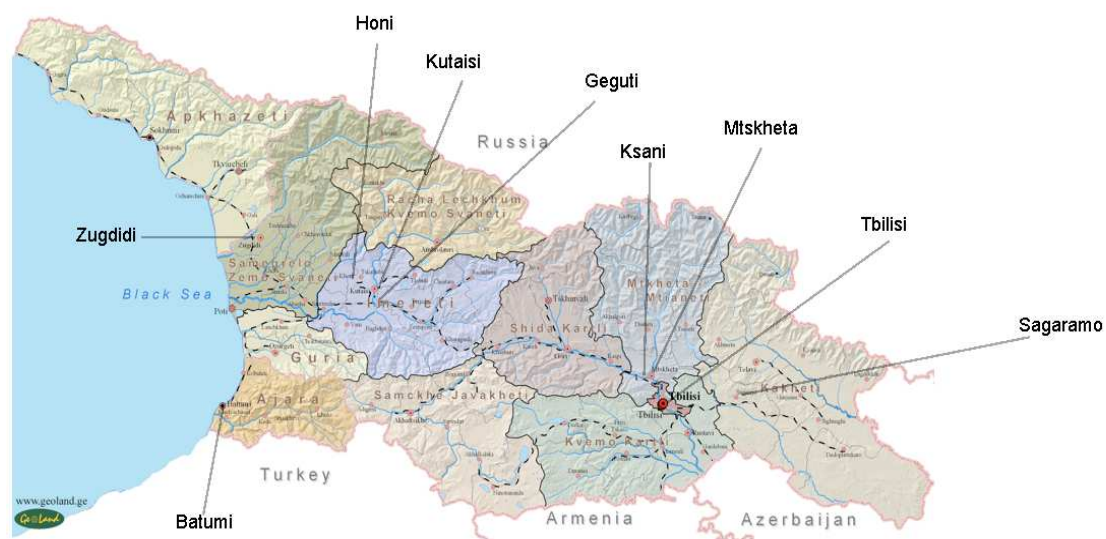
rising competition and agency costs as further factors for explaining this and the tendency to centralise within factions.

8.5.1 Factionalism and Penal Policy

Some studies (Shelley 1980; Reuter 1985; Varese forthcoming) suggest that penal and policing policies can have consequences for the geographic distribution of criminal groups and this might also plausibly impact on structure and organisation. Reuter (1985, ch. 7) argues that mafias in America are fundamentally local in character, so how then did they ever come into contact in order to coordinate? Reuter identifies the effect of a federal prison system for putting prisoners from different regions in touch, as attested to by mafia turncoat Joseph Valachi (Maas 2003). This suggestion seems entirely plausible as a factor explaining the initial reach of the thieves-in-law in the Soviet Union. However, the break up of the Soviet federal prison system into national, localised ones might be hypothesised to have the opposite effect on mafia organisation.

In terms of the effect of penal and policing policies on geographic distribution, the post-Soviet republics adopted new penal policies after independence. The Georgian government now stipulates that an offender serve his or her sentence at a facility in the region where the offence was committed though this does depend on the type of crime committed (R42). During Soviet times this policy also existed but was not necessarily used as serious criminals and political prisoners were notoriously sent to far-flung labour camps.

In the 1980s, Soviet Georgia had sent its dangerous recidivists far away to Siberia (see chapter 6), in the post-Soviet period however this option was no longer available. Perhaps then, the location of prisons might have affected interactions between *qurdebi* contributing to factions based on locales. The map below shows the location of the main prisons in Georgia before 2004. Since then new ones have been built and others destroyed.



Map 8.2 showing locations of Georgian prisons in 2004.

As can be seen, up to 2004 the prisons focus round population centres. Tbilisi and Kutaisi all have large, local prisons in the cities' limits. Both the hinterlands of Tbilisi and Kutaisi contain at least two big prisons and overall the two cities and their regions contain the majority of the prisons in Georgia. This might again be hypothesised to have consequences in terms of the prominence of Imereti and Tbilisi in the Georgian thieves' world. Furthermore, as will be considered below, the incarceration of local *qurdebi* in local prisons - Kutaisi, Geguti and Honi in

Imereti, and Ortachala (Tbilisi, Prison No. 5), Mtskheta and Ksani near Tbilisi - might have had a further effect in facilitating regional networks and solidifying interregional differences. I will see below if such an interpretation can be supported at all by the data.

The Imereti police files (AOCU-K 2004) give information on where cases of Imereti's *qurdebi* were tried and convicted prior to 2004. This information is presented below in Table 8.2. In total, for all convictions there was data on 154 trials. The results show that the vast majority of Imereti's *qurdebi* stayed close to home in committing crime as the vast majority of trials were conducted in Kutaisi and the other towns of Imereti. It is quite marked that so few trials (28%, N=154) were conducted outside the Imereti region. This suggests that the *qurdebi* contrary to popular perception were not that mobile, until forced to be.

	Place of Trial							
Court cases processed	Kutaisi	Imereti	Supreme Court of Georgia	Tbilisi	Other Georgia	Russia	Other country	Total
N	64	46	2	18	11	10	3	154
%	42	30	1	12	7	6	2	100

Table 8.2: shows frequencies for where court cases involving Imeretian *qurdebi* took place

There was no meaningful correlation between age of a *qurdi* and the place where *qurdebi* were tried. The table shows that the vast majority of *qurdebi* in the police files were tried in Imereti at 72%. This figure increases when we look only at the early convictions. So, at first conviction the vast majority (86%) of Imeretian *qurdebi* were tried in Imereti. This is understandable when we consider that a first conviction is more likely to be at a young age and this is intuitively more likely to be

for a crime committed locally rather than in some distant place, as young people are generally more dependent and less mobile. The figure for trials in Imereti remains high (70%) for both second and third conviction, however at fourth conviction the distribution becomes much more equal with 47% tried in Imereti, 24% in Tbilisi and other Georgian towns and 24% in Russia with 5% tried in another country. Looking at the cases individually the cases tried in Russia appear to represent hardened recidivists being sent to so-called 'harsh regime' camps in the Urals or Siberia; while other cases show older, previously convicted, *qurdebi* moving to Russia presumably to attempt to take up the criminal opportunities on offer there and then being picked up by the authorities. Unfortunately, attrition in the data means that the number of cases with information on the 4th conviction amounts to only 17 so it is difficult to draw too much out of this.

The overwhelming number of those tried and convicted in the Kutaisi and Imereti region generally seems to speak to the preference for these criminals to stay in their local area and conduct their activities there. It certainly seems to challenge the view that the Georgian *qurdebi* prefer to be mobile. Instead, the results here appear to support the hypothesis that the *qurdebi* stay in one place, until pushed out by external pressures such as violent competition or clampdowns by the authorities (Varese forthcoming). That is not to say that a lot of these *qurdebi* now do not live elsewhere away from their hometown, but it does suggest that regardless of where an Imeretian *qurdi* might finally be active, a criminal career initially commences and continues, at least for some time, at home.

The mechanism linking locally based criminal careers with changes in organisational structure, particularly the move to factionalism, may be the solidarity of locally born men through shared time together and mutual attraction and thus belief

in the otherness of *qurdebi* from other regions. Immobility on this argument is likely a strong cause of factionalism as local *qurdebi* network amongst themselves, committing crime in their home town, serving sentences in local prisons, and gaining reputation in immediate criminal circles. Localities that operated prisons therefore had a good chance of producing locally born *qurdebi*, known in and outside of the prison with reputations transferred freely from the town to the prison and vice versa, socialised into the thieves' understandings amongst other local representatives of the thieves' world. The police files have some examples of this (AOCU-T 2004). This means that authority on the street in a certain locale could be carried over into a local prison, built on whilst there and then brought back to the street (R42).

Penal policy may have had an effect then in creating local factions within the *qurdebi* network. However, it is not clear exactly what the size of this effect is on factionalism or when exactly this effect would have begun as it probably existed prior to 1991. It is enough to note here however that the criminal careers of many *qurdebi*, from Imereti at least, maintained a local character and that this might have added to the regional factionalism seen in the present day.

8.5.2 Centralised Factions and Competition

As was shown in chapter 7, competition in the environment can have important effects on an organisation. Leeson and Rogers (n.d.), borrowing from theories of the organisation of firms, find that competition has a positive correlation with the degree of hierarchy and centralisation in a criminal firm. These authors find that 'contestability crucially shapes organization' (Leeson & Rogers n.d., p.2) in criminal structures, in other words, the degree of competition a criminal group faces.

Competition is theorised as an exogenous factor that depends on the entry costs involved in the industry of, in the case of mafias, protection provision. The more competition there is, the greater the incentive for collusion amongst actors in order to block the market entry of other criminals. Such cartelization is likely when barriers to market entry are low as this facilitates competition (Ibid, p. 7).

However, the act of collusion faces coordination obstacles. The threat of defection on collusive agreements looms large. Punishment of defection in the extra-legal realm may be done through the use of violence, however this is costly to the punisher: in many cases guilt is difficult to prove and any punishment may be met with retaliation. The answer to these problems, according to the Leeson & Rogers is to endow a boss with the relevant authority. ‘When only one cartel member has the power to use violence to enforce collusion, mistakes are less costly for colluders’ (Ibid, p. 8). This explanation invokes the Hobbesian notion of leviathan. Deferral to the boss is costly, but allows a solution to coordination dilemmas that can create benefits for all. At higher levels, centralisation and hierarchical structure allow greater inter-firm collusion across markets and territories. Vesting too much power in a boss can lead to governance problems such as boss self-dealing, that is, taking advantage of the position and trust bestowed on him or her. However, as long as the cost of this is outweighed by the benefits of having an executive decision-maker, centralisation will remain a feature of a criminal organisation.

By the 1990s, the Georgian *qurdebi*, as has been shown, were operating in a seriously competitive market. On Leeson and Rogers’ view this would create a strong incentive to form around bosses, bringing together the many small organised crime groups run by individual *qurdebi* into one integrated structure within a territorially based clique. The theory predicts a top-down organisational structure as long as the

benefits from adopting a hierarchical structure outweigh the costs of boss self-dealing. With growing pressures of competition both in Georgia and Russia in the 1990s incentives grew to create an organisational form where bosses were able to make decisions and act on behalf of the group. This enables the *qurdebi* to have greater coordination amongst factions who can collude to block other market entrants, resolve collective disputes, or challenge existing competitors through the negotiation of their respective bosses. This appears to be a very plausible explanatory factor in the factionalisation and centralisation of the *qurdebi* then. There definitely was an increase in competition in the 1990s and there does appear to have been a corresponding increase in centralised factionalism. On this account, the mechanism to explain this apparent correlation is the incentive for self-preservation for the individuals involved who need to downsize their organisation from the overarching network of the thieves-in-law and centralise in more efficient units to survive in a more competitive environment.

Pfeffer and Leblebici (1973) also look at the effects of competition on firms in legal markets and find in line with Leeson and Rogers (n.d.) that more competition means more centralisation, more hierarchy and more formalisation of decision-making. However, these findings need to be more fully tested along with the intervening effects of size and technology, Pfeffer and Leblebici (1973, p. 278) warn. Leeson and Rogers do not factor in size as a variable in the structure of mafia groups rejecting it by employing a solitary counter example of a small group that does not hierarchically organise, street gangs. However, there are many studies of organisational change that test whether growth of an organisation changes structure. These studies do not reach a consensual conclusion (Barnett & Carroll 1995, p. 221). Large organisations might have inertial pressures especially if they are also relatively

old (Hannan & Freeman, 1984) or have no recent history of change (Kelly & Amburgey, 1991), yet a large organisation has greater resources so can implement and survive change easier (Huber et al. 1993). In principle, the larger the group is the more decentralisation and delegation should occur (Hall 1995) based on the logic of lowering agency costs on monitoring performance. Thus, while competition appears to be a strong determinant of organisational change, agency and monitoring costs should also be brought into the analysis in the context of changing size and complexity of the *qurdebi* network.

8.5.3 Network Size, Agency Costs, Factionalism and Centralisation

As we have seen agency costs most likely increased in the 1990s with authoritative *qurdebi* moving out of Georgia, probably due to a mixture of the level of dangerous competition and the greater opportunities elsewhere. Thus, increasing agency costs appear to be a problem. Furthermore, lowering barriers to entry could swell the number of recruits and thereby the size of the network making coordination and monitoring even more costly. Increasing size and agency costs combined with competition could provide significant pressures to re-structure.

It is very difficult to estimate the size of the trust network of the thieves-in-law; to know how many actual made men there are and how many ‘overseers,’ ‘goodfellas’ and ‘fighters’. However, certain estimates have been made. Figures of the last few years have placed the figure around 1,000-1,200 thieves-in-law from the post-Soviet space. Commentators provide conflicting reports as to the trends in these figures. Serio (2008, p. 168-169) states declining figures in the early 1990s, while Glonti and Lobjanidze (2004) suggest that the number of thieves-in-law increased

dramatically once the Soviet Union collapsed. Both base their findings on police evidence.

Glonti and Lobjanidze state that the Russian Interior Ministry recorded a six-fold increase between the years 1991 to 1996 in the number of thieves-in-law in Russia with 40-50 being 'crowned' every year compared to just 6 to 7 prior to 1991 (Ibid, p. 104). The authors do not give actual numbers of thieves-in-law but they also note, again based on government data, that the number of *skhodki* in Russia increased from 26 in the years 1989-1992, to around 100 in 1993, and 413 in 1994 (p. 108). Varese (2001) shows an increase in the number of thieves-in-law up to 1994 in Russia after which he projects declining figures based on the assumption that the thieves-in-law would be slowly picked off by the more violent, untraditional criminals known as 'bandits'. As regards the Georgians, a decline in the numbers of *qurdebi* appears not to have happened and this is most likely due to the lowering of barriers to entry in recruitment and greater ruthlessness and adaptability amongst the Georgian *qurdebi* themselves.

As was argued in chapter 7, barriers to becoming a *qurdi* significantly lowered in the 1990s. I have argued in that chapter that a major explanatory factor was an increase in agency and opportunity costs on those that would otherwise monitor the levels of *qurdebi* recruitment. The consequence of this situation was that many new *qurdebi* were 'baptised' without proper rigour. This would in principle further increase monitoring costs due to an enlarged membership of the trust network. Unfortunately, I do not have the adequate historical data to show that there were greater numbers in the 1990s than at other points in history. The data I have though show that there were more *qurdebi* baptised in the period 1992-2004 than in other periods. Assuming the estimation of baptism age of around 24 (and the age may well

have been more in flux in the 1992-2004 period), there were 110 *qurdebi* crowned in this 1992-2004 period against 88, 57 and 23 for other periods (1982-1991, 1972-1981, 1952-71 respectively). It should not be excluded of course that this is just an attrition effect in the police files where those baptised in the older cohorts have died off and therefore do not make it into the files.

However, interview data consistently shows that the impression of expert respondents is that the number of *qurdebi* increased in the 1990s. A retired police investigator said, ‘for some reason their numbers grew in the last few decades generally, we can say this. I can tell you that the number of *qurdebi* in Georgia after WWII you could have counted on your hand’ (R2). Others support this view and link the increase in numbers to the issue of the age when *qurdebi* were baptised in the 1990s. ‘In the communist period, *qurdebi* were never young guys, say around 20 or less.... but recently, in the 1990s, I remember there were *qurdebi* in prison who were 19, 20, 21 years old, suddenly many turned up’ (R20). Another respondent (R25), expressed an admiration for the *qurdebi* she had dealt with in the past but that ‘after the Soviet Union collapsed younger people started becoming *qurdebi* and the number of people grew. Before you would hear of a new *qurdi* once every couple of years maybe and now they are scattered around like sunflower seeds! If you steal a chicken you become a *qurdi*!’

Here then, the initial agency and opportunity costs incurred through the movement of the older *qurdebi* creates an increase in new recruits which then further amplifies the agency costs involved. Thus, just as individual *qurdebi* required the delegation of monitoring organised crime groups and prison gangs through the use of an ‘overseer,’ so at a group level the *qurdebi* required monitoring and regulation of activities by other *qurdebi*. Growth in numbers and the traditional wide geographic

spread of the *qurdebi* might have increased pressure to factionalise into smaller, more manageable groups centred on specific actors endowed with greater decision making capacity than other, formally equal, *qurdebi*.

The size of a criminal group and its dispersal might well dictate the need for a boss or bosses; the bigger the number of actors, the higher the number of interactions and the harder it is to monitor these actors. Increasing agency costs require that a structure be adopted that puts restraints on actors' behaviour through a range of mechanisms such as the deployment of norms, punishments and rewards and that authority be vested in actors who can oversee and implement this structure. As was shown earlier (see also chapter 5), individual Georgian *qurdebi*, often dispersed in many countries, decentralised the structure of their groups by employing others to look after their interests known as 'overseers' and 'authorities'.

Yet, the fact that the *qurdebi* network appears to have grown in size is not enough to explain factionalisation and centralisation on its own. Analyses of businesses note that a further stimulus to reorganise and restructure is needed. A bloated organisation can still manage as long as it is under no pressure. However, once competition emerges the pressure on management to streamline and restructure increases (Pfeffer & Leblecici 1973). Even the interaction of these two factors is not enough to guarantee that an organisation will change as this depends on many other confounding factors (Hannan & Freeman, 1984). There are many obstacles to organisational change. These include internal political wrangling, imperfect information, and sunk investments in the status quo (Haveman, 1992). Thus, opportunities and threats are not always recognised or acted upon. It is difficult then to be certain whether structural change occurs as a rational strategy, a response to

threats or opportunities, or haphazardly. Furthermore, there are some features that are outside the scope of this analysis, such as technological changes.

Yet clearly certain pressures shaped the *qurdebi* structurally towards centralised factions. Growing size, itself driven to some degree by the presence of lethal competition, meant that the thieves-in-law either adapted their structure or faced the decline that Varese (2001) predicted in Russia. Whilst more data is needed, these considerations provide the beginnings of an explanation for the move towards factionalism and centralisation.

8.6 Conclusion

I have presented various indicators that suggest changes in terms of internal relations and structural factors, most clearly in terms of factionalism and centralisation within those factions. I found that the *qurdebi* in Georgia have become factionalised and centred on certain charismatic characters. The Tbilisskaya, Kutaiskaya and Sukhumsкая groups, to the extent that they have established a degree of autonomy from each other and sometimes conflict, have begun to look more like authoritative organisations made up of groups of *qurdebi* and their associates but deferring to clear bosses. These groups may be thought of as cartels of small organised crime groups based on geographic distinctions, with the cartels subsequently becoming relatively centralised, sometimes competing sometimes cooperating, with cartels from other regions. I have argued that factionalism and centralisation might be seen as responses to pressures such as increasing competition, size, and agency costs in the 1990s.

The break up of the network of the *qurdebi* into localised factions most likely constitutes a survival strategy in the present day. The threat from paramilitary groups such as *Mkhedrioni* in Georgia and new post-1991 groups that simply structured themselves as hierarchical mafias ruled by ‘authorities’ and made up of organisational units of ‘bandits’ and ‘fighters’ in Russia for example (Volkov 2002; Humphreys 2002), was met by the Georgian *qurdebi* by adapting towards an authoritative organisational structure themselves.

This trend brings into question whether what we observe in the present day is indeed a ‘criminal system’ that pervades Russia, Georgia and the former Soviet states. As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, the thieves-in-law are bound by problems of governance, coordination and regulation and have to struggle with these issues if they are to maintain the wide reaching, all-pervasive criminal world that some have claimed for them. These problems of governance have made it more realistic in the present day to talk about Georgian mafias organisationally more akin to territorially based Italian mafias such as the Sicilian Cosa Nostra and the Calabrian N’drangheta.

As Tilly warns of other trust networks that centralise, this might have consequences in the long term in terms of the survival of the once uniform thieves’ world. The incentives to participate in a trust network also change, moving away from commitment towards the pursuit of capital or the avoidance of punishment, that is, coercion. I now turn to the issue of commitment, the glue that holds the *qurdebi* network together.

9. 'With My Body and Soul': Commitment and Exit Costs in the Thieves' World

*“To the question about his identity, he answered that he is V....and he is a kanonieri
qurdi with his ‘body and soul.’”³⁵*

Witness Statement on the arrest of the *qurdi* V.
(Prosecution Service Indictment, 2006b)

Gulag survivor Varlam Shalamov writes (1994 p.411) that ‘hundreds of thousands of people who have been in the camps are permanently seduced by the ideology of these criminals [the thieves] and have ceased to be people. Something criminal has entered into their souls forever. Thieves and their morality have left an indelible mark on each.’ This is an evocative portrayal of the thieves-in-law as the strongest representatives of a counter-culture that had a seductive appeal to the hundreds of thousands of Gulag inmates and former prisoners. However, from another point of view it is difficult to understand the attraction and commitment to the thieves’ life: the collective demands made on members, the ascetic lifestyle, and the perception of the prison as home. Yet the thieves-in-law of the Soviet Union and the criminal institution of the thieves’ world has managed to attract and keep committed

³⁵ This is a variation of the common refrain upon arrest for a *qurdi*. In Georgian: ‘*khortsit da siskhlit me qurdi var.*’ Literally, ‘with my flesh and blood I am a thief-in-law.’

members over the decades. It is undoubtedly one of the most important factors in explaining the resilience of the thieves-in-law. This chapter looks at the sources of such commitment and changes to that commitment in the present day.

For Tilly (2006), authoritative organisations, collaborative institutions and trust networks deploy mixtures of commitment, capital and coercion as incentives in order to govern and coordinate themselves. Trust networks stand out in relying on commitment to a greater degree than authoritative organisations or collaborative institutions. The earlier typologies of organisations also stress the differing incentives upon which different types of organisations are based (Kelman 1958; Etzioni 1961; Ouchi 1979). For Etzioni (1961) there are coercive, utilitarian and normative organisations and then fuzzy sets of these. For Ouchi (1979), organisational control mechanisms come in the form of bureaucracies, markets and clans. Tilly's 'trust network', Etzioni's 'normative organisation' or Ouchi's 'clan' rely not just on utilitarian mechanisms of securing commitment but also on the legitimacy of the claims made and symbols produced by a given organisation, identification of roles played, and internalisation of beliefs.

This chapter argues that the original society of thieves-in-law represented a commitment based trust network. The original rules that were instituted at the inception of the thieves' society comprised commitment-inducing mechanisms for governing behaviour and maintaining consistent lines of action. This was vital for the thieves-in-law to reproduce themselves. The prison-based essence of the group meant that it was impossible to attract new recruits by the promise of material gains and maintaining recruits through the threat of punishment would also have been too costly a process. Thus, recruits had to be socialised and committed to the thieves' idea as the first rule of being a thief-in-law. Furthermore, as in an ideal-type trust network (Tilly

2006), it was necessary to maintain high barriers to exit, with punishment for defectors and the removal of all privileges.

Below, I will discuss three of the main rules in the thieves' code: payment into the *obshchak*, the cutting of all social ties outside the thieves' world, and submission to the 'thieves' idea.' I will discuss these as binding devices that raise barriers to exit, however, these three areas also have affective and normative elements in inducing commitment. I draw on primary and secondary data to show the following: the *obshchak* is still a prominent phenomenon in Georgia and represents an open-ended investment for a *qurdi*; burning bridges with social ties and enacting communion with the thievish community is declining in Georgia witnessed by the rate of marriage and increase of degrees of wealth amongst the *qurdebi*; the sense of surrender to a higher ideal and re-identification with the thieves' community, itself part of a 'burning bridges' strategy, is perhaps on the decline in Georgia as indicated by rates of nicknaming amongst cohorts.

9.1 The Concept of Commitment

The concept of commitment is a focus in a number of disciplines and is of interest to sociologists of organisations and religion as well as to criminologists and game theorists. In the 1960s and 1970s especially, the concept gained a great deal of interest amongst those sociologists of industry and work who tried to understand the varying degrees of commitment a worker might have to his or her firm. The central theme was to try to explain the onset of 'consistent lines of activity' (Becker 1960), their antecedents and consequences. An important element to this lies in explaining the psychological attachment a person could develop towards an organisation

(O'Reilly & Chatman 1986, p. 493). The independent foundations of this attachment have been theorised as three-fold: compliance based on rewards (cognitive commitment); identification with organisational roles and desire for affiliation (affective commitment); and internalization of values and congruence between the beliefs and attitudes of the individual and those of the organisation (normative commitment) (Kelman 1958; Etzioni 1961; Kanter 1968; Buchanan 1974; Ouchi 1979; O'Reilly & Chatman 1986; Meyer & Allen 1991).

One of the best of these studies is Kanter's (1968, p. 499) work on commitment in utopian communities. She noted that not only is a supply of people necessary for the continuation of a utopian community but these people must also be committed: 'since social orders are supported by people, one problem of collectivities is to meet organisational requisites in such a way that participants at the same time become positively involved with the system.' She identified three components of commitment. These components are cognitive, affective and normative commitment. Gathering data on around 30 utopian communities, she identified the presence or absence of these commitment components, their manifestations and the effect these had on 'success' of a community, measured as survival for longer than a generation, or 25 years.

Though theoretical discussions of commitment mechanisms make these neat categorisations of cognitive, affective and normative commitment, discussed above (Kelman, 1958; Meyer & Allen 1991; Kanter 1968, 1972), it is clear that these categories overlap. The affective and normative dimensions interact with utilitarian functions of commitment. For Becker, following Schelling (1960), commitment emerges out of placing 'side bets' which tie the agent in to following a consistent line of action. There are three elements to Becker's notion of commitment: firstly, the

prior action of the person betting on his future consistent activity, secondly, a recognition of this side bet by other interested parties, thirdly, the resulting consistent line of activity (Becker 1960, p. 36). Becker stresses that not all such side bets are made consciously or deliberately but may simply include such actions as specialising in certain skills resulting in burning bridges with other possible career paths thereby tying in the agent to one area of work.

Concerning the *kanonieri qurdebi* in Georgia, as stated by Tevzadze (n.d.), this specific grouping at the outset contained many elements of a religious organisation or a monastic sect. Just as in the Italian mafias, the adherence to a strict moral code helps to keep self-interest in check against the interests of what Paoli (2003, p. 81) calls the ‘normative communitas’ of mafia members. Members sign up to a status contract which does not give immediate short-term pay offs for specific obligations. Instead, the claims made by the community rely on ‘generalized reciprocity’ where this means exchange that requires no payoff for the individual in the short term but benefits the whole. Such status contracts will usually only be accepted by committed individuals who have internalised the mafia code and identify with the morals and goals of the group (Sacco 1997).

However, emphasising processes of internalisation and identification does not exclude Becker’s notion of rational ‘side bets’ from being brought into the analysis of mafias. Becker is, in effect, describing a binding game that raises costs on exiting a network. Simply punishing exit is not an efficient strategy as it involves high monitoring and production costs. Thus, the essence of the binding game is to bring about commitment by altering pay offs on future choices, building in costs on defection or exit.

On this view, ‘generalized reciprocity’ can be seen as a strategy in a binding game. By taking on a status contract, in which individual interests are subordinated to the good of the group for an indeterminate period, continuing commitment to the original oaths is made credible. While it is difficult to measure or even estimate the degree of internalisation of norms, communal feeling, or changes in sense of self, the structure of costs and benefits on exit are easier to discern and analyse on the assumption that actors are rational.

Taking on a status contract and taking on the costs involved in generalised reciprocity bears resemblance to the establishment of trust in a signalling game. For example, paying individual resources into a common fund can be seen as signalling commitment. According to Bliege-Bird & Alden Smith (2005, p. 231), pooling resources ‘prompts the hypothesis that by paying these costs individuals signal to others that they are indeed committed to long-term collective action. Signal costs helps secure this commitment if a defector would find it not worthwhile to pay it whereas a committed individual will recoup it through group membership over the long run.’ Whether a given instance works as signalling or binding in a game of imperfect information depends on the sequence of events (Gambetta 2009a p. 74). In signalling, a signal is produced before the fact in order to establish the possession of some valuable attribute. In binding, commitment is secured after the fact in order to ensure consistent, continuing lines of activity in future. Thus, in the case of mafias signalling occurs primarily in the recruitment stage, and binding only once recruited.

In what follows, I will analyse three aspects of the thieves’ world that can be seen as binding devices inducing consistent lines of action amongst members, raising the costs of defection and barriers to exit. These elements are: the *obshchak*, burning bridges through rejection of social ties outside the criminal community, and a change

in identity and surrender of the individual to the collective. These mechanisms in the thieves' world tie in an actor to a consistent line of action by raising barriers to exit. As was argued with barriers to entry, it is costly to continually monitor the boundaries of the trust network, therefore instituting alternative arrangements to mitigate these costs is a rational strategy. Such arrangements might involve internalisation of norms in status contracts, or altering cost-benefit analyses of members through investment – whether fiscal, temporal or emotional - in the membership. Such strategies that increase the costs of defection are taken here as instances of binding rather than signals. This is because, firstly, it is not always clear that they meet the cost-discriminating condition required of signals (see chapter 7). Secondly, these acts are not committed solely at a time prior to recruitment but constitute ongoing demands placed upon individuals throughout their time as *qurdebi*.

Finally, it is not suggested here that elements of the thieves' law were deliberately constructed so as to induce commitment, this cannot be known, however, many of the elements of the thieves' law, in its original and purest conception, coincides with features of other clandestine trust networks that bring about commitment. In a final section of this chapter, I will, based on other studies, list those features and the degree to which they still exist and what this might mean for the resilience of the *qurdebi*.

9.2 Commitment and Change in the Georgian Thieves' World

It is worth setting out again the basic tenets of the thieves' code as this contains the original commandments which in effect induce commitment in members of the thieves' world. There are a number of publications that lay out the statutes of

the thieves' law (Gurov 1995; Podlesskikh & Tereshonok 1995; Serio & Razinkin 1994; Varese 2001; Oleinik 2003; Glonti & Lobjanidze 2004). The thieves' law should not be confused with a more general informal prison rules that also existed, related to the behaviour of all prisoners not just those 'in the understandings,' though this coincided on many points with the thieves' code. The thieves' law set out the following basic principles:

1. A thief-in-law must never work or have ever worked in or outside prison
2. A thief-in-law must not take a wife, start a family or maintain family ties
3. A thief-in-law must not collude with the state in any form
4. A thief-in-law must contribute to the criminal common fund (known as the *obshchak*)
5. A thief-in-law must be honest with other thieves
6. A thief-in-law must be dedicated to the thieves' idea
7. A thief-in-law must attract new recruits, especially from among the youth
8. A thief-in-law must control his prison and impose thievish jurisdiction there (known as 'turning it black')

From these principles, many further informal rules flow such as: avoid all political parties or unions, have no registered place of residence, and do not carry firearms (Glonti & Lobjanidze 2004, pp. 94-98) Attendant punishments accompanied the informal law of the thieves including beatings and death. These rules should be

kept in mind in the subsequent discussion, as they will be evident throughout. Below however, I concentrate mainly on rules 4), 2) and 6), in that order, though other statutes will be brought into the analysis indirectly.

9.2.1 Side Bets: The *Obshchak*

In terms of cognitive binding devices, Kanter (1968) writes that ‘through investment individuals become integrated with the system...they have, in effect, purchased a share in the proceeds of the organisation and now have a stake in its continued good operation’ (Kanter 1968 p. 506). Investments in utopian communities are often irreversible with no refunds and no records kept. The society of the *kanonieri qurdebi* may also be seen as employing a commitment strategy through fiscal investment which is laid down in the thieves’ commandment to always contribute earnings to the collective fund: the *obshchak*.

The *obshchak* was kept originally with the idea of mutual aid (Gurov 1995; Varese 2001). Funds are raised through the extortion of prisoners and entities outside prison and funds are also voluntarily paid in by the *qurdebi* as a cut from winnings in cards or profits from racketeering. It is a duty of all *qurdebi* to pay into the *obshchak* and a particularly reliable and trusted member of the thieves’ community looks after the fund. The *obshchak* then acts as a form of social insurance, and it may be drawn upon only with the consent of others and, originally at least, to aid those most in need (Varese 2001, p. 155; Glonti & Lobjanidze 2004).

Those wanting to become *qurdebi* and the *qurdebi* themselves are required to invest in the communal fund and this investment may be seen as an important side bet in bringing about commitment. The *obshchak* in Georgia is still a strong criminal

institution. The recent crackdown since 2005 on the *qurdebi* in Georgia has turned up examples of the *obshchak* being collected. On the 20th December 2006, after an operation by the special forces in Tbilisi, 19 people were arrested and their *obshchak* discovered by the authorities; it contained 100,000 lari (roughly \$50,000). Along with the money was an encoded list with names, dates and amounts given. ‘The money was collected by criminal authorities and by those people who by their own wish gave money to support the criminal world and transferred it to this criminal account’ (Prime Crime 2006).³⁶

Of course, a lot of this money would have been extracted from people through threats and coercion however it is clear that people did voluntarily pay money into the *obshchak*. One author (Rodkin 2006) claims that in Georgia during Soviet times the *obshchak* could receive small voluntary contributions such as 50 kopecks. The following story about a *kai bichi* who eventually became a *qurdi*, J., in the small town of Zugdidi in western Georgia is a good example:

‘I can tell you how he [J.] started getting involved with the qurdebi. It was when he was young, a teenager, he gave 2,000 rubles – this was the Soviet times, mind you – to my neighbour who was a criminal and had some authority. At that time my neighbour was in jail, so J. went round to his wife and gave her the money as help for her husband. From then on his name started to be banded about as a kai bichi and someone who follows the gageba. It was always like that, a young guy steals a TV, or whatever, sells it for \$100, goes to guys with connections to qurdebi, like the makarubeli [‘the overseer’ - a qurdi’s right-hand man], and gives them half and says ‘here you are guys, have this money for a supra [a Georgian feast] on me,’ and if he does it a couple of times he will be mentioned to the qurdi in that region....And J. was like that, he did a lot of robbing and mugging when he was young and gave money to the criminal authorities.’ (R22)

³⁶ www.primecrime.ru 20.12.06, ‘*Obshchak* naden, bilo 100,000 Lari’

This example shows that giving money to the *obshchak* can operate as both a signal of commitment as well as a commitment inducing investment (Bliege Bird & Alden Smith 2005). In this case, as J. was not yet initiated it is more likely to act as a signal. The money that was funnelled up to the made men however should still be split amongst other *qurdebi* with a cut going to the local *obshchak*.

Payments to the *obshchak* were made in the prison too. In this case it might not be the proceeds of crime but money sent from relatives and winnings from card games. The prison service claims that every month the money put in the *obshchak* through extortion or voluntary contributions from prisoners reached up to 300,000 lari (\$150,000), with minimum payments into the *obshchak* of 50 lari (\$25) and a maximum of 10,000 lari (\$5,000) (Prime Crime 2008c). A lot of the money might be ‘won’ from prisoners through forced gambling (Prison Service 2006), as the ability to play and win at cards was considered an important quality and was in the original thieves’ law. The Prison Service reform report (2006) states: ‘for decades, as a form of racketeering, under *vory-v-zakone* [*kanonieri qurdebi*] supervision all inmates were forced to pay sums ranging from 30 to several thousand lari into the so-called *obshchak*. *Vory-v-zakone* maintained a systematised list of the contributors and those who refused to pay were physically forced.’ The extortion of prisoners is corroborated by the story in March 2007 of Gia Eliauri, godson of a high-ranking official in the defence ministry who shot dead a 15-year old boy in an argument. In pre-trial detention he claimed that, ‘thieves were calling me and demanded I pay them \$20,000’ (HRIDC 2007).

The funds kept in the *obshchak* can only be used with the consent of other *qurdebi* and is kept in a safe place guarded by the most trusted people chosen collectively. Abuse of the *obshchak* is one of the greatest sins in the thieves’ world.

Glonti & Lobjanidze (2004, pp. 118-119) cite a document found by the police in Georgia that contains rules concerning the use of the *obshchak*. The pious language used in it is revealing: ‘The *obshchak* is a sacred place. It may only be governed by saintly people...These people must be absolutely honest to the thieves’ idea, dedicated in their heart and soul....Every keeper [of the *obshchak*] must have from five to fifteen people in his care.’ The *obshchak* then must be respected by all those who keep and use it.

The fact that the *qurdebi* and their closest associates pool their ill gotten gains instead of using it solely for themselves is indicative of an ongoing long-term investment in the *qurdebi* network and a form of social insurance that can be called upon in future. It can be seen as a form of generalised reciprocity. In this way, the cost of exclusion from the network is raised, as dropping out would represent a long-term investment with no return.

9.2.2 Burning Bridges: Social Ties and Lifestyle

The original scholar of the sociology of organisations, Chester Barnard, wrote that ‘the most tangible and subtle of incentives is that which I have called the condition of communion...it is the feeling of...solidarity, [and] social integration’ (Barnard quoted in Scott 1995, p. 39). The multiple arrangements created to implement strategies of renunciation of other social ties and communion with a new community (Kanter 1968) may broadly be seen as sub-categories of the creation and maintenance of symbolic and social boundaries (Lamont & Molnar 2002; Tilly 2005). This includes the uprooting of social ties outside the community, relinquishing other attachments that might compete such as family and friends, a special language and

attitudes towards an ‘outside,’ and the nurturing of a group consciousness and identity and ‘we-feeling.’ Kanter (1968, p. 510) suggests this we-feeling or communion is created through such mechanisms as equality of membership, communal sharing and living spaces, frequent meetings, rituals and ceremonies, songs, and celebrations. From the point of view of binding devices, this acts as a strategy of burning bridges: sacrificing other social ties, rejecting alternative social roles and choosing an irreversible path in life raises costs on exiting the network.

Aspects of such ‘cohesion-commitment’ (Kanter 1968) are present in the thieves’ world. Renunciation of family is, according to Gurov (1995, chapter 3), the first rule of the thieves’ code. Chalidze (1977, p. 48) also claims that ‘the specific purpose of the “thieves’ law” is to define the exact limits of the isolation [from society].’ In Italy the Mafia is often referred to as ‘mother’ (Paoli 2003, p.78), and so in the thieves’ world the figure of the mother is replaced by the thieves’ community. It is reported that thieves-in-law historically displayed the tattoo ‘*ne zabudu mat’ rodnuyu*’ (Russian for ‘I will not forget my mother’) where ‘mother’ most likely referred to the thieves’ fraternity itself (Tarabin 2003; Varese 2001; Monakhov 1957 in Gurov 1995). Oleinik (2003, p. 72) also refers to the renunciation of social roots quoting a former inmate as saying: ‘the thief had nothing...he was even forbidden to marry since otherwise he would think more of his family than the inmates.’ Varese (2001, p. 152) writes: ‘professional criminals who remained attached to their families were scornfully referred to as *domashniki* [home-dwellers] and on that basis could be refused entry into the brotherhood.’

The level of self-deprivation and self-control were high. For example, ‘one old *blatnoi* [someone in the ‘understandings’] was deprived of his rights as a *vor* [thief-in-law] only because he accepted a pack of tea from a camp guard,’ (Santerre, in Varese

2001, p. 154). This put the thieves-in-law in the same position as other radical religious groupings such as the *Krestiki*, who also refused to work under the Soviet regime (Ibid, fn 37, p. 241).

As well as renouncing the family, a thief-in-law was not supposed to marry, or at least to have no real attachment to a woman, though he may have sexual relations with women and often these women might be shared or seen as communal property (Shalamov 1994; Varese 2001). Thus, the thieves' rules concerning women as partners exist at the juncture of renunciation of normal sexual and affective ties with the opposite sex and communion through the sharing of women with others in the group.

Communion was also formed in a variety of other ways. Firstly, the use of a special jargon known as *fen'ya* and specific terms for an inside and outside create symbolic boundaries for the actors. 'The name [thief-in-law] symbolised a criminal's belonging to a group of recidivists, other categories of criminal related to an area situated outside the boundaries of the "law" of this group' (Gurov 1995, p. 104). The '*vorovskoi mir*' (thieves' world) of the *blatnye* (thieves-in-law, or high status criminals within the thieves' world) was juxtaposed with the ordinary society and the world of the *fraery* (ordinary people, derived from the German for 'freeman') or *lokhy* (mugs, i.e. someone who toils for the benefit of others). This linguistic element included songs known only to those who had served time in the Gulag (Dobson 2009).

Secondly, there existed the idea that the thieves' law or 'understandings' were a different philosophy of law and society that you either lived by or you did not. This quickly established an idea of two competing worlds: that of the lower depths (Galeotti 2008) and those of the upper world. The idea of being either in the

understandings or not was often reported by respondents. In Georgia, you might be asked simply “*gagebashi khar?*” - do you follow the understandings? ‘In the 1990s, it was possible to be asked on the street, “what suit do you belong to? *Qurdi? Kai bichi? Ment* [police]? *Fraer?*”’ (R12). The suit refers to cards, black and grey suits were those in the understandings, red and blue, those that were not (Glonti & Lobjanidze 2004, p. 163). The Georgian *qurdebi* took the suits distinction further, distinguished themselves from other thieves-in-law by taking on the suit of spades, *pikovaya mast*, as their own.

Thirdly, the use of elaborate tattoos and pictorial language to provide information on criminal status and type enhanced boundaries as tattoos often subverted official communist symbols and displayed a pride and knowledge of penal subculture (Dobson 2009). Fourthly, the physical environment in which the thieves lived made for limited privacy, communal spaces and close contact. Fifthly, the ritual practices of ‘crowning’ or ‘baptism’ and ‘uncrowning’ carried out at group meetings known as *skhodki* may all be seen as constitutive of communion in the thieves’ world.

Against the original code that promoted the cutting of all familial ties and restrictions on investment in marriage, the Georgian *qurdebi* in recent times began to take wives and maintain links with their families. The proportion of Georgian thieves-in-law with wives as of 2004 was 93% (N=141). *Qurdebi* however pay lip service to the original code and will not refer to their wives as ‘wives’ according to one respondent who as a lawyer has defended the *qurdebi* in court (R19). It is not clear how exceptional Georgian *qurdebi* are in terms of not giving up family and social roots though Oleinik (2003) states that there was Georgian exceptionalism on this issue and that from the 1960s onwards it was one of the main reasons for the split between the Georgian and the Russian thieves-in-law in the 1980s. The relinquishment of

familial and social ties then as a commitment mechanism became seriously compromised sometime in the later Soviet period.

Similarly, and related to the element of sacrifice, renouncing material goods and wealth accumulation also became seriously compromised as the Soviet Union became an increasingly unequal society³⁷ before the stark inequalities of the post-Soviet period hit. As Paoli (2003, 2008) notes with reference to the Italian mafia, where the values of the surrounding society in which the mafia is implanted are geared towards wealth generation and the ‘trivial pursuit of money’ the danger can be that the mafia will also embrace these attitudes. Doing so, according to Paoli, creates a tension between generalised and specific exchange in which payoffs are demanded immediately for services rendered. The code of honour in the case of Italy then has been most affected by the modernisation process. The question becomes the extent to which the code and membership of the mafia are valued instrumentally as a means to another end such as wealth creation and social climbing or as ends in themselves (Paoli 2003, pp. 94-95).

In the case of Georgia, the process of throwing off dedication to communist ideals and pursuing capitalistic ventures gradually sped up through the 1970s and 1980s up to the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The (re)orientation of society away from communist ideals to the individualistic pursuit of profit was mirrored in the Soviet underworld. The old code of honour concerning the rejection of material wealth and families was under threat of being overturned in favour of living rather more mainstream lives, yet if the thieves no longer lived by the letter of their own law then there were still those who wanted to remain true to the spirit of it.

³⁷ Using just official statistics inequality was actually declining in the 1980s and the Soviet Union was still not as unequal as other western countries (Alexeev & Gaddy 1991). However, these statistics do not take into account the wealth generated by second economic activities and the resulting inequalities by those who had access to bureaucratic resources.

Arrogant displays of wealth amongst many *qurdebi* were still not considered correct and were often a source of conflict or seen as deserving of punishment. For example, one Kutaisi *qurdi*, G., built a luxurious new house in the centre of town. For such a display of wealth he got into a conflict with an old *qurdi* by the nickname B. who was born in 1949 and considered himself a pure thief. According to the police records of this conflict G. was unimpressed with B.'s claims against him suggesting that B. should not be surprised at wealth or big houses. However, G. himself had made claims against another young Kutaisi *qurdi* for living an extravagant and 'un-thievish' lifestyle (AOCU-K 2004).

One former prison governor commented on the difference between the older and younger generations of *qurdebi* by recalling an experience in his early career when a *qurdi* returned back to prison in Georgia having been away in Siberia:

'I remember...there was one qurdi Khatishvili, Zura, strong, good guy, from Tbilisi, from Mtatsminda, the old region. They sent him off to Magadan, you know, far away, at that time 1970s, 1980s, it was silence, you couldn't find out about anything....and then suddenly everyone was talking about this Zura coming back, this kanonieri qurdi, that he was arriving, coming from Rostov in Russia. He'd been away for 5 or 6 years. Well even to this day I have no idea how everyone got this information so quickly, how they knew. When he arrived back everyone was waiting...he jumped out of the vehicle and he was wearing a Chokha [traditional Georgian cloak]...And he kissed the ground and he said "Thank God that I've come back to my land", like that, and went and took his things...And it gave you the feeling that this guy was a very dignified person, feelings of sympathy arose. And other prisoners had collected money for...a present, it couldn't have been any other way, I mean, a qurdi arrived! And he got some money as well, and he was saying, why so much money? At that time it was about 50 rubles, and he took some of it and gave the rest back, whereas now, they expect everything, cars, houses, bathhouses...'" (R21)

Achieving communion and burning bridges with other social ties has become consistently more difficult as the *qurdebi* have transformed from a prison fraternity to a mafia. Naturally, a group that was once prison based and then moves to the outside

will struggle to maintain the same level of communal activity. Aspects such as spending long parts of the day together, sharing finances and materials, creating and performing songs, marking celebrations and monitoring the amount and type of contact made with those outside the group become very difficult. The institution of the *skhodka* however is still maintained by the thieves-in-law except that where these were once held within penal institutions they are now held in restaurants, hotels, resorts and private homes.

However, other arrangements that induce commitment through the construction and reinforcement of symbolic and social boundaries that maintain a reified 'outside' have been maintained. These include the use of language, the agreed upon symbols of tattoos, and negative definitions of those outside the community. These aspects are not so dependent on the physical proximity of the prison setting and are still present within the Georgian thieves' world. The Georgians use slang both in Georgian and borrowings from Russian. The use of this jargon is one element that might now be used against a person under the new Georgian anti-mafia laws concerning being a 'member of the thieves' world' (R13). The 'outside' is seen negatively as a place for losers or mugs, governed by the unjust law of the state. Tattoos are still widely used, including the eight-point star on both shoulders, as is evidenced by many photos of the Georgian *qurdebi* (AOCU-T 2004).

9.2.3 Normative Commitment: Nicknaming and Self-Identification

Normative commitment for Kanter (1968, p. 511) can be broken down into two processes: mortification and surrender. The former refers to the relinquishing of an individual's sense of autonomy, a good example of which are the hazing practices

used by military institutions for new recruits. The latter involves giving over decision-making power to a higher authority. Weberian charismatic leadership may lead to such a deferral, but the charisma may also be of a collective ideology and identity, what Kanter (1968, p. 514) calls 'institutionalised awe' which: 'consists of ideological systems and structural arrangements which order and give meaning to the individual's life...these not only satisfy the individual's "need for meaning" but also provide a sense of rightness, certainty and conviction.' Such structural arrangements include shrouding an organisation in mystery, instituting hierarchies, separating out the leaders from members and making decisions based on seeming mysticism and magic (Ibid.).

Whilst creating a new identity submitted to a higher ideology is a strong element in commitment, it should not be discounted that such self-surrender also maintains a rational element in ensuring commitment. On this view, it can be seen as a further constitutive part of the burning of bridges with other social actors and normative orders. Combined with other elements already discussed these processes create a further disincentive to exit the trust network.

Thieves-in-law belong to a wider social institution (Chalidze 1977), the thieves' world, that provides an evolving set of rules and norms that in its purest form constitute an anti-statist ideology that may be to varying degrees internalized. The thieves' law given previously clearly states that submission to the thieves' ideology is one of the rules a made man must follow. Understanding the thieves' world as a 'social institution' points to the fact that the thieves-in-law do not just make up an organised criminal group or organisation but are actors in a wider arrangement that takes in not just rules but norms, beliefs, values, roles to play and templates for action (Hall & Taylor 1996; Scott 2000; Peters 2005). Mythologizing and romanticising the

thieves' world and the thieves-in-law themselves perpetuates a belief that this penal subculture does in fact represent an alternative moral order to that of the state, something that an individual may mortify and surrender him or herself to.

The thieves' idea, however romanticised, had such a hold over people according to Gurov (1995). The former thief-in-law Ch. is cited as writing that most thieves would rather give up on life than move away from the thieves' idea (in Gurov, chapter 3). The thieves' idea was actively propagated amongst young people and this was a very real problem for the Soviet regime. Sanctions against those initiated members who had broken the thieves' code included public humiliation and the reporting of sanctions through the dispersal of *malyava*, a type of thieves' newsletter containing information and directives. The thieves' code was held up as the moral standard. According to Podlesskikh and Tereshonok (1995, p. 236), the fifth statute of the thieves' law states that: 'denying the thieves' law is equivalent to treason and the punishment can only be death.' There were then strong rational incentives to surrender oneself to the thieves' idea. Yet this did not take away from the mythological elements of it which is summed up by Roeder's (1958, p. 91) awestruck account of the *blatnye* based on the author's own time served in the Gulag: 'everywhere and incessantly the system praises the hero of socialist labour, the pioneer, the robot-like worker, the machine man amidst his machines; but in their hearts the people love the *blatnoi*, the strong, free man.'

This mythologizing of the leaders of the thieves' world, the instituting of hierarchies separating the *blatnye* from others and the almost mystical power and justice of the thieves' idea to be obeyed at all costs, correspond to strategies that grounds the possibility for mortification and surrender of the self to this criminal community. This former aspect of mortification is defined here as the giving over of

an old, personal identity to a new, group one. In achieving this thieves-in-law historically adopted nicknames upon being ‘baptised’ or ‘crowned’. Here I will present data from Georgia on the prevalence of nicknames that examines this practice and identifies changes within it.

According to Varese (2001, Appendix A), a nickname would be bestowed during the thieves’ initiation ritual. The choice of name was left to the initiated and was sometimes based on pre-existing nicknames already acquired in other social milieus. This feature of the thieves’ initiation ritual suggests that for thieves-in-law there seems to be some sort of instrumental logic to nicknames as opposed to them just being purely expressive elements of masculine jocularity. Certainly the police in Georgia place some importance on nicknames, listing them in the files in all cases for each *qurdi*.

One important function of nicknames might be to create social cohesiveness through the adoption of a new name thereby going through a process of ‘rebirth’ where the new recruit submits himself to the laws of the group he has just joined, what Kanter (1968) calls mortification. This occurs in some religious fraternities and secret societies. In this sense nicknames would be important in the construction of a collective identity and sense of belonging. Varese (2001) suggests this to be the case with the Russian *vory-v-zakone*. The new *vor* creates himself anew as a follower of the ascetic life of the fraternity.

Alternatively, Gambetta (2009a pp. 230-250) identifies various roles for nicknames including reducing interpersonal tensions and increasing trust in collective enterprises. Gambetta also discusses the role of nicknames in facilitating identification of people, especially in a society, such as Sicily, where names are often the same. Like codenames in this case, nicknames can help criminals recognise each

other. They might also be used for secrecy and for confusing the issue of identification. The problem of course, as the Georgian police files show, is that a nickname might also help the police distinguish people. In the case of the *qurdebi* nicknames most likely aid rather than hinder identification and, if they have any instrumentality, are used for such identification amongst the *qurdebi* themselves.

This is for a number of reasons. Firstly, once initiated, *qurdebi* do not often commit crime directly thus it is difficult to suppose why a nickname would make them any more susceptible to arrest. Secondly, it is in the *qurdebi*'s code that if you are a *qurdi* you may not deny you are a *qurdi*; a real *qurdi* wears his criminal status proudly.³⁸ Again, this suggests the *qurdi* does not want to hide but clarify his identity. Thirdly, the *qurdebi* are highly mobile, thus, the idea that the nickname helps to spread the fact of joining the *qurdebi* is likely. Nicknames can, as any good trademark, fulfil the condition of being memorable and, when displayed in conjunction with other signs, re-identifiable (Gambetta 2009, p. 195). While this functionality of nicknames is plausible, nicknaming may also, intentionally or otherwise, engender solidarity amongst these criminals who coordinate across whole regions and countries.

Of the 278 cases in the police files, 33 have no nickname. A cross-table analysis by cohort based on the estimated year baptised shows a declining use of nicknames with the cases of no nickname mainly in the youngest cohort after 1992 as Table 9.1 shows below.

³⁸ Indeed, the Georgian government specifically utilised this obligation to its benefit when writing anti-mafia legislation in 2005 and now the possession of a nickname known in the underworld in Georgia is stated as evidence of 'belonging to the thieves' world' (R13).

<i>Cohort</i>	<i>Nickname or Not = N (%)</i>		<i>Total</i>
	No Nickname	Nickname	
1952-1971	0 (0%)	23 (100%)	23
1972-1981	2 (3%)	55 (97%)	57
1982-1991	7 (8%)	81 (92%)	88
1992-2004	24 (22%)	86 (78%)	110
Total	33 (12%)	245 (88%)	278

Table 9.1: number of qurdebi with nicknames and percentages by cohort determined by approximate age baptised Source: AOCU-T & K 2004

The table shows a steady increase in the lack of nicknaming. The oldest cohort has 0% with no nickname, compared to the 1972-1981 cohort who has 3% with no nickname, 1982-1991 has 8%, and the youngest cohort has a 22% rate of *qurdebi* with no nickname. A Chi-Square test comparing the youngest two cohorts found the difference to be statistically significant (Pearson 7.166, $p = 0.010$, phi -0.190, $p = 0.008$). In 89 cases the nickname appeared to be simply a diminutive but was recorded in the police files as a nickname though these strictly speaking fall outside the formal definition of nicknames. However, the trend still holds when diminutives were interpreted and coded instead as ‘no nickname’; the number of cases with no nickname still increases as the cohorts get younger and actually hold a majority (56 to 54) in the youngest cohort. However, the results once diminutives are coded as ‘no nickname’ lack statistical significance; comparing the last two cohorts using Chi-Square gives Pearson 2.441, $p = 0.151$.

The explanation for this overall change in nickname usage may be to do with

levels of socialisation. As shown elsewhere (chapter 7) recruitment practices changed and it appears to have become easier to take the title of *qurdi* in Georgia in the 1990s. It may well be possible then that the initiation itself became less protracted and those who did not want to, for whatever reason, were not forced by any tradition to take a nickname. As we have seen it is likely that monitoring of recruitment probably weakened so a plausible explanation lies in a lack of rule-following during initiation.

Along the same lines of logic, those that were being initiated had not shown the same levels of dedication in terms of crime commission and time in prison as past cohorts might have done (see chapter 7). Without the same level of socialisation into the thieves' world, and having already broken the rules with impunity, it makes sense that new recruits may not have had a deep sense of being 'born again' during initiation. If this is true the decline in the use of nicknames would be another key indicator here of the lowering of barriers to entry into the thieves' group, the degree of self-identification with roles in the thieves' world and the weakening of symbolic boundaries between an inside and an outside. It perhaps also suggests that new recruits were not so much relying on a name within the *qurdebi* status group so much as on their own reputations.

There is a further plausible explanation for the change in nicknaming. Younger *qurdebi*, not so socialised into the thieves' norms may well have understood that having a nickname just makes you more vulnerable to police identification and possible framing on trumped up charges, as Gambetta (2009a) suggests. Perhaps then declining to use a nickname was also a rational strategy by actors with a disinclination towards prison life to avoid unwanted attention that outweighed the desire for surrender to any higher ideal.

A further important indicator however of an endogenous weakening of the moral power of the thieves' idea is the increasing power and number of those career criminals who simply do not bother with getting initiated as a thief-in-law though they might make good candidates. A few commentators now clearly distinguish the criminals that emerged at the end of the 1980s and 1990s in the Soviet Union known as 'authorities' and 'bandits' from the *qurdebi* (Galeotti 2002; Volkov 2002). For these criminals the thieves' world evidently offered neither the material benefits nor the moral force to bring them into its orbit and surrender themselves to it.

9.3 Summary of Changes in Commitment Mechanisms

Above I have suggested that whilst the *obshchak* remains a prevalent part of the thieves' world in Georgia, declining use of nicknames, increasing wealth and materialism and rates of marriage indicate decline in the rational commitment mechanism of burning bridges with common social networks and familial ties that serve to bind actors to the thieves' world and maintain barriers to exit. This also likely negatively impacts processes of affective and normative commitment in which solidarity and surrender to the community bring about feelings of solidarity.

Table 9.2 below presents some of the commitment inducing features discussed above. All of the following features in the table were present in the early forms of the thieves' world of the 1930s when it was a prison fraternity and already mentioned in passing above. However, the table also states whether a given commitment inducing feature's presence has been constant or has since become unstable. None of the features in Table 9.2 are unique to the thieves' world; each one of in the table can found in Kanter's (1968, 1972) studies where they are identified as significant factors

in contributing to the success of utopian communities. Each one of the features in the table was present in proportionally twice as many successful utopian communities compared to unsuccessful ones in Kanter's study. Of an original 34 significant commitment arrangements uncovered by Kanter in successful utopian communities, the thieves' world utilised 18, presented in the table below, and these can very plausibly go towards explaining the longevity and the resilience of the thieves' world up to the present day. Other commitment arrangements that may be present in the thieves' world but do not make Kanter's list as significant in increasing longevity are left out of the table.

COMMITMENT INDUCING FEATURE IN INITIAL THIEVES' FRATERNITY	REMAINING PRESENCE
Distinction of residents and non-residents, only residents permitted (i.e. must be a prisoner)	No
Private property forbidden	No
Communal 'work' (obshchak)	Yes
No reimbursement for defectors	Yes
Sanctions for exit, removal of privilege	Yes
Special terms for inside/outside	Yes
Outside viewed negatively	Yes
Standardised symbols (tattoos as uniform)	Yes
Specialised language	Yes
Public denunciation of defectors	Yes
More than two-thirds of the day spent together	No
Daily group meetings	No
Songs about community	Yes
Members rarely leave community	No
Control on sexual relationships	No
Families cut away	No
Instruction on doctrine given	Yes
Members distinguished on moral grounds	Yes

Table 9.2: commitment mechanisms in the original thieves' world and whether each is still present.

(Kanter, 1972, 80-112; Tilly 2006, p. 73)

The table shows that many commitment inducing features still exist, but those that do tend to relate to maintaining symbolic boundaries such as the use of a specialised language and the preservation of a distinct image through such means as instructing young people in the thieves' idea. These symbolic boundaries are important in keeping the thieves' world alive even if only in a mythologised and emblematic form.

An implication of Table 9.2 is that as commitment-inducing features are lost, the thieves' world must rely on incentives other than commitment. The table shows features that directly speak to cognitive cost benefit analysis. The ever-present institution of the *obshchak* and the punishment of defectors through the removal of all support and privileges help maintain cognitive commitment (R40). One problem with relying too heavily on these purely rational commitment mechanisms, according to scholars of human resources, is that 'employees whose tenure in the organisation is based primarily on need may see little reason to do more than is required to maintain their membership in the organisation' (Meyer & Allen 1991, p. 74).

The problem lies in the fact that attitudes to the thieves' code and idea can become defined by the logic of instrumentality rather than the logic of appropriateness (March & Olsen 1984; 2004). The higher goals of the thieves' world become means to an end rather than an end in themselves. Paoli (2003; 2008) sees something like this happening in the Italian mafias as they become affected by the modernised society around them. In her terms, generalised reciprocity, where benefits of an investment are put off until an unspecified time, has been replaced in the Italian mafias by specific reciprocity where investments require immediate payoffs and

gratification. The wealth of some *qurdebi* and the assets accumulated suggest that this has also happened to the *qurdebi* in Georgia.

Clearly, the table shows that there are many commitment mechanisms still in place and still prescribed by the thieves' law however on the level of individual agents many of them are not being adhered to and have been passed into redundancy. Though it is difficult to observe this directly, the consequences of such redundancy have been revealed in this chapter such as the accumulation of wealth, the maintenance of social ties outside the trust network and the decline in the use of nicknames.

The causes of the decline of the effectiveness of the commitment mechanisms built into the original thieves' code are multiple. Perhaps foremost amongst them however is the move from being an exclusively prison based fraternity to a mafia existing outside the Soviet camps. The change to open society made many of the commitment inducing features redundant or impractical. Furthermore, the society into which the thieves-in-law emerged was itself changing with a growing second economy and wealth inequalities. These changes sped up dramatically with the collapse of the Soviet Union. It may be hypothesised that the adaptations of the Georgian *qurdebi* in these conditions brought about the decline in the effectiveness of the commitment mechanisms discussed here.

Another factor surely influencing this effectiveness, one which has been discussed in other chapters, concerns the ability of the more senior leaders of the *qurdebi* to monitor the behaviour and attitudes towards the traditional thieves' code that they themselves had lived by. It may be supposed that the opportunity costs on those leaders increased as they found their activities increasingly profitable, though their own original adherence to the thieves' code should also not be overstated or

portrayed as some pure and honest past. Thus, part of the reason the code and its attendant commitment mechanisms lost its power was due, as Chalidze (1977, p. 46) says, to ‘the constant jockeying for position among the elite, who exploit ambiguities of the traditional code for their own advantage.’ Thus, the thieves’ code whilst apparently designed to induce commitment, has not proven impervious to the effects of socio-economic changes or the opportunistic behaviour of individual actors.

9.4 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to address what Tilly (2006) calls the ‘internal incentives’ of a trust network. He argues that trust networks more than other forms of organisation rely on commitment of members relative to the use of capital and coercion. I have looked at three ‘binding devices’ which raise barriers to exit through a mix of rational, affective and normative inducements. Moving beyond this, I have asked whether these arrangements have been maintained despite the huge socio-economic changes witnessed in Georgia.

The conclusion was reached that some have and some have not and while it is easier to think of these binding devices in terms of rational disincentives to exit, the more intangible, normative and affective elements emphasised in organisational studies of commitment, are also hugely important in maintaining committed members of a trust network. Furthermore, as Tilly (2006) predicts, a move away from commitment as an incentive to capital puts the trust network at risk to other trust networks or organisations which can offer more in the way of this capital as an incentive. This might help explain why some criminals are choosing to either exit the *qurdebi* network or not enter in the first place. This all depends on the value that the *qurdebi* status can fetch, and it is to this element that I now turn.

10. Maintaining Distinction: the *Qurdebi* as a Criminal Status Group

'While he is undoubtedly a professional thief, I should a few years ago [before he was committed to prison] have been ashamed to be seen on the street with him. I say this not out of a spirit of snobbishness but simply for business reasons I feel that my reputation would have suffered in the eyes of my friends to be seen in the company of a booster [shoplifter].'

A 'big time confidence man' quoted in Edwin Sutherland's *The Professional Thief* (1956, p. 201)

Andro Alpaidze, a 60-year old resident of Tbilisi stated his views on the *qurdebi* and the anti-mafia laws quite clearly to a journalist (Mamiashvili 2006): 'He [the local *qurdi*] is always ready to help – unlike the police. The new law [of 2005 on organised crime] says that not only these criminals but their supporters too can be punished. That means they should arrest me too.' A puzzle in studying organised crime lies in explaining ongoing societal support for violence-wielding groups. In the 1870s, Italian politician Leopoldo Franchetti noted 'a tendency to turn a Mafioso into a legendary type' (in Gambetta 1993, p. 46) in southern Italy. In societies that have low levels of trust, the mafia can employ myth to encourage the idea of their own trustworthiness as 'men of honour' and 'supermen' of an elite group (Ibid).

This is central to the idea of criminal resilience. Societal support for organised crime groups grants such groups a pool of potential recruits as well as a buffer of popular opinion against attack by the state that enables their ongoing existence. Measuring such support is difficult, and explaining it more so. Does support for

mafias come from respect for a different lifestyle, a fear of their violent methods, or a mixture of both? Surely few people would want to go on record criticising the mafia so how deep does support for a mafia group actually run?

Furthermore, support is not merely present or not in a given society; the Mafiosi themselves work for it. The involvement of the mafia itself in its own cultural production can be in some cases a very deliberate strategy. Mafias in different countries have gone to great lengths to maintain a good image and reputation amongst the society in which they exist. The Yakuza invested in the Japanese film industry and thereby were able to manipulate the way they were represented (Varese 2006).

Reputation and image manipulation are then vital assets for a mafia, as they are for most businesses worried about brand management. Some businesses and professions such as doctors and lawyers are particularly susceptible to the effects of changes in reputation (Gambetta 1993). For a mafia however it is even more important to the extent that reputation may actually substitute completely for the production of their key asset, violence. By lowering production costs on violence, a fearsome reputation can expand profit margins for any mafia. And when violence is used, as it must be at times to maintain a reputation, fearsomeness combined with slickly managed public relations can minimise negative externalities produced by the use of that violence.

This chapter is concerned with the changing societal support and reputation of the *qurdebi*. I will treat the name of the *kanonieri qurdebi* as a criminal trademark whose reputation rests on a certain status distinction based upon, as Max Weber (in Whimster 1992) had it, clear differences in lifestyle that are in turn advertised and acclaimed by the *qurdebi* themselves. I will discuss this with reference to signalling theory again, developing the idea of signalling an identity, in this case one that clearly

demarcates a collective belonging to a status group that allows certain underlying qualities to be inferred by the receiver of the signals. I then go on to discuss the problematic issue of managing the signals in a changing environment and the methods the *qurdebi* have employed to maintain a credible status distinction between themselves and other violence-wielding competitors. Finally, I draw on survey and interview data to suggest that the *qurdebi* 'brand' is threatened by a potentially disastrous loss of reputation.

10.1 Criminal Collective Identities: Signalling Status

Chapter 7 dealt with how potential *qurdebi* might signal their character in being recruited. This chapter is concerned with looking at how the *qurdebi*, once they are made men, may signal that status to those outside the trust network including other criminals and wider society. Just as the *qurdebi* must decide whether a potential recruit is up to the job, so the petty criminal, inmate or businessman being made an offer of protection, must decide whether the signals being emitted by the offerer actually manifest a property or characteristic they can trust as real (Spence 1973; Bacharach & Gambetta 2001; Bliege-Bird 2005; Gambetta 2009a, 2009b). A person must successfully signal his belonging to a status group, the *kanonieri qurdebi*, in order to reveal himself as one of a set of individuals who carry unmistakable qualities.

Based mainly on the work of Max Weber, status groups are associated with prestige or honour and are juxtaposed with class identities that are based on property and wealth. Amongst other things status groups are most primarily founded on distinctive and exclusive lifestyles. 'In context, status honour is normally expressed by the fact that above all else a specific *style of life* can be expected from all those

who wish to belong to the circle' (Weber in Whimster 2003, p. 187, original italics). Privileged groups who maintain a certain status often signal this through ways of behaviour that are defined in codes of conduct. Those of the nobility, for example, may refrain from physical labour, have certain cultural tastes, patterns of consumption or, in the past at least, a disdain for commonplace commercial activities.

A key element in the formation and maintenance of status groups is the preservation of social boundaries and the recognition of these boundaries by both those inside and outside the status group. As Bourdieu writes (1996 p. 104), acts of consecration must 'get the "elite" boundary recognised by those it excludes no less than by those it includes.' This recognition by those on the outside is, for Ridgeway (2001), a matter of status belief diffusion where this denotes the spreading of certain ideas about a social group regardless of direct experience such that the already existing nominal distinction between groups of people becomes a value distinction about the competence of that group and the amount of respect and deference to be afforded them (Ridgeway 2001, p. 330). When these status beliefs are beneficial to those about whom they are held, the issue is to how to maintain that value distinction. Status, like reputation, is not immune to fluctuations and beliefs in the value distinctions across groups and by status can change. Thus an elite status, for example, can still be diminished by negative experiences of those individuals who belong to that status amongst those who do not hold the status (Ibid p. 328).

This brings the discussion to Gambetta and Bacharach's (2001) idea of categorical identity signalling where certain beliefs about a category of people can enable unobservable traits to be inferred by receivers of signals that identify a person as belonging to that category. In this case the receiver witnesses a signature that reveals the identity of a category of individuals. The receiver is more likely to believe

that the signaller really belongs to that category if the signal is difficult or costly to acquire and display. This cost could be constituted through painful group initiation procedures such as all over body tattoos or mutilation, complex and secretive language or hand gestures, or the danger of punishment of a faker displaying the signal (Gambetta 2009a). Once it is established that the signaller indeed belongs to the category of individuals signalled, unobservable attributes of the individual can be discerned based on the belief that all individuals who belong to that category have x, y and z properties, that is, members of that category bear a particular reputation for certain properties (Bacharach & Gambetta 2001 pp. 165-166).

According to Gambetta and Bacharach (2001), categories of identity have their advantages and disadvantages, on the one hand they allow the diffusion of reputation more rapidly, on the other, the signatures themselves that inform others of membership must obey the law of conformity: ‘a category of people can get identity signals to work only by coordinating across members to adopt matching signatures’ (Bacharach & Gambetta 2001, p. 166). Thus, for a group identity such as a mafia’s it is vital that conformity is regulated and monitored within the group as well as from the threat of a mimicker.

Joel Podolny (2005, 2009) has argued that the study of status can be seen as signalling, shifting the emphasis away from the concept of reputation bearers to status carriers and how this status is communicated. He notes (2005 p. 18) that reputation and status are related but distinct assets on the market for any brand name. He suggests, as also alluded to by Ridgeway (2001), that whereas reputation is built on past demonstrations of certain characteristics, status is a less tangible, symbolic property that belongs to groups and classes of people. Status distinctions can be more stable than reputations, which, by contrast, are liable to fluctuate for many reasons.

For example, large firms or criminal groups with a pool of workers cannot make sure that performance of each individual always reaches the right standard, information affecting reputation can sometimes be false, and prices for services fluctuate making perfect control over a collective reputation difficult. For this reason, status is something worth investing in and maintaining: ‘the greater market participants’ uncertainty about the underlying quality of a producer and the producer’s product, the more the market participants will rely on the producer’s status to make inferences about quality’ (Podolny 2005, p. 18; Podolny & Lynn 2009). Where status distinctions are present in uncertain transactions, identity signalling is concerned with establishing whether the signal establishes the identity of a carrier of a title. It is from the status of a successfully signalled title that unobservable qualities are inferred based on diffused status beliefs.

Status as signalling can also be thought of as a mimic beset trust game (Bacharach & Gambetta 2001). To maintain distinction, the signals that make up status distinctions need to be protected from impostors, in the same way that copyrights of certain brand names are protected in the business world. This can be difficult in that the gaining of deference from others is something that many aspire to and wish to fake the signals that might bring this about. Furthermore, as status distinction is often founded on lifestyle this can be something easily falsely replicated by mimickers. Moreover, it is not always easy to enforce conformity amongst members of the status group in signalling their identity of the group and this might also affect the boundaries between status groups.

This latter problem, as I will now go on to discuss appears to be the biggest problem for the *qurdebi* in recent times in Georgia. Individual *qurdebi* must be able to signal their identity as bona fide *qurdebi* but this requires that the law of conformity

be met and this is not easy in changing times. There is a strong link here between signalling during recruitment and subsequent signalling of criminal identity once recruited due to the fact that if a recruit is not up to the job then his ability to efficiently and successfully signal his status might also be lacking. Alternatively, it is possible that he might be able to signal his status well but that this in the final analysis does not correlate with his actual qualities when these are called for.

The weakening of the status beliefs and thus status distinction based on growing numbers of negative experiences with individual *qurdebi* can aggregate to finally affect the viability and resilience of the *qurdebi*, at least as a name worth wanting, that is, one that has some extra-legal market value. Therefore, if the signalling game in recruitment falls out of equilibrium and fails to sort the good from the bad, and this is not quickly remedied, we should expect to see a corresponding change in the signalling of the *qurdebi* identity at a later stage. Furthermore, as we have seen in chapter 9, the *qurdebi* have changed their commitment to certain ideals and the corresponding lifestyle. This can also have devastating consequences for the maintenance of status.

The rest of the chapter begins by looking at the *qurdebi* as a status group within Georgian society and their signalling of this status. It then goes on to discuss the problem of maintaining conformity in identity signalling in changing socio-economic conditions and the effects to reputation when the identity is signalled but the signals do not match with the expected qualities.

10.2 The *Qurdebi* as a Status Group

Just as nobilities manifest their higher caste through dress, mannerisms, speech, and lifestyle so the *qurdebi* also maintain distinction through a plurality of signs that make up a criminal trademark. I now briefly look at some of the aspects that made the *qurdebi* distinctive: frugality, language and body art.

The *qurdebi* signalled their distinctive status by displaying various aspects of their lifestyle. For example, famously, the *qurdebi* displayed contempt for any type of materialism instead leading a life of frugality (Gurov 1995; Varese 2001; Oleinik 2003). This mainly involved embracing the prison ethos and rejecting wealth. This lifestyle precluded taking a wife or creating families. This aspect of the *qurdebi* also includes dress sense that should also remain simple and unpretentious. Thus, ascetic living combined with authority in arbitration are part of the original marks of distinctiveness of the *qurdebi*, borrowed from their prison origins.

Another identifying mark was a specific way of speaking. In gaining a reputation for fairness in decision-making, an important part of this, as cited by respondents, was the ability to talk well, understand and apply informal rules – the *gageba* – and thus be good arbitrators without recourse to violence. Speaking *qurdulad* is to talk in the thieves' tongue, to be able to reason and judge well replicated by those on the street who already speak *kai bichurad*, the goodfellas' tongue. Moreover, the *qurdebi* and their followers used a specific vocabulary, known as *fenya*, the use of which in the present day can be employed by prosecutors for the purposes of proving a person's belonging to the thieves' world (R13). In his anthropological study of the 'social languages and orders' that Georgian youth make sense of, Koehler writes that 'the crucial criteria generating prestige is not strength or

brutality but the image of the sovereign and righteous: to withstand the threat of violence by sticking to the accepted codes of speaking true and just. Thus, individual honour is created' (Koehler 1999). Koehler identifies the family, the thieves' world and 'the school of the street' as social orders from which Georgian young people take cues as to social distinctions. A specific way of speaking, *qurdulad*, or in the thieves' tongue, was then one method of creating distinction.

Finally, a further example of a conventional signal employed by the *qurdebi* is the wearing of elaborate tattoos. The tattoos tell stories of crimes committed and places spent doing time. Tattoos could identify someone individually while others were general status symbols. Some were elaborate in order to make faking difficult, and the *qurdebi* protected their insignias by punishment of death to any non-*qurdi* displaying these (Varese, 2001 p. 154). The pictures available of various Georgian *qurdebi* still show a certain uniformity in tattooing with the eight point black and white star being displayed on both shoulders (AOCU-T 2004). On some, angels are displayed on the chest holding a cross that appears to hang in the middle of the chest. Such religious symbolism draws a parallel with the ascetic lives of Gulag prisoners and churchmen.

These various distinctive lifestyle factors allowed the *qurdebi* and those following the thieves' understandings to build a distinctive status. I will look later at how this was defended from impostors. However, this argument that the *qurdebi* are a status group relies on the idea that those outside the group maintain a positive value distinction towards this group and therefore allow the *qurdebi* to accumulate deference. The fact that such a positive value distinction towards the *qurdebi* specifically and the thieves' world more generally existed, and may still exist in some sectors of Georgian society, has been alluded to by respondents, government reports,

journalistic accounts, and academic works. I will now refer to these different sources in discussing the recognition of the status distinction of the *qurdebi*.

Anton Oleinik's book (2003), *Organised Crime, Prisons and Post-Soviet Societies* might be seen as a full attempt to establish the socio-psychological fact of positive normative orientations towards deviance, and specifically organised crime within the context of the thieves' world, in post-soviet countries. He writes (2003, original italics), 'the informal norms of the penal environment and the society that surrounds it are close whereas there is a major disjuncture between formal and informal norms in the prison *and* in the society that surrounds it,' and therefore, inmates and the citizenry use 'congruent normative markers in their everyday lives.' Oleinik argues then that support for the thieves' world is based on 'the significant scope' of the penal subculture's values within post-soviet society following the logic of appropriateness where these values are judged as good and right.

Along these lines, Humphreys (2002 pp. 112-125) argues that supporting these career criminals was not simply about power and influence or fear but 'that they [thieves-in-law] are the kind of people who *have law*...the whole notion of themselves as the kind of people who are disciplined, orderly, and subject to law [appealed] (original italics).' The thieves' law can have instrumental value for those that produce it and those that follow it, and it can also be valued as somehow socially appropriate, that is, an ethical stance worked into the fabric of culture.

The good name of the *qurdebi* in Georgia is frequently referred to along with the tendency to respect and mythologise these criminal characters, 'in Georgian culture, criminal figures have often been characterised as servants of the public good, embodying notions of honour, justice or even democracy' (Godson et al. 2003 p. 9). Serio & Razinkin (1994 p. 1) cite a 1993 survey of schoolchildren in Georgia that

showed that 25% of respondents stated that they wanted to be a *qurdi* when they grew up. Tevzadze (n.d) mentions that a Tbilisi newspaper had received letters asking for career advice on how to become a *qurdi*. And Godson et al. (2003) report that the children of one school opted to elect their own representative to the criminal world. Thus, Georgian scholars Glonti & Lobjanidze are surely right when they state (2004 p. 115): ‘it is possible to observe the widespread propaganda of the “thieves’ movement,” agitation for the “*zakonniki*” as “business people,” so to say, “thieves with a human face” and the romanticisation of these leaders in the eyes of the population and especially the youth.’

This type of popularity was perhaps fed in the Soviet Union by a state that disparaged the very notion of law yet used legal devices for political efficacy. This view was summed up by one respondent (R40): ‘the *qurdebi* had their own law and they had their own justice, but the main thing was that you could get the truth with them and everyone knows that at the court you can’t get justice, the prosecutor wants you to be guilty, so you can’t get justice.’ This point was maybe overstated in a Georgian article of 2006: ‘Georgians...automatically resist law in any and all forms...It could also be said that the society of Thieves has given the country of Georgia the only uncorrupted and enforceable judicial system Georgia has ever known’ (Nordin & Glonti, 2006). Thus, one news article on the Georgian fight against organised crime noted (Ablotiya 2006): ‘the main battle – still ahead – is the battle for minds. There is a need to outgrow a few generations for young people to cease talking in thieves’ jargon...today, a large part of the young still think *razborki*, *obshchak*, *malyava*...are absolute norms of life.’

The positive evaluations and idealisation of the *qurdebi* in Georgian society bring into being a status distinction that the *qurdebi* themselves perpetuate. Just as in

the prison where the *qurdebi* maintain clear boundaries between themselves and other prisoners through distinctive behaviour, the *qurdebi* outside of prison attempt to portray themselves, and are portrayed by others, as fundamentally distinctive social actors who behave according to different standards than others, criminal or otherwise. In this, the *qurdebi* benefit from a long history that has helped to lionise them as unbreakable men of honour and plays on the idea of surviving the repressions of successive authoritarian governments.

In terms of contrasting lifestyles, respondents brought up the idea of the life course and opportunities in such repressive environments. If a career in the communist party was undesirable, other paths were open in the criminal world or, during more liberal periods of the Soviet Union's existence, a life in the church. These were fundamental and long-term lifestyle choices. In terms of education, the files on individual *qurdebi* from Kutaisi suggest that the majority of them finish high school without going on to higher education (AOCU-K 2004). This could mean that once other avenues are closed in life, the thievish lifestyle appears attractive. Perhaps though, future *qurdebi* had already chosen this lifestyle in school and therefore precluded themselves from following any other type of life.

There was no clear consensus from respondents on the effect of class on choosing one career path or over another. One Georgian academic in Tbilisi felt the criminal world was mainly open to the lower classes in the city (R8). An analysis of the origins of *qurdebi* from Tbilisi's districts could not confirm or reject this hypothesis confidently. Indeed, the main areas that the *qurdebi* came from were the working class suburbs of Gldani and Samgori, yet these are more populous areas, and there were also significant numbers from the older, higher class and less densely populated districts, such as Vera and Mtatsminda (AOCU-T 2008).

This situation held also in Kutaisi, where the *qurdebi* hailed from areas of varying class categories (AOCU-K 2004). This was summarised by one Kutaisi based respondent who, when asked what attracted youth to the thieves' world, suggested it was instead the appeal of an idealised sense of justice and the style of life that this was based on:

'I don't think it's a class thing, I mean Gora [part of Kutaisi that produced some qurdebi] is a mixed region with kids from all classes. It's a newish area compared to Sapichkhia [part of Kutaisi that also produced qurdebi] and is more working class than Sapichkhia too. Sapichkhia is old, traditional, Imeretian area of Kutaisi. It might just be to do with a sense of fairness or justice, acting honestly, like a mentality and way of life' (R35).

Though Sapichkhia was a more well-heeled district with traditional housing and some families claiming noble heritage, the region produced as many if not more *qurdebi* than more working class districts that were constructed around factories during Soviet times.

Regardless of class then, a respect for the values and corresponding lifestyle, including a unique verbal and visual culture, was cited as a common reason for the value distinction made between the *qurdebi* and other social actors whether criminals or judges. Living chaste, quasi-religious lives in prison, renouncing material and physical pleasures, promoting a vision of justice that people identified with, refusing to work or collaborate with the regime, and displaying a specific appearance through modest clothing and tattooing, the *qurdebi* appeared to offer an alternative in life for those that could get close to them. Indeed, when religious observance was banned, this in effect closed off one competing lifestyle in the Soviet Union, leaving choices limited. 'When Stalin closed all the churches people couldn't go to the church, but the *qurdebi* took on the role of the church, they couldn't carry weapons or anything like

that, and [they] had no money, so it was them who were living the ascetic life then' (R40).

10.3 The Trademark and Foiling Fakers

The *qurdebi* as a high status brand name and identity that maintains value on the protection provision and dispute resolution markets faces threats just as other established trademarks might. These are, most primarily, the threat of mimicry by outsiders and the coordination, enforcement and maintenance of conformity of members of the status group adopting matching signatures to identify themselves. I begin by discussing this first problem and how the *qurdebi* might overcome it.

As Kaminski (2004, chap 1) writes, the first question for a newcomer to a Polish prison is 'are you a *grypsmen* [high status inmate]?' The question puts the responder in a difficult situation: saying 'no' straightaway relegates you to a position of disrespect which can be dangerous, while by saying 'yes' you must then prove it. Similarly, in Georgia the question: 'are you a *kai bichi*?' or 'do you follow the understandings?' brings about the same situation. The different *masti* or 'suits' and within them the varying status ranks such as the 'goats', 'cockerels', 'workers' and so on all need to be clearly signalled when working out the true identity of someone within that subculture. The *qurdebi* were no exception to this. How do people recognise that they are dealing with someone from that status group or an affiliate of it, what sort of security can be given to signals to stop them being usurped by others of lower status groups?

The aspects of the *qurdebi* brand – frugality and the prison as a way of life, and a unique verbal and visual culture - are all comprised of conventional signals that denote status and can be understood widely within the post-Soviet context (Gambetta 2009a chapter 6). These signals are not of themselves necessarily costly to display for a faker. Instead, they use widely available signs built on mutually understood conventions and require other forms of deterrence for fakers, such as the threat of punishment for displaying a tattoo that only *qurdebi* have an exclusive right to. Furthermore, these packages of signals can only work given the existence of the symbolic boundary created through initiation rituals that mark an unambiguous distinction between criminals. Even then it is still far from clear how correctly the identity of a potential *qurdi* can be read. The lifestyle differences that are exhibited are not enough. Ways of behaving, language and tattoos that had been exclusive to the prison camps can be aped quite easily, especially in countries where a great many people ended up incarcerated at some point. The penal subculture foisted various different identities onto those imprisoned and those identities slowly became part of a counter culture outside prison as well (Dobson 2009).

In overcoming the problem of mimicry, the *qurdebi* make use first and foremost of one signature that is supremely hard to mimic – face and name recognition. Respondents consistently reported that recognition of a *qurdi* was based on personal knowledge of who the *qurdebi* were in their local area, at least by nickname. This seems to support the idea that the *qurdebi*, at least in the early stages of their criminal careers, controlled their own locales, often where they grew up and this fits with the data presented earlier (see chapter 8). Furthermore, in this way, it could easily be worked out if smaller criminals were working on behalf of a particular *qurdi* or not. Displaying signature features of belonging to a group is secondary to

simply showing your face to make someone aware of the individual they are dealing with. One respondent (R23) recognised a particular *qurdi* in a meeting to recover a stolen car: ‘I don’t know exactly what he [*qurdi* D.] did...I don’t really know much about him or what he was controlling, but I knew him by his face and his name. I mean, everyone knows everyone here right?’ Or as another respondent put it, ‘All of Georgia knew who was a *kanonieri qurdi*...[its] a circle of authoritative criminals and...it was known...who in Georgia was a *kanonieri qurdi*, who is just below them, who today or tomorrow might become a *qurdi* and so on...if you went on the street and asked a kid, he could tell you who was the *qurdi* there’ (R20).

The *qurdebi* in Georgia then rely on identification through face and name and have distinctive mannerisms and speech. The question may arise as to why the *qurdebi* then need to be *qurdebi* at all and bother going to the trouble of becoming an initiated *qurdi* instead of just relying on their own personal reputations. There are incentives to investing in the brand name of *kanonieri qurdi* rather than relying simply on a personal reputation however. As Gambetta and Bacharach (2001, p. 166) state, collective reputations can be built and disseminated quicker than individual ones. A franchise operates according to a similar logic. Franchisors can grow quicker through avoiding full investment and liability for each enterprise and maintain control over franchisees by tying them into the fortunes of the franchise whilst demanding protection and standardisation of its trademarks, business concept, and methods. For the franchisee on the other hand, the reputation of the brand can do all the work in bringing in custom. This was summarised by one respondent (R17): ‘I remember my father’s friend’s wife, a very dignified woman, you would never imagine her having anything to do with this type of thing, coming and asking me “do you know some *qurdi*, I have a problem I need sorting out...” she didn’t have any idea what she was

asking for just that she had heard the *qurdebi* can help you.’ Here the brand does all the work in advertising the *qurdebi* service.

Furthermore, in the context of the Soviet and post-Soviet prisons where there is a high turnover of inmates and an architecture that includes wide, open spaces allowing high numbers of transactions, belonging to a status group can lower costs associated with building up an individual reputation by proving oneself over and over again every time an inmate moves prison (Gambetta 2009a). The answer to Kaminski’s (2004) question posed in Polish prisons – are you a *grypsmen*? – and its variants in Georgia is indicative of this. Kaminski states that the best answer to this is: ‘ask other *grypsmen*.’ Those who are already known to be high status criminals will be able to tell if you are also one or not. This system of referral implies a network of ties through which information is maintained about who is and who is not high status. In a penal state such as the Soviet Union with a high turnover of prisoners such devices as the ‘*vorovskoi progon*’ - the thieves’ equivalent of a newsletter distributed through the penal estate - would be indispensable for preventing the continuous proving of oneself upon arriving in new prisons and allows the *qurdebi* status a great mobility. One respondent, a prison worker (R25), claimed that in her prison it would not take longer than an hour to find out the position of a new inmate in the prison hierarchy.

Analogously, movement from region to region outside a prison might be greatly facilitated by investing in acquiring the *qurdebi* name. Whereas in a small town a *qurdi* might be known personally and have a reputation regardless of his belonging to the *qurdebi*, once outside this locale his face and name become known because he is a *kanoneri qurdi* and this fact in itself denotes various details about the person. Being a *qurdi* helps to spread these details. The *qurdi* title allows the *qurdebi*

greater mobility and transferable status. One of the biggest problems in finding penal policy to combat the *qurdebi* was their mobile authority (R42).

In a criminal underworld under constant threat of crackdowns by the state, the ability to move to new environments and quickly establish oneself is a key factor for the survival of a successful criminal careerist. Just as having the title in prison avoids painful initiation rituals every time one moves prison camp, so signalling a belonging to the *qurdebi* brand reduces the costs of proving one's criminal qualities every time a new business springs up in town. Those qualities can be deduced from the much larger collective reputation of the *qurdebi* that has already been built up.

Thus, there are good reasons to invest in becoming a *qurdi*. Nesting a personal reputation within the wider reputation of the *qurdebi* protects the status from impostors by personalising relationships with clients in a locale and utilising face and name recognition while at the same time reducing the costs of advertising and violence production by utilising a brand name. In particular, the *qurdebi* brand provides returns to the individual in terms of maintaining high status once an individual enters the prison system or moves to a different region.

10.4 Protecting High Status: Standardising Signatures

Other than protecting trademarks from imposters, a further problem for franchisors is maintaining standardisation amongst the franchisees. Franchisees must therefore be carefully selected and endorsed in the first place. The *qurdebi* also face this problem, and as we have seen in Chapter 7 changing recruitment dynamics have led to younger *qurdebi* being initiated based on less stringent criteria than previously,

going as far as recruits simply buying the *qurdi* title. This might have a negative impact on overall collective reputation and status. Once substandard individuals gain possession of the title, signalling a collective identity becomes beset with issues of trust. Membership of the *qurdebi* maintains value only conditionally upon the belief of the receiver of identity signals that those who are able to produce these signals invariably have certain attributes (Bacharach & Gambetta 2001). Once this stops being invariable, the belief of the receiver can quickly wane and with it the reputation of the whole group. Below I will show that there are certain indicators that suggest this to be the case in Georgia.

The complaints of the *qurdebi*-traditionalists about those recently recruited touch on different areas of their ‘work performance’ as *qurdebi*. Firstly, there is dissatisfaction with the performance of *qurdebi* duties such as paying into and looking after the *obshchak* and turning up at *skhodka*. As one expert respondent recalled (R10):

‘You can’t know what someone will be like. Like this guy, Z. When he was on the street he was a real guy, he did everything right, and when he became a qurdi he just became a drug addict, he didn’t do anything...he didn’t turn up to any skhodki for a long time....Can you imagine? It’s like at work here. See my friend? He’s head of division, you think he can just not come to work without trouble? That’s how it is for them too.’

Eventually Z. landed in prison and was uncrowned. Organising and attending *skhodki* is important. One former prison governor (R21) reported that *skhodki* were often held in the prison hospital of which there was only one on the territory of Soviet Georgia. In most cases attendance could easily be assured through a bribe in the right place and feigned injury. When this proved impossible, feigning was substituted by

real self-mutilation ensuring a trip to the hospital and attendance at the *skhodka*. This dedication to performing thievish duties appears to have diminished in some cases in the present day.

Secondly, some younger generation *qurdebi* have been picked up for crimes not befitting the status. This was exemplified by the example of a young Georgian *qurdi* (born in 1983) who was recently caught trying to steal a bottle of alcohol from a supermarket in Moscow. Such petty shoplifting has never been part of a *qurdi*'s repertoire of criminal activity once the title has been obtained and getting caught certainly does not look good either. This particular *qurdi* was baptised in the late 1990s in Samtredia by two of the older *qurdebi* in that town following the funeral of his father who had been a well-known *qurdi* there. He was baptised without any convictions (AOCU-K 2004). Two other Georgian *qurdebi* of the younger generation were picked up in Moscow in 2007 for similar crimes, one similarly had been baptised on the basis that he had *qurdebi* relatives (Criminalnaya 2008).

Thirdly, the *qurdebi* are well-known for moving away from their original ascetic existence in the camps and starting to acquire wealth and an extravagant lifestyle. The *qurdebi* seem to have been affected by general trends of consumption, ownership and wealth creation occurring in Georgia and the Soviet Union at large: 'I knew a lot of *qurdebi* in my time, and I asked them: 20 odd years ago you didn't have the right to marry, settle down, have property. They say, "that was then, now life is different, look at this or that guy, this minister or that one. They want to live well don't you think we want to too?"' (R21)

There are also accounts of *qurdebi* beating other *qurdebi* as punishment for their lifestyle. A generational gap appears to have opened up in some areas between *qurdebi*-traditionalists and new generation *qurdebi*. According to one example in the

police data, in the Guria region of western Georgia a conflict emerged along generational lines. On the one side an old *qurdi* L. had a protégé by the nickname K. baptised in 1999. K. subsequently administered a beating to a young *qurdi*, M., for the un-thievish act of returning stolen arms to the police. Subsequently, M. attempted to have K. uncrowned though this was not agreed to by older *qurdebi* living in Russia who intervened on the side of L. and thus the older generation's man (AOCU-T 2004).

Part of the attraction of becoming a *qurdi* by the 1990s was the sheer fact of becoming rich. This was attested to time and again by respondents. A typical response to what was so attractive about the *qurdebi* life was given by the head of the Kutaisi city police (R31): 'they were all driving big cars, they had money, people wanted to be like that. Simple.' This type of shift in lifestyle is important in changing incentives for relations within the *qurdebi*'s trust network, as was discussed in Chapter 9, as it alters the reliance on generalised reciprocity and normative commitment. As Paoli (2003, 2008) argues, such materialistic changes can shift incentives towards short-term personal gain of specific goods, such as consumer items, money and property weakening bonds between Mafiosi.

Whilst this is true of the dynamics internally, the problem highlighted here is how extravagant displays of wealth, changes in consumption patterns, leisure activities and so on, affect status. As classically stated by Weber, status amongst nobility is maintained on the basis of honour, prestige and lifestyle. The same held true in the past for the *qurdebi*. By the 1990s however the new *qurdebi* recruited were often only attracted to the title precisely to become a wealthy man in a poor country.

10.5 Protecting High Status: *Qurdebi* and the Church

Such changes in ‘work performance’ amongst the *qurdebi* make maintaining a status distinction as elite criminals difficult. As noted above, punishment of those who do not perform well is expensive for the punisher so it appears that the *qurdebi* use a cheaper way to try to maintain the status distinction which does not involve monitoring others’ decadent lifestyle or giving up luxuries oneself. The *qurdebi* seem to make a conscious effort to offset the decadence of their contemporary lifestyle by transmuting the old thieves’ traditions and values into support for an institution that has on the face of it maintained its status distinction through preservation of asceticism and abstinence: the Georgian Orthodox church.

Honi prison camp is one example.³⁹ Positioned in a wide valley where tea plantations provided work for the prisoners, the camp is in terrible condition. The exception to this is a small, beautifully built brick church in the middle of the grounds. The interior is suitably simple with all the adornments of a usual Georgian church. Respectfully lowering one’s head however reveals an eight-point black and white star in the middle of the floor. This is the *qurdebi* trademark. Honi had been a ‘black’ prison up to 2004 (R24).

A walk around the city of Kutaisi shows more examples. One *qurdi*, by the nickname of T. has built his house in the Gora region overlooking the town next to the 11th century cathedral of Bagrati, though residents now complain that it obstructs the view of the ancient site in contravention of local law stretching back a millennium. Meanwhile, near the railway station the *qurdi* P. turned classical style Stalinist blocks of flats into living quarters for various *qurdebi* and their families. Some 150 metres up

³⁹ I am grateful to Penal Reform International and the prison administration for enabling me to visit the prison in Honi.

the road on the banks of the river Rioni a new church has been built using money provided by those families (R29). Across the bridge from there, the *qurdi* Z. built a huge new house complete with English oak doors, a layout to resemble the *qurdebi* eight-point star from above and a top floor room for holding *skhodki* that, according to the police, was designed to emit smoke when baptising new *qurdebi* in imitation of the Vatican (R29).

Near Kutaisi, a *qurdi* called A. dominated the village of Terjola living in the one house that was over two-stories tall. However, a prosecutor (R30) reports that: ‘he built a church in Terdjola and a church gives people something, it feels like a blessing. I guess they [the *qurdebi*] want to buy off their sin...when I was talking to A. in jail...he was talking about the good he did for people.’ Similarly, west of Kutaisi, the *qurdi* Kh. controlled the small town of Tsalenjikha and gave his house, a huge mansion complete with swimming pool and helipad, to the church. He moved to Barcelona in Spain before the state confiscated his property from a surprised priest in 2006 (Gerzmava 2007).

It might be that some *qurdebi* are just relatively rich men who also happen to be very religious. Certainly, however, it can also be said that support for the church does no harm to their reputation in a society that sees its church as the highest expression of the nation. It also maintains the comparison between the ascetism of the church and the *qurdebi* and thereby helps to maintain a symbolic status distinction.

10.6 A Decline in Societal Support?

A common opinion in informal conversations about the *qurdebi* was that they were no longer *kanoneri qurdebi* in fact, but had become a ‘mafia’. This distinction

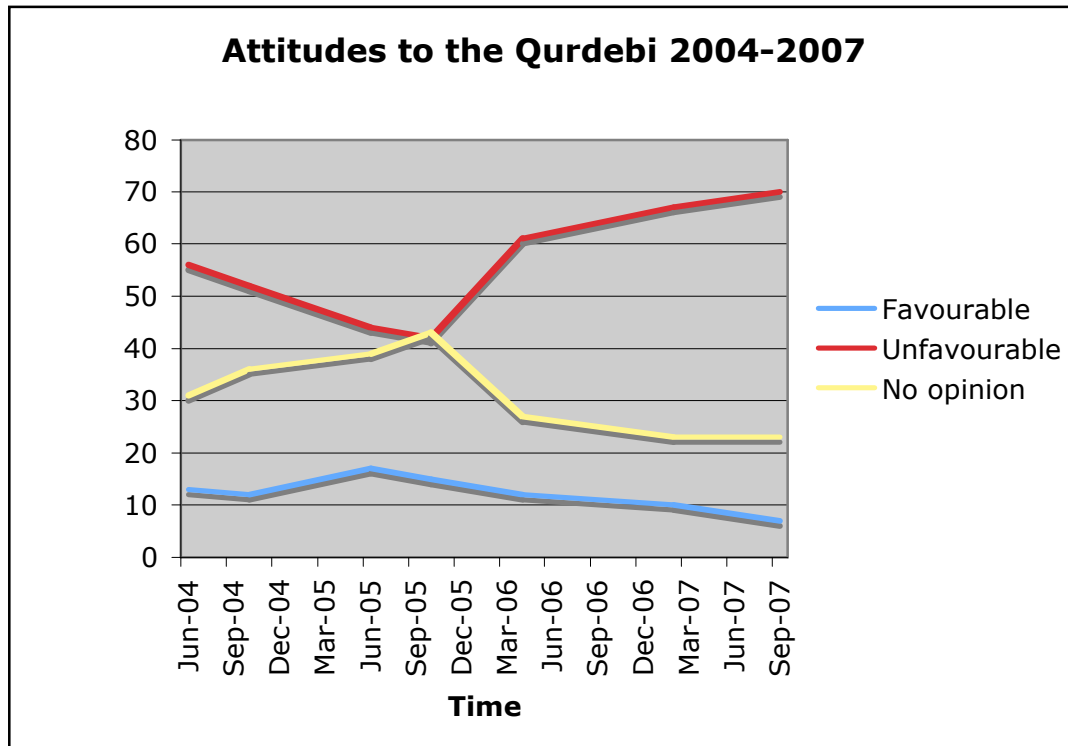
was quite curious. The common opinion appears to refer to the perceived shift from the honest, self-denying *qurdebi* of old to a ‘mafia’ where this refers to violent racketeers lacking in human values and only in it for the money. The opinion refers to the change in the *qurdebi*’s lifestyle. As such this opinion is surely indicative of a blurring of the status distinction upon which the *qurdebi* based their individual reputations so effectively in operating within Georgian society.

Certainly respondents highlighted the changes in the *qurdebi*’s lifestyle usually with overtones of lament at the loss of a more honest age when the *qurdebi* were genuinely reliable men. Referring to the *qurdebi*’s other name, *ramkiani*, ‘in the frame’, as in a framework of rules for living, one respondent (R21) said that in the past: ‘they just lived by the prisoners’ rules - ‘in the frame’ - but then they climbed out of the frame, you get it? They should have clearly defined actions, once one of them goes outside the frame, it used to be, he’s already not a *qurdi*. But the last few years, they came out of the frame.’ Another respondent (R10), referring to the recruitment of substandard members as *qurdebi*, summed up the problem for the *qurdebi* by drawing an analogy with football: ‘Yeah, it was a problem. Imagine Manchester United signing some shit player....and then you see he can’t play, maybe he can kick the ball but that’s all he can do! You know, they may want to bring someone in but if they see he can’t do anything they just stop the process....because if you make someone a *qurdi* and then he can’t work properly then it will be you who has problems.’ This opinion refers to changes in recruitment as detrimental to the overall brand name of the *qurdebi* and the status distinction of this name. There have been reports that *qurdebi* began to lose face amongst prisoners, having fun poked at that them and even physically challenged and slapped, a massive insult to a *qurdi* (R6).

Attitudes to the *qurdebi* were also taken in a national voter survey of 1,500 people over the age of 18 conducted twice a year by Gallup Corporation and USAID for the International Republican Institute (IRI) in Georgia, a democracy-promoting US think-tank, between 2003 and 2007. Under ‘confidence in institutions’ attitudes to the *qurdebi* were recorded as ‘favourable’ ‘unfavourable’ or ‘no opinion’ alongside attitudes to more formal institutions such as political parties, the president and the church. In terms of favourable attitudes the *qurdebi*, or “mafia network of ‘thieves-in-law’” as they are described in the survey results, come bottom of the pile in each survey with the exception of trade unions which also seem to be heavily disliked in Georgia. The church consistently tops all institutions with a favourability rating hovering around 90%. This lends further weight to the argument that the *qurdebi*, Georgia’s least favourite ‘institution’, might want to associate themselves with the church’s almost perfect infallibility in the eyes of the Georgian people.

Interestingly, whilst the *qurdebi* decreased in popularity in the period 2004-2007 the police inverted this trend gaining in popularity from 49% in June 2004 to around 70% favourability by 2007. The relationship between the *qurdebi* and the police is dealt with elsewhere (Chapter 6); suffice to say here that a lack of trust in the police naturally advantages the *qurdebi* in the area of dispute resolution.

The *qurdebi* were included in the survey from June 2004, I will present the results and then make some basic comparisons with other time periods. Below I present the results of surveys carried out in the following months: June and October 2004, June and October 2005, April 2006, June and September 2007.



Graph 10.1: to show attitudes to the qurdebi 2004-2007

Source: IRI

The *qurdebi* then, during this period at least, were not looked on particularly kindly by the respondents, the peak in favourability of 17% in June 2005 is an exception in an otherwise downward trend that bottoms out in the final survey with 7% favourability in September 2007. A much more pronounced change occurs however in the difference across time between those with no opinion and those viewing the *qurdebi* unfavourably; the trend for each is almost diametrically opposed from October 2005 onwards. In October 2005, those with ‘no opinion’ of the *qurdebi* and those that look on them unfavourably stood at almost exactly the same proportion (43% versus 42% respectively). By April 2006 a pronounced split between the respondents had appeared (61% unfavourable versus 27% with no opinion), this split grows steadily wider over time standing at 70% versus 23% by September 2007.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the decline in those with no opinion and the increase of those unfavourable to the *qurdebi* has something to do with the campaign against the *qurdebi*. After all, the new legislation targeting them was introduced in December 2005 right when this surge in unfavourability to the *qurdebi* occurs in these surveys. One explanation for this relationship may be a fear of the state and being associated with the *qurdebi* as this had just been made into a new crime. On the other hand, it could be, simply, that the power of the state attacks on the *qurdebi* through public announcements and use of the media were having an effect. The state attack with its subsequent arrests and high profile court cases was generally supported as increases in support for the police shows.

A third interpretation however could be that the state attack pushed those who previously would not speak about the *qurdebi* for fear of them, to express themselves more forcefully once they saw the state had gained the upper hand in the fight on organised crime. A lack of societal opposition to the *qurdebi* was due to a fear that they were somehow untouchable and that speaking out was dangerous. The importance of this for the argument here is that, if true, the sudden shift away from having no opinion to assessing the *qurdebi* unfavourably shows that the societal support for these criminals was not based so much on shared values in the anomic conditions of post-soviet society, as Oleinik (2003) for example suggests, or on a deep respect for the thievish lifestyle and a compatibility between Georgian values and the norms of the thieves' world as is often argued (Nordin & Glonti 2006) but something much shallower than that.

For example, the arrest of the *qurdi* A., who we met above as a major benefactor of the Georgian church, in January 2004 in the village of Terjola near Kutaisi, brought 150 people out literally onto the street. Protesting the arrest, A.'s

supporters blocked the main Tbilisi-Zugdidi highway and clashed with police (ITAR-TASS 2004). On the one hand, this might be seen as a manifestation of deep-seated support for the *qurdebi* and strong anti-statist feelings. However, according to the local police: ‘you know, people respected him, and for sure he was helping people in the village, no doubt he gave them money if they needed, but then there were businessmen and they were scared of him, he was involved in their business and they thought if they didn’t show their support there could be trouble’ (R29). This case suggests that, though there was societal support for this specific *qurdi* due to the benefits that could be gained from this, protest was also based on fear of the consequences if one was not seen to help out in the tight-knit context of the Georgian village.

This is not to say that there was not some genuine normative belief in the *qurdebi* as a socially beneficial phenomenon for Georgia and that those beliefs do not still exist to this day; it is clear that they do. As one respondent (R17) said, ‘personally, I can tell you, a relative of mine was killed, a young man, 18, killed over some argument, and his father blamed Saakashvili for the death. You know why? Because that month they had arrested the local *qurdi* in that area and he directly linked his son’s death to this....before Saakashvili, in the 1990s *qurdebi* were everywhere.’ However, despite this, it seems that often positive attitudes were not based on a logic of appropriateness with regards to the *qurdebi*’s norms, but rather a logic of instrumentality over what could be gained from supporting them or lost from opposing them and that this latter logic could thus quite quickly unravel the apparent status distinction of the *qurdebi* once the state had successfully attacked organised crime in 2005.

10.7 Conclusion

One Georgian academic (Kukhianidze 2008, p. 230) writes, ‘in the 1990s, many young people dreamed of becoming a “thief-in-law”, which was associated with power, influence and wealth. At present, the young generation understands that being a “thief-in-law” means spending the rest of your life in prison. In short, the reputation of Georgian “thieves-in-law” as well as other influential criminals has been seriously undermined.’ It would be worthwhile adding here that not just the deterrence of a prison sentence has undermined the reputation of the *qurdebi*. The fact that being a *qurdi* ‘was associated with power, influence and wealth,’ had become a factor in the decline in more general support for these criminals who had previously stood out as self-denying ascetics. While a lot of ‘support’ for the *qurdebi* may have been based on considerations of monetary gain, or fear of punishment, there was still the fact that they advertised themselves and got a reputation for being fair, honest and just. Combined with the distinctive lifestyle of apparent non-collaboration with the state, anti-materialism, unique argot, and tattoos, the *qurdebi* were regarded as a criminal status group in Georgia. However, the tendency to turn the *qurdi* into ‘a legendary type’ could only be justified while they did in fact maintain the lifestyle that comprised the symbolic boundary that enabled the beliefs about their status to hold in society.

I have argued that the major problem in achieving this was upholding the law of conformity whereby all those who are *qurdebi* signal their identity in the same way. The changes in recruitment led to a younger age, less experience and increasing numbers of new recruits making the job of maintaining the law of conformity even

more difficult. Instead, many *qurdebi* used their titles for self-enrichment, got married, bought property, and did not go in for tattooing as much as in the past.

The consequence appears to be a negative effect on the collective signalling of an elite identity on a group level that depends upon the receivers of such signalling believing that all those in that group maintain certain valuable qualities. The issue of course is that by undermining the basis of the status beliefs about the *qurdebi* and by flaunting their own rules, the newer *qurdebi* undermine the value of the brand name they have spent time buying into. It seems very plausible that the motive for many criminals in acquiring the title was simply to use it as a well-known franchise that they could profit from without doing much for. In any business, cashing in on the market value of a brand name without fully reinvesting in it is a highly short-term strategy.

As some of the opinions expressed above suggest, reputation amongst the *qurdebi* may have been negatively affected to the point where the *qurdebi* as a status group within the criminal world fail to maintain their distinction and are regarded as any other set of criminals. In such circumstances the causal arrow flips and reputation begins to affect recruitment. The supply of people dries up, as the exclusivity of the status is lost. This is fatal for any criminal group signifying a devastating loss of resilience. It is possible that the *qurdebi* in Georgia face such a scenario. As one respondent (R1) said of a close relative who had the criminal credentials to ‘look to the future’: ‘the *qurdebi* wanted him to [become a *qurdi*]. They recognised his authority, but he didn’t want to himself. He felt he didn’t need the title. And he didn’t really respect those guys, they don’t live correctly anymore.’

11. In Conclusion: the *Qurdebi* on Trial

'Why aren't you working, wolf?'

'The law doesn't allow it.'

'And eating, does your law allow that?'

'There is no law that says I should go hungry.'

'Your law has seen better days. All the zakonniki [thieves-in-law] split with it a long time ago.'

Conversation between the thief-in-law Kuptsov and the camp guard Pakhapil' in

Sergei Dovlatov's *Zona* (1982, pg. 69)

In July 2010, a Moscow court sentenced the widely recognised boss of the Kutaiskaya faction of the Georgian *kanonieri qurdebi*, Taniel Oniani, to 10 years in prison for kidnapping and extortion (Galeotti 2010). His other Georgian associates had been targeted and assassinated around Europe by the rival Tbilisskaya faction belonging to Aslan Usayan. In Oniani's hometown of Kutaisi in western Georgia, meanwhile, only one *qurdi* remains free to walk the streets, and then only due to reasons of old age and ill health. Yet, only seven years previous Oniani had been running a large money-laundering operation in Spain and had been treated like a statesman by the Georgian government, met by Interior Ministry officials at Tbilisi airport and provided with protective convoys.

The previous chapters should help explain many aspects of Oniani's plight: the factionalism, conflict, transplantation, and loss of influence. Oniani's predicament

is indicative of the fate of many *kanonieri qurdebi*, at least in Georgia. This criminal community, which I have defined as a trust network, has adapted and survived through many upheavals and social and political transformations and maintained a strong social influence in Georgia following the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, the anti-mafia policies adopted after the Rose Revolution of 2003 appear to put the survival of this trust network into question. The *qurdebi* in this case have not been able to resist or adapt.

There is one straightforward explanation for this: the state policy was well-informed, quick, and as targeted against the *qurdebi* as it was wide-ranging in evoking a more general ‘culture of lawfulness’ for society. Furthermore, the extraordinary powers given to opaque and not fully reformed power ministries allowed alleged abuses that made the blow struck against organised crime even harder. In the present day, August 2010, people continue to be arrested as ‘members of the thieves’ world,’ sometimes on flimsy or dubious pretexts (Interpress 2010).

This state and policy based explanation is not fully satisfying however. Firstly, the new Georgian government in 2004, despite the reforms, remained weak in relative terms and the tasks ahead of them large, particularly in terms of increasing the budget and state capacity. Secondly, other cases of countries implementing anti-mafia or organised crime policies in the presence of well-developed organised criminal communities faced strong resistance to these policies. The classic case of this is Italy in 1992, however other examples come from terrorist and paramilitary resistance to disbandment or criminalisation of certain activities.

Therefore, this study has paid particular attention to understanding the dynamics of the criminal world in Georgia to explain how and why the *kanonieri qurdebi* had low levels of resilience to state attack once it came in 2005. Four main

components of the dependent variable were identified: sustenance, external relations, internal relations, and boundaries. The study attempted to describe changes in these and, where possible, explain such changes. It was found that, since the collapse of communism, the *qurdebi* had increased their flow of resources (sustenance); lowered barriers to entry and exit, and blurred their criminal status distinction (boundaries); decreased the equality of ties within the network, formed centralised factions and reduced the reliance on commitment as an incentive for membership in favour of capital gain (internal relations); and adapted to changes in the political regime through various clientelist strategies (external relations).

From these observations, the analysis allows some tentative general conclusions to be drawn about the resilience of the *kanonieri qurdebi*:

- 1) External relations are key to reducing vulnerability to predation by the state. Multiple connections with a range of political actors protects against the effects of exogenous political change. However, a change in regime to a hostile, unified political party machine that enacts conformity across regional and political levels creates great exposure to attack.
- 2) Increased supply of resources from a range of sources has variable effects on resilience. It enables expansion and the resources to adapt to exogenous change however an orientation towards enrichment lowers incentives based purely on commitment in favour of capital which in turn can have negative effects on the exclusivity and prestige of membership of a trust network. Furthermore, greater

possibilities for wealth generation increases the opportunity costs on regulating other aspects of the network.

- 3) Lowering of boundaries, i.e. barriers to entry and exit, positively affects resilience in the short term in the presence of conflict and competition. However, in the long term lowering boundaries negatively affects resilience. Firstly, increasing membership size complicates coordination and exerts a pressure towards factionalism and thus conflict. Secondly, recruitment of substandard members negatively affects group reputation which can affect the exclusivity and desirability of membership in the long run.
- 4) Factionalism, lowering equality of ties, and centralisation has variable effects on resilience. It allows greater efficiency in coordination and governance and overcoming monitoring and collective action problems utilising authoritative forms of command and dispute resolution. However, it can potentially generate conflict between influential and charismatic personalities and hinder wider responses to exogenous threats that threaten the whole trust network.

The study does not claim that where variation occurs in these elements it is necessarily the product of purposive, well thought out policy within the thieves' world. Instead, the data appear to agree with the organisational change literature (see chapter 2) that suggests there are many confounding variables for understanding fully why and when organisations change or do not change. Thus, as the elements of resilience indicated above vary this may or may not be according to any rational

strategy to increase resilience. Though a decrease in resilience is not desirable, it can come about through unintended consequences in uncertain and quickly changing environments.

Given that these conditions hold for Georgia following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is difficult to make clear inferences about causal factors driving variation. While the study attempted to identify underlying causes for the changes in resilience, causal effects could not be measured precisely nor could all possible intervening variables be controlled for, however, certain factors did stand out and presented strong logical cases for producing causal effects. It is clear that one of these exogenous factors became particularly prominent in the analysis as bringing about change amongst the Georgian *kanonieri qurdebi*: levels of competition in the environment following the collapse of communism. This emerged as a factor in many areas. Levels of competition help to explain why the 1990s, though a time of abundant resources for a mafia with unbridled and unprotected capitalist activity, also proved to be perhaps one of the most turbulent and damaging decades for the *qurdebi* in their long history.

As well as pulling the *qurdebi* further away from their anti-materialist norms and increasing opportunity costs in investing in regulating the *qurdebi* network, the growth in available resources brought about violent competition from other armed groups, paramilitaries, and corrupt state agencies. This competition proved a catalyst for altering the structure and barriers to entry of the *qurdebi*. Furthermore, competition operates as a causal factor logically prior to any others identified in the study. For example, increased agency costs were discussed as another potential driving factor in explaining change. However, these increased costs were brought about by many influential *qurdebi* leaving Georgia, yet this was done often because of

the unprofitable balance of dangers and profits in the country due to conflict over resources.

11.1 Previous and Future Research

The observations and conclusions made in this study give support to the observations of a variety of scholars concerning the *kanonieri qurdebi* prior to the Rose Revolution. Firstly, Finkenauer & Waring wrote in 1998, (p. 108): ‘it is our impression that the *vory* [thieves-in-law] who were once active in Tbilisi have moved to Moscow. For several reasons some of those who are left have bought the title, most are very young (only 20 or slightly older) and many have not paid their dues by going to prison (sometimes because they bought their way out) – we have concluded that the *vory* traditions are breaking down in Georgia.’ Many of the aspects of Finkenauer & Waring’s impression have been borne out by this study. Secondly, Derluguian (1999) commented that the thieves-in-law ‘is not a centralised organisation, nor even an order. It is an institutional design embedded in local culture and is best suited to survival in highly repressive, large states like Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union.’ This suggests that outside such an oppressive regime survival has become difficult and the central tenets of the thieves’ code redundant. Serio, (2008 pp. 168-174) argues along similar lines: ‘the confusion and ambiguity that gripped society as the Soviet Union disappeared also impacted the thieves’ world. Suddenly, a *vor’s* decade in prison didn’t count for much on the outside world’ (p.171). Now disputes could be settled with guns rather than thieves-in-law. Varese (2001) makes a similar observation in suggesting that increased violence in the 1990s made the position of thieves-in-law precarious and suggests their decline.

The overall findings of this study are not at odds with such positions and compliment and expand upon them. It is clear that the *qurdebi*, in Georgia at least, struggled to adapt. Where adaptations, such as restructuring and allowing greater membership, did occur these could have adverse consequences for resilience. All this is to suggest that the thieves' world in Georgia is in a fight to maintain a clear, recognisable existence.

However, such conclusions can only be reached tentatively and are open to discussion. As accurate measures of causal effects cannot be given for the various relationships between phenomena that have been identified, qualifications have been made concerning many of the arguments. These mainly concern keeping inferences within what is justified by the data. The project as it stands would benefit from further data collection and research. However, as stated at the outset, part of the goal of this research was to identify relationships between phenomena, suggest causes, develop theory and put forward hypotheses. That some of the conclusions reached are tentative is not a flaw, but an invitation for future research.

Furthermore, it is clear that the arguments and conclusions here are not easily generalisable to a wider population of cases. However, some of the principles and relationships at work may be utilised for the purposes of comparison in similar cases. A potential future research strategy would be to identify a similar case study with a different result: i.e. a strong state crackdown that was resisted by a trust network. For example, in the case of resistance to the Italian Anti-Mafia Commission of 1992 it might be hypothesised that the Sicilian mafia were resilient and resistant to state attack. Identifying the strength and diversity of supply sources, the degree of retention of high barriers to entry, commitment mechanisms, equality amongst mob leaders, and the level of fractiousness of the state machine would help to address this question.

Setting up such comparative case studies would allow a deeper understanding of which factors are the most crucial in understanding levels of resistance and success in crackdowns on dangerous and predatory trust networks. Such a research agenda could be applied widely and particularly in the areas of terrorism and insurgency which takes up so much policy and public interest in the present day.

Finally, in terms of Georgia and the post-Soviet space more generally, there are many studies, both academic and non-academic, of organised crime and mafias these days. In these countries, the stream of books, films, serials, and even clothing lines that allude to the criminal subculture of thieves-in-law shows the hold it still has over popular consciousness. I believe that this study makes a novel and important contribution to understanding the dynamics of resilience of organised crime, something which has become a permanent feature of many post-Soviet countries today. This study has not referred back to anything particularly ‘Georgian’ in explaining aspects of the *kanonieri qurdebi* other than some of the symbolic features and forms of the trust network. In not doing so, this study indirectly makes the case that a long history of outlaws and alienation from the state does not lead to the inevitability of organised crime and mafia-rule in Georgia. If this study makes even a tiny contribution to building a law-governed, stable future for this fascinating country then it will have been worth it.

Glossary of Terms

Georgian	Russian	English
<i>apel'sin, lavrushnik</i>	<i>apel'sin, lavrushnik</i>	An 'orange' or a 'laurel leaf.' A thief-in-law who has gained the title through corruption, by buying recommendations from made men to be baptised.
<i>avtoriteti</i>	<i>avtoritet</i>	A high ranking criminal, sometimes equal to a thief-in-law.
<i>bespredel'</i>	<i>bespredel'</i>	A situation of chaos. Originally referred to a prison cell with no dispute arbitrator, it came to be a word to characterise post-Soviet society. Thieves-in-law were originally seen as preventing <i>bespredel'</i> in prison and later also in society.
<i>birzha</i>	<i>birzha</i>	Literally a trading place. In Georgia the <i>birzha</i> is a street hangout for young people. Originally separate from the thieves' world, in the 1990s these hangouts became common areas of thievish influence.
<i>bozebi</i>	<i>suki</i>	'Bitches' - those who originally moved away from the thieves' code.
<i>dzmaoba</i>	<i>bratva</i>	'Brotherhood', a term used in the post-Soviet period for a small group of racketeers, that a thief-in-law might control.
<i>gageba</i>	<i>ponyatiya</i>	The thieves' 'understandings', their code of honour.
<i>ganapi</i>	<i>bez pyati minut</i>	A person who will be initiated as a thief-in-law in the very near future.
<i>garcheva</i>	<i>razborka</i>	The practice of dispute

		resolution.
<i>hariphi</i>	<i>muzhik</i>	Someone who works for the prison regime and is therefore outside the thieves' understandings and may be exploited.
<i>kai bichi</i>	<i>horoshlak</i>	A 'goodfella'. Someone who follows the thieves' rules or understandings.
<i>kanonieri qurdi, ramkiani qurdi</i>	<i>vor-v-zakone, zakonnik</i>	Thief-in-law, the highest rank in the criminal world
<i>krysha</i>	<i>krysha</i>	A 'roof', protection by a criminal, a racket.
<i>kuchis skola</i>	-	The school of the street – the informal rules of street life that in principle is separate from the thieves' world but may feed into it.
<i>makarubeli</i>	<i>smotryashchii</i>	The 'overseer.' The representative of a thief-in-law in prison or in a given territory. May collect and keep the <i>obshchak</i> .
<i>malyava (progon)</i>	<i>malyava (progon)</i>	The dissemination of information amongst the thieves' community.
<i>momevali</i>	-	Someone 'looking to the future.' A person who has given a commitment to live the thieves' life and attempt to become a thief-in-law.
<i>natvla</i>	<i>koronovanie</i>	'Baptism' or 'crowning'. The process of initiation to the thieves' rank.
<i>obshchaki</i>	<i>obshchak</i>	The communal fund for mutual aid to be used for the benefit of those thieves who need it for good reasons, such as ill health or difficulties in prison.
<i>qurduli samkaro</i>	<i>vorovskoi mir</i>	The 'thieves' world'. The totality of status ranks, practices, rules and behavioural norms adhered to by those who profess to that way of life.
<i>skhodniaki</i>	<i>skhodka</i>	The thieves' 'courts' or meetings where issues are discussed, disputes settled

		and recruits initiated.
<i>tavi</i>	<i>dol'ya</i>	A cut or share of profit taken for providing the service of protection or dispute resolution.

Appendix: Images



Picture A: Confiscation of Qurdebi Property and the Symbolism of Law and Order.

Former house of a qurdi in Telavi, a town in eastern Georgia. As part of a deliberate policy it was confiscated and now houses a police station. One of the new cars of the Patrol Police is on display in the foreground. (Gavin Slade, 2008).



Picture B: Anti-Mafia in Kutaisi.

Former house of a qurdi in Kutaisi. This was confiscated and taken over by the police in 2007. The odd architectural design portrays the qurdebi eight-point star when seen from the top floors of the block of flats, visible in the top left of the picture. According to local police, the top-level room of the house was for holding skhodki and had a chimney intended to emit smoke when new members were successfully initiated. (Gavin Slade 2009).



Picture C: Commitment or Capital? The New Thieves' Code of Wealth and Power

Palatial residence of one of Georgia's most well-connected qurdebi in the hills above Tbilisi. This has been taken over by the financial police since the Rose Revolution. The qurdi in question is currently standing trial in Spain for money laundering. (Gavin Slade, 2009).



Picture D: The Way Things Were.

Examples of collective meetings (skhodki) in prison before the Rose Revolution. The corruption of the prison administration was widespread and qurdebi virtually ran so-called 'black prisons.' Qurdebi from outside the prisons (clearly distinct by their hats and outdoor clothing, above) were able to enter the prisons to conduct skhodki with their colleagues on the inside (those in athletic clothing, above). (Photo courtesy of AOCU-T).



Picture E: Factions & Conflict I

Skhodka of qurdebi from the Imereti region at the 12th century church and monastery complex Gelati, in the hills above Kutaisi. The qurdebi based in Kutaisi and its environs began to centre around Tariel Oniani (not pictured) and became known in Russia as the Kutaiskaya. The Kutaiskaya have been in conflict with the Tbilisi faction of qurdebi known as the Tbilisskaya and have come out of this conflict badly. Oniani is now in jail and some of their members have been assassinated. (Photo published by PrimeCrime.ru).



Picture F: Factions & Conflict II.

The picture shows a skhodka of the group close to Aslan Usoyan, known as Ded Hasan (centre, blue shirt). They hail mainly from Tbilisi and its environs (particularly Rustavi) and have become known in Russia as the Tbilisskaya. Since 2005 there has been friction with the Kutaisi-based faction known as the Kutaiskaya. Although Usoyan appeared to have the upper hand in this conflict, in November 2010 he narrowly survived an assassination attempt in central Moscow. (Photo courtesy of AOCU-T).



Picture G: Factions & Conflict III.

The funeral of the legendary Russian mobster Vyacheslav Ivan'kov, known as Yaponchik, in October 2009. Ivan'kov was assassinated in Moscow after attempting to mediate in the dispute between the Kutaisi and Tbilisi factions. (Photo published by PrimeCrime.ru).



Picture H: Maintaining Distinction: Qurdebi Trademarks.

Elaborate tattooing is still a feature of the qurdebi in the present day. Religious symbolism is popular (top) and the qurdebi trademark, the eight-point star on the two shoulders, is a condition of membership and a highly exclusive label (bottom). (Photo courtesy of AOCU-T).



Picture I: Maintaining Distinction: Qurdebi and the Church

According to the local police, this new church was built on the banks of the River Rioni in Kutaisi with money from prominent qurdebi. (Gavin Slade, 2009).



Picture J: The Qurdebi on Trial

Large poster in downtown Tbilisi on the sixth anniversary of the Rose Revolution, November 2009. The poster shows Taneli Oniani, leader of the Kutaiskaya, behind bars (though he was actually arrested in Russia). Surrounding him are photographs of other kanonieri qurdebi with their faces blurred out. The poster reads: 'The Rose Revolution: Promises Delivered. A Georgia without Kanonieri Qurdebi.' At the bottom somebody has clearly attempted to burn the poster off the wall, perhaps revealing again that societal support for the qurdebi has not been completely extinguished. (Gavin Slade, 2009).

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Expert Interviews

Respondent	Position	Place	Date
R1	Unemployed; connections with criminal 'authorities'	Tbilisi	09.05.08
R2	Former criminal investigator	Kutaisi	21.05.08
R3	Prison reform programme advisor, MoJ	Tbilisi	24.05.08
R4	Prosecutor	Tbilisi	25.05.08
R5	Academic; Police Academy Trainer	Tbilisi	27.05.08
R6	Academic; Director of crime-related NGO	Tbilisi	30.05.08
R7	Spokesman for MIA	Tbilisi	31.05.08
R8	Academic; NGO activist for 'culture of lawfulness' program.	Tbilisi	03.06.08
R9	Head of AOCU in SOD, MIA	Tbilisi	04.06.08
R10	Chief Criminal Investigator AOCU in SOD, MIA	Tbilisi	04.06.08
R11	Former police officer	Tbilisi	04.06.08
R12	Assistant Director Criminal Police, MIA	Tbilisi	05.06.08
R13	Head of Central Administration, PO	Tbilisi	05.06.08
R14	Director Safe Schools Project, MoE	Tbilisi	10.06.08
R15	Academic; Former police officer and parliamentarian	Tbilisi	11.06.08
R16	Journalist; Former bodyguard	Tbilisi	11.03.09
R17	Professor of Law	Tbilisi	19.03.09
R18	Unemployed; connections with criminal 'authorities'	Tbilisi	26.03.09
R19	Defence lawyer; former Kutaisi prosecutor	Tbilisi	07.04.09
R20	Worker for NGO on penal reform; former prison worker	Tbilisi	08.04.09
R21	Former prison governor	Tbilisi	14.04.09
R22	Police officer	Zugdidi	20.04.09
R23	Academic	Kutaisi	04.05.09
R24	Prison governor	Honi	27.04.09
R25	Former head of administration of prison nr Kutaisi	Kutaisi	27.04.09
R26	Prison governor	Geguti	28.04.09
R27	Prison governor	Kutaisi	28.04.09
R28	Prison governor	Zugdidi	29.04.09
R29	Head of Kutaisi AOCU in SOD, MIA	Kutaisi	30.04.09
R30	Head of Kutaisi PO	Kutaisi	01.05.09
R31	Head of Kutaisi City Criminal Police	Kutaisi	01.05.09
R32	Criminal Investigator	Kutaisi	01.05.09
R33	Former judge	Kutaisi	03.05.09
R34	Deputy head teacher	Kutaisi	04.05.09
R35	Head teacher	Kutaisi	05.05.09
R36	Imereti regional governor	Kutaisi	06.05.09
R37	Head teacher	Kutaisi	07.05.09
R38	Lawyer in legal assistance NGO	Kutaisi	07.05.09
R39	Prominent journalist	Tbilisi	20.05.09
R40	Defence lawyer; former political prisoner	Tbilisi	28.05.09
R41	Former president	Tbilisi	01.06.09
R42	Advisor to head of prison department	Tbilisi	02.06.09
R43	Ombudsman	Tbilisi	04.06.09
R44	Former prosecutor drafted anti-mafia legislation	Tbilisi	05.06.09

Abbreviations:

MoJ = Ministry of Justice;

MoE = Ministry of Education;

AOCU = Anti-Organised Crime Unit;

SOD = Special Operations Department;

MIA = Ministry of Internal Affairs;

PO = Prosecutor's Office;

NGO = Non-governmental organisation.

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