

European integration

EESC supports Schengen

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USPA NEWS - The EESC today adopted a resolution in support of the Schengen Agreement. The representatives of European civil society are concerned about the pressure being put on the Schengen Agreement and its use as an easy scapegoat for all the shortcomings in the management of Europe's borders.

Today, EESC Civil Society representatives made a strong appeal to Europe's governments to not bow to populist pressure and fear but instead to defend the rights that Europeans have striven for over the last 30 years.

In the resolution, the Committee "recognises that recent events have revealed serious shortcomings in the management of Europe's borders and our ability to trace the movements of those who want to cause harm. These concerns must be addressed, but Schengen is not the problem and should not be used as a scapegoat. The EU institutions must avoid at all cost the piecemeal unravelling of the Schengen rules, and with it the Internal Market, which will ultimately be to the detriment of us all."

Workers, businesses and - by and large - "wider civil society will indeed pay a heavy price: 7 million EU citizens living in another EU Member State will lose some of the most practical aspects of free movement, lorries will be stuck at the border for hours on end in peak times, reunited border communities will be divided in two again, and a drop of 110 billion euros in GDP is predicted over 10 years. European integration will take two steps back if the solidarity that Schengen represents takes such a hard knock.

"If solidarity is strengthened by removing obstacles, then it is bound to be weakened when they are put back. If freedom to cross borders and free movement are the expression of an "ever closer union" between peoples, then anything that hinders that freedom points to division between peoples", said Georges Dassis, president of the EESC, commenting on the preamble of the first Schengen agreement (1985).

The Committee also stresses the need to strengthen Frontex in order to efficiently manage EU's external borders, which ultimately will benefit those refugees who really need help. "Securing borders must not mean shutting out those who need protection" states the resolution.

Statements from EESC Groups representing civil society -

Jacek Krawczyk, president of the EESC Employers' Group:

"Schengen means far more than just easy travel for the millions of European citizens. It means far more than just enormously facilitated trade for thousands of European companies. Schengen is one of the most important and most ambitious results of the great EU project. It is a symbol, an achievement that must not be squandered. European employers support Schengen and urge policy makers not to take a step backwards. Europe as we know it cannot survive without Schengen!"

Gabriele Bischoff, president of the EESC Workers' Group:

"The right of EU citizens to seek employment, to work and to exercise the right of establishment in another Member State is enshrined in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. For citizens, Schengen is something concrete. It is the key that opens the door, enabling them to put these rights into action and to positively experience the benefits of 'Europe' in their daily lives. Weakening or dismantling Schengen will further weaken the trust and support of many workers, and ultimately result in a weaker Europe."

Luca Jahier, president of the EESC Various Interests' Group:

"The symbolic, political and economic price of a return to internal borders in Europe is too high: it could rapidly disintegrate the European Union. What we need is more Europe: in the control of external borders, in internal security, in refugee crisis, and certainly not the destruction of our freedom of movement. The reintroduction of border controls would stand for the failure of European solidarity, cohesion, negotiation, compromise and understanding. So, please: Don't touch my Schengen!"

During the EESC plenary session's debate, Eva Paunova (MEP, vice-president of the European Movement), Markus Beyrer (director general of Business Europe), Luca Visentini (general secretary of ETUC), Conny Reuter (co-chair of the EESC liaison group with European civil society organisations) and Allan Päll (secretary general of the European Youth Forum), acknowledged that freedom of

movement remained one of the most tangible success of the European Union.

Speakers mentioned the convergence that Schengen and its derived rights for citizens and businesses bring to many European regions, and for the EU as a whole. The question of the management of borders is at the heart of the issue, as obviously is the question of refugees. Many supported the statement of Allan Päll that “closed borders leads to closed minds”^[2], and expressed their concerns over the “fear”^[2] that is currently driving political leaders in the European Union. Populism and nationalism was fiercely denounced and calls to political courage ahead of the European Council to defend European values were voiced.

Determined to tirelessly advocate for the benefit of freedom of movement in Europe, the EESC has launched a campaign at its plenary session today with the slogan "Free to move, Support Schengen". It is calling on civil society organisations in Member States to join the effort and raise awareness among citizens about the benefits of free movement. The EESC is actively involved in a series of discussions with the EU institutions, as well as with Member States authorities to defend this freedom.

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