

FALSE DOCUMENTATION IN EASTERN EUROPE: ITS IMPLICATION FOR UNIVERSITIES

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In 2012, the utilization of false documents by non-governmental organizations seeking financial support for their activities became a major issue in the European Union. Most of the controversy was focused on distorted EU reports and the policy recommendations based on what were eventually determined to be falsely documented claims. Journalists and governmental officials feared that such policies would undermine Israeli security and result in renewed tension, and even violence in the Middle East. At the heart of the problem was the realization that more than a decade of the production and proliferation of false documents had resulted in a significant international crisis¹. The purpose of this presentation is to provide some of the background about the disturbing trends involving false documentation.

With the emergence of international terrorism as a major security concern throughout Europe, authorities have recognized the key role of false documents and identities in terrorist activities. The falsification of documents in the former USSR is a common phenomenon that is approaching epidemic proportions. The increase in counterfeiting is related to the social and economic isolation following the breakdown of the Soviet Union as well as to the widespread poverty. Because the average monthly salary is only about \$30 and employment opportunities are scarce, citizens are breaking the law simply to survive. This situation has had a great impact on popular attitudes toward criminal activities. According to police officials in the former Soviet Union, almost any kind of document can be falsified today. Underground false identity producers can create a wide range of identifications including simple identity cards, passports, diplomas, bills, labor contracts, passports, and visas. These forms of identification are used for anything from tax evasion to actions generating serious human rights violations.

In the Soviet era, Central Asia and the Soviet southwestern borderlands were recognized as being among the best places to live in the USSR. The pleasant climate and congenial atmosphere made these regions not only the preferred retirement home for many Russians, especially those in the military. Service in these areas also constituted important steps in the political ladder ascended by individuals such as Leonid Brezhnev and Constantin Chernenko, both of whom were at one point first secretary of Moldova's communist party while Brezhnev also served in Kazakhstan as first secretary. Yet, these regions also had, among Soviet circles, a reputation for corruption. Some would say this was a result of its more relaxed atmosphere while others suggest that it was a result of Russian influence. In Central Asia, Uzbekistan emerged as the site of a great controversy involving a Brezhnev family member who was Deputy Minister of Interior while in the southwest borderlands few places reached the level of corruption attributed to Moldova.

Whatever the reasons for the emergence of this reputation, it has endured. Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Moldova have been the targets of considerable attention among those who study corruption and crime in the FSU². One of the most widely discussed features of crime in the former USSR is the creation of false documentation that will support the performance of various illegal actions.

Creating and Maintaining False Documents

Post-Soviet violence and lawlessness created an environment in which there was a recognized need for falsified documents. Both Moldova and Tajikistan experienced major conflicts. The Tajik civil war, which

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¹ "EU Documents Repeat False NGO Claims and Increase Tension", NGO Monitor, 14 May 2012.

² Justin Peay, "A Post-Communist Nation Loses Its Way", The International Herald Tribune, 16 June 2000, p. 2.

began in 1992, resulted in an abrupt increase in crime in Tajikistan with an unprecedented rise in the production and distribution of false documents. Recent analyses by journalists and interviews with representatives of law-enforcement bodies and experts indicate that practically all kinds of documents have been falsified and used during the past decade.

Passports

In recent years, the most important civil document – the passport, has more often been subject to different illegal "operations". Not only Tajik internal but also Tajik international passports are being falsified. Numerous reports have exposed ongoing criminal actions associated with the forging of documents in Tajikistan, where individuals or organized criminal groups forge and sell the republic's internal and foreign passports by hand or with the use of computer equipment. Corruption among government officials has facilitated such activities. According to Tajikistan's Security Ministry Public Relations Center, "In October 1999, the law-enforcement bodies prevented activities of a criminal group. For a long period, A. B. Mazganov, a government employee, and his accomplices B. B. Nabiev, G. Khasanov and others were involved in making and selling of Tajik internal and foreign passports, diplomas of different higher education institutions and different types of ID cards, thus facilitating the legalization of many foreigners on the territory of our country"³.

Law-enforcement bodies in Sogdi Oblast stopped the illegal activities of a prominent criminal group. Criminal proceedings were instituted by the Oblast Prosecutor's Office against the gang headed by S. Olimdzhonov, the Vnesekonombak Khodjent Branch senior economist. Olimdzhonov and his partners forged the stamp and other relevant documentation of the Russian Federation Consulate General in the city of Khodjent. In order to do this, they used with the computer equipment of the bank in which Olimdzhonov worked. Using this stamp, the group made the necessary marks in the passports of citizens of Tajikistan and Kyrgyz Republics, which cost each "client" from 400 to 1000 Russian Rubles⁴.

A more common method of passport forgery is the falsification of data about the passport holders by simply making changes in the passport. Often this involves the replacement of the passport holder's photograph. This can easily be done because of a technological peculiarity of the new Tajik internal passports, where the passports are stamped above a laminated surface that covers the photograph of the owner. When placed in a freezing chamber, the photograph easily comes off in 15 to 20 minutes, and can be replaced. The replacement cannot be visually identified, as the stamp does not have a deep imprint on the photograph. The most common and widespread passport forgery in Tajikistan occurs when Tajik citizens sell their passports to buyers and then report them as lost. They are able to get a new passport from the Ministry of Interior (MOI) when they file a statement claiming a loss. Information about the number of lost passports indicates the scale of this new kind of "business". In 1999, 5,340 Tajik national passports were reported lost in the Sogdi Oblast alone. In 2000, 4,945 residents of this Oblast reported lost passports, and 3,975 persons reported the same within 9 months of 2001. The Sogdi Oblast First Deputy Prosecutor Fozildjon Okhunov has reported that individuals claiming to have lost passports are rarely ever reprimanded. Moreover, most of those who have lost their passports obtained new ones within a short period without any investigation, a practice which is contrary to the Tajik law on passports. Some individuals received new passports the same day they reported the loss. (see Appendix 1 for specific cases) There even are instances in which citizens obtained new passports two and even three times a year. All these facts indicate the level of corruption in the Interior Ministry bodies, particularly in passport services⁵.

Obtaining False Passports

The illegal issuance of passports is typically caused by (1) the poor control of MOI bodies over the process, (2) by the corruption of agencies responsible for issuing passports, or (3) by some combination of corruption and inefficiency. The primary method of obtaining false passports is through buying and selling.

³ "Security Forces Inform...", Vecherny Dushanbe, 28 April 2000.

⁴ Tajikistan Newspaper, Dushanbe, 29 Nov 2001.

⁵ Tajikistan Newspaper, Dushanbe, November 29, 2001.

Sometimes Tajik citizens illegally obtain passports from the Interior Affairs Departments of city or district Khukumats or simply through outright bribery of relevant officials. The greatest emphasis is on buying or selling of official Tajik internal and foreign passports by ordinary citizens, Passport Services officials on the one hand and consumers on the other hand. The exchange is made directly and through mediators. In the latter case such illegal operations as a rule are made by a group of people, including Passport Services or MOI representatives.

There are instances in which passports are given to citizens residing in other districts and even in other countries. Some former residents of a particular district, who earlier immigrated to other countries and returned temporarily, have received new passports in their former place of their residence without processing relevant documents. Sometimes Tajik passports are illegally given to CIS citizens. The casual practices with regard to issuance of passports are, in part, a result of the difficulties in identification of Soviet citizens in the Newly Independent States. They are also a consequence of the new states' inability to create border-guard and immigration control procedures in the post-Soviet states. In addition, there are problems with multiple citizenships. These occur when people either legally or illegally obtain citizenship and passports of several post-Soviet states. As a rule, these are states in which they have relatives or business and where they are labor migrants.

Another source of identity modification in the former USSR is tourist agencies. Almost all the former-Soviet republics acknowledge that this is a problem. As Soviet authority collapsed, numerous tourist "ghost-agencies" sprang up to offer so-called tourist services before the police could shut them down. There were cases in which agencies issued visas for citizens and then disappeared immediately after receiving payment from the clients. Later these visas proved to be false. Some victims not only lost their money but were arrested as well. According to the Moldovan Ministry of Internal Affairs, in January 2001 alone there were 1,341 registered enterprises that had international tourist services in their charter. Only 307 of them had licenses to practice such an activity and a mere 128 economic agents out of the total number of 1,341 registered at the beginning of the year actually presented their documents for registration.

Illegal Migration of Afghans

The falsification of Tajik passports, higher education diplomas and identity cards is commonly used in both the legalization of foreigners in Tajikistan as well as in illegal transit migration. The Afghan migration, which began in 1997, causes the biggest influx of illegal migrants into Tajik territory. As a result of the deterioration of the situation in Northern Afghanistan in 1997, the flight of Afghans into Tajikistan became a major problem. Most of them do not register with the refugee organizations but simply move on to third countries. Tajikistan is now a major center for the Afghan transit migration to other CIS countries, Western Europe, the USA and Canada. Most Afghans do not wait for the State Migration Services decision on their refugee petitions; they generally leave Tajikistan for other CIS states, especially Moldova which is the final stop before entering the West. In the spring of 2002, the State Migration Services reported that about half of asylum-seekers were no longer in Tajikistan and their whereabouts were unknown. Most Afghans travel from Tajikistan to the West by illegal international networks that have agents in all institutions dealing with migrants⁶.

Russian journalists have reported that "in Tajikistan, one can buy false passports for \$100, and that Kazakh border-guards detained more than 100 Afghans with false Tajik passports in the Moscow-Bishkek train". As authorities searched the sources where Afghans obtain false passports they found that passport trading is a thriving business. This endeavor has existed since the Afghan flight into Central Asia began. Some of them took the legal way: via registration of citizenship, obtaining a "propiska". Others resorted to the easier illegal way." (see Appendix 7 for specific cases) Russian investigative bodies have identified the procedures for obtaining false passports⁷.

⁶ S. Olimova. "Tajikistan is the first stop on the way of Afghan migration", Central Asia and the Caucasus Magazine, No. 1, 1998.

⁷ "How much costs ...the motherland? Or the new business on passport trading", Krim-Infor (Dushanbe), November 1, 2001.

Some illegal migrants who have obtained false Tajik passports choose Tajikistan as place of their permanent residence. Others use the illegally obtained documents for further migration. "Depending on the country they wish to move to, the clients pay from \$1,500 to \$5,000 or even \$6,000 to get airplane tickets, false passports and visas. After boarding their flights, the migrants destroy the documents. When they land at the airport they approach relevant officials in order to request asylum"⁸.

Dual Citizenship

Dual citizenship is widely sought by many individuals involved in criminal activities and may be illegally obtained in two ways. First, illegal migrants who have bought false passports obtain it. These are mostly Afghans who use false Tajik documents for transit via Tajikistan to further CIS countries, USA, Canada and Western Europe countries. Sometimes they take the advantage of the "Agreement on Double Citizenship" between Russia and Tajikistan and with their Tajik passports they receive Russian Federation passports, sometimes real and sometimes false. They go to Moscow, procure visas and then move to third countries. "It influences the cost of illegal transportation. Thus, the travel from Tajikistan (via Tashkent) to Western European countries costs Tajik citizens some \$1,500 (\$500 for the passport, \$500 for visa, \$300 for a ticket and the rest is honoraria for the senders). For Afghan citizens, the same route would cost \$5,000"⁹.

Second, there are countless attempts to obtain dual (Tajik and Russian) citizenship by Tajik citizens and citizens of other CIS countries (mostly by Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan) who intend to move to Russia as labor migrants or "shuttle traders". Such individuals traveling to the Russian Federation were the main clients of the organized group in Khudzhand. With a forged stamp of the Russian Federation Consulate General this group made the necessary marks in the passports of Tajik and Kyrgyz citizens, which cost each "client" from 10 to 1,000 Russian Rubles¹⁰.

The Role of Universities

An essential element in the creation of false identities is the counterfeit documentation of academic achievements and credentials. In post-communist East Europe, phony academic certificates can be used to accomplish two objectives. The first and least sinister is professional advancement. The second and more ominous objective is the creation of a completely new identity for individuals who are avoiding prosecution for previous criminal activities or are currently engaged in criminal endeavors. Several officials of the Dniester Moldovan Republic have been mentioned in this connection.

A willing and available university is required for accomplishment of either of the above objectives. Widespread international attention was focused on this issue when a Romanian university, one of the several independent universities to appear in the wake of the collapse of the communist regime in 1989, was implicated in the sale of advanced degrees in dentistry. The Romanian National Council for Academic Evaluation and Accreditation called attention to the phenomenon of universities granting doctoral degrees without authorization¹¹. As the National Council investigated these activities it learned that one new university was also issuing doctoral degrees in return for participation in a four-week "training program" and payment of a generous amount of money¹². Most widely commented upon was that university's doctorate in economics, a document that was embraced by many individuals hoping to either advance themselves professionally or to establish new identities¹³.

Many educational entrepreneurs in Moldova have strengthened their positions over the years by offering well-paid teaching positions to individuals who suddenly found themselves unemployed as a result

⁸ S. Olimova. "Tajikistan is the first stop on the way of Afghan migration", Central Asia and the Caucasus Magazine, 1998, No. 1.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Tajikistan Weekly (Dushanbe), 29 Nov 2001.

¹¹ "Scandallul diplomelor false da in clocot", Ziua (Bucharest), 27 February 2001.

¹² "Universitatea Ecologica ramane pe tusa: 19 universitati particulare din 20 pot primi acreditarea" Ziua (Bucharest), 31 October 2000.

¹³ "Diplome false de doctorat, eliberate de Universitatea Independentă Moldova", Evenimentul Zilei (Bucharest), 27 February 2001.

of the uncertainties and instability of Moldovan political life. By careful manipulation of the post-communist system, they have acquired impressive real estate holdings in downtown Chisinau and elsewhere.

The practice of bribing professors to document academic accomplishments is closely related to the outright falsification of academic credentials. In 2002, Moldova's Prime Minister Vasily Tarlev addressed this concern in a meeting with representatives of the Ministries of Justice and of Education. The Moldovan government eventually established a special body to combat fraud in the university system. In the past, such activities were generally ignored and even in the event of exposure, perpetrators were not subject to criminal prosecution¹⁴.

Using Documents in Connection with Criminal Activities

A well-publicized incident involving false passports occurred in March 2001 when Ukrainian authorities reported that a group of six Moldovan citizens had been detained at the border between Ukraine and Belarus after attempting to cross the frontier using false Ukrainian passports. Police determined that the group's final destination was Poland where they intended to join with a criminal organization. In 1999, several Arab citizens were arrested on a similar charge. A passenger flight from Chisinau to Prague was delayed in the Chisinau airport because several passengers held Moldovan passports but had Arab features and spoke no Romanian or Russian. The case was investigated by Moldova's Security and Information Service, which apparently was embarrassed by the incident and did not wish to publicize details about the holders or producers of the documents. While representatives in charge of the Ministry of Interior claimed that no false passports are made in the Republic of Moldova they limited that assertion to only Moldovan passports.

¹⁴ "Premier Warning of University Bride-takers", Infotag, May 30, 2002.