

On Jan. 15, 2007, Alexandr Kovali, 44, one of the richest people in Moldova, walked into the Appeals Court building in Moldova's capital, Chisinau. Entering this sparse building — against his will and under escort — was a change of pace for a man accustomed to luxury hotels and night clubs.

For 10 years, this former police officer had been a leader in his field, running a business in Moldova, Romania and Ukraine. Today his criminal file is riddled with indictments and evidence accusing him of trafficking women and children, heading a criminal organization, using forged documents and bribing many officials — all illegal acts according to Moldovan Penal Code.

An investigation determined that Kovali had turned six buildings into mini-hotels featuring rooms where intimate services were provided. When the buildings were searched, numerous weapons were discovered: six handguns, six rifles, 60 knives, 20 swords of different sizes, hundreds of cartridges of different calibers, and many gas and aerosol guns.

But the weapons were just the tip of the iceberg. The police also discovered 18 girls and young women, ages 16 to 27.

Several of the women found in Kovali's brothels were invited to speak out against him at the appeals court on that day in January. But, in their experience, the police didn't disturb Kovali or his business. Files were often opened against him that never ended in a conviction. As a result, the young women kept their silence.

During the hearing, a journalist outside the courtroom tried to take a picture of Kovali, but was held back by one of Kovali's escorts and threatened with detention.

“You are lucky that Mr. Nicolaev, the vice president of the Chamber, intervened, otherwise the reporter would have been arrested,” said Major Mura, deputy commander of Guard and Escort Troupes Direction under Penitentiary Department. The message was clear: A journalist's rights to be present in a public space are not valid when “Sasha” or “Shalun” (Kovali's nicknames) passes through.

Moldova is known as one of Europe's primary sources of exploited women and children. And it is not very hard to find targets for exploitation, when every fourth Moldovan went abroad illegally and thousands of others are going to go the same way.

It's also known as the poorest country in Europe. The average monthly salary in Moldova is 1,697 Moldovan lei (US\$148), but

its prices are near the European market level. The average salary is the same for policemen, judges and mayors, all of whom seek out extra money. Such abject poverty makes Moldova a breeding ground for human traffickers and a lost battlefield for victims of the phenomenon.

“I had to pay 4,000 Euros (US\$5,636) for my visa. I didn’t know it was a false one. I paid to a tourist company that promised me to bring me to Italy, where my mother works as a babysitter,” Lilia Catana says.

Catana and 12 other “tourists” were taken by car in the night through Ukraine to the Slovakian border. “They told us to stay silent in a cornfield near the customs office. I was shocked. I asked, ‘Why have we paid so much money for that?’ The man said we had to wait for his ‘friend’ to be alone in the customs office.”

After an hour, Catana says, four of the women were taken to the customs office; others had to wait longer.

Police in Slovakia, Romania and Hungary have to deal with Moldovan illegals every day. Many are arrested because of forged visas or passports. However, news about arrested traffickers or customs officials is very rare.

According to Moldovan police data, every year about 300 cases are opened against people accused of human trafficking. The Moldovan Prosecutor’s Office says about 200 files are sent to the judicial courts. About 50 result in convictions, and about 10 result in jail time for the convicted.

The Moldovan Department of Jails reports that the people convicted of human trafficking are mostly women. “I am a mother of two and I was looking for a job,” says Ludmila Botnaru, who is serving 10 years in prison for human trafficking. A tourist firm offered her a job doing phone work, collecting information from young women who wanted to work abroad. She would pass the information on to her boss. “One day, the police called me and ask for a bribe,” says Botnaru. “I said, ‘I have no money.’ They came and arrested me.”

Many Moldovan politicians run “tourist” firms, as do the relatives of police officers, prosecutors and senior officials. Many of these firms are doing illegal businesses with forged passports or visas, yet enforcement actions against these well connected businesses are rare.

Kovali is allegedly just one of many profiting from human trafficking. Moldovan Minister of Domestic Affairs Gheorghe

Papuc complains that bringing this phenomenon to an end is difficult, despite efforts to bring down Kovali and others.

On Sept. 5, 2006, Papuc wrote a letter to Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin that accused Kovali of recruiting underage girls from Ukraine, the Transnistrian region of Moldova and some other places, then forced them into prostitution.

Papuc believed people with a direct interest in the situation were using lawyers to influence the judges, ensuring Kovali's freedom. "The prosecutors, along with the judges in the Court of Buiucani district, are trying to delay the trials, therefore trying to free Kovali," Papuc said. His petition yielded no results.

After that letter was written, Moldovan media reported that Papuc himself had been involved in supporting a virtual brothel, broadcasting images of 15 girls in Moldova, while he served as Minister.

A new scandal in the Ministry of Domestic Affairs has recently come to light. Ion Bejan, chief of the Department for Fighting Human Trafficking (an organization that received \$5 million in U.S. government aid to fulfill its mission), was dismissed after being accused of cooperating with human traffickers. Bejan was allegedly Kovali's partner.

Despite the accusations and evidence, the criminal file on Bejan's corruption case didn't progress. Boris Poiata, the head of the prosecutor's office dealing with corruption, pointed out that the case was examined by the Centre for Combating Economic Crime and Corruption (CCECC). However, conflict of interest seemed to prevail: Certain people from the CCECC also worked at the Economic Police Office with Bejan.

Ion Vazdoaga, the director of the Centre for the Prevention of Women Trafficking and a lawyer for two underage victims who reported being exploited by Kovali, said this case discourages the fight against human trafficking.

Referring to his clients, he said, "The victims, who were underage at the time they were exploited, don't trust police and law-enforcing structures. They said that they heard many times that their former boss, Kovali, is friends with the police."



