



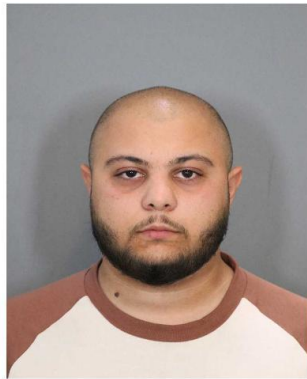
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PRESS RELEASE

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Laurentiu Baceanu



Alexandru Vasile

Two Romanian Nationals Posing as Immigration Agents Charged with Hate Crimes for Targeting Hispanic Victims in Street Robberies across Orange County

Defendants preyed on street food vendor, laborers and others they believed are undocumented immigrants fearful of being deported to steal cash; Men have been charged with kidnapping, robbery in Contra Costa County and are wanted for similar crimes across the Western United States.

SANTA ANA, Calif. – Two Romanian nationals have been charged with hate crimes for posing as United States immigration agents while targeting Hispanic victims across Orange County whom they believed are undocumented immigrants fearful of deportation to steal their cash. The men are accused of wearing fake law enforcement badges around their necks while they spoke to their victims in Spanish and threatened to have them deported if they refused to hand over money and debit cards. They had a gun in their car during at least one of the robberies.

The two suspects, who are believed to be in the United States illegally and have ties to Romanian organized criminal organizations, have also been charged with felony kidnapping, false imprisonment, and robberies in Contra Costa County, and are suspected to have carried out similar crimes in Santa Clara County, and possibly in the states of Washington and New York.

In Orange County, Laurentiu Baceanu, of Romania, and Alexandru Vasile, of Romania, were each charged Monday with 11 felony counts of second-degree robbery and 11 felony hate crime enhancements in connection with 11 different victims in Orange County. In many of the robberies they identified themselves as agents with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), police officers, or FBI agents. They each face a maximum sentence of 29 years in state prison if convicted on all counts.

Baceanu and Vasile are being held without bail after Orange County prosecutors successfully argued for their ongoing risk to public safety, reading in open court a statement from an Anaheim police report that one of the suspects confirmed he “targeted Hispanic males because they have cash, they are not smart, they do not fight and they are scared due to their immigration status and would not call the police.”

Authorities are asking anyone who believes they may have been a victim of similar crimes to contact your local police department or Orange County Crime Stoppers at 855-TIP-OCCS or www.occrimestoppers.org.

Baceanu and Vasile were also charged Monday in Contra Costa County with one felony kidnapping to commit robbery, one felony first degree automated teller machine robbery, one felony count of second-degree robbery, one felony count of false imprisonment by violence, and one felony count of grand theft of personal property. They are scheduled to be tried in Orange County first before facing charges in Contra Costa County.

In January, Orange County District Attorney Todd Spitzer and Orange County law enforcement announced the arrest of 48 suspects believed to be tied to Romanian organized crime had been arrested across Orange County in a countywide operation to crack down on skimming operations targeting recipients of public assistance funds intended to pay for basic necessities including diapers, formula and food. Among those arrested in that crackdown was Florin Duduianu, one of Romania’s most wanted criminals, who was subsequently indicted by a federal grand jury and convicted of fraudulently accessing government assistance funds.

California lost more than \$108 million in CalWORKS benefits (cash aid to dependent families) in 2023. These “skimming” related losses occur primarily during the first five days of every month as thieves targeted CalWORKS cash-aid benefits administered to California residents through Electronic Benefit Transfer Accounts (EBT).

Many of the suspects have been determined to have entered the United States through illegal border crossings and a lack of accurate criminal history has made it difficult for prosecutors to argue for higher bail or no bail. For the first time in 25 years, the San Diego region has become the top destination for migrants coming across the southern United States border illegally, according to the U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

“Criminals with ties to organized Romanian crime are continuing to prey on the most vulnerable of victims here in Orange County and across the nation while using the porous southern border as a direct pipeline to enter the United States with the sole purpose of committing crimes. The State Department and the Department of Homeland Security are painfully aware of the significant risk Romanian organized crime rings pose to the United States, but while President Biden is busy forgiving millions and millions in student loans, he continues to ignore the most basic function of government – protecting public safety,” said Orange County District Attorney Todd Spitzer. “While their victims are struggling to put food on their table and a roof over their children’s heads, these thieves are being trained to carry out these sophisticated operations to prey on people they know are

unlikely to come forward to report being victimized and then using their money to help fund the lavish lifestyles that their victims could only dream about. The humiliation and fear these individuals inflicted on their victims because of their perceived ethnicity is nothing short of disgusting. In Orange County, we will not tolerate hate and any crime motivated by someone's ethnicity or race will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law."

On June 8, 2024, a street food vendor was selling food out of his cart in Tustin when he was approached by two men who approached him in a vehicle. Identifying themselves as police officers, the men, later identified as Baceanu and Vasile, are accused of asking for his identification and telling him that they were looking for counterfeit bills. They demanded money and if he refused to hand the cash over, they told him that he would be deported. They are accused of stealing \$380 in cash and his Mexican identification card.

On June 15, 2024, a man and his son were walking in the city of Tustin when two men in an Audi pulled up next to them and claimed to be FBI agents looking for a random man. After demanding their identification, they asked the father and son if the money in their wallets was real. The victims became suspicious and called police, but the men drove off with some of the victims' money.

The same day a man was riding his bicycle home from work in the city of Westminster when he was stopped by two men who claimed to be ICE agents who demanded his identification and money. They are accused of telling the victim that if he didn't hand his money over, he would be deported.

On June 17, 2024, a man was in the parking lot of a restaurant parking lot when two men pulled up next to him and identified themselves as immigration agents. They are accused of demanding to see his identification and then stealing cash along with the man's debit card and PIN.

On June 18, 2024, a man goes to the Westminster Police Department to report that he had money stolen out of his banking app along with cash and a debit card after handing his phone over to two men who stopped him on the street and identified themselves as ICE agents looking for a man who was counterfeiting money.

The same day a woman reported to Anaheim police that she had been flagged down by two men who claimed to be immigration workers who asked to see her immigration paperwork and then stole more than \$800 in cash from her.

On June 20, 2024, three men were in the parking lot of an Anaheim Home Depot when two men wearing badges around their neck drove up to them and identified themselves as police officers. After demanding to see their immigration paperwork, they stole cash from the men and drove away.

A short time later, a man walking on the street in Anaheim was approached by two men in a vehicle who identified themselves as ICE agents and threatened to take him to a deportation facility if he didn't hand over his wallet. They are accused of stealing more than \$600 in cash before throwing the wallet out of their SUV and driving away.

Five hours later, Anaheim police tracked down a blue Audi Q7 SUV in the city of Fullerton believed to be used in the two Anaheim robberies that day. Laurentiu Baceanu and Vasile Alexandru were arrested on suspicion of robbery.

Baceanu and Vasile have pleaded not guilty and are scheduled to appear in court for a pretrial hearing on July 2, 2024 in Department C57 at the Central Justice Center in Santa Ana.

Deputy District Attorney Gerard Gully of the TARGET/Gangs Unit is prosecuting this case.

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