

Romania: 'Beggars and Thieves' Wrecking EU Dream

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Illegal emigrants jeopardise Romania's drive towards European integration.

Illegal immigrants have put paid to Romania's dream of joining the European Union in the next few years.

The country was officially notified recently that it had failed to meet the standards required for membership, and would not be part of the first wave of Central European nations to join the union in 2007.

An influx of Romanian beggars and thieves - many of them members of the Roma community - into western European countries has been cited as one of reasons.

While the government has played down this latest setback, Prime Minister Adrian Nastase has acknowledged that "a small number of persons have put forward a distorted image" of the country.

The Bucharest authorities have been harshly criticised by the international media for failing to prevent the flood of illegal immigrants. The French daily newspaper *Le Monde* said that Romania's inability to deal with the problem made it the "weakest" of the candidates for EU integration.

So many Romanian beggars and thieves have flooded into France that its interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy was forced to make a special trip to Bucharest to tackle the scourge.

The two nations signed an agreement at the end of August that allowed any Romanian citizen arrested for committing a crime in France to be extradited, and have their property confiscated upon their return.

"We understand Romania is concerned about its image, which must not be stained by the actions of a tiny minority," Sarkozy said in reference to the Gypsies.

In September, Bucharest was further embarrassed by the news that more than 400 Romanian Gypsies had been discovered wandering in western Switzerland.

The Roma, who claimed that they had paid up to 500 US dollars each to be taken through France by truck, were housed in refugee reception centres until the Bucharest foreign ministry sent experts to arrange their extradition.

Faced with international condemnation, the Bucharest authorities have now imposed tough new legislation aimed at reducing illegal immigration to EU member states. It was announced recently that any Romanian citizen charged with a felony such as vagrancy or begging could have their passport confiscated.

The country's Roma community, which makes up 1.8 per cent of the population, is often blamed for Romania's illegal emigration but representatives of the ethnic minority believe these accusations are unfounded.

Roma leader Florin Cioaba told IWPR that around 90 per cent of Gypsies stopped at the border fulfil the conditions needed to travel abroad.

Parliamentary deputy Nicolae Paun, who represents the Roma community in the Romanian parliament, denounced the expulsion of asylum seekers from France and described the Parisian response as "exaggerated".

But his fellow deputy Madalin Voicu, former leader of the ethnic Roma party Partida Romilor, told IWPR, "We agree to the immediate repatriation of all beggars and criminals who damage Romania's image abroad, regardless of their ethnicity."

The problem has been exacerbated by a number of crooked tourism agencies, which often help would-be migrants to cross the border illegally.

At the end of September, the owner of an agency in the Bistrita area was arrested along with two accomplices for allegedly organising an illegal international migration network designed to send Romanians to Spain.

Immigration became a big issue in January, when Romania was the last of the 12 EU candidates to see its visa restrictions.

Since then, Britain and Finland have faced a wave of illegal migrants from Romania. "In the first weeks of January this year, Finnish authorities received hundreds of asylum applications," deputy interior minister Alexandru Farcas told IWPR. "This came as a surprise, as only 37 applications were submitted by Romanian citizens throughout the whole of the Nineties."

The European Commission has since endorsed three new contracts worth eight million euro to help the Romanian customs department to improve its administration.

Government officials claim that around 220,000 Romanians have been prevented from leaving the country illegally in the first six months of 2002. However, poverty and unemployment are driving more and more to go in search of a better life abroad.

"Unless it takes further action, Romania runs the risk of having the old visa restrictions re-imposed by the end of the year," warned journalist Cornel Nistorescu. "This would be a severe blow to the Nastase government, as well as to the Romanian people."

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