

INFOCUS

The partial accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the Schengen area

C4EP analysis on the subject – *One step towards the “European Balkans”: a partial enlargement of the Schengen area with Romania and Bulgaria*

„Any state with this ambition has to undergo a series of evaluations, so that members can determine whether it fulfils these conditions necessary for the successful application of the Schengen rules.

And this is the “easy” part. The – seemingly – harder one comes only after this: a vastly political decision by the states already members. Once the abovementioned evaluation confirms the readiness of a member state to join the Schengen area, the other members of the Schengen area have to approve this decision unanimously, after a consultation with the European Parliament. This was one element, where Romania and Bulgaria have had some problems in the past, regardless of their actual readiness.”

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C4REPORT

EPC and FNF: The role of women in and after war – lessons learned from Ukraine – 16 April 2024

„Maria Martisiute opened the panel by pointing out that the Ukraine-Russia war is the greatest human security crisis since the death of Stalin and the 1990s Balkan Wars. During war times, women have to face high risks and challenges. On one hand, Ukrainian women are warriors who joined the armed forces or lead civic organisations. On the other hand, they are victims of violence and human trafficking. After introducing the four speakers, Gemma Pörzgen gave them the floor to explore the role of women in and after war.”

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EUISS: EU-India relations: Decoding worldviews and norms – 18 April 2024

„The aim of the conference organized by the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) was to delve into the normative dimension underpinning the relationship between the European Union and India. Led by Amaia Sanchez-Cacicedo, with Kanti Bajpai, and Rohan Mukherjee, the discussion sought to illuminate how the worldviews and normative red lines of these two actors influenced their cooperation. Drawing from the Chaillot Paper titled “EU-India Relations – Gaining Strategic Traction?” published by EUISS, the discussion navigated through the divergences and convergences between the EU and India, particularly focusing on their normative approaches.”

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C4EP: European Elections from the V4 Perspective – 18 April 2024

„The upcoming European elections in June are crucial, especially for the countries in Central and Eastern Europe that joined the EU in 2004. That’s why the Centre for European Progression organized an event focused on these elections from the perspective of the Visegrád Group, which consists of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. The goal of this conference was to discuss the political landscape in these countries and within the Visegrád Group itself. The event provided an opportunity to delve into the challenges and opportunities these nations face in Europe and what their election choices mean for the EU’s future.”

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C4EPOSITION

Petar Tanev, EU Affairs Advisor, Free Russia Foundation

It’s hard to describe the joy and pride the Bulgarian society felt when the first passengers freely passed the empty security checkpoints at Sofia Airport. On my return from Sofia to Brussels, I exchanged views with other passengers. It may sound surprising, but even those whose whole appearance signalled how sceptic they felt about the EU, wholeheartedly endorsed pan-European regulations. No wonder: for the first time they felt truly citizens of this common space – the European Union.

Bulgaria and Romania achieved a partial success because the Schengen area should not be perceived as an air corridor for tourism. Although as early as 2011 the EU Commission confirmed that both of the countries had fulfilled the requirements for joining the Schengen area, it was only in December 2023 that all EU member states agreed that Bulgaria would become part of the free travel area, though the freedom here is restricted to air travels only – because of Austria’s objections. Vienna explains its veto with the shortcomings of the Schengen Info System – the largest system for sharing information on security and border management in Europe – and examples are given of the return of internal border control between some of the countries in the space. But it is not comparable to the outer borders, where the reality is much more serious. Trucks wait an average of six hours at the Bulgarian-Romanian border, and this is not only bad for the environment, but also costs money and makes goods more expensive. So, the ongoing blockade by Austria on the full membership of Bulgaria and Romania in Schengen will bring way more serious economic problems for the Balkan region, and this will only reinforce Euroscepticism and thus also the pro-Kremlin populists in this year’s upcoming parliamentary and EU elections in both countries.

In this scenario, the only winner is Putin’s Russia. It always had a special interest in interfering in the Balkan region. If this year Austria and the EU miss another opportunity to integrate their Balkan member states into Schengen, also “on land”, the reaction from the public in Bulgaria and Romania will be furious. In both countries, the governments are struggling to counter the growing support for pro-Russia Eurosceptic political parties – Bulgaria’s Vazrazhdane (Revival) and Romania’s Alliance for Romanian Unity. They spread narratives complaining that “Bulgaria and Romania are treated like periphery by the EU” and that “non-acceptance in Schengen is an example of such humiliating slavish treatment by the bosses in Brussels”. Another overland Schengen veto would be the

perfect political gift delivered into their hands. The response to those manipulative Kremlin narratives must be different: Both countries have long proven themselves to be reliable and stable partners in the common European project, and now it is time for the EU to finally reward both for their hard work on this path.

Continuing to keep Bulgaria and Romania out of Schengen land membership will not encourage political reforms, but only spread more antagonization and frustration within the two pro-EU member states. It is the Kremlin, who will look for all ways to divide the EU member states and will readily take advantage of this opportunity. Such a perspective and important geostrategic dimensions should not be ignored. It is up to the EU Council and, particularly, Austria, to ensure that Putin does not win in the region.