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Bulgaria becomes part of Europe's Schengen-Area



Map of the Schengen and EU countries - *SchengenVisaInfo*¹

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¹ <https://www.schengenvisa.info.com/schengen-visa-countries-list/>

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Bulgaria's fence on its border with Turkey. Photo: Boyko Borissov/Facebook.²

Introduction

Earlier this year, Bulgarian authorities made a disturbing discovery when they found 18 migrants dead in an abandoned truck illegally transporting around 40 people, including children, across the border. This discovery sparked a series of raids across the country, which resulted in the arrest of 15 individuals believed to be smugglers and the detention of hundreds of migrants³. Over the past year, Bulgaria has seen a rapid increase in the number of asylum seekers arriving from its neighbor, Turkey. According to the Asylum Information Database (AIDA), there was a significant increase in the number of irregular crossing attempts in Bulgaria in 2022. The Bulgarian border police prevented 164,000 attempts in 2022, which is almost triple the number of 55,000 from the previous year⁴.

² <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/05/06/bulgaria-%D1%82%D0%BE-start-sending-migrants-back-to-turkey-from-june-1-05-06-2016/>

³ <https://www.euronews.com/2023/07/20/border-violence-what-is-going-on-in-bulgaria>

⁴ https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/AIDA-BG_2021update.pdf

Bulgaria has long struggled with managing illegal immigration and crime at its border with Turkey. In the past, Human Rights Watch (HRW) accused Bulgaria of using extreme force to push back migrants at the border⁵. In more recent months, Bulgaria has come under fire again from several NGOs about the alleged use of violence by Bulgarian border guards against migrants attempting to enter the country⁶.

These incidents come on the back of talks about Bulgaria's possible admission to the Schengen area.



Map of the Schengen and EU countries - *SchengenVisaInfo*⁷

⁵ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/26/bulgaria-migrants-brutally-pushed-back-turkish-border>

⁶ <https://www.euronews.com/2023/07/20/border-violence-what-is-going-on-in-bulgaria>

⁷ <https://www.schengenvisa.info/schengen-visa-countries-list/>

The Schengen area consists of 27 European countries that have eliminated their internal borders to allow unrestricted movement of people, making it the largest visa-free zone in the world. Although European Union (EU) membership is connected to Schengen, not all EU countries are part of it, and not all Schengen members are part of the EU. However, all EU nations are bound by law to join Schengen eventually⁸.

The European Parliament has stated that Bulgaria and Romania have now met all the requirements to become full members of the Schengen area by the end of 2023. Despite joining the EU in 2007, the two Balkan nations have been on a waiting list to become part of Schengen due to issues such as unchecked cross-border crime, unlawful migration routes, and security concerns⁹.

In the past, Bulgaria has resisted accepting its bid for Schengen membership. In 2019, it temporarily backed off from its bid to join the Schengen area due to fears that the country would go through a “migrant invasion” as soon as it joined the borderless area. In a meeting with the President of the Christian Social Union in Bavaria, Alexander Dobrindt, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov stated that “As far as the Schengen area is concerned, I do not know if it is now convenient for Bulgaria to enter it. We fully use all that the Schengen area offers in the field of the fight against terrorism, smuggling, and drug trafficking. Yet we give back to Greece more than 150 people every day. If Alexander tells us ‘Today you are joining the Schengen Zone,’ many will arrive in Bulgaria tomorrow.” Conservative lawmakers in Bulgaria and Romania continue to protest the admission, arguing that this could put Europe’s internal security at risk as their geographical location makes them a popular destination for irregular migrants and disadvantaged groups traveling via Turkey and other countries¹⁰. However, Bulgaria’s past resistance to accepting their bid has ceased.

⁸ <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/schengen-visa-countries-list/>

⁹ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230707IPR02431/bulgaria-and-romania-should-be-in-schengen-by-end-of-2023-says-parliament>

¹⁰ <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/bulgaria-doesnt-want-to-join-schengen-zone-for-now-due-to-fear-of-migrant-invasion/>

To become a part of the Schengen Area, countries must get approval from all member states. Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia were originally voted on in 2022. However, while Croatia was fully approved, Austria and the Netherlands vetoed the membership of Bulgaria and Romania¹¹.

Austria and the Netherlands vetoed Bulgaria and Romania's bid to join Schengen due to concerns about illegal migration, with Austria citing a rapid increase in migrants entering its borders through the West Balkan route¹². The "Western Balkan Route," also referred to as the "Balkan Route," became prominent as immigration into Europe peaked in 2015. The Western Balkan route was initially an alternative to the more dangerous sea routes used prior. Typically, refugees traveled from Greece, through Serbia, and then either through Hungary into Austria and then Germany, or through Croatia and Slovenia¹³. Political leaders in Bulgaria and Romania argue that few migrants cross their territory into Austria, and instead, argue that their bid to join Schengen has been derailed for political reasons. They claim that Austria and the Netherlands vetoed their bid in an effort to attract the anti-immigrant vote in their countries¹⁴.

The Dutch have a history of taking a tough line on the political aspects of European integration, particularly immigration. Tensions have intensified in the past two decades as the immigration debate has heated up. The Dutch opposition to Bulgarian admission may be due to the "Bulgarian Fraud" scandal in 2013. The "Bulgarian Fraud" was a documentary film that showed Bulgarian nationals bragging about swindling the Netherlands out of bogus childcare, housing, and other benefits worth an estimated \$120 million¹⁵. This incident dealt a significant blow to the Dutch government and caused conflict between Bulgarian migrants and Dutch nationals protective of their generous welfare states¹⁶.

¹¹ <https://www.traveloffpath.com/these-2-countries-will-join-the-schengen-zone-impacting-all-travelers-and-digital-nomads/>

¹² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63905113>

¹³ <https://www.webofscience.com/wos/woscc/full-record/WOS:000462341100005?SID=USW2EC0A1FpjziFqoNfjXXTO98Jhl>

¹⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63905113>

¹⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-23043543>

¹⁶ <https://www.ft.com/content/7afd3bd6-bcac-11e2-b344-00144feab7de>

The incident also strengthened perceptions among Dutch center-right parties that Romanian and Bulgarian ascension to EU status in 2007 happened too fast. They believe too little was done at the time in terms of reform, corruption, and quality of government. The Netherlands has been struggling with immigration reform and control for some time. In 2015, they decreased their asylum capacity, which caused a shortage of housing and resulted in asylum seekers sleeping outside of refugee reception centers. The inability of the Dutch government to manage the influx has become one of the biggest conflicts within itself and has an undeniable effect on how they approach immigration issues in other EU countries¹⁷.



The launch of the European Border and Coast Guard at the Bulgarian-Turkish border, in Kapitan Andreevo, 6 October. Photo Credit: European Commission.¹⁸

In recent months, Bulgaria has been taking steps to overcome the obstacles that have been preventing its entry into the Schengen area. To address concerns about migration, Bulgaria invited customs experts from Austria and the Netherlands to observe their operations at the Turkish border.

¹⁷ <https://www.rferl.org/a/bulgaria-romania-schengen-eu-netherlands/32120507.html>

¹⁸ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/26/bulgaria-migrants-brutally-pushed-back-turkish-border>

The Turkish-Bulgarian border has a reputation as a major transit point for smuggling people, drugs, and weapons from the Middle East into Europe¹⁹.

While the EU has taken considerable measures to ease restrictions on movement internally within the Schengen area, it has only strengthened the barriers to entry for those outside the EU. As the Schengen area expands, the brunt of border control falls on countries situated on Europe's external borders²⁰. Present issues within European countries concerning immigration reform and the treatment of migrants fall to the wayside as the focus is shifted towards active fronts in countries like Bulgaria and Romania.

The expansion of the Schengen area also holds implications for migration routes in the future. As the Schengen area has expanded continuously since its implementation in 1990, popular migration routes have changed, with methods of transport becoming more dangerous and the journey riskier. The inclusion of Bulgaria in the Schengen area will undoubtedly change this further²¹.

With no indication of illegal migration flows slowing down in the near future, it is crucial to establish more organized border control to prevent potential human rights violations. Additionally, the EU must prioritize implementing stronger protections for asylum seekers currently residing in European countries to ensure their rights are upheld.



¹⁹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-turkey-border-dutch-austria-guards-schengen-accession/>

²⁰ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/anti.12670>

²¹ <https://www.webofscience.com/wos/woscc/full-record/WOS:000462341100005?SID=USW2EC0A1FpjziFqoNfjXXTO98Jhl>