

## MACEDONIA: Turning Away from the Law

Written by OCCRP

Tuesday, 17 November 2009 13:45

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*Airport in Skopje*

The South Macedonia woman waited impatiently in Skopje airport, asking if there were any delay of her plane to Oslo.

Told that the plane to Norway was still on time, Suzana Gorgiovska began talking about her ordeal with the Norwegian embassy in trying to get a visa, so that she could, at 70, visit her son and see her year-old granddaughter “before I die.”

“I have asked four times for a Norwegian visa,” she said at the time, in 2008. “And always have been denied. I have never been to Norway, so my son had taken care of all of the documents. For a whole year I was hoping to go there, to see my one-year-old granddaughter. My son asked there [in Norway] what it would take to bring his mother to visit. My son works there as a doctor.”

She said she had never left Macedonia, but after she left the Norwegian embassy in Skopje one time, “a man with a mustache called my younger son and offered help...the man claimed that he knew high officials in the Macedonian government who have people inside the embassy. That man asked for €1,700 to help us with the visa.

“I have never broken any law, so I asked my younger son to forget that man. But ...[he] persuaded me that there was no other options.

When someone who was also traveling to Norway pointed out to her that her visa was false, she just waved her hand and said, “What they can do to me? I'm just an old lady.”

Gorgiovska managed to get to Norway in 2008.

### “Assistance” a Double Risk



*Ivo Kotevski, a spokesman for the Ministry of the Interior.*

But her success using such a go-between is not guaranteed with fixers, police said. Dealing with someone who promises a less painful way to get out of Macedonia can be a gamble, and not just because it risks arrest. Some people make promises, take money and never deliver, said Ivo Kotevski, a spokesman for the Ministry of the Interior (MOI).

One such person, Emine Polozani, 64, from Struga, was arrested at the Kafasan checkpoint at the Albanian border, convicted and sent to prison for three years for fraud.

Polozani, the wife of Mersim Polozani, the former Macedonia Minister of Justice, was accused of promising papers, taking money and then just leaving the victims stranded. Police said she used her tourist agency, Anila Marketing, and promised six people from Struga that she would

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provide them with US and Canada documents. The price she asked, said Kotevski, was \$8,000 for a single visa.

Kotevski said citizens who complained were not accused as criminals “because they didn’t commit any crime, despite the fact that they planned to do that.” He said that policy is very important because it helps authorities to arrest counterfeiters.

And Polozani was far from alone in that business. In April, Kotevski said, police arrested three people who had made and sold false Schengen visas. Kotevski said that a German visa good for the Schengen region cost €1,500, one for Belgium €1,200 and one for Italy €1,000. When police raided the houses of the three arrested, they found 50 false Schengen visas. And they found that the trio had advertised in the Macedonian daily, Dnevnik.

Kotevski said, “This is a serious problem. Every day the MOI gets a request for a new Macedonian passport. A citizen claims to have lost a previous passport, but we suspect that they travel with a false visa, have been discovered in some western country and deported. Lots of these people ask for a new passport because in the old one they have a “black” stamp, [which signifies deportation] and cannot travel anywhere.”

An official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that Macedonia’s embassies, which are required to report arrests of Macedonians in foreign countries or those found using false papers, send those reports only every three months. The official, who did not want his name used because he said his comments could be taken as critical of his ministry, explained that this allows arrested people to apply quickly, before police have been notified.

### **Questioning Biometric Passports**

The hope, said the official, lies with a newly formed national visa center and new requirements that embassies immediately inform officials about arrested or expelled Macedonians. Another aid is thought to be the new, biometric passport, which contains embedded information within the passport that can be read only by a special scanner.

But will such changes in the system work? One Macedonian lawyer doubts it will.

The lawyer, who deals with “assistance” for acquiring passports and visas, would not allow his name to be used because he is known among those seeking his help and does not want to speak on the record.

He said he understands how getting false passports and visas is done. He said the way that is used to get around the legal system is to use a high resolution scanner, but under the law these scanners are generally forbidden and are allowed only under a special permit from the police.

“I know in Bulgaria, there is one,” he said. “They can make false visas with it, but they can fake money as well. I heard also that biometric passports can be made.”

He said he did not know whether any biometric passport had been compromised, adding that the skills to do it lie with a younger generation. The old forger’s skills will not work for this new

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task, he said, but "young hackers who mess with credit cards" have the kinds of skills needed. He said, "The trick is to figure out how to break the code hidden inside the biometric passport."

Since the technology of credit cards is not very different from that used in biometric passports, he said, the same skills used to crack credit card codes can be used to defeat the biometric passport.

Officials will not discuss biometric passports, saying only that they cannot be defeated, but the lawyers questioned whether they are right.

The lawyer said the Macedonian biometric passport, produced by Hewlett-Packard, has 12 different elements within the code, but he said one weakness is that it is checked by a computer at any border crossing and guards tend to trust the computer completely.

"Officers at the border points can assure themselves that a document is valid" by using a computer to scan, he said. But "unless they have information from their superiors that someone broke the passport code," he said, they will not be extremely careful. And another weak link, he said, is that only two computer experts work on the immigration enforcement force.

He said, though, that the Macedonian passport, because it is made by Hewlett-Packard, should be as strong as the US passport. The German biometric passport, he said, is the best protected.

**-- Aleksandar Bozinovski**