

A light gray world map with a red square highlighting Romania in the Balkans. A horizontal line extends from the square across the map.

Q&A: Trending Issues on Migration

Insights from Romania:

Is the Black Sea a relevant migration route?

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- In August and September 2017, a total of 480 migrants disembarked on the Romanian Black Sea coast, having survived a perilous journey across the sea from Turkey. Although not the first time migrants used the Black Sea route in recent years, the number of people was large enough to spark fresh debates regarding current changes in migration routes, the risks of tragedies at the sea and the safeguarding of frontiers.
- Faced with this new and unexpected situation, Carmen Dan - the Romanian Minister of Internal Affairs declared¹ that Romania is very well prepared to manage a large influx of migrants, though without providing any details. Until now, the only solution found by the Romanian authorities consists of setting up tented camps in the reception centers' courtyards². Although the lack of proper accommodation facilities was confirmed by the Prime Minister Victor Ponta back in 2015, when Romania committed to receiving up to 4180 relocated asylum seekers, not much has been done since then to remedy the problem.
- The migrants that reached Romania by sea in the last months prompted speculations that the Black Sea might become a new migration route. Although some say that it's premature to draw conclusions, the partial closing of the Balkan route as well as Hungary's militarized approach towards people crossing the border might transform the Black Sea into a real gate to the European Union, via Romania. Whether these latest events represent just a testing of routes that will not see further developments or a glimpse into one of the new pathways to Fortress Europe is a question that for the time being remains open.

Why is Romania only a transit country?

Romania ratified the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees in January 1991 and began setting up an asylum system by creating facilities and enforcing laws that detail the asylum procedure, together with the rights and obligations of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection (subsidiary protection and refugee status).

Until 2011, when the Arab Spring swept across the Middle East, Romania had received relatively few asylum requests and many asylum seekers were leaving the country either during the asylum procedure or shortly after receiving international protection. Despite permissive legal provisions which grant the beneficiaries of international protection similar rights to those of Romanian citizens, most people saw Romania only as a transit country. This was mainly due to the country's very basic social security system, limited opportunities for securing a stable living in terms of employment and wages, inadequate access to and quality of available language courses and integration programs, and poor access to education and professional training. In addition to this, the legal framework was not adapted to the particular situation of migrants lacking documents and needing to prove their marital and family status, educational level and qualifications, which very often restricted access to rights.

Although in recent years the situation has seen some improvement, most asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection still decry the lack of opportunities for a stable future. They continue to leave the country in search for better living conditions in Western Europe.

Starting in 2011, the number of asylum seekers reaching Romania increased significantly, most

requests being filed by Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi nationals that came via Bulgaria and Serbia. Given Romania's historical economic and political ties with Syria, most people fleeing the war-torn country for Romania did not ask for asylum but instead came on the basis of family reunification. Still, their social and economic situation often proved just as precarious as that of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection.

Until today, only 728 out of the legally mandated commitment of 4180 people have reached Romania through the Relocation Mechanism, most of whom were brought from Greece. Upon receiving international protection in Romania, the large majority left the country to reunite with their families in Western Europe. As with other refugees, after 3 months of living abroad they risked being returned at any time, according to the Dublin Regulation.

What happens to migrants who take the Black Sea route to Europe?

Until recently, the only asylum requests that Romania received were registered at the land borders with Bulgaria, Serbia and Hungary as well as at the country's international airports. Asylum requests could also be filed by people who were already on the territory of Romania, either documented or undocumented. The Black Sea was largely bypassed by migrants and there could be no comparison to the situation on the Mediterranean or Aegean seas. Although around 500 migrants reached Romanian shores between 2013 and 2015, debates on this issue were overshadowed by the far larger numbers in other countries. According to official data, only one person arrived in Romania by sea in 2016, effectively burying the subject as far as the public agenda was concerned.

On 13 August 2017, a fishing boat carrying 69 people reached Romania via the Black Sea. A week later, another 70 arrived via the same route. On the 3rd of September 87 migrants reached the Romanian coast, followed by another 97 six days later. Yet another boat was intercepted by the Romanian border police on September 13, carrying 157 people who had embarked on a dangerous three-day journey across the sea from Turkey. Within the span of only one month, a total of 480 people

¹ <https://www.agerpres.ro/justitie/2017/09/15/video-carmen-dan-migrantii-cu-un-minim-risc-sunt-in-centre-cu-regim-inchis-numarul-lor-nu-e-deloc-ingrijorator-12-07-59>

² <http://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/social/aflux-de-refugiatii-in-romania-criza-de-locuri-de-cazare-solutia-de-avarie-gasita-de-autoritati-793978parum-nonsend-esedit-aut-Um-es-dipsand-ucitatis-eum-velenihicia-doluptate>

reached the Romanian coast, of which 167 children and 313 adults from Iraq and Iran, most of whom were native Kurdish speakers. From the beginning of this year around 2000 migrants tried to enter Romania by land, mostly at the borders with Bulgaria and Serbia, a number that has doubled since 2016.

Of the 480 migrants that arrived by sea, 10 ended up being accused of smuggling and were detained for legal inquiries. According to people's testimonies they all left from Turkey, where they each paid between 2500 and 3000 dollars to reach the European Union. Some of those who knew the actual destination said a trip to Italy would have cost up to 6000 dollars. Most had sold their possessions in their home country to be able to afford setting out on this dangerous route. According to the border police and coast guard, the boats were in very bad condition and some operations lasted several hours due to the difficult weather conditions that hastened their efforts to approach the drifting boats.

After being kept in the custody of the Romanian coast guard for two days, the migrants were handed to the General Inspectorate for Immigration (GII), which was in charge of deciding where to take them as well as on the appropriate procedures to be followed. Most migrants did not have passports, travel documents or ID. According to official information provided by GII, only 67 requested asylum upon arrival and were distributed across the country in the reception centers for asylum seekers.

Most of the others were to be returned under escort and were placed in the Otopeni/Bucharest and Horea/Arad (detention) centers. Adults and children, children with physical and psychological disabilities, infants, sick people, pregnant women and other vulnerable persons were placed in detention as they awaited deportation. Those who did not fit in the detention centers received tolerated status and were granted temporary accommodation in Holiday Village Mamaia, a Black Sea resort left empty after the holiday season. Their food and accommodation costs were covered by The Jesuit Refugee Services, an NGO running a project for the benefit of persons with tolerated status. If it had not been for this project, almost 100 people could have been forced to stay out in the streets,

as the Romanian state does not guarantee food and shelter for tolerated people. After 30 days of staying in the resort, they were given notice that they would be evicted. Most of them asked for asylum and were transferred to a reception center for asylum seekers, while others had to find solutions on their own.

Perhaps none of these migrants saw Romania as their final destination. Some wanted to go to Western Europe or Scandinavia, where they have family and friends – this being the reason they refused to ask for asylum and have their fingerprints logged in the EURODAC System. Some of them said they had been tricked into boarding these boats and that they had in fact negotiated to get to Italy. Others knew they were headed for Romania, but thought their journey to Western countries would be relatively straightforward, unaware that Romania is not in the Schengen Area and that the Balkan route is partially closed. Most asylum seekers left the country in a matter of days, heading to Western European countries via Hungary, while others were caught at the Hungarian border and brought back to the reception centers. Very few stayed and went through the asylum procedure. The families of those in detention say their relatives asked for asylum but their requests were not registered – this was not confirmed by the authorities, as it would contravene Romanian asylum law. Some were eventually convinced to opt for the voluntary return programs, while only a few were released and granted tolerated status due to severe medical conditions that would have endangered their lives in detention.

Will the Black Sea migration route remain an issue on the Romanian agenda?

When the first boat reached Romanian shores in August 2013, the Black Sea migration route drew the attention of the Romanian media. The boats that followed sparked the interest of the international media. While the total number of people reaching Romania in this way remains small compared to the hundreds of thousands who have made the perilous journey between Turkey and Greece, this could still be a significant development. Even though only 480 people actual-

ly reached Romania by sea, Anadolu Agency, the state-run news agency of the Turkish government, talks about another 834 in 7 boats that were intercepted by Turkish border police, their final destination being Romania.

“While it is too early to talk about the opening of a new migratory route, the recent incidents of intercepted wooden boats with migrants on the Black Sea suggest that smugglers might be looking to revive this route,” said Krzysztof Borowski, a Frontex spokesman. He stated that migrants might choose this route because crossing the Mediterranean has become increasingly difficult, although crossing the Black Sea is still far more dangerous, due to the rough sea, strong winds and very low temperatures in the cold season. He also emphasized that smugglers might be testing new routes.

In the midst of all this, the Romanian authorities remain largely silent. Since August this year, the Immigration Office has refrained from offering too much information regarding the migrants who came by sea, perhaps hoping that this issue will quickly drop from the public agenda. In reality, Romania is far from prepared to receive more people than it already has and the entire system would have collapsed long ago had it not been for Romania's transit country status – that is, a place from which most asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection try to leave as soon as possible.

All in all, it might be too early to talk about clearly discernible changes in migration routes, with the Black Sea becoming a future option to explore. And it is also not realistic to talk about Romania as a destination country, where migrants want to settle and live long-term.

Since the last boat reached the Romanian coast on the 13th of September 2017 carrying 157 people, other migrants tried to follow and the first tragedies became headlines. On September 22nd a boat that was heading to Romania capsized close to the Turkish northern coast, drowning around 25 people. Due to the inclement sea weather and low temperatures that hit Romania at the beginning of the autumn, no boats are expected at least until

the cold season ends. Romania's poor reception conditions and the large number of people that are being caught when trying to enter Hungary without documents – roughly 1500 people since the beginning of this year - could also be discouraging for those who might consider the Black Sea a gate to Western Europe or a substitute for more traditional routes.

About the author

Simina Guga, holds degrees in Sociology, Anthropology and Islamic Studies. In the last decade, she has been working mainly as a counselor for immigrants and refugees with several NGOs from Bucharest. Currently she is also a trainer for public institutions employees offering information and support that facilitate the access to public social and health services for migrants.

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- Exchanging experiences concerning integration and sharing best practices in the field of integration policies.
- Developing ideas and recommendations for a Common European Migration and Asylum Policy, as well as contributing to a rapprochement of the divergent approaches towards migration policy within Europe.

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