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Schengen is the agreement signed in 1985 creating a single, “border-free” territory inside the European Union. It was a big step, not only for European integration, but also, and especially, for the creation and development of European citizenship. Schengen not only allows citizens of signatory states to cross borders without passports, it also fosters convergence and understanding between them. Schengen is recognised by European citizens not just as one of the key pillars of the EU but as its main achievement. Nevertheless, the refugee crisis is calling those achievements into question along with the viability and continuity of this right.

This is not the first time member states have closed borders. Schengen’s own legislation establishes that borders may be closed in cases where public order or national security requires, but only temporarily. The interruption of the free movement of people for reasons linked to the mobility of people has been suggested on various occasions. An example is the bilateral agreement made between the leaders of France and Germany, Sarkozy and Merkel, at the end of 2011 to face the difficulties of controlling the external borders of member states when third-country nationals arrive. However, it is the closing of the Italy-France border in 2011 following an increase in irregular immigrants from Italy that provides the closest example to the current crisis. Today, we see the reimposition of controls by Germany on its border with Austria, Austria with Slovenia, Slovenia with Croatia and Sweden – the last to join this group – with Denmark, all with the aim of controlling the flow of refugees, which is a measure of how far the erosion of the area of free movement has gone.

As in other areas of the European construction process, Schengen is only a partial act of integration. Many complementary policies for managing movement within the EU remain in national hands. It is not possible to construct a common area of freedom, security and justice (AFSJ) while the management of asylum, control of external borders and immigrant integration policies remain in national hands, without shared policies and mechanisms. And while member states continue to resist ceding competences, the likelihood of falling into greater disagreement increases and

the possible end of Schengen approaches. No current mechanisms of governance allow internal freedom to be guaranteed. The refugee crisis has made clear that, to survive, Schengen needs reforms that go beyond the AFSJ.

The common asylum policy will need to be reshaped, especially when it comes to establishing the country responsible for handling the asylum process (the Dublin system) and reinforcing coordination of external borders. But a policy to fight people trafficking must also be designed that strives to defend the human rights of migrants and refugees and which also works on the causes of forced displacement, among other factors.

We must learn from our mistakes. Closing the border between Germany and Austria to control the entry of refugees was counterproductive if what the German government sought was to pressure the other member states into committing, in solidarity, to the handling and relocation of the refugees. Finally, collectively, the EU will have to improve its capacity for anticipation and foresight. Not only to handle a new arrival of refugees but also to face the strengthening of Eurosceptic and anti-immigration political forces who demand permanent restrictions on the free circulation of people. Forces that have not hesitated to use the attacks in Paris to restate their thesis. Facing these discourses it must be put on the table and explained to the public that closing internal borders can only further weaken the capacity for joint, coordinated response.

Weakening Schengen by using it as a tool for exerting pressure strikes right at the heart of Europe, challenging one of its key pillars, in particular the development of a European citizenship. The refugee issue will not be a temporary crisis and may continue for many years. Thus, as long as member states cannot reach global agreements based on solidarity and cooperation that affect the whole of the EU, the Schengen system will be robbed of its essence. There may be no declaration of death, but its collapse will be ever more visible.

So, ultimately, will the refugee crisis put an end to the free movement of people? The answer is that while it provides one significant reason for it, alone it is not enough. The convergence of various open fronts such as the increase in intra-EU labour movement due to the crisis, the immigration of third country nationals coming from outside as well as inside the Schengen space itself, the growth of Eurosceptic parties and now the refugee crisis are all factors that, together, put the free movement of people at risk. If member states continue to introduce temporary closures of national borders, the EU will be destined for a weakening of its power and influence, both inside and outside its borders.