



Matthew Swibel



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The Bribe Buster

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Genuinely upstanding government mi  e about as common in Georgia as honest tax returns. Which makes cl  ashing Roman Bokeria, 31, all the more conspicuous. As deputy chairman of Georgia's Chamber of Control, the equivalent of the Government Accountability Office in the U.S., Bokeria regularly flags wrongdoing at state-owned businesses and in the offices of fellow bureaucrats. His phone messages often contain loosely veiled threats about his career and life.

Some of the governmental departments his agency audits: state bureaucracies overseeing seaports, TV, telecommunications. So far Bokeria has squealed on government managers taking kickbacks from private gold mines and railcar construction firms—embarrassing wealthy executives along the way. “No one should think they’re above getting caught,” he says defiantly.

The odds are stacked against him. Until recently auditors on his staff of 600 got paid \$50 per month—just below the country’s living wage. “Such a system pushes them to take a bribe,” says Bokeria. Confidential Chamber of Control documents obtained by FORBES show hush money starts at \$1,000 and can exceed \$100,000. These documents allege that before Bokeria’s arrival the auditors kept 30% themselves, 25% went to their direct bosses and the remainder was split evenly among the brass. Today some 70% of audits reveal fishy bookkeeping and missing funds—so the dirty-money spigot flows often.

Bokeria, who used a USAID grant to spend seven months training at the GAO in Washington in 2002, also cut his teeth at an Internal Revenue Service field office in Atlanta. He thinks adopting U.S. auditing standards will “dramatically decrease the level of corruption.” It may also help him become president one day, which, much to the chagrin of Georgia’s old guard, ranks high on his to-do list.

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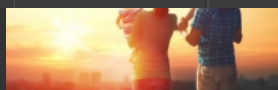
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