

Georgia's Red Bridge Ordeal

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Traders trying to cross from Azerbaijan into Georgia are forced to endure a bureaucratic nightmare.

At the customs controls at Krasny Most (or Red Bridge) on the Georgian-Azerbaijani border, long lines of buses, lorries and people wait to cross the frontier.

A series of exasperating customs procedures and other checks leave many travellers looking exhausted. "I have just two bags and I'm going on foot, but the Georgian customs officers still found fault with me and haven't let me across for several hours now," said Teimuraz Mamedov, an Azerbaijani heading for Georgia. The tomatoes in his bags were going bad in the heat.

Crossing the busiest border post between Azerbaijan and Georgia - supposedly the two friendliest states in the region - is slow, agonising and an object lesson in how underpaid officials use a complicated system to exact maximum personal profit for themselves.

At Krasny Most, the traffic - comprising small traders ferrying household equipment and clothes and farmers laden with agricultural produce - goes mostly one way, from Azerbaijan into Georgia.

The travellers have to negotiate their way through customs control, visa authorities (Georgians and Azeris do not need visas to visit each other's countries, but require an entry and exit stamp in their passports), and plant, veterinary and health ministry checks.

They have no choice but to put up with the endless delays. "It's no secret that for many people delivering different goods from Azerbaijan to Georgia and selling them there is the only way they can earn a living," said Eteri Kalanadze from the Georgian town of Rustav.

The bus in which she was travelling back to Georgia had been standing for more than two hours in a queue. "And this happens every time," said Kalanadze, who travels from Georgia through Azerbaijan to third countries to buy goods.

Georgian customs officials insist the hold-ups have less to do with the number of checks than the fact that many of the traders lack the right sales purchase documentation for their goods - which are required for items worth more than 700 laris (around 350 US dollars).

"They deliberately create a lot of small and large problems for us - for example they ask us for documents which we don't have, as we do not do our shopping in supermarkets. We look for cheap wholesale markets or go directly to farmers so what kind of stamps and signatures can we have?" said Kalanadze.

In the absence of documentation, traders have to pay an import duty determined by local customs officers. Since the latter is invariably less than official tax rates, there's little incentive for traders to produce sales documents.

Georgia's two most recent tax revenue ministers, Mikhail Machavariani and Levan Dzneladze, have both outlined ambitious programmes for reforming the customs system, but neither has proposed simplifying procedures.

In this situation, it is easy to understand why, according to the Association of Young Economists, 95 per cent of those carrying goods across the border at Krasny Most try to ease their way through the border controls with “tips”.

The Association of Young Economists is currently working with Armenian and Azerbaijani colleagues on a joint project to try and make customs procedures more transparent. One of their main conclusions is that frontier officials often don't understand customs legislation. And that's not surprising, as the experts also found it to be unclear.

The group believes wholesale changes are needed, but in the meantime proposes a short-term solution in the form of a joint mobile customs group, consisting of officers from the two countries, which would attempt to speed up the flow of traders across the frontier.

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