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# Keep Europe Borderless



By Douglas Webber , INSEAD Professor of Political Science

**The Schengen Accord is one of the most tangible achievements of European integration and a boon for cross-border business. Resurrecting border controls will be politically and economically costly.**

Seldom if ever has the name of such a small village become so famous – or notorious – in Europe and the world. Located on the Moselle River in Luxembourg, Schengen counts no more than 425 inhabitants. But lying as it does at a spot where the borders of Luxembourg, France and Germany converge, it was an appropriate choice for signing an accord to abolish border controls when little Luxembourg was the president of the EU (European Union) Council of Ministers in 1985. Few measures adopted by the EU have had a more tangible impact on the daily lives of its citizens than ‘Schengen’.

Historically, border controls between European states have been the exception rather than the rule; so the Schengen Accord was far from revolutionary. Anybody who reads the memoirs of the great Austrian writer Stefan Zweig, for example, will see that, before the First World War, travellers could traverse Europe – and venture even further afield – without

as much as a passport. For Zweig, the limits imposed on the freedom of travel illustrated more powerfully the ‘enormous regression’ that the world suffered after the 1914-18 war than anything else. Border controls, passports and their like – stood for the growing power of the nation-state and the growing sway of nationalist ideologies that Zweig and other cosmopolitan Europeans of his day so heartily detested.

Unsurprisingly then, the idea of abolishing border controls was championed after the Second World War by those political forces that sought to secure the peace in Europe by vanquishing nationalism and building something like a federal European state. The primary driving force behind Schengen was the fervently pro-European German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, who, as an adolescent, had already participated in the symbolic dismantling of border posts between France and Germany in his Rhineland neighbourhood. He and the French president François Mitterrand had to push the accord through against the opposition of the interior and internal security bureaucracies of their respective governments.

### **How far we’ve come**

Schengen shared and still shares various traits with the other most tangible symbol of European integration, the Euro. It too began as an experiment in ‘multi-speed’ integration. With the UK in particular unwilling to participate, it was launched initially with just five of the then 10 EU member states. The other three signatories – the Benelux states – had in any case abolished controls between their borders in the late 1950s. Its architects anticipated that, as with the Euro, other member states would join in future as they recognised the advantages of doing so. And so they did. Today the Schengen Area embraces 26 member states, including several non-EU members, notably Switzerland and Norway.

But Schengen also resembled and still resembles the Euro in as far as it remained incomplete and inherently unstable, unless and in as far it was flanked by other measures involving closer European cooperation or integration. For the Euro, this was the case for fiscal policy and redistribution, as the ongoing Eurozone crisis has sorely demonstrated. For its part, Schengen, if it was to work well, implied *inter alia* the maintenance of effective controls on borders with third countries, the adoption of common visa and political asylum policies and the sharing of police information and intelligence among its member states.

Like the global financial crisis buffeting the Eurozone, the migration crisis provoked by the post-2011 violence in the Middle East and North Africa and the terrorist attacks in 2015 struck Schengen like tornados pummelling a half-built house. In their wake, one after another, in a domino effect that has swept across Europe, numerous Schengen states have re-instituted border controls. Whilst temporary border controls in such circumstances are compatible with EU law, permanent controls would not be.

### **Schengen's many advantages**

The advantages of Schengen are clear. Border controls are a nuisance for travellers and a cost for business. Given the volume of cross-border traffic in the Schengen Area today (in 2012, for example, there were 460 million arrivals from intra-EU flights at EU airports), the inconvenience caused by the general re-imposition of border controls would be massive. Freedom of movement in the EU, of which borderless travel is one component, promotes trade and helps to tie Europe together.

The benefits of Schengen would not justify the accord's existence if they were achieved at the cost of security. However, there is no evidence that the abolition of border controls has led to higher crime or lower crime detection rates – and little reason to think that, should these be resurrected, Europe will consequently be safer and more immune to terrorist or other violence. Schengen or not, hundreds of roads leading into France, for example, from neighbouring countries – Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, Switzerland, Italy and Spain – would be bound to remain unpoliced.

The most effective response to the current crisis of Schengen would actually be 'more Europe': more effective policing of the member states' borders with third countries (if necessary by members of a European border police force); the more comprehensive sharing of information and intelligence among member states' police and intelligence services; and a stronger collective European engagement in the conflicts ravaging North Africa and the Middle East. This is the thrust of proposals to reinforce Schengen made by the European Commission in December 2015. Supported as they are by France and Germany, these proposals stand a good chance of being adopted. But their effective implementation 'on the ground' will be a much longer, tougher and uncertain process. It will require more than a couple of hundred of extra EU border guards to secure the borders of Greece in the Mediterranean Sea.

Meanwhile, almost everywhere in Europe, in particular in France, but also increasingly in Germany, national-populist movements that would consign Schengen to the dust-bin of history have more and more wind in their political sails. It is possible but by no means certain that Schengen, as we have come to know it, will survive their assault.

The collapse of Schengen would provide even more political momentum to these movements than they have already. If the borders in Europe should indeed go back or stay up, the costs may extend well beyond the longer time travellers spend crossing European border checkpoints.

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