

The “Heavy Industry” of Fake Passports in Greece

VICE meets trapped migrants in Kos island who are dreaming of Europe, as also travel documents’ counterfeiters in downtown Athens.

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It’s a Saturday on the last weekend of September, and hundreds of tourists are patiently waiting in line at the airport on Kos island for charter flights back home to central Europe. A few days earlier, the news of travel group *Thomas Cook*’s collapse sent the tourism industry into shock. And on this warm, early autumn evening everybody - tour operators, taxi drivers and returning tourists - are talking about the latest updates.

This small airport on the East Aegean island has 15 check-in counters and nine departure gates. Between 9:10pm and 11:59pm, flights to Glasgow, London, Köln, Hanover, Manchester and Birmingham will be taking off. The airport is swarming with people; airport staff wearing colorful nylon vests giving instructions in an energetic manner, as tourists holding souvenirs from the island are taking their last selfies of the holidays. As the hours pass, the queue extends all the way into the airport car park.

But not everyone waiting in line here is a tourist. On that same Saturday night, and the following Sunday, police officers arrested 10 migrants at the airport for attempting to travel on fake documents or passports. Four men and six women, aged between 19 and 49, are taken in, all of them trying to reach Europe.

Thousands of migrants and asylum seekers reach the Greek islands each year, travelling from the nearby Turkish shoreline in perilous rubber boats. They want to get to Greece’s mainland or the much desired Europe, but the examination procedures of their asylum applications takes more than a year. A fake passport is “A Ticket to Heaven”. So, after paying smugglers thousands for fake travel documents, migrants mingle with the crowds of tourists, usually at small airports on the Greek islands that are overwhelmed by charter flights in the summer months.

Statistics given to VICE by the Greek Police’s Aliens and Border Protection Branch show that during the first nine months of 2019, a total of 4,536 migrants were arrested at Greek airports for having fake travel documents. In 2018, this number reached 6,045 cases and it looks like by the end of this year, that record will be broken. Kos airport comes fourth from top for the number of arrests, even more than Athens international airport. Demand creates the supply. And the illegal commerce of fake passports is today the “heavy industry” in Greece.

Trapped Humans

Next morning, at the northernmost point on the island of Kos. Jutting out into the sea, this stretch of land is only three miles (5.5 kilometres) from the Turkish coast and and you can even make out the shapes of buildings and streets in the Turkish town of Bodrum just across the water. It’s this sea passage where the boatloads of migrants usually cross towards Kos. The human traces are easy to see. Red and black life jackets and rubber boats regularly wash ashore.

The Reception and Identification Center in Kos is a former military camp in the middle of nowhere, close to the village of Pyli, about 15 km away from the port and also quite far from the all-inclusive hotels. It's not a detention facility, but access for media is forbidden without permission.

The administrator of the hotspot is Maria Kritikou. She is from Kos and has been occupying this position for the last three years. Kritikou oversees with huge efforts a facility originally meant to temporarily host 900 people, although today there are more than 3,150. There isn't enough space in the container housing, so some asylum seekers are living in makeshift tents outside the fence instead.

"We could handle it until April as the number was no greater than 900 people. After that, the situation became a ticking bomb", Kritikou says.

More than half of the migrants in the camp are families, mostly from Syria, although there are also many people from Africa and Palestine. "We have people from 43 different countries, as well as 107 unaccompanied minors," the administrator says. But people keep coming. The same morning, another 46 people arrived in two boats.

Suddenly, news of a pregnant woman from Syria going into labour cuts the conversation short. There is only one doctor in the camp and many of the cases are taken to the local hospital, which is also short-staffed.

"I am Dreaming of Europe"

In the refugee camp at Kos, there are just two representatives of the Asylum Service. According to Kritikou, it usually takes three to four months to register new asylum applications, followed by another four to five months during which asylum seekers wait for the first interview. Theoretically, after that, those who are considered refugees, or vulnerable, can travel to the mainland. But in practice, most people get stuck in the hotspot in Kos for more than a year.

That's exactly how long Iraqi asylum seeker Mariam, 30, has been waiting here with her husband and their three children, "I want to get to Athens or Europe. We do not have friends or relatives there but I know it is very nice," Mariam's young son Haider says.

Except for catering to their basic needs, there is nothing more for the migrants stuck on the island. It is almost impossible to go to town. They live far away from the eyes of the locals and tourists. If one does not look for them, it is difficult to notice that there are 3,500 of people who've been here waiting for months, living in a grey zone.

Marzia is from Kandahar in Afghanistan. She crossed from Turkey, together with her family, in April. "I was very afraid at the sea. I can still feel it like a pain in the heart," she says. "In the camp I am afraid only when there is quarrelling among Arabs and Africans."

Marzia's little daughter, Alina, draws some nice sketches in a notebook with hard covers. She shows us her drawings and says she wants to become a doctor. Her family, just like most of them, dreams of getting to Athens or central Europe.

"Wear Some Make Up"

On July 12, police launch a series of raids in Athens and Kos. Six people were arrested, including a police officer, suspected of being part of a network for falsifying travel documents since April 2018. According to court papers reviewed by VICE, smugglers transported the migrants from Athens to Kos by ferry and then on to the island's airport. From there, migrants used fake documents to reach various destinations around Europe. Besides fake passports, the network's members would give them advice on how to behave and what to look like while waiting in line for their charter flight to Europe. "They were even asked to wear some make up," reads one police investigator's comment in the court documents.

A "ticket to Heaven" cost anywhere between 4,500 and 6,000 euros, even if the migrants are arrested at their final destination. But the boss running the network was somewhere back in Athens - a 36-year-old Syrian who owned a small shop in the capital. The similar cases brought to court all lead back to one place in the city: Omonoia Square. And so the investigation takes us back to Athens.

595 Fotos

Omonoia is the very centre of Athens. In the narrow streets around the crowded square, you can find just about anything - including fake passports. Irham* is from Iran and for the last three years, he has been living in Greece under a blurry regime. His asylum application has not been examined yet and he cannot go back to Turkey either - the same goes for getting to Europe. Irham insists he is not part of a forgers' network, and only agreed to talk to VICE when a third party assured him that his identity would be concealed.

"The first thing that a migrant looking for a fake passport does is to make an account on *Telegram*," Irham says, referring to the encrypted private messaging application. Sitting on his phone, Irham types in the hashtags *#IDcards* and *#passports*, and a whole world opens up on the screen in front of him showing thousands of passport and ID photos.

"You find more or less what you are looking for and then initiate a private conversation," Irham says. "In order to be taken seriously you need to have a real photo and not an avatar. And also to write Arabic". In the end, it was even simpler than that.

People killing time outside the migrant shops around Omonoia - mostly photo studios and exchange houses - made it clear how the system works. VICE got hold of a USB stick filled with 595 photos showing passport and ID cards from across the world: Spain, England, Australia, France. Most of the photos were quickly taken by somebody holding them in one hand, but many show passports and ID carefully arranged in line, like a menu, therefore the number of documents is larger. The people who trusted us with the material tell us these documents were stolen from tourists.

But why would an organised crime network making fake documents be interested in real stolen passports, instead of making their own?

The "Masters"

Athens-based lawyer Zacharias Kesses has dealt with many cases of forgery networks in recent years, and knows all too well the evolution of this phenomenon - especially after the boom of the so-called "refugee crisis" in 2015.

“During the first years in Athens, there were but a few specialists, known as ‘Masters’ and they could make high- security passports - even American and the Israeli ones,” Kesses says. “You could find an American passport for 1,500-2,000 euros”

In the following years, demand escalated. It became a lucrative trade. And so the people making the fake passports grew in number. The documents were no longer of the same quality, so the prices went down and the police bust many of the groups responsible.

“‘Masters’ were either arrested sent back to their countries or left Greece and continued their job at a distance,” Kesses explains. And that's why fake passports and IDs started being made abroad, before being sent by post back to the migrants stuck in Greece.

During the peak of the crisis in Greece, the networks offered a full service beyond the documents themselves -including an escort to the airport, hotels and a welcome party at the final destination. All of these services could be bought separately, all according to the amount of money one had.

“It was the case mainly with the airport in Athens. When controls became stricter, the networks switched to the smaller airports on the islands with that had lots of charter flights,” the lawyer says.

“We Will Have Plenty of Work in the Camp”

VICE investigated court documents detailing two such cases from 2016 until today. The evolution of action is mind-blowing. On May 26, 2016, riot police evacuated the makeshift camp of Idomeni on the border between Greece and North Macedonia. As part of the last day of the operation, the Aliens Division organised a big operation in Athens. Sixteen people were arrested, mostly Bangladeshi and Sudanese nationals, suspected of counterfeiting passports.

The timing wasn't coincidental. Tens of boats kept passing daily from the Turkish coasts to the Greek islands. Volunteers and NGO members from all over the world were on the islands in order to offer help.

Police say that the forgery network consisted of two parts - the Bangladeshis, based in a restaurant on Geraniou Street in the center of Athens, and the Sudanese who would meet at a mobile phone shop on Acharnon Street. The price of each document was up to 350 euros. Those requiring an escort to the airport of Athens the price would pay 3,000 euros.

The case-files include tens of phone calls between smugglers that were intercepted by police phone-taps. On February 18, 2016, two members of the network are discussing a new delivery on the phone:

- *There is a woman, she has a six-year-old son and they want to go to Britain. Can you do something?*
- *Travelling from where?*
- *They are here, in Greece.*
- *OK, I will arrange it.*
- *How old is the woman?*

- 33-35.
- *Okay, I will do it.*
- *Alright, how much should I tell them?*
- *Twelve (Editor's note: meaning 1,200 euros)*
- *It's too much.*
- *But it's for the UK. If it were another country...Okay, we'll tell them 10.*

The expertise was high; the counterfeiters were artists. The day before, two smugglers were preparing a new document:

- *I'll make the stamp for you on a white page so you can scan it and pass it on a computer.*
- *I don't know these things.*
- *So I need to make you a wooden stamper, with the ink. But it will cost me a bit. You'll need to send me copies of the passports and I will fill them in, to take them to someone who puts stamps on them, in order to make us the color. Should it be in red or blue?*

Everyone was rushing to pass from Idomeni and continue north, on to the Balkan Route. On March 10, a migrant call someone in the network worried about the closure of the borders along the Balkan route:

- *Is the route good? He said that they go through Macedonia and Hungary.*
- *Through Hungary, Serbia and Austria.*
- *So Serbia again?*
- *But it's on the way, you can't continue if you don't go through Serbia.*
- *We fear that there might be military camps, jungles and messiness.*

In another conversation, the same migrant checks again:

- *Did the borders open?*
- *No, in the morning they said that they're closed from Greece, but the people who have passed into Macedonia are passing into Serbia.*
- *So they are open further ahead. Might they open?*
- *We will know tomorrow morning. I'm going home now to open Euronews.*
- *We should pass as it may close again.*
- *No, it doesn't cause us harm. We work anyway when the summer comes. Because in summer there are people wanting to go to England or elsewhere, and we take them from the islands.*

The police investigation focused on one Bangladeshi man, named as Jahir D. in the court documents. Police believed him to be network's leader. Three companies were allegedly operating in his name in Athens: small shops selling tourism programs and remittance transfers abroad. One of Jahir's companies was allegedly associated with a NGO, whose registered offices were declared at the same address. "That was the seemingly legal way for the network's members to interact with the migrants," a comment in the court documents reads.

In a bugged call on February 17, 2016, two network members discuss clearly why they want to do that: "We will have plenty of work with the people in the camp," they say.

Operation "Postman"

Today the “job” has changed once again. Smugglers are no longer falsifying travel documents but instead replace the photo on a real passport or ID that had been stolen. Sometimes they don’t even change the photo; they just look for somebody who is just looks a lot like the real person in the photograph (known as the “look-alike method”). After somebody arrives, the same passport is sent back to Athens for the next migrant-client.

On September 5, 2018 the courier company UPS delivered five parcels to the Aliens Division of the General Police Division of Attica. “We examined them with X-rays and they probably contain passports,” the people of the company told the police. Each parcel had a different sender and their recipients were in Germany, in Iceland, in Turkey and in Iraq. But all of them were charged to the same client code 773 5V2, a number corresponding to the Pakistani Imtiaz M., 44, owner of a small photo studio on Voulgari Street, three alleys down from Omonoia.

Actually, the shop in the center of Athens was half a photo studio and half a barber shop - typical of the small migrant-owned shops in downtown Athens. Open 24 hours and in public view, the place was a beehive of activity where people would always come and go. On June 19th, 2019, policemen raided it. They arrested Imtiaz as leader of a network forging and selling passports.

Court papers obtained by VICE show that police officers gave the operation the code name “Postman.” After opening the boxes, police found passports and other travel documents - most of them were genuine ones that had been declared stolen and already existed in the Interpol’s database, but the name and the possessor’s photograph had been changed. Indicatively, the United Kingdom’s passport with the number 505923999 was declared as stolen by Kenneth John D., but now the name had been changed to Abulkalam M. The same thing was going on with French and Norwegian passports.

In many cases, even the photograph on the passport would not change, because the new possessor looked like the real one. The price of each passport allegedly ranged from 300 to 1,200 euros. The Greek authorities decided to ask for help through Europol and the Germans replied: 28 parcels (totally 105 documents) with the client code of Imtiaz had been foreclosed in Leipzig airport where the Parcels Distribution Center is operated by courier company DHL Express.

Imtiaz denied all charges. “I am legal and that’s why I collaborate with the government body in Pakistan, Nadra, about the electronic renewal of identity cards of Pakistan’s citizens. It is known and controlled by the embassy,” he said in his defence statement. He also claimed that his mini-shop was also operating as a Western Union agency for remittance transactions. Imtiaz is temporarily led to prison awaiting trial.

Coconut Sunscreen

Behind the dry descriptions of the court documents, there are real people. Ahmed,* , 28, was born in Tehran and owned a restaurant. His English wife moved to a town in the British countryside together with their two children. Ahmed could travel normally abroad but after politics worsened in Iran, he couldn’t get a visa anymore. So he flew to Belgrade, taking advantage of a Serbia-Iran state agreement and then came to Thessaloniki in, northern Greece. He waited for more than a year for an answer from the Asylum Service, but there was no result. Last June, he came to Athens looking for a smuggler.

Ahmed was taken into an apartment in Athens along with some Kurds from Syria. "Two people were working on computers and printers, and two welcomed me," he says. "They made me two offers: 11,000 euros to try with fake passports as many times until I made it, or 2,200 euros for a stolen passport of somebody that looked like me. I chose the second" Ahmed wrote in an email to VICE.

"Three days later I had a Spanish passport and ID. The real owner of the passport looked 90 percent like me. They told me to read the personal data and learn it by heart - to . To check on a map where that address is, what bus goes from there to the airport and what are the tourist attractions in my alleged home town."".

Ahmed deleted all his social media account and made fake ones with the Spanish data. He also bought an expensive suitcase and put on sunscreen that smells like coconut. The police officers in Athens airport did not ask him anything. When the airplane took off, he went to the toilet and destroyed the travel documents.

Since arriving, Ahmed has claimed asylum. He shares an apartment with other refugees while he waits to hear back. But Ahmed is happy - he can meet his wife and children twice a week.

His journey is over for now.

**Names were changed in order to protect the identity of our sources.*

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