The Role of Violence in the Consolidation of Organised Crime in Bulgaria during the 1990s

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"[…] it is not about being a cool dude at all costs, it is about staying alive."

\- Georgi Iliev

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Introduction

On the evening of April 25, 1995, a silver Mercedes was crawling through the narrow, poorly lit “Nikola Kamenov” street in Sofia. Moments later, gunfire erupted from a passing vehicle, killing the driver, Vasil Iliev, a former national wrestling champion and the founder of the VIS (Vasil Iliev Security) insurance and security group. Iliev's cold-blooded assassination was one of the most notorious contract killings of Bulgaria's tumultuous post-communist transition. The case attracted massive media attention, yet, as in most such incidents in 1990s Bulgaria, no perpetrator was ever brought to justice (Center for the Study of Democracy [CSD], 2007, pp. 25–26; Stoev, 2008, pp. 25–27). Iliev's murder was not an isolated event; it was indicative of a larger pattern of organised violence that defined public life during Bulgaria's early transition from communism (Kupatadze, 2012, pp. 120–123).

From the early 1990s through the early 2000s, Bulgaria experienced over 150 contract-style killings, many executed in public spaces with military-grade weapons. The victims included not just criminal rivals, but also politicians, journalists, businessmen, and law enforcement veterans (Kupatadze, 2012, pp. 120–123; CSD, 2007, pp. 25–27). These events, together with widespread extortion and bombings, created an atmosphere of insecurity that fundamentally shaped Bulgarians' perceptions of democracy and the rule of law (Galev et al., 2011, p. 21; Stoev, 2008, pp. 25–30). Although Bulgaria adopted a multiparty system and initiated market reforms, its post-socialist state was characterised by institutional volatility, recurring political crises, and a persistently weak rule of law (Ganev, 2007, pp. 142–151; Grzymała-Busse, 2007, pp. 49–52).

Dominant theories in organised crime research suggest violence is most prevalent when criminal organisations are new or the state is weak, but recede as these organisations become embedded in legal, political, and economic institutions (Gambetta, 1993, pp. 17–23; Paoli, 2003, pp. 108–112; Varese, 2011, p. 9). In other similar cases, such as Sicily, violence gives way to reputation and informal governance once political protection and legitimacy are established (Gambetta, 1993). This pacification hypothesis is echoed by Paoli (2003) and Della Porta & Vannucci (1999), who argue that the costs of violence increase with institutional integration, pushing criminal groups toward discretion and corruption rather than open coercion (Paoli, 2003, pp. 122–124; Della Porta & Vannucci, 1999, p. 59).

However, the Bulgarian experience starkly contradicts this theoretical expectation. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, groups such as VIS and its rival SIC (Security Insurance Company) became deeply integrated into Bulgaria's legal economy and political system, developing from networks of former athletes and security personnel into business conglomerates with interests in insurance, infrastructure, real estate, tourism, and media (Stoev, 2008, pp. 28–31; CSD, 2007, pp. 36–40). They established connections with ruling parties and gained visibility as "benefactors" through philanthropy and community engagement (Stoev, 2008, pp. 60–66). Furthermore, instead of retreating from public view or forgoing violence, these groups continued to use violence openly—even as their legitimacy and embeddedness increased (CSD, 2007, pp. 25–27; Galev et al., 2011, pp. 18–23).

This paradox—the persistence of violence after criminal actors have become institutionally embedded—constitutes the central question of this thesis. If embeddedness is meant to reduce the utility and necessity of violence, why did Bulgarian criminal organisations continue to rely on it so publicly? What explains the coexistence of legitimacy and ongoing coercion, and what does this reveal about the limits of dominant organised crime theory?

This thesis argues that persistent organised criminal violence in Bulgaria was not a result of incomplete transition or state weakness alone, but a function of how embeddedness was structured in the post-communist context. Bulgarian criminal groups were indeed embedded, but within structures that failed to impose the constraints typically associated with institutionalisation. Instead, their embeddedness developed in a setting marked by fragmented state enforcement, weak civil society oversight, and volatile elite alliances—each of which undermined the disincentives for violence and created new incentives for its use (Ganev, 2007, pp. 147–150; Howard, 2003, pp. 33–36; Kupatadze, 2012, pp. 118–122).

In sum, the Bulgarian case exemplifies what this thesis conceptualises as "violent embeddedness"—a hybrid order in which criminal organisations are simultaneously institutionalised and overtly violent. Violence persisted not despite embeddedness, but under its protection.

Literature Review

The study of organised crime has become increasingly interdisciplinary, evolving beyond early criminological and sociological perspectives to incorporate political science,

economics, and comparative politics (Paoli, 2002; Varese, 2011). This expanded analytical focus has produced a rich literature on the origins, strategies, and consequences of criminal organisations, particularly regarding their interaction with state institutions and legitimate markets.

Classic studies laid the groundwork for an economic logic of organised crime. These works conceptualise criminal groups as rational actors responding to opportunities created by state weakness and the absence of credible law enforcement (Schelling, 1967; Gambetta, 1993). In such settings, organised crime organisations fill governance gaps by enforcing contracts, regulating markets, and even providing dispute resolution (Becker, 1968; Fiorentini & Peltzman, 1995). Violence in these models is instrumental—deployed as a rational tool when the costs are outweighed by the benefits of securing reputation, market share, or compliance. Expectations are that as state capacity strengthens and criminal actors become more institutionalised, their use of violence should decline in favour of more discreet forms of influence (Gambetta, 1993, pp. 17–23).

Building on and complicating this economic logic, a second strand of scholarship emphasises the social, political, and institutional embeddedness of criminal organisations. Drawing on Granovetter's (1985) foundational work, scholars such as Paoli (2003) and Varese (2011) argue that illicit groups thrive not only through their monopoly on violence but by embedding themselves in networks of kinship, political patronage, and local legitimacy. In the Italian, American, and Japanese contexts, mafia-type organisations have achieved durability by cultivating alliances with state actors, legal businesses, and community institutions (Varese, 2011, pp. 6–9; Paoli, 2003, pp. 108–112). Empirical work suggests that as criminal organisations achieve embeddedness in these environments, their reliance on violence diminishes. Instead, they increasingly govern through corruption, collusion, and informal control, reserving violence for moments when their other assets—such as reputation, relationships, or institutional ties—are insufficient (Della Porta & Vannucci, 1999, p. 59; Gambetta, 1993, pp. 17–23).

This "pacification through embeddedness" hypothesis has been influential in shaping comparative organised crime studies such as Gambetta's (1993) analysis of the Sicilian mafia, Reuter's (1983) study of the American Cosa Nostra, and Hill's (2003) work on the Japanese Yakuza. These papers all document how violence is most visible and frequent during the formative stages of criminal consolidation, but wanes as organisations become embedded and

can substitute coercion with political and economic influence. Furthermore, the reputational and legal costs of violence act as powerful deterrents, particularly in consolidated democracies, incentivising criminal groups to rely on less conspicuous means of control (Della Porta & Vannucci, 1999; Paoli, 2003).

However, a growing body of research suggests that this model does not apply universally. In many transitional and hybrid regimes, violence persists or intensifies even after criminal organisations achieve significant institutional, economic, and symbolic embeddedness (Snyder & Duran-Martinez, 2009; Lessing, 2021). Latin American cases—such as Mexico and Colombia—provide striking examples where drug cartels, despite extensive ties to politicians, law enforcement, and business, continue to rely on spectacular violence for market control, discipline, and deterrence, further demonstrating that the impact of embeddedness on violence is not unidirectional; rather, it depends on the stability of protection, the fragmentation of enforcement, and the nature of elite alliances (Lessing, 2021, pp. 121–123).

Research from Eastern Europe reinforces this challenge to the pacification hypothesis. In the post-socialist period, rapid privatisation, state fragmentation, and the erosion of legal-institutional boundaries created conditions under which organised crime flourished not on the margins, but at the center of the political economy (Galev et al., 2011; Ganev, 2007). The integration of former athletes, security officials, and business elites into criminal networks was facilitated by widespread corruption, weak oversight, and regulatory gaps (Stoev, 2008, pp. 26–31). Groups like VIS and SIC rapidly established legal fronts, including insurance companies, holding groups, and media assets, while simultaneously cultivating reputations for violence, intimidation, and public spectacle (CSD, 2007, pp. 36–40; Galev et al., 2011, pp. 17–23).

Bulgaria's experience stands out within this broader regional trend. While classic theory predicts that embeddedness in legal markets and political institutions should lead to a reduction in violence, Bulgarian criminal groups persisted in deploying contract killings, public shootings, and bombings well after they had become central economic and political actors (CSD, 2007, pp. 25–27; Stoev, 2008, pp. 28–33; Kupatadze, 2012, pp. 120–123). These acts were not limited to underworld rivalries; public officials, law enforcement veterans, journalists, and businesspeople were also targeted, contributing to a pervasive sense

of insecurity and a crisis of public trust (Galev et al., 2011, pp. 18–20; CSD, 2007, pp. 26–27).

Scholarship on state capture and institutional subversion in Bulgaria and the wider region further complicates the pacification hypothesis. The Bulgarian transition was characterised by "subversion from within," where elites actively dismantled oversight and enforcement bodies to facilitate rent-seeking and evade accountability (Ganev, 2007, pp. 147–150). This “predatory” transformation resulted in a hybrid regime, where criminal actors could access institutional protection and act as enforcers for segments of the elite, rather than being constrained by integration into state structures (Ganev, 2007, pp. 147–150). Similarities are found in the Russian example, too, where “violent entrepreneurs” were not marginal outlaws, but key players in a new political economy that rewarded both institutional access and the capacity for violence (Volkov, 2002, pp. 13–15).

The weakness of Bulgarian civil society is another key factor emphasised in the literature. Post-communist societies inherited a "participation gap"—marked by distrust in public institutions, limited civic engagement, and shallow associational life—which left a vacuum that criminal actors could fill (Howard, 2003, pp. 33–36). Groups such as VIS and SIC gained symbolic capital and legitimacy by investing in sports, religious organisations, and local philanthropy, even as they relied on violence to secure market dominance and enforce internal discipline (Stoev, 2008, pp. 60–66; Smilov & Toplak, 2007, pp. 96–98).

Political instability and volatile elite alliances further enabled the persistence of violence. The Bulgarian party system in the 1990s and early 2000s was marked by frequent realignments, weak programmatic coherence, and transactional relationships between political and criminal actors (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2006, p. 89; Kupatadze, 2012, pp. 118–122). In such an environment, violence served as a tool for managing risk, deterring betrayal, and enforcing informal contracts, rather than an anachronism to be abandoned as legitimacy increased (Snyder & Duran-Martinez, 2009, p. 257; Lessing, 2021, pp. 121–123).

Taken together, this literature demonstrates that the relationship between embeddedness and violence is highly contingent on context. The Bulgarian case, as a “crucial case” (Gerring, 2007; Seawright & Gerring, 2008), highlights the need for frameworks that can account for situations where institutional, economic, and symbolic integration coexist with persistent and visible violence. Recent comparative research has responded by advocating for more precise,

multidimensional approaches—examining how the fragmentation of state enforcement, the weakness of civil society, and the instability of elite networks interact to produce distinct patterns of criminal governance (Kupatadze, 2012, pp. 120–125; Lessing, 2021, pp. 121–123; Galev et al., 2011, pp. 21–22).

The persistence of organised violence in Bulgaria thus challenges the orthodoxy that embeddedness is inherently pacifying. It raises the need for a theoretical framework that can explain not only why criminal actors seek institutional legitimacy, but also how certain structural conditions may enable them to continue deploying violence as a rational and protected strategy.

Theoretical Framework

To address the persistence of violence within embedded criminal organisations, particularly in the context of post-socialist Bulgaria, this thesis constructs a theoretical framework rooted in comparative political science, economic sociology, and the most recent literature on organised crime. A conceptualisation of violence, embeddedness, and their intersection is essential for both analytical clarity and enabling the replication and critical evaluation of the study.

Conceptualization of Variables

In the literature on organised crime, **violence** is broadly defined as the actual or threatened use of force against persons or property in pursuit of criminal, political, or economic ends (Varese, 2011, p. 9; Gambetta, 1993, pp. 17–20). This includes not only lethal acts—such as contract killings, shootings, and bombings—but also non-lethal forms such as intimidation, extortion, and public displays of coercion (CSD, 2007, pp. 25–28). Scholars emphasise that violence within organised crime is not solely instrumental, used to eliminate rivals or enforce agreements, but is also deeply symbolic. Its deployment serves to signal credibility, deter betrayal, and assert dominance, especially in environments where the rule of law is weak or unreliable (Paoli, 2003, p. 115; Lessing, 2021, pp. 121–123). The public and performative nature of much of Bulgaria's criminal violence in the 1990s and 2000s—contract killings in broad daylight and bombings in urban areas—exemplifies both its instrumental and symbolic dimensions (CSD, 2007, pp. 25–27; Kupatadze, 2012, pp. 120–123).

Embeddedness is a foundational concept borrowed from economic sociology (Granovetter, 1985) and adapted by organised crime scholars (Paoli, 2003). It refers to the degree to which actors are integrated into networks of social relations, institutional structures, and shared norms. For criminal organisations, embeddedness describes not merely a set of connections or alliances, but a structural position within legal, political, and symbolic systems that enables illicit actors to interact, cooperate, and compete with legitimate stakeholders (Granovetter, 1985, pp. 487–488; Paoli, 2003, pp. 108–112). In the context of organised crime, embeddedness often involves cultivating ties with state officials, penetrating the legal economy, and acquiring a degree of public legitimacy. Thus, mafia-type organisations derive their staying power from being embedded in broader social contexts, providing governance and dispute resolution functions where state institutions fail (Paoli, 2003, pp. 108–112). This perspective has dominated comparative research, which tends to assume that as criminal actors become more deeply embedded in legal and political institutions, the incentives for open violence decrease while those for corruption, collusion, and discretion increase (Varese, 2011, pp. 6–9; Della Porta & Vannucci, 1999, p. 59).

However, the Bulgarian case—and others in transitional or hybrid regimes—has shown that embeddedness does not always produce pacification. The outcome, as highlighted by recent research, depends not merely on the fact of institutionalisation, but on the nature and quality of the structures into which criminal actors are embedded (Lessing, 2021, pp. 118–126; Snyder & Duran-Martinez, 2009, p. 257). In Latin America, the stability and coherence of political protection shape whether embeddedness restrains or enables violence (Lessing, 2021, pp. 121–123). Similarly, the visibility and persistence of violence in drug-producing regions is shaped not only by embeddedness but by the fragmentation and autonomy of state enforcement agencies (Snyder & Duran-Martinez, 2009, p. 257). In other words, embeddedness is not inherently pacifying; the broader institutional, social, and political context shapes its consequences.

Operationalization of Main Concept and Dimensions

Building on this recognition, this thesis introduces and operationalises the concept of **violent embeddedness**. Violent embeddedness refers to a situation in which criminal groups are deeply integrated into legal, political, and symbolic institutions, yet persist in using violence as a rational and effective strategy of governance. This concept is grounded in empirical observations from Bulgaria, where groups like VIS and SIC maintained both

institutional legitimacy and coercive capacity throughout the 1990s and 2000s (CSD, 2007, pp. 36–44; Stoev, 2008, pp. 60–66). Violent embeddedness emerges when the typical structural constraints of institutionalisation—such as the threat of prosecution, reputational risk, or the loss of elite support—are weak or easily circumvented (Kupatadze, 2012, pp. 120–123; Galev et al., 2011, pp. 21–22). Under these conditions, embeddedness does not inhibit violence; instead, it can shield and sometimes amplify it.

For analytical rigour, this paper breaks down violent embeddedness into three interrelated dimensions that are directly observable in the Bulgarian case and are also supported in the broader literature:

First, **state fragmentation** is central. Rather than a unified, coherent state capable of imposing consistent legal constraints, Bulgaria's post-socialist regime was marked by divided enforcement agencies, politicised oversight bodies, and selective application of the law, described even as "predatory," with ruling elites deliberately weakening enforcement institutions to facilitate rent-seeking and avoid accountability (Ganev, 2007, pp. 147–150). This institutional fragmentation allowed criminal actors to secure selective protection from prosecution while avoiding unified state action (Grzymała-Busse, 2007, pp. 49–52; Galev et al., 2011, pp. 17–18).

Second, the **weakness of civil society** fundamentally shaped the nexus between embeddedness and violence. Decades of authoritarian rule produced a legacy of distrust in public institutions, low civic engagement, and underdeveloped watchdog organisations (Howard, 2003, pp. 33–36). In Bulgaria, these conditions limited public accountability and created space for criminal actors to gain symbolic capital by sponsoring sports teams, supporting religious foundations, and engaging in philanthropy (Smilov & Toplak, 2007, pp. 96–98; Stoev, 2008, pp. 60–66). This symbolic embeddedness enabled them to acquire legitimacy even while continuing to employ violent enforcement.

Third, **elite instability** contributed to the persistence of violence within embedded organisations. The post-socialist period in Bulgaria was characterised by political volatility, short-term transactional alliances, and frequent realignments among elite actors (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2006, p. 89; Kupatadze, 2012, pp. 118–122). Rather than the long-term, programmatic political-criminal alliances theorised in classic mafia models, the Bulgarian context produced a fluid, unpredictable elite environment in which violence was used as a

form of insurance—to enforce informal contracts, deter betrayal, and signal credibility both to allies and rivals (Snyder & Duran-Martinez, 2009, p. 257; Lessing, 2021, pp. 121–123).

The concept of violent embeddedness thus departs from traditional models that treat institutionalisation as an automatic constraint on coercion. Instead, it theorises embeddedness as a variable outcome, whose effect on violence is conditional on the broader structure of incentives and constraints in the state, civil society, and political elite networks. This aligns with the recent turn in the literature toward "unpacking" embeddedness and specifying the institutional and social features that mediate its consequences (Lessing, 2021, p. 125; Kupatadze, 2012, pp. 120–123).

This thesis operationalises violent embeddedness by analysing how these three dimensions—state fragmentation, weak civil society, and elite instability—interacted in Bulgaria to enable criminal actors to persist in the use of violence even after gaining legal, political, and symbolic legitimacy. By specifying the mechanisms through which embeddedness can sustain rather than pacify violence, this framework advances theory. It provides a replicable template for comparative analysis in other transitional or hybrid regimes.

Case Selection, Data Collection, and Methodology

To address the persistence of organised criminal violence in Bulgaria during its post-socialist transition, this paper applies a qualitative case study approach. This design is particularly suitable for studying complex, context-dependent social phenomena and for generating insights into the causal mechanisms underlying such cases (Gerring, 2007; George & Bennett, 2005). By conducting an in-depth analysis of Bulgaria as a single case, the research aims to produce findings that are both theoretically meaningful and replicable, while also offering a nuanced understanding relevant to broader debates about organised crime, violence, and institutional transformation.

Case Selection

Bulgaria was chosen because it is considered a "crucial case" in the field of comparative politics. A crucial case is one in which the outcome has particular theoretical significance, often because it diverges from expectations drawn from established theories (Gerring, 2007; Seawright & Gerring, 2008). In the context of organised crime, prevailing

scholarship holds that as criminal organisations become more deeply embedded in state institutions and legal economies, their reliance on violence should decrease. The Bulgarian case is noteworthy because, rather than declining, violence remained highly visible and persistent, even as criminal groups established legal businesses, entered into political alliances, and acquired symbolic legitimacy (CSD, 2007; Stoev, 2008; Kupatadze, 2012). The presence of this "negative" or paradoxical outcome allows for testing and refinement of theories of embeddedness and violence.

Research Design

The research design employs process tracing, a method widely regarded as a cornerstone of qualitative case study research. Process tracing is especially effective for uncovering the sequences of events, decision points, and causal pathways that connect institutional structures, elite strategies, and the evolution of organised crime (George & Bennett, 2005; Beach & Pedersen, 2013). The thesis reconstructs the timeline of Bulgaria's post-socialist transition, with a particular focus on institutional reforms, patterns of criminal group activity, changes in elite alliances, and the responses of civil society and state agencies. By analysing how these factors interacted at key moments, process tracing enables the identification of how violent embeddedness was sustained and why alternative outcomes—such as pacification or marginalisation of organised crime—did not occur.

Data Sources and Collection Strategy

The empirical analysis relies exclusively on secondary sources, a decision shaped by both practical and ethical considerations. Direct research on organised crime, especially in a contemporary context, raises significant challenges regarding access to primary data, the safety of researchers and participants, and the reliability of self-reported information from involved actors (Varese, 2011; Paoli, 2003). As a result, the study is grounded in an extensive review of peer-reviewed monographs, journal articles, institutional reports, policy documents, and reputable investigative journalism. Prominent sources include the works of Stoev (2008), Kupatadze (2012), and the Center for the Study of Democracy (2007), which provide detailed empirical accounts of organised crime dynamics in Bulgaria. These are complemented by policy studies from international organisations (such as the European Commission and Transparency International), as well as analytic reports on governance, civil society, and corruption in post-communist states.

Ethical Considerations

When using media coverage, the thesis takes care to compare narratives across different outlets and to verify key facts against scholarly or institutional studies. Investigative journalism is included only when produced by reputable organisations and when findings can be triangulated with other forms of evidence. This critical approach to source evaluation helps minimise the risk of relying on sensationalist accounts or politically motivated reporting, both of which are recognised as common problems in the study of organised crime (Della Porta & Vannucci, 1999, pp. 47–50).

Conceptual clarity and replicability are further ensured by providing explicit definitions and operational criteria for all core concepts. Violence is defined as acts of contract killing, bombings, public assaults, and credible threats, with each incident or pattern cited from institutional or scholarly documentation (CSD, 2007, pp. 25–28; Galev et al., 2011, pp. 18–21). Embeddedness is traced through evidence of legal business activity, political ties, participation in philanthropic or cultural initiatives, and documented influence over the media (Stoev, 2008, pp. 60–66; CSD, 2007, pp. 36–44). The three central enabling conditions for violent embeddedness—state fragmentation, civil society weakness, and elite instability—are identified by examining institutional reforms, shifts in NGO activity, party realignments, and relevant changes in the broader socio-political context (Ganev, 2007; Howard, 2003; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2006).

Empirical Strategy and Methodological Approach

The process tracing approach is implemented by developing a comprehensive timeline of events, mapping out interactions among state agencies, political actors, and criminal groups, and identifying key turning points where violence persisted or escalated in connection with institutional changes. Alternative explanations, such as general state weakness or economic deprivation, are considered and weighed against the more specific claim advanced in this thesis: that violence endured because the structures into which criminal groups became embedded did not impose sufficient constraints or disincentives.

Methodological Considerations

There are limitations inherent in this methodology that must be acknowledged. Reliance on secondary sources may leave gaps in knowledge, particularly regarding internal

deliberations of criminal actors or undocumented acts of violence. Some events or relationships may be underreported due to the clandestine nature of the subject. To mitigate these issues, triangulation is employed, drawing on multiple sources and analytic perspectives whenever possible, thus identifying areas where evidence is ambiguous or incomplete.

In summary, this paper applies a qualitative case study approach, relying on process tracing and critical evaluation of secondary data to explore the mechanisms and conditions of violent embeddedness in Bulgaria. By focusing on a crucial case where theoretical predictions fail, and by carefully operationalising all variables and concepts, the research can offer both an empirical analysis and a foundation for broader theoretical development.

Analysis: State Fragmentation, Civil Society and Elite Instability

The persistence of organised criminal violence in Bulgaria during its transition from socialism to democracy and a market economy cannot be understood through monocausal explanations. Instead, it emerges from the intersection of state fragmentation, civil society weakness, and elite instability—each of which undermines the institutional and reputational constraints that, according to prevailing theory, should accompany embeddedness. This analysis section is organised around these three enabling conditions, each supported by empirical evidence and scholarly interpretation, to demonstrate how violent embeddedness was both possible and rational for criminal actors in Bulgaria. Throughout, the argument is illustrated with concrete examples from the Bulgarian context and situated within broader debates in the organised crime literature.

State Fragmentation and the Opportunity for Violence

A central enabling condition for violent embeddedness in Bulgaria was the fragmentation of state enforcement, which emerged following the collapse of state socialism in 1989. The final years of the regime were marked by economic decline, contested political authority, and a rapidly weakening party-state, culminating in mass protests and the resignation of the long-ruling Communist Party in 1989 (Crampton, 2007, pp. 373–376; Ganev, 2007, pp. 142–151). In the early phase of the transition, Bulgaria underwent a chaotic process of economic liberalisation, privatisation, and institutional reorganisation. These reforms, often implemented hastily and under external pressure, produced significant gaps in

legal oversight and administrative continuity (Ganev, 2007, pp. 145–147; Grzymała-Busse, 2007, pp. 49–52; CSD, 2007, pp. 18–23).

Scholars of post-communist Europe widely recognise that the absence of robust, depoliticised law enforcement institutions during this era allowed private interests to shape the new rules of the game (Grzymała-Busse, 2007, p. 50). Ministries and regulatory bodies were frequently reorganised or staffed according to shifting political alignments, with officials chosen for partisan loyalty rather than expertise or integrity (Ganev, 2007, pp. 147–150). The judiciary was similarly affected by instability and politicisation; judicial independence remained fragile, and the courts often failed to hold powerful actors accountable (Smilov & Toplak, 2007, pp. 111–112).

Amid this turbulence, "grey zones" - areas of economic, regulatory, or administrative activity where the boundaries between legality and illegality were porous and contested (CSD, 2007, pp. 21–23). The lack of clear property rights, fluctuating regulatory standards, and the routine circumvention of formal procedures facilitated the emergence of informal markets, many of which were quickly dominated by criminal groups with backgrounds in security or law enforcement (CSD, 2007, pp. 18–22; Galev et al., 2011, pp. 14–15).

Notably, the fragmentation of state enforcement was not merely an accidental byproduct of transition. Emerging elites, including former Communist Party officials, security personnel, and business opportunists, actively subverted oversight agencies to protect their interests, creating a system of "predatory" governance (Ganev, 2007, pp. 147–151). This process of "subversion from within" meant that even as new democratic institutions were being constructed, many retained patterns of selective enforcement, clientelism, and corruption (CSD, 2007, pp. 18–23; Stoev, 2008, pp. 29–31).

Criminal entrepreneurs quickly exploited the institutional gaps. The groups that came to dominate Bulgaria's underworld—most notably VIS (Vasil Iliev Security) and SIC (Security Insurance Company)—were staffed by former athletes, security officials, and police veterans who possessed the skills and connections necessary to navigate the new order (Stoev, 2008, pp. 26–29; CSD, 2007, pp. 18–22). These organisations established ostensibly legal business fronts in insurance, security, logistics, and later construction, exploiting loopholes in regulatory oversight while using intimidation and violence to eliminate competition and enforce their claims (CSD, 2007, pp. 36–40; Galev et al., 2011, pp. 16–18).

For example, VIS's operations in the early 1990s were widely reported to combine insurance activities with extortion, "protection" rackets, and targeted violence against business rivals and non-compliant clients (CSD, 2007, pp. 25–27; Galev et al., 2011, pp. 17–18). When high-profile contract killings or bombings took place—often in public spaces in Sofia or other major cities—the resulting investigations were typically superficial, with law enforcement agencies either lacking the resources or the will to pursue influential suspects (Kupatadze, 2012, pp. 120–123). The result was an atmosphere of near-total impunity for violent crime at the elite level (CSD, 2007; Kaputadze, 2012).

State fragmentation also manifested in the politicisation and selectivity of enforcement actions. Crackdowns on organised crime, when they occurred, were often timed to coincide with shifts in government or intra-elite conflict, targeting groups associated with rival political actors rather than representing a genuine commitment to public order (Stoev, 2008, pp. 32–34; Galev et al., 2011, pp. 19–20). VIS and SIC were each able to avoid significant legal repercussions for years at a time, with periods of prosecution or harassment typically reflecting changes in elite alliances or shifts in the balance of power between political factions (CSD, 2007, pp. 25–28).

This selective application of law enabled criminal organisations not only to survive but to become deeply embedded in the country's political economy. Instead of transitioning from violence to legitimacy, as classic theories would predict (Gambetta, 1993; Paoli, 2003), these groups maintained their coercive capacity while acquiring legal business assets, political protection, and public recognition (Stoev, 2008, pp. 28–31; Galev et al., 2011, pp. 18–20). They could sponsor political campaigns, invest in infrastructure, and control significant segments of the media, all while retaining the means to deploy violence as a strategic resource (CSD, 2007, pp. 36–44).

Comparative studies of organised crime in other transitional settings—such as Russia and Ukraine—confirm that similar patterns emerge when state enforcement is fragmented, legal institutions are weak, and political elites see benefit in colluding with criminal actors (Volkov, 2002, pp. 13–15; Varese, 2011, pp. 162–168). What distinguishes the Bulgarian case is not simply the level of violence but its persistence after criminal groups had become fully institutionalised (Kupatadze, 2012; Galev et al., 2011). The coexistence of formal embeddedness and ongoing coercion suggests a hybrid order in which embeddedness and violence reinforce each other, rather than being mutually exclusive.

In summary, the fragmentation of state enforcement in Bulgaria following the collapse of socialism provided both the opportunities and the incentives for organised crime groups to embed themselves in legal, political, and symbolic institutions without abandoning violence. This environment of divided authority, selective enforcement, and elite collusion forms the first and foundational pillar of violent embeddedness in post-socialist Bulgaria, challenging the assumption that embeddedness alone is sufficient to pacify organised crime.

The Weakness of Civil Society

A second, equally significant pillar supporting the persistence of organised criminal violence in Bulgaria is the enduring weakness of civil society, which is widely identified as a distinctive legacy of the country's authoritarian past (Howard, 2003, pp. 19–36; Smilov & Toplak, 2007, pp. 96–98). Civil society is understood in political science as the realm of voluntary associations, media, non-governmental organisations, and informal networks that mediate between state and citizen, holding both government and other powerful actors to account (Howard, 2003, pp. 2–7). Robust civil societies can act as checks on the abuse of power, foster trust, and increase the costs of illegitimate or violent conduct by making it visible and socially costly (Putnam, 1993, pp. 167–170).

Bulgaria's communist regime, like others in Eastern Europe, systematically suppressed independent civic organisation for four decades, dissolving autonomous groups and replacing them with state-controlled "mass organisations" that functioned as instruments of political and social surveillance (Howard, 2003, pp. 19–25). This repression not only destroyed civil society but also undermined norms of trust and collective action, fostering a legacy of atomisation and political apathy (Howard, 2003, pp. 28–31). As a result, when the regime collapsed, citizens did not immediately mobilise into new associations but rather approached post-1989 politics with wariness, scepticism, and low expectations of collective efficacy (Smilov & Toplak, 2007, pp. 96–97).

This legacy is confirmed by multiple surveys, conducted in the 1990s and 2000s, which consistently found that Bulgarians reported some of the lowest rates of interpersonal trust and civic participation in the region (Howard, 2003, pp. 34–36). Additionally, the Bulgarian non-governmental sector has been criticised as "weak, fragmented, and highly dependent on external funding," with few organisations capable of mounting sustained challenges to state or criminal power (Smilov & Toplak, 2007, p. 97). Furthermore, the country's limited

tradition of investigative journalism and the rapid commercialisation of the media landscape after 1989 made the press highly susceptible to both political and criminal influence (Transparency International, 1997, pp. 13–15).

This combination of weak civic associations and fragile media oversight had far-reaching consequences for the public visibility and social cost of organised crime. Where civil society is strong, illicit actors risk reputational harm, social isolation, or public protest if they deploy violence openly or capture local institutions (Putnam, 1993, pp. 172–175). In Bulgaria, by contrast, organised crime groups faced few such constraints. High-profile criminals were able to "launder" their reputations through strategic philanthropy and community engagement (Stoev, 2008, pp. 60–66; CSD, 2007, pp. 41–44). VIS and SIC, for example, regularly sponsored local sports teams, rebuilt churches, or made public donations to hospitals and schools; these acts were often highly publicised, with coverage in local and national media that rarely addressed the criminal background of the benefactors (Stoev, 2008, pp. 60–66; CSD, 2007, pp. 41–44).

This performance of symbolic capital was not merely instrumental, but it also shaped the social perception of violence and criminality itself. The acquisition and display of symbolic capital—such as respect, honour, and generosity—can transform the legitimacy of actors, even those operating outside or against the law (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 98–104). In Bulgaria, the line between criminal and benefactor became blurred, and violent groups could present themselves as community protectors, nationalists, or "successful businessmen." This blurred identity was often reinforced by local officials and even religious authorities, who accepted donations or attended events hosted by underworld figures (Stoev, 2008, pp. 63–65).

Empirical illustrations, such as the funeral of VIS founder Vasil Iliev, which attracted thousands of mourners and prominent public figures, and was widely covered in the press as a significant national event, are abundant throughout (Stoev, 2008, pp. 61–63). Despite Iliev's well-documented connections to extortion and contract killings, his public persona was that of a successful entrepreneur and patriot. Similarly, SIC members were able to secure influential positions in sporting federations and local councils, increasing their symbolic presence and normalising their role in community life (CSD, 2007, pp. 41–44).

The weakness of civil society also meant that acts of violence committed by embedded criminal groups often failed to spark sustained protest or institutional action. Media outlets

would report spectacular contract killings or bombings, but rarely pursued long-term investigations, and public demonstrations against organised crime were almost nonexistent (Transparency International, 1997, pp. 14–15; CSD, 2007, pp. 25–28). Instead, such violence was often understood as an internal matter—an "underworld war" or a reckoning between rival factions—rather than a challenge to the fabric of law and society (Kupatadze, 2012, pp. 120–123). This normalisation was further reinforced by a fatalistic or even admiring attitude toward criminal success, particularly in a society marked by high levels of economic insecurity and state dysfunction (Galev et al., 2011, pp. 21–23).

Comparative research confirms that this combination of post-authoritarian distrust, weak associational life, and fragile media oversight is a recurring enabler of embedded criminal violence in other transitional and hybrid regimes (Howard, 2003, pp. 119–122; Volkov, 2002, pp. 25–28). Nevertheless, the Bulgarian case stands out for the degree to which symbolic embeddedness could coexist with persistent coercion, and for the absence of a robust civil response even as criminal groups achieved unprecedented levels of social legitimacy.

In conclusion, the weakness of Bulgarian civil society allowed organised crime to become embedded not only in state and market institutions but also in the nation's symbolic and cultural fabric. Lacking strong watchdogs, investigative media, or traditions of collective protest, society was unable to impose reputational or institutional costs on those who used violence. This structural deficit enabled criminal actors to project legitimacy, build alliances, and deploy violence as a rational strategy for governance and profit. The failure of civil society to constrain or delegitimise criminal violence thus constitutes the second essential pillar of violent embeddedness. It explains why embeddedness did not bring about pacification but rather enabled its opposite.

Elite Instability and Volatile Alliances

A third and equally critical factor in the persistence of organised criminal violence in Bulgaria is the instability of elite alliances and the absence of stable, enforceable pacts between political and criminal actors. Rather than a scenario in which organised crime captured the state through long-term, exclusive relationships, the post-communist period in Bulgaria was defined by fragmented, short-term, and highly transactional partnerships between criminal groups and shifting political elites (Kupatadze, 2012, pp. 118–122; CSD, 2007, pp. 23–25).

The 1990s witnessed frequent changes in government, with Bulgaria having over ten different cabinets between 1990 and 2005, resulting in recurring realignments within the political and administrative elite (Grzymała-Busse, 2007, pp. 50–52; Ganev, 2007, p. 153). This instability was particularly acute during economic crises or periods of contested privatisation, when control over key state assets was hotly contested and opportunities for enrichment or political leverage were at their peak (Galev et al., 2011, pp. 21–22). Under such circumstances, politicians sought financial support, electoral muscle, and street-level enforcement from criminal groups, while organised crime actors pursued protection, favourable legislation, and access to lucrative privatisation deals (CSD, 2007, pp. 24–25; Stoev, 2008, pp. 66–68).

The relationship between VIS and the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) exemplifies these dynamics. Multiple sources document how, during the early 1990s, VIS developed close ties to figures in the BSP, gaining access to state contracts, protection from prosecution, and opportunities to participate in privatisation processes (Stoev, 2008, pp. 66–68; CSD, 2007, pp. 24–25). However, these alliances were rarely exclusive or enduring. VIS was also known to channel funds to emerging centre-right parties such as the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), hedging its bets as the political environment shifted (Kupatadze, 2012, pp. 119–121). SIC, as a rival group, pursued similar multipolar strategies, supporting candidates from different parties and adapting its alliances to the changing political landscape (Galev et al., 2011, p. 21).

Such flexibility allowed criminal groups to survive rapid changes in government, but also created constant uncertainty. The risk of betrayal, shifting loyalties, and sudden withdrawal of protection meant that violence remained a rational strategy for both signalling strength and deterring rivals within both the underworld and the political elite (Snyder & Duran-Martinez, 2009, p. 257; Lessing, 2021, pp. 121–123). Assassinations of businesspeople, politicians, and underworld figures tended to cluster around periods of heightened political competition, such as the 1996–1997 financial crisis, when alliances were being renegotiated and the stakes for both criminal and political actors were exceptionally high (Kupatadze, 2012, pp. 121–123).

The recurring pattern of elite instability and shifting alliances in Bulgaria is evident in the trajectories of major criminal figures and business conglomerates, whose fates were closely tied to the volatile fortunes of political actors. For instance, Multigroup, headed by Iliya Pavlov, is often cited as the archetypal example of a business empire thriving on both legal

and illicit revenue streams, heavily involved in the privatisation of state assets, and notorious for leveraging political contacts across the spectrum (CSD, 2007, pp. 27–28; Stoev, 2008, p. 67). The company's ability to survive multiple changes in government was attributed to Pavlov's skill at "networking" with different parties and ministries, providing financial and other forms of support during elections, and switching allegiances as necessary (Galev et al., 2011, p. 22; Kupatadze, 2012, p. 121). Pavlov's assassination in 2003 is widely interpreted as a consequence of both internal underworld rivalries and unresolved conflicts between competing elite coalitions in the context of Bulgaria's ongoing economic and political transformation (CSD, 2007, pp. 27–28).

Another case is that of the TIM (an abbreviation of its leaders' first names) group, originating in Varna, whose rise was facilitated by connections with local political authorities and ex-military and police officers in the early 1990s (Stoev, 2008, pp. 70–73; Galev et al., 2011, pp. 22–23). TIM successfully embedded itself in key economic sectors, including port operations, shipping, and agriculture, while maintaining flexible ties to both national and municipal elites. TIM's leaders were known for simultaneously providing campaign financing to multiple parties, ensuring that, regardless of election outcomes, their interests would be represented and protected (Galev et al., 2011, p. 23). These alliances, however, did not guarantee immunity from violence or prosecution. There were several high-profile attacks on rival groups in Varna throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, as TIM sought to consolidate its position amid fluctuating political protection (Stoev, 2008, pp. 71–73).

The criminal organisation known as SIC also illustrates this dynamic. SIC initially rose to prominence by aligning with elements of the former Communist security services, which had transformed themselves into private business actors in the new market economy (CSD, 2007, pp. 24–26). Over time, SIC shifted its loyalties, supporting both Socialist and centre-right parties at various points in exchange for access to contracts and state resources. This pattern of multipolar alliances meant that when political winds shifted, SIC or its leaders could become targets for rivals or scapegoats for authorities eager to demonstrate "progress" in fighting organised crime—leading to periodic waves of violence and arrests, though rarely resulting in successful prosecution (Kupatadze, 2012, pp. 118–121).

Journalistic and policy investigations have documented how this lack of stable elite protection was also mirrored at the local level. For example, in cities like Plovdiv and Burgas, organised crime groups were often able to gain influence by exploiting rifts between local

politicians and national parties, offering financial inducements, and using violence or intimidation to maintain control of key businesses or public contracts (Galev et al., 2011, pp. 22–24; CSD, 2007, p. 44). When political alliances broke down or were replaced following elections, these groups faced renewed threats and responded by escalating violence to reassert dominance or retaliate against defectors (Stoev, 2008, pp. 73–75).

This cyclical logic of unstable protection and recurring violence is well established in the comparative literature on criminal governance. In post-Soviet Russia, the disintegration of stable elite pacts during the 1990s led to a proliferation of "violent entrepreneurs" who used coercion both to manage business conflicts and to signal their indispensability to local authorities (Volkov, 2002, pp. 78–80). In Mexico, the fragmentation of cartel-state pacts during political liberalisation produced violent competition for control over both criminal and political rents (Lessing, 2021, pp. 118–123). In both cases, as in Bulgaria, the absence of durable elite settlements made violence a rational and visible strategy for both criminal and political actors.

Nevertheless, a unique feature of the Bulgarian case is the public and sometimes spectacular nature of this violence. High-profile contract killings—such as those of banker Emil Kyulev in 2005 or “businessman” Georgi Iliev in 2005—were carried out in public view, often on busy streets or in luxury establishments, and with little fear of immediate arrest or prosecution (Kupatadze, 2012, pp. 121–123; CSD, 2007, p. 28). These acts sent unmistakable messages not only to rivals but also to politicians and business elites regarding the risks of betrayal or shifting allegiances. At the same time, the repeated failure of authorities to solve or even seriously investigate such crimes reinforced the perception that real power rested not with the formal institutions of the state but with those who could most effectively blend embeddedness with the credible threat of violence (CSD, 2007, pp. 28–29).

Thus, the Bulgarian case stands as a paradigmatic example of how elite instability, combined with fragmented enforcement and weak civil society, can sustain a hybrid order in which criminal organisations are both deeply embedded and persistently violent. The interaction between shifting elite alliances, multipolar political investments by criminal groups, and recurring acts of public violence not only preserved the autonomy of these organisations but also cemented their role as arbiters and enforcers in the blurred space between state and underworld.

Implications

The empirical analysis of Bulgaria's post-socialist experience reveals that violent embeddedness is not a paradoxical or anomalous outcome, but rather the result of specific and mutually reinforcing structural conditions. Rather than following the linear pacification model predicted by much of the classic organised crime literature—where embeddedness gradually replaces violence with legitimacy and restraint (Gambetta, 1993; Paoli, 2003; Varese, 2011)—the Bulgarian case reveals how institutional fragmentation, weak civic oversight, and elite instability combined to perpetuate and legitimise coercion as a rational and effective strategy.

The fragmentation of state enforcement created an environment in which criminal organisations could exploit gaps, ambiguities, and selective application of law. The deliberate politicisation and undermining of oversight bodies by competing elite factions provided opportunities for groups such as VIS, SIC, and TIM to expand their operations with minimal fear of consistent prosecution (Ganev, 2007, pp. 147–151; CSD, 2007, pp. 25–29). This not only allowed violence to flourish as a tool of market regulation and elite negotiation but also ensured that criminal actors could secure the legal and political capital necessary for long-term survival.

The weakness of civil society further diminished the reputational and institutional costs of violence. With a legacy of atomisation, distrust, and low civic participation, post-communist Bulgaria lacked the watchdog NGOs, critical media, and grassroots mobilisation that might otherwise have challenged or delegitimised the rise of criminal power (Howard, 2003, pp. 34–36; Smilov & Toplak, 2007, p. 97). This allowed organised crime to cultivate symbolic legitimacy through philanthropy, public rituals, and the performance of community leadership—thereby normalising their role and blurring the line between legality and illegality (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 98–104; Stoev, 2008, pp. 60–66).

Elite instability and the absence of durable protection pacts were, in turn, crucial in perpetuating open violence. The inability of criminal organisations to rely on stable, exclusive relationships with political actors meant that the threat and use of violence remained an essential form of insurance, signaling strength and deterring defection or betrayal (Kupatadze, 2012, pp. 118–123; Snyder & Duran-Martinez, 2009, p. 257; Lessing, 2021, pp. 121–123). The highly visible assassinations of businessmen, officials, and

underworld leaders during periods of political realignment or crisis sent powerful messages to both rivals and allies, reinforcing the embeddedness of violence within the very fabric of Bulgaria's evolving state and economy (CSD, 2007, pp. 27–29; Galev et al., 2011, pp. 21–23).

The interactive effect of these three conditions is evident: state fragmentation enabled criminal groups to become embedded; weak civil society allowed them to legitimate their presence and avoid social sanction; and elite instability created the incentive and necessity to retain coercive capacity. The concept of "violent embeddedness," as developed and operationalised in this thesis, thus captures the conditional and context-dependent nature of embeddedness in transitional regimes. It demonstrates that under specific structural circumstances, embeddedness does not pacify organised crime but may instead serve as a protective shield for ongoing violence.

Comparative evidence supports the broader relevance of these findings. In Russia, Mexico, Colombia, and other hybrid or transitional regimes, similar constellations of fragmented enforcement, weak civic oversight, and elite volatility have enabled the persistence or resurgence of criminal violence even as organisations acquire institutional legitimacy (Volkov, 2002; Lessing, 2021; Snyder & Duran-Martinez, 2009). The Bulgarian case, therefore, contributes both to a more nuanced understanding of criminal governance and to the refinement of theories concerning the relationship between embeddedness, institutional development, and violence.

This analysis also underscores the limitations of policy responses that focus narrowly on capacity-building or anti-corruption measures without addressing the deeper social and political foundations of criminal power. The Bulgarian case requires not only a technical solution but broader structural change, recognising that organised crime adapts to, and thrives on, the ambiguities and contradictions of transitional regimes. Strengthening law enforcement in isolation may produce new forms of selective repression or elite bargaining, unless accompanied by reforms that promote civic engagement, media independence, and genuine accountability in political life (Galev et al., 2011, pp. 24–26; CSD, 2007, pp. 44–46).

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to explain a central paradox in the study of organised crime: the persistence of overt and spectacular violence in Bulgaria long after criminal groups became embedded within legal, economic, and political institutions. Classic theories of criminal governance suggest that as organised crime becomes institutionalised—gaining legitimacy, political protection, and economic influence—violence should decline, supplanted by reputation, corruption, and informal pacts (Gambetta, 1993; Paoli, 2003; Varese, 2011). However, the Bulgarian case emphatically challenges this model. Instead, the experience of Bulgaria in the 1990s and 2000s reveals a pattern of "violent embeddedness," in which criminal organisations maintained and even expanded their use of violence precisely as they deepened their integration into the structures of the state, market, and public life.

The analysis conducted here, grounded in process tracing and critical engagement with both empirical case material and comparative scholarship, demonstrates that this outcome was not the product of incomplete transition or simple institutional weakness. Instead, it was the result of a specific convergence of structural conditions: fragmented and politicised state enforcement, the enduring weakness of civil society, and the volatility of elite alliances. Each of these pillars, individually and in combination, undermined the incentives for pacification and supplied the conditions under which violence became a rational, protected, and even celebrated strategy for criminal actors.

First, the fragmentation of state enforcement provided organised crime groups with both opportunity and a shield. The deliberate subversion and politicisation of law enforcement institutions allowed criminal organisations to operate with impunity, leveraging their ties to different segments of the state to evade prosecution, eliminate rivals, and access public resources. State institutions became battlegrounds for competing factions, and enforcement was often selective or manipulated for political gain (Ganev, 2007; CSD, 2007). This dynamic not only undermined the rule of law but also sent clear signals that violence, when strategically deployed, would not be punished and could even be rewarded.

Second, the enduring weakness of civil society—rooted in the authoritarian legacy of atomisation and distrust—meant that there was little practical social or reputational constraint on organised crime. Civic participation remained low, watchdog NGOs were underfunded, and media outlets were vulnerable to both political and criminal capture (Howard, 2003;

Smilov & Toplak, 2007; Transparency International, 1997). In this environment, criminal groups could cultivate public legitimacy through philanthropy, sponsorship of cultural and sporting events, and the performance of symbolic capital. As a result, violence was normalised or rationalised as a matter of underworld affairs, rather than being seen as a threat to the fabric of society.

Third, the volatility and transactional nature of elite alliances meant that criminal organisations could not rely on stable, long-term protection from political patrons. Instead, they developed multipolar strategies—financing rival parties, shifting loyalties, and using violence to signal credibility and deter betrayal. Elite instability made violence a central tool for managing both internal discipline and external bargaining, particularly during periods of political transition, privatisation, or economic crisis (Kupatadze, 2012; Galev et al., 2011; Stoev, 2008). The persistence and spectacular nature of contract killings, bombings, and other forms of coercion reflected not a lack of embeddedness but the specific character of Bulgaria's embedded criminal actors—adaptive, resilient, and prepared to enforce their interests through force when necessary.

The broader implication of these findings is a call to rethink the relationship between embeddedness and violence in organised crime studies. The Bulgarian case demonstrates that embeddedness is not inherently pacifying and that, under certain conditions, it may serve as the very foundation for durable, visible, and celebrated forms of criminal coercion. Violent embeddedness emerges when institutional integration co-occurs with fragmented enforcement, weak civic oversight, and elite volatility—conditions that are not unique to Bulgaria, but have been observed in a range of transitional and hybrid regimes (Volkov, 2002; Lessing, 2021; Snyder & Duran-Martinez, 2009).

For policy-makers, this means that combating organised crime requires more than technical reforms or capacity-building for law enforcement. It should involve deeper structural interventions to strengthen civic engagement, support independent media, ensure genuine political accountability, and break the feedback loops between criminal actors and political elites. For scholars, the case invites further research into the conditional, context-dependent forms of embeddedness and the mechanisms by which violence and legitimacy can be mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive.

In conclusion, the persistence of organised criminal violence in Bulgaria is best understood not as a transitional anomaly, but as the outcome of violent embeddedness—a hybrid order produced by the complex interplay of state, society, and elite strategy. Understanding this reality requires not only attention to institutional failure, but to how crime, power, and violence are woven together in the making of modern, post-socialist societies.

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