

30 years of Schengen - was it worth it?

At the start of the opening debate, the panellists, including former EU Commissioner António Vitorino, first took the opportunity to comment on the speech by EU Dimitris Avramopoulos, who just minutes earlier outlined in his keynote speech the recently unveiled European Agenda for Migration.

Vitorino, who was the EU's second Commissioner for Justice and Home Affairs, praised the Commission's migration plan, saying it was "a major breakthrough" and "politically courageous" because it raised the right questions in the year where Europe was celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Schengen Agreements - the main topic of the debate.

Panellist Philippe De Bruycker, however, called on European leaders to take a more forceful stance, saying that the proposals were not ambitious when there are millions of internally displaced refugees in several states rocked by conflicts and countries outside the EU, such as Turkey, are taking on millions of refugees. Europe, he said, should use already existing directives to promote solidarity among the EU states.

Vitorino said his nightmare was that the manipulation of debate over migration would backfire and hurt the freedom of movement for European citizens, the core of the Schengen Agreement. But Gil Arias, the Deputy Executive Director of Frontex, said that with 400 million people enjoying passport free travel to make 1.25 billion journeys each year, it was "difficult to envisage going back 20 years to the previous system" where passport checks took place at all borders between EU countries. "It is rather difficult to imagine a common border between Germany and France being populated by border guards again," he said.


Michał Parzyszek, who moderated the panel, asked whether the European Union's policies were failing somewhat because so few Europeans were moving within the borders to find new jobs and homes and since there was still an issue of acceptance by EU citizens of immigration, both from other EU states and from outside.


De Bruycker said the big challenge for the EU was to start to understand that Europe is already a continent of immigration and the future of Europe depends on more migration, not less. "If the EU doesn't want to be on the decline it will have to accept more migrants to avoid the ageing population problem," he said.

"We need to act on the reality, but cannot ignore perceptions," responded Vitorino, citing a study that showed that people in each EU Member State wrongly think that there are a lot more immigrants in their country than the real number, in some states thinking that there are twice the real number.

He added that the capacity for integration was not limited and border control was still needed to guarantee the ability to "guarantee the decision of entry". Vitorino said in terms of controlling the borders, the Schengen Agreement was a revolutionary experiment because it partially spread the responsibility over the decision about who is present on the territory of any given state among a number of countries who have the EU's external borders. But he said border control cannot be asked to deliver what it cannot and, in his opinion, a vast majority of people staying illegally did not enter the EU illegally, but rather overstayed their visa. So, while Europe needs strict border controls to dissuade criminal networks and prevent illegal entries, it is other law enforcement agencies that must cooperate to reduce the number of people overstaying their visas. There needs to be a much stronger cooperation between various agencies, the police and border guards.

Arias echoed the sentiment, saying border control was not a panacea to all of Europe's problems with migration, although border management has to play an important role in providing security.





“There is always tension between freedom and security”, according to Vitorino, who said he was proud that Europe held on to its values and did not scrap or limit the Schengen Agreement in the face of terrorist attacks and other security threats over the last years. “Putting an end to Schengen would improve security, but it would be a terrible mistake” because many of the threats are transnational and just at a national level there would be fewer incentives for law enforcement bodies to cooperate across Europe.

Responding to Parzyszek’s question to the panellists about what else needs to be done to make the Schengen Area function better, De Bruycker called for a reinforcement of the Frontex’s mandate to remove the “schizophrenic” approach to border control. “Are borders European or national. It’s very ambiguous,” he said. Vitorini said he wanted Europe to work more closely with the neighbouring countries and for Frontex and European security agencies, such as Europol.