

Policy Brief 3

The Digital Publics of #Schengen and #Eurozone During the Coronavirus Crisis

Executive Summary

The pandemic in Europe and the outbreak of the coronavirus paved the way to abrupt and extensive border closures in the Schengen zone. More generally, it hindered the solidarity essence of the EU integration. The Schengen zone had temporary border closures in the past, in particular in 2015, amidst the sudden increase in the number of irregular migrant arrivals to Europe. However, at the face of the coronavirus health crisis almost all Schengen states introduced border controls starting with early March 2020. The border closures also implied states' intervention with the transportation and expropriation of healthcare products across their borders. Furthermore, some EU states banned foreigners, including the citizens of other EU states from entry. This put the solidarity essence of EU integration in further peril. While the RESPOND Project WP6 team has worked on how the EU politicians consider the future of EU integration in view of external migration and their emerging conflicting conceptualisations of Europeanisation, the border closure within the Schengen zone brought forward yet another conflict to do with Europeanisation involving free movement of EU citizens and European solidarity.

In order to understand the repercussions around internal border closures and travel controls within the Schengen zone, and in particular how some EU publics see the internal mobility in view of the coronavirus crisis and Europeanisation, the WP6 team primarily collected tweets with #Schengen hashtag from France, Italy, Hungary, Germany, and Romania. The selected countries reflect the linguistic ability of the WP6 team members based at Glasgow Caledonian University. We have also harnessed tweets with hashtags of #border, in French #frontiere, in Hungarian #hatar, and in Italian #confini and #frontera. In an attempt to explore solidarity a bit further, we also followed the #Eurozone hashtag. The social media data analysis includes a period from 10th March 2020 to 10th May 2020. The former date corresponds with when Austria closed its Schengen border with North Italy. While we collected tweets from France, Italy, Germany, Hungary and Romania, the bulk of the tweets with #Schengen were from France and Italy. In total, this policy brief reflects a dataset of around 8000 tweets collected with the abovementioned hashtags in the designated time period.

For our analysis, we interpreted the texts of the tweets to have a grasp of how some European publics felt about the Schengen border closure and their eventual opening – a very essential element of Europeanisation considering the mobility of EU citizens and the smooth operation of the Single Market. We introduce a brief summary of our observations below from tweets in Italian and French language following #Schengen, as the tweets in these languages were the predominant tweets of the whole dataset. The tweets in other languages did not present a consistent viewpoint about the publics in these countries.

- While the closure of internal borders of the Schengen area did not receive much comment in French and Hungarian language tweets, there is an extensive and outspoken resentment against the removal of planned border controls for the summer of 2020, particularly in French language tweets.

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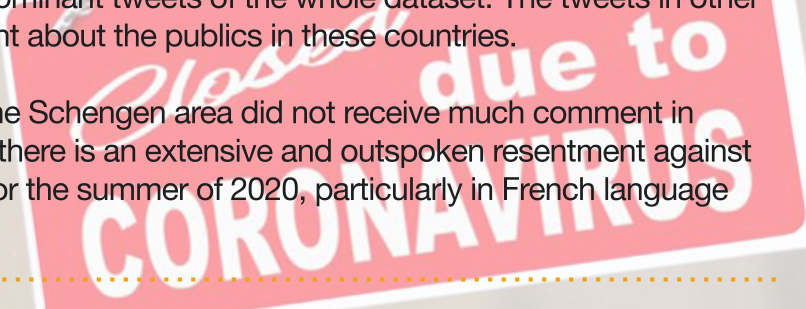
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RESPOND is a Horizon 2020 project which aims at studying the multilevel governance of migration in Europe and beyond.

This policy brief is based on analysis of reports, political speeches, legal documents and interviews.



- The majority of tweets in French, reaching 90%, consider the Schengen mobility a problem of Europeanisation and identify Schengen as an “infectious zone”.
- Considering tweets in Italian, the closure of Schengen borders received more attention at the outset of the corona virus crisis. The majority of twitter users viewed overturning the Schengen mobility yet another failed element of the EU project alongside the Eurozone.
- ‘Open borders’ became a contentious issue to do with the EU integration after 2015. The coronavirus crisis brought further criticism from some European publics to it.
- However, we also note that twitter analysis is only a way to understand how certain themes are represented, but it is not always representative.

Evidence and Analysis

The project of European integration has suffered from a succession of shocks, challenging its underpinning values and questioning the very possibility of cosmopolitan order. The coronavirus crisis is posing a crucial challenge to the main pillar of EU integration, that is, solidarity among the EU member states. To date, the chief beneficiaries of challenges to EU integration have been the anti-immigration parties and movements that form the continent’s counterpart to the global rise of illiberal and authoritarian forces. During the course of the WP6, RESPOND project partners have studied how political leaders, including the maverick populists, have framed external migration to put their sway on the future course of EU integration. We found that while leaders like Orbán, Salvini and others self-consciously spar with the EU establishment, there is growing evidence that these discourses are reshaping mainstream narratives that affect even the EU’s supranational structures. Although the EU remains rhetorically committed to openness and humanitarianism, “fortress Europe” initiatives have hardened under van der Leyen Commission, and the Commission’s “European way of life” agenda.

Yet, while the emphasis thus far has been on the issue of external migration, the coronavirus crisis has posed a further challenge to the EU integration, hitting its main pillars of solidarity, including mobility of its citizens within the Schengen travel zone. During the second week of March 2020, there were imminent border closures with Denmark, Poland, Slovakia, and Austria being the first Schengen states to impose them. In order to understand how some European publics reacted to the impediment of such a major asset of EU integration, that is, free circulation of people, the RESPOND WP6 team carried out an exploratory analysis of the twitter feed following #Schengen. While what we present below is not truly representative, given the possible inconsistencies regarding who uses Twitter and why these users employ it across the member states, we still suggest that our analysis could be a crucial way to understand how some publics approach the Schengen mobility in view of the coronavirus crisis. Throughout this brief, we also reinstate the importance of understanding micro-debates in everyday sites to have a foresight on the course of Europeanisation and migration.

Evidence:

The evidence for this analysis relies on tweets, extracted from Twitter’s Advanced Search utilising Python programming language between March 10 and May 10, 2020 with the GetOldTweets3 library (<https://pypi.org/project/GetOldTweets3/>). Figure 1 presents how the data was collected. This extraction was then repeated to filter specific countries using the geocode and distances. Historical tweets normally do not provide location information automatically. However, every tweet on Twitter has geo coordinate information in the public API, therefore, this process helped us identify which tweets were tweeted from the specific countries (see Figure II).

Figure 1 Code snippet of the tweet extraction

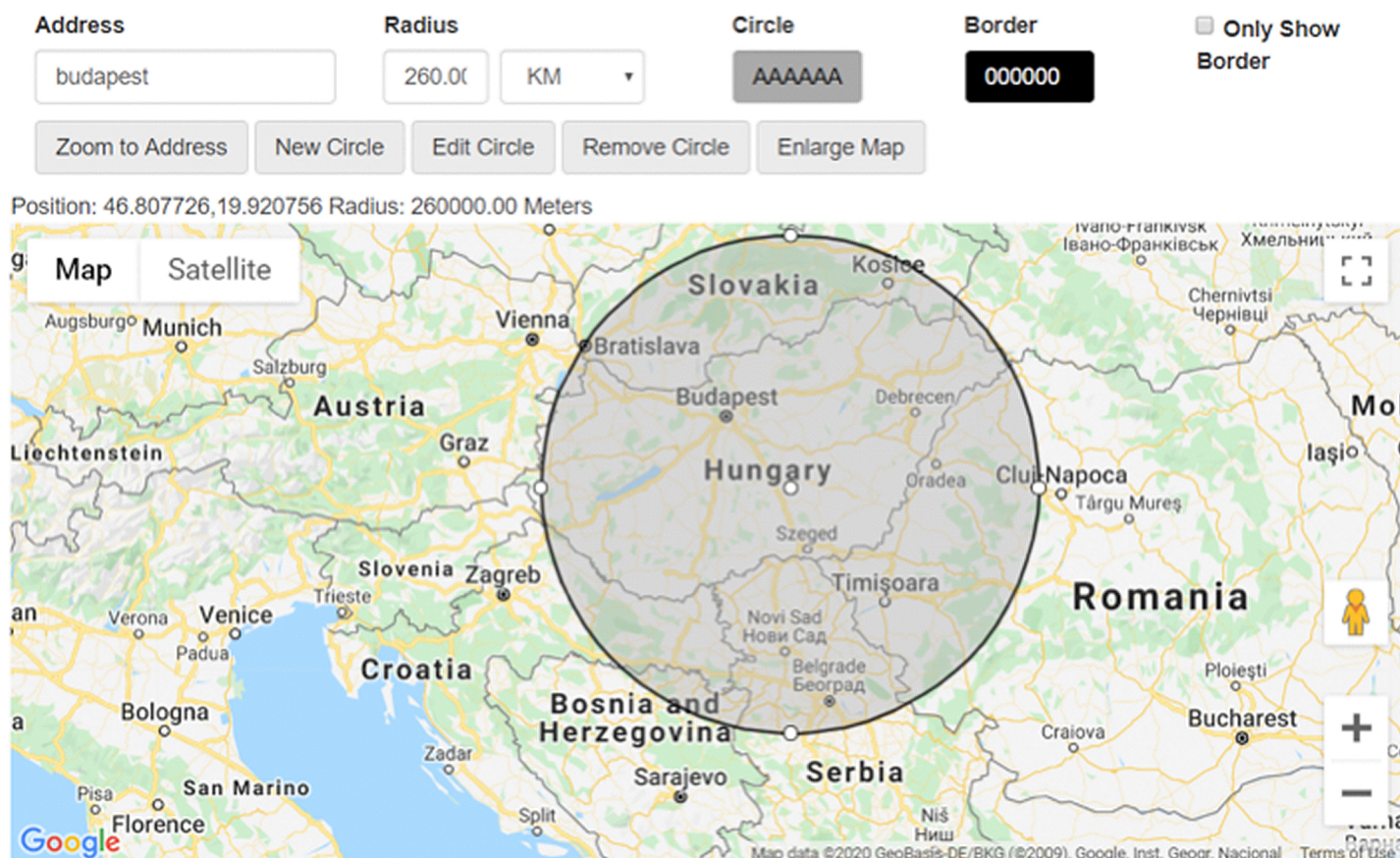
```
keyword = "#schengen"

oldest_date= "2020-03-10"
newest_date= "2020-05-10"
number_tweets = 50000 #max number of tweets that will be returned (may be lower depending on availability)
geocode = 46.807726,19.920756"
km = "260km"

#get old tweets
tweet_criteria = got.manager.TweetCriteria().setQuerySearch(keyword)\
    .setSince(oldest_date)\
    .setUntil(newest_date)\
    .setMaxTweets(number_tweets)\
    .setNear(geocode).setWithin(km)
```


Figure II: The representation of the geocode process

Draw a circle - Create a circle on a google map using a point and a radius



Analysis:

We come across a few frames in the tweets i.e. disbelief about the removal of border controls and the failure of national government in France, and the failure of EU and Europeanists in Italy. There is a predominant inclination to frame the political decision to remove Schengen border controls with disbelief. We take this as a reflection of how the coronavirus has suddenly become the new normal in Europeans' lives, despite their experience with the Schengen internal mobility for a much longer period. Out of the 8,000 tweets analysed, we are quoting some crucial tweets below, and we take their discourse reflective of some emerging public opinion considering how the coronavirus crisis has affected the Schengen cooperation – an essential element of Europeanisation.

So access forbidden to beaches, restaurants, bars, etc. but the whole #Schengen area can enter as desired to #France, it is because they have access to # Hydroxychloroquine that YOU prohibit in France so that they can enter as they want?#LREM #Macron #Criminels

No #Quarantine for anyone from the #EU, the #Schengen area or the UK. But 100km max for us. Here we touch the bottom!!! #COVID—19 #COVID19 #ConfinementJour49

But no, open them for the foreigners of #Schengen! Only you [the French] will be kept on a leash, 100km away from work! And how do we accept that?

However, the French cannot go to the countries concerned or even more than 100 km from their home anyway. In this crisis, the only borders that the French government refused to close until the end were the borders of France. #Schengen

#Schengen Macron's hatred of his country has no historical precedent. There were agitated, incompetent, ambiguous, but never unpatriotic heads of state.

But the good news, the shareholders are always just as rich if not + and will now be able to exploit us without RTT [short-working arrangements], without holidays, without 35 hours with 2/3 deaths in morale and the fear of dying and especially withholding tax #COVID—19 #Schengen #ConfinementJour49

No #free masks, no #quarantine for visitors to the #Schengen area, #scanning in companies, would #COVID-19 be new sword of [Minister of Labour] #MurielPenicaud ??

Do not panic ... We will soon have the Italians, the Spanish, the English and so on [Government Spokeswoman] @SibethNdiaye your rates will go up again !!! And we will remain confined like cons ... # Deconfinement # 11May #quarantaine #Schengen#déconfinement

This government is managing this #COVID — 19 health crisis with proven amateurism. So no quarantine for people coming from the #Schengen area but on the other hand the French should not exceed 100 km! #Macron and #Philippe the DIY enthusiasts!

The # Covid_19 has become a political instrument for @EmmanuelMacron which will restrict our freedoms, stifle France, promote Schengen to achieve its supreme goal: to become the first President of Schengen Europe.

The Freedom of movement is not the freedom to do anything! #Schengen

"Quarantine for those arriving from abroad, except from #Schengen: this European fanaticism has NO SENSE!" The government imposes [controls] on the French from the border zones, but refuses controls at the national borders ... Where is the LOGIC ?! "#Les4V

Snap of the # Monday: So no confinement for #migrants no confinement in # cities, arrangements for the #ramadan and now no #quarantine for people in the #Schengen area! We are # French fuck you! @EmmanuelMacron

The only indisputable success of Mr. Macron will be to have succeeded, in addition to having ruined the economy, to coerce the French, to prevent them from demonstrating, to express themselves, to move or even to treat themselves. For #Schengen and the rest he applies ultra-liberalism.

@EmmanuelMacron needs more dead people so he opens the borders of Schengen, migrants here we go again, and microbes from all countries welcome, to kill the French, go go, but we close restaurants, cinemas, shows.

Lack of consistency at the European level and especially at the French executive level which wants to make Schengen its natural border at all costs while the EU does not have authority over the health policy of the states!

Someone will then explain to me what needs to be regularized in Poles and Romanians who move a Schengen area to work. Wasn't it that they wanted to regularize the industrial reserve army that arrived with the boats? [the irregular migrants that arrived at Italy] No?

The tweets below are collected from March 2020 from Italy.

Do we want to say that without the EU, Schengen and globalization, Covid19 would not have existed in Italy?

Our who? That your friend Prodi and the predecessors tricked us into the [EU]. "YOU WILL WORK ONE DAY LESS AS IF WE WORKED ONE DAY MORE." And all the pigs later approved such as the transfer of sovereignty, Schengen etc. etc.

OK, I am happy with the plans: If to "contain a virus" that YOU brought to Italy because you defined "jackals and racists" who asked for quarantine for those returning from China, Schengen suspension in order to better control who entered and additional spending.

Fortunately, there is a positive thing. With the pandemic, Schengen Maastricht and solidarity between states have collapsed. This Europe is reduced to an Erdogan doormat. Immediately take an advantage of this to free us from stepmothers. Salvini Meloni after the danger get busy with ITALEXIT

Schengen finished, myth of the ECB finished, stability pact finished, 3% deficit limit, finished. To help itself, the great Europe turns itself off, each for itself and God for all. Europeanists are also understanding this. The EU is among the first victims of the virus.

It is interesting to note that the timing of the French and Italian tweets are so different with each other. Some French publics did not use twitter to express any affect with the Schengen border closure and turned to twitter to express anger with the prospective removal of internal border controls. In contrast, some Italian twitter publics were expressive about border closures considering it as yet another element of the European project falling into pieces. This also means the French tweets are mostly from May 2020, while the Italian tweets are dated from the earlier days of the crisis in March 2020.

Discussion, conclusions and recommendations:

The analysis above is not representative of the EU publics' opinion of the Schengen closure and its prospective opening. Based on our sentiment analysis of the tweets, it is safe to say that our dataset represents a dominant negative tone over the Schengen as an element of European integration. The negative attitude is so prevalent that we came across only a handful positive tweets over Schengen and its mobility element. An alternative interpretation can point out that those with negative opinions are those that do not use Schengen for cross-border work, shopping, and similar activities, but merely for holidays. However, as we show above, we gathered tweets to capture a comprehensive geographical area using the geocode function. This implies that if there were positive reactions over the removal of border controls, we would have captured them. Their absence can show either the weakness of this opinion or the inactivity of pro-Schengen publics on Twitter. This is why we argue that our findings are not fully representative, but still represent an important and prevalent conviction. For this reason, our analysis can be valuable for further research studying the impact of the last crisis of Covid-19 on the Europeanization discourses.

Another finding is related to how embedded national politics feed into some publics' reflections on the EU. The Respond WP6 partners have delved deeper in this issue by looking at migration narratives of European politicians in view of their opinions on the future course of European integration in creating their own audiences. Yet, this policy brief presented us with a possibility to explore how some publics approached an essential element of Europeanisation, and used their criticism of pro-European national politicians in France and Italy in order to smear the European project. This is a bottom-up process that adversely reflects on the potential internal mobility to wage an impact on the future course of EU integration. Given their negative stance over what should otherwise have been a major advantage of the European integration, that is, internal mobility within the Schengen area, we can thereby see how the coronavirus crisis has infected the most essential pillars of EU integration as well.

Based on these findings, the RESPOND team offers the following recommendations as way of this policy brief.

1. There is an urgent need to start a public campaign in Europe to present that the Coronavirus infection rates across the EU states are equivalent, and hence removing border controls should not unleash abrupt new infection waves due to cross-border mobility.
2. The EU publics, in particular those from the Southern countries affected more adversely by coronavirus, seemed to have turned against the fellow Europeans due to the lack of solidarity that they have experienced at the outset of the crisis. For some Italian publics, this is yet another sign that the Northern EU states do not care about them. The biggest challenge for the EU right now is to provide a renewed feeling of solidarity. There are many other ways of expressing solidarity along with financial guarantees. There is then a need to address solidarity in a more affective way both aesthetically and discursively. Emotionally resonant slogans and visual depictions of solidarity are needed rather than long and verbose political declarations.
3. Thus far, there seems to be an inclination among the Schengen zone states to act unilaterally in removing internal border controls namely the safe travel zones such as the Baltic bubble across Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia. The EU Commission needs to interfere with these superficial creations that may become latent, affecting people's mental horizons for the years to come with negative connotations over mobility within the Schengen zone. This would be detrimental towards the Single Market since a major element of it is free circulation of people and labour within the EU. In order not to foster superficial healthy versus unhealthy zones in European public philosophies, any movement by the member states towards creating "bubbles" need to be prevented from the outset.

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Project Identity

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