Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 13.12.2024 www.osw.waw.pl

Bulgaria and Romania join the Schengen Area: no more 'second-class membership'

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On 12 December, the EU Council decided to fully integrate Bulgaria and Romania into the Schengen Area as of 1 January 2025. This was made possible by a shift in Austria's position, which had been the final EU member state to oppose their accession, citing inadequate border protection by both countries in response to migration pressures. The EU's decision marks the culmination of a process lasting over a year, involving the EU Council lifting checks at Bulgaria's and Romania's sea and air borders, which have been in place since late March this year.

The local political elites view their countries' accession to the Schengen Area as an opportunity to curb the rise of domestic radical and Eurosceptic forces. The admission of new members is also one of the few successes for the Schengen Area, which has been struggling with internal challenges. Meanwhile, Hungary, which currently holds the EU presidency and has been actively involved in mediating between Bulgaria, Romania, and Austria, is likely to take advantage of this decision to boost its political standing in the region.

Commentary

- **Accession to the Schengen Area represents the culmination of Bulgaria's and Romania's long-standing efforts, initiated following their accession to the EU in early 2007.** It has been one of the most significant objectives for all successive governments in Sofia and Bucharest. The prolonged exclusion of both countries from the Schengen Area amplified the feeling of being 'second-class members of the EU' among their citizens, similar to the perception associated with being subjected to the EU's Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) implemented by the European Commission. In reports published under the CVM, issues such as corruption and insufficient border protection were frequently cited as reasons for other EU member states' opposition to Bulgaria and Romania's accession to the Schengen Area. Ultimately, in September 2023, the European Commission decided to terminate the application of the CVM, clearing the way for their inclusion in the Schengen Area.
- **The inclusion of Bulgaria and Romania in the Schengen Area was made possible after Austria and, earlier, the Netherlands lifted their objections to their accession.** Their opposition was primarily motivated by domestic political factors, particularly pressure from far-right parties: the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and the Dutch Party for

Freedom (PVV). These parties accused Sofia and Bucharest of insufficient protection of the EU's borders, despite consistent evidence from Bucharest demonstrating that only a marginal number of migrants transit through Romania to Hungary and then to Austria (see '*Austria vetoes Romania and Bulgaria entering Schengen*'). The outcome of the parliamentary election in Austria in September this year was a significant factor in its decision to lift its veto. Romania and Bulgaria were concerned that a potential government formed by the victorious Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) could uphold the veto. However, the coalition now most likely to form, comprising Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, and Liberals, played a key role in Austria's decision to withdraw its opposition.

- **Paradoxically, Bulgaria and Romania's long-delayed accession to the Schengen Area comes amid significant turmoil in both countries.** In this context, their political elites hope this achievement will help counter the rise of radical and Eurosceptic sentiment. In Bulgaria, which has been grappling with a prolonged political crisis (with seven parliamentary elections held over the past three years), joining Schengen is one of the few recent successes. In Romania, the mainstream parties expect this development to improve their reputation among voters, which is particularly important ahead of the presidential election planned for either late March or early April.
- **The accession of Bulgaria and Romania represents one of the few positive developments for the Schengen Area, which has been facing significant challenges.** In recent months, several countries, including Germany and France, have reinstated controls at their internal borders, citing migration pressures. The expansion of Schengen, which will encompass 29 members in January, also stands out as one of the few achievements of Hungary's EU Council presidency. It was in Budapest on 22 November that the foreign ministers of Bulgaria, Romania, and Austria signed a trilateral declaration, prompting Vienna to withdraw its veto.