Europe Without Borders

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'We are not forming coalitions of states, we are uniting men.' Perhaps nothing expresses better than these words of Jean Monnet, one of the founders of the European project, the essence of the goodness of the European Union: the free movement of persons, recognized by the vast majority of its citizens as the Union's most valuable achievement. March 26, 2020 marks the 25th anniversary of the

implementation of the Schengen Agreement. Free movement with the European Union is also seen as the greatest political achievement of Georgia-EU relations. March 28 marks three years since the Georgian state adopted a visa-free regime with EU / Schengen member states. On 28 March 2017 Georgian citizens were able to travel to the Schengen Area without a visa for the first time. With the restoration of historical regularity, the process of returning of the free Georgian nation to the united European family has become much stronger. Over the past three years since Georgia and the EU adopted a visa-free regime, over half a million Georgian citizens have travelled to the countries of the Schengen Area, accounting for over 1 million visits.

The COVID-19 global pandemic, however, has unfortunately caused the free movement of people in the Schengen Area to be temporarily suspended, and all events planned for the 25th anniversary of the Schengen Agreement have also been cancelled. In this extraordinary situation, it is strategically important for the European idea to underline all the advantages of a *Europe Without Borders*. The 25-year existence of the Schengen Area is of great significance in many ways, especially in political, economic and cultural terms.

The decision to grant their citizens freedom of movement was taken on the 26th of March 1995 by seven European Union member states. Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain decided to abolish their internal borders, implementing the Treaty on the abolishment of internal border checks between EU Member States that had been signed in 1985 at Schengen, a Luxembourgish commune bordering France and Germany. The creation of the Schengen Area heralded a new era in Europe based upon the idea of uniting her peoples: over the next 25 years, the borders between 26 countries were gradually abolished, including 22 EU member states and 4 non-members (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland), and partner countries such as Georgia became eligible for a visa liberalization regime. Today, the Schengen Area is the largest area in the world in which people are able to move freely regardless of citizenship and without internal border checks.

The abolition of internal borders between Schengen countries is based upon the principle of co-operation between signatories in order to better protect their external borders. With the aim of improving the security of citizens in a *Europe without borders*, the police forces and judiciaries of the Schengen member states collaborate closely—notably through the *Schengen Information System*, the largest security database in Europe, which is effectively used to combat shared European challenges such as terrorism organized crime, etc. From its founding to the present day, this information system has enabled over 50,000 wanted persons to be detained, the detection of over 150,000 persons illegally in Europe, and over 28,000 missing persons to be found. The free movement of citizens in the Schengen Area also has a positive economic impact in member states—according to a study by the European Parliament, rolling back the Schengen Agreement would cost member states between 5 and 18 billion euros per year—but the impact of free movement on the European integration of citizens has been much more important from a cultural point of view. Moreover, the free movement of citizens is considered today as the most perfect means of European integration, the basis of European citizenship.

Yet despite the given incomplete list of benefits of the Schengen area, the Schengen Agreement has long been criticized by nationalist political parties and anti-European groups. This criticism was particularly acute during Europe's 2015-2016 migration crisis, when around 10 Schengen members temporarily restored border controls in an attempt to reduce illegal migration flows. Anti-European populist movements at the time actively opposed the Schengen area and noted a lack of solidarity between EU member states.

Since this acute crisis, it is unlikely that anyone would ever have imagined that the new reason for the violation of the idea of a *Europe without Borders* by the restoration of internal controls by Schengen members would be such a non-political issue as the current COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the benefits of free movement and the economic prosperity it engenders, on the 17th of March this unprecedented global challenge forced the EU to temporarily close its external borders for 30 days. This decision further strengthens the rhetoric of right-wing populist movements, which this time is accompanied by a focus on the lack of coordination during the temporary restoration of internal borders by this or that member state within the European Union.

'A crisis without borders cannot be resolved by putting barriers between us. And yet, this is exactly the first reflex that many European countries had. This simply makes no sense. Because there is not one single Member State that can meet its own needs when it comes to vital medical supplies and equipment. Not one,' stated the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. A call for the abolition of internal borders was voiced by one of the Schengen Agreement's founding members: '*We need solidarity more than ever, and the rules of the Schengen area provide the framework for cooperation which will enable us to face this unprecedented challenge together. Therefore, I call upon all to restore Schengen without delay,*' noted Luxembourg's Foreign and European Affairs Minister Jean Asselborn in a statement released to mark the 25th anniversary of the entry into force of the Schengen Agreement.

The removal of internal borders imposed by EU member states and the restoration of the Schengen Area are undoubtedly preconditions for economic growth, especially when one considers the pandemic's future economic impact on Europe. From a political point of view, co-ordination and co-operation are fundamental to a united and solidary Europe whose citizens and partners such as Georgia believe in the future of the common European idea, and in which, as the Georgian poet and writer Vaja Pshavela once said, *'every true patriot is a cosmopolitan and every reasonable cosmopolitan is a patriot'*. Only unity can counter anti-European and pseudo-patriotic populist sentiments. As for Georgia, it is important that the country continue to strengthen its close and consistent co-operation with the European Union in order to minimize the threat of illegal migration related to visa liberalization.

Last but not least, the extraordinary situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic puts on the agenda not so much the issue of de-globalization as the need for more timely and co-ordinated cooperation between European states at Union level as well as between various European and international institutions. It is of course nothing new to argue that every crisis must be turned into an opportunity, but given the ongoing search for a stronger and more sovereign Europe, the current pandemic is indeed

pushing Europe towards closer unity—a precondition for becoming a stronger global player on the international stage. Such *Europe Without borders,* with its geographical sense affiliated to the Schengen area or philosophical sense - the European Union being an example for all other human beings, it is only possible to deal with crisis situations. *'I have always believed that Europe would be built through crises, and that it would be the sum of their solutions.' /// 'When you are caught in the storm, you must push on and above all never change direction. It's the only way to get through it.'* - wrote Jean Monnet in his memoirs.