Coronavirus Threatening Europe's Open-Border Goals

By Lisa Bryant
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PARIS – In another one of its many fallouts, the coronavirus is creating new strains for Europe's 26-nation Schengen zone that allows for the free movement of people among member states. European officials say, for now, there is no reason to close borders, but the spread of the virus seems to bolster nationalist arguments for the zone to be scrapped altogether.

Like in most places these days, the coronavirus outbreak is topping the French news. Several dozen cases have been reported so far. The government is advising precautionary measures like not shaking hands and forgoing the traditional kiss on both cheeks. The post office has suspended link with China.

The bigger worry, for now, lies in neighboring Italy. For the moment, the borders between France and Italy remain open. However, a recent decision to allow 3,000 Italian fans to travel to the French city of Lyon for a football match

sparked controversy.

That's just one example testing Europe's decades-old Schengen zone. The concept of open internal borders is a cornerstone of European Union goals for closer integration—although Schengen includes several non-EU members, such as Switzerland.

Europe Races to Ready Hospitals for Coronavirus Break Out

With public health experts warning a tipping point for coronavirus is getting closer, European authorities are racing to ready their health systems to cope with a flood of sick and highly contagious patients

As yet, the EU has not called for closing Schengen borders. However, its top official for communicable diseases, Andrea Ammon, said Europe must prepare for more serious outbreaks, like Italy's.

"Our assessment is that we will likely see similar situations in other countries in Europe, and that the picture may, in the coming weeks, vary from country to country," Ammon said.

Experts say closing borders won't prevent the virus from crossing them but that hasn't stopped nationalist parties from pushing this move. Here's

Among them is Marine Le Pen, head of France's main opposition National Rally party. But speaking on French radio this week, she wrongly claimed the EU has not said a word about the coronavirus outbreak. She said the bloc has only

condemned those who want more border control — proving an open-border ideology that is almost a religion.

Nationalist politicians in Austria, Italy and Switzerland have made similar remarks. They have long lobbied for closed borders to stop migration. The coronavirus has reinforced these arguments.

At the same time, Schengen has also been weakened by member states. A few years ago some, such as Hungary, closed their borders to counter the migration crisis. France closed its borders after the 2015 terrorist attacks on its soil.

While the Schengen system allows for temporary closures, experts say in practice some countries are turning "temporary" into a more permanent state of affairs.

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Written By
Lisa Bryant