

Are the cigarette-loving Balkans lighting up less?

June 23 2011, by Isabelle Wesselingh

If the question was misunderstood by the waiter in a Bucharest restaurant, the irony wasn't lost on the customer who cringed after asking, "Do you have a smoke-free area?"

"Don't worry, madam, you can smoke everywhere," he happily replied.

Welcome to Romania where, as in many Balkan peninsula states, bars, restaurants and clubs are filled with [cigarette smoke](#) -- a nightmare for [nonsmokers](#).

But things are changing in a region known for its unreconstructed [nicotine](#) habit and some of Europe's highest smoking rates after Russia and the Ukraine.

"Romanians travel abroad more and more. When they are in Paris or in Rome, they realise how pleasant it is to go out and be able to breathe," said Magda Ciobanu, a pulmonologist at the national Institute Marius Nasta who studies the trend.

Hard-smoking Turkey surprisingly pushed through a cigarette ban in cafes and restaurants in July 2009, and Macedonia banned the habit inside bars, restaurants and clubs in 2010. Greece and Albania also have put laws on the books, and Croatia toughened a public [smoking ban](#) last year.

Hold-out Romania could follow suit this year if a bill proposed by

opposition deputy Manuela Mitrea is adopted. Examined by the Senate in June, it could go to the lower chamber in September.

Mitrea is adamant that "Romania should follow the example set by other [European countries](#)", citing drastic anti-tobacco laws in Ireland, France, Norway, Spain and Italy.

"I do not want to forbid people to smoke... But it's not normal that people smoking in bars and restaurants should make nonsmokers around them sick," she told AFP.

[World Health Organization](#) (WHO) figures show that more than 600,000 nonsmokers die around the world each year from exposure to [tobacco smoke](#).

But the battle for a ban in Romania could drag on.

"The general perception is that Romanians are opposed to a total smoking ban in bars and restaurants," said pulmonologist Ciobanu. Yet "all the studies we carried out show that a majority favour such a move."

A 2009 health ministry survey also showed that 46 percent of Romanians favoured such a prohibition and 43 percent opposed it.

And daily smoking is on the decline, down from 36 percent of the population over 15 years old in 2003 to 28 percent in 2009, according to official statistics.

But many club and cafe owners remain sceptical.

"People do not come to a club to do penance but to have fun. If the bill is adopted ... we will lose customers," warned Ana Cucu, a manager at the popular El Comandante club in Bucharest.

Gabi, a bar owner who gave only his first name, secretly supports the ban but worries about enforcement. "In a country with corruption like Romania, some places might be checked and fined more than others."

The Senate has already chipped away at the initial draft, exempting smaller bars, clubs and restaurants from the ban.

And the formidable tobacco industry lobby has moved East, according to Kristina Mauer-Stender, a tobacco control officer in WHO's Regional Office for Europe.

"They do see very clearly that in the old European countries the legislation is very much in place," she said. "They go to countries where there is not so much legislation or not so much enforcement. They definitely moved East in our region."

Noting that smoking bans don't "happen overnight" anywhere, Mauer-Stender pointed to the example of Turkey, which "has had the smoking ban since 2009 and it works!"

If Romania, one of the most populated regional states after Turkey, also comes on board, it could add weight to the trend.

Mauer-Stender stressed the critical role played by the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's support for the ban. "If you can mobilise a prime minister or ministers, it makes a difference".

In Romania, the health ministry has so far refused to comment on the bill.

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