

## EU will consign Romanian traditions to history

By Kate Connolly in Bucharest  
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The deep howl brought neighbours scurrying into the Margarit family's back yard. Four men held down Ghita the pig, her trotters were tied up with wire, and George Margarit plunged a knife into her throat.

As the thick steaming blood spilled out on to the ground and her cries and shudders continued long after she had breathed her last, Vasilica Margarit poured out hot home-made tuica or plum brandy for the visitors. "This is the last time we'll be able to do this," she said.

They have been informed in writing by the local mayor that when Romania joins the EU such practices will have to stop. They will be required to kill their pigs more humanely by electrocution, shooting or tranquillisers, watched over by a local inspector.

The residents of the village of Vidra, 12 miles south of Bucharest, are not happy about the regulation. Neither are they pleased about a raft of others which will revolutionise the lives and traditions of the self-sufficient millions who earn their living from the land.

"I thought when we joined the EU we'd get lots of benefits and freedom," said Mr Margarit, 40, a railway worker. "But what does freedom mean if I can't slaughter my own pig in my back yard?"

He also cited the taxes which are to be placed on those who produce their own plum brandy with a volume of more than 50 per cent (most producers), and the rule which will mean corpses will no longer be allowed to be kept at home for three days after death, as is the custom, but will have to be moved to the local church.

Vegetables will have to be packaged before they can be sold from farms. Shepherds will no longer be able to sell their sheep-stomach wrapped cheeses by the roadside.

The estimated three million-strong Roma community meanwhile, are upset at being told that their tradition of under-age arranged marriages will have to stop.

"I can understand the advantages of certain of these regulations, like the hygiene aspect," said Mrs Margarit, 38, a nurse. "But as state workers with a joint [monthly] income of £536, we cannot afford the extra expense these rules will cost us, and we're worried about losing our identity as we join this huge club."

Ion Dimitru, a vegetable grower, said: "We were suppressed under pressure in communist times now we're being suppressed again, just when we thought we were free." In the months prior to Romania joining the EU, consumers have seen living costs rise, while wages have not kept pace. It is as yet hard for ordinary people to see what advantages joining will bring.

But Sorin Ionita, research director of the Romanian Academic Society, said the country is undergoing a "crash course in modernisation" in which the "positives outweigh the negatives". Most Romanians view accession with a stoical acceptance. But the prospect of joining the EU has given the process of reform huge propulsion.

"The most substantial help the EU has given us is just by being there – encouraging the rule of law, indirectly disciplining our politicians, speeding up the reform of public administration, the judiciary," said Mr Ionita.



Last year 200 judges and lawyers, 66 policemen and 16 customs officials were brought before the courts on corruption charges. But bribery still remains endemic, affecting everything from midwifery to grave digging.

Yet thanks to the prospect of EU entry, the country has been boosted by its high economic growth rate and low unemployment and despite the prevalence still of its stray dogs, orphanages and decaying Ceausescu-era architecture, it is buzzing with foreign investment and an infectious spirit of enterprise.

On University Square in the capital, a huge aluminium clock counts down the days to accession, beneath bright blue EU-style stars which flicker along the main boulevard.

But the challenges are immense, not least demands for better public services and roads. Romania will also now be responsible for policing the second longest EU border (1,274 miles) after Finland. One of the biggest challenges will be persuading Romanians to stay at home to work. With unemployment at under six per cent, there is a growing skills shortage in every field from administration to engineering. Already two million out of 22 million Romanians work abroad.

After Jan 1, a further 300,000 are expected to leave, with two-thirds of them going to southern Europe due to the language similarities, while the better-educated are expected to head to Britain, France and Scandinavia. For the exodus to stop, wages will have to rise at home to around 40 to 60 per cent of levels it is possible to earn abroad.

A big fear is the extent to which they will have to open up after years of isolation. It can expect an influx of immigrants from Turkey and China – and tourists. "I get the impression they don't love us very much in Europe," said Emilia Slav, 18, an agricultural tourism student. "Now's our chance to prove that we're not a nation of uncivilised blood suckers who drive badly and chuck our rubbish on the side of the road, but passionate, adaptable people."

The cheap flights that are due to start in the New Year, making Romania accessible to many tourists for the first time, are seen as a blessing and a curse. "We're waiting with fear and trepidation for the time when the British stag parties discover Bucharest as a source of cheap beer," said Mr Ionita.