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Pipss.org is grateful to Alina Sari who translated the interview into English

¹ PIPSS.ORG - Tell us a little about yourself and about your professional experience in the law enforcement: when and, if permissible, why you joined the Police? What motivated you then to make this choice?

² Alexander Zelichenko: In terms of calendar years, I served in the Police for almost 37 years. Considering my service in the conflict zones (the Balkans), where the term of service is calculated at one day equating to three, I served for nearly 46 years.

³ I began my service at the Criminal Investigation Department, and subsequently served as the Head of the Municipal Department of Internal Affairs, the Regional Criminal Investigation Department, the State Anti-Narcotics Service, the Kyrgyz Republic State Commission on Drug Control, the General Staff of the Ministry of the Interior, the Passport and Visa Department, and the Ministry of the Interior Reform Center.
In addition to the inherent sense of justice, my choice of the profession was largely influenced by family traditions – my father served in the law enforcement for almost 40 years. His stories gradually created in me the image of an indomitable servant of the law, a civil servant.

The Communist Party and the Government allocated colossal resources in order to promote and sustain such an image of the Police in the public eye. Books, movies featuring the most famous and popular actors, and the aura of romanticism made a career in the Police quite attractive to the youth. This image largely reflected my internal world. Besides, in those times, young men were inclined to choose a profession in engineering and economics or a career of a military officer. I was unmistakably inclined towards humanities; therefore, the first two career paths did not attract me at all. I chose the second one...

Mainly due to the prestige of the profession and high faculty wages, institutions of the Department of Internal Affairs of USSR housed the best scientists and practitioners. The education we received was one of the best one could then get in the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the prospects of not only becoming a career detective or an investigator but also obtaining a degree in law compelled me to continue to climb the mountain of knowledge. I later graduated from the Police Academy of the USSR in Moscow and received a Higher Diploma in Law Enforcement and Security Management.

“[During the Soviet period], the ethnic background of one’s partner did not matter”

Alexander Zelichenko: A personnel policy, including the one of ethnicity, has always existed in the Internal Affairs. A type of an ethnic balance has been sustained: in multiethnic regions, the leading position was held by a Slav while the deputy had to be a Kyrgyz (Uzbek) or vice versa. We, as mere employees, have never pondered on this – the ethnic background of one’s partner did not matter.

The “civilian” society was somewhat looked down upon. We were feared but also respected. Nevertheless, we tried to abide by the law in those times. We were forced to break it on numerous occasions while chasing crime detection rates and at times as the result of direct involvement in the matters of the Soviet Party. A refusal to follow its unlawful «guidelines» could cost one a career. For instance, during various campaigns, practically all employees were removed from performing their primary functional duties; thus, little time was left for crime prevention and detection.

There was a distinct system of selection, training, and development of personnel. Every employee was in sight due to numerous internal institutions: the Council of Mentors, the Council of Veterans, the Officer's Court of Honor, etc.

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PIPSS.ORG - What were the most acute problems you faced internally in the Police (professional training, corruption, abuse...) during different stages of your career? Depending on the position, the rank, or institution?
12 **Alexander Zelichenko:** At that time corruption already existed. The most corrupt were the Division of Theft Prevention of Socialist Property and the State Vehicle Inspection. Not until the mid-1980s did corruption rapidly spread within the agencies.

13 When I began my career, specifically in the Criminal Investigation Department, the problem lay in common physical abuse, such as for the purpose of receiving the desired testimonies. I did my best to avert this throughout every stage of my career in the Police. There have been instances of employee appointments without regard to one’s intellectual capacity and level of knowledge and training. However, unlike nowadays, these instances were rare.

“[After the collapse of the USSR], the brain drain caused a drastic decline in the level of professionalism”

14 **PIPSS.ORG** - After the collapse of the USSR, there has been a significant brain drain from Central Asian States. What motivated you to stay?

15 **Alexander Zelichenko:** After the collapse of the USSR, many employees of Slavic ethnicity (for example, in Bishkek and Chui region they held the majority in the Central Apparatus) indeed began to leave. Well, that was their choice... I had no desire to leave – I sincerely considered and consider Kyrgyzstan to be my motherland. In all these years, none of my closest relatives leave the Republic. I want to reiterate that no “purges” on the basis of ethnic background took place.

16 **PIPSS.ORG** - What were the most acute problems during this transitional period? Brain drain? Did “purges” take place?

17 **Alexander Zelichenko:** The brain drain caused a drastic decline in the level of professionalism – “people from the street” were hired to serve in the Internal Affairs (veterinarians, failed teachers, physical education teachers...). Concurrently, the level of personnel training considerably dropped in educational institutions of the Ministry of the Interior, which divided themselves into ethnic enclaves... The outcomes of the personnel policy of that period are evident even today. It took almost three to five years before the realities forced the employees of the Criminal Investigation Department, for example, to begin working with a degree of professionalism.

18 They were forced to learn quickly due to the complicated operational environment. Indeed, these young men became professionals in crime solving. However, in my opinion, at the same time they lost the core, when in the past determined a Policeman as the protector of state interests. The concept of the Rule of Law was also weakened.

19 There is a constant struggle between the “reds” (Police) and the “blacks” (Criminal Structure). Moreover, quite often, both operate in similar ways. In many ways, such state of affairs is influenced by the weakness of the state and distorted notions of spirituality, ideology, and morality. The Police, as it is known, is a mirror reflection of the realities. I would like to add that at times, due to professional peculiarities, existing powers of authority, and so on, this mirror is twisted...
“Police reform [...] was accepted [...] as “sucking out” of resources from international organizations [...]”

[20] PIPSS.ORG - What were the stages of post-Soviet Police reforms in Kyrgyz Republic and how were they implemented in the “field”? What were the successes and the shortcomings?

[21] Alexander Zelichenko: Police reform was initially accepted in simple terms; specifically, as “sucking out” of resources from international organizations involved in this process. Unfortunately, this point of view exists to this day. For example, a certain reform program was proposed. We did not have a slightest concern over its “ideological component”, whether we needed it, and if it will continue. The importance laid in how many vehicles, radios, and bulletproof vests we would receive. At times, we even bargained over every vehicle. There have been instances when the leadership would impose its demands onto the international organizations: “Do you want a certain reform program to start? Then, include in it remodeling and reconstruction of telephone lines for the Ministry of the Interior with the cost of approximately fifty thousand euros. Yes, this had nothing to do with reforms; however there is no other way.” Roughly speaking, this was the manner.

[22] Nevertheless, in response to criminal retorts, the Ministry of the Interior created the State Anti-Narcotics Service, the Anti-Organized Crime Glaucus, and more. Later, the Penitentiary and Prison system, the Fire Department, the Passport and Visa Apparatus were formed. The “rock-solid” Police, Precinct Police officers, Juvenile Department inspectors, and especially Patrol Service, worked in the old fashion. Some improvements were brought by reforms in the Quarterly Police. However, as the financing of this project ended, the interest ceased as well. All returned to the “normal”.

[23] PIPSS.ORG - What role do the research and expertise institutions play in developing new ideas (All-Russian Scientific Research Institute of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, Procuracy Institute)? Are their findings publically accessable?

[24] Alexander Zelichenko: The Ministry of the Internal Affairs simply lacks the research and expertise institutions (I am not quite aware of what the Procuracy Institute does; I believe it handles training of Prosecutor’s Office’s personnel). All attempts at creating such institutions failed due to an array of reasons stemming from the crisis of the system.

[25] In current conditions, the most optimal decision was to utilize the academic and expert foundation of the Kyrgyz Republic Academy of the Ministry of the Interior, which, by Kyrgyzstan’s standards, has considerable potential. However, numerous attempts of such nature failed. Academic and research activities are developed without consideration of practical demands; this process is free of oversight and coordination. In actuality, nowadays, there is no entity to conceptualize the “State order”; it is more favorable for the Academy to “free float” as it will not be bound by any responsibilities and can develop its activities based solely on self interests. Here are more specific questions: how were the training and activities of Precinct officers transformed?

[26] PIPSS.ORG - Here are more specific questions: how were the training and activities of Precinct officers transformed?
Alexander Zelichenko: Due to its specific importance, let me first speak about reforms in the Precinct Police. The idea was interesting – to implement a typical Western system of “Precinct Police”, and by doing so to bring it closer to the community.

Initially, under the thorough oversight of international organizations, the work was busy. Yet, it was done without significant changes in the “philosophy” of Police activities, its ever-changing leadership, modification of methodology, consideration of local peculiarities, and mentality, and so on. In reality, this was an expensive attempt to blindly embed the Western experience into our environment. Evidently, as the attention of international organizations towards this endeavor weakened, it [the endeavor] ordered to “live long”.

PIPSS.ORG - Have you witnessed any competition among Kyrgyz and Uzbeks?

Alexander Zelichenko: In the beginning, in Soviet times, there has been no such “competition”. Later, right before the collapse of the USSR and after the Osh incident of 1990, as I traveled to the south, I began to notice a slight divide based on the ethnic background. Later, it somehow settled down, at least, became not so bluntly evident. But even then and nowadays, there were less Uzbeks in the [law enforcement] service; therefore, there was and is no basis to reflect on competition. Reflecting the surrounding atmosphere, particularly unacceptable types of ethnic relationships in the Police force were formed prior to the 2010 tragedy in Osh. It will take years to restore trust towards one another, as well as within the Police and the society at large.

Here, I would like to illustrate a true story. Kosovo Police is proud of the following fact: after the prolonged bloody conflict between the Serbs and the Albanians, it started the multiethnic Police project, in which representatives of certain ethnicity, based on how many of them lived in a region, were invited to serve in the Police. I had an opportunity to train multiethnic personnel on equality in the Police force and Police brotherhood. So, when during yet another escalating situation in the region, armed extremists appeared at the doors of the Police Academy in Vushtrri demanding to turn it Serbian cadets, the Albanian cadets (by the way, among them were many former members of armed groups) turned them away with the following words: “Here, we have no Serbs, no Albanians, nor Gypsies. We are all Police officers.”

Reforms were implemented without consideration of that due to an array of circumstances of primarily political nature (using Police to guard the political system and to serve a particular ruling family; attempting to blame the Internal Affairs for political errors, such as during the 2002 events in Aksi, and so forth), changes in core life-determining principles (making the statewide corruption and embezzlement obsolete), and decline in public educational level, nowadays, the Police force exhibits all signs of crisis of the system. Therefore, reforming its individual elements, especially without initiation of statewide reforms, will give bring no expected positive results.

“A prolonged crisis in the law enforcement system caused the public to completely reject it”

PIPSS.ORG - In the past 20 years, how did the relationship between the Police and the public change?
Alexander Zelichenko: It is worth noting that the prolonged crisis of the law enforcement system caused the public to completely reject it. Torture, corruption, nepotism, and cronyism became a form of a business card for the contemporary Police, concealing a number of positive examples of fulfilling professional duties while often risking the lives (at times, costing lives) of honest and honorable sergeants and officers.

The Role of the International Community

Alexander Zelichenko: The international organizations tried and try to help facilitate the police reforms. Now matter how paradoxical it may sound, the Republic’s experience in this process is considered to be the best in the CIS! Nevertheless, as earlier noted, it was done by means of mechanical “immunization” of the Western experience. And, as evident in numerous public opinion polls and existing realities, it mostly brought no positive results. In any case, however, we should be thankful for everything they have done for the Kyrgyz Police. Without international assistance, our Police would “starve” to this day.

Alexander Zelichenko: The leadership of the State Law Enforcement was satisfied with such an approach – significant technical and monetary allocations took place, vehicles and technology was procured, and so on. Nobody thought of end results and institutionalization of experimental outcomes. Employees of the Police, perhaps with the exception of those directly involved in the “experiments” (even they at times did not understand the purpose and tasks), accepted what was happening as something foreign and externally imposed, and did not take it seriously.

The leadership, on the other hand, often did not grasp the essence of proposed reforms; it treated them as the opportunity to receive any type of financial and technical assistance and as well as positive feedback from the international public. Sometimes, as it happened, for instance, with the Millennium Challenge Account program, it explicitly boycotted the implementation.

Current Police Structure in Kyrgyzstan

Alexander Zelichenko: Today, the “Police” is comprised of practically all key services of the State Interior Departments: Criminal Investigation, Investigation, Precinct Police, Juvenile, Anti-Narcotics, Anti-Organized Crime, State Vehicle Inspection, and more…

Alexander Zelichenko: The Special Police Squad and the Special Rapid Reaction Detachment exist in the central apparatus of the Ministry of the Interior, as well as
regional and municipal (Bishkek and Osh) Departments of the Interior. They all were transferred to the south of the Republic during the tragic events of last year. In some instances, officers of these departments displayed exceptional endurance and heroism. However, as already highlighted, due to a number of systematic misjudgments and reasons of political nature, the existence of appropriate efforts and resources did not provide the ability to quickly and efficiently localize the conflict and avoid large numbers of victims as well as prevent and avoid conflict.

During the last year’s tragedy in Osh, the Police, happening to be multiethnic and having to follow the orders of the shortsighted leadership, once again became the weapon of political terror. It failed to utilize its primary responsibilities of guaranteeing public safety.

Police reform in the CIS: a view from within

Today, a lot is being said about police reforms in other post-Soviet states. As a professional and an expert, how would you rate such processes, particularly in Russia and Georgia?

Alexander Zelichenko: Any attempts at reforming the law enforcement without initiating statewide reforms are practically doomed to fail. Thus, I am skeptical towards what has been happening in Russia (though the magnitude of such attempts deserves recognition) and salute everything taking place in this regard in Georgia.

There, the law enforcement reforms take place within the framework of the entire state apparatus reforms, are based on a thorough revision of the legislature, and are widely supported by the public. It is rather risky that the entire reform initiative is concentrated on a single, even if it is quite a dazzling, political figure (what will happen if Saakashvili leaves for whatever reason?!). The Georgian Police will have to cultivate professionalism quickly (based on the experience of Kosovo Police formation, I know that at the initial stage of reforms of such magnitude, it [professionalism] is in catastrophic shortage), as well as follow the path of reforms till the end.

NOTES

1. Alexander Zelitchenko has published extensively on fight against criminality, terrorism and drug.
2. Under Andropov, a massive campaign was also launched in the media to promote the image of the KGB in the public eye. Incidently Putin himself explained in Ot Pervogo litsa. Razgavory s Vladimirom Putinym (Moskva, Vagrius, 2000, p. 24) that the books and films released at that time made him dream to join the KGB [E.S.K.’s note].
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