

# Romania and Bulgaria have not been admitted to the Schengen Agreement because of the deep seated anxiety of the treaty's current members about the regime's future.

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*Where will the Schengen Agreement be ten years from now? [Ruben Zaiotti](#) explores why its signatories are currently hesitant to admit Romania and Bulgaria. He argues that in the wake of the financial and economic crisis the Romanian and Bulgarian governments can only hope that Schengen club's chronic anxiety can be channelled against someone else.*



The European economic and financial crisis is accelerating and national leaders are beginning to panic. Hence, it is not surprising that the Schengen border regime which lifts border controls within its signatory states and which is often hailed as one of the most successful stories of European integration is now under strain.

This tension has taken different forms: Some Schengen members (e.g. France) have repeatedly moaned about the regime's (alleged) shortcomings and called for its reform and renewal. This sense of unease has also affected the debate about Schengen's present and future expansion. Romania and Bulgaria, who joined the European Union (EU) in 2007, want to become part of Europe's free travel area as well. Despite having met the necessary legal and technical requirements (at least according to the EU experts who have evaluated their bid), their membership is still pending. The main bone of contention is well known: it is the mistrust of some Member States, the most vocal are the Netherlands, over the candidates' capacities upholding Schengen's standards.

Particularly problematic in the Dutch eyes is the persistent high levels of corruption and organized crime in the two South-Eastern European countries; phenomena which are believed to affect their ability to manage what would become de facto Europe's borders. The degree to which Romania and Bulgaria have made actual progress towards overcoming these problems is a matter of debate. Be it as it may, Bucharest's and Sofia's actual or perceived shortcomings regarding border control, coupled with a growing anti-EU and anti-freedom-of-movement sentiment in some Schengen members – have created an explosive mix that have rendered this crisis almost 'inevitable'.

The convergence of the two candidate countries' reputation and Schengen members' domestic politics is a plausible explanation for the current tensions in the Schengen regime, and one that it is shared by commentators and policy-makers alike.

However, the bleak conclusion that that is typically inferred from this account, namely that the regime is entering into an inward looking phase of retrenchment, with limited prospects for future enlargements, is premature. The current dispute over the accession of Romania and Bulgaria, while certainly troublesome, is not unique in the history of the Schengen regime: Italy's



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membership bid in the 1990s, for example, turned out to be a politically charged saga that lasted for almost a decade.

On the contrary, this dispute can be considered as the latest symptomatic example of an enduring – and so far unsolved – tension within the regime between, on one hand, an in-built propensity to constantly expand in order to maintain the myth of Schengen as a success story of European integration and, on the other, the fear of losing this very status because of overstretching, and, more generally, the fear of the unknown that the admission of new and untested members entails. This inherent tension is expressed in enlargement anxiety.

As a psychological condition, anxiety is the result of high levels of uncertainty and over-commitment that an individual might face in his/her everyday life. One of the ways in which anxiety manifests itself is through resentment, which typically takes the form of overly critical language – including insults – and bullying against a designated scapegoat. From a psychological perspective, the function of resentment is to temporarily release in relatively controlled manner all, or part of, the tension affecting an individual.

Seen in this light, the Romania and Bulgaria affair is not just a cruel rite of passage, in which the two countries are enduring series of humiliating tests in order to become ‘proper’ members of the club, but also a sort of cathartic process in which current Schengen members, by vocally expressing their misgivings about the candidates, yet not rejecting their plight outright, assuage their fears and are persuaded to accept the new round of club’s expansion. The Romanian and Bulgarian governments can only hope that this healing exercise quickly runs its course, so that Schengen’s chronic anxiety can be channelled against somebody else.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPPE – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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