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How Romania and Bulgaria Gained Access to the Schengen Area and Its Implications for International Migration Patterns

AUTORA: ZHANG NAN

TUTOR: Dr. RICCARDO TURATI

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Abstract

This thesis provides a descriptive and institutional analysis of migration patterns from Romania and Bulgaria in the context of their full accession to the Schengen Area in 2025. Using data from UN DESA, OECD DIOC, the World Bank, and Eurostat, it examines population decline, the geographical distribution of emigrant stocks, and migrant characteristics by gender and education. The findings indicate high emigration rates, a strong concentration of emigrants within the EU, and evidence

consistent with positive educational selection. The study interprets Schengen accession as an institutional facilitator of established circulatory mobility rather than a direct cause of new migration flows.

Keywords

Romania; Bulgaria; Schengen Area; International Migration; Labour Mobility.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

The evolution of the Schengen Area stands as one of the most significant achievements of the European integration project. In simple terms, it has progressively transformed Europe from a continent divided by multiple national borders into a space allowing relatively free movement. The core principle of this system is free movement. The Schengen cooperation originally began in 1985, when France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg launched an intergovernmental initiative. Its main objective was clear: gradually remove internal border controls between member states and promote the four freedoms long championed by the EU—namely, the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital (; European Commission, 2024). Later, following the signing of the Treaty of Amsterdam, the Schengen acquis was formally incorporated into the European Union’s legal framework. As an institutional milestone, the Schengen Area evolved from a “side road” of cooperation into a “main artery” within the EU’s institutional structure, thereby establishing the world’s largest free travel area (Pingen, 2025). Today, the area encompasses 29 countries and serves a population of over 450 million residents (Pingen, 2025).

For Romania and Bulgaria, the path to this "crown jewel" of integration was exceptionally protracted. Both nations joined the EU on January 1, 2007, under the mandate of the 2005 Accession Treaties, which obligated them to eventually apply the full Schengen acquis (Council of the European Union, 2024). However, unlike earlier enlargement rounds where Schengen membership closely followed EU entry, Romania and Bulgaria remained in a state of "partial integration" for 18 years (Pingen, 2025; Pieńkowski & Szymańska, 2025). This delay exposed deep-seated tensions within the Union, where technical readiness was frequently overshadowed by the political anxieties of established member states regarding migration management and the rule of law (Pieńkowski & Szymańska, 2025).

1.2 Motivation and Relevance

Romania and Bulgaria's full accession on January 1, 2025, marks a historic and institutional milestone for the EU's southeastern flank. Imagine it as “the final Iron Curtain of the Cold War era finally being torn down”, not merely a physical border, but a symbolic barrier.

Firstly, this accession resolves the long-standing “second-class membership puzzle.” Despite both countries attaining technical readiness as early as 2011, certain “veto

players” continued to block their progress through extra-treaty conditions (Pieńkowski & Szymańska, 2025). Such perceived discrimination sparked significant EU skepticism locally: an INSCOP poll in 2024 revealed that 60% of Romanians felt their country had been treated unfairly (Pieńkowski & Szymańska, 2025). In essence, it is as if there have always been two “neglected neighbors” within the EU family, who have finally been invited to the table.

Secondly, this accession carries significant economic and environmental implications. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has quantified the economic cost of Romania and Bulgaria remaining outside the Schengen Area. According to the EESC, Bulgaria loses approximately EUR 834 million annually, while the annual losses for Romania are estimated at EUR 2.41 billion, including around EUR 90 million in direct transport costs and EUR 2.32 billion in lost revenues associated with border delays. In addition, freight vehicles waiting at land borders emit approximately 46,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide per year, highlighting the environmental costs of maintaining internal border checks (EESC, 2024). Put another way, prolonged border waits not only slow down the economy but also impose a high “carbon cost” on the environment. Tracing the process that led to this breakthrough also sheds light on the pragmatism of current EU governance.

Finally, the case holds significant importance for migration studies. By eliminating structural constraints, it provides researchers with a “real-time experiment” to observe changes in labor mobility and migration routes. With the EU's transition to a management system centered on “digital borders” and the introduction of the Entry/Exit System (EES), Romania and Bulgaria serve as “sentinels” on the southeastern frontier, becoming a crucial link in safeguarding the EU's collective security (Pingen, 2025).

1.3 Research Questions and Objectives

This thesis examines the migratory patterns of Romania and Bulgaria through a descriptive and institutional lens. It asks how the scale of emigrant stocks and emigration intensity evolved between the 2000 and 2020 reference cycles, how the geographical distribution of these stocks changed across EU and non-EU destinations, and whether the available OECD DIOC evidence on gender and educational attainment is consistent with patterns of migrant selection. The study does not aim at causal identification; instead, it seeks to build a descriptive empirical baseline using verified longitudinal data from UN DESA, OECD DIOC, and the World Bank.

The central objective of the thesis is to explain the structure of these established migration corridors and to situate them within the institutional changes associated with Romania and Bulgaria’s integration into the Schengen Area. In this framework, the 2025 Schengen accession is treated not as the origin of new migratory flows, but as an institutional development that may reduce border-related frictions and facilitate mobility patterns already well established before full land-border accession.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis comprises of seven chapters. Chapter 1 presents the topic, the importance of Romania and Bulgaria joining the Schengen Area and the questions and the objectives of the study. The literature and the conceptual framework is reviewed in Chapter 2, with an emphasis on migration policies, migration stocks and flows, circular migration, labour demand and migrant selection. Chapter 3 focuses on the legal and institutional context of the Schengen Area and the steps which Romania and Bulgaria have taken in order to become part of the Schengen Area, as they became members of the EU in 2007 and are scheduled to fully join the Schengen Area in 2025. Chapter 4 presents the research design, data sources, construction of variables, and methodological limitations of the empirical analysis. Descriptive evidence of population decline, emigrant stocks, destination patterns and migrant characteristics by gender and education are presented in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 presents an analysis of the accession to the Schengen area and the recent mobility developments, covering policy expectations, early observations and implications for EU migration governance. The summary, thesis contribution, and limitations and future directions are presented in Chapter 7.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Migration Policies and the Accumulation of Migration Stocks

Migration policies and immigrant “stocks” (i.e., the total size of the foreign-born population in a country) are largely influenced by policy-induced costs. These costs are sometimes vividly described as a “massive cliff at the border” (Bertoli & Fernández-Huertas Moraga, 2015,). In this context, the “cliff” can be understood as various invisible yet very real barriers, such as administrative procedures, legal restrictions, and economic costs. Collectively, these factors determine whether and to what extent the international labor force can actually move.

Against the backdrop of the European Union, although the Schengen acquis has to some extent eliminated these barriers, this elimination is not entirely uniform, thereby giving rise to a form of “multilateral resistance” (Bertoli & Fernández-Huertas Moraga, 2015). Within contemporary migration studies, a fundamental assumption is that migrants do not make decisions arbitrarily but tend to follow a logic of “income maximization.” Grogger and Hanson (2011) note that migrants from the same country typically prefer destinations that offer higher absolute rewards for skill. This corresponds to the “positive sorting” phenomenon: those with higher levels of education are more likely to migrate to countries with higher wages and greater opportunities. Therefore, it also explains why highly educated individuals from Romania and Bulgaria tend to enter Western European labor markets where significant wage premiums exist (Grogger & Hanson, 2011).

From a mechanistic perspective, a country’s stock of immigrants depends largely on this “skill-income gap.” Once institutional integration reduces migration costs, if the returns on high skills are higher, the overall immigration structure will often shift toward higher-skilled workers (Grogger & Hanson, 2011). Applying this to the Romanian and Bulgarian cases, the 18-year delay in Schengen accession effectively

constituted a persistent structural constraint. Even after joining the EU in 2007, when both countries gained the right to legal migration, the lack of full integration of land borders meant that the movement of people and goods still faced high transaction costs.

Further research indicates that integration policies also play a crucial role in influencing the stock of immigrants. Factors such as access to permanent residence and the allowance of family reunification significantly affect whether immigrants choose to stay long-term (Beverelli, 2021). Compared to strict restrictive policies, a shift toward moderately integration-oriented policies could increase cross-border migration by about one-third relative to internal mobility, with the core mechanism being the reduction in the costs of long-term settlement (Beverelli, 2021).

Consequently, full accession in 2025 is likely to alter the “stock dynamics” of migration in Romania and Bulgaria. Migration patterns that were originally short-term, survival-oriented, and relatively unstable may gradually shift toward a more stable, integrated, and productive settlement structure.

2.2 Immigration Policy and Circular Migration

While immigration “stocks” primarily reflect the foreign-born population that has already settled permanently in a country, immigration “flows” better reveal people’s immediate reactions to policy changes—reactions that are often cyclical in nature. Previously, much immigration research assumed a relatively intuitive logic: once border controls are relaxed, immigration increases—the so-called “pull effect.” However, recent research suggests a more complex scenario: agreements on free labor mobility do not necessarily just “pull people in”; they may also prompt already settled immigrants to reconsider leaving their current country of residence (Bazillier et al., 2023).

Central to this dynamic is the “insurance argument.” With fully open borders, migrants perceive that they can “return home”—or at least retain the possibility of returning or relocating—thereby reducing the risks they face when attempting to return to their country of origin or move to a third country (Bazillier et al., 2023). It functions much like a psychological safety net: while returning is not guaranteed, knowing that a fallback option exists allows for more flexible behavioral choices.

This is further supported by data on European migration outflows from 1990 to 2011. Studies reveal that the “Schengen effect” had a significantly greater impact on outbound migration than on inbound migration, with the ratio of outbound to inbound migrants increasing by nearly 20 percentage points (Bazillier et al., 2023). These findings suggest that the changes brought about by Schengen are not merely about “more people coming in”; more importantly, it has altered people’s expectations regarding departure and return. Applying this to the cases of Romania and Bulgaria, the “Air Schengen” initiative in 2024 and full land accession in 2025 effectively signify a significant enhancement in the “capabilities” of citizens from both countries. Under the Aspirations-Capabilities framework, once border costs are reduced through the Schengen mechanism, individuals are better positioned to engage in circular

migration, rather than having to resort to “permanent emigration” to cope with the uncertainty of potential future border tightening (de Haas, 2021).

Viewed this way, the real impact of institutional changes extends beyond whether “people can leave” to how “people plan their futures.” It alters the timing underlying migration decisions: previously, many might have opted for a one-time, long-term departure out of fear of not being able to return; but as border restrictions ease and return becomes easier, people are more likely to view migration as a reversible, adjustable choice.

This shift is particularly evident among migrants with “home bias”, those who typically prefer to spend money in their country of origin and maintain ties with their hometown. The opening of borders makes them more likely to leave their previously stable host countries, as the risk of being “locked out” decreases and the utility of returning increases (Bazillier et al., 2023).

For this reason, Romania and Bulgaria's full integration is likely to be more than just an adjustment to border regimes; it is a step toward propelling intra-European regional mobility into a new phase. During this phase, the distinction between “internal travelers” and “systemically relevant workers” will become less rigid; as mobility increases, these two categories will increasingly overlap (Freudlsperger et al., 2025). Viewed from a broader perspective, this shift is actually driving the emergence of a more flexible and regionalized European mobility order.

2.3 Labour Demand, Mobility, and the "Roy Model" Application

The integration of Romania and Bulgaria into the European single labor market can be understood from two key perspectives: first, labor demand; and second, the convergence process driven by wage differentials. Dorn and Zweimüller (2021) note that while domestic labor mobility in the United States is declining, labor mobility in Europe is steadily increasing, with over 460 million citizens now enjoying equal access to employment opportunities.

Much of this mobility stems from persistent income disparities within the EU. For example, in 2008, the average income of Romanian workers was 64% lower than that of German workers; by 2018, this gap had narrowed to 51% (Dorn & Zweimüller, 2021). In essence, wages are “gradually converging,” but they are far from truly equalized; it is precisely this “unresolved gap” that continues to drive population mobility.

In terms of economic benefits, the “static earnings gains” resulting from this cross-border mobility are substantial. In Bulgaria, for example, the additional income earned by migrants in high-wage countries is equivalent to 8.0% of its GDP, one of the highest levels in the EU (Dorn & Zweimüller, 2021). Romania presents a similar situation, where these structural disparities constitute a very clear “push factor.” Real-world data clearly illustrates this disparity: in 2024, Romania’s hourly labor cost was €12.5, compared to the EU average of €33.5 (Eurostat, 2024).

This phenomenon strongly validates the basic logic of the “Roy model”: as long as the productivity and wage gap between countries remains greater than the cost of migration, the trend of labor flowing from low-income to high-income countries will

persist (Grogger & Hanson, 2011). People will continue to strive to move upward as long as the returns on the “upper tier” are sufficiently high.

However, explaining mobility solely through wage differentials is insufficient; labor demand in destination countries also plays a critical role.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the “paradox of essentiality” illustrated this point well: while Eastern European workers were viewed as “essential cogs” in keeping Western European food supply chains running, they were denied the same health protections and rights to free movement enjoyed by local citizens (Szelewa & Polakowski, 2022). Even more intriguingly, despite widespread travel restrictions, governments still organized charter flights for seasonal workers from Romania and Bulgaria (Szelewa & Polakowski, 2022). To some extent, when labor demand is sufficiently strong, institutional restrictions are “temporarily bypassed,” as if creating a “bypass channel” for labor mobility in emergency situations.

Full Schengen accession in 2025 can be understood as transforming this “temporary opening” into an “institutional channel.” It converts mobility that previously required emergency measures into a normalized mechanism, reintegrating “essentiality” and “liberty” within the same framework, thereby ensuring that labor mobility no longer depends on ad hoc policy adjustments (Pingen, 2025). This transformation not only enhances efficiency but also makes the entire labor market function more like a “sustained system” rather than a makeshift structure requiring constant patching.

Chapter 3: Institutional Pathways and the Path to Schengen Integration.

The process of Romania and Bulgaria joining the Schengen Area is a complicated institutional process that cuts across technical compliance and top-level political diplomacy. The Schengen acquis, which is a pillar of the European project, prescribes a harmonized regime of mobility where member states would switch national border management to collective security regime. This chapter will look at the legal basis of the border-free zone, the long-term journey that was politically conditional to the accession states of 2007 and the last procedural process leading to the end of internal border controls in 2025.

3.1 Legal and Institutional Foundations of Schengen

The legal framework of the Schengen Area dates back to 1985 with an intergovernmental agreement between five founding members France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg, to eliminate internal border controls to allow people to move freely (Pingen, 2025). The 1990 Schengen Convention greatly broadened this framework and became, in turn, a part of the main legislation of the European Union, introducing the so-called four freedoms as core competencies of the Union (OSW, 2024; Pingen, 2025). In this regime, internal border controls are abolished and in their place, the Schengen acquis, a complex of regulations, is applied based on harmonized visa policy, cross-border police and judicial cooperation, and strict management of the common external frontier (Pettersson Fürst, 2023; Pingen, 2025).

An efficient border-free zone is dependent on the level of trust among the member

countries, which requires that every member state must prove as having the technical capacity to protect the perimeter of the Union. This is supported by the deployment of massive IT systems, mainly the Schengen Information System (SIS II) and Visa Information System (VIS) that allow the exchange of data on alert and security threats in real-time between national authorities (Altunbaş & Memişoğlu, 2024; European Commission, 2022). Joining the area is not automatic but a multi-phase peer-to-peer assessment that considers five domains of critical focus, external border management, visa policy, police cooperation, data protection, and technical preparedness to implement SIS (European Commission, 2024). It is not until a candidate has confirmed that it complies with these technical standards that the Council of the European Union may make a unanimous decision to remove internal border controls, in fact turning national borders into internal European lines of transit.

3.2 Romania and Bulgaria's Path to Schengen

In the case of Romania and Bulgaria, it was laid in their 2005 Accession Treaties, which on January 1, 2007, they joined the European Union (Pieńkowski & Szymańska, 2025). Although both countries managed to fulfill all technical criteria to join the European Union by June 2011, as the various European Commission assessments and European Parliament decisions confirmed, the integration was delayed by eighteen years as a result of political reservations of the old member states (OSW, 2024; Pieńkowski & Szymańska, 2025). The other nations that used their veto power in the Council during this period were the Netherlands, France and subsequently Austria who connected the border-free zone to the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM). The CVM was an intermediate monitoring tool that was introduced during accession to control judicial reform progress and combating corruption and organized crime (Pieńkowski & Szymańska, 2025).

The connection between technical Schengen requirements and the political goals of the CVM resulted in the emergence of a special kind of post-accession conditionality, which became common among Sofia and Bucharest as a symbol of the second-class membership (OSW, 2024; Pieńkowski and Szymańska, 2025). The 2015 refugee crisis further intensified the use of the securitization of migration policy in political discussions in the Council as it was combined with wider interests. Austria especially insisted on a long-standing veto due to the claim that a high number of illegal arrivals on the Western Balkan route passed through Bulgaria and Romania, which was contradicted by the actual data provided by the Commission that unconditionally proved the efficiency of their external border protection (Altunbaş & Memişoğlu, 2024; Pieńkowski and Szymańska, 2025). The eventual closure of the CVM in September 2023 eliminated the institutional rationale on the continued exclusion, paving the way to a gradual process of integration.

3.3 Final Integration Steps (2024–2025)

The breakthrough in the accession process was achieved due to the two-stage institutional transition, starting with the "Air Schengen" phase in early 2024. On March 31, 2024, following an internal air and maritime border control lift imposed by

a Council decision in December 2023, Romania and Bulgaria removed internal air and maritime border control, allowing passengers to travel without passport control at airports and seaports (Council of the European Union, 2024). Although this move was symbolically important to the aviation industry, it failed to alleviate the structural economic bottlenecks created due to land border delay, which contributed to the overwhelming majority of freight and commercial traffic (EESC, 2024; Pieńkowski & Szymańska, 2025). Therefore, to fully fulfill the membership rights, another all-unanimous decision was necessary to tackle the internal land borders, which were still under severe pressure of internal political interests in the Western core.

The end point was met when on December 12, 2024 the Council decided unanimously to abolish internal land border checks with Bulgaria and Romania, which would be removed on January 1, 2025 (European Commission, 2024). This move finalized the complete union of the two nations to the Schengen Area, which gave their citizens the freedom to free movement across Europe, covering 29 countries (Pingen, 2025). Both countries have taken on very large roles in the external border management, such as running fast-track asylum and return processes assisted by the Frontex Standing Corps, as full members (Frontex, 2025; European Commission, 2024). To address the issue of the abrupt migratory changes, the agreement provided a clause on the continuation of random checks at the select land borders up to the middle of 2025 (Pieńkowski and Szymańska, 2025). Finally, the 2025 membership makes formal the status of Romania and Bulgaria as protectors of the southeastern frontier of the Union, where the elimination of internal borders is to be supported by a well-functioning and technologically advanced control over the common external border (Altunbaş and Memişoğlu, 2024; Pieńkowski and Szymańska, 2025).

Chapter 4: Data and Methodology

This chapter outlines the research design and methodological framework employed to analyze the migratory dynamics of Romania and Bulgaria within the context of their integration into the European Union and the Schengen Area. The study adopts a descriptive and institutional approach to characterize the evolution of Southeast European human capital movements, prioritizing the use of validated longitudinal data over causal identification strategies that are often limited by the complexities of multi-stage institutional integration.

4.1 Research Design and Empirical Strategy

The thesis utilizes a descriptive and institutional research design focused on the period between the 2007 EU accession and the 2025 Schengen milestone. This approach is intentionally non-causal. As established in the migration literature, identifying a "pure" causal effect of institutional changes like Schengen membership is methodologically challenging due to the overlapping influence of prior labor market liberalizations and the maturity of existing migratory corridors (Dorn & Zweimüller, 2021; Bazillier et al., 2023). Because Romania and Bulgaria acquired the right to free movement in 2007, the 2025 Schengen accession functions not as a creator of new migratory channels, but as an institutional facilitator that removes final physical

land-border constraints and reduces the "multilateral resistance" to mobility (Bertoli & Fernández-Huertas Moraga, 2015; de Haas, 2021).

The empirical strategy, therefore, focuses on characterizing the "mature migratory environment" through a multi-dimensional analysis of population trends, geographical stock distributions, and migrant selection patterns. By mapping the established state of the Balkan diaspora prior to the removal of land-border checks, the study provides a baseline to understand how Schengen integration facilitates circularity and flexibility rather than initiating massive new flows. This strategy aligns with the "aspirations-capabilities" framework, which posits that institutional shifts alter the capabilities of individuals to realize established migratory aspirations (de Haas, 2021).

4.2 Data Sources and Validation

The empirical analysis in Chapter 5 is constructed from a synthesis of four primary international datasets, each selected for its robustness and longitudinal coverage.

The UN DESA International Migrant Stock (IMS), specifically the 2020 and 2024 revisions, serves as the authoritative source for bilateral emigrant stocks. This dataset provides quinquennial estimates of the number of foreign-born individuals or foreign citizens residing in destination countries, allowing for a comparative analysis of the milestones in 2000 and 2020 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2024). To supplement these stocks with demographic context, World Bank World Development Indicators (WDI) are utilized to track the total resident population size of Romania and Bulgaria between 2003 and 2023, documenting the structural contraction of the source-country populations (Dabrowski & Louro, 2025). For the analysis of migrant characteristics, the study relies on the OECD Database on Immigrants in OECD Countries (DIOC), particularly the 2020–2021 reference cycle. The DIOC is essential for measuring educational attainment and gender composition, as it standardizes schooling categories across different national statistical systems (OECD, 2021). Finally, Eurostat provides the critical economic benchmarks, including hourly labor costs, which act as primary pull factors in the "Roy model" of income maximization (Eurostat, 2024; Grogger & Hanson, 2011). Data validation is further ensured by cross-referencing these international sources with specific national survey evidence, such as the Spanish National Immigrant Survey (ENI), which offers granular insights into family settlement patterns (Stanek, 2009).

4.3 Variable Construction

To ensure analytical consistency, several key variables are constructed from the raw data. The emigration rate is the primary indicator of migratory intensity, defined as the total stock of a country's citizens residing in other EU/EEA member states divided by the total domestic resident population of the source country (Dorn & Zweimüller, 2021). This rate provides a standardized measure of the scale of the diaspora relative to the hollowing-out domestic population.

The geographical distribution variable categorizes migratory stocks by their legal

regime destination, distinguishing between EU-27 member states and non-EU destinations. This allows for the calculation of the "EU share" of the diaspora, which serves as a proxy for the redirection of flows toward the European Single Market following the removal of administrative barriers (Bertoli & Fernández-Huertas Moraga, 2015). Socioeconomic characteristics are measured using the tertiary-educated share, defined as the proportion of the diaspora with 13 or more years of schooling, and the gender ratio, expressed as the number of males per 100 females (Stanek, 2009; Dorn & Zweimüller, 2021). These variables are used to test for "positive selection"—the hypothesis that more educated individuals are more likely to emigrate due to higher absolute wage gains in destination countries (Grogger & Hanson, 2011).

4.4 Methodological Limitations

Several limitations inherent in international migration data require a cautious interpretation of the findings. First, there is significant heterogeneity in reporting methods across destination countries; while some nations utilize municipal registers, others rely on decennial censuses or periodic surveys (Bazillier et al., 2023). This can lead to inconsistencies in the recording of temporary or circulatory movements, which are particularly prevalent in the Balkan context (Stanek, 2009).

Second, the study is constrained by time-series gaps. While the World Bank provides annual population counts, migration stock data from UN DESA and education data from DIOC are typically released in multi-year reference cycles, precluding a continuous year-by-year analysis of the 2000–2024 period (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2024; Dorn & Zweimüller, 2021). Furthermore, the study acknowledges the risk of occupational downgrading, where the recorded educational attainment of a migrant does not necessarily reflect their professional activity in the host country (Dorn & Zweimüller, 2021). Consequently, evidence regarding "positive selection" is presented as a descriptive characteristic of the diaspora's human capital rather than a definitive indicator of labor market success. These limitations necessitate the use of benchmark years and milestones to characterize the migratory landscape.

Chapter 5: International Migration Patterns of Romania and Bulgaria

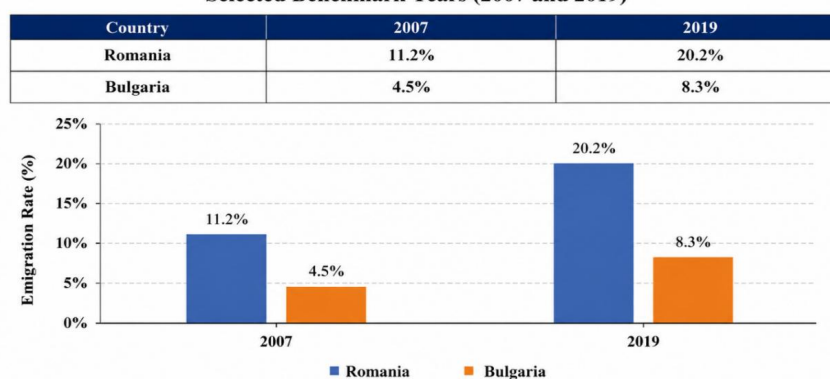
The transition of Romania and Bulgaria toward full membership in the Schengen Area occurs within a demographic and migratory context defined by high-intensity mobility and structural population contraction. Unlike previous enlargements, the 2025 milestone does not initiate a new migratory channel but rather formalizes one of the most active labor corridors in the European Union (EU). This chapter provides an evidence-based empirical analysis of the demographic shifts, geographical distributions, and socioeconomic characteristics of the Romanian and Bulgarian diaspora. By synthesizing longitudinal data from international statistical agencies, the analysis establishes a descriptive baseline of the environment into which these two nations have integrated, emphasizing the role of institutional frameworks as facilitators of established mobility aspirations.

5.1 Population Evolution and Emigration Dynamics

The demographic landscape of Southeastern Europe since the early 2000s has been characterized by a sustained contraction of the resident population, often described as a structural "hollowing out" of the Balkan periphery. Longitudinal indicators reveal that between 2003 and 2023, Bulgaria experienced a total population decline of approximately 18%, while Romania's resident population fell by roughly 12% (Dabrowski & Louro, 2025). This contraction indicates a multifaceted demographic crisis driven by both negative natural growth and significant net outward migration following the acquisition of EU free movement rights in 2007. The intensity of these trends is consistent with a structural relocation of human capital toward the high-income core of the Union. The scale of the "emigrant stock"—defined as the total number of a country's citizens residing abroad—has reached levels that are exceptional within the European context. According to data consolidated from Eurostat and the UN DESA International Migrant Stock (IMS), the Romanian diaspora is one of the largest globally relative to its home population. By 2019, approximately 3.6 million Romanian citizens were residing in other countries within the European Economic Area (EEA), indicating that roughly 20.2%, or one in five citizens, lives abroad (Dorn & Zweimüller, 2021). Bulgaria exhibits a similar intensity, with its citizens residing in other EU member states corresponding to approximately 8.3% of its domestic population (Dorn & Zweimüller, 2021). These trends are visually summarized in Figure 5.1, which illustrates the evolution of national emigration rates at verified benchmark years. These milestones suggest that migration has transitioned from a temporary survival strategy into a structural feature of the regional economy. According to the "aspirations-capabilities" framework, the legal rights granted in 2007 converted long-standing migratory aspirations into a sustained relocation of the workforce (de Haas, 2021).

In this context, the 2025 Schengen accession functions as an additional facilitator that removes the final physical "structural constraints" of land border checks, thereby increasing the capability of individuals to move more flexibly between home and host countries (de Haas, 2021).

Figure 5.1. Emigration Rates of Romania and Bulgaria at Selected Benchmark Years (2007 and 2019)



Source: Author's construction based on Dorn and Zweimüller (2021) and World Bank (2024).

Note: Emigration rates are calculated as the stock of emigrants residing in EU/EEA countries divided by the domestic resident population. Benchmark years are selected according to data availability and the 2007 EU accession milestone.

5.2 Geographical Distribution and Regional Concentration

The distribution of Romanian and Bulgarian migrants is overwhelmingly oriented toward the high-income economies of the EU, reflecting the utilization of free movement rights acquired nearly two decades ago. Data from the UN DESA IMS confirms that migration stocks are concentrated within specific high-productivity corridors. Table 5.1 illustrates the massive scaling of these stocks and the subsequent geographic diversification between 2000 and 2020. Romanian stocks in Italy escalated from approximately 65,000 in 2000 to over 1.14 million by 2020, while the stock in Germany reached 716,000 and the presence in Spain grew to 673,000 (UN DESA, 2024). Conversely, Bulgaria’s distribution shows a notable shift; while its stock in Turkey—a traditional non-EU destination—declined from 490,000 to 350,000, its presence in Germany grew eightfold to 360,000 by 2020 (UN DESA, 2024).

Table 5.1. Main Destination Countries and Emigrant Stocks of Romania and Bulgaria, 2000 and 2020

Origin Country	Destination Country	Stock in 2000	Stock in 2020
Romania	Italy	65,000	1,145,000
Romania	Spain	31,600	673,000
Romania	Germany	180,000	716,000
Bulgaria	Turkey	490,000	350,000
Bulgaria	Germany	45,000	360,000
Bulgaria	Spain	12,000	125,000

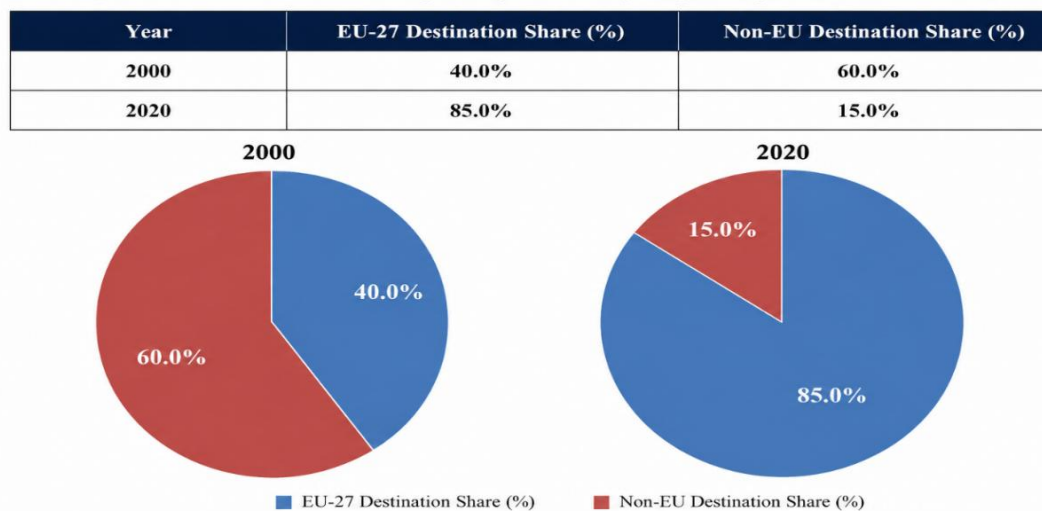
Note: Migrant stocks refer to the total number of persons born in or holding the nationality of the origin country residing in the destination country.

Source: Author’s construction based on UN DESA International Migrant Stock (2020; 2024 revisions).

The empirical meaning of this redirection is further clarified by Figure 5.2, which displays the share of total emigrant stocks categorized by their legal regime destination. In 2000, the share of the Balkan diaspora residing in EU-27 destinations stood at approximately 40%, while non-EU destinations (primarily Turkey for Bulgarians) accounted for roughly 60%. By 2020, this ratio had dramatically inverted, with EU-27 destinations accounting for over 85% of the total stock and non-EU shares falling below 15% (UN DESA, 2024). This inversion indicates that

institutional integration into the European Single Market acted as a primary redirection agent, consistent with the theory of the "removal of multilateral resistance," where the attractiveness of EU destinations increased as administrative and legal barriers were dismantled (Bertoli & Fernández-Huertas Moraga, 2015). The geographical concentration of these stocks is further illuminated by granular NUTS-3 regional evidence. Utilizing a comprehensive regional dataset compiled from 16 national statistical offices, Dorn and Zweimüller (2021) map the predominant foreign nationality across 1,095 Western European NUTS-3 regions for the 2018–2019 period. The variable measures the nationality of the largest (predominant) foreign group in each region. The data reveal that Romanian nationals form the predominant foreign group in dozens of regions across Italy and Spain, as well as in specific areas of Austria and Southern Germany (Dorn & Zweimüller, 2021). Romanian and Bulgarian migrants appear concentrated in these regions due to established social networks and high demand for labor in construction, agriculture, and domestic services (Dorn & Zweimüller, 2021; Stanek, 2009). This clustering indicates that linguistic proximity (for Romania in Italy and Spain) and historical economic ties (in Germanic regions) remain influential pull factors that guide migrants toward specific regional labor markets.

Figure 5.2: Redirection of Migratory Stocks by Legal Regime (2000 vs. 2020)



Source: Author's construction based on aggregate data from UN DESA (2024) International Migrant Stock.

5.3 Migrant Characteristics and Selection

The socioeconomic profile of the diaspora indicates that migration from Southeastern Europe follows distinct patterns of selection and maturation. Evidence from the OECD Database on Immigrants (DIOC) and associated surveys suggests that the diaspora has evolved from a male-dominated "pioneer" phase to a more balanced distribution. As documented in Table 5.2, male-to-female ratios in early surges to Spain reached 111 and 118 males per 100 females for Romanians and Bulgarians respectively by 2007 (Stanek, 2009). Regarding education and selection, verified data

from the OECD DIOC indicates a pattern of "positive selection" relative to the domestic population. The tertiary-educated share of the diaspora—approximately 25.2% for Romania and 27.8% for Bulgaria—is consistently higher than average domestic educational attainment (Dorn & Zweimüller, 2021). This supports the Roy model of income maximization, which posits that individuals with higher skills are more likely to emigrate because they can achieve larger absolute wage gains in the destination country (Grogger & Hanson, 2011). Positive selection occurs because the absolute difference in earnings between destination and source countries is greater for high-skilled than for low-skilled workers (Grogger & Hanson, 2011). However, since the foreign-born tertiary average in the EU stands at 30%, many Balkan migrants appear to experience "occupational downgrading," occupying roles below their educational level to secure higher absolute wages (Dorn & Zweimüller, 2021).

Table 5.2. Gender and Educational Characteristics of the Romanian and Bulgarian Diaspora

Variable	Romania	Bulgaria
Tertiary Educated Share (%)	25.2%	27.8%
Male-to-Female Ratio (2007)	111 : 100	118 : 100

Source: Author's construction based on OECD DIOC (2021 Reference Cycle) and Stanek (2009).

Note: Tertiary educated share refers to foreign-born residents with 13+ years of schooling.

5.4 Summary of Empirical Findings

The empirical evidence characterizes the Romanian and Bulgarian migratory landscape as one defined by high intensity and structural maturity. The data in Table 5.2 suggest a pattern consistent with positive selection, as Romanian and Bulgarian migrants appear to be relatively well educated and, in the Spanish case, initially male-dominated before family settlement became more common. A demographic crisis—marked by an 18% population loss in Bulgaria and a 12% loss in Romania since 2003—is consistent with an emigrant stock that has relocated one-fifth of the Romanian population to the EEA (Dabrowski & Louro, 2025; Dorn & Zweimüller, 2021). Geographically, the diaspora is highly concentrated in specific regional labor markets, as evidenced by NUTS-3 data (Dorn & Zweimüller, 2021). Socioeconomically, the diaspora has matured from individual labor pioneers into settled units with increasingly balanced gender ratios and a "positively selected"

educational profile. While the 2025 Schengen accession removes final physical border checks, the underlying drivers of mobility—the massive wage gap and established networks—predate this institutional milestone, suggesting that Schengen integration serves primarily as a facilitator for existing circulatory mobility and an "insurance device" that guarantees the right of re-entry (Bazillier et al., 2023; de Haas, 2021).

Chapter 6: Schengen Accession and Recent Mobility Developments

The complete entry into the Schengen Area of Romania and Bulgaria on 1 January 2025 is the last institutional step of the 2007 enlargement cycle. This has been accomplished in two stages: firstly, on 31 March 2024, air and maritime border controls have been lifted, known as the "Air Schengen" stage; and secondly, in December 2024, the Council agreed unanimously to lift checks at the internal land borders (Council of the European Union, 2024; European Commission, 2024). This chapter reviews the policy hopes and initial empirical findings on this transition. Overall, the analysis views the accession of 2025 as part of a wider theoretical perspective of European labour mobility, and thus considers Schengen not as an independent factor shaping migration, but as an important enabler that helps adjust the 'capabilities' of migrants in an already established migratory corridor.

6.1 Policy Expectations and Theoretical Insights

The main policy goal of Schengen accession is to minimize and decrease "multilateral resistance" to mobility, by eliminating physical and administrative land-border barriers. As outlined in chapter 5 the Romanian and Bulgarian diaspora is already well connected to the European Single Market with more than 85% of their migratory stocks living in EU-27 member countries (UN DESA, 2024). Migration literature indicates that the abolition of border checks does not necessarily translate into "a flood of new 'pioneer' migration" but rather into "circularity and flexibility of existing populations". Institutional changes like Schengen accession change the capability of the individual to move by reducing the transaction costs of crossing the border according to the aspirations-capabilities framework. The 2025 goal eliminates a major physical obstacle to circular mobility for workers from Romania and Bulgaria, who were previously subjected to long waiting times at the Romanian-Hungarian border (8-16 hours) or at the Danube bridges (several days)(PISM, 2025).

Theoretical understandings from Bazillier, Magris and Mirza (2023) offer a nuanced prediction with respect to out-migration and return. Their study suggests that the "borderless" policy of a Schengen agreement may even boost out-migration (exits) by as much as 40% to 53% from the host country. If borders are open, and re-entry is permanent, migrants feel more secure to leave a host country and go home or try to find another place to live if economic conditions change (Bazillier et al., 2023). The 2025 target presents a so-called 'insurance argument', implying that such a deadline might not lead to a one-way migration from the Balkan periphery to the western European core, but might instead help stimulate greater movement of people between the two areas. In addition, the elimination of land borders will likely reduce the "cliff at the border" effect, which is the costs and disincentives associated with the efficient

movement of labour between regional markets because of policies (Bertoli & Fernández-Huertas Moraga, 2015; Pritchett, 2009).

6.2 Recent Data and First Observations

Initial data for the 2024 transition period indicates that the practical effects of ‘partial accession’ on the overall regional economy were relatively limited. “Air Schengen” made travelling more convenient for the airline industry – accounting for about two third of Romania’s international passenger transport – but offered little in terms of addressing the structural constraints on goods transport. For instance, only 3% of the Bulgarian products are exported by air to other EU member states, and the main economic burden of not having a Schengen status is associated with the land borders before the 2025 deadline. These land border checks have exacted significant economic damages to the two countries. Estimates made by the European Economic and Social Committee suggests that the annual losses are as high as EUR 834 million in Bulgaria and EUR 2.41 billion in Romania, primarily because of transport delays, administrative burdens and lost business opportunities (EESC, 2024). Thus, the elimination of internal land border checks will be likely to benefit the cross-border supply chains by lowering the logistics costs.

As for irregular migration governance, Frontex data in the immediate period before the full accession shows that there is a major change in the regional dynamics. The number of people who managed to cross the borders irregularly in 2024 on the Western Balkan route decreased by some 78%, to the lowest recorded since the pandemic (EESC, 2024; PISM, 2025). This decrease is due to the increased security cooperation and to the presence of Frontex Standing Corps officers to assist national border police forces in Romania and Bulgaria. Both countries are full members of the Schengen area, and are now responsible for the external Southeastern border of the Union, with the help of the Schengen Information System (SIS II) and the Visa Information System (VIS) (Altunbaş & Memişoğlu, 2024; European Commission, 2022). Yet, a key limitation of the evidence so far is that more detailed and comprehensive annual data on labour mobility and stock changes will only become fully available at the next reporting round, in 2025, which will require a cautious interpretation of the initial trends.

6.3 Discussion: Schengen as a Facilitator and Governance Implications

As Romania and Bulgaria join the Schengen in 2025, it is clear that Schengen integration acts mainly as an institutional enabler of the existing circulatory logic. The EU has removed a physical land border which has given validity to the “four freedoms” of its Southeastern citizens, who have been living a “second-class membership” for eighteen years (OSW, 2024). But this growth is taking place in the midst of a paradox of fragmentation. The current Schengen area consists of 29 countries, although 10 of them have reintroduced or extended temporary internal border controls for reasons of secondary migration and internal security reasons, such as Germany, France, Austria and the Netherlands. Such a differentiated implementation of the Schengen acquis indicates that, for Romania and Bulgaria, the

legal obstacles have been removed but the functional aspects of the 'borderless' Europe remain under the internal political pressure of 'securitization' in the West (Pettersson Fürst, 2023).

Physical to digital surveillance is becoming a key determinant of the implications for EU migration governance. The "hard" physical borders are giving way to a digital system with more emphasis on the processing of biometric data and intelligence-based decision making, with the imminent launch of the Entry/Exit System (EES) and the European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS). Now, central operators in Romania and Bulgaria are in charge of this digital frontier. This is part of a larger pattern in which the 'freedom of movement' of EU citizens is more and more dependent on the 'enhanced exclusion' of third country nationals at the external borders (Altunbaş & Memişoğlu, 2024; Schimmelfennig, 2021). Finally, the institutional map of the Union is completed with the 2025 enlargement, but the success of this incorporation will depend on whether the removal of the land borders will be the basis for a real economic convergence or will only increase the "hollowing out" of the Balkans' labour market.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Main Findings

This thesis has described and analysed the migration landscape in Romania and Bulgaria, as these two countries move closer to becoming full members of the Schengen Area in 2025. The empirical analysis developed in Chapter 5 is used to show that this corridor is a mature and intense labour channel, with a structural 'hollowing out' of the Balkan periphery. The population of Bulgaria and Romania has declined by 18% and 12% respectively, from 2003 to 2023, primarily due to the migration of human capital to the European core countries (Dabrowski & Louro, 2025). The data show that there was a significant geographical shift in the Balkan diaspora: while in 2000 more than 55% of migratory stocks were concentrated in non-EU destinations, in 2020 the shares of such stocks were less than 15%, with over 85% found in the EU-27 (UN DESA, 2024).

Socioeconomically, the diaspora has gone from a "pioneer" phase, where the gender ratio was in favour of males, to settled family units with a balanced gender ratio and a "positively selected" educational profile. But the most important push factor is the wage differentials which often lead to "occupational downgrading" (Grogger & Hanson, 2011; Dorn & Zweimüller, 2021), meaning that highly educated migrants take jobs lower than their qualifications to make absolute gains. This is already the reality, and the accession to the Schengen regime in 2025 formalizes it, as discussed in Chapter 6. Removing land border controls is not a new push factor for migration but rather is an institutional enabler that lowers "multilateral resistance" to migration and acts as an "insurance device" for circularity, providing migrants with the flexibility to move between country of origin and country of destination without administrative and physical barriers (Bazillier et al., 2023; de Haas, 2021).

7.2 Contributions to European Integration and Migration Studies

The main novelty of this research is the use of the "aspirations-capabilities" approach to the last stages of institutional closure of the 2007 enlargement round. The study provides an empirical baseline for the "mature migratory environment" before land borders are lifted, which will help to understand how future institutional changes affect individual mobility capabilities, and not necessarily aspirations for mobility. Moreover, the thesis brings attention to the "paradox of fragmentation" in the Schengen governance model: the zone seems to be reaching its Southeastern borders, while internal checks are being reintroduced in the Western core of the zone, an idealistic system of freedom of movement has become a pragmatic system of securitization and digital surveillance (Altunbaş & Memişoğlu, 2024; Pettersson Fürst, 2023).

7.3 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limiting factors. First, the complete integration of the land borders is only from 1 January 2025, and a fully-fledged annual time-series of the labor stock shift is therefore not yet available. Second, reference cycles are multi-year cycles and thus UN DESA and OECD DIOC reference cycles do not allow for a year-by-year analysis of temporary circulatory flows. Future research should perhaps use individual-level longitudinal data to examine how the overall effects of Schengen (both good and bad) impact on wage convergence and/or worsen the "brain drain" from Southeastern Europe. In addition, the new digital frontier, the Entry/Exit System (EES) on border crossings in the Balkans, and its impact on the mobility of third country nationals should be explored.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence tools were used as writing assistance tools for language improvement, structural revision, and formatting suggestions. All factual information, statistical claims, and references were independently verified by the author, who remains fully responsible for the final content of the thesis.

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