By Fred Burton and Scott Stewart

Even as the Russian government begins to rein in organized crime, the number of homicides has not begun to decline, and the number of high-profile targeted killings even seems to be rising.

This could be a signal that another group relying on violence and assassinations as a tool is on the rise, though with very different motives than those of the criminal groups. This other group is most likely the Federal Security Service (FSB), which is on the rise again.

Crime in Post-Soviet RussiaCorruption in the Soviet Union was bred largely by the state-run economy, which left citizens lacking basic goods. Small groups of entrepreneurs emerged to provide items otherwise not available, and so the black market came into its own with the 1917 Revolution. The stability of both the Soviet state and organized crime allowed for a balance that kept crime and violence at a fairly minimal level.

The collapse of the Soviet Union was a disaster for Russians. But the situation in the Russia of the 1990s was even worse. Workers went unpaid, social services collapsed and poverty was epidemic. Uncertainty, fear and desperation are major motivators for crime in Russia, as they would be anywhere. This alone was enough to trigger high crime rates. There was in fact an explosion in homicides after the fall of the Soviet Union. In Russia, homicides alone jumped from just over 10,000 in 1988 to 20,000 in 1992 and to 30,000 in 1995. The rate has continued to stay around the last figure for the past decade, with only a miniscule decrease in the past two years.

All of this was compounded by the reality that the only stable entities in Russia of the 1990s were organized criminal groups. As the Soviet Union became the Russian Federation, elements within the government called on organized crime to facilitate reform. In the process, the line between business and the underworld became significantly more blurred, perhaps even nonexistent. The new government of Russia felt that combating such corruption would hinder the shift to capitalism, at least in the initial stages of the tranisition from a state-planned economy.

When Russia began to privatize state property in 1992, Russian organized crime groups snapped up the assets. Not only did this help expand and solidify the emerging relationship between the state and organized crime, it also gave criminal groups tremendous economic and political power since the property gave the criminal organizations direct access to the Russian government. In 1994, then-President Boris Yeltsin called Russia the "biggest mafia state in the world." This reality would only worsen as the 1990s dragged on.

Making matters worse, Russian organized crime groups were transformed from basic groups with simple tactics of intimidation to highly trained and knowledgeable groups with more

precise targeting and a better arsenal of hardware and connections. This transformation occurred as approximately 40 percent of workers from the KGB left government employment. The majority of these former KGB employees either entered the personal protection business -- most of whom found work for criminals and the new class of oligarchs -- or simply joined criminal groups.

The Return of State Control

But Russia as a country changed once Vladimir Putin became president of the country in 1999. Putin's main objectives after taking the top office were first, to get Russia back under government control, and second, to let the world know Russia was back under control and thus able to act effectively again. Most Russians feel Putin saved Russia from break-up, political chaos, an economic black hole and degeneration into a criminal state. To accomplish this, Putin first had to gain control over the government while reorganizing those structures used to keep all Russian groups in line, such as the FSB. He then had to take back the state's assets from the oligarchs and the organized criminal groups.

The exorbitant amount of revenue Russia has earned from petroleum has fueled Putin's bold moves. Putin tucked away some of this money as a safety net; the rest flooded into the Russian economy. Now, as Putin leaves the Presidential office, the country is nearly consolidated. The state owns the most important assets in the country and controls most facets of life, the economy is growing substantially and most Russians have confidence in their government.

Expanded government control over most apsects of Russia has not translated into wiping organized crime out, for the criminal sector is such a large facet of Russian society that any attempt to purge organized crime altogether could destabilize the country. It has meant, however, restricting its activities mainly to business and nonstrategic economic matters while maintaining firm state oversight over organized crime's activities.

The Homicide Paradox and the FSB Reborn

But as mentioned, increased state control has not caused the homicide rate to decline and Russia has seen an increase in high-profile targeted killings over the past two years. And also as metnioned, the explanation for this seeming paradox could be a shift in who is carrying out these killings -- especially the high-profile killings -- and why.

The FSB, the KGB's successor, has undergone a massive makeover under Putin, mainly because he is a former KGB and FSB man himself. Before the fall of the Soviet Union, all internal legal issues, domestic espionage and foreign espionage were handled by the KGB. After the intelligence community mounted a slew of coup attempts following the Soviet collapse, Yeltsin broke up what was left of the powerful KGB, by then called the FSB, into a series of intelligence agencies without an overarching entity. This was meant to create competition among the smaller intelligence services and to prevent more coup attempts.

But splintering the intelligence body created massive inefficiencies and information gaps,

leaving the former Soviet intelligence and security community -- once one of the largest and most powerful organizations in the world -- a mere shadow of its former menacing self. Putin, however, knew that one of the best ways to rein in Russia's chaotic businesses, organized crime and politicians was through strong-arm security tactics. And that meant consolidating and re-empowering the FSB.

The FSB's reconstitution has taken two forms over the past decade. First, Putin has consolidated most of the splinter intelligence agencies back under the FSB, correcting many of the inefficiencies, and has flooded the FSB with funding for training, recruiting and modernizing after years of disregard. Second, Putin has used former KGB and current FSB members to fill many positions within Russian big business, the Duma and other political posts. Putin initially reasoned that the intelligence community thought of Russia the same way he did -- namely, as a great state, domestically and internationally. Putin also knew that those within the intelligence community would not flinch at his less than democratic (to put it mildly) means of consolidating Russia politically, economically, socially, etc. And this reorganization has seen the FSB engage in extralegal killings formerly monopolized by organized crime.

Organized Crime vs. FSB Hits

What differentiates organized criminal hits from FSB hits is that the criminal groups kill to stake their turf, to protect or advance their business interests or if a deal has gone bad. By contrast, the FSB is ideologically motivated, and will strike in the interests of the Russian state or of the politicians it serves. This explains the shift toward high-profile murders in the past few years, with victims expanding from common businesspeople to include journalists, politicians, bankers and people involved with strategic sectors.

High-profile murders are defined by the status of the victim within his or her cause, position or business; for example, the killing of a mid-level manager at a steel company would not represent a high-profile murder. These hits take on national interest, and sometimes even garner international attention. The 1990s saw approximately two to four high-profile murders a year. Nearly all of them were motivated by business or criminal reasons, and did not have a political purpose. The past three years, however, saw approximately four high-profile murders per year. Half of these killings were carried out for deeper, more political reasons. This has sparked the assumption that the more recent killings were political hits by the government's tool for such purposes, namely, the FSB.

Some of the high-profile victims suspected of being slain for political reasons have included:Anna Politkovskaya, October 2006. A prominent journalist and critic of the Kremlin, Politkovskaya was in the process of publishing a series condemning the government's policy in Chechnya. She was shot in the head in her apartment building.

Alexander Litvinenko, November 2006. Litvinenko was a former KGB agent who had defected to the United Kingdom and published books on the internal workings of Putin's FSB networks and critical of the new Russian state. He was poisoned with radioactive polonium-210.Ivan Safronov, March 2007. Safronov was a journalist who criticized the state of the Russian military and was accused of leaking military affairs to foreign parties. He allegedly committed

suicide by jumping from the fifth floor of his apartment building, though some reports say a person behind him forced him out of the buidling.

Oleg Zhukovsky, December 2007. Zhukovsky was an executive of the VTB bank, which at the time of his death was being taken over by the state so the Kremlin could hand-pick its senior officers to oversee many strategic state accounts. Zhukovsky allegedly performed the feat of commiting suicide by being tied to a chair and thrown into his swimming pool, where he drowned.Arkady Patarkatsishvili, February 2008. A wealthy Georgian-Russian businessman, Patarkatsishvili was extensively involved in Georgian politics. Patarkatsishvili died in the United Kingdom of coronary complications that resembled a heart attack. His family and many in Georgia have accused the FSB of involvement, however, saying the FSB has many untraceable poisons at its disposal.Leonid Rozhetskin, March 2008. Rozhetskin was an international financier and lawyer who held stakes in strategic companies, like mobile phone giant MegaFon. He disappeared while in Latvia after losing Kremlin backing by selling his assets to multiple parties, including some government ministers who are former FSB agents.

This trend of high-profile killings is still very new, and could just be a temporary spike. But Russia's state security services are on course to have much more control over society, business and politics. Russia will therefore most likely see more targeted killings of politically and strategically important people. This does not mean Russia will forever be locked into such a trend, however. As Russia finalizes its control internally and "rids the motherland of her enemies," the Russian state will become ever further locked down -- not to the extent seen under the Soviet Union, but enough that the Kremlin feels secure in its control.

Until then, FSB exterminations will continue.