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The E.U.'s Balancing Act on Open Borders

By [STEPHEN CASTLE](#)

BRUSSELS — Allowing travelers to speed across frontiers and skip long lines at airports, the passport-free travel zone is a rare symbol of the benefits of closer European integration.

But this experiment in dismantling borders faces one of the biggest challenges in its 35-year history: Can it adapt to an era of growing international migration? Proposals due on Wednesday could bring the [European Union](#) unprecedented powers to manage external frontiers when migrants arrive en masse.

In exceptional circumstances, nations would find it easier to reinstate temporary controls at the hundreds of border checkpoints they have put into mothballs. And the European Union might even create its own border guard.

All this is being proposed to salvage a system that was already under increasing strain when it was plunged into crisis by the dispute between Italy and France over the arrival of more than 20,000 people from [Tunisia](#) as a result of the revolution there.

“In [Europe](#), we are surrounded by poorer but increasingly internationally mobile peoples who want in to societies boasting the highest quality of life in the world,” said Hugo Brady, senior research fellow at the Center for European Reform. “It is hard to see how we can deter that desire indefinitely.”

The rift between Italy and France touched a raw nerve on a continent where anti-immigrant parties have chalked up a series of recent advances.

“We know,” said one European official who requested anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue, “that because of the coming French presidential elections and the situation in Italy, there is going to be a temptation to undermine one of the pillars of European integration.”

That is not the world envisaged by the founders of a system named after the tranquil wine-making village of Schengen, Luxembourg, where negotiators from Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and West Germany met in 1985. There, aboard a riverboat, they signed an accord on “the gradual abolition of controls at the common frontier.”

For countries whose borders had been fought over just 40 years earlier, this was a bold step, but one fundamentally concerned with scrapping internal barriers between nations that enjoyed strong economic and geographical similarities.

Yet while Britain and Ireland have stayed outside the Schengen zone, it has expanded enormously, even beyond the European Union to places like Norway and Switzerland, and now numbers 25 countries.

Inevitably, challenges have mounted, because once travelers enter one nation, there is little to stop them from moving on to another, making the zone only as strong as its weakest link. Anxiety has been worsened by plans to admit Bulgaria and Romania, both of which have struggled to control organized crime and corruption.

Expecting migratory pressure to be greatest on its eastern borders, the European Union created an agency to coordinate cooperation on border security — Frontex, based in Warsaw. South European nations, meanwhile, were relying on Arab and African regimes to control flows of migrants.

Italy, for example, began cooperating with Libya more than a decade ago. In 2008, Italy signed a friendship pact and agreed to pay \$5 billion, spread over 25 years, officially as compensation for abuses during its 32-year colonial rule of Libya but effectively in exchange for cooperation in stopping migrants. There was pressure on countries like Morocco and Algeria to sign agreements to take back people who tried but failed to win asylum.

That strategy has been called into question by the “Arab Spring,” and a fierce dispute broke out last month when, convinced that they should have had more help dealing with the arrival of refugees from Tunisia, Italy issued temporary residence permits to those who arrived in Italy before April 5. Because the permits allowed them to move within the Schengen zone, France introduced border checks and pushed back hundreds of people.

The proposals due on Wednesday from the [European Commission](#), the bloc’s executive, aim to avert such rifts, in part by giving countries greater freedom to close their borders temporarily under such exceptional circumstances.

In fact, however, Schengen nations have used existing rules to do exactly that at least 66 times since 1995, according to a recent paper by the Center for European Policy Studies. The justifications ranged from the wedding of Prince Felipe in Spain in 2004 to a visit by Hells Angels to Reykjavik in 2009.

Perhaps more significant, the European Commission will also propose a new crisis mechanism to try to prevent the type of tension seen between France and Italy.

This would “allow the Union to handle situations where either a member state is not fulfilling its obligations to control its section of the external border, or where a particular

portion of the external border comes under unexpected and heavy pressure due to external events,” according to a draft of the document.

Frontex, the border security agency, would be able to mount special operations, as it did when it recently sent a 250-member multinational team to the Greek-Turkish border. How the mechanism would be triggered remains to be resolved.

Officials hope, however, that Frontex will gradually be granted greater resources and a bigger role. “The feasibility of creating a European system of border guards should be considered,” the draft document says.

The draft also seeks to address the bloc’s biggest problem with illegal migration: the E.U.’s inability to track those who overstay their visas. The answer, it says, is to go ahead with plans to create a European “entry-exit system” to record movements of non-E.U. citizens, though officials concede that constructing that will be costly.

That underlines how strengthening Schengen will require governments to spend more money and share more sovereignty — something they have shown little appetite for.

“The politics of Schengen are such that no one wants to give up control of their own frontiers but everyone wants some control over other countries’ borders,” said Mr. Brady, the research fellow. “That’s not the best basis for a new grand bargain on the rules of the game.”