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## **Schengen area freedom of movement being undermined**

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**Freedom of movement and the Schengen area are among the greatest achievements of European integration, but they are suffering from growing mistrust among member states, says think-tank**

Freedom of movement of people within the Schengen area is ensured and maintained because of two crucial fundamentals: solidarity and mutual trust. Mutual trust between partners is needed so that member states have confidence in the checks carried out by each partner, at the entry into the Schengen area. But solidarity mechanisms, both financial and operational, are also needed to offset the burden that weighs mainly on the countries situated along the periphery of the area. These elements are the cornerstone of the Schengen area and they ensure that it is upheld.

Since the beginning of the Arab Spring and the arrival of thousands of Tunisian nationals on Italian shores, these fundamentals have been called into question. This is particularly the case with respect to the Franco-Italian request, presented in April 2011, asking to modify the Schengen rules in order to enlarge the criteria to reintroduce internal border controls. This request, which is currently being negotiated at a European Union level, is based on the idea that if a partner fails in its duty to control persons crossing the external border - the response to such a situation should be to reintroduce internal border checks.

In such a situation, mutual trust will be eroded and solidarity disregarded as the ultimate solution available for states consists of retreating behind their borders. Put differently, this shows creeping mistrust between partners. While some level of mutual mistrust between countries is a 'natural state' when it comes to security-related policies, an abnormal or artificial increase of mistrust could damage the development and the maintenance of freedom of movement for European Union citizens as well as third country nationals legally residing in the EU.

A closer look at current issues in policy linked to freedom of movement shows that the level of mistrust is increasing to a worrying degree. The delayed accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the Schengen area and the recently announced British contingency plan to restrict freedom of movement of EU citizens in the event of Greece exiting the eurozone, are signs that the basis of European integration - freedom of movement - is under high pressure, even endangered.

This should be looked at carefully. It could lead to a complete reversal of the logic surrounding more than 50 years of European integration, devoted to the constant quest for greater freedom of movement. While freedom of movement has brought significant benefits to member state economies, it is also as underlined by former European Commissioner for Justice and Home Affairs António Vitorino - a benefit for the millions of citizens "who enjoy a freedom of movement at once so unprecedented and so precious on a daily basis".

Instead of trying to undermine major achievements, efforts should focus on three main elements. First, we must ensure greater solidarity between member states and in particular helping those facing difficulties. Second, we should respect the fundamental EU rules regarding limitations to freedom of movement, as they should be allowed only in exceptional circumstances and for public order reasons. Third, we can improve cooperation between EU institutions in order to preserve this freedom.

Thankfully, while signs of mutual mistrust are clearly visible - their impact has remained limited so far. However, nothing prevents a 'negative coalition' of member states from pushing even harder in the direction of a slow, but sure, dismantling of freedom of movement. It is the responsibility of EU institutions – the European Council, the European Parliament, the European Commission and the European Court of justice – each in its own capacity, to avoid any such further developments; and to stand firmly against any attempt that would undermine freedom of movement and the Schengen area, which are among the greatest achievements of European integration.

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