

RUSSIA: A Price for Everything

Written by OCCRP

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The doorway of The Central Telegraph, with the Soviet State symbol still hanging above it, opens into a world of visa possibilities. --by Julia Balashova, Novaya Gazeta About 500 meters from the Kremlin and Red Square on Tverskaya Street squats the 52,200 square-meter grey building of The Central Telegraph. Granite steps lead to a central entrance and above the glass of the massive wooden front doors hangs an old Soviet State emblem with the prominent terrestrial globe and stylized hammer and sickle below it.

From this building, it is possible to get nearly anywhere in the world. With a tourist or business visa in a passport and without spending time in line or even in an embassy, travel is possible to Europe, Australia, South America, Asia and North America. There are few problems for anyone with enough money.

An investigation by reporters for the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) shows that money and connections are enough to provide not only a passport and a visa, but all the necessary documents for unrestricted travel all over the world. They also can secure a second citizenship and a second passport and even a second passport under a different name.

Why any regular citizen might need to seek assistance with a visa is seen through the eyes of one woman who wanted only to travel legally.

She married a man who had come from Germany and while they live and work in Russia, they planned to spend their honeymoon traveling and also visiting his native country. The woman, who did not want her name used, is a Russian and has no desire to leave her country for good, so she asked the German Embassy for a Schengen multi-visa. The embassy rejected the application on suspicion she would not return to Russia, and stamped her passport with the

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black stamp, the symbol of rejection recognized by embassies and customs agents all over the world.

Later, she asked for a transit or limited visa, but was refused again—the black stamp made any visa virtually impossible to acquire.

“Several times, I left the German Embassy in tears,” said the woman, who is 28. “...my mother lives in Russia, I have a job that brings good money, and I like my job...But in the embassy, they don’t trust me at all.

She is a designer and never had problems with the law and still she could not travel for a year. After the year had passed and she had spent seven nervous visits to the embassy where she said she was treated coldly, she got a visa for three months, and it was to be her single opportunity to visit the country.

Suspected criminal leaders and those willing to break the law can avoid such obstacles, whether they want to travel or even decide to become citizens of other countries.

Take the case of Russian native Yuri Salikov, accused last year in Spain of being a member of the “Tambovsko-Malyshevskaya” organized crime group. When he went to Spain, he had managed to acquire German citizenship. When he was charged in Spain for tax fraud of more than €28 million, his friends posted a bond for him and he was released.

The indictment, signed by famous investigating judge Baltasar Garzon in 2008, recounted that, despite all his accounts being blocked, he had led a high life.

Connections to Petrov, Malyshev

Garzon noted Salikov’s connections with Gennadi Petrov and Alexander Malyshev, who also have been indicted in Spain as leaders of Russian “Tambovsko-Malyshevskaya” group, which has been identified by law enforcement as involved in money laundering, weapons trading, fraud, smuggling, drug trafficking and murder.

Petrov and Malyshev also had moved from Russia to Europe without problems. The two had been tracked by Russian and Spanish law enforcement, beginning in the early 1990s. Before that, Soviet law enforcement had indicted Malyshev twice for murder and Petrov for economic crime. Nevertheless, Petrov managed to get Greek citizenship, and Malyshev assumed a new identity as “Alexander Lagnas Gonzalez” and moved to Spain.

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