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Why does everyone win from the elimination of land border controls in Southeastern Europe?

The full Schengen area accession of Bulgaria and Romania will move Southeastern Europe closer to the center of Europe. Bulgarians and Romanians deserve to have the full status of European citizens in spite of competing geopolitical visions for their region. Even if the “fortress” mindset is strong in the region, the fall of the border is a huge success for the mentality of openness and the empowerment of the citizens as conditions for greater synchronization and people’s agency.

The proposal for elimination of land borders control in Southeastern Europe

Following Bulgaria and Romania accession to the Schengen area on 31 March 2024, but with border controls on the land borders, the proposal for elimination of border controls between Greece, Bulgaria and Romania was considered by some people in Sofia and Bucharest as an option that could exercise pressure for the full admission of Bulgaria and Romania to Schengen area. It was however an option, which the political elites in Sofia and Bucharest showed reluctance to adopt, because they didn’t have a lot of trust in each other, were not accustomed to co-operate (e.g. to manage movement of people and goods without border controls) and were skeptical even of the legal possibility to do it. Importantly, the European Commission did not reject the proposal on legal grounds, preferring instead to remain ambiguous as the Commission.

It might seem counterintuitive, but the fact that the proposal was rejected in January-February 2024 consecutively by the Bulgarian prime minister Nikolay Denkov¹ and the Romanian European commissioner Adina Vălean² showed that there was certain support for it among the population, as high-ranking politicians wouldn’t have bothered to counter it, as if it was irrelevant.

Following the 22 November 2024 meeting in Budapest of the internal ministers of Austria, Hungary, Romanian and Bulgaria, as well as the EU commissioner for home affairs Ylva Johansson, a political agreement was reached, which led to Austria’s acceptance that Bulgaria and Romania join Schengen through their terrestrial borders, while strengthening the controls on the Bulgarian-Turkish border by a joint group of 100 border guards from Austria, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. The joint document’s political will was adopted into a decision by the Justice and Home Affairs Council of the EU on 12 December 2024. It outlined the lifting of any border controls on Bulgarian-Greek borders on 1 January 2025, while the controls on the Bulgarian-Romanian and Romanian-Hungarian borders would remain for at least 6 months, but would be applied on the basis of risk assessment and on random basis.

That already constitutes a significant reduction in the border control, which is expected to be limited to a small number of cases to a part of the trucks and vehicles from outside of the Schengen area. At the same time, in the transitional period of six months it is expected that places for fiscal and other truck verification will be established within a perimeter of 20-30 km away from the border inside the territory of Bulgaria and Romania.

¹ K. Nikolov, *Bulgaria, Romania, Greece ‘mini Schengen’ would be illegal, says Denkov*, Euractiv, 02.02.2024, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/bulgaria-romania-greece-mini-schengen-would-be-illegal-says-denkov/>, visited on 30 December 2024.

² C. Turp-Balazs, *Why Bulgarian-Romanian hopes for a mini-Schengen were a non-starter*, Emerging Europe, 07.02.2024, <https://emerging-europe.com/analysis/why-bulgarian-romanian-hopes-for-a-mini-schengen-were-a-non-starter/>, visited on 30 December 2024.

Bulgaria and Romania completed the technical conditions for entering the Schengen area in 2011. Their painful waiting on the road to full Schengen area accession lasted for much more than a decade, because of the lack of political will to accept them among the older members. But even as they are now side by side with the older members of the free movement space, the proposal for a Bulgarian-Romanian mini-Schengen had its role to play at the level of people and elites in Southeastern Europe, as it was a proposal for the countries' self-determination. And it is curious to study to what extent its hypotheses for greater citizen empowerment via cross-border and regional action could now create real effect on the ground in Southeastern Europe.

Essence of the proposal and arguments in its support

In 2011, an anonymous Romanian political scientist ("The Rational Idealist") working for UNDP formulated the proposal for Bulgarian-Romanian Mini-Schengen Zone³ on his blog for the first time. He claimed that such an initiative would be a win-win situation for everyone, as it would allow the two countries to take a pro-active position against the lack of political will for their acceptance into the Schengen area (it appeared only in December 2023, when the agreement between Austria, Bulgaria and Romania allowed for a conditional entrance) and to prove they can manage free borders.

The first known formulation of the idea in Bulgarian media appeared in 2014 in an interview with the Romanian NGO trainer Codru Vrabie. In 2019 he explained in another interview that the initiative would increase the economic dynamics and the human interaction between Bulgarians and Romanians⁴. It would have also exerted pressure on EU countries, as it may have shown that the two countries can manage open borders. It was the lack of trust and innovation among politicians that prevented any step towards the Mini-Schengen Zone. Another NGO representative – a Scotsman David Bisset, defined the Mini-Schengen Zone as a tool for Bulgaria and Romania to have self-determination and development with greater reliance on their own resources⁵.

Counterarguments

The political elites and the foreign policy experts in Bulgaria and Romania have always been rejecting the idea of the elimination of land border controls or have even avoided to discuss it publicly out of fear that mere talking about it would legitimize it. An argument against it is that the two countries would self-isolate themselves from the Schengen area if they go for an alternative option⁶. After they formally become part of it in March 2024 (without the land borders) and could emit Schengen visas, other arguments were advanced, namely that the elimination of border controls would put a lot of pressure on the Romanian-Hungarian border (Adina Vălean) or that such an initiative is illegal (former Bulgarian prime minister Nikolay Denkov). An unspoken argument against the idea is that Bulgarian and Romanian political elites are not accustomed to work together and have a low level of mutual trust. Therefore, even their joint declaration for strategic partnership from March 2023 is seen by some as insufficiently bold in its ambitions.

³ *Schengen – o idee constructiva pentru Romania si Bulgaria (RO)*, The Rational Idealist, 21.09.2011, <https://rational-idealist.blogspot.com/2011/09/schengen-o-idee-constructiva-pentru.html>, visited on 30 December 2024.

⁴ V. Mitev, *Codru Vrabie: The Romanian-Bulgarian mini-Schengen seems a good idea*, The Bridge of Friendship, 29.10.2019, <https://friendshipbridge.eu/2019/10/29/vrabie-schengen-en/>, visited on 30 December 2024.

⁵ V. Mitev, *David Bisset: The Bulgarian-Romanian mini-Schengen could boost the two countries' bargaining power*, The Bridge of Friendship, 12.06.2023, <https://friendshipbridge.eu/2023/06/12/bisset-3-mini-schengen-en/>, visited on 30 December 2024.

⁶ Bulgarian former diplomat Biserka Benisheva is quoted saying this at the article by Petya Minkova. See П. Минкова, *МИНИ-Шенген с Гърция и Румъния става токсичен*, 168 часа, 19.09.2024, <https://www.168chasa.bg/Article/18921784>, visited on 30 December 2024.

The new situation after the agreement between Austria, Bulgaria and Romania in December 2023 and the accession to the Schengen area in March 2024

After Bulgaria and Romania joined the Schengen area following an agreement with Austria in December 2023, the discussed proposal no longer referred to the Bulgarian-Romanian Mini-Schengen Zone. It was renamed “the abolition of land border controls between Greece, Bulgaria and Romania”. It had the support of the transport and tourism sectors in the three countries. Importantly, it was supported by high-level politicians from these countries, such as former European Commissioner and Romanian Prime Minister Dacian Cioloș, who is associated with the French tendency in Romania and the EU⁷. However, if it had been applied, it would have violated the provisions of the agreement with Austria, which provided for the strengthening of border controls on the Bulgarian-Romanian border⁸. At that time – the beginning of 2024 – it seemed that there were two competing visions for the future of Southeastern Europe with regard to Schengen and border controls. The one based on greater synchronization among the people of Southeastern Europe appeared to be in a weaker position.

Conclusions: The future of Southeastern Europe after the full accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the Schengen Area

On 1 January 2025, Bulgaria and Romania joined the Schengen area via their land borders, and while some border control will temporarily remain, within 6 months it is expected that border control will no longer take place at the current border crossing points, but rather at some place within the countries’ territory at some distance from the border, based on principles that are generally applied in the Schengen area – the so-called risk assessment⁹. The significance of this development is manifold.

The economic dimension of the abolition of land border controls is usually emphasized. Until now, trucks have been queuing up at the EU borders of Bulgaria and Romania, wasting time and money and polluting the environment. An economic boost is expected from the mere fact that these losses will no longer occur.

In addition, Bulgaria and Romania were previously less attractive to foreign investors because investors were aware that the goods they produced in each of the countries would potentially be delayed by days on their way to Western Europe, compared to their potential transportation from full members of the Schengen area.

Importantly, the isolation of Bulgaria and Romania from the Schengen area fueled the feeling that their citizens were “second-class Europeans”. Therefore, full Schengen membership is expected to increase the Europeanization of the region and the pro-EU sentiment in it.

Now, at last, the mini-Schengen proposal for empowering the citizens of Bulgaria and Romania through cross-border interaction could have a reality check. It is a proposal in the European spirit, because usually the countries of the periphery tend to compete to attract the centers of the international relations system to their side, and therefore often ignore or try to separate from each other. If the peripheries begin to co-operate, they will demonstrate the logic of the center and move closer to it in synchrony. This could be the main principle of a real project of change in Southeastern Europe, whose nations have been traditionally too fragmented and convinced of the validity of their individual insular mentality.

In other words, while security and fortress thinking have long been dominant in and with regard to Southeastern Europe, full accession to the Schengen area could be seen as a major victory for the open border vision for the

⁷ V. Mitev, *Elimination of border controls between Bulgaria, Romania and Greece is technically complex*, The Bridge of Friendship, 01.02.2024, <https://friendshipbridge.eu/2024/02/01/simeonova-border-controls-en/>, visited on 30 December 2024.

⁸ V. Mitev, *Council Decision on the full application of the Schengen acquis in the Republic of Bulgaria and Romania*, The Bridge of Friendship, 01.01.2024, <https://friendshipbridge.eu/2024/01/01/cm-5950-23-en/>, visited on 30 December 2024.

⁹ V. Mitev, *Dragomir Draganov: Traffic on Friendship Bridge will increase by more than 20% after full Schengen accession*, The Bridge of Friendship, 28.12.2024, <https://friendshipbridge.eu/2024/12/28/full-schengen-ruse-giurgiu-2024-2025-en/>, visited on 30 December 2024.

region, based on its synchronization and the gradual building of a greater social capital and trust beyond borders. Now, with the fluidity of borders, the citizens of the region are receiving an influx of energy. If their desires, curiosities and ambitions are to practice relationships and gain new experiences across the ever-weakening borders, we will see win-win developments in the region that would also benefit the EU project.

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