

EUROPE

For a Departed Mobster, Wreaths and Roses but No Tears

By MICHAEL SCHWIRTZ OCT. 13, 2009

MOSCOW — With an array of pinstripes, leather coats and facial scars, princes of the Russian underworld gathered on Tuesday to say farewell to a king.

Vyacheslav K. Ivankov, a Russian crime boss who survived tangles with the K.G.B., the F.B.I. and other violent criminals in a bloody career that spanned decades, was laid to rest at a Moscow cemetery. Hundreds attended the funeral.

Mr. Ivankov died on Friday in a Moscow hospital from complications stemming from a gunshot wound he received apparently in an assassination attempt in July. He was 69.

His death has set off fears of a mob war in Moscow like those that bloodied the streets of major Russian cities in the 1990s.

“It almost certainly will lead to some deaths,” said Vadim Volkov, a Russian mafia expert at the European University at St. Petersburg. “It shows that violence is still the ultimate way of resolving a dispute.”

Russian officials, however, have played down the threat.

“There will be no conflict,” Vladimir A. Vasilyev, chairman of the Security Committee in the Russian Parliament, told the Ria Novosti news agency. “Even if there is one, then it will occur so deeply within these structures that it will in no way threaten citizens.”

Better known as Yaponchik, or the Little Japanese, Mr. Ivankov was among the last of a mafia-like criminal class known as the Vory v Zakone, or Thieves-in-Law. Though the Vory figure prominently in Russia’s rich criminal mythology, their influence in the

criminal world has waned since their heyday in the Soviet period, organized crime experts say.

Among these heavily tattooed crime barons, Mr. Ivankov was royalty. By most accounts he began his career as a petty thief in the 1960s, serving multiple terms in Soviet prisons before fleeing to the United States in the early 1990s. There, he built a criminal empire based in New York that the F.B.I. once considered among the most powerful in the country.

In 1997 he was sentenced to nine years in prison for extortion, but was extradited to Russia in 2004 to face murder charges. He was acquitted and freed.

Mr. Ivankov was able to keep a low profile until July, when a gunman shot him in the stomach with a sniper rifle as he left a Thai restaurant in central Moscow, Russian prosecutors said. No suspects have been identified.

The funeral brought out a sampling of characters, including thick-necked toughs wearing heavy gold chains and cigar-smoking men in pinstriped suits. Many were carrying huge bouquets of red roses.

“Forgive us, we could not protect you,” read a banner signed “Osman and brothers” on one of the many wreaths from various “brotherhoods” piled outside the chapel of the Vagankovskoe Cemetery, where Mr. Ivankov was buried.

Several ambulances and busloads of riot police officers crowded the cemetery entrance, though mourners appeared to come and go freely.

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