

## **Citizenship-traffickers are making you a Romanian, using false papers**

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### **Romanian citizenship to Moldovans means free movement and free access to the EU labour market**

Stalin would not be happy if he knew that his nephew Vladimir is soon going to get Romanian citizenship, a Romanian passport, and hence the right to work in the EU. Vladimir's grandparents were Romanian citizens, born in the early twentieth century, long before the country joined the European Union. They lost their citizenship at the end of World War II when Romania ceded Bessarabia to Russia. Today, Vladimir has the right to receive Romanian citizenship that his grandparents were stripped of. His grandmother's name is Svetlana Aliluieva and she has the same name and date of birth as those of the former Soviet dictator's daughter.

Vladimir is one of thousands of Moldovans with Romanian origins who are seeing the border between Romania and Moldova as a mere bureaucratic invention. But Vladimir has a secret that officials who are close to let him join the European Union do not know: his grandparents, just like the border [between Romania and Moldova], are invented [they were not real persons]. According to documents we have obtained from Moldova's State Archives, Vladimir's celebrated grandmother married Ostop Bender, a notorious charlatan, a fictional character in Ilf and Petrov's novels '12 Chairs' and 'The Gold Calf'.

The papers handed to us by the Chisinau Archives' official are full of historical coincidences, just because we requested them this way. Ostop Bender was born on 28 June 1914, the very day that Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo, which led to the outbreak of the First World War. Ostop and Svetlana were married (according to the same papers) on 2 September 1945, the very day that Japan surrender unconditionally to the USA. It is unlikely that a woman with the same name as Stalin's daughter married a notorious crook from novels exactly at the end of the war.

### **Passport to Europe**

Today, however, it is possible for a person who claims to have such grandparents to buy the right to work in the EU. Patience, money and relationships with citizenship intermediaries and corrupt officials in Bucharest and Chisinau is all that is needed to reach Europe. Moldova was part of Romania between 1918-1940 and 1941-1944, when it was annexed to the Soviet Union and became an independent republic in 1991. In the same year, Bucharest adopted a law according to which Romanian citizens and their descendants who lost their citizenship by no personal fault are entitled to recover, upon request, Romanian citizenship. Since then, officials have processed almost 225,000 Romanian citizenship requests coming from Moldovans, as shown in a report released by the Soros Foundation in April 2012. This report contains data sent to the Soros Foundation by Romanian authorities, but some figures are still subject to dispute. In the absence of accurate data, Soros report shows that the 225,000 figure is closer to reality regarding the number of those who regained Romanian citizenship in the last 20 years. The number of applications for restoration of citizenship to Moldovans is continuously growing, and this growth is closely linked to changes in the Romanian legislation, especially to Romania's accession to the European Union. Moldova is the poorest country bordering the European Union, and many of its citizens are working abroad for a better life. The same report mentions that applications for regaining Romanian citizenship are processed more rapidly since 2007, and out of the total number of

applications more than half, approximately 116,000, were solved in the past four years. Many Bessarabians are considering the Romanian passport a special key to enter the European Union. This is also mentioned by Romanian prosecutors who investigated and prosecuted a network of nearly 40 state employees and intermediaries dealing with the sale of citizenship. 'The acquisition of Romanian citizenship is particularly important for Moldovan citizens, because it offers the possibility to travel – without requiring a visa – to EU countries in order to work', says the General Prosecutor.

### **Citizenship through the back door**

Usually Bessarabians require Romanian citizenship and Romanian passports in order to work in the European Union, prosecutors say. This was also confirmed, though not in a public manner, by an official of the National Citizenship Authority in Bucharest, who said that Bessarabians have shown no obvious interest for Romanian citizenship until 2007, the date of Romania's accession to the European Union. Moldovan citizens have some reasons to seek to obtain Romanian citizenship, especially those who are entitled to recover it. President Traian Basescu said in 2009 that nearly 800,000 Bessarabians, or about a quarter of the population of Moldova, are entitled to acquire Romanian citizenship and repeatedly promised that the bureaucracy will be reduced.

However, this article will show that Moldovan citizens prefer to get Romanian citizenship through unofficial channels. They often pay hundreds of euros to intermediaries hoping that applications will be resolved faster. Bessarabians who do not have experience with the process of regaining Romanian citizenship may be screwed when using intermediaries. But informal ways of acquiring citizenship proved to be very effective and, as we show in this paper, provide evidence of Romanian grandparents who actually did not exist. The European Union does not intervene in the granting of citizenship in the Member States, the decision belonging to each of the EU countries. However, Romania's policy of granting citizenship to persons beyond the Prut River has been criticized as an access 'door' to the EU for Moldovans. In 2010, Pierre Lellouche, French Secretary of State for European Affairs, justified the postponement of Romania's accession to Schengen using the situation of the Romanian-Moldovan border, which 'remains poorly controlled because of the distribution of thousands Romanian passports across the border'.

The same idea was expressed by Lellouche's successor, Laurent Wauquiez. These reactions seemed to be provoked by Romanian President Traian Basescu's statements, who said in April 2010 that Romania's objective is to satisfy 10,000 requests for regaining Romanian citizenship monthly, and that the state has the resources to do so. Two years later, in April 2012, the Soros Foundation published a report showing that these fears are not justified and that there is no evidence to conclude that Moldovans are rushing to Europe. The same study criticized Basescu's statement that nearly 800,000 Moldovans are seeking Romanian citizenship.

### **'Real documents'**

Our investigation proves the existence of a black market for Romanian citizenship, but we could not conclude that Romania contributes to migration within the EU using the 'back door', as many European officials fear. Indeed, many Moldovan citizens are using intermediaries simply because they do not have the patience to approach the Romanian bureaucracy. According to prosecutors who dismantled the above-mentioned network, this market is attractive even for those entitled to ask for Romanian citizenship because intermediaries are more effective than official channels (normally, Romanian citizenship is granted within six years). Some of Bessarabians use intermediaries because they already work illegally in some EU countries and cannot leave work to apply for citizenship because they would be banned to come back in those countries.

Using our character Vladimir, who wants Romanian citizenship, we have shown that it is difficult to distinguish between those who are entitled to receive Romanian citizenship and those who use documents of the kind we have used. After we got birth and marriage certificates of Svetlana Aliluieva

and Ostap Bender, we used the same intermediary to also receive both Moldovan and Romanian criminal records (showing that Vladimir did not break any law). After a few days we received them: the Romanian one was signed by the Romanian police commissioner George L. Stan from the Bucharest Police. We went with these documents at the National Citizenship Authority where a special inspector said that the documents seem to be real and that some other small formalities need be fulfilled. The documents we presented have Moldovan institutions' stamps and signatures [see pictures of the documents in this [link](#)].

To make Vladimir an EU citizen, we started the documenting work in Chisinau, at the Romanian Consulate. Here, intermediaries are easy to spot. They swarm around the institution and the nearby gas station. They are blocking the entry in the consulate, they have pochettes and bags, and they sit in groups and drink coffee. In fact they are only the 'facade' people who offer to anyone interested visiting cards and tips. One of them, Vadim, praised his contacts among Romanian officials in Bucharest, Iasi and Vaslui. He guided us to Mrs. Mary, who assured us that we would receive the documents in six months, so we gave up. Emil, another intermediate, assured us that he is not doing anything illegal, but is just using his influence. 'I have a lawyer in Bucharest who speeds up the process', he told us and gave us a card that advertises a site that promises Romanian citizenship to anyone, anywhere. Prices that appear on the site advertised by Emil vary depending on how fast one wants to acquire citizenship.

For 700 euros, documents can be obtained in 15 months, for 1,000 euros in 10 months, but for the fastest method (which takes five months) the person wishing to obtain Romanian citizenship must pay 1,500 euros. Once citizenship is acquired, one also has to pay 95 euros for the Romanian passport, which can be obtained in ten days, and 140 euros for the Romanian identity card.

Another intermediate we have met in front of the Civil Service in Chisinau was Sergiu. The discussion was in Romanian and Russian, and Sergiu promised us that he can bring us all the documents for 300 euros. A young woman that passed by joined the discussion and also promised us some help, but hurried because she had to finish a reportage. She was a student in journalism. In the same place we also met Arghira, a lady of about 50 who had a bruise on her left eye. Arghira took Romanian citizenship in 2010 and she proposed us to complete the deal for 300 euros, but after some negotiation she reduced the price to 250 euros.

Arghira took us to a public notary where Vladimir signed a document that empowered Arghira to represent his interests before Romanian and Moldovan authorities. Although she praised her relationships, Arghira proved not to be a person of confidence immediately after she started to ask for more money. Eventually we found Ion, who promised that for every document required for citizenship we have to pay 70 euros. Within a few days he brought us the birth certificates of Ostap and Svetlana, and also their marriage certificate. The documents have been recently issued by the Chisinau Civil Service. Once he would have obtained Romanian citizenship with these documents, the next step would have been to get Vladimir the Romanian identity card. To obtain this document, the person requesting it must prove that he is resident in Romania. And here comes another network of dealers who are ready to help him (of course, for a fee) to find residence. On Emil's website appeared a Romanian identity card with some deleted identifying information. We found the same identity card on an advertisement page of a newspaper in Iasi: in this notice, those who wished to receive in their house Moldovan citizens were promised 40 euros / person, but they were also required to know people in the police. The notice also stated that one can bring even 20 Bessarabians in one transport, persons who would live at that address virtually or not.

We identified all deleted data in this identity card. There was no big surprise to find out that the address corresponded to a 'home for single' building in Bucharest's outskirts. At that apartment there were registered many people from Moldova and Romania, but also companies, some of them owned by Chinese people. Romanian authorities tried to stop this practice particularly related to residence granted to Moldovan citizens – but without much success, even if the law was amended in 2011. Victor Gîndac,

director of the Romanian Immigration Office (RIO) said that the institution can hardly face the situation, especially because of shortages in personnel. 'Since 2009 I noticed that there is a problem. A large number of Moldovan citizens were cheated by intermediaries and lawyers. They identified some "hosts" that agreed to give them Romanian citizenship and residence to a single address. We identified 4-5 lawyers in Bucharest who took care of this work. It is worth mentioning that there were pressures on RIO workers, but also threats', Gîndac added. The fact that some lawyers entered into this business was also observed by officials from the National Citizenship Authority (NCA), who were warning those coming with citizenship documents not to use intermediaries or lawyers. This NCA warning was removed from the NCA website after some lawyers made complaints.

In early March 2012, a major scandal erupted in Bucharest. Sex, corruption, deaths, undercover officers, protected witnesses, destruction of evidence, and the U.S. Secret Service are just some of the scandal's ingredients. Employees of the Community Public Service 'People Records Bucharest', officials of the Civil Status from the Bucharest's First District, and NCA officials were accused of taking bribes. Nine persons (whose activity was monitored for at least three years) were arrested (out of 35 persons involved). Among them there were several intermediaries who had dual citizenship and also consulting firms in Bucharest. Police searched and found printed forms, agendas with names of people who were fraudulently going to obtain Romanian citizenship, and tens of thousands of euros.

An NCA official used to claim (in addition to the amount of 50 to 100 euros for each case illegally submitted) also sexual favours from one intermediate. Others tried to escape incriminatory evidence. After police searches and arrests, the head of the Civil Status from the Bucharest's First District had a heart attack and died, after learning that he would be questioned about the illegal activities of his subordinates. Also in Moldova 80 people connected with the case were surveyed. After the outbreak of the scandal, some intermediaries were afraid to operate freely without hiding. In front of the Passport Directorate in Bucharest we met Andrei, a Moldovan citizen who was expecting his 'agent' Oxana. She promised him that she would quickly obtain his passport, but was scared of the consequences of the scandal. 'She knew some big boss here, but now he is not so visual', Andrei told us. He also said that he paid 1,500 euros in order to obtain Romanian citizenship.

So did other Moldovans whom we talked to in Chisinau. Liuba Cărpineanu regained Romanian citizenship in 2007 and after maternity leave she has not been able to find a job anymore. He went to Spain and then to Italy. 'If I would come back home, I think I would die of hunger. It is good that this "door" (i.e., the Romanian passport) appeared, because first time I went illegally and had to pay 4,000 euros to those who brought us here'. Alexander Covas also works in Italy, in an auto service: 'Having a Romanian passport it's very convenient. I was praying only not to be checked by the Carabinieri. The Romanian passport is a salvation, but I cannot stand Romanians. They are selfish and they are selling you three times only to keep themselves "clean".'

Veaceslav Mandiș came on holiday to Moldova to see his mother. He is also living and working in Italy. 'I am a driver, and my wife is a hairdresser. The Romanian passport was a relief for us. This way, we can work legally and also send money to my mother in Moldova. I am a history teacher, but I have no choice. I personally do not feel myself a profiteer because I enjoy the facilities of Romanian passport since I am actually a Moldovan. My grandfather was not asked by anyone when they deprived him of his Romanian citizenship in 1945, so I just restored my rights', said Veaceslav.

While acquiring Romanian citizenship has obvious advantages, a problem is raised by the number of those who received it. There are large differences between the data bases that we had access to. NCA says there were 15,000 applications between 2007 and 2011, out of which around 1,000 were rejected. The data provided by the NCA run counter to those of the Soros Foundation report. This report, citing the NCA, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other institutions, shows that during the same period there were processed 116,000 applications. NCA did not comment on this difference, stating that actual data are those that they have sent following the request we submitted.

Soros Foundation's representatives maintain their point of view, arguing that when the document was published, NCA officials had no objection. On the other hand, Gabriela Neagu, the NCA spokesman, said the institution did not agree with the figures presented in the report and that the documents presented to institution's inspectors by a person who wants Romanian citizenship are carefully checked, even using special scanning equipment. As if in order to contradict her, a citizenship dealer with whom we talked in Chisinau assured us we can obtain Romanian citizenship anytime: 'Give me a Russian from a remote corner of Siberia and I will make him a Romanian citizen'.

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