

Borats of the customs

Looks like it is not about the professor and his absentmindedness.

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By Alexander Kaminsky, Almaty.

If there were a Prize named after Borat Sagdiiev for the biggest harm to the image of the Republic of Kazakhstan, it would undoubtedly go to the customs officials of the Astana airport.

Our newspaper reported a couple of weeks ago how our brave customs officials detained Victor Skormin, a U.S. citizen, Professor of the State University of New York, and our former countryman, for carrying undeclared currency. The absentminded professor, who was invited by two Kazakh flagship universities to work in Astana and Almaty, received his honestly earned money, and later at the airport, before having a chance to fill out a customs declaration form, he was “caught red handed.” They did not pay any attention either to the available documents that showed origin of the money or to the idiotism of the situation – why would a respectable person hide from the customs officials something that belongs to him as much as his own pants?

Skormin was detained, his passport revoked, the money confiscated. Only personal assurance of the President of Eurasian University saved the professor from being sent to jail. Currently, he is sitting in Astana awaiting his trial. Or, to be more precise, he is laying in Astana after being taken by an ambulance and hospitalized due to emergency medical conditions. The professor is an ill person: he has only one kidney and suffers from a serious form of diabetes. He could survive on the medications thoroughly selected in America, but here he cannot get adequate care. God forbid, but the justice could be late.

I think it is unnecessary to explain the reputation of our customs. At the same time, the reputation of professor Skormin in the scientific world turned out to be very high. Further scenario could be like déjà vu of the Soviet times. Remember how the joint forces of the Free World rescued dissidents from behind the “iron curtain?” Something similar is starting in support of Skormin. The story of his detention was sent to the Washington Post and reported on Channel 34 of American television. Colleagues of the professor are making contacts with the U.S. State Department, and personally with Hillary Clinton. It is easy to see how the image of Kazakhstan is changing as a result of this.

Academic communities of Kazakhstan and Russia are making efforts to save their colleague who found himself in this situation. Petitions to the court were sent from Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, L. Gumilyov Eurasian University, and the Institute of Informatics and Automation of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Other researchers, who

personally know professor Skormin, did not stay away from this and started collecting signatures in his support.

Considering the limitations of our newspaper, we would like to present only several quotations from the petitions.

Dastan Syzdykov, Doctor of Technical Sciences, Professor, Distinguished Science and Technology Researcher of the Republic of Kazakhstan:

- Professor Skormin is a world known researcher in the fields of modern control theory and process control. He graduated from our institution and defended his dissertation here. He often visits us to give lectures and invites candidates and doctors from Kazakhstan to work with him in the USA. Skormin is an honest and financially secure person. He always said that he had moral duties in Kazakhstan, where he was born and educated. He wrote a book that will be published in Kazakhstan in three languages. It is a shame what happened. Skormin is an ill person, and I do not know how he can stay here longer.

Rashid Yusupov, Director of St. Petersburg Institute of Informatics and Automation of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS), corresponding member of the RAS, Distinguished Science and Technology Researcher of the Russian Federation, Doctor of Technical Sciences, Professor:

- We are very confident that the incident that occurred at the airport of Astana city is a result of confusion caused by his personal lack of attention due to late check-in for the flight, tiredness, and his illness. We are also asking you, for humanitarian reasons, to understand his health condition and the possible complications that could develop as a result of his further detention in Kazakhstan.

Mamyrbek Bisenbi, Doctor of Technical Sciences, Professor, Chair of the Department of System Analysis and Control, Gumilyov Eurasian University:

- We are preparing Ph.D. graduates in collaboration with Skormin. To assure high quality of scientific and pedagogical processes, leading specialists from other countries were invited, and Skormin is one of them. He is well known in America and Russia as a researcher in the field of information and control theory; his research work is supported by the U.S. government, and he collaborates with the Russian Academy of Sciences. In 1999 he was an organizer of an international scientific conference in Almaty, which was sponsored from American sources. This time, he was invited by the Kazakh National University and Eurasian National University. The money that the customs officers confiscated was paid to him for giving lectures, consulting services, and for the work with Ph.D. students from Kazakhstan. I do not think that he did not fill out a declaration form intentionally.

Stephen Zahorian, Professor of the State University of New York, Chair of the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering:

- I sincerely believe that he did make an "honest" mistake, as he says, with no illicit or tax evasions intentions in mind. The department of electrical and computer engineering at Binghamton University sorely misses Prof. Skormin. He is one of

our best instructors and excellent mentor for graduate students. I respectfully ask you to resolve this case promptly, and let Victor return home and get back to work.

Ualisher Tukeev, Doctor of Technical Sciences, Professor, Chair of the Department of Information Systems, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University:

- We also invited Victor under the Ph.D. preparation program; he is a foreign advisor of our doctoral students. Skormin is a co-chair of two well known international conferences on models and methods of information security and multi-agent systems. He invites our faculty and doctoral students to the State University of New York at Binghamton where he is a Distinguished Service Professor. They have an opportunity to use the equipment in his laboratory. I think that the incident with the customs happened because of his tiredness and forgetfulness. The money that he was carrying was honestly earned.

Victor Chelpachenko, Doctor of Technical Sciences, Professor, Member of the International Academy of Transportation, Provost of the Academy of Civil Aviation:

- Victor and I are friends of childhood, and I cannot remember anything criminal about him. I am totally bewildered. Of course he got confused, but he did not do it intentionally, I just cannot believe it. Probably it was just a mistake. I am, for example, one year older (Professor Skormin is 62 – Auth.) and I may not be aware of all the customs procedures. It can happen to anyone!

Of course it can, but this is still strange. Absolutely respectable, distinguished, and financially secure person stepped into the customs control zone of Astana airport, where he immediately turned into a criminal. I am bothered by a terrible suspicion – perhaps it is not about the professor and his absentmindedness.

Skormin recalls how the customs officers performed slow, very slow count of his money, wrote down the serial numbers of the bills, and occasionally gave him a very expressive look. There was an evident question in the look, which became clear to the law-abiding professor, but only eventually.

Then one of the customs officers apparently decided to play psychologist and asked Skormin: “Why are you so nervous?”

“I was nervous indeed,” Victor admitted, “I saw sparkles in their eyes when they took and counted the money. I suddenly thought that, under different circumstances, if they could kill me and take the money, they would have probably done so!”