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MEETING DOCUMENT

From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Visa Working Party

Subject: EU Visa Strategy

Delegations will find attached the presentation made by the Commission services at the Visa Working Party meeting on 3 March 2026 on the above-mentioned subject.

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EU Visa Strategy

A connected, secure and strong Europe

DG Home, Visa Policy

03/03/2026

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 of growing mobility, regional instability, and geopolitical competition, managing access to Europe is a strategic choice.
- The EU's visa policy must reflect the Europe we want: committed to the security of citizens and the integrity of external borders, yet open and contributing to prosperity

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Aims of the strategy

The Commission is presenting its first-ever EU Visa Strategy to make Europe:



More **safer** by strengthening the first line of security screening



More **influential globally**, by advancing the EU's strategic interests, values and global standing



More **prosperous and competitive**, by facilitating access for those who contribute to our economies and societies



More **efficient** through smarter, modern and coherent visa policy

The strategy sets out a framework for a visa policy that advances the EU's long-term interests and values, making visa policy more **strategic** and better equipped to respond to growing mobility, regional instability, and geopolitical competition



Pillars of EU Visa Strategy

Security

- A modern system for granting visa exemptions
- Stronger monitoring of visa-free regimes
- Increased leverage to foster third-country cooperation
- Targeted visa measures
- Strengthened document security
- Strategic approach to local adaptation of visa rules
- Protection of the most vulnerable

Competitiveness

- Facilitating travel for tourism and business
- Attracting talent for innovation and competitiveness
- Reducing complexities

Modern, digital visa system

- Smart IT systems to improve information sharing and prevent visa abuse
- Supporting Member States in visa processing
- Strategic use of EU funding for visa policy implementation



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Visa policy that strengthens our security



I. A modern system for granting visa exemptions

- EU visa-free travel is a powerful tool for advancing the Union's **strategic interests** and strengthening the **security framework**.
- The prospect of visa waivers under certain conditions gives the EU geopolitical leverage, anchoring partners to a common area of movement and giving **privileged access to EU markets**.
- **Conditions to obtain visa-free status:** partner countries must meet requirements ranging from respect for the rule of law to security cooperation and migration management.
- **Problem:** the current system is based on a broad set of criteria, but the absence of distinctive thresholds leaves room for interpretation and can create a perception of opacity, at times irritating third countries rather than amplifying EU strategic objectives.



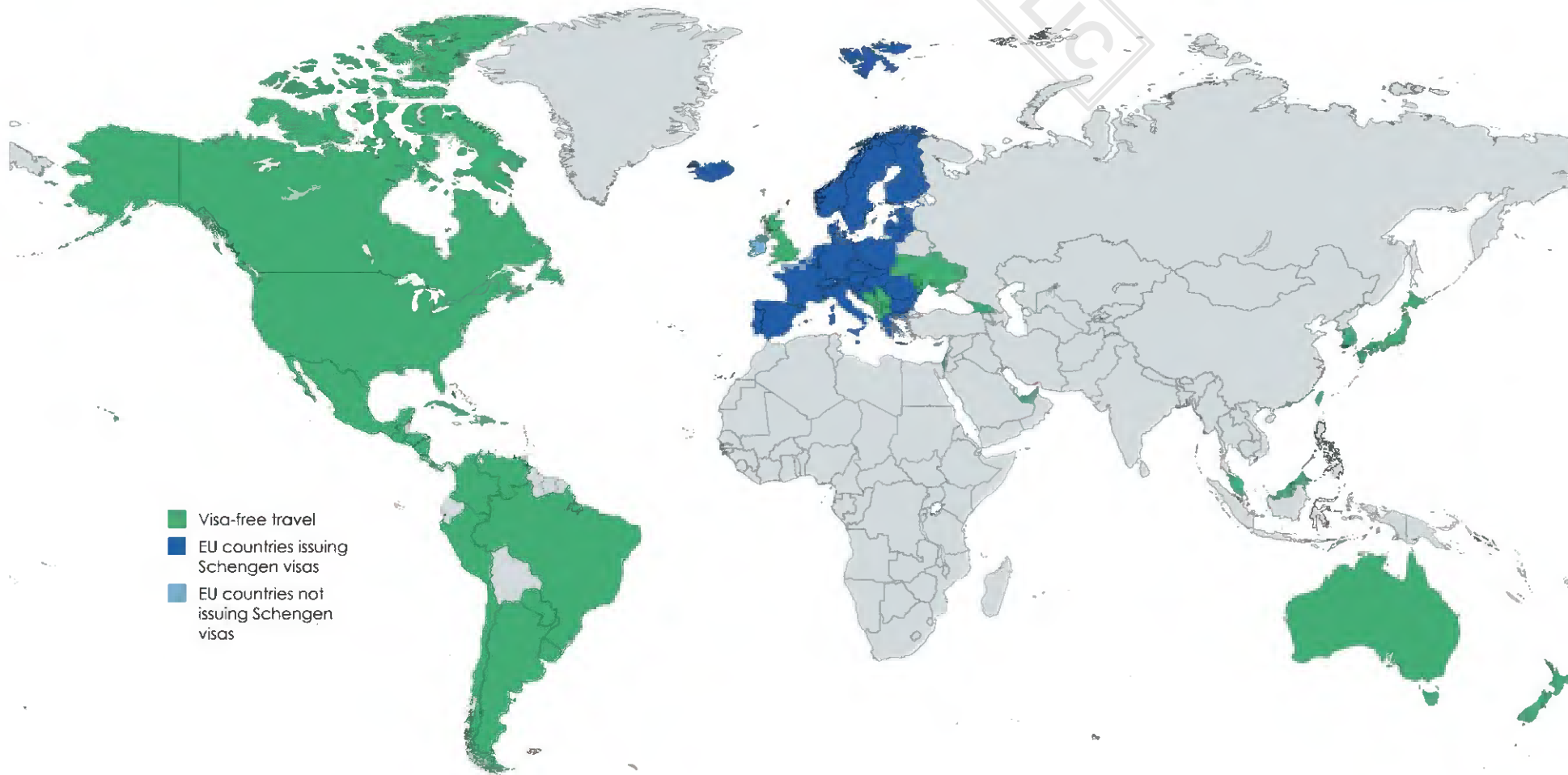
I. A modern system for granting visa exemptions

The EU will develop a **modern system for proposing visa exemptions** that provides **greater clarity and transparency** and serves EU strategic interests more **effectively and consistently**.

- **New framework for evaluation of visa-required countries as potential candidates**; more targeted set of criteria (within the current legal framework). Indicative benchmarks may include visa refusal rate, unfounded asylum applications, return rate, and practical cooperation on return and readmission; also security-linked criteria including cybersecurity and cooperation on counterterrorism, anti-smuggling, and fighting organised crime.
- **Structured visa liberalisation dialogue**
 - agreed benchmarks; demonstrated cooperation incl. security, migration and border management,
 - formalised through a visa waiver agreement ensuring reciprocity and long-term sustainability.
- In parallel, COM will assess whether a **revision of the Visa Regulation** is needed to align new suspension grounds with the conditions for granting a visa exemption.



II. Stronger monitoring of visa-free regimes



II. Stronger monitoring of visa-free regimes

- The EU visa-free list has steadily grown and now covers **64 countries and territories**. After visa-free status is granted, it may not always be the case that countries continue to meet all conditions for visa exemptions.
- Key challenges:
 - **Misuse of asylum procedures**: nearly a quarter of 2024 asylum applications in the EU came from visa-free travellers, with a significant share unfounded.
 - **Overstays**: visa-free nationals remaining in the EU illegally after authorised stay.
 - **Security risks**: some visa-exempt countries operate citizenship-by-investment programmes granting citizenship without proper security screening.
 - **Visa policy misalignment**: divergences from EU visa policy can facilitate illegal migration routes; for candidate and potential candidate countries, alignment is a fundamental requirement for Schengen security.



II. Stronger monitoring of visa-free regimes

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- The revised **Visa Suspension Mechanism (VSM)**: wider and stronger triggers, enables swift and proportionate response; coordinated use is key to keeping visa-free travel secure, credible, and conditional on mutual trust, supported by continued dialogue with partner countries.
- The **VSM report** will:
 - (i) keep focusing on cases with challenges that could lead to suspension,
 - (ii) add an overview of compliance with exemption conditions using the new assessment framework, and
 - (iii) where exemptions are suspended for certain passport holders, the Commission will monitor and support Member States in implementation.
- Ongoing preparation of the 9th VSM report



III. Increased leverage to foster cooperation on the part of third countries

- **Article 25a of the Visa Code** links visa policy to third countries' cooperation on return and readmission of their nationals irregularly staying in the EU.
- The EU can apply a more restrictive application of Visa Code provisions, e.g. suspension of issuance of multiple-entry visas, longer processing times, increased visa fees
- Measures can apply to certain categories (e.g. diplomatic/service passport holders) or all categories of applicants. Most effective when applied in a well-coordinated manner at EU level, with coherent messages on consequences of insufficient cooperation.
- As part of the planned **legislative revision of the Visa Code**, the Commission will propose a **more effective, strategic and agile** mechanism for implementing Article 25a.

Assess cooperation

- Commission assesses third-country cooperation on return/readmission (at least annually)



Identify problems

- Either through the Commission's assessment based on Member States' qualitative and quantitative input; or a MS notification of substantial, persisting problems



Commission concludes that cooperation is insufficient

- Taking account of efforts to improve cooperation and overall EU relations



Commission proposal → Council Implementing Decision

- Restrictive visa measures may be applied to all or certain categories ((e.g. suspending facilitations, applying higher fees or longer processing times



Review and adjustment

- Commission monitors progress and can propose to amend or repeal measures; reports on progress after implementation

Article 25a workflow



III. Increased leverage to foster cooperation on the part of third countries

Aims of the revision

- Alignment with the Union's objective of “**safeguarding and promoting EU interests**” already at the assessment stage, with greater emphasis on the Union's **policy priorities**.
- Greater flexibility at the stage of the Commission's proposal and the subsequent choice of restrictive visa measures.

Recalibrated measures and faster reaction

- Focus on measures proven most effective (suspension of MEVs and longer processing times)
- Allow **suspension of visa issuance in** in particularly serious situations
- Allow quick reaction to **severe and sudden deterioration** in cooperation by enabling **direct triggering** of restrictive measures

Coherence, expansion, practical measures

- Strengthen **EU-wide coherence** so measures are not undermined by bilateral exemptions granted by Member States.
- Assess extending the logic of Article 25a to allow **agile and targeted ad hoc measures** under the Visa Code
- **Minimal initial duration** for adopted measures; more systematic use of **Article 25a(3) notifications**; systematic review of non-adopted Commission proposals and repeal of Council-adopted measures.
- Expand the toolbox via synergies with other instruments: **Global Europe Regulation (Article 12.3) under the proposed MFF 2028–2034**, and the revised **GSP** to support cooperation on readmission.



IV. Targeted visa measures

- The EU must respond swiftly and proportionately to hostile actions → visa policy should include tools that act as **deterrent** and response in cases of severe political or security deterioration.
- Growing hostility from some third countries, hybrid threats, information manipulation and interference, instrumentalisation of migration, open acts of aggression.
 - In such cases, continued issuance of visas (especially for non-essential travel) **may no longer be appropriate** due to risks to security, public policy, or international relations.
- **Future Visa Code revision:** new category of targeted restrictive visa measures
 - e.g. ability to adopt binding measures allowing the suspension, rejection or restriction of visa applications for nationals of such third countries (in consultation with MS) .
 - Categories such as diplomatic/service/official passport holders, identified combatants of an aggressor state, or non-essential travel
 - Clear procedure (consultation + review period) and **safeguards** for human rights defenders, dissidents, independent journalists, civil society, and other exceptional cases.
- Proposal **complements Article 25a and the VSM** with swift, proportionate, reversible restrictions
 - Reinforces that access to Schengen is linked to respect for international law, peaceful conduct, and constructive engagement with the EU.



V. Strengthening travel document security

- EU visa and border policy depends on **secure and reliable travel documents** with security features to prevent falsification and counterfeiting.
- Member States' national positions vary significantly on which third-country travel documents are accepted
- Cases of third-country nationals fraudulently using EU passports or residence permits to access Schengen; biometric verification crucial, but cross-border fingerprint verification is hindered by operational and technical limits.
- Document fraud **enables serious crime and illegal migration** but...
- ...no common EU definitions or minimum criminal/administrative sanctions, creating fragmentation and opportunities for abuse (including visa shopping).



V. Strengthening travel document security

Accepted travel documents

- Consider how to align Member States' positions on **accepted third-country travel documents**
- Common approach to the acceptance of such documents for **visa applications and border crossing**

Fingerprint verification

- Assess feasibility of an **EU-level central point of contact** for fingerprint certificates exchange
- Replace **992 bilateral connections**
- Increased interoperability will contribute to simplification & cost savings

Sanctions for document fraud

- Assess state of play + policy options for a **more coherent approach**
- Possible options: harmonised definitions, minimum criminal penalties, and common administrative sanctions (incl. entry bans)
- Enhance deterrence, facilitate investigation and prosecution, and enable sanctions even when perpetrators reside outside Member States' jurisdictions



VI. Strategic approach to local adaptations of visa rules

- For the issuance of short-stay visas, Member States coordinate through **local Schengen cooperation** and prior or ex-post consultation procedures.
- The Commission regularly adopts local adaptation implementing acts to adapt Visa Code rules (e.g. on supporting documents or multiple-entry visas), making them more or less favourable depending on specific regional contexts.
- Advance the EU's strategic interests through a common European approach
 - Strengthen local adaptations through Commission steering to support Member States, ensure coherent application across visa required countries and safeguard consistency with broader geopolitical objectives.
- **Future Visa Code revision:** the Commission will consider whether new criteria should guide local adaptations, for example:
 - a **sharp and uncontrolled increase in arrivals** of nationals of a visa-required third country not offset by corresponding returns;
 - the third country's **level of cooperation on readmission**, when assessing migratory and security risks.



VII. A visa policy that protects the most vulnerable

- While strengthening EU security, the common visa policy allows **flexibility** for 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.
- In **exceptional circumstances** and where justified, Member States may issue **short-stay visas on humanitarian grounds** even if certain conditions are not met.
- Updated **Visa Code Handbook** with additional guidance on using existing flexibility provisions, and will continue discussions with Member States.
- **Digitalisation of visa procedures** will reduce administrative burden for all applicants, including vulnerable groups.
- Member States also 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 effective, strategic and agile by recalibrating the measures to what has proven most effective: the suspension of fast-track visa processing and of multiple-entry visas, 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 VSM**.
- **Ensure synergies** with the GSP regulation and the Global Europe proposed under the new Multiannual Financial Framework to leverage third countries' cooperation on readmission.
- **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.



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Visa policy that powers our economy and competitiveness



I. Facilitating travel for tourism and business

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40% of global international travel crosses the Schengen area's external borders

Cultural tourism accounts for **40% of all EU tourism** (with important economic impact on other sectors)

10+ million visas issued last year by the Member States

Tourism accounts for **≈10% of EU GDP** and supports around **23 million jobs**

International tourists spent **EUR 515 billion** in the EU in 2024 (business travel has the highest expenditure per trip)



I. Facilitating travel for tourism and business

- A modern visa policy should make legitimate travel easier and more **predictable, with faster, paperless, and secure visa procedures** for tourists and businesspeople.
- The EU will roll out a major reform that will transform how visa applications are collected, processed and issued:
 - **digitalisation** of visa procedures
 - traditional visa stickers replaced by **secure digital visas**
- **Multiple-entry visas (MEVs) with longer validity:** COM will consider possibilities for tourism/business MEVs beyond five years for bona fide applicants with a lawful visa history and no migratory/security risks
 - options could include extending/reconfirming existing five-year MEVs or creating a new longer-validity MEV category.
- **Trusted business travellers:** COM will consult Member States on a possible common list of verified companies whose employees would receive fast-track processing, reducing fragmentation.
- For visa-free travellers: the EU will **launch ETIAS in 2026** (online application prior to departure) to make border checks faster/more efficient and enable enhanced pre-screening;
 - **Frontex** will set up a **24/7 ETIAS assistance centre** for travellers and carriers.





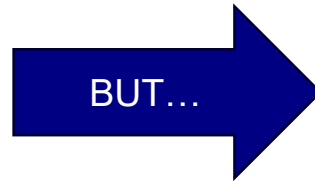
II. Attracting talent for innovation and competitiveness

- EU 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 benefits to SMEs, startups and large enterprises in sectors relevant for the twin transitions.
- International students and researchers contribute by **filling skill gaps and driving research and innovation**;
- Academics, artists and cultural professionals enhance EU competitiveness 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.

II. Attracting talent for innovation and competitiveness

EU initiatives highlighting the need to facilitate arrival of talent

- Union of Skills; Start-up and Scale-up Strategy; AI Continent Action Plan; Choose Europe initiative
- Erasmus Mundus; European Universities Alliances; future joint European degree/label; upcoming Vocational Education and Training Strategy; Pact for the Mediterranean
- Upcoming **28th regime** (businesses will be able to register/operate across Member States seamlessly)



Lengthy and fragmented procedures for long-stay visas discourage the people Europe needs most.

- EU frameworks exist (Students and Researchers Directive; EU Blue Card Directive), but **gaps and inefficiencies in implementation** reduce attractiveness.
- Recurrent concerns: **delays** in consular processing, difficulty **booking appointments**, lack of **clear and accessible information** on documentation, and **complex/inconsistent procedures**.



II. Attracting talent for innovation and competitiveness – key steps

Improve the existing framework

- A **Recommendation on Attracting Talent for Innovation**, encouraging MS to **simplify and accelerate procedures, pool/coordinate consular resources, ensure consistent rights and safeguards**, and improve **access to information** and coordination among authorities, education institutions and innovation ecosystems.
- Complementary measures for top researchers to be considered in the upcoming **ERA Act** (e.g. facilitate researchers' mobility under EU-funded programmes).

Operational support and tools

- EU funding to support consulates processing applications from non-EU nationals with specialised skills/innovation and research potential (e.g. Erasmus+ and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions; focus on Talent Partnership countries).
- **European Legal Gateway Office pilot in India** (starting with the **ICT sector**), with work to expand to other sectors/partner countries.
- **EU Talent Pool** to facilitate job-matching and provide information on recruitment/migration rules and recognition procedures.
- Implementation should minimise negative and maximise positive impact on partner countries (“brain drain” → “brain gain”) and include safeguards for **research security** and risks in international cooperation.

Next step (2026)

COM assessment whether **targeted legislative adjustments** are needed to make long-stay visa procedures simpler and more responsive - particularly for people working/researching/studying in **STEM** - including exploring an ‘**Omnibus**’ of targeted amendments and a targeted EU framework for **start-up/scale-up founders and innovative entrepreneurs**.



III. Reducing complexities

- EU law authorises stays in Schengen for **up to 90 days within 180 days**. Any stay exceeding 90 days requires a **long-term visa or residence permit** issued by a Member State.
- Some third-country professionals who rely on mobility between Member States may need access for **>90 days within 180 days** without needing long-stay or residence in the EU
 - e.g. **touring artists, athletes, experts on cross-border projects, workforce supporting EU industries and services, truck drivers** servicing EU businesses).
- System complicated by **pre-Schengen bilateral agreements** allowing certain third-country nationals to stay >90 days **only in the territory of the Member State concerned**
- COM will work with MS to identify **pragmatic solutions** for extended short stays for selected categories - ensuring **security and economic benefit** and **legal clarity** for travellers.
- Explore **new EU-level legislation** with a specific set of extended short-stay rules
 - COM will also review existing bilateral agreements with a view to **gradually phasing them out**.



Key next steps

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



ETIAS
European Travel Information
and Authorisation System



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Supporting Member States with modern visa tools



I. IT systems to improve information sharing and prevent visa abuse

Operational systems as of February 2026:

Entry/Exit system (EES)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Automated IT system registering non-EU travellers for a short stay each time they cross the external borders of any of the 29 Schengen countries.• Started operating in October 2025.• Allows travellers to verify 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 launch, it has proven a “game-changer” for managing borders, preventing illegal migration, detecting document and identity fraud, and increasing EU security.• Fully operational at all Schengen border crossing points as of April 2026.
Eurodac	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Will substantially improve the Union’s ability to address visa misuse by visa-required third-country nationals.• Includes more detailed information, links datasets for the same individual, and stores data on visa holders who have applied for international protection.
Visa Information System (VIS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Already includes short-stay visa application data for foreign nationals from visa-required countries.• Facilitates the visa process for legitimate travellers while helping prevent fraud and visa shopping.• Supports external border checks to ensure the person arriving is the rightful visa holder.



I. IT systems to improve information sharing and prevent visa abuse

- **Ongoing digitalisation of visa procedures**
- **Revised VIS**
 - will integrate data on **long-stay visas and residence permits** (in addition to short-stay visas) and **automate querying** of all relevant EU databases, improving the quality and consistency of visa decisions.
- **ETIAS (operational in Q4 2026)**
 - **pre-screening** travellers for potential security, illegal migration, and high epidemic risks **prior to departure**
 - automated checks against various EU databases → border crossings faster and more efficient for travellers who do not pose a risk
- **Interoperability framework (2028):** once fully implemented, authorities will be able to query multiple databases through a **single, central search**.
 - Presents a comprehensive picture of a person's status on a single screen.
 - Enables detection of **multiple/fraudulent identities** and non-compliance with stay rules.
 - Generates cross-system statistics on travel patterns, risks, and potential abuses, supporting **evidence-based visa policy**.
- **Looking ahead:** EU IT systems supporting visa processing should aim to leverage technological developments, in particular **AI solutions**; new technologies also offer opportunities to improve security and make travel easier for **bona fide travellers**.



II. Supporting Member States in visa processing

- Efficient visa policy requires **efficient processing** of applications.
- Managing **high volumes** and ensuring **timely appointments** at consulates is challenging
 - pressures are increased by procedural steps such as **thorough security checks**, **reliable identification** of applicants, and addressing **document fraud** risks.
- Differences in national practices and uneven levels of **digitalisation** → less streamlined and less transparent travel for the applicant,
 - undermining effectiveness, reducing trust among Member States, and diminishing public confidence in the fairness of EU visa procedures.
- The roll-out of border-management IT tools is crucial for security and integrity, but must be complemented by **practical support** at consular and central levels to:
 - ensure more harmonised application of rules;
 - enhance quality, efficiency and consistency of decision-making;
 - facilitate digitalisation of the visa procedure;
 - help reduce **visa shopping**.



II. Supporting Member States in visa processing

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- Visa policy is the only home affairs policy without structured EU Agency support
- Revision of the Frontex mandate will explore establishing an **EU Visa Support Office within Frontex** (advisory operational support). Tasks could include:
 - training for consular officers to ensure consistently high standards;
 - support on document verification and detection of document fraud (expertise/tools/best practices);
 - risk assessments and country analyses to promote coherent, evidence-based visa decision-making.
- 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.
 - COM 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.



III. Strategic use of EU funding for visa policy implementation

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- Strengthen **processing capacities** in locations where applicants face **long waiting times** for Schengen visa appointments.
- COM aims to provide **financial support** to Member States for visa-related policy priorities, **targeted guidance**, **thematic workshops** and **best practice exchanges** to facilitate implementation.
- **2028–2034**: the Commission seeks to draw lessons from current implementation so visa-related priorities are more prominently integrated into future funding frameworks.
- With focus on **innovation**, **interoperability** and **operational effectiveness**, EU funding should further advance a modern, secure and efficient EU visa policy.
- COM will explore, with MS, the feasibility of **increasing harmonised Schengen visa fees** to support further development of 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.



Conclusion

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- **EU visa policy** sits at the intersection of competitiveness, security, and foreign policy
- A modern visa policy boosts **global attractiveness** and supports **innovation, growth, and competitiveness**, while keeping openness tied to responsibility
- A credible policy must **prevent abuse, deter irregular migration, and protect Schengen**, balancing security and facilitation to sustain trust and resilience
- Visa free travel is a **privilege** and reforms stress it must be maintained through consistent efforts
- Digitalisation and simplification will make the system more **efficient, secure, and user friendly**, with consistent implementation across the Union essential
- Visa policy remains a **strategic bridge** between openness and protection, enabling the EU to shape mobility on its own terms



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