

The Covid-19 pandemic has shattered the myth of a borderless Europe



The removal of border-checks and travel restrictions between EU states has been one of the most striking features of European integration. Yet as [Jaume Castan Pinos](#) and [Steven M. Radil](#) write, European governments quickly adopted tighter border controls as they sought to halt the spread of Covid-19. They argue that while national borders were once thought to be a feature of Europe's past, the pandemic has underlined just how resilient and meaningful they continue to be.

The word myth has a dual meaning, both referring to a story people tell themselves to explain something about the world and to something that is widely believed as true but is actually false. And, in politics at least, both meanings can apply simultaneously. One could argue that the myth of a borderless Europe, based on the idea that borders have become obsolete as a result of [European integration](#), may have been revealed by the current pandemic to be just another folktale. While the myth of a borderless Europe may have helped to justify the openness of previous border practices in the EU, the harsh reality of the Covid-19 crisis has unveiled just how resilient and meaningful Europe's national borders continue to be.

Since the end of the Cold War, [Europe](#) has been the geographical centre of the idea of a [borderless world](#). The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, economic integration, the apparent abolition of internal borders through the [Schengen Agreement](#), and the continued enlargement of the EU (at least until Brexit) have all contributed to the perception that borders were part of Europe's past, not its future. However, the EU member states' responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, which have primarily relied on the strategy of [tightening borders](#) as a core tactic to fight the virus, fundamentally clashes with the seemingly limitless mobility associated with the borderless world narrative. In short, the political responses to the pandemic have involved a swift '[rebordering](#)' which has mercilessly exposed the myth for what it is.

It is important to note that Europe is not alone and this rebordering has transcended region and ideology; all around the [world](#), borders have been enthusiastically embraced by authoritarian states, liberal democracies and hybrid regimes alike as one of the main artefacts to halt the spread of the virus. Indeed the national border has been used and abused across the globe as an instrument to 'shield' the state and its citizens from a virus that is, in many cases, portrayed as a [foreign invader](#). However, the myth-busting is most potent in Europe as European states, including EU members, have been at the forefront of this border revival. This is strikingly paradoxical given the fact that the EU had tried, until very recently, to draw [legitimacy](#) by highlighting the idea of a borderless Europe.

The rapid and uncoordinated closure of national European borders, which began in mid-March 2020, has critically jeopardised the '[crown jewel of the EU](#)': the Schengen Agreement which has allowed the unconstrained mobility of European citizens around the Schengen area. The exceptional [Schengen prerogative](#) which 'provides Member States with the capability of temporarily reintroducing border controls' is no longer exceptional and seems to have become the new norm. During the Covid-19 pandemic crisis, the majority of Schengen states have partially or totally sealed their land, sea and air borders with the outside world, including to their Schengen/EU partners. Many national border restrictions are still in place, three months after they were first introduced. This not-so-exceptional exception has led some, like the President of the Veneto region Luca Zaia, to dramatically claim that '[Schengen no longer exists](#)'. In parallel, external EU borders have also become impermeable following restrictions to [non-EU nationals](#). Even if these border restrictions are eventually lifted, the willingness to *de facto* suspend the Schengen Agreement has created a political precedent and, most importantly, shown that the idea of a borderless politics is no longer an inescapable destiny for Europe.



A barrier at the border between Switzerland and France, Credit: [Nicolas Nova](#) (CC BY-NC 2.0)

The rebordering response to Covid-19 is not the only evidence of a border revival in Europe. National borders have increasingly operated as barriers to the movement of people within the EU over the past few years, as illustrated during the 2015-16 'refugee crisis' in Europe or, more recently, when migrants and refugees became stranded at the [Greek/Turkish border](#). Just as with the pandemic, the political response to migrant/refugee-related crises has been in the direction of rebordering. And the visible legacy of these policies has been the [fortification of land borders](#) using [barbed wire fencing](#) or concrete walls and the reintroduction of securitised checkpoints. In other words, even before the pandemic, the myth of a borderless Europe was becoming difficult to sustain. In the post-Covid-19 era, it will likely be hopelessly shattered.

Covid-19 will have political implications that will endure past the pandemic. It is not too far-fetched to claim that one of the potential consequences will likely be a global revival in bordering practices. For once, the use – and abuse – of borders does not represent a major political cost for policymakers. In fact, in a global context of fear and uncertainty, borders may generate a (perhaps false) sense of protection, stability and most importantly legitimacy for struggling governments. After all, borders are the ultimate symbol of state power.

The EU, still reeling from the Brexit blow, has largely [disappeared from the scene](#) during the crisis, as recently admitted by the President of the EU Commission, [Ursula von der Leyen](#). In the post Covid-19 era, the EU, similarly to other polities around the world, will have a desperate need to regain legitimacy, support and trust. Resorting to borders, as powerful symbols of political order and stability, may be a tempting option. The specific problem for the EU is that the use of this strategy will pose a serious dilemma for the bloc as rebordering inevitably clashes with its (previously held) borderless myth.

The pandemic has unveiled that, far from disappearing or being an anachronistic vestige from good old Europe, national borders still matter. Europe, and the rest of the world, appear to be a *borderful* place where borders flourish. The borderless Europe, or indeed the borderless world idea, seems to be nothing short of a myth. The national responses to the Covid-19 crisis indicate that borders, national and otherwise, will continue to be a determinant factor shaping human experiences.

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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