

## **Romania Moves To Stem Illegal Immigration**

**Author:** [Marian Chiriac](#)

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Romania is seeking fresh aid to improve border security as it works to bring its migration controls up to European Union standards.

"For preventing illegal border crossings and smuggling we need more money," says Colonel Marian Dumitru, head of the Romanian border guard department. "We need help, European Union assistance and especially financing."

Romania has in recent years become a transit centre for clandestine immigrants to the EU, especially from the former Soviet Union, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. And Brussels has told Bucharest it needs to improve its controls if it is to win EU membership.

Official statistics show almost 500 people entered Romania illegally in the first six months of this year, double the number during the same period last year. All said Romania was just a transit country, and they were hoping to continue westwards into the EU.

Romania's experience mirrors that of other Balkan countries - particularly Bosnia and Croatia. The bodies of 12 Iranian illegal immigrants were recovered from the Sava River, which separates Croatia and Bosnia, on August 30 and 31. The nine men and three children drowned when their boat capsized. Last week, Croatian police returned 54 Iranians, 29 Iraqis and 9 Turkish citizens to Bosnia after they were captured trying to cross the border.

Bosnia's lack of visa requirements makes it a popular starting point for many would-be migrants. In the first six months of the year, Bosnian police detained 600 people trying to cross the country. Local and international estimates suggest ten times that number complete the journey successfully.

Croatian police in the 12 months to May 2000 arrested 6,000 'illegals', up from 4,500 for the same period the previous year.

This month, Romanian authorities plan to open a second centre for illegal immigrants, in the west of the country, close to the border with Hungary. The facility will provide accommodation, food and medical assistance for 100 people. The first centre, on the outskirts of Bucharest, is always crowded.

Funding for the new facility has come from the European Community (800,000 Euros) and the Romanian Internal Affairs Ministry (200,000 Euros).

The EU has also approved loans of \$12 million for equipment to improve border security. But officials say more money is needed if Romania is to bring its controls up to EU standards. A senior Croatian immigration official has also appealed for international help to combat the problem. The Croatian border service, the official said, lacks the necessary personnel and equipment to fully monitor its frontiers.

In line with EU policy to try to find a common approach to influx controls, Romania has started to work with Bulgaria to tighten border security. A bilateral repatriation accord was signed at the end of June. Both

nations are on a "blacklist" of countries whose citizens require a visa to enter the EU, because of their lax immigration controls.

Bucharest is also in talks with the Ukraine, Russia and Moldova on agreements to return citizens from those countries who enter the country illegally. Romania has signed re-admission accords with Bulgaria, Hungary and most Western countries in recent years.

Official figures show that in the first six months of this year Romanian border police stopped some 21,000 foreigners - mainly from the former Soviet Union - from entering the country because their travel documents were not in order.

But the movements are in both directions. Police records show some 23,000 Romanians were returned last year and more than 4,300 were repatriated in the first quarter this year - some 1,800 from neighbouring Hungary. Between April and June 2000, Macedonian police intercepted 7,000 people trying to enter the republic illegally. Most were Romanians, followed by Albanians, Bulgarians and Yugoslav citizens.

Romanian police also intercepted some 4,700 Romanians trying to leave the country with false documents. The Romanian authorities are expected to approve a new style passport, which meets EU standards, in the near future.

Marian Chiriac is a regular IWPR contributor

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