

## BORDER-CROSSING AS A STRATEGY OF DAILY SURVIVAL: THE ODESSA-CHISINAU ELEKTRICHKA

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### Introduction

Few things are more indicative of the drama of the post-Soviet transition than the Odessa-Chisinau train, where a 'separate' world with its own economic system has developed spontaneous institutions for making up for the lack of state assistance. The *elektrichka* train travelling between Odessa and Chisinau is a microcosm that incorporates many relevant aspects of post-soviet societies; from the political struggle for power, corruption and ethno-political clashes, to shadow economy practices and border problems. The peculiarities of this train are numerous. First of all there is the geographic location of the railway line that unites Moldova and Ukraine passing through the separatist republic of Transdnistria (not recognized at an international level but *de facto* a state between Moldova and Ukraine). Secondly, the border crossing itself: apart from some administrative changes, at the time of the research Moldovans still considered Odessa the place to go for purchasing goods, as they did in the past, when Odessa was the largest Soviet port on the Black Sea. Finally, there is the informal economy reigning supreme due to a lack of a strong state that cannot provide security to those needing a more reliable income besides their meagre or nonexistent wage.

The aim of this paper is to show the socio-economic function of the *elektrichka* and give an analysis of its hidden dynamics. The paper will focus on three of the most significant aspects related to this train trip: borders, economy/trade and corruption. After a general description of the train trip, the following section focuses on border problems between Ukraine and Moldova and on the ambiguity of the Transdnistrian border. Then the problem of trade and the shadow economy will be considered in the context of the *elektrichka*, using previous literature and my own analysis of fieldwork data. Finally, the controversial issue of corruption will be described in its local forms, including its positive and negative aspects. I suggest that, before stigmatising corruption as an evil to eradicate, one should reckon with the fact that a "little" corruption may guarantee an equilibrium and an even distribution of money - availing the theoretical framework given by Rasanayagam (2003) who suggests that corruption

has to be contextualised before being classified as a negative practice. In this case, it is argued, restricted illegalities make up for state failures, allowing people to survive. Border management is viewed as a failure—of both national and international actors - in carrying out negotiations to end an ongoing conflict. Finally, petty smuggling will be presented as a market regulator able to elude the protectionist policy of local monopolists who operate to the detriment of consumers and prevent new investors from entering the market. At the end of each trading trip, a (relatively) positive effect is achieved: officers and traders make financial gains and consumers have access to better quality goods.

The article is based on participant observation carried out in the spring of 2004, complimented by informal interviews with local informants. Given the sensitivity of the issue, I have preserved the anonymity of informants and omitted any information that could be dangerous to the concerned actors.

### A running bazaar

Odessa railway station, 11.30 am. The sun is shining on people and trains while a crowd overloaded with luggage is gathered on the last platform, leaving the rest of the train station almost empty. Despite the heterogeneity of the crowd, a main characteristic is immediately remarkable: the *babushka*.<sup>37</sup> These old ladies jump back and forth with unexpected vitality carrying huge quantities of goods. Bags full of coffee, flour, cucumbers and cabbages are tied down on improvised trolleys and thrown onboard. People cry, argue or even fight for a place. This unexpected phenomenon awoke curiosity in me as a casual observer (which I was at that time) that only increased as I discovered that it was the train I had to take: the *elektrichka* travelling from Odessa to Chisinau.

An *elektrichka*, in Soviet terminology, is a small train, with only a fourth class<sup>38</sup>, covering a short distance very slowly. In this case it covers the 180 km separating Odessa from Chisinau in about five hours. What was an internal train commuting between two Soviet cities is nowadays, as a result of the collapse of the USSR, an international train that several hundred people use everyday.

The train travels to Chisinau via the Transdnistrian Republic. For this reason Russian and Romanian speakers are evenly distributed but hardly anybody seems to be travelling for any other reason apart from “business”. Actually trade is the quintessence of the *elektrichka* whose function is that of feeding people on both sides of the border.

### Hum, I am sorry...where is the border?

*“Les frontières sont des structures spatiales élémentaires, de forme linéaire la fonction de discontinuité géopolitique et de marquage, de repère, sur les trois registres du réel, du symbolique et de l’imaginaire.”* (Foucher 1991:38)<sup>39</sup>

Less than two percent of the European borders determined during the 20<sup>th</sup> century are the result of a plebiscite, warns Foucher (1991) and the Ukrainian-Moldovan border most definitely does not belong to this two percent. Ruré reports that a “Socialist Soviet Republic of Moldova was born on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August 1940 merging Central Bessarabia and a large part of the Moldovan SSR. The other part was attributed to Ukrainian RSS, that incorporated the north and south of Bessarabia, the Hertza District and the north of Bukovina” (Ruré 1999:228, translated by Polese). The line separating Ukraine and Moldova has few of the qualities of a ‘traditional’ border and it is much more imaginary than real, to recall Foucher. I experienced the mobility of the Moldovan border during my first trip on the *elektrichka*, in March 2004. On the Ukrainian side control procedures are rather normal for a former Soviet Republic; the train arrives in Razdelna, passports are checked, custom officers screen people<sup>40</sup> and the train starts again.

The question is: where is the Moldovan border? After the Ukrainian border the train stops again in Kuchurgan, situated on the territory of the separatist republic of Transdnistria. The Republic pledges a Soviet identity and strives to continue the Soviet tradition of territorial continuity and open borders. Many citizens still travel on Soviet passports as the Transdnistrian passport, if ever issued, would have no international value.

No customs officer shows up and people literally jump out of the train and rush out of the station. I discovered the reason behind this during an informal interview with a border official in Chisinau: to check on people entering the administrative territory of Moldova would mean further official recognition of the separatist republic, something Moldova is not prepared to do.

Nonetheless, in order to fight against the contraband problem, the Chisinau government

decided, on 1 June 1999, to establish 17 permanent custom posts and 30 mobile posts along the inner Moldovan administrative border and also along the border with Ukraine but, as Neukrich (2001) reported, these posts did not seem very effective. The fact that various political groups/classes in Chisinau profit from contraband and illegal trafficking might be an additional incentive for not having rigid customs controls between Transdnistria and Moldova.

To complicate the whole issue, sporadic actions to regularize the situation were unsuccessful. The economic sanctions imposed by Chisinau on Transdnistrian goods for failure to respect minimal standards of quality resulted in a blockade of the railway, the closure of Romanian schools in Transdnistria and the cut off of gas and electricity supplies to Moldova (the main supplier is the plant in Kuchurgan in Transdnistria (Dogaru 2004)).

A palliative faced by Chisinau was to place customs officials along the train line to control, if not people, at least goods. From the first Moldovan station, officials are liable to enter the train and check anyone, though they might not be officially allowed to carry out a complete border control and actually passports are not checked<sup>41</sup>. This broadly reminds one of the EU and Schengen regime. No official border control is recognised<sup>42</sup> between the Schengen states; nevertheless fear of illegal migration often results in random controls, for example, on the movement of cars between states.

A question at this point might be: how many borders does one have to cross on the route Odessa-Chisinau? The answer depends on the means of transport!

The Chisinau-Odessa trip by coach<sup>43</sup> shows a different version of the borders from that experienced when crossing by train. The fact that even fixed entities like borders are experienced in a mobile way is indicative of the weak role of the Moldovan state after independence, as locals are able to manipulate it for their own benefits. No official control to leave the Moldovan administrative territory exists but, to enter Tiraspol, the capital of Transdnistria, people have to pass an ‘imaginary’ border not recognised on any world map. Then they will have their passport checked, but not stamped, because their country does not enjoy international recognition. However, people will be asked to buy a *talon*, in this case a piece of paper with an unofficial stamp on it, for the price of seven lei (half a Euro) to be presented when leaving the ‘country’ as evidence that a ‘tax’ has been paid.

A border official checks the passports<sup>44</sup> and orders all those not living in the Republic or travelling on a Russian passport to buy a talon. The diligent traveller has to go to the nearby office, pay seven lei and get the piece of paper that is produced when passing the border again, be that the border leading to Ukraine or the one back to Moldova. Failure to produce the talon might result in a 'Soviet fine', or better still, a bribe.

On the Ukrainian side there is another paradox. Ukraine has waived registration for foreigners<sup>45</sup>, a procedure still practiced in other former USSR countries, but it has introduced a registration (immigration card) at the border. According to the new rules of 2001, foreign passport holders must declare their destination and address of stay. I have witnessed several times the awkwardness of both border officers and passengers as the latter indicated the length of their stay at the train station as 'a few hours'<sup>46</sup>.

Foucher (1991:47) states quite rightly: "...*La frontière marque le point où expire la compétence territoriale*"<sup>47</sup>. If there is an exception to this statement, it is represented by the Transdnistrian border. The starting point of Transdnistrian and Moldovan territorial competence is unclear or even mobile depending on several factors. Any existence of territorial competence is challenged by the ongoing conflict<sup>48</sup>.

The shock of the collapse of the USSR is still perceivable in the former Bessarabian region. The repartition of power from Moscow to local centres (Kiev, Chisinau) was not accepted by some elites, especially in the Tiraspol region, where Russian elites had been forming since the 1970s and more recently have proposed themselves as an alternative to the Moldovan elites in Chisinau. This resulted in armed conflict in 1992, as well as the presence of the Russian army and an informal division of Moldova, that boosted the economic crisis of postsocialist societies in the 1990s while generating new borders not recognized by the international community. It has also affected the life of locals who, despite the conflict, have to find the means to survive. The next section is dedicated to the way locals organized themselves to make up for the lack of state provision of security and stability.

### Smugglers or traders?

As Papava and Khaduri (1997) remarked, external border controls in communist countries were tight, but the controls were designed to detect primarily political and criminal activities (such as involvement in drugs and arms dealing). In countries

that have undergone postsocialist transformations the type of smuggling has changed—increasingly including ordinary commercial and seconded goods<sup>49</sup>, which have plagued the Soviet economy for many years. The result was a huge volume of trade between and inside post-Soviet countries<sup>50</sup>. Manifestations of illegal trade were often punished as individual asocial inclinations. Sometimes they were given political importance, as in the Khrushchev era when reports of corruption increased. Illegal trade was also ignored as 'beneficial' for the economy, during the Brezhnev era (Werner 2002). Few raised questions concerning the roots of the problem.

Odessa, the biggest commercial port in Ukraine, has always provided its inhabitants with a strong local identity which was fostered by the economic opportunities offered by the city<sup>51</sup> - far superior to those of the rest of the country. For example, Odessa was home to some of the most prestigious Soviet champagnes (*Frantsuskyj Bulvar, Odessa*), considered an elite present; it was also the place where the biggest open-air market in Ukraine (*Sedmoj Kilometer, Seventh Kilometer*) operated. Given its dimension as a port, and the presence of nationalities that are able to use informal networks to spot any kind of good<sup>52</sup>, at the end of *perestroika* it was common knowledge that anything, from meat to guns and bombs, could be found at the legendary Odessa bazaar (*Privoz*)<sup>53</sup>.

Odessa-Chisinau has always been a route of intense, and not necessarily legal, trade and its importance has been developing in the course of the years as a result of the economic evolution (and involution) of the two countries. Even though official figures are hard to find and, to my knowledge, no research on such a topic has been carried out, one can put together a picture of the evolution of the trade between the two cities from the history of Odessa's markets. For instance, *Sedmoj Kilometer*, was established as a local market situated in the centre of the city. Eventually it was moved out to the *Moldavianka*, one of the oldest parts of Odessa and later, when its size reached the current one, was relocated once more, this time to outside the city. This allowed for expansion, enabling the trading of a larger quantity of goods, but also made it easier to escape strict state control. As a result, after 1960 *Sedmoj Kilometer* became practically illegal, but it kept active and functioned as the biggest smuggling market of the USSR (Nikolski 2005). It is therefore conceivable that, given the short distance, Moldovans have a long history of trading with Odessa in order to obtain what was lacking in the rest of the region and what Odessa sailors and traders were able to ship into their city through their networks<sup>54</sup>. In recent times,

two phenomena have increased the variety of goods purchasable in Odessa: the opening up of Ukraine to foreign imports, which started with *perestroika*, and the overproduction in some neighbouring countries, especially Turkey, of clothes that could easily be shipped across the Black sea. At the same time, as Crowter (1995:328) remarked, Moldova has suffered from a dramatic economic decline in the first half of the 1990s, partly because "...Moldova is dependent on external sources for coal, oil and natural gas. As energy resources became scarce, industrial enterprises were forced to reduce production".

Although nowadays Ukraine cannot be considered an economic paradise by Moldovans, the city of Odessa is a completely different story. The market *Sedmoj Kilometer*, named so because it is situated seven kilometres outside of Odessa, is by far the biggest trading centre in Ukraine. It hosts 2,000 sellers and around 8,000 people buy goods there daily. It is open 24 hours a day; during the day time normal goods are traded while at night time the typology of goods traded is unknown to most. Low cost goods are received mainly from Turkey and China, but also from Russia and Poland<sup>55</sup>. The rental of a container to store goods can cost from 1,500 US Dollars or upwards. As a result, although numerous people go to the markets simply to shop, there are others –and this is more relevant to this analysis - who live on the daily export and smuggling of goods.

The *Sedmoj Kilometer* market provides many of the wares that are transported by the *elektrichka*. From the first moment one climbs on, the train shows the features of a moving bazaar. At the Odessa railway station the congestion is so bad that railway officials have to filter the passengers approaching the train and to divide them into several waves. Everybody has at least one trolley overloaded with boxes filled with recent purchases. Once people reach the train they run for the best places to put down their heavy luggage - aggressive behaviour and even petty physical confrontation, sometimes culminating into a slap or a little more, are not uncommon at this time. As the train leaves, re-packing procedures begin. From the departure of the train until it reaches the Ukrainian border (the station of Razdelna) most people mix up, hide and change the composition of their boxes. The aim is to hide valuable items purchased under food or socks. Normally, people trade in clothes as they are easier to transport and allow a higher profit, given that the choice on the Moldovan market is very limited. But in the boxes there might be any other item<sup>56</sup>.

One of my informants, whom I met several times during my trips, spelled out some of the products he intended to buy in Odessa—margarine,

*krabovy palochky* [crab meat] and mayonnaise—because he could find them at lower prices in Odessa. He used to travel every other day to Odessa and had already a retailer in Chisinau so that, once he returned, he could sell everything immediately and rest for the remaining part of the day. This activity is completely beyond state control but limited in size and, therefore, of little interest to Moldovan officers<sup>57</sup>. Nevertheless, the man took the precaution of getting off one station before the main Chisinau station in order to avoid possible customs control officers.

The types of goods introduced into a country varies according to which particular border is being crossed. The Polish-Ukrainian and Polish-Belorussian trains are opened like tuna cans as officials search for cigarettes. The buses running between Ukraine and Poland operate on a system of sharing out the goods, although also there are strategies for hiding items in the usual ways.<sup>58</sup> In the Ukraine-Moldovian-Transdnistrian case, neither alcohol nor tobacco is involved and trains are not searched. The system is much simpler and everything takes place during daylight hours. After passing the Ukrainian border, as mentioned, there is no real Moldovan border but officials are susceptible to jump on the train anytime.

The first exodus happens in the Moldovan (actually Transdnistrian) station of Kuchurgan, the first station after the border. Here people leave the train and run out of the station, which is quite small (the street is some 30 meters away from the train). There is general concern that, should local officials have had a bad day, they might want to stop to check somebody; this is why the sooner one leaves the station, the better. At the same time, some other people without luggage remain seated in the train. Most of them are relatives or simply partners of those carrying the goods. They pretend to be together and divide the quantity of goods being carried amongst four or five persons.

From this moment until Chisinau, it is a matter of negotiation. People will have to play 'the poor', 'the ignorant', and 'the naïve' and pretend that the quantity of goods they carry with them is fair – though there is no official definition of 'fair'. Otherwise they will be obliged to leave the train and negotiate with the officer<sup>59</sup>. It may be interesting to note that in this process, with several officials going around the train several times, neither I nor my passport were ever checked.

The first way to categorize this phenomenon may be to see it as smuggling, but the situation is more complicated. Recalling the concept of informal

economy used by Keith Hart (1973, cited in Rasanayagam 2003) to refer to the irregular income earning opportunities of the urban poor in Ghana, Rasanayagam (2003) this warns us of the difficulty of making a distinction between state and shadow economies, particularly in the ex-USSR. This is because, depending on one another, the state and shadow economy form two aspects of a single economy and, actually, each operation may involve both legal and illegal aspects. Indeed, it is impossible to operate completely within the law all of the time (2003:6). The boundary between legal and illegal is not sharp, especially in the former USSR. The perception people have of what is legal and illegal is determined by morality and often localized. Therefore any such phenomena should be contextualized and western definitions avoided.

To further complicate the picture, there is the political and economic function covered by the *elektrichka*. Papava and Khaduri (1997:30-31) remark that amongst those who call themselves entrepreneurs in post communist countries, many are former Party figures and former directors in whose behaviour it is very difficult to find the merits possessed by Western type entrepreneurs. They are able to carry out political lobbying to obtain favourable conditions for their work; and they are able to hamper competition in the country, aware that this would entail the arrival of quality goods on 'their' market, which is dominated by 'their' seconded goods<sup>60</sup>. Smugglers address this discrepancy, making up for the low quality of goods and improving choices for customers, by breaking the circle of a seconded goods economy run by local entrepreneurs.

In addition, trade-smuggling on the *elektrichka* has the function of making up for the failure of the state. The *elektrichka* is a breath of fresh air in the failure of post-MSSR (Moldovan Socialist Soviet Republic) politicians to take care of their citizens. Thanks to the *elektrichka*, people can still earn money despite unemployment. People can still find goods, despite shortages. Barely legal actions have the function of cooling down the social climate and avoiding an extreme level of discontent that could cause further unrest.

Despite the fact that the shadow economy is negatively perceived by economists who see it as a loss for state finances, and by those who see it as fiscal fraud, contextualization shows the specificities of the *elektrichka* case. In this case, the shadow economy is the response of local traders to an imposed monopoly by local businessmen, characterised by a deficit of goods (especially quality goods), high prices and a lack of jobs.

Do you have a tomato? Scenes of 'legal' corruption

Social scientists do not always agree on a definition for corruption. In anthropology there is the recent tendency to contextualize the exchange of goods or favours before labelling them as 'corrupt' acts, since in many non-western cultures gift exchange is basic to everyday relations and paves the way for economic networks. As Werner (2002) has highlighted in her study on corruption in Kazakhstan, it is not always easy to distinguish gifts from bribes, in whatever form they are presented. This is also the case with the *elektrichka*, which supports trading activities in the context of a Moldovan state that is tacitly to blame for a lack of interest in the concerned regions and for living conditions that are so low that supplements to the salary or pension are necessary for survival.

Both state officials and ordinary people expect to benefit from the *elektrichka*. In examining widespread and explicit corruption it is useful to recall a case study analysed by Temple and Petrov (2004). They found that, contrary to the norm (where corruption is discovered, and people and institutions who are implicated are discredited), in Russian educational institutions the "transparency" of the process of corruption, including sometimes even the setting of an official price list, is 'not harmful' for the corruption process. This is also the case with the *elektrichka*: the fact that everybody knows how things work is far from a hindrance.

As wages are very low on both sides of the border, the situation is comfortable for the government and its employees: by tolerating widespread corruption, the Ukrainian and Moldovan states do not have to allocate large sums from the budget for the salary of state officials but, at the same time, as it is well known that the meagre salary will be topped up with additional "provisions", it is still possible to recruit people to work on such a low wage.

The ticket control is the first opportunity for 'corruption'. The whole trip Chisinau-Odessa costs 13 *Hryvnia* (around two Euros) but one can get along with less by paying the Ukrainian inspector and then the Moldovan counterpart. The price varies according to the length of the route and for students there is a "special price".

On the Ukrainian side of the Ukrainian-Moldovan border, everything is relatively calm. If success in smuggling things into Poland depends on the mood of the officers and the quantity of goods, here it is simpler, it depends on the price. It has been remarked that, whilst in the western world bribes are given for actions that the law does not allow, in the

post-Soviet case bribes in the great majority of instances are given for entirely lawful actions (Papava & Khaduri 1997:25).

The customs officer goes back and forth handing out a customs declaration to those with luggage. The form will remain blank; its only function is to envelop the five *Hryvnia* bills. A newcomer is rapidly integrated; he just has to ask what the price is and will be updated by more experienced colleagues. One bill for small luggage, more as the load increases. Everybody hides most of the valuable goods under petty items such as paper or pencils. The trick here is to move objects around and convince officials that one has little (in value) in order to pay as little as possible.

Passport control moves along smoothly too but, as the holder of the only EU passport in the train, I had the honour of dealing with officers and speaking with them.

Normally they simulate a problem with the documents and expect you to offer money to 'regulate' the matter, but on one occasion the officer called over a colleague and they took me into an empty corridor and, while stamping my passport, asked for a present (*prezent dlya pogranychnykh*). I grabbed my stamped passport and returned to the carriage, not responding to the repeated requests that followed my retreat, *a prezent?* in a mixed tone of surprise and rage. The routine practice of "giving and taking" under communism has turned into often institutionalised, widespread corruption (Temple & Petrov 2004) reaching paradoxical levels in Ukrainian society<sup>61</sup> even though Yushchenko, the newly elected President (2005), has promised to eradicate it.

The Moldovan side is more complicated. There is no checkpoint and people have to be ready to be checked at any time. Boxes are distributed around the train with the hope that they remain unnoticed. Another common strategy is to invite the whole family to share the purchases after the first Moldovan station. The family beside me included: the grandmother, a relative who was not introduced to me and two nephews of around 16 years. They probably had different surnames in their passports in order to pass themselves off as strangers. Nevertheless the officer in this case understood that they were together and, after long negotiations, directed them off the train.

The *elektrichka* is, surprisingly, the safest and cheapest way to run this kind of business. Transdnistrian officials are not involved in the process and this lowers the costs. The trip by car is

perhaps more interesting as it opens different possibilities.

Several informants reported the level of corruption of Transdnistrian officers as extremely high, this is why most of those going by bus to Odessa come back by train, not wanting to risk travelling by bus with full bags.

As suggested, institutionalised corruption helps to regulate the system. Nevertheless, sometimes it may go too far, falling into a paradox and revealing the mere (and very human) wish to get easy extra money from the casual traveller. As one informant complained, border officers were capable of asking for anything they could take, and another reported the following conversation:

- "Do you have, by chance, a dollar?"
- "No!"
- "A tomato?"
- "...No!"
- "A cucumber?" ...

Finally, I experienced, as have others, the threat of "pay or we will not let you pass".

In this game, is it possible to find out who is the victim and who is the perpetrator? Using the threefold classification—victims, sources of corruption and accomplices—used by Miller et al. (2000) and the observations made by Temple and Petrov (2004) concerning corruption in higher education institutions, citizens are not "victims." Rather, given the existence of a price list, they should be seen as accomplices.

According to Palmer (1983), we can define corruption as the "use of public office for private advantage". Temple and Petrov (2004:86) have quite a radical approach to this. They refuse to acknowledge a grey area existing between legality and illegality; even 'petty corruption' is able to bring a nation to its knees. A more relative approach, that seems more appropriate to the Moldovan context, is suggested by Rasanayagam (2003) who reported for Uzbekistan that, informally, some interviewees believed that a "little corruption" does not hurt anyone. Moreover, we have a moral justification developed out of necessity, which is quite common to a number of cultures (some would argue to many cultures). In southern Italian cultures, for instance, moral justification is given for all sorts of illegal acts on the basis that the concerned person has children to feed (*chill ü pat' e' creature*, [he is a father]). This highlights similarities that Putnam (1993) has also

explored.<sup>62</sup> Evidence suggests a fruitful comparison can be made with Putnam (1993) who shows how the functioning of civil society may be hindered by pre-existing kinship structures.

To support this argument one can call upon Harrison (1999), who reported that corruption in Africa was considered by some social scientists as a mere infusion of a culture of traditional gift-giving into the bureaucracy following the logic of family, village or tribe loyalty. In the same way, corruption is not an example of the degradation of society, rather in the case of the *elektrichka*, it has a function of generating an independent, and uncontrollable, economic system in which all the actors are happy—with the result of limiting economic discontent and avoiding social tensions. The contextualization of ‘corruption’ leads to the understanding that the way the system is organized—informal exchanges, bribing, favours—is the best option given the national political and economic context, especially in the Transdnistrian republic. In a country where the state and economic elites are more interested in the preservation and creation of their profits than in the welfare of people, where unemployment is high and wages are extremely low, condemning corruption has little meaning. In this case, where the state fails to protect its citizens, from (what in a Western vision is labelled) ‘corruption’, such activities can be viewed as one way for a population to survive. Ukrainian, Moldovan and Transdnistrian governments are unable to guarantee decent standards for their citizens who therefore have to work out their own ways to survive.

### Conclusion

In a situation of stalemate, where international actors are unable to intervene and local elites are glad to preserve the current *status quo*, the *elektrichka* may be understood as an example of “the best we can do given the current political situation”.

In this respect, the *elektrichka* seems to be a theatre for a play with few losers. Given the crystallisation of the Moldovan crisis, when few people are willing, or allowed, to invest in Moldova, goods are hard to find and money scarcely circulates, people have to find a way out. This situation is comfortable for political and economic elites concerned to keep control over the country or simply seeking new economic opportunities. Border officers are also quite happy as they can receive some benefits and top up their salary, something they do out of necessity, living in one of the most depressed areas of the region. Finally, ordinary people can break up the vicious circle of the crisis and introduce new goods and earn some money.

Nevertheless, as Bovi (2003) remarked, the shadow economy is generally related to institutional failure. Hence, in this case, there is a loser and this is the state itself. A weak state means uncontrolled revenues; no taxes paid on income; and, even more importantly, a distorted perception of the role of the state. The state is perceived as limiting initiative and activities and bringing no real advantage to the loyal citizen. As Bovi (2003:67) notes, where the state is able to protect its citizens and offer some advantages and perspectives in exchange for loyalty, people would be more willing to act in the frame of legality. Given the present situation in the region, this is still a faraway option in oldova and Ukraine. In a region with strong emigration<sup>63</sup>, the *elektrichka* is to be seen as another strategy of survival for Moldovans (as well as for the Ukrainian officials) who cannot count on their state institutions.

In transition countries such as Ukraine and Moldova, the dynamics hereby analyzed offer themselves to different interpretations. From the view of Western political analysts, the weakness of the state (its inability to control economic and social processes) encourages the shadow economy, which in turn feeds corruption. This is viewed as problematic in that it brings no revenue to the state and prevents the state from securing decent life standards to its citizens. In an alternative vision, the weak state feeds a circle of smuggling and corruption, and can challenge its traditional responsibilities as welfare dispenser since it gives birth to a circle of functioning transactions where people themselves are the dispensers of welfare without passing through state channels; traders can earn what they need to eat; customs officers can round up their wages; and future purchasers can have access to goods that they would otherwise never get. Given the delicateness of the issue it is up to the reader to avail which one of the two above mentioned interpretations reflects the realities of the *elektrichka*.

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### Notes

<sup>37</sup> The literary translation of the word is grandmother, but in Soviet terminology the word designates an elderly lady, normally over 50. After post Soviet reforms such individuals have been struggling to make ends meet, living on the minimal pensions that are not sufficient for survival. Often they have to invent other ways to top up their meager income.

<sup>38</sup> In this train there are two kinds of fourth class. By paying one *Hryvnia* (1 Euro= 6,2 Hryvnia in February 2006) people gained the right to sit in the TV wagon and watch old-fashioned action movies for five hours.

<sup>39</sup> 'Borders are elementary spatial structures of linear form with the function of geopolitical discontinuity and mark, reference, on the three registers of the real, symbolic and imaginary' (author's translation).

<sup>40</sup> For a description of how this happens, see the section on Corruption.

<sup>41</sup> The first time I entered Moldova I was shocked that as a Westerner I was not checked. I had to run after the first official I saw to get my passport stamped and, even so, the result was a lazy glance at my passport and no stamp. Failure to produce evidence of legal entrance into the territory can result in a fine in other former Soviet republics whereas in Moldova this does not seem to be the case.

<sup>42</sup> The most common exception is a temporary state of emergency that one state can call upon. In such a case, the state is entitled to re-introduce border checks temporarily. One of the most recent cases is the border control which was carried out in Portugal during the European Cup, but random controls on cars and coaches often take place on route, for example, between Bruxelles-Paris.

<sup>43</sup> I was informed that the trip by car is much more complicated as it involves police controls before and after the Transdnistrian border.

<sup>44</sup> In the case of a bus, the bus driver collects the money and hands it to a border official obtaining unofficial permission to pass the border. The impression I gained during my border crossings is that, even at the checkpoint, a sort of jungle law exists. Those who are able to get the money from travellers will do it, regardless of hierarchies and role. I was once stopped by an official who did not want to let me pass as I refused to pay a bribe. Then I met somebody less important who allowed me to pass for a much lower amount of money (8 Euros). As he was starting the procedure, other people got interested and I heard a voice of another one saying "*Ya tozhe khochu babki*" [I want the money too]. The translation of the word "*babki*" is not literally money but gives the sense). Bribery has its specific rules in this part of the world; for instance officers never put the money into their pocket until they are alone so that they can always drop it on the floor if caught.

<sup>45</sup> Registration in Ukraine was required within three days of entering the country. The same practice is still valid in most CIS countries.

<sup>46</sup> It was also reported, a few years after the border was set up, that the situation was so unclear that a Westerner could dare to go to Ukraine from Moldova and back without a visa. The number of Westerners who used that means of transport from Odessa is

extremely small; therefore my attention is on the circulation of goods rather than persons.

<sup>47</sup> 'The border marks the point where the territorial competences expire' (author's translation).

<sup>48</sup> An analysis of the conflict between Moldova and Transdnistria goes beyond the competences of this paper. Nevertheless it might be useful to recall that several scholars see the 'artificiality' of the conflict; Kuzio (2004) wrote the conflict is not about ethnicity, as most Russians do not live in Transdnistria but in Moldova. Even in Transdnistria, Moldovans form the majority, although Russian is the predominant language. As early as 1991 Devetak (1991:130) notes that "...the easiest way for some ethno or political elite to disguise its incompetence with regard to running the country is to create the stereotype that some other nation is the cause for all social, economic or other grievances of the members of their own nation, with the ruling elite being left as the sole defender of 'their nation' against the bad intentions of any kind of 'other nations'". In this case too, it appears that neither Moldovan nor Transdnistrian political elites are willing to give up part of the political and economic power obtained in an attempt to find a solution. This is also the opinion of an OSCE observer in the region, Neukirch (2001: 131), who states that Transdnistria has become a 'black hole' in the region from where organized crime can operate, goods can be smuggled and money can be laundered. He stresses the economic advantages of having an anarchic area in Moldova and highlights the fact that "influential figures in the security forces might well dare shop in Chisinau today, but they would feel much more uneasy should a political settlement be reached" (2001:133). He concludes that OSCE offers have "failed to capture the interest of the current Transdnistrian leaders and to address certain elite interests in Chisinau" and "...only an economic crisis might help out" (2001: 133).

<sup>49</sup> Papava and Khaduri state "...[seconded goods] are inferior, substandard and even unsafe products...by offering these pseudoproducts for lower prices, they (businessmen) capture considerable segments of the market and receive significant incomes, to the detriment of consumers' interest." (1997:30)

<sup>50</sup> Moldovans are not the only people using travelling abroad as a strategy to survive. Malinovskaya (2003) discusses the same phenomenon in Ukraine in "Poezdki za granitsu kak strategiya vyzhivaniya v usloviyakh perekhodnogo perioda: opyt Ukrainy" [journeys abroad as a survival strategy in transition conditions: the case of Ukraine] in *Trudovaya*

*Migratsiya v SNG. Sotsyialnie i ekonomicheskie efekty.* Moskva.

<sup>51</sup>Odessa was the city of opportunities, where people could feel at home regardless of their status and nationality and Odessians are proud of the fact that the city, even in its darkest moments, was the best refurbished city in Ukraine. The expression 'Odessa mama' indicates that the city would feed anybody living in it, like a mother, and the popular quote '*Mama grechanka, papa turek, ya Odessity*' (my mother is Greek, my father is Turkish, I am Odessian) highlights the fact that 'Odessian is not a status, it is a nationality' (personal communication). For a more detailed description of the economic opportunities provided by the city see Herly (1987).

<sup>52</sup>The city has a tradition of trading: from its foundation -when Greek and Italians imposed themselves as important trading groups - to the incoming Jews, Armenians and Moldovans (Herly 1987) and, more recently, Turks. But any inhabitant of Odessa is able to get what he needs, regardless of his/her nationality.

<sup>53</sup>Evidence is the *odesskyj vorovanyj chaj*: during Soviet times the black tea used by millions of people was the classic Georgian tea [*gruzinskij chaj*], while at the beginning of the 1990s it was possible to find tea produced in Odessa through mixing the popular Georgian tea with some quality tea imported from the east.

<sup>54</sup>Odessa's markets were, and are, the place where any item can be found for sale if you are willing to pay. I have heard of Japanese cars and motorcycles shipped for a few dollars and this is just the tip of the iceberg.

<sup>55</sup>Clothes from "Italy" and "Slovakia" can also easily be found (Nikolski 2005).

<sup>56</sup>The typology of goods and the way of smuggling has changed over time. One of my informants reported "...we used to trade boots and there was a moment, at the border, when all the doors of the train got blocked [by us] (he smiles) so that officials were unable to come onboard to check us...then the train simply started again..."

<sup>57</sup>We could even define it as a sort of legal, family trade.

<sup>58</sup>There is a sophisticated procedure of smuggling goods that changes from one border to another, from one means of transport to another, which could be the object of further investigation. It will be sufficient for the present analysis to mention that 'sharing' means that in order to smuggle 'legally' some passengers will ask other passengers not carrying alcohol or cigarettes to take a bottle and a packet of cigarettes

and pretend it is theirs while crossing the border, later returning it to the real owner.

<sup>59</sup>Recently, given the popularity of the sharing method, officers started to be less tolerant and check not each passenger, but the family as a whole, limiting the amount of goods purchased per family, not per person.

<sup>60</sup>Papava and Khaduri (1997:31) continue that competition and the welfare of customers is harmed by such entrepreneurs. In a 'healthy' market environment they should either lower the prices or improve the quality of goods produced. Unfortunately, very few post socialist businessmen consider this option. It is much easier to persuade authorities to pursue a strong protectionist policy (erect a 'Great Wall of China'), using calls to patriotism as a basis for justification'.

<sup>61</sup>It is worth mentioning: the assistant of the *Gubernator* [a sort of regional president] of Kharkhiv, interviewed after his boss had to leave the post after being accused of corruption, complained about the new administration "they have not yet sent us any souvenirs". The interview was transmitted on ERA, one of the main TV channels in Ukraine on January 28, 2004.

<sup>62</sup>Further, Wanner (2005) has also explored the shift - from state to subject - in morality in societies where the state is absent and the rule of law not respected. Using life histories from Ukraine she challenges the Western interpretation of the word morality: is it immoral to pay a bribe to win a process when the man who sued you also bribed the city administration to produce evidence against you? For a more complete analysis, see Wanner (2005).

<sup>63</sup>Experts say at least 20 percent of Moldova's active population - or about 300,000 people - work abroad, although the real figure could be as high as 1 million (RFE, Moldova: Mass migration threatens the country's future by Eugen Tomiuc, 29 October 2004).

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