

USSR

An American in the MVD

by Betsy McKay

The last person you might expect to find in the USSR's Ministry of Interior Affairs (MVD) is an American.

But that's where Joseph Serio is working these days. An international representative for the Chicago-based Office of International Criminal Justice, Serio has been at the headquarters of the much-maligned ministry since September. Serio is here to establish an exchange between his office—a center for developing criminal justice contacts on an international level—and the Ministry's Department of Organized Crime Control, or "Sixth Department."

He arrived with a U.S. delegation in September to conclude an agreement establishing an exchange of Soviet and American organized crime control specialists and scholars. Under the agreement, Soviet police officials and scholars will go to Chicago to learn about American methods of combating organized crime, while U.S. officers and scholars will come here to work with the MVD's Organized Crime Control Department.

Serio is the first American exchange. His job is to get an overview of the ministry and of organized crime in this country and to make contacts.

One of the toughest parts of Serio's job is dealing with the ministry's image problem. Recent events in the Baltics have severely tarnished the ministry's never-too-shiny reputation, and Serio perceives that he could easily be the target of serious criticism. His Chicago office had some angry responses for its presence in China after Tiananmen Square, he says. There is the potential now for a lot of resentment, particularly from Chicago's large Lithuanian community.

But Serio defends his role. "I feel no guilt about what I'm doing here," he says.

"Most people understand that we're basically doing good. We feel that if we want to help change the way things are here, if we want to develop international contacts to battle organized crime, we've got to be involved and understand the way things run."

But, he stresses, his organization has a specific purpose. "We are not mouth-pieces for the ministry, we are not mouth-

by, and Serio waves occasionally to some of his civilian-clad co-workers.

He describes his department, created only in January 1989, as one full of hard-working, liberal-minded people who are determined to do something about the overwhelming level of organized crime in the country but who are, as he puts it, "fighting an uphill battle" in the ministry.

"The people I work with are people who want to get things done," he says, "and around here, they're definitely the minority."

Things may be improving for them now. On the books, the department's status was raised from department to head department (*upravlenie to glavnoe upravlenie*) by presidential decree on February 4. But even here there are problems—the change hasn't been made yet, despite the fact that the decree was made over a month ago, and Serio says he doesn't know when it will take place.

"The move is something that will give the department more power," he says. "But the change isn't in place yet."

That's not the ministry's only problem, according to Serio. Frequent replacement of ministers and deputy ministers leads to a great deal of confusion in the lower ranks. Shortages of manpower and equipment are severe as well. Ministry drivers are sometimes sent on "operations" because there aren't enough for that purpose, he says. And as far as computer networks to facilitate communications between law enforcement offices around the country or internationally—forget it.

"We have three or four computers," he says, "but they function as separate word processors."

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Joe Serio shows his pass at the Interior Ministry

pieces for the government, we are here for organized crime control and academic exchanges," he says. In concentrating on combating specifically so-called "mafia" or group crimes—drug trafficking, money laundering, extortion, and bribery, for example, at a national and international level—Serio says that he sees his organization's work here as something most people appreciate.

Although he spends some hours at the Police Academy, learning the academic side of controlling organized crime in the Soviet Union, Serio works most of the time at MVD headquarters, a vast white monolithic structure overlooking Oktyabrskaya Ploshchad, where an oversized bust of Secret Police founder Felix Dzerzhinsky keeps a watchful eye over the stark lobby. Lunchtime crowds flow