

Bulgarians Ponder EU Visa Ruling

Author: [Dimitar Sotirov](#)

Bulgarians have mixed feelings over the EU's decision to exempt them from visa restrictions.

A group of 50 Bulgarian youngsters on their way to an international conference in France earlier this month were detained and searched at the Italian border for more than four hours. At the same time, a bus full of Macedonian youths attending the same event crossed the frontier without any problems.

The incident - which would not ordinarily have rated as news, as Bulgarians have long experienced such discrimination by customs officials - was splashed across the front pages of the papers because it coincided with a decision by EU ministers to waive visa requirements for Bulgarian nationals wishing to visit member countries.

Bulgaria and Romania have long resented the fact their nationals have to apply for permission to travel to EU member states unlike those of other former communist countries being considered for membership of the bloc.

Sofia was still celebrating the long anticipated decision - President Peter Stoyanov comparing it with the fall of the Berlin Wall - when the border incident was reported.

The atmosphere quickly soured. People were furious. They asked whether it had been worth improving border security and tightening passport controls in order to fulfil EU preconditions for withdrawing visa restrictions.

The Italian border incident was all the more galling because the EU decision still has to be ratified by the European parliament before taking effect - the earliest possible implementation date being March 2001.

Bulgarians wishing to travel abroad have had to put up with a lot over the last seven years. Many scientists, intellectuals and sportsmen were unable to attend international events because their EU visas weren't processed in time.

While the EU's decision to lift travel restrictions is clearly a relief for the Sofia authorities, it's not all good news. The government will now be obliged to introduce visa requirements for countries outside the Schengen zone, which may harm its economy and undermine relations with them.

Prime Minister Ivan Kostov insists the advantages of Bulgaria opening up to Europe would exceed the disadvantages, but only just over a third of the country shares this view, according to recent opinion polls.

The Bulgarian government will have to tread very carefully to avoid falling out with neighbouring countries over Schengen criteria.

The Sofia authorities have announced the end of restriction-free travel for Russians and plan to do the same for Georgian, Ukrainian and Tunisian nationals over the next six months.

The government says it will exempt Macedonian nationals, many of who have relatives in Bulgaria, from visa requirements, as their country is about to become an associate EU member. Sofia has in recent years striven to foster good relations with Skopje, after decades of confrontation and suspicion during the communist era.

Bulgaria may have more difficulties with Bucharest over the visa issue. Romania is understandably bitter that the EU did not scrap travel restrictions for its own nationals.

Senior member of the Social Democratic Party Adrian Nastase described Brussels' decision as "disturbing" and discriminatory. The vice-president of the National Liberal Party Valeriu Stoica went further warning it might provoke extremism in Romania. The issue might jeopardise plans for a new bridge over the Danube.

Greece, which supported lifting visa restrictions on Bulgarians, has now expressed fears that it might lead to a substantial increase in illegal Bulgarian immigrants next year.

It's estimated there are 100,000 Bulgarians in Greece, the second largest group of illegal workers after Albanians. Athens said the number of Bulgarians in the country doubled last year - many Greek employers prefer them to local employees because they are much cheaper.

President Konstandinos Stefanopoulos has recently warned his Bulgarian counterpart during his visit to Greece that Athens will soon introduce legislation curbing the illegal workforce.

So while the EU's decision to waive visas for Bulgarian nationals is undoubtedly a major success for the government, it might deliver unexpected problems in the run-up to general elections next spring.

Kostov, considered the country's best prime minister of recent years, could be faced with difficult decisions over relations with neighbouring countries, whose outcome may influence his political future and that of his ruling party, the Union of Democratic Forces.

Dimitar Sotirov is a Sofia-based journalist

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/bulgarians-ponder-eu-visa-ruling>