

September 3, 2011

New Conservatism in Europe Impedes Two of Its Nations

By SUZANNE DALEY and STEPHEN CASTLE

SVILENGRAD, Bulgaria — The infrared cameras here near Bulgaria's borders with Greece and Turkey are high powered enough to pick up rabbits scampering across farm fields in the dead of night.

But on a recent afternoon, the men inside the border station were focused on a car — moving a bit too fast along a country road. Maybe a smuggler, they thought. They called over their radios to have the car stopped. It turned out to be a false alarm.

Bulgaria and its neighbor [Romania](#), which has spent more than 1 billion euros, or about \$1.4 billion, developing an equally high-tech border operation, are hoping to join the [European Union](#)'s visa-free travel zone this month. They also hope to take over guarding some of the union's outer borders.

A few years ago, such a move would probably have been routine, experts say, just another step in the European Union's continuing, enthusiastic expansion. But today, there is a new conservatism at work in the bloc.

Both Bulgaria and Romania were welcomed into the European Union in 2007, despite lingering questions about organized crime, corruption and an ineffective judiciary. Now, however, as Europe faces an economic crisis, fear of more [immigration](#) from Africa and growing nationalistic fervor among member countries, it is paying more attention to these issues.

“It is nice to have a machine to check if there is an illegal person in the back of a truck,” said Karel van Kesteren, the Dutch ambassador to Bulgaria. “But if you can pay 500 euros to someone to look the other way, it makes no sense at all.

“When you give the key to your common home to someone else, you want to be sure that this person is 100 percent reliable and obeys all the rules.”

The Netherlands is one country likely to veto the entry of Bulgaria and Romania into the free-travel zone, known as the Schengen zone. But others are likely to object as well, including

Finland, Germany and France, where President Nicolas Sarkozy's re-election campaign has courted conservative voters who have been increasingly critical of the European Union's open borders.

Signs of corruption dot both the Bulgarian and Romanian countryside along the borders in the form of lavish villas belonging to border guards and customs officers. Dozens can be found here in Svilengrad, a town of about 20,000 on Bulgaria's southern border. So notorious is the behavior of border guards and customs officers that they are the object of popular ridicule. "What do you give a border guard for his birthday?" goes one joke. The answer: "A shift on his own."

But a local taxi driver, who gave a tour of the villas on the condition that his name not be used, defended the border guards, saying that they brought wealth to the town. He also said that one customs officer, now the owner of a hotel and casino, had replaced the windows in the school and rebuilt the local church.

"When they have money, we have money, too," he said.

Trying to combat corruption, Bulgaria has started using computerized scheduling to assign its border guards to different posts randomly every few hours. Romania has taken steps, too. In the past year, it arrested 248 border guards and customs officers, some of whom were accused of collecting as much as 5,800 euros, or about \$8,240, in a single shift.

In the past, some experts say, the arrests might have been enough to win the European Union's approval. But no more.

"It is a moment of extreme conservatism, and Romania and Bulgaria are suffering from that," said Heather Grabbe, director of the Open Society Institute in Brussels. "After the end of the cold war, people were looking at the big picture. Now everyone is looking small, rather than thinking big."

Some experts say the reluctance to admit Romania and Bulgaria is also to a degree a sense of buyer's remorse — a feeling that neither country was ready when admitted to the European Union.

Holding out on entry to the free-travel zone is the only real lever the bloc has to force both nations to deal with multiple problems, including rampant criminal gangs and the treatment of the region's Roma population.

Even Bulgarian and Romanian officials no longer expect to get into the Schengen zone this fall. Most experts believe that, to soften the blow, the European Union will allow both countries to open their airports to visa-free travel, as a first step. But border control will rest elsewhere for some time to come.

Bulgarian and Romanian officials make no secret of their disappointment. They complain that they have met the requirements of the European Union but are now being held to new standards. Deputy Prime Minister Simeon Djankov of Bulgaria said those standards were not even clear.

“It would be simpler if they said, ‘O.K., we have thought about it and the world has changed,’ ” he said, “ ‘and therefore we think that there should be another three criteria — and here they are.’ ”

Instead, he said, his country is facing “vague” complaints about organized crime rings and border corruption. He added that those same complaints could be made about other European countries, including Italy and Greece.

Romania’s foreign minister, Teodor Baconschi, concurs. “We are better equipped now than many of the member states.”

As far as equipment goes, visits to the border seem to bear him out. In Bulgaria, border barriers that once existed largely to stop citizens from leaving the country during the communist era are now being retooled to keep immigrants and smugglers from coming in. The old electric fences and guard towers are rusting. But a line of freshly turned soil indicates where motion sensors are to be installed in the next few weeks.

At the Vaslui border station in Romania, guards patrol the river between Romania and Moldova in new speed boats. Trucks can be X-rayed, and there are wands that can measure whether there is too much carbon dioxide in the back of a truck — an indication that people are hiding inside.

But Gabisor Tofan, the mayor of a nearby village, said that corruption at the borders has been an open secret. “Every villager that passed into Moldova knew they had to give a small amount,” he said.

There have been dozens of arrests of customs officers and border guards working at the Vaslui checkpoint, and there may yet be more, some officials said. The arrests drew attention to their fancy houses, including one belonging to a border guard, Sorin Bucur, that was pictured in several newspapers.

Mr. Bucur's wife, Marinella, said he had been questioned but not arrested. "My husband is very correct," she said. "They never found anything on him."

Geography is yet another factor in the lack of enthusiasm for letting Bulgaria and Romania into the free-travel zone. The two countries are paying a price for being close to Greece, which has done a poor job of controlling the flow of immigrants and illicit goods like stolen cars and smuggled cigarettes. In recent years, officials have estimated the influx of immigrants to Greece to be around 80,000 a year.

"Some E.U. countries are saying, 'Let us learn from the lesson of Greece,' " said Hugo Brady, a researcher at the Center for European Reform. " 'Let us be conservative with Romania and Bulgaria.' "