

Papers please

Inside Europe, border checks are creeping back

Voters and politicians are worried about unauthorised migrants



Illustration: Nishant Choksi

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LOBITH, NEAR where the river Rhine enters the Netherlands, has been a border town ever since northern Europe has had borders. Buried nearby lie the remains of a Roman camp that in the first century AD guarded the *limes*, the fortified line protecting the empire from Germanic tribes. In 1672 Louis XIV of France crossed the Rhine here with an invading army, launching the “year of disaster” that ended the Dutch Golden Age. Today the Dutch-German border runs along a quiet street of villas east of town. Barges ply the river; on the dyke-top cycling path, you notice that you have switched countries only when the signs acquire umlauts.

The border’s near-invisibility is a product of the 1985 Schengen agreement, which waives passport checks between 29 European countries, 25 of them members of the EU. Lately, with voters antsy about irregular migration, such carefree circulation makes governments nervous. Friedrich Merz, a conservative who is likely to become Germany’s chancellor after next month’s election, now says (implausibly) that he will introduce permanent controls on the country’s Schengen borders on his first day in office in order to reduce illegal crossings. His proposals have [caused uproar in Germany](#).

But many governments, including Germany’s, have invoked a Schengen emergency clause that lets them resume border checks for up to six months at a time. The Netherlands began sporadic inspections at land crossings on December 9th, with much fanfare. Marjolein Faber, the immigration minister in the new hard-right-led Dutch government, said they were meant to stop an “out-of-control” influx of asylum-seekers. (In fact fewer arrived in the country last year than in 2022 or 2023, and far fewer than during the crisis of 2015.)

At Lobith, however, the border checks are nowhere to be seen. The Netherlands has 840 land crossings, but its border police can spare only 50 officers for the new inspections. In the first week they reportedly turned back just ten people. Border police complain they are wasting time needed for more important operations based on concrete intelligence. Opposition parties say Ms Faber’s roadblocks are nothing but symbolic politics. The head of Germany’s federal police union has called Mr Merz’s proposals “not feasible”.

Ten countries currently have controls at Schengen’s internal borders, but there is usually not much to them. Permanent border gates are not being reintroduced; the checks are mobile and temporary. “They don’t come close to what used to exist before Schengen. Countries don’t have the staff for that,” says Hanne Beirens of the Migration Policy Institute, a think-tank in Brussels. Germany introduced new “emergency” controls in September, after a rejected asylum-seeker murdered three people. Its checkpoint on the A1 highway at the Dutch border has caused frequent traffic jams. But many drivers have simply switched to the smaller N35,

where the roadblocks are rare. The police say the new checks are bringing results, though figures are inconclusive; 11,675 people were turned away between the introduction of the new checks and the end of 2024, about the same as in 2023.

In some countries, the announcement of “temporary” checks has become a ritual repeated every six months. France renewed its border controls in October, having previously invoked them over fears of terrorism during the Paris Olympics; indeed, they have been in force in some form since terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015. Austria has had one version or another in place since Europe’s migrant crisis that same year. Yet motorists driving from Brussels to Lille, or from Prague to Linz, are very unlikely to see any sign of them.

For the transport industry, the new border measures are nonetheless a reason to worry—especially in the Netherlands, whose economy relies on freight coming through Rotterdam, Europe’s biggest port. TLN, the Dutch transport-industry organisation, says that when lorry drivers encounter a German border check, it typically costs them between ten and 30 minutes. The delay is manageable, but can lead to missed connections or push a driver over the legal drive-time limit, forcing them to take a rest. (Lorries in the EU must carry a tachograph, a device that monitors how long the driver has gone without a break.)

There have been few estimates of the damage that would be caused by reintroducing controls wholesale. A 2016 study put the cost of a complete two-year suspension of Schengen at between €25bn and €50bn (then \$28bn-55bn), but the current measures are tiny in comparison. Freight companies say the costs of the border controls are not yet worth calculating.

Some officials at the European Commission see these temporary border controls as relatively harmless political gestures by national governments. They signal to voters that national governments are taking irregular migration seriously. But the big risk from the growing hostility towards asylum seekers may be not to the free flow of goods, but to the new Pact on Migration and Asylum, which countries are supposed to start implementing in 2026. The pact involves beefing up the forces guarding the EU’s external borders, and sharing the burden of refugees: northern member states are required either to accept some asylum-seekers from southern ones, or to pay fees.

The hope is that tougher enforcement at external borders (such as the Greek-Turkish one) will cut irregular migration numbers so much that member states will happily once again scrap their own checks at internal borders. But the same political forces that lead governments to stage photo-ops at roadblocks seem likely to also threaten the migration pact. Austria, an avid exploiter of temporary border controls, looks set to get a new hard-right chancellor, Herbert Kickl, who has vowed not to comply with the agreement.

It would be a shame if politicians pandering to voters’ concerns with showy national border checks were to end up helping to undermine a more effective European-level solution. But some governments may not be able to resist the pressure. Others are determined to bring border controls back. TLN spent months trying to persuade the Dutch government to forgo them. “We told them, don’t do it. It’s going to cause economic damage,” says Lars Walder, the group’s spokesperson. The controls went ahead anyway. ■