

Germany's solidarity

dubious

EU

Tensions between Germany on the one hand, and France and Italy on the other, have increased since Berlin unilaterally closed Germany's borders earlier this month, thereby annulling the Schengen Agreement. The fact that the EU countries hardest hit by COVID-19 – Italy Spain and France – are also the countries most deeply indebted could potentially lead to the disintegration of the EU.

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The German government's unilateral closure of the country's borders has provoked serious resentment in France. In a televised statement, President Emmanuel Macron criticised border closures within the EU and insisted that any such decisions should be made "at EU level." There is considerable anger at the Élysée Palace that Germany closed its borders without consultation.

Germany also unilaterally reinforced its controls at its French borders. Tobias Hans, Prime Minister of the German state of Saarland, called on French commuters not to continue to travel to workplaces in Germany. There are exceptions in place for workers classified in Germany as "system relevant", such as doctors and nursing staff.

The authorities in France were caught off guard by the border controls. "I was informed of this by my own police officers," protested Josiane Chevalier, Prefect of the Grand Est, the affected region of France. The measures were taken, she insisted, "without any consultation."

Anger in Paris was further exacerbated by the fact that Berlin's Robert Koch Institute summarily declared France's entire Grand Est region a "risk area", thereby justifying the extensive border closures. In fact, more than 60 percent of Grand Est's COVID-19 cases were diagnosed in France's Haut Rhin Department; all of the nine other departments in Grand Est were significantly less infected. The Robert Koch Institute has also been criticised for publishing statistics on COVID-19 infections and death tolls in Germany that are out of date, and clearly underestimated – meaning embellished.

EU Backing for Germany

Under President Ursula von der Leyen, Berlin has the backing of the EU Commission on its border closures. In principle, the commission takes its obligatory position against closing the borders due to it violating the Schengen Agreements. However, von der Leyen's spokesperson, Eric Mamer, was quoted as saying that in practice Brussels must choose between fighting border closures, or fighting to improve the situation; and faced with these options, the Commission President chooses the latter.

Accordingly, the guidelines that have now been drawn up in Brussels stipulate that border closures are permitted in an "extraordinarily critical situation." According to observers, this formulation covers Germany's border closures, because it prohibits entry from particular risk areas. However, it is "questionable" whether the Czech Republic and Denmark – both of which have also closed their borders – are covered by these new guidelines, and Poland, Hungary, and Lithuania "cannot".

"Only Rhetoric Remains"

Resentment is growing not only in France, but in Italy as well. The left-liberal Italian daily, *La Repubblica* noted that it is "not insignificant" that the decision to close the

borders was taken in Berlin, the “hub of the economic and institutional architecture on which the Union is based.”

La Repubblica, unlike Italy’s right-wing or the milieu around the 5 Star movement, is known to consistently take pro-EU positions. The paper criticised Berlin for unilaterally annulling the Schengen Agreement by “pursuing a national logic” rather than discussing “with the partners” as Macron had demanded. Thus, “in just a few weeks, the virus has swept away the illusions” about the EU. All this is happening while relief supplies are arriving in Italy not from “mistrustful European friends”, but from China. “The virus has exposed the hypocrisy; all that remains is the rhetoric,” lamented the paper.

“A Powerful Centrifugal Force”

An expert at Washington’s American Enterprise Institute reminds us that besides political tensions such as Germany’s border closure, the EU has been beset by economic tensions since at least the major crises of 2007 and 2008. Dalibor Rohac notes that the three countries hit hardest by the pandemic – Italy, Spain and France – are also the countries with the least amount of financial headroom at their disposal. Currently Italy’s debts are at 134 percent of its GDP, while Spain and France’s are approaching 100 percent.

The human toll exacted by the pandemic, as well as the feeling – justified or not – “that the European institutions are not helping” could very well “develop into a powerful centrifugal force,” suggests Rohac. The EU’s leaders are confronted with the choice of “either courageously coming to the aid of the periphery, or the periphery will help itself, as best it can – even at the price of disbanding the eurozone and the EU.”