Western Balkans: landlocked within the Schengen area

Description

The Schengen area abolishes controls at the internal borders of the Member States, implying establishing an external borders policy. With Croatia's accession in 2023 and Bulgaria and Romania's integration on 31 March 2024, we are witnessing the creation of a dividing line that encloses the Western Balkans within the European Union.

Enlarging the Schengen area's external borders requires the new Member States to conduct systematic checks at the area's external borders and use the Schengen Information System (SIS) and Interpol's database of stolen and lost travel documents. Countries have to prepare for many years before joining the Schengen area. Several countries in the Western Balkans, for example, are already preparing, even if the prospect of joining the European Union is still far off. Croatia, a member of the European Union since 2013, joined the Schengen area in 2023. Bulgaria and Romania, EU members since 2007, will not enter the Schengen area until the end of March next year. This process is not without consequences for the European Union itself, as well as for the entire Western Balkans region.

Croatia's accession: a break with the former Yugoslavia

On 1 January 2023, Croatia became the twenty-seventh country in the Schengen area (on the same day, it joined the eurozone). This integration took place in stages over several years, and Zagreb could join the Schengen Information System (SIS) as early as 2017. In 2023, the border crossings between Croatia on the one hand and Slovenia and Hungary on the other were dismantled. At the same time, the Schengen area acquired more than 1,350km of external land borders with Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Montenegro as a result of this enlargement. This new border means stricter border controls for these landlocked countries within the European Union. However, this borderline is also an ancestral dividing line(1), with multiple historical references.

The disappearance of borders between Slovenia and Croatia foreshadows what the Western Balkans region will be like once everyone has joined the European Union and, one day, the Schengen area. Reestablishing a common area within the European Union will make it possible to recreate an area of borderless movement, as in Yugoslavia. In this way, the disappearance of border crossings will also have a strong symbolic impact, recalling the independence processes of the former Yugoslav republics in the early 1990s. Even if this scenario still seems remote and uncertain, with no date yet set for the accession of the Western Balkan states to the European Union or the Schengen area, the countries of the region are preparing for these deadlines. In Serbia, for example, the European Union has set up a project financed by the pre-accession funds to support the development of the Schengen Action Plan(2).

Bulgaria and Romania: the Western Balkans are even more landlocked

From 31 March 2024, Bulgaria and Romania will be partially integrated into the Schengen area. These two countries, which have been members of the EU since 2007, negotiated for twelve years before achieving this integration, following a notable refusal by Austria at the end of 2022 to protest against the arrival of too many illegal immigrants on its territory. After this veto was lifted at the end of December 2023, with Sofia's and Bucharest's assurances having convinced Vienna of better control of illegal migration, the partial integration of the two countries was announced. Air and sea border controls will be lifted from April, with land controls maintained until an unspecified date.

This integration will reinforce the contrast between these countries and the fragile and increasingly landlocked Western Balkans. This new dividing line is also symbolic, materializing a more robust separation from the European Union for the Western Balkans countries. However, the three new Schengen states – Croatia, Bulgaria, and Romania – share with the Western Balkans the same concern about illegal immigration and the fight against trafficking.

Managing the Balkan route

The new dividing line between the European Union and its near neighbors also lies on the "Balkan route," which was used extensively by migrants during the massive crisis of 2015 and 2016. Many migrants retook this route in 2023 and 2024 to reach Western Europe. For Croatia and its neighboring countries, primarily Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the fight against organized crime remains a priority. These countries are faced with illegal immigration as well as trafficking in human beings, arms, and drugs.

The countries along the "Balkan route" have long had the means to filter people at their borders(3). This particular position of "airlock" was reinforced during the Covid-19 pandemic. The introduction of health measures meant that migrants on the "Balkan route" found themselves "locked in" to the region. The new Schengen border between Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Serbia makes it more difficult for illegal migrants to enter the European Union. In recent years, images conveyed by the media and non-governmental organizations have shown migrants being turned back, sometimes violently, at border crossings. Against this backdrop, it is likely that the migratory "airlock" will be tightened on the countries of the Western Balkans, particularly Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia. The Balkan migratory route, therefore, places these countries in a sensitive position in the face of a renewed influx, shifting the responsibility for the humane management of migrants onto them.

The Western Balkans and border management

The EU has provided border management assistance to the Western Balkans for years to help these countries ensure proper conditions while combating trafficking and organized crime. For example, Brussels is funding projects to develop the concept of integrated border management, which aims to safeguard national security, prevent irregular migration and cross-border crime, and ensure smooth border crossings for legitimate travelers. These measures involve controlling borders, analyzing risks and intelligence on crime, detecting cross-border crime, and implementing inter-institutional and international cooperation.

Western Balkans countries have also set up national systems for personal databases and fingerprinting. They are preparing national biometric databases for the fingerprints of asylum seekers and illegal immigrants to strengthen data exchange capacities in the EURODAC(4) system, one of the three large-scale IT systems created at the European Union level in justice and home affairs. These systems make it possible to control flows and security and to combat crime linked to migratory flows. Since February 2016, a European Centre for Combating the Smuggling of Migrants has also been set up within Europol. All these measures make for more effective border management and meet European needs. In the Western Balkans, a privileged transit area and gateway to the European Union for migrants, these instruments play a central role. Their use can also be seen as a first step in the rapprochement with the EU that these countries want.

Notes:

(1) Mirjana Morokvasic-Muller, « Balkans : les exclus de l'élargissement », *Hommes et migrations*, n° 1230, 2001, pp. 81-93.

(2) *Development of the Schengen Action Plan.*

(3) Nebojsa Vukadinovic, « Élargissement des frontières Schengen et de la zone euro : quelles conséquences pour les Balkans occidentaux ? », *La Lettre de l'Est*, n° 33, 2023.

(4) EURODAC is a European system for comparing the fingerprints of asylum seekers. It is presented as the armed arm of the Dublin system*: "The principle of the Dublin Regulation is that a single European State is responsible for the asylum application of a third-country national."*

Thumbnail: Press conference with Ylva Johansson, European Commissioner for Home Affairs, and Eric Mamer, Chief Spokesman of the European Commission, Brussels, 16 November 2022 (copyright: Alicia Perdu/European Union).

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Link to the French version of the article

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