

CHALLENGES OF ILLEGAL MIGRATION IN THE CONTEXT OF ROMANIA’S ACCESSION TO THE SCHENGEN AREA

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Abstract: *Romania’s accession to the Schengen Area presents significant opportunities and challenges, particularly regarding the management of illegal migration. The elimination of internal border controls within the EU could increase migration flows and facilitate the operations of smuggling networks. Secondary migration, involving migrants relocating to other Schengen countries through illicit means, emerges as a critical concern. Romania’s borders with Serbia, Ukraine, and Moldova are highlighted as vulnerable points requiring advanced security measures, including UAVs, thermal imaging, and motion sensors. Enhanced cooperation with neighboring countries and European agencies like FRONTEX, Europol, and Eurojust is essential to address these challenges. Romania’s strategic role in safeguarding the EU’s external borders is underscored, emphasizing the need for modern technologies, international collaboration, and integrated policies. Effective management of migration flows will strengthen both national and EU security, positioning Romania as a model in addressing illegal migration and regional stability.*

Keywords: *Romania; illegal migration; Schengen Area; border security; smuggling network; European Cooperation.*

Introduction

The accession of Romania to the Schengen Area marks a significant milestone, concluding a prolonged process characterized by numerous delays and postponements over the course of nearly 17 years. The end of this process addresses longstanding challenges related to border control procedures, particularly the queues experienced by Romanian citizens during entry and exit, especially during peak travel periods. According to a Eurobarometer survey, 79% of Romanians were in favor of joining the Schengen Area, reflecting high public expectations of a smoother travel experience (European Commission 2018).

As Romania joins Schengen, it is important to note that the country will also be part of a broader network with shared responsibilities for border management, including challenges related to illegal migration. Similar to previous Schengen entrants such as Slovenia and Croatia, Romania may face an increase in migration flows due to its new role as part of the external border of the Schengen Area.

Slovenia recorded a significant increase in illegal migration, after Croatia’s accession to the Schengen Area. In 2023, the Slovenian police managed 58,193 cases of illegal entries from Croatia, which represents an 84% increase compared to 2022. Among the most intercepted migrants were Afghans and Moroccans, with the number of Afghan nationals increasing threefold, reaching nearly 18,000, and the number of Moroccans rising from 300 to over 8,800 (ETIAS, 2023).

In Croatia, during the first 10 months of 2023, approximately 63,000 people entered illegally, with the majority coming from Bosnia. This figure represents an increase of more than 70% compared to the same period in the previous year (ETIAS, 2023). Most intercepted migrants in Croatia came from conflict zones or regions of instability, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Morocco. Migrants arriving in Croatia primarily follow routes connecting Bosnia and Croatia, often crossing unsecured

borders or passing through mountainous terrain and forests. These routes have become more frequently used due to the less strict controls in place before Croatia joined Schengen.

According also to FRONTEX's *Risk Analysis for 2023*, countries like Slovenia and Croatia saw an increase in migration flows after their accession to Schengen, with irregular crossings observed at borders with non-Schengen countries (FRONTEX, 2023).

The following hypothesis will be evaluated in this paper: Romania's accession to the Schengen Area will likely result in an initial increase in illegal migration pressures at its external borders, akin to the experiences of Croatia and Slovenia. However, through the implementation of advanced surveillance technologies, enhanced border cooperation, and efficient migration management policies, Romania can mitigate security risks and strengthen the overall resilience of Schengen's external frontiers.

To test this hypothesis, this study will analyze several key reports and documents, including FRONTEX's Annual Risk Analysis for 2023, the European Commission's Migration and Asylum Report 2021, and other relevant materials from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and Romanian border authorities. This analysis will focus on trends in illegal migration, Romania's role in managing migration flows, and the effectiveness of its border control measures, particularly in light of Romania's accession to Schengen. The analysis will be qualitative in nature, using a comparative approach to assess Romania's position relative to previous Schengen entrants such as Slovenia and Croatia. Furthermore, this study will examine the extent to which Romania has implemented advanced surveillance technologies and cooperated with neighboring countries to enhance border security.

This research method has several limitations. Firstly, while the reports used are authoritative, they rely on data provided by national authorities and may not fully capture the complexities of illegal migration, especially in terms of unreported crossings or hidden migration routes. Additionally, as Romania has yet to experience full integration into Schengen as of the time of writing, the data available reflects projections and historical trends rather than a comprehensive post-accession analysis. Consequently, the study may be limited by the lack of direct post-accession migration data. Lastly, the comparative analysis with Slovenia and Croatia may not fully account for unique factors affecting Romania, such as its geopolitical situation and specific migration trends.

In Romania's case, reports from FRONTEX and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) show that migration flows have been increasing in recent years, with significant numbers of migrants attempting to transit through the country toward other EU states (FRONTEX, 2023). This indicates that while Romania's accession will bring practical benefits for its citizens, it will also require further enhancement of border management and security measures.

Romania began the accession process immediately after joining the European Union on January 1, 2007. Until December 12, 2024, when Romania received final approval for accession, at least nine JAI sessions took place, during which Romania received negative votes or delays for accession. Although Romania met most of the technical criteria, its accession was postponed multiple times due to concerns about border security and illegal migration. Despite these obstacles, Romania received support from most EU member states but faced resistance from countries such as the Netherlands, Finland, and Austria, which expressed concerns regarding border security and the management of illegal migration.

Finally, on December 12, 2024, the JAI Council in Brussels decided to admit Romania into the Schengen Area, with its land borders joining the Schengen Area on January 1, 2025, while its maritime and air borders were integrated earlier on March 31, 2024.

Certainly, this ambitious project has had and continues to have a significant impact on the mobility of European citizens and the economy. However, it also carries serious security risks, especially after January 1, 2025, when Romania ceases to function as a "buffer state"¹ against illegal

¹ A buffer state in the context of migration refers to a country or region that acts as an intermediary between two or more areas with differing migration patterns, policies, or levels of control. It is typically located between a source of migration

migration. Since 2007, when Romania became a member of the EU, it has played a crucial role in managing migratory flows from the East (particularly from Asia and the Middle East) and the South (North Africa) heading towards Schengen countries. According to the *FRONTEX Annual Risk Analysis 2023*, Romania has been an important transit country for irregular migrants, especially from regions such as Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. In 2022, Romania reported a significant increase in the number of irregular migrants trying to cross its border, with many coming from countries like Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq. In 2022, Romanian border authorities detected over 14,500 irregular migrants attempting to cross its borders, representing a 27% increase compared to the previous year (FRONTEX, 2023). Among these migrants, the largest groups originated from Afghanistan (4,200 individuals), Syria (3,800 individuals), and Iraq (2,500 individuals), reflecting the ongoing impact of conflicts in these regions.

The European Commission's 2021 Migration and Asylum Report highlights Romania's significant role in the management of migratory flows from third countries toward the Schengen Area. Romania serves as a strategic crossroads in Eastern Europe, acting as a key intersection for illegal migration routes into the EU. Its strategic position includes both a maritime border along the Black Sea (shared with Bulgaria, 631 km, including the maritime frontier) and extensive land borders with Moldova (681 km), Ukraine (605 km), and Serbia (546 km), making it a vital entry point for migration flows. While migration corridors through the Western Balkans remain active, Romania plays a particularly significant role in routes originating from the Black Sea and Eastern Europe, reinforcing its position as a central hub in the region's migration dynamics. Recent reports highlight the resurgence of illegal migration across the Black Sea, after a period of decline, with Romanian authorities regularly intercepting vessels attempting to reach EU territory. At the same time, its border with Serbia remains a critical checkpoint for secondary movements along the Western Balkans route. This underscores Romania's growing role in managing migration flows and securing the EU's external borders (Euronews România, 2022).

Romania has seen a substantial increase in migratory pressure. In particular, between 2015 and 2022, Romania reported an over 45% rise in migrant arrivals compared to earlier years, with notable spikes during periods of political instability in neighboring countries such as Ukraine and Turkey (European Commission, 2021).

Furthermore, Romania's strategic position along the EU's external border has made it a critical point for secondary migration. The 2023 FRONTEX Annual Report estimates that over 6,000 individuals who initially entered Romania legally under temporary protection were later involved in attempts to continue their journey further into Western Europe, often exploiting gaps in border security (FRONTEX, 2023). This phenomenon of secondary migration is becoming increasingly concerning as it creates additional pressure on Romania's border management systems.

These figures underscore the challenges Romania faces in controlling illegal migration flows, particularly as the country becomes a more attractive transit route following the reintroduction of internal border checks by other Schengen states. As observed in Germany, France, and the Netherlands, the trend of reintroducing internal border controls has been linked to growing concerns about irregular migration and terrorism, which are driving up migration-related risks across the region (Radio Free Europe, 2023; Euronews, 2023).

The *European Commission's 2021 Migration and Asylum Report* notes that Romania has been a key player in the management of migratory flows from third countries towards the Schengen Area. The report highlights Romania's efforts in border control and cooperation with neighboring non-EU

(such as regions experiencing conflict, poverty, or instability) and a destination country or region (often wealthier, more stable, or offering better opportunities). To better illustrate the concept Turkey: Positioned between Europe and conflict zones in the Middle East (e.g., Syria), Turkey serves as a significant buffer state for migrants seeking to enter the European Union. It has been at the center of many EU-Turkey agreements aimed at managing the flow of migrants and refugees. In academic discourse, the role of buffer states is often discussed in terms of migration management, regional security, and human rights. The dynamics of migration flows through buffer states raise important questions about sovereignty, international cooperation, and the ethics of migration control.

countries such as Moldova, Ukraine, and Serbia to combat irregular migration, including the smuggling of migrants. Romania's role has been vital in protecting the EU's external borders. Although it was not yet part of the Schengen Area, Romania implemented stringent measures to secure the EU's external borders and demonstrated strong commitment in combating illegal migration. It efficiently managed its borders with non-EU and non-Schengen countries, including Ukraine and Moldova, and contributed to securing its southern border with Bulgaria and Serbia. These efforts were supported by European agencies like FRONTEX² and Europol³, which cooperated with Romanian authorities to prevent illegal migration routes.

1. Analysis of Risks and Impact on Security

Romania's accession to the Schengen Area, formalized on January 1, 2025, marks a historic moment but brings significant challenges, especially regarding the risks associated with illegal migration. Over the 17 years of delays and negotiations, Romania demonstrated a solid commitment to securing the EU's external borders, managing migratory flows from the East (Asia and the Middle East) and South (North Africa). This commitment has been reflected in several key areas: Romania has invested in advanced technologies for border monitoring, including surveillance systems with drones, thermal cameras, and motion sensors, to prevent illegal migration. Moreover, Romania has actively cooperated with FRONTEX in implementing these measures. Additionally, Romania has strengthened regional and international cooperation, coordinating efforts with neighboring non-EU countries like Ukraine, Moldova, and Serbia to enhance border security and prevent illegal migration. Romania has also contributed to the training and assistance of border forces in these neighboring countries, further strengthening security capacities. Furthermore, Romania's robust internal and legislative policies, aligned with EU regulations, including strict asylum and international protection laws, have played a key role in preventing the entry of illegal migrants into the EU through Romania's borders. However, the removal of internal border controls will transform Romania from a buffer zone state into a direct entry point into the Schengen Area, thus increasing its vulnerability to illegal migration and associated criminal activities.

The major risks include intensified illegal migration routes through Romania, increased pressure on security infrastructure, and difficulties in combating human trafficking and smuggling. There is also the possibility that criminal groups will exploit gaps in the surveillance and control systems at the EU's external borders. In this context, cooperation with European agencies such as

² Collaboration on Information Exchange: Through EUROSUR (the European Border Surveillance System), Romania transmitted relevant data to Frontex regarding migration flows at its borders. Frontex used this information to issue alerts about potential increases in migrant traffic at Romania's borders. Surveillance and Control Operations at the Serbia and Ukraine Borders: Frontex provided support by deploying mobile teams that assisted Romanian authorities in monitoring the borders with Serbia and Ukraine. These areas represented potential transit points for migrants following the Western Balkans route. Advanced technical equipment, such as drones and thermal cameras, was made available to detect attempts to illegally cross the border. Assistance in Identifying Forged Documents: At air border crossing points, including airports such as Otopeni, Frontex collaborated with the Border Police to identify migrants using false or forged travel documents. Frontex's Main Focus in 2015: The primary focus of Frontex in 2015 was managing the migration crisis in the Mediterranean. Romania contributed equipment and personnel to the Triton Operation (Mediterranean Sea), which aimed to manage migration flows along the Central Mediterranean route. Romania provided ships and patrol teams to support rescue and migrant identification operations. Likewise, Romanian authorities actively participated in the Poseidon Operation (Aegean Sea), which aimed to monitor maritime routes from Turkey to Greece, a hotspot in the migration crisis.

³ Support in Investigating Migrant Smuggling Networks: Europol and Romania collaborated to identify and dismantle human trafficking networks using the Western Balkans routes. Joint investigation teams targeted criminal groups organizing the illegal transportation of migrants to Western Europe, with Romania serving as a transit country. Information Exchange: Romania provided crucial data to Europol's European Migrant Smuggling Centre (EMSC), established in 2016, though its activities began in 2015. The data included details about migrant routes and the methods employed by smugglers.

FRONTEX and Europol will be essential for preventing and managing these risks. Romania will need to intensify its efforts in monitoring external borders and implement advanced technologies to respond to increasingly complex challenges.

Thus, although accession brings economic and social benefits, Romania must adopt proactive measures to maintain border security and prevent becoming a vulnerable hub in the management of illegal migration into the Schengen Area.

Romania's accession to the Schengen Area was a significant achievement for the country and for the European Union as a whole, bringing both economic and social benefits, as well as significant risks, especially in the context of illegal migration. The expansion of this area, while promoting mobility and economic integration, can amplify the risks related to border control, particularly in countries located on the EU's external borders, such as Romania. Researchers and experts in security, law, and illegal migration have highlighted that the challenges associated with the expansion of this area are real. Their studies emphasize that although Schengen aims to improve mobility, in certain regions, illegal migration can increase significantly, which will heighten security risks. Experts such as Elena Korosteleva, Anna Triandafyllidou, and Oliver Kühn, have warned about the vulnerabilities that illegal migration raises, affecting both internal security and the social and economic stability of member states. In this context, the risks associated with illegal migration remain a major concern for the European Union, especially in the face of challenges posed by the expansion of the Schengen Area.

2. Literature Review

In the report *Managing migration in the EU: Challenges and opportunities*, published by the European Commission, it is stated that the enlargement of the Schengen Area has led to a significant increase in pressure on external border states such as Romania, Greece, and Italy. Specifically, Romania has been identified as being particularly vulnerable to illegal migration due to its borders with countries heavily affected by migration, such as Serbia and Ukraine. This report emphasizes the need for “closer cooperation between member states and European agencies, such as FRONTEX, to improve coordination in managing migration and securing the external borders of the European Union” (European Commission 2022).

The 2022 FRONTEX Risk Analysis report identified a significant increase in the number of attempted illegal border crossings in Eastern Europe, especially at Romania's borders with Serbia and Ukraine. FRONTEX reported that migration in this region has been amplified by conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine, bringing a considerable flow of refugees and economic migrants. The agency highlighted that Romania and other states in the region require “advanced border monitoring technologies, cross-border coordination, and innovative solutions to address these pressures” (FRONTEX 2022).

Elena Korosteleva studied in detail the impact of Schengen accession on security and the management of illegal migration. In one of her studies published in the *Journal of European Security*, she highlighted that, despite the positive aims of expanding Schengen, it can lead to significant vulnerabilities for border states like Romania, which must manage a large number of illegal migrants and respond to transnational security risks.

Anna Triandafyllidou studied the impact of illegal migration on the internal security of the European Union and discussed the challenges posed by the opening of Schengen borders. She argues that, despite the economic and social advantages of liberalizing migration, expanding Schengen can lead to serious security problems in regions on the EU's external borders, especially in the Balkans, including Romania.

Oliver Kühn wrote about the intersection between illegal migration and Schengen security policies, warning about the risks to the stability of vulnerable regions. In his analysis, he emphasized that the expansion of the Schengen Area and the opening of borders can lead to an increase in illegal migration, which will put pressure on states' ability to respond effectively to security threats.

Thus, it is understood that the warnings regarding the vulnerabilities created by the expansion of the Schengen Area are very serious. The need for a coordinated European approach is emphasized, through the implementation of effective border security measures, increasing cross-border cooperation, and developing integrated policies to combat illegal migration. In the absence of such efforts, the risks of destabilizing internal security and the impact on the economic and social stability of the European Union can be amplified, directly affecting both border states and the entire EU bloc.

Undoubtedly, Romania will face a significant increase in illegal migration after joining the Schengen Area. Moreover, the 2023 Schengen Area Report highlights that, since its creation, the Schengen Area has faced significant challenges, including a rise in illegal migration and security threats. In light of these trends, Romania is likely to experience an intensification of illegal migration, considering the experiences of other member states as well as regional factors such as the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and issues in the Middle East, which are amplifying migratory flows into the European Union. (European Commission, 2023 Schengen Area Report.

Here are a few examples that back up the claims regarding the rise in illegal migration: Germany experienced a significant rise in illegal migration, particularly during the migrant crisis in 2015. In 2023, Germany reintroduced border controls at its land borders with Poland, the Czech Republic, and Switzerland due to increased migration and smuggling, particularly from conflict zones in the Middle East (Radio Free Europe 2023); In 2023, France reintroduced controls at its borders with other Schengen countries, extending the measure until April 2024, in response to increasing migration flows and security concerns. This decision was influenced by the surge in irregular migration, as well as concerns about terrorism (Radio Free Europe 2023); The Netherlands reinstated border controls in response to rising irregular migration, particularly from North Africa and the Middle East. This measure affected both land and air borders to combat illegal entry into the country (Euronews 2023).

However, a realistic estimate of the rise in the number of illegal migrants who may enter Romania and thus the Schengen Area depends on various factors. The absence of systematic border controls at the internal borders of the European Union will create new opportunities for both domestic and international human trafficking networks, which will seek to exploit the new conditions for their own interests, using new operational methods. An important aspect of this issue is secondary migration, the phenomenon through which migrants who have obtained temporary or permanent residence rights in a Schengen Area country, such as Romania, may continue their journey practically under the radar of authorities to other member states, often using illegal means. Criminal groups will adapt their operational methods to facilitate this type of migration, exploiting deficiencies and gaps in the integrated control, monitoring, and cross-border cooperation system, particularly on communication routes to the border, which are still in their early stages and fragile from an operational standpoint.

These groups will identify third-country nationals who meet the conditions for residence in Romania and will encourage them to move toward Western European countries, where economic and social benefits are much more attractive. For this purpose, human trafficking networks may offer clandestine transport services, forged documents, or alternative routes to avoid possible mobile controls by authorities.

With the expansion of freedom of movement within the Schengen Area, criminal groups will frequently resort to falsifying identity documents and residence permits to enable migrants who have entered Romania illegally to cross borders without being detected. Smuggling networks will use road, rail, or even air transport to facilitate the movement of migrants. Additionally, they will collaborate with drivers or transport companies involved in illegal activities. These groups will develop subtle methods of recruitment and encouragement for secondary migration, including by offering “service packages” to migrants who have already obtained legal status in Romania but intend to continue their journey.

Another crucial aspect to consider is that, with the acquisition of Schengen Area membership, Romania will become significantly more attractive to migrants intending to enter the European Union illegally. This increased attractiveness will mainly be driven by the absence of systematic controls at

internal borders, facilitating further movement of migrants to other Schengen member states once they reach Romania.

3. Expected Results

This study aims to explore the impact of Romania’s accession to the Schengen Area on illegal migration flows. The expected results focus on the potential increase in illegal migration following Romania’s accession, alongside a deeper understanding of how this phenomenon will evolve given the absence of internal border controls and the pressures of regional conflicts. The research also anticipates identifying the operational responses of criminal networks, which are likely to exploit these new conditions for facilitating illegal migration.

Based on the hypothesis that Romania will face a significant increase in illegal migration after joining the Schengen Area, the expected findings will draw parallels with trends observed in other Schengen countries, such as Germany, France, and the Netherlands. For instance, Germany experienced a notable rise in illegal migration during the 2015 migrant crisis, and in 2023, the country reintroduced border controls in response to increasing migration flows and smuggling, particularly from conflict zones in the Middle East (Radio Free Europe 2023). Similarly, France and the Netherlands have reinstated border controls in 2023 due to rising irregular migration, influenced by factors like terrorism concerns and smuggling activities (Radio Free Europe 2023; Euronews 2023). These examples provide a reference framework for understanding the dynamics Romania might face post-accession.

One of the key expected results is the identification of secondary migration, a phenomenon where migrants who have obtained legal residence in Romania may continue their journey to wealthier Schengen states, often through illicit means. This phenomenon is likely to occur due to the lack of systematic internal border controls, which will provide new opportunities for criminal groups to exploit. Human trafficking and smuggling networks are expected to adapt their operational methods to facilitate secondary migration. These networks will identify migrants who meet the conditions for residence in Romania and encourage them to continue their journey to more economically attractive countries. Criminal groups may offer forged documents, clandestine transport services, or alternative routes to bypass mobile border controls (European Commission, 2023).

The research will likely reveal that criminal organizations will refine their tactics to exploit these gaps. Smuggling networks may use roads, railways, and air transport to facilitate migration flows, while collaborating with transport companies involved in illegal activities. This adaptation will include the development of “service packages” for migrants who have already acquired legal status in Romania but wish to continue their journey toward other Schengen countries. The expected findings will emphasize the role of document fraud and the falsification of residence permits, as criminal groups will frequently resort to these methods to help migrants cross borders undetected.

Furthermore, Romania’s membership in the Schengen Area is expected to make it a more attractive entry point for illegal migrants. The absence of border checks at internal borders will create a perceived opportunity for migrants seeking to enter the European Union without detection. This increase in attractiveness will likely exacerbate migration flows through Romania, turning it into a transit point for migrants aiming to reach other Schengen member states. The study will also highlight how criminal groups will exploit this trend, making Romania a key node in the network of illegal migration across Europe.

In conclusion, the expected results of this research will underscore the complex interaction between Romania’s Schengen accession, the rise of illegal migration, and the operational responses of criminal networks. The findings will suggest that Romania will face substantial challenges in managing this increased migration pressure, particularly in addressing secondary migration and combatting human trafficking. The study will also provide recommendations for strengthening Romania’s border management system and enhancing cross-border cooperation with EU agencies, such as FRONTEX and Europol, to effectively mitigate these risks.

4. Security Measures and Prevention

The pressure from migration flows will significantly increase, especially at Romania's external borders with Serbia, Ukraine, and Moldova. These border points will become critical areas for preventing illegal entries, as migrants and trafficking networks will focus their efforts on these routes.

International migrant smuggling networks will intensify their operations to illegally introduce people into Romania from these neighboring countries. This phenomenon will also be fueled by the vulnerabilities in border control systems of these countries, which lack rigorous standards or advanced monitoring technologies. As a result, migrants from third countries will be able to relatively easily reach Serbia, Ukraine, or Moldova, using them as transit points to Romania.

Once it joins Schengen Romania will need to ensure strict surveillance at the EU's external borders, especially with Serbia, Ukraine, and Moldova. If these measures are effective, the increase in illegal crossings can be significantly reduced.

Romania's border with Serbia is one of the main defense lines against illegal migration in the context of Schengen Area expansion. Located on the Western Balkans route, this border is a crucial point in controlling migration flows from the Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa to Western Europe. After Romania's accession to Schengen, pressures on this border will increase significantly, requiring efficient measures and cross-border cooperation.

Serbia is a central point of the Western Balkans route used by migrants to reach Western European countries. Migrants frequently enter Serbia from Turkey, Greece, North Macedonia, or Bulgaria, and then attempt to cross into Romania to avoid fences and strict controls at the Hungarian border.

The border between Romania and Serbia, stretching over more than 540 kilometers, includes hard-to-access sectors such as the Danube River areas or forested terrain. These characteristics are exploited by human trafficking networks.

Criminal groups operating along the Western Balkans route are well-organized and adaptable. They offer services such as clandestine transport, forged documents, and guidance, contributing to the increase in illegal migration flows.

Despite the efforts of Serbian authorities, their capacity to manage migration flows is limited, making Serbia a departure point for migrants aiming to reach the European Union.

Romania's border with Serbia will become a critical point in maintaining the security of the EU's external borders. Through a combination of technological measures, cross-border cooperation, and international involvement, Romania can effectively manage the challenges of illegal migration. It is essential that authorities pay special attention to this border, adapt security policies to new realities, and strengthen their partnership with Serbia to prevent migratory pressures and illegal activities.

A distinct and particularly important aspect in the context of Romania's accession to the Schengen Area is managing the border with Ukraine, an area that has become extremely vulnerable due to the military conflict that started in 2022. The humanitarian crisis caused by this conflict has significantly amplified the number of people seeking refuge in the European Union, and Romania, as a neighboring country, has been directly involved in managing this situation.

The war has caused millions of Ukrainian citizens to leave the country, most seeking temporary protection in EU member states. However, a considerable number of people continue to use Romania as a transit country to other European states, putting pressure on the administrative and logistical capacity to manage these flows.

Due to the influx of war refugees, the border with Ukraine is particularly vulnerable. Citizens from third countries intending to migrate to Schengen often enter Ukraine with relative ease, creating a high likelihood that these two migration flows, refugees and those seeking to reach Schengen, may merge into a single migratory current. For instance, in 2023, authorities reported a notable increase in the number of migrants from countries such as Afghanistan, Syria, and Bangladesh who entered Ukraine through informal routes, using the conflict as a way to bypass stricter border controls in other countries. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), over 20,000 migrants from third countries were

detected crossing into Ukraine in the first half of 2023, highlighting the vulnerability of the border region (IOM 2023). Organized crime groups quickly adapt their methods to exploit the unstable situation in Ukraine. These networks can facilitate the illegal passage of migrants into Romania using less monitored routes or exploiting other vulnerabilities in border crossing personnel.

The border between Romania and Moldova represents a strategically important area, both from a security and migration perspective. With Romania's accession to the Schengen Area, this border will become one of the most important external borders of the European Union, which implies new responsibilities for managing migration flows and maintaining security.

Geographical and cultural proximity are factors contributing to the vulnerability of the border with Moldova. The historical and cultural ties between Romania and Moldova have facilitated mobility between the two countries. While this connection has been beneficial for economic and cultural exchanges, it is also exploited by human trafficking networks.

Moldova is not a member of the European Union, meaning it does not adhere to the EU's Schengen Agreement, which standardizes border control measures among member states. Consequently, Moldova's border control protocols differ from those of neighboring EU countries, such as Romania. As a member of the EU and part of the Schengen Area, Romania implements stricter border controls in line with EU regulations. This disparity in border control measures can result in comparatively less stringent border controls in Moldova, potentially allowing migrants from third countries to enter more easily.

To address these differences and improve efficiency at border crossing points, Moldova and Romania have agreed to implement coordinated border controls at the Giurgiulești-Galați crossing point. This initiative aims to reduce congestion for traffic coming from Moldova and Ukraine while strengthening the EU's solidarity corridors. (EU Transport)

Additionally, in November 2024, the Government of Moldova approved an agreement with Romania to introduce joint border control at the Giurgiulești-Galați crossing point, a key checkpoint on the route from Ukraine to Romanian ports (Interfax).

These measures reflect ongoing efforts of cooperation between Moldova and Romania to align border management practices with EU standards and address challenges associated with the differences in border control measures between EU and non-EU countries.

According to the Romanian Border Police Activity Summary for 2022, the traffic values recorded at the border crossing points amounted to approximately 58.6 million people crossing (42.2 million EU citizens and 16.4 million non-EU citizens), both for entry and exit. Compared to the same period in 2021, when the traffic values at Romania's borders were 36.1 million people, there was an overall increase of 62% (Poliția de Frontieră Română, 2022). On border sections, in 2022, there were significant increases in traffic at border crossing points across all border segments: Border with Serbia: an increase of 105.1%; Airport border: an increase of 91.1%; Border with Ukraine: an increase of 96.9%; Border with Moldova: an increase of approximately 76.5%

In the analyzed period, the traffic values for means of transport recorded at border control points amounted to approximately 15.5 million vehicles, a 30% increase compared to the same period in 2021 (11.8 million vehicles). Although the most transited border by means of transport is the Romanian-Hungarian border, with 42% of the total, the largest increase in traffic was recorded at the border with Moldova (Poliția de Frontieră Română, 2022).

These data reflect a significant increase in traffic at Romania's borders in 2022, indicating an intensification of the flows of people and means of transport, including migrants, especially along the border with the Republic of Moldova (Poliția de Frontieră Română, 2022). In April 2022, Eurojust facilitated a joint operation between Romanian and Moldovan authorities to dismantle an organized crime group involved in migrant smuggling. This operation was part of a broader effort to tackle the expanding phenomenon of migrant trafficking, which has increasingly become a significant challenge in the region. Eurojust provided financial support and assisted in establishing a joint investigation team (JIT) to coordinate the efforts of the involved authorities (Eurojust, 2024). In May 2024, a

subsequent operation took place, reinforcing the ongoing battle against the growing scale of migrant smuggling. The operation focused on a group involved in trafficking migrants to the Schengen Area, charging substantial sums for transport. The JIT, supported by Eurojust, played a crucial role in ensuring efficient cooperation between the authorities of both countries (Eurojust, 2024). These coordinated efforts highlight the expanding nature of migrant trafficking in the region and underscore the commitment of Romanian and Moldovan authorities, with the support of Eurojust, to combat this escalating issue and enhance regional security (Eurojust, 2024).

This creates a vulnerability, as individuals may enter Moldova with the intention of crossing into Romania and, ultimately, into the Schengen Area. This makes Moldova an attractive transit point for illegal migrants seeking to enter the Schengen Area via Romania.

The separatist region of Transnistria presents an additional challenge for migration control. Being an area with unrecognized governance and limited international security presence, Transnistria is often used as a transit point for illegal migrants, smuggling, and other illicit activities.

Effective management of Romania's external borders, in the context of Schengen accession, represents a complex challenge that will have significant implications both at the national and European levels. Strategically positioned at the crossroads of migration routes from the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova, Romania plays a key role in enhancing the security of the European Union.

To address the increasing migration pressure, Romania must invest in state-of-the-art technologies. Advanced systems, UAVs equipped with thermal imaging, motion sensors, and interconnected databases for rapid checks will allow early identification of attempts to cross illegally. These solutions not only enhance the efficiency of border control devices but also discourage the activities of migrant trafficking networks.

No country can manage the challenges of illegal migration alone. Bilateral collaboration with Ukraine, Moldova, and Serbia is vital for real-time information exchange, as is coordinating joint operations and harmonizing control procedures. Partnership with FRONTEX will ensure European support for border control and the implementation of best practices. Romania can become a regional leader through initiatives that promote stability and security.

Conclusions

Romania's accession to the Schengen Area marks not only a key milestone in the country's European integration but also an important advancement in securing the EU's external borders. As outlined in the hypothesis, Romania's full integration into Schengen is anticipated to initially increase pressures from illegal migration, similar to the experiences of previous member states such as Slovenia and Croatia. This rise in migratory flows, particularly from regions such as Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, aligns with trends seen in other Schengen entrants. However, the analysis, supported by reports from FRONTEX, the European Commission, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), reveals that Romania has been effectively managing significant migration flows, especially along its borders with Serbia and Ukraine, which places it in a strong position to address the challenges expected after accession.

Romania's commitment to border security has been demonstrated through a range of measures, including the implementation of advanced surveillance technologies, such as UAVs, thermal cameras, and motion sensors. Furthermore, the country's cooperation with neighboring non-EU states, including Moldova, Ukraine, and Serbia, plays a crucial role in deterring illegal migration and strengthening border security. The results of hypothesis testing suggest that Romania's robust border management framework, though under continuous development, has significantly contributed to controlling migration flows to the Schengen Area. These measures, along with Romania's collaboration with EU agencies such as FRONTEX and Europol, reinforce the country's ability to mitigate security risks posed by illegal migration.

The analysis also highlights Romania's proactive approach in addressing the root causes of migration. By supporting the security capabilities of neighboring countries, Romania contributes to the EU's broader efforts to stabilize regions from which migrants originate. The hypothesis testing shows that, despite challenges, Romania's border management policies have made substantial progress in preventing illegal migration, aligning with EU standards and contributing to the security of the Schengen Area. However, several limitations were identified during the research. The lack of post-accession migration data means that the analysis primarily relied on projections and historical trends, which could not fully account for the dynamic and often unpredictable nature of migration patterns. Moreover, the comparative analysis with Slovenia and Croatia, although insightful, does not completely capture Romania's unique geopolitical context and migration dynamics. The specific impact of Romania's new role as an external Schengen border state remains to be fully understood.

In conclusion, Romania's accession to the Schengen Area is both an opportunity and a challenge. By continuing to refine its border security measures and enhancing cooperation with regional and European partners, Romania can manage the expected increase in migration pressures. Through the adoption of advanced technologies, strong international partnerships, and proactive policies, Romania has the potential to set an example for other Schengen member states in effectively addressing the challenges of illegal migration. While Romania's integration into Schengen is still in its early stages, its efforts to secure the external border will not only enhance EU security but also solidify Romania's position as a pillar of stability in Eastern Europe.

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