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## **An Interview with Silviu Taras, the deputy mayor of Romanian town Chichis**

**Ryan Scott**

### **Abstract:**

Silviu Taras, the mayor of Romanian town Chichis, describes how local Romanian people perceive the case of forest workers who have been misled and taken advantage of in the Czech Republic.

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Chichis, located in Covasna county, central Romania, was one of the many villages and towns where people were recruited to work for sub-contractors of Less and Forest. Average monthly wages in the region are between 150 and 250 Euro. For this reason, many people sought work in other regions or even abroad. Chichis, like many other towns in the region, has a long established Hungarian minority with which many of the men who were recruited identify. I spoke with Silviu Taras, who is both the deputy mayor of Chichis and a history teacher in Sfântu Gheorghe, to get a more informed perspective of the lives of the men who had been exploited.

### **Ryan Scott: What was your impression of the case now and your impression before?**

Silviu Taras: My first impression was that I could not believe it. In the first place, I thought these were stories. It was also due to the fact that I had heard several versions of it from different people. They were not always very precise when telling the whole story. There were also parts that were not factual. But when the first guy from Chichis came home earlier than the rest and then the others were returning with pretty much the same stories, I thought something was up. Even though in Romania they estimate that about 40% of the labor is on the black market, human rights and human dignity is still somehow respected. Of course, we have this image that things are bad in Romania; nicer, more democratic and law-abiding societies are western societies, like how we consider Czech society. That's why this case was surprising for us. And also for me, this is a case of dignity. They were cheated. And of course it has a material, a very strong material, component. They were cheated out of money. It's not only the

guys. There were hundreds of other victims, because the wife and kids were planning on him coming home for the first time in their lives with a lot of money. And they were planning each penny .

**RS: When did your opinion change from being somewhat sceptical at the beginning to really believing?**

ST: When the stories were confirmed by the retelling and retelling several times by other workers who had been in the Czech Republic.

**RS: What's been the effect of the last two days of meeting some of the other men from the other villages?**

ST: Actually, the situation was even worse than I thought because these guys are not in such a miserable condition here in Chichis. As you could hear, they had plans for making their lives better. They are not starving at home. They are young people, most of them without families. Only a few of them had small children, whom they left at home. And, okay, this experience was really bad, but the size of the case was clear for me, especially when we saw the crowd waiting for us in that village Batanii Mari. There were many more people. The size was different, and of course, it also added drama because there were different people. Not our kind of people from Chichis, but really poor ones, who have really bad living conditions. (For example, a second group from nearby Zalan, whom Mr Taras introduced me to, live considerably more modest lives as farmers and forestry workers in Romania. The wages promised in the Czech Republic were especially appealing.) And of course, for them it was an even bigger disappointment, a bigger tragedy. It's a kind of social tragedy. It's not a social drama anymore. I think it is exaggerated what I will say now, but in a way, in order to proceed with this, it is not about numbers just as the Holocaust is not about the numbers. It's about personal lives and the personal lives with names and with fates that were broken by this event. As you have seen, they came home and thank God most of them are in the same condition as they were before going, so it's not like they are worse off now. But they had this opportunity to meet the European Union. For me, that counts as well. Quite a lot of people are sceptical about the European Union and what Europe means for us. And this is quite a strong argument. Whenever I said, 'Oh come on, it should be good for us because they are more civilized. They have laws that take individual and human rights into consideration.' From now on whenever I argue with someone who is sceptical about the European Union, they have an argument which I cannot contest.

**RS: What do you think the men's feelings are now that they have been presented with papers from the lawyers? What's your impression?**

ST: Although we are stressing that this gives them a chance, only a small chance, and also we were underlining each time that signing the form will not mean that they will get the money very soon, my problem is that we have generated, regenerated, the whole situation with giving them hope again, which means the burden of the situation is resting on us because we were the ones who made contact with the people and made promises and that we will go on and try to do something in order to solve this situation.

**RS: What could the Romanian authorities do in this case?**

ST: They function as every politician functions. Not only in Romania, but in all democratic societies, they have to do something to get the trust of the electorate, so in order to have a bigger impact on the case, the better it will be for them for to be the knight of some poor people who were cheated by mobsters from the Czech Republic. It would give them some symbolic capital. They can use it in the next year because it's an election year, so I pretty much think they will be interested. There are three parties, and since the electoral threshold is 5% and the Hungarians are 7% of the Romanian population, if they will compete against each other, the chances that none of them will get into the Parliament is quite big.

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