



YOUNG
EUROPEAN
FEDERALISTS



Don't Touch My Schengen

Manifesto



nce upon a time, on a land far away, hidden between the rolling hills of the Ardennes and the curling streams of the Moselle river, right in the intersection of three European realms, lay a tiny village named Schengen. On a late spring day, some of the highest ranking elders of the realms of that little corner of the world met on a boat off this village to make history by agreeing to make it possible for all their subjects to move freely between their realms. For a long time before, these realms had been collaborating, making it possible for their merchants to bring their carts full of produce all over the region. After decades waiting, it was about time that their dwellers could also move without any restrictions or fear of being detained at the confines of their respective realms by the knights of the borderlands. After that momentous episode, the elders returned to their realms, as others slowly joined into this great common space for the free movement of travellers, and we all lived happily ever after...

...but we didn't really live happily ever after for long.

The past decade and its crises have tested the limits of our Union and, in this regard, Schengen has suffered some of the harshest blows. 40 years after its inception, the Schengen system is under massive pressure – and with it the rights we have come to take for granted. “Temporary” border checks, systematic questioning by political forces aiming at exacting electoral benefits out of anti-immigration sentiments, vetoes to its enlargement, or the shutdown of borders during the COVID 19 crisis, serve us as a reminder of the fragility of the Schengen system and the need to stand up for it and what it represents.



Permanent temporary checks and securitarian policies

The main threat to the continued existence of the Schengen Area has been, for the past decade, the growing use and abuse of the formula of “temporary” border controls. These have been implemented by Member States such as Hungary, Austria, Denmark, France or Germany, who made use of dubious claims to justify them. These policies, born out of a securitarian approach to migration, aimed at criminalising and othering certain groups of people, attack the very foundations of the Schengen Agreement. Intra-Schengen checks have a strong human and financial impact on cross-border communities, in particular cross-border workers, as well as on travellers and the transport of goods and provision of services. They make the crossing of borders a hassle, undermining the Single Market and European unity itself.

While the governments of some of the aforementioned Member States are self-declared defenders of the European project, their policies pay homage to those proposed by the worst enemies of European integration. These attempts to provide national solutions to European topics only lead to failure and gamble on the essence of our Union in a vain effort to harvest a fistful of votes. ***Those intra-Schengen controls need to be suspended at once and Member States must abide by the Schengen border code while also removing physical barriers installed in intra-Schengen borders.***

Regulatory frameworks and infrastructure working against freedom of movement

To this day, the lack of a true social union and the slow deployment of necessary cross-border transport infrastructure keep the Schengen Area from guaranteeing everyone's freedom to move through the European Union. National frameworks on unemployment status and benefits create a whole segment of the population that is essentially stuck in their own Member State and



keeps them from travelling within the Union, which sends the message that freedom of movement is just an economic right and not a social right of every EU citizen.

Similarly, cross-border transport infrastructure efforts, while ambitious and far-reaching as expressed by the development of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), are focused on the connectivity across borders of large urban areas. This conception is leaving behind the connectivity needs of cross-border (and often rural) areas which are in need of a close proximity commuter transport instead of longer-distance, high speed connections. ***Member States need to review their social policies to prevent them from curtailing citizens' right to free movement, and work on ensuring the quick deployment of commuter railway lines to bind together cross-border and rural communities.***

Vetoes and political gambling

The accession of new states to Schengen has been, for the last decade, another front of the political gambling that EU Member States have engaged in and that has been enabled by the still-existing instances of unanimous decision-making in the Council. The long and painful process that Romania and Bulgaria have had to endure before their accession to the Schengen Area this year, has contributed to the erosion in pro-European sentiment in those countries. Besides the absurdity of requiring unanimous consent of the Council to allow Member States joining an element of the EU framework that they are obliged to join, this also touches upon the broader issue pertaining to unanimous decision-making in the Council. ***We must advance towards Treaty Change to abolish Council unanimity in the admission of new Member States to the Schengen Area.***



Working for a promising future for Schengen

In spite of the challenges, not all is lost. In 2022, the Court of Justice of the EU ruled against the abuse of the temporary border checks mechanism by Member States, ensuring that rule of law prevails in ensuring that our rights as citizens of the EU are respected in spite of the undermining by nation-states. The full accessions of Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania into Schengen in the last years, and the recent announcement of the Cypriot government's intent to join Schengen by 2026, symbolize the hopes for a bright future for the Schengen Agreement.

These symbolic points are important, but they can't in themselves guarantee that Schengen will be there for us for another 40 years. It is essential that a mobilised civil society keeps pushing, ***not only to preserve what we already have, but to bring it further***. Freedom of movement has proven, through the last four decades, to be itself a symbol of the essence of the Europe without borders brought upon by the European Union. If we are to ensure that the essence of the European project is people-centred, Schengen must prevail.

It is for all these reasons that we renew our pledge:

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