Margaret Thatcher's fixation on national borders played a fundamental role in the making of the Schengen regime.

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*For nearly twenty years, the Schengen policy regime has guaranteed freedom of movement throughout much of the EU. **Ruben Zaiotti** reflects on former UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's opposition to Schengen: opposition which was based on a fixation on national borders and the apparent protection that they provide. He writes that in light of these criticisms, Schengen's architects designed the regime to have the flexibility to cope with political turbulence and Euroscepticism, ensuring its success.*

It is an understatement to say that Margaret Thatcher was not a fan of the Schengen border control regime, which allows for the freedom of movement between most EU member states. In her vitriolic attacks on 'Europe' as a political project, she did not spare what she believed was an unnerving and ultimately quixotic quest to dilute, and ultimately dissolve, British sovereignty, a quest concocted by naive continentals, or worse still, by faceless bureaucrats in Brussels. As she put it in her notorious 'Bruges Speech', the political manifesto of British Euro-scepticism, "it is a matter of plain common sense that we cannot totally abolish frontier controls if we are also to protect our citizens from crime and stop the movement of drugs, of terrorists and of illegal immigrants." Commonsensical are also the reasons why national borders should persist: "I did not join Europe to have free movement of terrorists, criminals, drugs, plant and animal diseases and rabies, and illegal migrants". In Thatcher's 'commonsensical world', the triad of borders, security, and state is so ingrained in our collective understanding of what border control means as to not require further explanation. Borders and security are indissolubly linked, and *national* governments (as opposed to supra-national institutions) should be in charge of this issue. From this perspective, Schengen can only be an aberration.

And yet, despite her visceral opposition to continental Europe's experimentation with territoriality, Margaret Thatcher has played a fundamental role in the making of Schengen as we know it today. The Iron Lady's trenchant critiques have set the terms – and the tone – of the debate about this eminently political project. Schengen supporters (be it in Brussels or in European capitals) have had to come to terms, adapt and respond to the 'nationalist backlash' that she so powerfully and persuasively unleashed. The former British prime minister also embodied one of the major obstacles (yet to be fully overcome) which hinders the full realization of a post-national vision of territoriality in Europe, namely the persistence among European policy-makers and the population at large of what I call 'border fixation'.

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Despite claims that traditional territorial boundaries are 'passé', borders have not lost their appeal. For some commentators, this fixation is baseless. First of all, advocates of hard borders tend to exaggerate the demand for them. Uncontrollable mass movements of population across frontiers are, after all, rare events. Moreover, borders cannot (and arguably never did) effectively achieve one of the main goals they were established for, namely, preventing unwanted entries into a territory. These arguments are well founded, but they do not take into consideration that the appeal of borders does not stem (or at least not solely) from their 'material' functions; instead, it is based on the powerful psychological need for order and stability in a community.

The leap required to go beyond this border fixation would therefore entail the embracing of a new type of post-territorial governance where this need is addressed in a different fashion. Europe is not new to far-reaching and 'unimaginable' transformations. The Old Continent is a constant work in progress, an open-ended experiment that has been re-adjusted in light of new events or circumstances in the past. Yet, given the current gloomy and inward looking political climate, the conditions to overcome the long-lasting fascination with borders do not seem ripe. And even if they were, we should nonetheless heed to Margaret Thatcher's admonition about the Jacobin (radical and hyper-rationalist) tendencies that she so strongly despised in the European project:

> *"…look at the architecture of the last fifty years — look, in particular, at the architecture that went beyond the modern to the futuristic. It was certainly a very dramatic architecture but the one thing it no longer expresses is the Future. What it expresses is yesterday's vision of the future. C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la politique."*

Schengen's 'architects' seem to have listened to Thatcher's warning about Europe's institutional hubris. One of the policy regime's signature traits is in fact its flexible and pragmatic design, which has allowed it to withstand turbulent times, wobbly political will and recurrent bouts of skepticism during its three decade long history. The Iron Lady would probably balk at the idea, but helping Schengen thrive might well be part of her vast political legacy.

A version of this article first appeared on the Schengenalia blog.

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