



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

# The entry of Romania and Bulgaria into the Schengen area - a success that does not encourage others waiting in line

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From the outset, Bulgaria and Romania have taken a more demanding and longer path towards full integration into the EU than their Eastern European friends, with whom they spent almost half a century of shared life in the Soviet bloc.

They missed out on the big train of EU enlargement to the east in 2004, even though there was a plan to join the bloc with Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and the Baltic states.

They succeeded 3 years later, with great haste and a lot of unfinished businesses, some of which is still outstanding today.

The majority of Eastern Europeans waited for the admission, or has it been a matter of less exact and more political obstacles that got in the way due to the opposition of the so-called "old Europeans"?

In the last days of 2023, there was great relief in Bucharest and Sofia after the **removal** of the last obstacle to their entry into the shared area of cross-border movement.

"Today we can congratulate ourselves on this indisputable success of Bulgaria", said Nikolay Denkov, Bulgarian PM. His Romanian colleague Marcel Ciolacu also **celebrated**: "A lot of work was put into this national project. I thank everyone involved".

## The growth of the right inhibits expansion

Frustration in both countries has lasted since 2011. The European Commission then stated that both Romania and Bulgaria had to meet the conditions to be part of the Schengen area. It has been repeating its position year after year, but the 2 EU members remained behind the Schengen curtain.

A breakthrough happened in the last days of 2023 when the principal obstacle to the admission of Romania and Bulgaria - Austria - agreed to a compromise. Now, it is definite

that the 2 Balkan countries have become members of the Schengen Agreement, which will be applied from March 31 at airports and ports.

### Austria was the latest in a series of EU countries to block Romania and Bulgaria

Austria was the latest in a series of EU countries to block Romania and Bulgaria, allegedly fearing that their accession to Schengen would lead to more illegal migrants entering the EU.

However, as in many previous cases of vetoes on EU enlargement decisions, Austria was guided by internal political reasons. In the autumn of this year, parliamentary elections await the country, ahead of which support for right-wing forces, particularly the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), has been growing.

It recovered from a **scandal** in 2019, when its leader and then-Vice Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache, a favourite in the elections in the second half of the year, was caught in an attempt of bribery by a businessman with Russian contacts.

Given that illegal immigration is a first-class political issue in Austria, right-wing parties want to leave the impression of the strongest protector of national borders, and if the ambitions of the "younger brothers" in the EU to enter Schengen suffer, the stake is acceptable.

Austria's arguments, like those of some countries before it (the Netherlands) regarding the opposition to the entry of Romania and Bulgaria into the Schengen area, were never convincing.



*The EU persuaded Austria to compromise by promising to strengthen controls at the Romanian and Bulgarian border crossings as external points of entry into the EU*

Even though they raised the alarm because of the sudden increase in the influx of migrants after the COVID-19 pandemic, which is around 300,000 in the entire EU this year, only around 2% came through Bulgaria, for example, according to official Sofia data.

Austria's blocking of Romania and Bulgaria was difficult to defend given that Vienna did not apply the same standard to Croatia, which joined the Schengen area a year ago, even though it was on the same migration route as the other 2 Balkan states.

The EU persuaded Austria to compromise by promising to strengthen controls at the Romanian and Bulgarian border crossings as external points of entry into the EU. Also, the European border protection mission Frontex will be strengthened on the Romanian and Bulgarian corridors.

The final inclusion of Romania and Bulgaria in the Schengen system is an encouragement for the Union, because it showed that despite the difficult and slow process of reaching a consensus, it is still capable of maintaining internal cohesion.

## An unsolvable problem

Including 2 Balkan EU members in the Schengen area is a victory for those European policies that saw a significant response to Russia's efforts to weaken the bloc in the

accelerated expansion and strengthening of internal ties.

The slowness of enlargement due to bilateral torpedoing remains an almost intractable problem for the EU to establish internal solidity.

### **It took Romania and Bulgaria 13 years to overcome the obstacles set up by individual EU members**

It took Romania and Bulgaria 13 years to overcome the obstacles set up by individual EU members. But regardless of the final success, this does not end the idea of rapidly rounding up the EU space as a block that can resist the pressures of Russia.

Even though the newly admitted members of the Schengen area believe that the borderless regime will soon be extended to land crossings, perhaps even during this year, the EU has not precisely determined when that work will be completed.

Of the EU members, only 2 - Ireland and Cyprus - are not part of the Schengen area, and 6 more countries from the Western Balkans, and more recently Ukraine and Moldova, have been in line for EU membership for a long time.

Their progress is slower year by year, partly due to their unreadiness but also due to the still low mood within the EU to expand further. The experience of Romania and Bulgaria in this respect is not encouraging, as long as there is an open possibility that one of the bloc members will use the right to veto, guided by their internal reasons.