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#### COVER NOTE

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From: Secretary-General of the European Commission, signed by Ms Martine DEPREZ, Director

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To: Ms Thérèse BLANCHET, Secretary-General of the Council of the European Union

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Subject: COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL on EU visa policy strategy

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Delegations will find attached document COM(2026) 43 final.

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Brussels, 29.1.2026  
COM(2026) 43 final

**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN  
PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL**

**on EU visa policy strategy**

## **I. EU VISA STRATEGY: A CONNECTED, SECURE AND STRONG EUROPE**

The EU's visa policy reflects the Union's interests and values. It is far more than a set of rules and administrative procedures: it is a bridge that connects Europe to global opportunities. In an age defined by growing mobility, regional instability, and geopolitical competition, the way we manage access to Europe is a strategic choice. The EU's visa policy must reflect the Europe we want: firmly committed to the **security of our citizens** and the **integrity of our external borders yet open and contributing to our prosperity**.

A credible visa policy is essential to maintaining Europe's **security**<sup>1</sup>. The integrity of the Schengen area, one of our most tangible achievements, depends on robust border management and consistent application of common rules. The visa system is Europe's first line of security screening, helping to prevent illegal migration, organised crime, and terrorism. New technologies, information-sharing, and interoperability between EU databases will make our visa system smarter and more resilient. But security also relies on maintaining trustworthy relations with partner countries, ensuring the respect of and alignment with European rules. A secure visa policy must strengthen that trust and safeguard the freedom of movement that lies at the heart of the Union.

Visa policy must also be a driver of Europe's **economic growth and competitiveness**. Today, talent, innovative ideas, and investments are drawn to regions with well-developed, reliable, and efficient visa systems. Europe must remain the destination of choice for: tourists and businesspeople, students and researchers, artists and cultural professionals, athletes, entrepreneurs and skilled professionals, who contribute to our economies and societies. Digital visa procedures, faster decision-making, and more efficient visa processes can make travel to Europe as seamless as it is secure. Modernising the visa system is a strategic investment in Europe's economic strength and global attractiveness.

Europe's visa policy is also a projection of **partnership and influence**. How we open or restrict access sends a clear signal to the world about Europe's values and strategic interests. In an increasingly competitive and volatile world, a clear visa policy gives Europe real leverage. It is a powerful tool that reinforces our global standing and advances our interests abroad.

This **first-ever EU visa strategy** sets out a framework for a visa policy that advances Europe's **long-term interests**. It is a policy that strengthens security across the Schengen area, fosters EU prosperity and competitiveness, and projects Europe's position and resilience on the global stage. The strategy therefore reaffirms the dual nature of Europe's visa policy, namely to protect the Union's security and integrity, and enable bona fide travel that benefits the EU. The strategy aims to make visa policy more coherent and unified, grounded in a common European framework of shared rules and standards, interoperable systems and coordinated responses. The strategy also aims to make the EU's visa policy smarter, more digital and better at leveraging technological innovations. By modernising our management of who enters our Union, we are shaping how Europe connects with the world – with **conviction and purpose**.

## **II. VISA POLICY THAT STRENGTHENS OUR SECURITY**

### **1. A modern system for granting visa exemptions**

EU visa-free travel is a powerful tool for advancing the Union's **strategic interests** and strengthening our security framework. By offering the prospect of visa waivers under certain conditions, the EU exerts strong **geopolitical leverage** in its relations with third countries,

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<sup>1</sup> In line with [COM/2025/148/final](#).

anchoring them to a common area of movement and giving them privileged access to our markets. To receive visa-free status, partner countries must meet requirements on issues ranging from respect for the rule of law to security cooperation and migration management<sup>2</sup>.

The EU's current system for granting visa exemptions is based on a broad set of criteria<sup>3</sup>. The absence of distinctive thresholds leaves considerable room for interpretation by both the EU and third countries, which can create a perception of opacity in the decision-making process. This perception has, at times, become a source of irritation for third countries rather than an effective amplifier of European strategic objectives.

Therefore, the Commission will develop a **modern system for proposing visa exemptions** that provides greater clarity and transparency to third countries and serves the EU's strategic interests more effectively and consistently.

The key element of such system will be a **new assessment framework** for evaluating current visa-required countries as potential candidates for visa exemptions. To support this framework, the Commission, in consultation with Member States, will develop a more targeted set of criteria, acting within the current legal framework. Alongside the already existing qualitative considerations, additional benchmarks will be considered for nationals of the third country concerned, which could include: the visa refusal rate, unfounded asylum applications, the return rate, and an assessment of the country's practical cooperation on return and readmission. Further criteria, particularly those linked to security, including cybersecurity (such as cooperation on counterterrorism, anti-smuggling, and fighting organised crime), should also be considered. The new framework will continue to take into account the overall state of relations with the third country concerned and the advancement of the Union's strategic interests. These indicative criteria will be agreed with Member States in 2026 and will be used to assess whether visa-required countries may qualify for exemption.

Once a country has been identified as a candidate for visa-free travel for its citizens, the process will be complemented by a **structured visa liberalisation dialogue**, based on agreed benchmarks and demonstrated cooperation in areas of strategic importance for the EU, including security, migration and border management. The outcome of such dialogues will be formalised through a **visa waiver agreement**, ensuring reciprocity and long-term sustainability of visa-free travel.

In parallel, the Commission, in consultation with Member States, will assess whether a **revision of the Visa Regulation** is needed to align the recently introduced new suspension grounds with the conditions to be fulfilled when considering the granting of a visa exemption.

## 2. Stronger monitoring of visa-free regimes

The list of countries whose citizens benefit from **visa-free** travel to the EU has steadily grown, now including **64 countries and territories**, more than any other similar travel destinations<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Regulation (EU) 2018/1806 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 November 2018 listing the third countries whose nationals must be in possession of visas when crossing the external borders and those whose nationals are exempt from that requirement (codification), Official Journal L series 303, 28.11.2018, p. 39-58 ('Visa Regulation') identifies third countries whose nationals are visa-required to travel to the Schengen area and those who are visa-exempt.

<sup>3</sup> Article 1 of the Visa Regulation provides that a visa exemption is to be based on a case-by-case assessment of a variety of criteria relating, *inter alia*, to illegal migration, public policy and security, economic benefit, in particular in terms of tourism and foreign trade, and the Union's external relations with the relevant third countries, including, in particular, considerations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as the implications of regional coherence and reciprocity. The list of criteria is not exhaustive.

<sup>4</sup> [EU visa agreements with non-EU countries](#), accessed on 06 January 2026.

However, once countries get visa-free status for their citizens, it may not always be the case that they continue to meet all the conditions for visa exemptions.

The European Commission's monitoring of visa-free regimes reveals significant challenges to the EU's security, border and migration management due to various forms of abuse of the visa exemption. These can include the **misuse of asylum procedures**, with nearly a quarter of 2024 asylum applications in the EU coming from visa-free travellers, and a significant proportion of these applications being unfounded<sup>5</sup>. Another issue is visa-free nationals **overstaying** their authorised stay and remaining in the EU illegally. Moreover, security risks are heightened by the practice of certain visa-exempt countries operating **citizenship-by-investment programmes**, granting citizenship without proper security screening. In addition, persistent **misalignments in the visa policies** of some visa-free partners with the visa policy of the EU can create or facilitate illegal migration routes into the EU. For EU candidate countries and potential candidates, visa policy alignment is a fundamental requirement and contributes to the security and protection of the Schengen area.

The **revised visa suspension mechanism (VSM)**, which now includes wider and stronger triggers<sup>6</sup> to suspend visa-free travel, provides the Union with a robust instrument to respond swiftly and proportionately to abuses and security concerns. Full and coordinated use of the revised mechanism will be key to ensuring that visa-free travel remains secure, credible, and conditional on mutual trust. Maintaining dialogue with the countries concerned will be crucial to foster effective cooperation in this regard.

The visa suspension mechanism **report** will continue to focus on countries or regions facing particular challenges that could lead to possible suspension of their visa exemptions. In addition, the report will include an overview of visa-free countries' compliance with the conditions for visa exemptions, in line with the new assessment framework and its additional benchmarks. This will help ensure continued fulfilment of the criteria by partner countries and will safeguard the integrity of visa-free travel to the EU. Finally, in cases when the visa exemption has been suspended for certain passport holders, the Commission will monitor and support Member States in the effective implementation of such suspension.

### **3. Increased leverage to foster cooperation on the part of third countries**

EU legislation, namely **Article 25a of the Visa Code**<sup>7</sup>, already links visa policy with third countries' cooperation on the return and readmission of their own nationals illegally staying in the EU. If cooperation is insufficient, based on the Commission's assessment and proposal, the EU can impose a more restrictive application of some provisions in the Visa Code, for example: the suspension of issuance of multiple entry visas, longer processing times, or increased visa fees. These measures can be applied for certain categories of applicants (e.g. diplomatic or service passport holders) or all categories of applicants. This mechanism is a **powerful tool to influence** cooperation on the part of third countries on readmission through a common European approach. The mechanism has proven most effective when applied in a well-

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<sup>5</sup> [Latest Asylum Trends - Annual Analysis | European Union Agency for Asylum](#), accessed 06 January 2026. The interactive bar chart (in the "Recognition Rates" and "Main citizenships" section) displays the recognition rates by nationality between 2015 and 2024, showing that recognition rates are very low for applications lodged by nationals of visa-free countries.

<sup>6</sup> The thresholds based on refusals of entry or overstay rates, and the substantial increase of asylum application have been lowered. New grounds for suspension were added: the operation of investor citizenship schemes, non-alignment with the EU's visa policy, non-compliance with commitments made during visa liberalisation dialogues, and the deterioration of the external relations between the EU and the third country concerned.

<sup>7</sup> Regulation (EC) No 810/2009 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 July 2009 establishing a Community Code on Visas, OJ L 243, 15.9.2009, pp. 1–58 ('Visa Code').

coordinated manner at EU level and accompanied by coherent messages to third countries on the consequences of insufficient cooperation.

There is potential to use the mechanism in a more coherent way and to strengthen its role in promoting the EU's values and interests. As part of the planned legislative revision of the Visa Code, the Commission will propose a **more strategic and agile mechanism for implementing Article 25a**.

The proposed revision will aim to ensure that the mechanism is more closely aligned with the Union's objective of safeguarding and promoting EU interests already at the stage of the assessment and will lead to a greater emphasis being placed on the Union's policy priorities.

Such a revision should provide for **greater flexibility** at the stage of the Commission's proposal, and of the subsequent choice of restrictive visa measures. The two existing steps of the mechanism will be recalibrated and **focused on measures that have proven most effective** in practice, namely the suspension of fast-track visa processing and of multiple-entry visas for certain (e.g. diplomatic or service) or all categories of passports. In particularly serious situations, the mechanism should also allow for the **suspension of visa issuance** for certain (e.g. diplomatic or service) or all categories of passports. In addition, the mechanism should provide for the possibility to **quickly react to a severe and sudden deterioration** in return and readmission cooperation by a third country, by allowing for a direct triggering of restrictive measures if for example a third country introduces a moratorium on forced returns.

To ensure a more strategic use of the mechanism and a common European approach, it has to be applied consistently across the EU. Therefore, the revision will also aim to strengthen **EU-wide coherence** and ensure that visa measures imposed on a third country under the Article 25a mechanism are not affected by **exemptions** for certain categories of passports (e.g. diplomatic or service) granted bilaterally by Member States, which would otherwise undermine the effectiveness of the measures.

The Commission will assess the possibility to extend the logic of the Article 25a mechanism to other policy areas, allowing the development of agile and targeted **ad hoc measures** under the Visa Code, in response to insufficient cooperation by third countries in the fields of **security and border management**, including fighting illegal migration and migrant smuggling. This could help create a more comprehensive and integrated approach to addressing the underlying causes that undermine an effective visa policy.

In addition to legislative changes, the Commission will implement **practical measures** to make use of the mechanism's full potential, such as: introducing a **minimal initial duration for adopted visa measures**, during which the concerned third country should achieve sustainable progress in cooperation on readmission, which will reinforce their effectiveness and ensure clearer communication and predictability vis-à-vis third countries; encouraging a more systematic use of the notification under Article 25a(3) of the Visa Code when Member States are faced with **substantial and persisting practical problems** in cooperation; and pursuing a systematic approach to the regular review of the relevance of Commission proposals not adopted by the Council and the repeal of measures adopted by the Council.

To make the Article 25a mechanism more effective in improving third countries' cooperation on return and readmission, the EU must expand its toolbox to include **instruments in other areas**, such as international cooperation and trade, taking into account the EU's strategic interests. The Commission will therefore ensure synergies with the Global Europe Regulation (Article 12.3) proposed under the new Multiannual Financial Framework for the programming period 2028–2034, to leverage third countries' cooperation on readmission. The revised Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP), which grants preferential trade access to the EU

single market, should also support cooperation on readmission. A more integrated approach would give the visa mechanism a more substantial impact and foster a more coherent strategic approach in the EU's relations with third countries concerned.

#### 4. Introducing targeted restrictive visa measures

In an increasingly volatile geopolitical environment, the European Union must be able to respond swiftly and proportionately to hostile actions by third countries. The EU's visa policy is one of the Union's most visible and direct interfaces with the outside world, and it should comprise effective tools to serve as both a deterrent and a response mechanism in cases of **severe political or security deterioration**.

In recent years, the Union has faced growing hostility from several third countries, including hybrid attacks, information manipulation and interference, the politically motivated instrumentalisation of migrants, weaponisation of migration, and open acts of aggression. In such circumstances, the continued issuance of visas (particularly for non-essential travel purposes, such as tourism, leisure, or unofficial visits) might no longer be considered appropriate as it could pose tangible risks to the Union's security, public policy, or international relations.

To address these risks and foster a common European approach in the field of visa policy in such contexts, the Commission will consider proposing, as part of a future legislative proposal for a revision of the Visa Code, to introduce a new category of **targeted restrictive visa measures** within the EU's visa policy framework. This new category of measures could include equipping the Commission with the ability to adopt, in consultation with Member States, binding measures that are in the interest of the EU and would allow for the **suspension, rejection or restriction of visa applications** submitted by nationals of such third countries. These measures could target specific categories of travellers, such as: holders of diplomatic, service, or official passports; identified former and current combatants of aggressor state; or applicants whose purpose of travel is non-essential. In this context, careful consideration will be given to overall EU interests and relations of the EU with the country in question. To ensure transparency, proportionality, and legal certainty, any activation of such measures should follow a clear procedural framework, including prior consultation of Member States and a predetermined review period. Safeguards should be built in to provide sufficient flexibility to issue visas for human rights defenders, dissidents, independent journalists, members of civil society organisations, and other humanitarian and exceptional cases.

These measures would complement existing mechanisms, such as Article 25a of the Visa Code and the visa suspension mechanism, by enabling the adoption of swift, proportionate, and reversible restrictions in cases of a grave deterioration in relations with specific third countries.

Introducing such an instrument would increase the Union's **strategic autonomy and coherence**, aligning visa policy more closely with the objectives of the EU's common foreign and security policy. It would also send a clear political message that granting access to the Schengen area is a prerogative of the Union and its Member States linked to respect for international law, peaceful conduct, and constructive engagement with the EU. This would make the EU's visa policy a credible and strategic instrument in the Union's external action toolbox.

#### 5. Strengthening travel document security

Visa policy depends on the use of **secure and reliable travel documents** that contain security features, which help prevent the falsification and counterfeiting of documents. Despite efforts to achieve a harmonised approach between Member States regarding which third-country travel documents may be used to enter and stay in the EU, the positions adopted at national level vary

significantly. To address this, the Commission will, after consultations with the Member States, consider proposing a new mechanism for drawing up a **list of accepted third-country travel documents** for entry into the Schengen area. A common approach to the acceptance of such documents, both for visa applications and border crossing, would strengthen the coherence of EU visa and border policies and reduce operational and legal uncertainties. Following further consultations with Member States, the Commission will present policy options to align Member States' positions on this issue.

Furthermore, there have been cases whereby third-country nationals fraudulently used EU passports or residence permits to gain access into the Schengen area. While biometric verification is crucial for secure entry management, operational and technical limitations hinder cross-border access to fingerprint data stored in EU travel documents. It is therefore essential to improve the capacity of Member States authorities to **verify fingerprints stored in EU travel documents**. The Commission will therefore assess the feasibility of creating an **EU-level central point of contact** through which Member States could securely exchange certificates for fingerprint verification, replacing the current 992 bilateral connections<sup>8</sup> (in which every Member State and the Commission are connected to one another) and any legislative changes required to achieve this. Increasing interoperability of these connections would significantly contribute to simplification and cost savings.

Finally, document fraud enables serious crime and illegal migration, yet there are currently no common EU definitions or minimum criminal or administrative sanctions addressing the use of fraudulent documents. The absence of common definitions, rules and penalties for **document fraud** creates fragmentation and opportunities for abuse, including visa shopping<sup>9</sup>. The Commission will assess the state of play in the Member States and present policy options for a more coherent approach to sanctions for the use of fraudulent documents. Such options could include a legislative initiative on **harmonised definitions, minimum criminal penalties**, and targeted amendments to the existing *acquis* to draw up common **administrative sanctions**, including entry bans, which would ensure a more coherent approach to sanctions, enhance deterrence, facilitate investigation and prosecution, and enable sanctions even when perpetrators reside outside Member States' jurisdictions. These measures would improve monitoring, support operational cooperation, and strengthen the overall integrity of EU visa, border and migration policies.

## 6. A more strategic approach to local adaptations of visa rules

For the issuance of short-stay visas, coordination among Member States is done through local Schengen cooperation, as well as prior or ex-post consultation procedures<sup>10</sup>. The Commission regularly adopts **local adaptation implementing acts** to adapt rules laid down in the Visa

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<sup>8</sup> Travel documents issued by EU Member States contain fingerprints of the holder. Currently, the verification whether the biometric information stored in such travel document matches the holder requires bilateral exchange of certificates between individual Member States' designated points of contact (in practice, 992 technical connections). Technical differences between the systems may impact the speed of such verifications.

<sup>9</sup> Visa shopping is the practice where applicants submit their visa applications not in the consulate of a Member State that most appropriately fits the applicant's genuine main destination or purpose of travel, but in the consulate of a Member State perceived as offering more favourable conditions, such as lower refusal rates, faster processing times or easier appointment availability, or where the applicant applies in different Member States after having been previously rejected.

<sup>10</sup> Prior consultation grants Member States the right to object to each other's visa decisions; ex post consultation allows Member States to be informed about other Member States' decisions.

Code, concerning for example supporting documents or the issuance of multiple entry-visa, making them either more or less favourable, depending on the specific regional contexts.

While these adaptations have proven useful, their potential to advance the EU's strategic interests through a common European approach should be further strengthened through the Commission's participation in steering the preparation of such decisions to support and provide guidance to Member States and ensure the coherent application of such local adaptations between visa-required countries, and to safeguard consistency with broader geopolitical objectives.

In addition, in the context of a proposal for a revision of the Visa Code, the Commission will consider whether **new criteria** should be added to guide the local adaptations. For example, these new criteria could include situations where there is a sharp and uncontrolled increase in arrivals of nationals of a visa-required third country, not offset by a corresponding number of returns, or the country's level of cooperation on readmission, when assessing migratory and security risks.

### 7. A visa policy that protects the most vulnerable

While strengthening the EU's security, the common visa policy allows sufficient flexibility to Member States to cater to **vulnerable applicants**, such as human rights defenders, dissidents, independent journalists, and members of civil society organisations, on a case-by case basis. Member States may, in exceptional circumstances and where justified, issue short-stay visas on **humanitarian grounds** even if certain conditions are not met<sup>11</sup>. To strike the right balance between derogations in individual cases and a harmonised application of the common rules, the Commission has recently updated the **Visa Code Handbook** with additional guidance to Member States on using the existing flexibility provisions of the legal framework in such situations, and will continue to discuss the matter with Member States. Furthermore, the digitalisation of visa procedures will reduce the administrative burden for all applicants, including vulnerable groups. In addition, Member States retain the possibility to issue long-stay visas for humanitarian reasons.

#### **Key next steps:**

- Develop in 2026 a new assessment framework for proposing visa exemptions.
- Propose a revision of the Visa Code in 2026, including to:
  - make the Article 25a mechanism more strategic and agile to respond more effectively to insufficient cooperation on readmission; by focusing on the suspension of fast-track visa processing and of multiple-entry visas, as well as allowing for the suspension of visa issuance for certain (e.g. diplomatic or service) or all categories of passports.
  - develop *ad hoc* measures under the Visa Code in response to insufficient cooperation by third countries in the fields of security and border management, including the fight against illegal migration and human smuggling;
  - introduce targeted restrictive visa measures in cases of a severe deterioration of the political or security situation in a third country;
  - introduce new criteria for local adaptations of visa rules.
- Full and coordinated use of the revised visa suspension mechanism.

<sup>11</sup> In line with the European Court of Justice case law, Member States are not required, under EU law, to grant a humanitarian visa to persons who wish to enter their territory with a view to applying for asylum, but they remain free to do so on the basis of their national law (Judgment C-638/16 PPU X and X v État belge).

- Ensure synergies with the GSP regulation and the Global Europe proposed under the new Multiannual Financial Framework to leverage third countries' cooperation on readmission.
- Consider strengthening travel document security, including by:
  - establishing a uniform list of accepted third-country travel documents;
  - setting up an EU-level central point of contact for verification of fingerprints stored in EU travel documents;
- putting in place a more coherent approach to sanctions for the use of fraudulent documents.

### **III. VISA POLICY THAT POWERS OUR ECONOMY AND COMPETITIVENESS**

#### **1. Facilitating travel for tourism and business**

The Schengen area is the **world's most visited destination**, with 40% of global international travel crossing its external borders<sup>12</sup>. In addition to those from visa-free countries, these travellers included people arriving with the over 10 million visas issued last year by Member States<sup>13</sup>. Tourism accounts for approximately 10% of the EU's GDP and supports around 23 million jobs across various sectors<sup>14</sup>. It reinforces the EU's global standing by showcasing our values and heritage, with cultural tourism accounting for 40% of all EU tourism and having an important economic impact on other sectors<sup>15</sup>. International tourists spent EUR 515 billion in the EU in 2024, with business travel having the highest expenditure per trip<sup>16</sup>. This generates a key source of revenue for local, regional, and national economies.

A modern visa policy must make **legitimate travel easier and more predictable**. Tourists and businesspeople expect a seamless travel experience with faster, paperless, and secure visa procedures. By simplifying access for such travellers, the EU will strengthen its position as a global hub for tourism and business, without, however, compromising on its high security standards.

The EU will roll out in the coming years a major reform of its visa rules that will fundamentally transform the way visa applications are collected, processed and issued, facilitating travel for travellers who need a visa to enter the EU. A key feature of this reform will be the **digitalisation of visa procedures**. Applicants will be able to complete the entire visa application process online, and traditional visa stickers will be replaced by secure **digital visas**<sup>17</sup>. This reform will make travelling to Europe safer and more convenient, while providing Member States with up-to-date and harmonised tools to process applications efficiently and securely.

**Multiple-entry visas** with longer validity periods are a tool that rewards reliable travellers, reduces administrative burden, and stimulates economic activity<sup>18</sup>. To make further use of this tool, the Commission, in close cooperation with Member States, will consider possibilities for issuing multiple-entry visas for tourism and business with a validity period beyond five years for *bona-fide* applicants with a lawful visa history and who do not present migratory or security

<sup>12</sup> [COM/2025/185 final](#).

<sup>13</sup> [DG HOME, Live work travel in EU](#), accessed 06 January 2026.

<sup>14</sup> Overview of EU tourism policy - Mobility and Transport, accessed 06 January 2026.

<sup>15</sup> [COM/2025/785 final](#).

<sup>16</sup> [Tourism statistics](#), accessed 06 January 2026. [EU Tourism in 2024: Key Updates and Emerging Trends](#), accessed 06 January 2026.

<sup>17</sup> [Schengen visa digitalisation](#), accessed 06 January 2026.

<sup>18</sup> Canada, U.K., the U.S.

risks, while taking into account the retention periods for biometric data stored in EU IT systems for border management. As part of a future revision of the Visa Code, the Commission will consider possible options, such as extending the validity of existing five-year multiple-entry visas after a new assessment, reconfirming them for an additional number of years, or creating a new category of multiple-entry visas valid for a longer period.

Visa applicants who travel for business on behalf of trusted companies generally present low risks and are reliable. However, there is no common approach to managing such trusted travellers and corporate **sponsors**, with each Member State having separate schemes and facilitations for the visa process. Some of these schemes target specific sectors, such as the shipping or road transport industries. This leads to fragmentation for businesses that are active throughout the EU. Together with Member States, the Commission will consult Member States on setting up a possible **common list of verified companies**, including startups and scaleups, whose employees would receive fast-track processing, facilitating procedures for trusted business travellers and bringing economic benefits to the entire EU single market.

For travellers who do not need a visa to enter the EU, the EU will launch in 2026 the **European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS)**. By requiring travellers to submit personal and travel information through an online application prior to departure, ETIAS will make border checks faster and more efficient, while enabling authorities to carry out enhanced security screening before travellers reach Europe's borders. The European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) will set up a **24/7 ETIAS assistance centre** to support both travellers (for example by helping them fill in their application form), and carriers (for instance by assisting them with technical issues)<sup>19</sup>.

## 2. Attracting talent for innovation and competitiveness

In today's increasingly competitive global landscape, the EU's visa policy should support the **EU competitiveness agenda**, with a more agile framework to attract global talent, foster knowledge transfer and international collaboration, and deliver clear benefits to SMEs, startups, and large enterprises seeking diverse, highly qualified and skilled workforce in the sectors most relevant for the twin transitions.

International students and researchers contribute to the EU's economy by filling skill gaps, driving research, innovation, and contributing to a more skilled workforce through their subsequent employment or entrepreneurship. Highly qualified and skilled workers and entrepreneurs, including digitally skilled ones, bring ideas, drive investments and help businesses to grow. Academics, artists and cultural professionals also play a role in enhancing the global competitiveness of the EU by fostering international collaboration.

To remain a world leader in innovation, the EU must become a **preferred destination for the world's most skilled and creative individuals**. The Union of Skills<sup>20</sup>, the Start-up and Scale-up Strategy<sup>21</sup>, the AI Continent Action Plan<sup>22</sup>, and the Choose Europe<sup>23</sup> initiative all highlight the need to facilitate the arrival of international students, researchers, highly qualified and skilled workers, startup founders and innovative entrepreneurs. Flagship initiatives such as Erasmus Mundus, the European Universities Alliances, the future joint European degree/label, the upcoming Vocational Education and Training Strategy, and the Pact for the

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<sup>19</sup> [ETIAS](#), accessed on 06 January 2026.

<sup>20</sup> [COM\(2025\) 90 final](#).

<sup>21</sup> [COM\(2025\) 270 final](#).

<sup>22</sup> [COM\(2025\) 165 final](#).

<sup>23</sup> [Choose Europe: advance your research career in the EU](#), accessed 06 January 2026.

Mediterranean<sup>24</sup> also seek to contribute to attracting international talent and reinforce the significance of talent mobility to build comprehensive partnerships. The upcoming 28th regime will allow businesses to register and operate across Member States seamlessly, helping EU companies grow and attracting investment from across the world.

Yet today, lengthy and fragmented procedures for long-stay visas discourage those people Europe needs the most from coming to the EU.

The EU has a framework in place to attract international students and researchers, as well as highly qualified and skilled workers, namely the Students and Researchers Directive<sup>25</sup> and the EU Blue Card Directive<sup>26</sup>. However, gaps and inefficiencies in the implementation of that framework make the EU less attractive for these categories of persons. Applicants, European universities and employers often raise concerns about delays in the processing of long-stay visa applications by consulates, difficulties in booking appointments, a lack of clear and accessible information on required documentation, as well as complex and inconsistent visa procedures.

Efforts should be made for the existing **framework on talent attraction** to work better. To this end, the Commission is presenting alongside this strategy a **Recommendation on Attracting Talent for Innovation** encouraging Member States to simplify and accelerate procedures, pool and coordinate consular resources, ensure consistent rights and safeguards, and improve access to information and coordination among national authorities, education institutions and innovation ecosystems. Complementary measures for top researchers will be considered in the upcoming European Research Area (ERA) Act, for example to facilitate researchers' mobility to Europe as part of EU-funded programmes.

**EU funding** will complement these efforts by supporting Member States' consulates in processing applications from non-EU nationals with specialised skills and strong innovation and research potential, particularly participants in EU programmes such as Erasmus+ and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, and also with a focus on **Talent Partnership countries**<sup>27</sup>. The first European **Legal Gateway Office** pilot will be launched in India starting with the ICT sector. On the basis of the lessons learnt from this pilot, the Commission will work to expand the European Legal Gateway Office to other sectors and other partner countries, such as Talent Partnership countries, including with the aim to support third-country nationals and employers to address challenges linked to the visa process. Once operational, the **EU Talent Pool**<sup>28</sup> will facilitate job-matching in the recruitment of non-EU talent at all skills levels, including by providing information on recruitment and migration rules, as well as recognition procedures<sup>29</sup>. The implementation of these initiatives will have to minimise the negative impact and maximise the positive impact on partner countries in order to turn brain

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<sup>24</sup> [JOIN\(2025\) 26 final](#).

<sup>25</sup> Directive (EU) 2016/801 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 May 2016 on the conditions of entry and residence of third-country nationals for the purposes of research, studies, training, voluntary service, pupil exchange schemes or educational projects and au pairing, OJ L 132, 21.5.2016, pp. 21–25.

<sup>26</sup> Directive (EU) 2021/1883 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 October 2021 on the conditions of entry and residence of third-country nationals for the purpose of highly qualified employment, OJ L 382, 28.10.2021, pp. 1–38.

<sup>27</sup> Talent Partnerships aim to promote structured cooperation frameworks with partner countries. The Commission together with the EU Member States has currently launched Talent Partnerships with Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

<sup>28</sup> [COM/2023/716](#).

<sup>29</sup> In the context of the Talent Pool, low- and medium-skilled workers who could contribute to tackling job shortages could potentially benefit from facilitated visa application procedures.

drain into brain gain. Furthermore, it will be important to provide safeguards to ensure research security, and mitigate risks related to international research and innovation cooperation<sup>30</sup>.

In parallel, and taking stock of the implementation of the Recommendation, the Commission will assess in 2026 whether **targeted legislative adjustments** are needed to make long-stay visa procedures simpler and more responsive to the EU's competitiveness and innovation ambitions, aimed in particular at people working, researching or studying in STEM-related fields (science, technology, engineering, mathematics). The Commission will notably explore the feasibility of an 'Omnibus' series of targeted amendments to existing EU rules on students and researchers and highly qualified and skilled workers to adapt them to the innovation and research ecosystems, as well as a targeted EU legal framework for start-up and scale-up founders and innovative entrepreneurs.

Together, these measures will help turn Europe into a genuine magnet for talent – a continent that welcomes knowledge, creativity and entrepreneurship as drivers of its future prosperity.

### 3. Reducing complexities

Currently, EU law authorises stays within the Schengen area for up to 90 days within 180 days for visa-free and visa-required travellers. Any stay exceeding 90 days requires a long-term visa or residence permit issued by a Member State. However, some third country professionals who heavily rely on mobility between Member States – such as touring artists, athletes attending sporting events, experts working on cross-border projects, work-force supporting the EU industries and services or truck drivers servicing EU businesses – may require access to different Member States for **more than 90 days within 180 days**, without needing long stay or residence in the EU.

This creates a **complex system**, which is further complicated by the existence of bilateral agreements concluded by some Member States before the entry into force of the Schengen *acquis*, which allow nationals of specific third countries to stay beyond 90 days, but only within the territory of the Member State concerned, thereby undermining the uniform application of the Schengen *acquis*.

The Commission will work closely with Member States to identify **pragmatic solutions** to accommodate extended short stays for selected categories of third-country nationals, ensuring a security and economic benefit for the Union, as well as legal clarity for travellers. These reflections will also explore the introduction of new legislation with a **specific set of extended short-stay rules** at EU level. In this context, the Commission will review the impact of existing bilateral agreements allowing extended stays, with a view to gradually phasing them out<sup>31</sup>.

#### **Key next steps:**

- Roll out swiftly the digitalisation of the visa procedures.
- Launch the European Travel Information and Authorisation System in 2026.
- Identify options for multiple-entry visas with longer validity.
- Implement the Commission Recommendation on attracting talent for innovation.
- Explore options to adapt the EU's long-stay visa framework to innovation and research ecosystems.

<sup>30</sup> Council Recommendation of 23 May 2024 on enhancing research security, OJ C, C/2024/3510, 30.5.2024.

<sup>31</sup> As foreseen by Regulation (EU) 2017/2226 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 November 2017 establishing an Entry/Exit System (EES) to register entry and exit data and refusal of entry data of third-country nationals crossing the external borders of the Member States and determining the conditions for access to the EES for law enforcement purposes, and amending the Convention implementing the Schengen Agreement and Regulations (EC) No 767/2008 and (EU) No 1077/2011, OJ L 327, 9.12.2017, pp. 20–82.

- Explore new rules for extended short stays for selected categories of third-country professionals, such as touring artists, competing athletes, or truck drivers.

#### **IV. SUPPORTING MEMBER STATES WITH MODERN VISA TOOLS**

##### **1. Smart IT systems to improve information sharing and prevent visa abuse**

The EU is rolling out one of the **most advanced digital systems for border management** in the world.

The **Entry/Exit System (EES)** – an automated IT system that registers non-EU travellers for a short stay each time they cross the external borders of any of the 29 Schengen countries – successfully started operating in October 2025. It allows travellers to verify at any time their remaining authorised period of stay and automatically alerts Member States when individuals are identified as overstayers. With more than 20 million registrations of entries and exits since its launch, the EES has already proven to be a game-changer in managing borders, preventing illegal migration, detecting document and identify fraud, and ultimately increasing the security of the EU. After the progressive start, the EES will be fully operational at all border crossing points in the Schengen area as of April 2026.

Furthermore, the new **Eurodac** system for registration of applicants for international protection will become operational in June 2026. It will substantially improve the Union's ability to address visa misuse by visa-required third-country nationals. It will include more detailed information on third-country nationals, and it will link all datasets corresponding to the same individual and store data on visa holders who have applied for international protection.

**ETIAS** will increase internal security by pre-screening travellers for potential security, illegal migration, and high epidemic risks prior to their departure. By automating these checks against various EU databases, ETIAS will make border crossings faster and more efficient for the travellers who do not pose a risk.

The **Visa Information System (VIS)** already now includes short-stay visa application data for foreign nationals from visa-required countries. It aims to facilitate, in particular, the visa process for legitimate travellers, while helping authorities to prevent fraud and visa shopping. It also helps with checks at external border crossing points to make sure that the person arriving at the border is the rightful visa holder. The revised VIS will integrate data on long-stay visas and residence permits, in addition to information on short-stay visas. It will also automate the querying of all relevant EU databases, improving the quality and consistency of decisions on visa applications.

Once the **interoperability framework** of EU information systems is fully implemented in 2028, it will be possible to query – through a single, central search – multiple databases at once. The interoperability framework will present a comprehensive picture of a person's status by pulling together relevant data on a single screen. This means that authorities will be able to automatically detect multiple or fraudulent identities or identify whether a person did not comply with the rules of their stay. It will also generate cross-system statistics that will provide valuable insights into travel patterns, risks, and potential abuses, thereby supporting evidence-based visa policy.

In the future, EU IT systems supporting visa processing should aim to leverage technological developments, in particular Artificial Intelligence solutions. At the same time, new technologies will offer further opportunities to improve the security of visa processes and make the travel experience of *bona fide* travellers smoother and easier.

## 2. Supporting Member States in visa processing

Modern visa policy also requires the efficient processing of visa applications. Managing high volumes of applications and ensuring timely appointments at consulates pose challenges, particularly during peak periods. These pressures are further increased by necessary procedural steps, such as conducting thorough security checks, reliably identifying applicants, and addressing risks related to document fraud. Differences in national practices and varying levels of digitalisation across Member States can also result in a less streamlined and a less transparent experience for applicants. These challenges can undermine the effectiveness of the system, reduce trust among Member States and diminish public confidence in the fairness of EU visa procedures.

The **roll out of IT tools** for border management referred to above will be crucial to strengthen the security and integrity of the EU's visa process. However, this must be complemented by practical support for the implementation of visa policy at both consular and central levels. Such support will: ensure a more harmonised application of visa rules, enhance the quality, efficiency, and consistency of decision-making across Member States, facilitate the roll-out of the digitalisation of the visa procedure, and help to reduce visa shopping.

Although visa policy is a core component of the EU's border management policy and represents the Union's first level of protection in safeguarding the Schengen area, it is the only home affairs policy that does not benefit from the structured support of an EU Agency. To this end, the forthcoming revision of the Frontex mandate will explore the opportunities to establish an **EU Visa Support Office** within Frontex to provide operational support in an advisory capacity. Its tasks could include: **developing and delivering training** for consular officers to ensure consistently high standards in visa-decision making; supporting **consulates in document verification** and the detection of document fraud through specialised expertise, tools and best practices; and **conducting risk assessments and country analyses** to promote coherent, evidence-based visa decision-making across the Union.

Furthermore, the growing reliance by Member States on **external service providers (ESPs)** to handle parts of the visa process calls for improved quality control and monitoring. For this reason, the Commission will launch a **comprehensive study on outsourcing practices and the financing** of ESPs charged with collecting visa applications, with a view to drawing up options to prevent system abuses.

## 3. Strategic use of EU funding for visa policy implementation

Member States should continue to make strategic use of available EU funding to **support the effective implementation of visa policy**. Priority should be given to financing the development of national components and necessary adaptations for the revised VIS and the digitalisation of visa procedures. Funding should also strengthen processing capacities (staffing and equipment) in locations where applicants face long waiting times for Schengen visa appointments. The Commission aims to provide financial support to Member States in the implementation of the visa-related policy priorities to address key needs in visa policy. The Commission also aims to provide targeted guidance, thematic workshops and best practice exchanges to highlight successful initiatives and facilitate the practical implementation of visa-related activities. Looking ahead to the programming period 2028-2034, the Commission seeks to draw lessons from current implementation to ensure that visa-related priorities are more prominently integrated into future funding frameworks. By maintaining a strong focus on innovation, interoperability and operational effectiveness, the Commission aims to ensure that EU funding further advances a modern, secure and efficient EU visa policy. The Commission will explore, together with Member States, the feasibility of increasing visa fees harmonised at

Union level for Schengen visas, and using revenues from such increase in support of further developing the EU's common visa policy.

**Key next steps:**

- Ensure the roll out of smart IT systems for border management and the interoperability framework.
- Propose to establish an EU Visa Support Office as part of the proposal for the revision of the mandate of Frontex in 2026.
- Launch a comprehensive study on the use of external service providers in the visa process.

**V. CONCLUSION**

To meet current and future global challenges, the Union must adapt. The EU's visa policy is central to this transformation, sitting at the intersection of the Union's competitiveness, security and foreign policy.

To ensure a successful implementation of this strategy, the Commission will engage with the **European Parliament** and the **Council of the European Union**, and will invite both institutions to support work on the announced future initiatives. In view of their impact on the external relations of the EU, the actions proposed in this strategy will be carried out in cooperation with the European External Action Service, within the exercise of its functions.

A modern, forward-looking visa policy will be a key enabler of the EU's global attractiveness, sustaining Europe's innovation capacity, growth and competitiveness. But **openness** must go hand in hand with **responsibility**. A credible visa policy must therefore prevent abuses, deter illegal migration, and protect the integrity of the Schengen area. Striking the right **balance between security and facilitation** is essential to both maintaining citizens' trust and ensuring the resilience of Europe's external borders and its internal security.

At the same time, visa policy is a **powerful instrument** of the Union's external and foreign policy. It can promote cooperation with partner countries in areas of strategic importance to the EU. The proposed reforms will ensure that **visa-free travel is not a permanent entitlement but a privilege** that requires consistent efforts to be maintained.

Delivering on this vision requires **modern tools and effective implementation**. The digitalisation of visa procedures and the simplification of application systems will make Europe's visa policy more efficient, secure and user-friendly, benefitting both travellers and Member States. Consistent implementation across the Union will be crucial to turn these reforms into tangible results.

Ultimately, visa policy, as an essential pillar of the Schengen *acquis*, must serve as a **strategic bridge between openness and protection**. It must reassure citizens that Europe's borders are managed effectively, while signalling to the world that the European Union is an assertive, competitive and strategically-minded global actor, ready to shape mobility on its own terms in an increasingly interconnected world.