



European Commission - Speech [Check Against Delivery]



Keynote address by Commissioner Johansson at the Schengen Forum

Brussels, 30 November 2020

35 years ago, five countries took a pioneering step.

They agreed to abolish border controls between them. And 25 years ago, the Schengen Agreement, came into force.

It is also an area of prosperity, an area of trust. We have 26 countries, more than 400 million people that share this area of freedom, security and justice.

Trust means also that we, as good neighbours, don't have to knock before passing by each other's house.

That trust also means to watch out for each other's security.

Now with the coronavirus, this trust has been put to the test.

But I also do think that we will pass this test.

During the crisis of the pandemic, I think we have shown the value of Schengen.

And I think that now when we hopefully soon go into the economic recovery we will also need to see the importance of the free movement and the Schengen area.

40% of the Schengen territory is border regions - 40%. That means that a lot of people live in an area where crossing borders freely is part of their every-day life; is part of their every-day economic activities - it is also part of their identity I should say.

So it is important that we can keep these areas open.

I think we all have all gotten a lot of letters in the Spring as the virus hit and lockdowns began.

Our helplines got thousands of calls from citizens in distress. Stuck behind borders, unable to go home. Not knowing what to do.

During April and May, I met with you if not every day, at least some weeks we had meetings three times a week - very frequently as Margaritis just said. But I think that also shows that together we kept essential goods and medicine flowing. Together we made sure people could return home. And in the end, we restored those freedoms.

And now when we are facing the biggest economic crisis in our history probably, free movement will also be our most important instruments, for recovery.

It is clear that internal border controls will damage the GDP significantly.

Several studies like France Stratégie, Bertelsmann Foundation and our own research all points to that.

According to France Stratégie an overall loss of 100 billion by 2025 will be the result if we have internal borders.

In the context of post COVID economic recovery, this is not acceptable.

Citizens also mentioned the economic situation as the most pressing issue facing the EU.

Similarly, the economic situation has overtaken health as the most important issue at national level - rising from seventh to first position.

And a functioning Schengen is central in meeting these concerns.

In many ways Schengen is stronger than ever. But the challenges of today are not those of yesterday. That's why we need to modernize our legal rules and make them fit for purpose.

We need for instance to reply to the digitalisation challenge.

We need a proper operational and political governance of Schengen.

That's why I have invited you to this Schengen Forum.

An opportunity to shape the future of Schengen together, Ministers, representatives of the European Parliament, and Commission.

An area of freedom, security and justice needs effective protection of our common external borders.

And that's of course why we are building up Frontex with a standing corps of 10,000 people, that's what we need to do even more to protect our external borders.

And we need close cooperation to effectively prevent and combat crime and terrorism. And in this area we also need to do more when it comes to interoperability, cooperation and I will next week present new proposals on internal security.

And we also need of course well-functioning management of migration and asylum and that's why we put forward a new pact on migration and asylum in September. And that is what Council and Parliament are now working on.

But let me be clear, internal border checks are not an effective tool to prevent crime and terrorism.

It should be the measures of last resort.

We must also remember, border checks this summer did not stop the virus.

Border controls at internal borders unfortunately won't stop terrorists.

However, we know border controls will stop transport, trade and tourists.

What will be effective to stop terrorists is police work and security cooperation. Closer cooperation in this area should indeed become the rule.

This year not only a debate about border guards and sniffer dogs. And that is because the scent we need to follow is also online.

We need to be more effective to protect our citizens also on line.

We need to improve our cooperation on all these matters.

That's why next week I will present proposals to boost Europol. And a new European counter-terrorism agenda.

I am also working on proposals for a police cooperation code. And on proposals to improve information exchange – of DNA, fingerprints, number plates.

Granted, a shared external border means a shared responsibility for security.

In a normal year, we have 540 million tourists coming to Europe. In recent years we have had smaller numbers of irregular arrivals – last year 140,000 and probably even fewer this year.

But this is for sure something where everyone has to be properly checked and screened at the borders. Nobody, as President von der Leyen said, should be able to come into the Schengen area undetected. Everybody needs be checked and security risks must be identified.

It is not acceptable that according to a Frontex report, 22% of those entering the Schengen area were not checked towards the Schengen Information System.

An area without internal borders needs a fully secure external border. I think we all agree on that and I think we all agree that we need to do even more in this aspect.

In the last five years we've greatly improved our external border management. By building a state of the art architecture for information exchange. Systems that we are expanding and updating as we speak.

If you have an airport, you have an external Schengen border. That's all countries represented here today. But some countries protect a larger part of our shared external borders, than others.

From next year, a new standing corps of the European Border and Coast Guard will support these countries: providing expertise and setting the standard.

We also need to make sure the state of art information systems we agreed to are fully used and become interoperable.

Interoperability should be high on the agenda in all Member States.

An area of free movement also demands a shared approach on migration.

That's why we put forward the New Pact on Migration Asylum to help us better manage migration. Balancing responsibility and solidarity, and help prevent secondary movements, for example.

We also need to complete Schengen. Geographically. All EU citizens deserve to enjoy freedom of movement. It's time to extend the Schengen circle of trust, to those Member States that fulfil the required conditions.

And we need to upgrade Schengen, to meet new challenges.

To manage shared borders, we need stronger cooperation and shared governance.

We must replace provisional measures by permanent structures – To respond effectively to future pandemics, terrorist attacks or sudden peaks in irregular migration.

To improve constantly how Schengen works, we must also constantly evaluate how Schengen functions.

Last week I presented a report on the functioning of Schengen in the last five years. I also welcome the study the European Parliament presented last Friday.

Next year, I plan to present a package of proposals. A Strategy on the future of Schengen. A new Schengen Borders Code and a new Schengen evaluation mechanism.

Today's Schengen Forum is a first step, towards that shared Schengen governance- Because to do this I need to first discuss and listen to you.

My proposed way forward is that after today's discussion we continue at technical level with workshops to go deeper into the topics and to prepare for the next Schengen Forum in April to guide me and the Commission before we present the Schengen Strategy and new Proposals on the Schengen Border Code and Evaluation Mechanism in May.

Today is the start of a discussion to shape the future of Schengen and free movement for decades to come.

As you have seen from the discussion paper, I would like us to discuss, among other things:

- How to further strengthen Schengen governance;
- How to better protect our external borders, looking at possible challenges into the implementation of the many measures already agreed so far;
- How to improve all the other compensatory measures to support the whole Schengen architecture;
- How digital technology, artificial intelligence can help to modernise Schengen;
- How to increase the effectiveness of the Schengen evaluation mechanism;
- What can we learn from the Covid-19 experience and how we can use Schengen for economic recovery;
- And finally how to make border checks truly a measure of last resort and the alternatives for border checks.

I want this to be a concrete, pragmatic and operational discussion on the way forward.

Let us in our discussions always remember:

Our citizens overwhelmingly support free movement. And see Schengen as a crowning European achievement.

They demand economic recovery as soon as possible.

They want to work, they want to spend, they want to travel. And they want to be safe.

We know that Europeans worry about their security only when things go wrong.

Their priority is building a secure economic future for themselves and their families.

Our job is to make sure that the road we are travelling on is as safe as possible, but we must never forget the destination for millions.

Economic recovery, security and prosperity in an area of freedom, security and justice.

Thank you.

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