

What happened to the Ukraine?

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Travel can take you to many unplanned places. In my search for home I had planned to cover a lot of East Europe. It was after all the place everyone said was the 'New Europe.' The Ukraine was perhaps a little extreme in hindsight, but at the same time, that's where the risk was. It was either that, or head to the Balkans. So I set my mind on getting a taste of true and new eastern Europe. A quick trip into the Ukraine, down to Moldova and back out into Romania.

I was in Krakow, Poland and with Oskar, my big Polish friend I had met way back in Portugal several years before. I had purchased a Eurolines bus ticket that night to take me to L'viv the next morning. A simple task accomplished the day before thanks to a ticket lady at the Eurolines office. She got the usual questions from me about, when it arrives, how long it took, and where exactly does it arrive?

We sat on the bus lane area waiting for the 9.50pm bus to arrive. The problem was, it was now 10.10pm and still no bus. Now having taken previous Eurolines trips This did not worry me too much. But at 10.30pm we grew anxious. Oskar needed to get going for his train to Warsaw that night. But before leaving we asked a few attendants where the bus was.

They all shook their heads and said there was no bus to L'viv on a Saturday. As Oskar headed off I waited until 11pm at the deserted station. No other passengers around. Shit happens. Buses, break down, and time tables get mixed up. I gathered up my bags and headed off to find a hostel.

The next day I arrived early at the Eurolines office to be confronted with an unhelpful pimply faced student type. I explained the situation.

"There is nothing I can do," he replied.

Now of all things to say. That was not one of them. I showed the attendant my ticket, and said there was plenty I was about to do unless this gets resolved.

The attendant took the ticket and began typing away. "The bus schedule is correct. You must have missed it."

I came down hard. "No. I was here with my Polish friend last night 30 minutes before the bus was due, and stayed at bus lane number 4 until 11pm. The attendants last night said no bus came either. I am not a stupid tourist standing up someone's ass, but as I have sweet bugger all to do now. I am prepared to sit here all day and night, until this is resolved. Okay?"

The attendant stared at me for a second, then began typing again. "The system said the bus was here last . . ."

"Then we have a problem." I interrupted. "Would you like me to call my witness who was here last night?"

I wanted my money back, or a solution. And, could see it was not going to happen with the attendant. I asked him to call his boss.

After some more typing the attendant handed me a phone. The voice at the other end spoke only Polish. I glared at the attendant and asked if he was truly stupid, or would he like me to get the

police for insulting me.
He spoke on the phone for a while before hanging up. "That was the bus driver last night."

"Your boss, or the bus driver?"

"The owner of the bus, and the driver," replied the attendant. "He said he was here at 9.30 last night, and left at 10pm."

There was some silence before he continued. "He also says that due to the mix up, you can have another ticket for tonight."

This was not good. If the driver and owner was the same, then I did not need more crap tonight. I had already made up my mind I would not be taking the bus.

"I would like a refund."

"This is not possible."

"Why not? Eurolines's bus did not show up, and now you are offering me a new ticket. What about the expense of staying in Poland for another day?"

The attendant pulled out an A4 sheet of paper with lots of writing. "It is not a Eurolines's bus ticket you have sir. It is a Eurobus ticket."

I looked at the spotted face in front of me and blinked. I knew what was happening. "I bought the ticket here, in Eurolines Office, for the Eurolines journey to the Ukraine."

"Yes," nodded the attendant. "But the service is run by the Eurobus company."

"So you lease out to another company? Then let them refund me."

"It is the bus company who can issue a refund. And, they actually leased out the service to the owner of that bus."

"The man you just spoke with?"

"Yes, and he says you can have a new ticket. They don't give refunds."

A complete and utter swindle. I called Oskar and handed the phone to the attendant. There was much shouting from the phone's speaker, and much shuffling of papers by the attendant. Oskar called my back as I sat outside hunched over a map of Europe.

He was convinced it was a typical scam run by the company's in Poland. When he got back to Krakow next week he would follow it up. In the mean time he told me of a train I could take to the border and 3 transfers later end up in Lviv. I thanked my friend and returned to my map. I pulled out a train timetable from the station next door, and spotted a train heading to Budapest that afternoon.

If I had to do this all over again, it would have turned out the same way. Unless I video taped the whole 24 hour period and brought 4 Polish and possibly 2 Ukrainian speaking lawyers

with me.

What it meant was that I lost out on a sizeable chunk of my journey. On the positive side, the train to Budapest was fine, and my journey continued. I would have loved to have seen the Ukraine, and Moldova. The black sea and it's coast had a remote potential for home. Who knows? Instead I was heading to Budapest, a city who's name I liked. And a city I never thought I would get to see.