

# Virus-linked border moves raise fears on free travel in EU

August 10 2020, by Lorne Cook

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In this Monday, April 6, 2020 file photo, police perform checks on commercial and passenger traffic on the Dutch-Belgian border, during a partial lockdown to contain the spread of COVID-19 in Meer, Belgium. As European countries struggle to manage spikes in coronavirus cases, concern is mounting about a "second wave" of uncoordinated border restrictions within Europe that threatens the free movement of goods and people: a foundation stone that the world's biggest trading bloc is built on. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo, File)

As European countries struggle to manage spikes in coronavirus cases, concern is mounting about a "second wave" of uncoordinated border restrictions within Europe that threatens the free movement of goods and people—a foundation that the world's biggest trading bloc is built on.

Despite repeated warnings about the dangers of unannounced checks, some countries have imposed new restrictions, or demanded that travelers quarantine, recalling the panic border closures after Europe's first outbreak emerged in Italy in February, blocking traffic and [medical equipment](#).

Beyond the economic impact of uncoordinated measures, experts fear that countries are becoming so used to lowering the gates at their frontiers as they see fit that the future of Europe's ID-check free travel zone known as the Schengen area is in real peril.

In a letter to national governments, seen by The Associated Press, the European Commission warns that "while we must ensure that the EU is ready for possible resurgences of COVID-19 cases ... we should at the same time avoid a second wave of uncoordinated actions at the internal borders of the EU."

"The re-establishment of ineffective restrictions and internal border controls must be avoided. Rather, the response should be to have targeted, proportionate and coordinated measures, informed by scientific evidence," said the letter, sent to the 27 EU member countries and Britain.



In this Tuesday, March 17, 2020 file photo, trucks stuck in a traffic jams for 60 kilometers (36 miles) on the Lithuanian side of the border to enter Poland in Vilnius, Lithuania. As European countries struggle to manage spikes in coronavirus cases, concern is mounting about a "second wave" of uncoordinated border restrictions within Europe that threatens the free movement of goods and people: a foundation stone that the world's biggest trading bloc is built on. (AP Photo/Saulius Zaura, File)

Belgium—where EU headquarters are based—does not allow travel to some regions in Spain, notably Catalonia in the north, and also has bans on people coming from parts of France, Britain, Bulgaria, Croatia, Lithuania, Romania and Switzerland.

Scandinavian nations are notably quick to react to any rise in infection rates. Denmark's [foreign ministry](#) now has Spain, Bulgaria, Luxembourg,



Romania and Andorra on its so-called red list. Norway, which is not an EU member but is part of the Schengen area, has not hesitated either.

"Unfortunately, developments in several European countries are not moving in the right direction," Norwegian Foreign Minister Ine Eriksen Soereide said. She says that people arriving from France, Monaco, Switzerland and the Czech Republic must now self-quarantine for 10 days.



In this Monday, June 15, 2020 file photo, French gendarmes approach a car at the Saint-Ludovic border check point on the Franco-Italian border in Menton, France. As European countries struggle to manage spikes in coronavirus cases, concern is mounting about a "second wave" of uncoordinated border restrictions within Europe that threatens the free movement of goods and people: a foundation stone that the world's biggest trading bloc is built on. (AP

Photo/Daniel Cole, File)

The use of compulsory COVID-19 testing is also growing. Germany is testing people arriving from high-risk areas, including parts of Bulgaria and Romania, which are EU partners but not members of the Schengen area. Greece and Italy are taking similar steps for the two countries.

But it's the constant tinkering with travel restrictions that is of greatest concern. EU governments can impose border restrictions for reasons of public security—including health concerns—as they see fit. However, the measures should be targeted and limited in time, and governments should warn of their plans.

Since 2015, the Schengen rules have been routinely flouted, mostly due to distrust among European countries who doubted that their partners would do the right thing. First some countries relied on closures to help cope with the arrival of hundreds of thousands of migrants, many fleeing conflict in Syria or Iraq, seeking better lives in northern Europe. Some of those restrictions are still in place.



In this Sunday, May 17, 2020 file photo, people gather at the border crossing at Saed, Denmark, to attend a demonstration to open the border between Denmark and Germany. As European countries struggle to manage spikes in coronavirus cases, concern is mounting about a "second wave" of uncoordinated border restrictions within Europe that threatens the free movement of goods and people: a foundation stone that the world's biggest trading bloc is built on. (Claus Fisker/Ritzau Scanpix via AP, File)



In this Wednesday, July 1, 2020 file photo, from left to right, Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, Spain's King Felipe VI, Portugal's President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa and Portugal's Prime Minister Antonio Costa during a ceremony to mark the reopening of the Portugal-Spain border in Elvas, Portugal. As European countries struggle to manage spikes in coronavirus cases, concern is mounting about a "second wave" of uncoordinated border restrictions within Europe that threatens the free movement of goods and people: a foundation stone that the world's biggest trading bloc is built on. (AP Photo/Armando Franca, File)





In this Monday, July 6, 2020 file photo, cars queue at the Promahonas border crossing with Bulgaria. As European countries struggle to manage spikes in coronavirus cases, concern is mounting about a "second wave" of uncoordinated border restrictions within Europe that threatens the free movement of goods and people: a foundation stone that the world's biggest trading bloc is built on. (AP Photo/Giannis Papanikos, File)





In this Monday, June 15, 2020 file photo, cars drive to Belgium at the French-Belgium border in Le Bizet, northern France. As European countries struggle to manage spikes in coronavirus cases, concern is mounting about a "second wave" of uncoordinated border restrictions within Europe that threatens the free movement of goods and people: a foundation stone that the world's biggest trading bloc is built on. (AP Photo/Michel Spingler, File)

The big challenge to Schengen these days is the coronavirus pandemic.

"Scenes of backed-up borders and checkpoints would have been unthinkable just five years ago. Yet today, the unilateral reintroduction of border checks and border closures has become an accepted part of member states' toolkits to respond to cross-border emergencies," according to the Migration Policy Institute.

A side-effect of the virus [border](#) restrictions—which might be welcomed by countries such as Austria, Denmark, Hungary or Poland that are still worried about migrant arrivals—is that the number of people applying for asylum also plummeted.

The danger, the institute said, is that "the instinct to return to national borders at times of crisis may only grow stronger, particularly as second or third waves of the virus necessitate the reintroduction of some level of travel restrictions."

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