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SCHENGEN'S SUMMERTIME BLUES

by Hugo Brady

By 1 July, free movement should once again be a reality within the EU's passport-free zone, more or less. The Union is re-opening the single market just in time to secure this year's agricultural production and the tourist season. The big question now is whether and how to re-open to the rest of the world.

The Great European Summer is back on. This week, EU countries began lifting COVID-19 restrictions on non-essential travel within the Union, whilst gradually relaxing the internal border controls they introduced back in March. Airport testing and mandatory quarantine requirements are set to dwindle to spot checks and heightened vigilance in July and August. What can go wrong? Actually, a lot.

An uneven opening

First, do not expect a simultaneous, uniform re-opening. National approaches will continue to differ based on threat perception. The Central and Eastern Europeans worry the summer easing could be premature and will lift restrictions only gingerly. Portugal, Spain and Italy (the latter two with around 30,000 fatalities each) are torn between continuing quarantine and the fact that tourism accounts for over 10 per cent of their economies. Travellers from EU countries with the highest per capita infections will continue to face quarantine requirements in Austria, Denmark and Greece, amongst others. This includes Spain, Britain — the worst affected with over 40,000 deaths — and Sweden. (Britain exited the EU in January but remains in the single market until the end of the year.)

Second, even one bad outbreak in a popular destination could mean thousands of stranded travellers and perhaps a depressing resumption of national lockdowns. Greece has announced it will [“welcome the world”](#) from 1 July, using a series of measures to mitigate this danger, from outdoor hotel check-ins to enforcement of social distancing on beaches by talking drones. Although not its original purpose, the Greek government uses the European Aviation Safety Authority's [airport watch-list](#) as a basis for deciding which regions' arrivals — whether EU or third country — should face mandatory testing and monitored 14-day quarantine. Schengen's decentralised governance model, now in operation for over [25 years](#), means that

national authorities rely on tools like the EASA list as a reference point for their individual actions.

Despite the clear risks, the right mix of precautionary measures can save Europe's summer. Tourism-reliant countries will deploy an avalanche of Plexiglas in key destinations, longer 'cooling off' periods between guests for hotel rooms, and the use of contact tracing apps to control and limit outbreaks. Each Schengen country appears to be producing their own app, including [Switzerland](#) and [Iceland](#). The European Commission wants to ensure these are [interoperable](#) to support the restoration of free movement. This week it also launches its own real-time website and app, '[Re-open EU](#)', to help travellers navigate this summer's uneven landscape of remaining travel restrictions.

Deciding who is safe

Then there is the crucial question of what to do about the EU's still-closed external border. Europe was the pandemic's epicentre when the Commission recommended banning all non-essential travel to and from third countries in March. Hence, the EU was as much shielding the rest of the world from itself as limiting the spread of infection from without. Now, according to the WHO, European infection rates are dropping whilst the global outlook is worsening. 7 June set a new daily record for the highest number of new cases since the crisis began. As of 15 June, there were 7.5 million cases and over 420,000 recorded deaths worldwide. And, as forecast at the beginning of the ICMPD series on COVID-19, the pandemic is now [accelerating in the developing world](#), taking 98 days to reach 100,000 infections in Africa, but only 18 days more to reach 200,000. Similar patterns are emerging in South Asia and [the Middle East](#).

Nevertheless, the Commission has signalled the ban on non-essential third country travel can be lifted after 1 July, albeit carefully. Last week, it set out [basic criteria](#) for resuming visa operations and also for determining which individual third countries are controlling the pandemic adequately enough to allow a resumption of travel to Europe. But whilst Schengen countries have a legally binding means to decide lifting visa restrictions for particular countries, no similar 'white list' system exists for designating third countries 'safe' during a pandemic. The Italian and Spanish prime ministers pointed this out to Commission president Ursula von der Leyen on 4 June, [stating](#) "COVID incidence thresholds in third countries, for instance, should be agreed among us, before regaining full mobility with them".

Presently, the EU simply lacks the political bandwidth to negotiate changes to the Schengen *acquis* to take account of the current situation. Instead, countries will spend the

summer improvising. How will the others respond if one Schengen member decides to re-open its borders with Russia, the world's third worst affected country? How will the Schengen area formulate a common policy towards travel from the US – the current epicentre – or Latin America, where the crisis continues to worsen and has yet to peak? An uncoordinated re-opening of external borders goes against the very concept of a common travel area and would lead to the rapid re-introduction of border controls and travel restrictions internally. Most important, it would risk Europe's precious achievement in getting the virus under control within three months without a vaccine.

Possible solutions

One option would be to extend the ban on non-essential travel to the EU to 31 August when coordination lessons could be drawn from the European tourist season, and when the changing direction of the pandemic will be clearer. (Seasonal workers, passengers in transit and asylum seekers are in any case already exempt under the Commission's guidance.) Another would be an ad hoc coordination mechanism, developed in tandem with the [European Centre for Disease Control](#) and EASA. This would set epidemiological criteria for third countries, such as recorded COVID-19 fatalities and evolving infection rates per 100,000 of population. Those with clear upward trends over 14 days or more would face tougher controls. Others on a downward trend over one month would be subject to heightened vigilance but not special restrictions.

A temporary home for this system might be the Union's [Integrated Political Crisis Response](#) (IPCR) mechanism. Originally developed in case of a 9/11 like incident in Europe after 2001, the IPCR brings together the countries most affected by a particular crisis, along with the Commission and key operational actors, to determine crisis management priorities. The EU's rotating presidency chairs the IPCR and tables its recommendations at meetings of national EU ambassadors, the Union's most important decision-making body under the political level. First activated for the irregular arrivals crises of 2015-2016, the IPCR already began exchanging information on COVID-19 on 2 March.

A solution along these lines would only serve as a band aid. Once the crisis subsides, Schengen countries need to reflect in earnest on how to fill clear governance gaps in the acquis, in public health, but also areas like transport, [security and crisis management](#). With the Commission shortly to publish proposals for a new grand bargain between EU countries on migration policy, this debate is coming.

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