# Hungary and Romania in The Schengen Moment

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**The Schengen Area offers to heal a history of political divisions between Hungary and Romania.**

On 1 January 2025, the border between Romania and Hungary fell, with Romania joining the Schengen Area of the EU. Together with Bulgaria, Romania became the 29th state to implement the Schengen Agreement, which eliminates border controls between European states. Many news pieces have focused on the politics of the enlargement. Relatively few articles have

considered what this change means for people who live close to the border between Hungary and Romania.

More than a red line on a map, the border between Hungary and Romania is a physical and psychological frontier. It influences the lives of Hungarians and Romanians. I was born close to the border in Debrecen, Hungary. My grandparents live just a couple of kilometres away from it. We often biked until the white boundary stones of the border with my grandmother, and we would look across at the dark-blue peaks of the Bihor Mountains in Romania. My grandparents would tell me about the dangers of crossing the border in old times. The Ceausescu regime would shoot at anyone who attempted to go across without permission. In a very early lesson in politics, the border taught me to differentiate between places I could and could not go. I do not doubt that it imparted the same lesson to many generations of Hungarians and Romanians who came before me.

In primary school, the border permeated discussions about national identity. My class learned about being Hungarian and that we had a national capital in Budapest. In this vein, the border became a symbolic perimeter to everything great about our state. Our lives on the border became peripheral to the overarching idea of Hungary. I learned about the Bihor Mountains– those valleys and hills and peaks you could see from my grandparents' house! –and how they were a part of Romania, as were the many villages and bell towers I could see across the border on bike rides. Romania started to emanate a sense of strangeness, while Hungary began to signal home. Despite their shared history, Hungary and Romania emerged as remote concepts in school.

In a larger sense, the physical division of the border expresses the remains of a factious history between Hungary and Romania. This history escaped discussion before the fall of the Iron Curtain, and its discourse continues to reverberate in Hungarian politics today. In 2022, the Hosszúpályi municipality near the border built a memorial to the 1920 Trianon Agreement. The Treaty, regarded by Hungary as a national tragedy, concluded the First World War and redrew Hungary's borders, leaving over one million Hungarians within the territory of modern-day Romania. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Hungarians marched to the border in memory of the 100th anniversary of the Trianon Agreement. At the same time, the Romanian parliament declared a new public holiday to commemorate the signing of the Treaty. The latter is a powerful source of national pride for many Romanians.

Political differences between Hungary and Romania seem to have eclipsed the fall of the Iron Curtain; they continue to imbue the border with a strong suspicion for the other in Hungarians and Romanians alike. Many Hungarians have painful memories of the Mayoralty of Gheorghe Funar în Cluj-Napoca, who notoriously defaced a statue of Hungarian King Mathias Corvinus. At the same time, Romanians are outraged to see the current Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, sport scarves with irre-

dentist symbols of Greater Hungary to football matches. The wide-scale and oftentimes obscure political and economic involvement of the FIDESZ government in Transylvania is equally provocative for many Romanians.

The border between Hungary and Romania is unlikely to disappear in the minds of those who live close to it, as much as the Schengen Area may expand to incorporate Romania. The border constitutes a psychological boundary; its physical end will remain sudden and confusing to locals, despite the many years of negotiations that sought to tear it down. One can only speculate about how locals will come to terms with the new political reality of unrestricted access from Hungary to Romania and vice versa.

In this sense, the new border offers a hopeful alternative for the future of international relations between Hungary and Romania. The Schengen Area provides a unique opportunity for Europeans to collaborate across geographical and cultural divisions. When the Hungary-Romania border began moving towards its legal revision, the EU opened seemingly impossible prospects for locals in Hungary and Romania. You could suddenly imagine waking up in Debrecen (HU) to leave for work in Oradea (RO), or travelling from home in Nyíregyháza (HU) to visit the beautiful Satu Mare (RO), or commuting from Timișoara (RO) to study in Szeged (HU), all without needing to show a passport.

The fall of the border between Hungary and Romania is consequential. As Hungary continues to lead a populist and isolationist foreign policy, challenging the EU in many areas of decision-making, and Romania grapples with the emergence of a decidedly nationalist sentiment in its politics, the fall of the border between the two states teaches three critical lessons. First, peace and prosperity are not direct functions of nationalism; they result from success in international collaboration. Second, the EU does not oppose Hungarian or Romanian national interests as much as it may benefit them. Third, while a physical border may have dissolved between Hungary and Romania, a psychological barrier to mutual understanding remains to be overcome for future generations.