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SHARAPAT KHURKINOVA

HAPPINESS WITHOUT BORDERS. HOW THE ERADICATION OF
STATELESSNESS IN THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC HAS AFFECTED THE LIVES
OF ORDINARY PEOPLE

"In the past few years, I have only had one dream: to see my relatives who live in Uzbekistan," says Sharapat Khurkinova. Three years ago, the 80-year-old heroine replaced her Soviet passport with a Kyrgyz one. Now she and her children are citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic.

"I was born in Uzbekistan in 1941. When the war began, my father was called up to the front, and so I don't remember him at all. My mother died a little later, when I was little. I only remember her from photos. From an early age I was brought up by my sister. It wasn't possible to study, so I went straight away with my sisters and brothers to work on collective farms."

Two months ago Sharapat apa buried her husband, with whom she had lived for 50 long years. They had met in Uzbekistan, but at the beginning of the 1970s they moved to Osh Oblast of the Kyrgyz Republic, where she still lives with her children and grandchildren.

"We had a happy life, despite the difficulties that we faced. We had four children. We worked all our lives either on fields or on farms, looking after livestock. Sometimes we travelled to see our relatives in Uzbekistan, but then the Soviet Union collapsed and the borders appeared. My cousins were left in Uzbekistan, and it wasn't possible to visit them because it was no longer possible to cross the border with Soviet passports. We lived like that for many years, separated from each other."





Sharapat apa is far from unusual to have found herself in such a situation. After the collapse of the Soviet Union hundreds of thousands of people in Central Asia ended up without citizenship of any country. This was mainly because people did not apply for new documents to confirm their identities during the time period they were supposed to. Many people who lived in remote areas of the country were unable to travel to the capital or nearby cities to change their documents.

Sharapat Khurkinova decided to apply for a new passport in 2015, when she met lawyers who were providing free consultations. Her children also had an opportunity to receive new documents.

"My children had Kyrgyzstani passports, but old ones that also needed replaced. One day lawyers came to our neighbourhood, and said they would help us get new Kyrgyz passports. Frankly speaking, we did not immediately believe it: why would strangers help us? But they insisted, promising that we would be able to cross the borders. They explained in detail which documents we had to provide to obtain new passports. We collected them, took them to the passport desk and waited. Just a month later, we were delighted to be handed ID cards. We got the passports later. The process of collecting all the required documentation was short, but it was still necessary to travel. It was worth it; they helped us a lot and were understanding to my family."



The implementors of the project to identify and assist stateless persons in the south of the country were "Ferghana Valley Lawyers without Borders", a public association headed by Azizbek Ashurov. The public association started addressing the issue of statelessness in 2007, and in 2014, with support from UNHCR and the State Registration Service under the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, it created mobile legal groups and informed the general public about the situation of stateless persons.

"We discovered that the territory of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Ferghana Valley – which also includes parts of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan – was the most problematic place, with more than 12,000 people living without any form of documentation. In the five years we were implementing the programme to eliminate statelessness, our lawyers provided assistance to 10,000 people who had been deprived of their fundamental rights, such as access to health care, education, employment and free movement. But they had not chosen for this to happen, and our efforts concentrated on helping them regain their lost rights," noted Azizbek Ashurov.

As UNHCR Regional Representative for Central Asia Yasuko Oda emphasized, the key for the Kyrgyz Republic was the decision to conduct mapping and registration at national scale, rather than organizing a pilot project.

"Work in the fields will soon finish and my children will take me to Samarkand. It was one of my late husband's last wishes. He wanted us not to be strangers in the land where we lived for half a century and where our children and grandchildren will live. Thank you to all the caring people who have tackled this complex problem of obtaining citizenship."

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"It was rather brave, I would say, and required many decisions at different levels. The State Registration Office was active in ensuring that everyone, was registered, not only stateless persons. Joint efforts and digitization of the civil registration system are, I think, what set the Kyrgyz Republic apart from other countries."

In addition to receiving the new passports, the Khurkinov family had the opportunity to realize long-term plans. Now Sharapat apa is receiving her pension and awaiting a long-awaited trip to her relatives in Uzbekistan.

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BAGAUTDIN GAMURZIEV

STATELESS FOR HALF A LIFETIME. THE STORY OF BAGAUTDIN,
WHO FOUND A HOME IN THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

Bagautdin Gamurziev is 33 and he has lived for most of his life in the Kyrgyz Republic, after he and his mother and grandmother moved from a small town in Kazakhstan. Bagautdin had to live in Bishkek without a passport until 2019. His birth certificate was the only document he had.

"I was born in 1986 in Mirny village in Kazakhstan. My father left us when I was in second grade. I lived with my mum and grandmother. We moved to Bishkek at the end of 1990. My mother's relatives lived here, and they insisted on our move. I lost my relatives at an early age. My grandmother passed away one year after our arrival in the Kyrgyz Republic. Five years later, my mum completed suicide after suffering health problems. I was left almost alone, with only a birth certificate in my hands."

Bagautdin's mother – Lyudmila – died when her son was 17. Lyudmila had lost the Soviet passport that she had in those days, but she had not managed to get a new passport within the Kyrgyz Republic. After that, Bagautdin could do nothing but try to obtain citizenship himself and acquire a Kyrgyz passport.

"After my mother's death some distant relatives took me in. Later it turned out that they had not done it because of familial feeling, but because they needed someone to work and bring money to the house. I found a job and started working instead of studying, to support myself and pay for my accommodation. I worked as a loader, a builder and a locksmith. Without a passport it was difficult to find a better job. So I decided I should get a passport."



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The passport office for Bagautdin's area of residence gave him a list of essential documents that he had to gather. A certificate of residence registration was listed, among other things. Bagautdin says that this certificate became a bone of contention between him and his relatives.

"As the owners of the house, they simply refused: they did not want to give me the certificate. I first had to be registered as living in the house to receive a certificate of residence. It seems they did not want that. They told me: 'Sort things out for yourself, you're already an adult.' And I left the house forever, realizing on the way that now I definitely wouldn't be able to get a passport."

Bagautdin continued working, but it was impossible to get a good job without documents. And the problem did not only extend to work, but also to qualified care. Once Bagautdin had a mild stroke. Doctors examined him and prescribed treatment. But this did not always happen, because patients without documents can be refused assistance.



“Without documents, I was very vulnerable: I could not quietly go to the city centre or to a market. I was afraid that police officers would stop me to check my documents. When I worked at the factory, I carried my work ID card with me at all times. It had my photo, name and surname on it. Sometimes, when I was asked to show my passport, I would say that I had forgotten it at work or at home, and showed them my work ID. Sometimes it worked, but only in very limited circumstances. But I also could not get a bank card or go to another country or do many other things”

Bagautdin was saved by complete strangers, who later became his new family. In 2016, he got married and a new stage began in his life.

“I had known my future wife for a long time, and she knew about my situation. When we started living together, her mother – my mother-in-law – agreed to register me at her flat, so I finally had a chance to get the passport I needed so much. We collected all the documents again and the process started.”

With the help of lawyers from the “Legal Clinic “Adilet” and the relevant authorities, Bagautdin managed to realize the dream he had had for years: to acquire citizenship and become a full- fledged citizen of the country.



"I went for consultations. I gave the lawyers all my documents, and a day later they called and told me to submit my documents to the Department of Public Registration. In a month and a half, the Conflict Commission recognized me as a stateless person. Ten days later I received a residence permit. In April 2019 they gave me a passport, and this still makes me feel happy today."

Immediately after obtaining his residence permit, Bagautdin and his wife registered their marriage. He admits that if it had not been for his new family he does not know when he could have become a full-fledged citizen of the Kyrgyz Republic. Now he has big plans for the future, and his new passport is a vital part of it.



"I was officially hired at a tomato factory in Kara-Balta. I became a workshop manager. Now I have one more little dream: I want to become a lorry driver. I have loved large trucks since childhood. I want to go to driving courses next spring and get a driver's licence. I don't want to guess what will happen in the future, but I believe that everything will be fine. I have found hope and purpose in my life."

The Kyrgyz Republic has made a real breakthrough in ending statelessness, and it has become an example for many countries around the world: since 2014, all known cases of statelessness in the country have been resolved. This achievement became possible in the framework of the global #IBelong campaign to end statelessness by 2024 thanks to joint work by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), state bodies and non-governmental organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic.



TAHMINA SULTANOVA

“I WAS BORN AT HOME”. HOW TAHMINA WAS HELPED TO ACQUIRE
CITIZENSHIP, WHICH SHE HAD NEVER HAD

Five years ago, around a third of the residents of Jany-Mahalla (Jany-Kyshtak) village in Kara Suu district did not have any identity documents. The state did not even know about the existence of some of the villagers.

Tahmina Sultanova is a 22-year-old ethnic Gypsy living near Osh city. She does not have a passport but only a birth certificate, which she received just a year ago.

“The lack of documents is not entirely my fault: it was just because of circumstances. I was born in Osh, in Jany-Mahalla village, a place inhabited by a Gypsy community that moved to Osh more than 70 years ago. My parents also lived in this mahalla. Mum gave birth to me at home. I wouldn't say that for all local women giving birth at home is a norm, but because of the lack of documents, most of them cannot get registered at polyclinics. When I was 16, my mother decided that I should have documents and that she needed to register me. But it turned out to be much more complicated than it appeared at first sight. After several attempts to get me a birth certificate, my mother fell ill. She had kidney surgery, later she needed more surgery and then she died. She died before she could get me a birth certificate”.



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I want a different future for my children: they should study, enter a good profession and work wherever they want. This is now my only goal in life. And, of course, I should ensure that my children have passports and birth certificates so they can achieve it”.

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Tahmina has two children, aged four and five years, who also have no documentation certifying their births. However, her elder son needs to go to school next year. Tahmina and her husband were worried that without documents their son would not be able to receive an education.

“We knew that without a birth certificate I would not be given a passport, and the children would not receive their documents. My husband once went to the head of our district to find out what we should do. He took us to some lawyers in Osh city. They in turn told us how to get certification. They asked us to collect certain documents, including one from the mahalla head, to get a birth certificate. I got a birth certificate in 2018. Now I have to get a passport.”

The lawyers who helped Tahmina were from the “Ferghana Valley Lawyers Without Borders”, a public association. Specifically, Kanatbek Abdukerimov:

“We paid special attention to everyone who came to us to seek help. We spent long hours consulting with them, explaining the basic rules for obtaining documents. In practice, ethnic Gypsies needed to be constantly accompanied, because many of them were barely literate with some adults unable to read or write. We accompanied 90 per cent of them to passport offices and other government agencies, because otherwise they would simply have stopped trying after several attempts to submit all the necessary documents. We also established some mobile groups – made up of representatives of municipal authorities, passport offices and lawyers – to serve residents in both urban and hard-to-reach areas. This greatly aided the documentation process.”





When she is not busy with housework, Tahmina is teaching her elder son to read and write. She says that she herself had not wanted to study, but she now understands how she had been mistaken.

“My son often asks when he will go to school and sit at a desk. I dropped out of school in Grade 5; I was not interested in studying. Now I understand that I made a mistake. I still need education: for example, in order to get a good job. In our village, women work in the fields or at the factory. I want a different future for my children: they should study, enter a good profession and work wherever they want. This is now my only goal in life. And, of course, I should ensure that my children have passports and birth certificates so they can achieve it”.

The Kyrgyz Republic has made a real breakthrough in ending statelessness, and has become an example for many countries around the world: all known cases of statelessness in the country have been resolved in a drive that began in 2014. This became possible in the framework of the global #IBelong campaign to end statelessness by 2024, thanks to joint efforts by, state bodies of the Kyrgyz Republic, non-governmental organizations in the Kyrgyz Republic and the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR).



UMIJON ARZIBAEV

AFTER MANY YEARS OF STATELESSNESS, UMIJON FROM BATKEN AND HIS FAMILY HAVE BECOME CITIZENS OF THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

Umijon gets on well with everyone in the area. Congenital deafness does not prevent the 20-year-old from doing work around the house, communicating via mobile phone and playing football with his peers.

“Our whole family moved to Uzbekistan in 1993. We parents were working there and the children studied at local schools. We used to have Uzbek documents, and we crossed the border using them. In 2007 we wanted to return, but there were already borders between the countries. At the border post our Uzbek documents were taken from us and we were issued with temporary Kyrgyz ones. That’s how we lived until 2018”, says Umijon’s father Jeenbek baike.

The family now live in Batken, not far from the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border. Jeenbek baike takes care of the household, while his wife and daughter-in-law are at work. His son Umijon helps him a lot. After they moved to the Kyrgyz Republic the family were most worried about him.

“I attended a specialized boarding school for deaf children in Uzbekistan, and then the borders were closed. I ended up on this side of the border, but the school was on the opposite side. I stopped studying in Grade 9. There were no specialized schools near our new house, but just one in Jalalabad. I couldn’t get a certificate of general education because my documents were not valid. My parents tried to support me and they ordered sign language textbooks from Uzbekistan so I could communicate by gestures, but people understand me anyway. I think I can feel what they want to tell me,” Umijon smiles.



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*It made me very happy. My disability has never made me upset,
but I was very worried about the documents I didn't have.
Now I'm planning my future.*

*I dream of seeing Arsenal,
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Many ethnic Kyrgyz and others were left in limbo after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Tens of thousands of people could not obtain documents due to ignorance and the imperfections of the legal framework. Bureaucracy in civic registration system made it extremely difficult to obtain citizenship.

During a five-year project to identify and resolve cases of statelessness, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), together with its partners, identified more than 10,000 people just in the south of the country who needed help. Many of them had the “red” passports of the former Soviet Union. “In Soviet times we did not need passports, because the borders were open,” says Umijon’s father.

“We crossed the borders and didn’t think that one day we would end up behind the line without documents. At first you do not understand what to do and where to go. Then you gradually come to the conclusion that if you do not start sorting out the problem your children will suffer. We are ordinary people, I will retire soon, Umijon should also have been receiving a disability benefit. Time passed relentlessly. I went to a passport office with one goal – to understand what to do next – and I heard about the lawyers who were visiting houses and asking if residents had problems with documents. Soon after that they arrived at our house as well. They helped us apply for the status of “kayrylman”, and a year later I received official notification that I had been awarded citizenship. I obtained my passport in 2014.”



"Ferghana Valley Lawyers Without Borders", a public association, has been providing assistance to stateless persons and refugees since 2003. By the time UNHCR launched the global #IBelong campaign in 2014, to end statelessness by 2024, the public association already had extensive experience in the field.

"In 2014, with funding from UNHCR, we were able to create mobile legal clinics and inform the general public about the problem. We found out that the Kyrgyz Republic's part of the Ferghana Valley – a densely populated region of Central Asia that also includes parts of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan – was the most problematic territory, with more than 10,000 people living without documents. We visited remote mountainous areas in our Lada Nivas, and where driving a car was impossible we rode horses. In the five years of the campaign we were able to help 10,820 people in the south of the country", – said Azizbek Ashurov, director of the public association.

Immediately after obtaining citizenship, Jeenbek baike applied for documents for his son Umijon, so that he could receive a disability allowance and continue his education, if possible. Umijon received a passport in 2018.

"It made me very happy. My disability has never made me upset, but I was very worried about the documents I didn't have. Now I'm planning my future. I am currently working part time as a builder to support my parents financially. In my spare time I play football, and I will start learning a foreign language soon. I dream of seeing Arsenal, my favourite English club, playing a game."





The problems with documentation occurred mainly in border areas, where people only had Soviet identity documents, and child citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic had never received birth certificates.

“We started implementing a global plan to eradicate statelessness with the motto: “Not a single village, not a single citizen in the Kyrgyz Republic should be left without attention.” The work was conducted through 60 mobile groups, which included our staff, members of local self-governance bodies and our partner lawyers. We identified more than 14,000 stateless persons between 2014 and 2017. Of these, 57 are awaiting confirmation of their citizenship, but we consider these cases already to be resolved, as all the necessary documents have been collected and the required procedures have been completed.” said Muhabat Pratova, Head of the Department for Registration of the Population and Civil Status under the State Registration Service of the Kyrgyz Republic.

According to Yasuko Oda, UNHCR Regional Representative for Central Asia, political will and the digitalization of civil status registration are what set the Kyrgyz Republic apart from other countries in the region.

“The key was the decision to conduct country-wide mapping and country-wide registration. That was quite courageous, as it required many decisions at various levels. The State Registration Service was particularly active to ensure that everybody was registered. I have been working with the five countries in Central Asia over the years, and I really feel that everybody understands the issue and all are really eager to find solutions. It is not easy, because it requires involvement of many ministries, various departments, and the central apparatus. We are glad that we were able to help the Kyrgyz Republic to resolve the statelessness problem.”





SEVILIA MAMEDOVA

PREVIOUSLY STATELESS SEVILIA OBTAINED KYRGYZ CITIZENSHIP AND
WANTS TO REPRESENT HER COUNTRY INTERNATIONALLY



Sevilia Mamedova is a 19-year-old student at the Judicial Academy. She is an athlete and represents the Kyrgyz Republic at sporting events. But just a couple of years ago, she did not know whether she could complete school and receive the coveted certificate of general education to enter university.

“All my school life I did not have documents. My parents managed to convince the administration to keep me at school, but after Grade 9 new difficulties arose. I had to get a passport to register for my final tests. I often missed important tests. I also play football competitively, but due to my lack of citizenship and documents I was not selected to play for the national team. Why would they want a player who could not go to training camps and defend the honour of the country abroad?”

Sevilia’s mother, Alisa, was born in Azerbaijan. The family lost their documents in a fire. The house where they lived burned down so quickly that no one managed to collect essential items. Without the documents, they quickly lost hope that they could restore important papers.

"It was not possible to restore the documents in Azerbaijan. My grandmother and mother moved to the Kyrgyz Republic in the 1980s and their roaming continued. They appealed to various authorities and gave large sums of money, but the state services still had many questions," recalls Sevilla.

A couple of years after the move, Alisa got married and Sevilla was born. In the hospital where the baby was born, they could only provide a document certifying the birth.

"I can't explain how terrified I was when I thought about how I couldn't complete school without a passport. That paper from the hospital could not help me in any way. Everyone was worried: mum, me, my stepfather. After my mother and father divorced, she married again, and they have been living together for the past 14 years. If it were not for their support, I don't think I would have been able to cope with the fears and complexes that I faced every day."

Lawyers from "Legal Clinic "Adilet" helped Sevilla resolve the problem with her documents.

"One day we saw an announcement that "Legal Clinic "Adilet" was offering assistance with restoration of documents. We were already at the office door the next day: two days later we were given a detailed action plan, and they did everything for free. Perhaps this made us trust them, people who sincerely wanted to help us for the first time. The Adilet lawyers collected all our documents step by step".



In December 2016, Sevilla's mother received a permanent residence permit as a stateless person in the Kyrgyz Republic. The Conflict Commission only recognized Sevilla Mamedova as a citizen of the Kyrgyz Republic in 2018, on the basis that she was born in the country, and her mother had a permanent residence permit.

"It is difficult to explain to people who have never faced this problem what is it like to live without documents. I felt as if I didn't exist. Sometimes people asked me how it had happened, I explained to them, but a week later they asked the same question again. You understand – I didn't have any documents, but I really love playing football, studying and working: this is my life. And without a passport, I would not have had this life. I am the only child in the family and always wanted to have a younger brother or sister, but my mother was afraid to even talk about it. It was enough for her that I have suffered. She and my stepfather were afraid to have children until my mother received the documents. That's what it is like to live without documents, it's scary. And I do not stop saying that I have nothing to be afraid of anymore. All that I dreamed of – going to college, playing for the national team, travelling – came true".



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I have a goal: I really want to work for a law enforcement agency. Once I even planned to enter the Police Academy, but at the last moment I changed my mind and entered the more general Judicial Academy, in the Department of Investigation and Forensics. Perhaps I'll also become a lawyer: I really admire this profession now.

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After receiving her passport, Sevilla went to Tashkent as a member of the national team of the Kyrgyz Republic and represented the country. Sport takes up a lot of her time, but studying, she admits, is the most important thing.

"I have a goal: I really want to work for a law enforcement agency. Once I even planned to enter the Police Academy, but at the last moment I changed my mind and entered the more general Judicial Academy, in the Department of Investigation and Forensics. Perhaps I'll also become a lawyer: I really admire this profession now," smiles Sevilla.

In 2019, the Kyrgyz Republic achieved the greatest progress in the world in reducing statelessness and has given thousands of people opportunities to be officially recognized and acquire permanent homes. Since 2014, the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, together with its partners, has identified and assisted more than 13,000 stateless persons, including more than 2,000 children, in the framework of the United Nations Refugee Agency's (UNHCR's) #IBelong campaign to end statelessness by 2024.

