Virus Variants Deliver Fresh Blow to Europe's Open Borders

BRUSSELS – With the rapid spread of new variants of the coronavirus, major powers are beginning to re-establish border control, a practice that has become a new European habit during the pandemic and is once abandoning the world's largest free movement zone.

Fearful of highly contagious new options first identified in the UK and South Africa, both Germany and Belgium last week imposed new border restrictions and joined the steps already taken by other countries.

The EU sees free movement as a key pillar of the continent's deepening integration, but the ease with which states can apply for border control after a decade ago, first by terrorism and then by the migration crisis, puts it under new pressure.

The European Commission, the EU's executive, has been trying to dissuade countries from restricting free movement since last March after restrictions were imposed at the start of the crisis. The result was a changing patchwork of boundary rules, which caused confusion, but did not always limit the spread of the virus.

"Last spring we had 17 different member states that took border measures and the lessons we learned at that time were that it could not stop the virus, but it disrupted the single market and caused a lot of problems. "The commission's president, Ursula von der, said. Leyen told the press this week. "The virus has taught us that closing borders don't stop it."

But many countries see the return of border control as irreversible. Ms. von der Leyen's remarks and the commission's suggestion that the new restrictions should be lifted led to a retreat from Germany, which reiterated a new common practice among EU countries in the context of the coronavirus: our borders, our business.

"We are fighting a mutated virus on the border with the Czech Republic and Austria," said German Interior Minister Horst Zixofer. he said tabloid newspaper

Bild. The commission “should support us and not put speakers on our wheels with cheap advice,” he said.

The system of borderless movement of people and goods is known in Europe as Schengen, because the city of Luxembourg, the treaty defining its principles, was signed in 1985 by five states in the center of the current EU.

Today, the Schengen area includes 22 of the 27 EU member states and four neighbors (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland), where tourists can in principle move freely without having to face checks and other requirements.

Joining the Schengen area was seen as the culmination of European integration as well as the aspiration of the peoples who have gone through the process of joining the European Union, along with joining the common currency of the euro.

Throughout its 35-year history, the Schengen system has been shaped and deepened, but, like many other EU aspirations, has failed in times of crisis.

“My biggest concern – and I’ve been dealing with Schengen for many years – is a serious threat to Schengen,” said Tanjay Fajon, a Slovenian member of the European Parliament, who heads the assembly’s Schengen inspection team.

Terrorist attacks in EU countries over the past decade and the abuse of Schengen’s frustrated freedoms by militants fleeing from country to country, cooperation with law enforcement and intelligence sharing European countries open their borders found that it did not keep pace with.

The arrival of more than a million refugees fleeing the war in Syria in 2015-2016 dealt a more decisive blow to Schengen. Many member states, unwilling to share the burden, tightened their borders, isolated themselves, and used Greece and Italy on the periphery of the bloc as buffer zones.

The impact of the Syrian refugee crisis has shown a tectonic shift in European border policy. The lack of a border that once had a united, prosperous, and free Europe with a romantic ideal was accepted by the right and the far-right and discarded as a threat instead.

Soon, even moderate politicians began to see Europe’s borders as necessary after decades of work to eliminate them.

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“Freedom of movement is a symbol of European integration, the most tangible result of integration, people really feel it,” Ms. Fajon said.

“It is no longer a pandemic that threatens it – we have been experiencing the Schengen crisis since 2015 without any real benefit since internal border controls were implemented to protect the narrow national interests around refugees,” he added.

The unstoppable spread of the coronavirus is giving a third blow to the dream of open European borders.

“Schengen is not a very crisis-resistant system,” said Marie De Somer, an expert at the Center for European Policy at the Brussels-based research institute. “It works in fair weather, but we see that there are flaws and gaps in its performance the minute it’s under pressure, and Covid is the best example of that.”

Schengen-owned countries have a clear right to reinstate inspections at their borders, but for that they have to overcome several legal barriers, and they are not designed to maintain them for long.

Ms. De Somer said that because national boundaries are important for flexibility, flexibility is embedded in Schengen; this is a deliberate part of the design.

“But the biggest risk is that these measures will go beyond the original purpose and the system will collapse,” he said, making it difficult to return to previous open borders once the crisis escalates.

One of the factors that helps keep boundaries open, even in small closures, is the huge and rapid economic impact – a reflection of how the daily activities of the block have been built around decades without borders.

Since Sunday, entry into Germany from the Czech Republic or the Austrian province of Tyrol has been on the rise, with a growing number of coronavirus variants appearing in the UK, including people living in Germany, living in Germany, transporting or working in important jobs. Jobs in Germany. Before admission, everyone must register and show negative coronavirus test results.

But in Austria and the Czech Republic, thousands of people go to workplaces in Germany every day, and as new inspections take effect, long trips have begun to emerge. By the end of the week, business groups were writing desperate letters asking Germany to ease or lift restrictions, warning that limited and targeted action had already caused disruptions in supply chains.

“These measures have a serious impact on the whole of Austria and therefore run counter to the‘ lessons ’learned last spring,” said Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg.

Even in the near future, when many Europeans are vaccinated and the coronavirus is finally controlled, the future of Schengen may be in doubt.

The European Commission is proposing changes that will make it harder for individual members to set barriers. But a number of French-led states have argued that the bloc’s external borders should be impassable if internal freedom of movement is to be maintained – an idea often referred to as the “European Fortress” and The Union’s border agency will be strengthened by increasing Frontex’s budget.

These ideas go hand in hand with proposals to expand surveillance within internal boundaries to replace significant physical barriers and inspections.

The struggle for the future of Schengen continues, Ms. Fajon said, as the European legislature prepares to submit a strategic document on the subject later this year.

“The question arises, what kind of Schengen will it be?” Mrs. Fajon said. “Shooting hidden cameras and state numbers at the border or other questionable technological means?”

Nevertheless, Ms. De Somer said the free movement system has an important long-term ally: the continental youth.

“Young people are talking about what it’s like to live in Europe, where the Covid crisis has borders for the first time,” he said. “It made them appreciate infinity.”

Christopher F. Shuetze Berlin and Monica Pronczuk From Brussels.

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