



Pressure and punishment: What the Ceuta crisis means for Schengen's future

by Camino Mortera-Martinez, 17 September 2026

Ceuta was not a migration crisis, but a crisis of trust. Europe's leaders should stop weaponising Schengen against each other, lest the EU's adversaries copy them.

For more than four decades, the members of the EU's Schengen area have maintained something unique: a passport-free space where Europeans can roam, ringed by a common external frontier designed to keep out those with no right to enter. What sets Schengen apart is that it does not rely on the usual elements of a border: immovable frontiers; an army to defend them; and a general understanding of who belongs inside and who should be kept outside.

Instead, Schengen is built on trust: the expectation that every member country will protect its stretch of a border shared by all of them – and that none will turn the machinery against the others. This summer, in Ceuta, both expectations were broken.

On July 30th and 31st, some [80,000 people](#) crossed from Morocco into the Spanish enclave of Ceuta on the north African coast, most of them swimming around a breakwater. Within 48 hours, 70,000 had returned to Morocco, according to the Spanish government. None reached mainland Spain. Although Spain became part of the Schengen agreements in 1991, special arrangements have since continued to apply to Ceuta (and the separate enclave of Melilla), with Spain checking all travellers leaving the two enclaves for mainland Spain or another destination in the EU, to ensure that they have the right to enter the passport-free Schengen area.

Why did so many people suddenly decide to cross a border that is usually well-policed – and why did Morocco not stop them? There is no agreed explanation, but several factors were in play. On June 29th, the Spanish Supreme Court [ruled](#) that pushing back migrants who had reached Spanish territory by swimming was unlawful. The ruling was published on July 8th and subsequently circulated widely on social media.

But the legal ruling alone cannot explain the scale of the crossings. Morocco has, in recent years, become more daring in testing Spain's willingness and ability to defend its borders. And both the EU and the Spanish government have grown more deferential in their dealings with Morocco, which remains a crucial partner in containing sub-Saharan migration to Europe and a good friend of the current US administration.

Although those entering Ceuta had little prospect of travelling onwards into the rest of the Schengen area, the response quickly became politicised. Italy re-introduced controls on travellers arriving by air and sea from Spain on August 1st, citing the risk of secondary movements. The same day, 22 heads of government signed an [unprecedented letter blaming](#) Spain for creating "pull factors" – which allegedly included the Supreme Court ruling and Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez's generous scheme for regularising the status of irregular migrants. (In April 2026 Spain approved by decree an extraordinary regularisation of some half a million undocumented migrants, most of them from South and Central America, who had arrived before the end of 2025. This upset many European capitals).

A week later, Spain retaliated by re-introducing controls on its air and sea borders with Italy. The Spanish government pointed to Frontex data showing that Italy had recorded more irregular migrant arrivals than any other member-state. It also accused Rome of failing to comply with EU rules obliging it to accept the return of irregular migrants who had entered the EU via Italian territory before travelling to another member-state. On August 31st, both countries decided to extend controls for a further 15 days. On September 15th, Italy extended them again until October 1st, and Spain announced it would do the same.

The crisis in Ceuta is far from over. Between 5,000 and 11,000 of those who crossed remain in a city with a population of only 83,000. They include somewhere between 2,100 and 4,000 unaccompanied children, depending on whether one accepts the figures provided by Madrid or those cited by NGOs on the ground. At least 141 people have died, mostly by drowning while trying to enter Ceuta; violent attacks are rising, both against migrants and involving them; and Ceuta's conservative city government and Spain's socialist central government are increasingly at odds over how to handle the situation and who is responsible for it.

But, like many emergencies before it, Ceuta will not spell the end of Schengen. The arrangement has proved flexible and strong enough to withstand everything from a pandemic to a refugee crisis to a war in Europe. What Ceuta has exposed, however, is that trust amongst EU countries has deteriorated to a low point. And that is dangerous for Schengen.

There are three principles that enable Schengen to work, and each has been tested by the Ceuta crisis. First, the Schengen border needs to be definitive: those inside and outside it need to know where it lies, and those outside need to know what would happen if they tried to cross it without permission. Second, it needs to be defensible: those inside it should be able and willing to defend it. Third, and perhaps most importantly, it needs to be credible: both insiders and outsiders should know that everything possible will be done to protect it. In Ceuta, Europe's Schengen border was none of these three things.

A definitive border

The EU's divided response to the situation in Ceuta will not have gone unnoticed by those watching Europe from Moscow, Beijing, Rabat or Washington. All of them, except Beijing, currently claim some

piece of European territory. It is then crucial that, at the very least, everyone understands where the Schengen border lies and what will happen if they try to cross it. When even friends stop treating borders as settled, ambiguity about where Europe's borders begin and end looks a lot like an invitation to adversaries.

That is a lesson Minsk [knows well](#). In 2021, Alyaksandr Lukashenka's Belarusian regime transported large numbers of migrants to the border between Belarus and its EU neighbours Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. Within weeks, the European Council had attributed responsibility for the crisis to him, and the EU was putting pressure on airlines that carried the migrants to Belarus. Until July 30th, the message was clear for Morocco, too. In 2021, following a crisis in Spain's bilateral relations with Morocco, around 8,000 people crossed into Ceuta. Margaritis Schinas, then a vice-president of the Commission, [said](#) that Ceuta's borders were Europe's, and that the EU should not allow third countries to instrumentalise migration. Von der Leyen [stood firmly with Spain then](#). This July, she [offered](#) Morocco more money instead, in the form of EU technical assistance and financial support.

Morocco and the EU have good reasons to be partners in tackling migration. Brussels has funded Moroccan border management for two decades, and Rabat has been diligent in return, controlling the sub-Saharan migration that has become a political flashpoint across Europe. But the [return of power politics](#) has changed the terms of the relationship.

Two things explain Rabat's newfound appetite for testing Europe's borders.

First, Morocco has realised the leverage that European hostility to irregular migration has given it. After the 2021 migration crisis in Ceuta, Spain made a (still not fully explained) major political concession to Morocco by backing its plan to absorb the disputed former Spanish colony of Western Sahara while giving it autonomous status. Until then, Madrid had remained neutral between the claims of Morocco and the demands of the Polisario Front for self-determination for the indigenous Saharawi population.

Madrid has handled Rabat with kid gloves since then, and the Moroccan authorities may think that they can extract further concessions from the Spanish government by subsequently helping to resolve a problem which they themselves caused.

Second, Morocco has been emboldened by President Donald Trump's support for its sovereignty over Western Sahara, and by clear signals from Washington that it would not oppose further Moroccan [territorial claims](#). The sour relationship between Sánchez and Trump does not help Madrid.

Faced with what appears to have been a deliberate relaxation of Moroccan border enforcement – and therefore a threat to Schengen's territorial integrity – the EU could have signalled its willingness to use some of the leverage it has over Rabat. The EU's revised Association Agreement gives Moroccan agricultural and fisheries exports preferential access to the EU's single market. The mobility partnership makes it easier for Moroccans to get visas and migrate to the EU legally. Meanwhile, [three legal cases](#) pending before the European Court of Justice, all turning on whether those agreements can legally extend to Western Sahara, have already placed part of the relationship's legal foundation in question.

The EU would not have needed to suspend any of these arrangements. Even announcing their review would have demonstrated to Rabat – more effectively than a strongly worded letter from Brussels – that attempts to put pressure on a member-state carry consequences.

Instead, the Union decided to hold back, perhaps at Madrid's behest. When the European Parliament debated Ceuta on September 15th, under a title referring to hybrid attacks and the instrumentalisation of migrants, the Commission's message was that those with no right to stay should be returned swiftly to Morocco. If Brussels (or Madrid) will not signal that it is prepared to use what tools it has to defend its borders, then those outside can only conclude that the border is not really there. That is a dangerous precedent to set for Europe's adversaries, and, increasingly, for some of its friends.

A defensible border

Schengen encompasses 29 countries and stretches from the Arctic to the Mediterranean. Its members were never expected to have the same geographical problems – border crossings in the Greek islands look very different from those in land-locked Austria – let alone the same politics.

Temporary border controls have always been part of the Schengen bargain: they were a necessary condition of membership for many. Around [a third](#) of Schengen's members have temporary controls in place. Some are temporary in name only: some countries, including Germany and France, have had them continuously for over a decade. Such checks used to be targeted at specific events: Iceland closed its air borders twice because of the Hells Angels' visits to a Reykjavík motorcycle club, for instance. Since 2010, however, temporary border controls have mostly been imposed in response to security threats, or when a significant increase in irregular crossings has been identified at a particular border, as Austria and Germany did in September 2015. Whatever their merit, previous controls have at least made some geographical sense. But Spain and Italy do not share a land border, and nobody has ever crossed from Ceuta to Milan Malpensa airport on foot. Austria has even cited Ceuta among its reasons for prolonging checks on its borders with Slovakia, Czechia, Hungary and Slovenia.

Neither Italy, nor Spain, nor the 21 other member-states that signed the letter led by Italy's prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, and Denmark's, Mette Frederiksen, were doing anything to defend Schengen. They were either trying to make a political point or win an election. Migration has been a fault line in European politics for years; and four out of the EU's five biggest countries are due to hold elections in 2027 – Italy, Spain, France and Poland. France, which did not sign the letter, tightened its controls with Spain anyway. Ireland, another that did not sign, holds the rotating presidency of the Council and, as such, must stay neutral. It is also not a member of the Schengen area – though that did not stop Cyprus, another non-member, from signing the letter.

The European Commission took an unusual stance. In contrast with her [denunciation](#) of the Belarusian attack on Schengen's eastern border in November 2021, von der Leyen's first [public reaction](#) to Ceuta was to say that crossings must stop and returns must be swift; and to offer Frontex support. At least she stopped short of praising Morocco.

Von der Leyen course-corrected with a supportive letter to Sánchez on August 3rd, and took a firmer position in her September 16th [State of the European Union Speech](#). In Strasbourg, she said that "Ceuta's border is a European border. Because Ceuta is Spain. Ceuta is Europe. And Europe will be there for you." But her initial equivocation suggests that her Commission may sometimes act in line with the political interests of the centre-right European People's Party, to which she herself belongs, rather than as a more neutral guardian of EU law.

Europe has been veering towards a more restrictive view of migration for some time now. And there is no love lost between Sánchez – who presents himself as the left’s self-appointed last true believer – and many of his counterparts – chiefly Meloni and, more recently, his fellow socialist (but immigration hard-liner) Frederiksen. But none of this should be a reason for those who are supposed to defend Schengen to use it against each other.

Temporary controls were always designed as a ‘safety valve’ to relieve pressure on the passport-free area in emergencies. They are now being used to exert political pressure on other member-states. A mechanism intended as a way to protect Schengen has become an instrument of punishment.

A credible border

Schengen will remain under pressure unless the agreement becomes more credible. Those inside it may be willing, and able, to defend it; and those outside may be unwilling, or unable, to attack it. Neither counts for much if nobody believes the arrangement will hold.

In the days after Ceuta, several governments demanded that Spain be suspended from Schengen. Italy’s foreign minister Antonio Tajani, a former European commissioner, said that the Schengen area should be [closed to Spain](#). Finland’s interior minister Mari Rantanen [said](#) that countries which failed to protect the external border could not be members of Schengen.

As with the [eurozone](#), there is no mechanism to expel or suspend a country from Schengen, however. Article 29 of the Schengen Borders Code allows for the re-introduction of internal border controls in case of persistent and serious deficiencies at the external border, and only in exceptional circumstances. Individual governments cannot simply trigger Article 29: they need the agreement of both the Commission and the Council of Ministers. Such a last-resort measure has only been used once, during the 2016 migration crisis in Greece. Greece remained both in Schengen and in the eurozone, despite repeated calls for its expulsion from both during the 2010s.

When the euro faced its own existential crisis, Mario Draghi restored the eurozone’s credibility with one [sentence](#): “Within our mandate, the ECB is ready to do whatever it takes to preserve the euro.” Now Schengen needs its own ‘whatever it takes’ moment. Von der Leyen’s State of the Union address did not provide it. She promised a new emergency framework for mass movements of people that are “engineered and weaponised”, but said nothing about member-states turning internal border controls against each other.

Such a moment does not require [new plans](#) to reform Schengen, let alone the expulsion of any member country, though the old idea of ‘a Mr or Ms Schengen’ – someone able to speak for the area and settle disputes between its members before they reach the newspapers – might have proved useful in August. It simply requires a renewal of the pact, based on trust, that all Schengen countries have signed. The European Commission should enforce the rules governing internal borders impartially; member-states should decide whether to trust each other, or to lose Schengen’s credibility for good; and when a third country uses migration to put pressure on one member, the EU should respond collectively, drawing on its diplomatic and economic leverage.

The Schengen area is not immune to the consequences of the increasing polarisation of European and global politics, or to the populist exploitation of public concerns about migration. But, unlike other parts of the EU, it is particularly vulnerable to hybrid warfare and territorial claims. Its durability therefore depends on mutual trust and solidarity: every member must believe that the others will help defend the common border, while those outside must see that attempts to challenge it will carry a cost. Ceuta showed how quickly that confidence can erode. Unless European governments rebuild it by making the Schengen border definitive, defensible, and credible once again, the next crisis may be harder to contain.

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