A lack of transparency has some virtues

Be wary of plans to monitor how member states patrol their borders, writes Roderick Parkes

As in so many areas of European co-operation, the EU's passport-free travel area is suffering from a chronic lack of trust between its members. None of the Schengen zone's 26 members quite knows what the others are up to. And for once, they actually care.

A toxic cocktail of poor asylum rules in Greece, concerns about corruption in two Schengen candidates, Bulgaria and Romania, and fear of further arrivals from countries of the Arab Spring mean that governments will not ignore the weak links.

The sudden urge to monitor one another marks the end of a remarkably successful era of European co-operation: member states acting together while assiduously minding their own business.

True, to offset the lifting of border controls, the 26 have adopted a common set of rules. Yet, when checking each other's implementation, governments have tended to turn a blind eye to failings and given their partners time to improve.

That set-up is now under review. Strong, independent oversight is the order of the day. The European Commission has proposed taking over and boosting the existing supervision powers. EU security agencies would gain a stronger role in analysing members' defences.

Yet there are dissenting voices – and they come not just from politicians nervous about interference, but also from those who believe the proposals do not go nearly far enough.

Instead of seeing power shift to the spineless Commission, they

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want more robust supervision by governments themselves: the 26 should be ready to name and shame lax members, to suspend and even to expel laggards.

A good thing too, one might think. Governments have tiptoed around one another for too long – it is time that they got on with the unpleasant business of scrutinising each other.

Yet there can be such a thing as too much transparency.

The old Schengen system of trust-as-ignorance may well have lent itself to cheating and shoddy implementation. And any new system of trust-as-assurance would run on wholesome values such as scrutiny, accuracy and openness. But things are not that simple.

According to students of trust, those who champion an uncompromising diet of transparency and scrutiny are usually those who have developed the strongest sense of their own rightness and of others' inherent dishonesty. That is the only reason they put up with a system that exposes them to invasive scrutiny.

If that is so, then the control and supervision structures in such systems are motivated by a desire not to re-establish trust, but, rather, to exercise mistrust. And, robbed of any co-operative spirit, such structures cannot work: they simply make laggards feel that cheating is what is expected of them.

Schengen's current system of trust-as-ignorance may rely on all sorts of naughty principles – obfuscation, inaccuracy and untruth – but so do plenty of well-functioning societies. Polite obfuscation and minding one's own business involve a genuine desire for trust. Turning a blind eye to others' behaviour encourages everyone to keep to the spirit of the rules.

Aggressive Schengen reforms would be rather akin to rifling through the dustbins at a gentleman's club. The increased scrutiny would identify some deficiencies, but it would also put an end to co-operation.

What course of action should be taken, then, by mild-mannered Schengen states like Luxembourg or Belgium worried about lax south-eastern partners on the one hand and aggressively suspicious neighbours on the other?

The advice is simple. Governments that receive a positive Schengen evaluation should actively publicise the results. That would bring transparency in a non-invasive manner, and it would also highlight others' room for improvement.

There are many such means of putting pressure on laggards without ruining the co-operative spirit of relations in pursuit of an over-zealous for transparency. Obfuscation, inaccuracy and untruth do have some value.

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