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Germany's Schengen abdication — a structural policy failure not a quick fix

Germany's [latest move to reinstate border controls](#) is more than just a temporary fix; it is a sign of deeper cracks within the country's migration policy.

Since the Ventimiglia crisis in 2011, internal border controls in the Schengen zone have been an increasingly common tool to address migration pressures.

Germany, as the most frequently-impacted member state, has often resorted to EU safeguard clauses to manage the flow of people. However, what sets this latest decision apart is not the act itself but its magnitude in the absence of an immediate border crisis. This time, it reveals a more structural issue within Germany's approach to integration and migration. If left unaddressed, this policy shift could put the entire European project at risk.

Border control reinstatements have become a familiar pattern in the Schengen zone over the last decade. The [Ventimiglia crisis](#) of April 2011 marked the beginning of a series of temporary border control reinstatements within the EU, with Germany often at the forefront.

This approach became most visible during the 2015 refugee crisis, when Germany, facing exceptional migration pressure, utilised safeguard clauses within EU law to reintroduce checks at its borders. Since then, sporadic controls have persisted, as seen in Germany's recent actions to curb irregular migration on its borders with Switzerland and Poland.

Germany has often leaned on EU safeguard clauses to control the movement of people, illustrating the weight put on the country by migration management in the EU framework. In recent years, border

checks between Germany and its neighbouring countries, like Austria, Poland, and Switzerland, have been frequently reinstated to manage the influx of asylum seekers.

These moves are legal under the Schengen Border Code, which permits temporary border controls in the event of a serious threat to public order or internal security. Yet, Germany's new reliance on these clauses indicates a deeper issue.

While these controls were initially justified by immediate crises, they now appear to be an increasingly entrenched element of Germany's approach to migration, raising concerns about the long-term future of open borders within the Schengen zone.

With the present border control announcement, the question arises: Is Germany truly dealing with an imminent security threat, or is this a sign of its failure to develop a coherent and effective integration strategy?

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Unlike previous instances, the current reinstatement of border controls does not result from exceptional pressure, such as the 2015 refugee crisis.

Instead, it signals structural issues within Germany's integration policies. Over the past decade, Germany has implemented expensive integration programmes aimed at enhancing immigrants' employability.

These programmes, while well-intentioned, have led to long processing delays and left many immigrants in a state of limbo. A vivid example of this alienation is portrayed in the [2022 movie "The Swimmers" by Sally El-Hosaini](#), highlighting the exhausting wait times and idleness forced upon asylum seekers.

These expansive integration programmes stem partly from recent German

labour market reforms, including the introduction of a national minimum wage in January 2015. These reforms made it harder to integrate low-skilled newcomers, resulting in both a financial burden for taxpayers and increased public resentment.

As cases of violence involving immigrants become more mediatised, Germany's move to close its borders appears more a reaction to internal policy failures than an immediate security crisis.

Germany's recent border control decision signifies a worrying shift towards an insulated approach that could undermine the European project.

Historically, Germany has championed open borders, driving Schengen's establishment in the 1980s and 1990s. Its current stance, however, could suggest a retreat from this legacy, endangering the core principles of European integration.

If Germany – Europe's economic powerhouse and Schengen's key architect – begins to normalise border checks, other EU states will follow suit, threatening the zone's survival.

Labour market reforms

While this inward turn is a direct outcome of internal German policies, the ripple effect of these internal decisions reaches beyond Germany's borders, potentially disrupting the European single market and straining intra-EU relationships. Europe now risks fragmentation, with each country pursuing its own version of control, eroding the foundation of free movement.

Germany's move to restore border controls is less a response to an immediate crisis than a symptom of deeper policy failures.

The root cause lies in Germany's labour market reforms, which have inadvertently hampered the inclusion of newcomers and led to expansive new programmes to integrate the latter. An effective response would

require Germany to once again liberalise its labour market, as it successfully did in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Those reforms absorbed post-reunification unemployment and restored Germany's economic clout, enabling it to hold Europe together in the ensuing decades.

German policymakers must recognise that a more insulated approach threatens not only national interests but also the broader European project.

Reinvigorating labour market flexibility could alleviate migration pressures, making restrictive border controls unnecessary. The future of European integration hinges on Germany's ability to embrace policies that reflect its historical commitment to openness. Now is the time for Germany to return to policies that strengthen both its own economy and the entire continent.