



Whatever happened to the Schengen crisis?

by Hugo Brady

EU ministers will put years of political wrangling behind them this autumn when they sign off a new set of rules for the Schengen area. The 26-country travel zone was tipped into political turmoil in 2011 when, during the Arab Spring, France temporarily re-imposed border controls with Italy over a trickle of Tunisian migrants crossing their shared frontier. (An exasperated Nicolas Sarkozy would later declare that “*Schengen ne marche pas*” during a televised election debate with François Hollande.)

Though trivial, the Franco-Italian tiff was symptomatic of evident tensions between Schengen states throughout 2011 and 2012. Anti-immigrant feeling seemed on the rise with far-right groups wielding political influence in the Netherlands and Sweden, and a half-serious attempt to re-introduce customs controls in Denmark. Greece – long the weak link in Schengen’s shared external frontier – had to have its Turkish border manned for months by Frontex, the EU’s border agency, and accepted €100 million in European funds to create a proper system for granting political asylum. Meanwhile, Schengen members looked on anxiously as Bulgaria and Romania were set to join by December 2012, despite persistent concerns over the rule of law in both countries.

How did all this drama play out? EU leaders had already instructed their interior ministers to re-visit Schengen’s rulebook in summer 2011. (Every EU country is a member or hopes to be, save Britain and Ireland; Iceland, Norway and Switzerland are also in.) Some

in the Union’s Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Council wanted more leeway to re-introduce internal borders following events like the Arab Spring. Current rules allow for this only in true national emergencies or to provide security for major sporting tournaments. But the European Commission demurred, floating instead a heroically unlikely proposal that would allow national controls only if it first approved them. A year-long stalemate ensued, as the European Parliament blocked other JHA business in an attempt to force ministers to yield to the Commission and hence expand its own powers in the process.

Ironically, it was Ireland, a non-Schengen country, which resolved the affair early in 2013. As president of the JHA Council, Justice Minister Alan Shatter brokered a compromise to give the Commission the lead in evaluating standards at Schengen’s external frontiers from 2014 onwards, and to recommend if particular countries should face suspension. Effectively, the Commission will monitor Schengen border controls in a similar

way to how it assesses judicial standards and the rule of law in Bulgaria and Romania.

Neither of these two countries will now join the passport-free zone until at least mid-2014, and then by the abolition of air borders only. Among other reasons, their entry prospects were badly undermined by a nasty constitutional crisis involving Romania's president, Traian Basescu, and the prime minister, Victor Ponta, in 2012. Although disappointing for ordinary Bulgarians and Romanians, the affair represented a reprieve for the passport-free zone. Given its other problems, Schengen was ill-prepared for enlargement.

The Schengen area got lucky on other fronts, too. Sarkozy's tough stance on immigration could not distract attention from his economic record and he failed to win re-election. Under Hollande, France is no longer a vocal critic of passport-free travel. Similarly, the anti-Schengen Dutch Freedom Party (PVV) lost their position in the Netherlands' governing coalition in September 2012. And the Greek situation gradually stabilised, thanks partly to some surprising bilateral border co-operation between Ankara and Athens, but also, less pleasantly, to the latter's policy of locking up anyone found crossing the border illegally in detention centres, built mainly with EU money.

What of Schengen's prospects? On some fronts, the outlook is encouraging. The EU has rolled-out two cross-border databases and an information network to link up the different Schengen countries' police and border forces, maritime patrols and consular services. But profound challenges remain. The situation in Greece remains very serious, with tens of thousands of asylum applicants awaiting a hearing.

Unauthorised migrants from Africa and the Middle East (and as far away as Bangladesh and China) have switched their attention to the Greek islands or are attempting to cross from Turkey into Bulgaria.

This year's good summer prompted a considerable rise in the number of 'boat people' arriving to all southern Schengen states by sea. Accordingly, Italy wants its 2014 JHA Council presidency to pressure other Schengen members for more EU 'solidarity' in policing the complex Mediterranean border. Co-operation with Turkey is a critical piece of the puzzle. Yet talks between the Commission and Ankara on a deal to repatriate unauthorised migrants in return for a roadmap towards Turkish visa liberalisation are getting nowhere.

Meanwhile, Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands regret easing Schengen visa restrictions with several Western Balkan countries in 2009. Their officials complain that they now receive more asylum applications from Roma minorities there than from Syria and Afghanistan combined. Several Schengen governments may push the Commission to re-introduce visas with Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro in 2014.

Hence the passport-free zone is likely to be tested again by various forms of political drama next year, due to unfinished business with Bulgaria and Romania, as well as Greece, Turkey and the Western Balkans. But by weathering the storms of 2011-13, Schengen has proved itself a stubbornly resilient project.

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CER in the press

Le Monde

15th September 2013
 For Charles Grant, director of the CER, "Germany is the big problem" for European security policy. The reason being that it either stays neutral or defends its narrow interests.

The New York Times

5th September 2013
 The vote in Parliament "could turn out to be the signal for a strategic shift in favour of insularity," said Ian Bond of the CER. British lawmakers risked "sending the message that in the future the UK will be content to stay on the

sidelines, regardless of what is happening in distant lands."

The Daily Telegraph

4th September 2013
 "Europe, it seems, has become anaesthetised to bad news," says Simon Tilford, deputy director of the CER. "The reality is that the Spanish and Italian economies will shrink by a further 2% in 2013. Greece is on course to contract by an additional 5% to 7% and Portugal by 3% to 4%"

The New York Times

2nd September 2013
 "During the entire two years,

the EU was seen as an honest broker [in Egypt]. Maybe [Catherine] Ashton could have used that leverage more than she did," said Rem Korteweg, of the CER.

Reuters

1st September 2013
 "[The EU] is like playing Jenga," said Hugo Brady, a senior research fellow at the CER. "If someone pulls out the wrong block, the whole thing collapses."

The Financialist

15th August 2013
 "This is not the first such

initiative to free up transatlantic trade and investment, and all previous initiatives have resulted in failure," said Philip Whyte of the CER.

The Wall Street Journal

22nd July 2013
 "The idea that Germans would even get backing from other Europeans [for G20 mandatory debt targets] was rather fanciful, and the idea that Americans would go along with targets was far-fetched," said Simon Tilford of the CER. "...More people are questioning whether austerity in Europe has been self-defeating," he said.