

A bus carrying 20 people stopped at the Moldovan checkpoint of Leuseni near the Romanian border for a routine inspection. A border guard took passports for verification. A customs officer searched the personal belongings and asked all passengers to state their destinations.

The passengers were going to various countries in the Schengen zone. After a quiet conversation outside with the officer, the driver announced that the visas in several passports were fake. He did not name any names, but suggested that they raise a total of 15,000 euros (US\$22,277) to pay off the customs officials so they would be allowed to continue the trip. Otherwise, the driver warned, the bus would be turned back.

A few of the passengers protested noisily, but after only a few minutes of hesitation nearly all of them agreed to pay up. Only Stanislav refused to pay [he preferred not to use his last name in discussing this story]. He asked the border guard if he could speak to the station chief so he could file a complaint. The border official pointed at his colleague from customs. Infuriated, Stanislav ended his journey and returned to the capital.

Stanislav, 33 years of age, said he paid 3,800 euros (US\$5,642) to an entrepreneur who helped obtain the visa, which turned out to be genuine after all. He borrowed the money intending to reach Spain, and he could not afford to spend any more. He is one of the thousands of Moldovans who dream of finding a job in the West, opinion polls reveal. As a doctor in Chisinau, Moldova, he earned just 2,500 lei (US\$240) a month in a country where the cost of living amounts to a minimum of 4,000 lei (US\$388) a month.

Moldava: Nowhere to Go?

Average wages in this ex-Soviet state amount to 800 lei (US\$78) a month in rural areas, and 3,000 lei (US\$291) in large cities, according to National Statistical Bureau data. A study by CBS-AXA showed that Moldova provides few incentives for employment, and migration remains the best prospect for many Moldovans.

But the road through the border is difficult to maneuver. Customs officers are aware that many of their compatriots who travel as “tourists” will become illegals when their visas expire. They also know that those with no return plans prefer to give informal payments rather than turn

around or complain. Even a European Union (EU) resident's permit may not protect against humiliation by Moldovan border officials.

Liuba, a 40-year-old housekeeper, was travelling to Italy through the Ukraine. Her train stopped in Ocnita, in northern Moldova, for passport inspection. She related: "I have an Italian *soggiorno* (green card), and I was going back to my work in Padova, where I am employed legally. The officer who inspected my luggage demanded 50 euros (US\$74). He did not explain why. When I refused, he turned and walked away with my passport. I immediately regretted my refusal to pay. After all, the sum was reasonable." The train was due to depart in 10 minutes, so Liuba ran and caught up with him. After a bargaining session, she slipped a 20-euro (US\$26) banknote into his pocket and returned to her seat.

Liuba said she didn't know much about the laws, but she realized that she and the officer had committed an offense. But she insists her decision helped her save time and money: "The choice I made was unpleasant, but justified."

Justice for No One

In Chisinau, the case of Varvara Zingan and her son has been making headlines in the media. Varvara has been demonstrating in front of the Parliament building since July 2007, trying to free her son, Vitalie, from jail. Vitalie is 29 and had spent one year in pre-trial detention before being convicted in 2001 and sentenced to 13 years in prison for imprudent manslaughter arising from a brawl in Grigoriopol, part of the breakaway Transnistrian enclave. Although Moldova does not have jurisdiction over Transnistria, he was tried by a Moldovan court. He was acquitted in 2006, but in June 2007, the conviction was upheld in absentia and Vitalie was imprisoned again.

Mrs. Zingan described her son as a victim of a frame-up orchestrated by high-ranking officials. She said that she had secretly obtained copies of the case files, which she discovered had been fabricated by Transnistrian authorities. "The witnesses were bribed or intimidated. Some links lead to the Chisinau government," she claimed in interviews with *Timpul* and *Ziarul de Garda* newspapers. According to Varvara, Vitalie's misfortune is that the person responsible for the fatal accident is a relative of the Grigoriopol prosecutor and managed to escape prosecution, thanks to his connections.

Varvara said she has proof of her allegations, but she won't use it in a court of law because she doesn't trust the

judges. Nor is she willing to file a complaint in the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), for fear her son will be tortured in retaliation. So, the 49-year-old mother continues her peaceful protests.

In June 2008, Vitalie stabbed himself in the abdomen with a sharp object, reportedly as a result of a psychological breakdown he suffered in the Cricova prison. The wound was severe, but he survived.

Going Outside the System

Weak Moldovan state institutions are one reason why Moldovans give up seeking justice and redress for their grievances, says Galina Bostan, director of the Center for Corruption Analysis and Prevention (CAPC — *Centrul de Analiza si Prevenirea Coruptiei*), a transparency and civil rights nongovernmental organization in Chisinau. “People expect the public functionaries to satisfy their grievances. Once this hope is gone, they turn to [other] measures,” Bostan explains.

Varvara Zingan’s distrust in the national justice system is shared by most of her fellow citizens. An increasing number of Moldovans choose to defend their rights in the Strasbourg-based European Court of Human Rights. It has become the most respected European institution in Moldova among ordinary people and the last resort for many Moldovans who have been disappointed by their own national courts’ decisions, according to the CAPC and Lawyers for Human Rights (JDO — *Juristii pentru Drepturile Omului*), a Chisinau-based nongovernmental organization that represents Moldovans in the ECHR. So far, Moldova has lost 111 challenges by its citizens and another 66 cases are pending deliberation. For 2007, the CAPC has calculated a rate of one ECHR condemnation per 57,000 residents — the highest rate in Europe.

Corruption from Head to Tail

Aneta Grosu, editor-in-chief of *Ziarul de Gardainvestigative* weekly newspaper, brands the domestic judiciary system as non-transparent and incompetent: “The prisons are overcrowded with people sentenced for stealing chickens, and not one minister accused in the media of contraband or bribery has been held accountable until now.”

Moldova’s latest corruption scandal involves Interior Minister Gheorghe Papuc, a protégé of President Voronin, who was quietly fired after revelations of his alleged involvement in a record seizure of heroin. In March 2008, a traffic patrol discovered about 200 kilograms of heroin in a

small bus in the very heart of Chisinau. The drugs, worth 10 million euros (US\$14,782,000) on the black market, came from Turkey and were headed to Western Europe. Three police officials arrested for their alleged implication in this scheme claimed Papuc knew about the shipment. The Prosecutor-General's Office confirmed the allegations that Papuc was under house arrest and that he was cited as a "witness" in the so-called Heroin Dossier, a story that has been kept under a virtual media embargo. After much drama, half a year later, the president reinstated Mr. Papuc as interior minister, who was declared "clean and ready."

President Voronin, in turn, publicly accused the traffic officers of bribery without bothering to present evidence. Half of them were fired at his order. Commenting on this measure, Mihai Mirzenco, a motorist from Straseni town, said that 30 lei (US\$3) used to be enough to get rid of annoying officers. "Today, I have to come up with 60 lei (US\$6) — the officers claim that their workload has doubled." The Voronin administration has disputed reports that bribe prices have increased.

A police major from the Center for Combating Economic Crimes and Corruption (CCECE — *Centrul pentru Combaterea Crimelor Economice si Coruptiei*), who asked not to be named, recalled a comic but sad story where a suspect offered 5,000 lei (US\$482) to an investigator to drop the charges against him. The investigator invited the suspect to a cemetery at midnight, then ordered the man to strip naked, climb up a tree, and leave the cash in a hollow. Then, according to the suspect's story, the investigator also got naked and collected the money. Ultimately, the suspect was convicted and sentenced to a lengthy term, despite the alleged bribe. He tried to take revenge by relating his side of story, but the prosecutors laughed it off as too ridiculous to be believed.

Opinion polls conducted by IMAS Inc., and CBS-AXA agencies, well-regarded for their accuracy, show that customs officers, judges and policemen are "traditionally" the most-cited officials in the Moldovan corruption index table.

A specific Moldovan way of looking at bribery is that public functionaries who demand bribes are regarded as dirty, while offering a gift or money as a form of gratitude is considered a "custom," and thus less criminal. The police major remarked, "It's in the blood. People are not ready yet to stop giving bribes, which are an easy way to get a matter solved or to avoid bureaucratic red tape."

