



## Questions and Answers: Adapting the common EU visa policy to new challenges

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### What is the Common EU Visa Policy?

The EU has a common visa policy for short-stay visits to the Schengen area, comprising of a set of harmonised rules setting out the countries whose nationals require a visa to travel to the EU and those who do not, the procedures and conditions for issuing short-stay visas, a uniform format for visa stickers and a common Visa Information System (VIS) that records all visa applications and decisions.

This means that, for citizens from non-EU countries that are required to hold a visa when travelling to the Schengen area, the procedures and conditions for the issuance of visas are the same. Currently, the visa requirement applies to travellers from 105 non-EU countries or entities. Having common rules also means that a short-stay visa issued by one of the Schengen States entitles its holder to travel and visit all 26 Schengen States for short stays (stays of up to 90 days in any 180-day period; issued for travel purposes only).

The visa policy serves various objectives, in particular preventing irregular immigration, as well as safeguarding public order and security. At the same time, the visa policy also aims at facilitating travel to the EU for legitimate and bona fide travellers, supporting tourism and trade, and thus boosting growth in the EU. In 2016, almost 14 million Schengen visas were issued (see the [latest statistics](#) on Schengen visas).

The harmonised procedures and conditions for issuing visas for the purpose of short stays in the Schengen area are set out in the [Visa Code](#), a central element of the EU's visa policy. Since it entered into force in 2010, the Visa Code has contributed to facilitating travel to the EU and tackling irregular immigration, for example through the improvement of consular cooperation. A harmonised application of the rules has also contributed to streamlining the visa application procedure and reinforced equal treatment of visa applicants.

### Why is the Commission proposing a reform of the EU common visa policy?

The Commission is today proposing to reform the EU's common visa policy to adapt the rules to evolving security concerns, challenges linked to migration and new opportunities offered by technological developments. The proposed changes will make it easier for legitimate travellers to obtain a visa to come to Europe, facilitate tourism, trade and business whilst reducing of security and irregular migration risks.

The tourism and travel industry plays a key role in the European economy, representing around 10% of the EU's GDP. EU Member States are among the world's leading tourist destinations – the number of visa applications processed by Member States has increased considerably over the last 8 years and continues to expand. Since 2009, applications for EU visas have risen 50% – from 10.2 million to 15.2 million in 2016. At the same time, financial resources available to Member States to process visa applications remained the same or diminished. Visa application procedures have not changed since 2010 and thus are proving to be lengthy, cumbersome and simply out of date. This can deter tourists from travelling to Europe, directing investment and spending to other countries and affecting the EU's economy negatively. In addition, the environment in which visa policy operates has drastically changed over the past years. This is why the benefits of visa travel need to be balanced with improved migration, security and border management to adequately respond to present and future security and migration challenges.

### What are the new rules proposed by the Commission?

The changes proposed today aim at modernising the common EU visa rules, facilitating the process for issuing visas both for legitimate travellers and Member States while strengthening the security standards of the visa procedure.

- **Faster and more flexible procedures:** The decision-making time for visa applications will be reduced from 15 to 10 days. It will be possible for travellers to submit their applications up to 6

months in advance of their planned trip, instead of the current 3 months, and to fill in and sign applications electronically. This means that travellers will no longer have to be physically present in consulates to submit applications – their presence will only be required to collect fingerprints.

- **Multiple-entry visas with longer validity:** Harmonised rules will apply to multiple-entry visas to better prevent "visa shopping" and to reduce costs and save time for Member States and frequent travellers. Such multiple-entry visas will be issued to trusted regular travellers with a positive visa history for a gradually increasing period from 1 up to 5 years. Travellers' fulfilment of entry conditions will be thoroughly and repeatedly verified.
- **Short-term visas at external borders:** To facilitate short-term tourism, Member States will be allowed to issue single-entry visas directly at the external land and sea borders under temporary, seasonal schemes. Such visas will be valid for a stay of maximum 7 days in the issuing Member State only. Strict conditions will apply to minimise irregular migration and security risks.
- **Additional resources to reinforce the security of the procedure:** In view of significantly increased processing costs over the past years, a moderate €20 increase of the fee – unchanged since 2006 – will be introduced (the fee will be raised from €60 to €80). This will allow Member States to maintain adequate levels of consular staff worldwide to ensure stronger security screenings as well as the upgrading of IT equipment and software. The visa fee will be reviewed every two years, taking into account criteria such as the EU inflation rate.
- **Improve cooperation on irregular migration and return:** In addition, the Commission is today also following through on the joint EU efforts on return and readmission by proposing to make better use of the leverage of the common visa policy. A new mechanism will be introduced to trigger stricter conditions for processing visas when a partner country does not cooperate sufficiently on the readmission of its own nationals who are staying in the EU irregularly.

#### **How will the proposed amendments improve the security of the visa procedures?**

The new provisions will further strengthen the existing security checks and thorough verification requirements of all travellers under the visa rules. Whilst the vast majority of visa applicants and persons visiting the EU pose no security or migratory risk, in all cases all applications are carefully screened and persons applying for a visa for the first time have their fingerprints collected.

The proposed increase of the visa fee will for example enable Member States to maintain adequate numbers of consular staff, making it easier to detect any security or irregular migration risks. Likewise, the increased revenue will contribute to upgrading Member States' IT equipment and software.

In addition, all travellers whether EU or non-EU nationals, are systematically checked at the EU's external borders against relevant security databases.

At the same time, the EU is upgrading its information systems for border management in order to close information gaps and enhance internal security. The future revision of the VIS – together with the recent adoption of the Entry/Exit System (EES) and the European Travel Information Authorisation System (ETIAS) – will be yet another building block towards making the EU's information systems interoperable.

#### **What concrete benefits will the changes bring for travellers?**

With the new rules, travellers will benefit from a simpler and faster visa application procedure, making travelling to the EU much easier.

Travellers will for example:

- Be able to better plan their trips and submit visa applications up to 6 months in advance;
- No longer need to submit a new visa application every time they wish to visit the EU. The new rules on multiple entry visas with long validity will save them time and money;
- Be able to fill in and sign applications electronically instead of in person, which will also save time, money and hassle;
- Be able to spontaneously travel to the EU under the special temporary scheme applying for a visa directly at the external border.

#### **Why is the Commission proposing to increase the visa fee? How will the additional revenue collected be used?**

The Commission is proposing a moderate €20 increase of the visa fee (from €60 to €80) in order to contribute to more efficient and faster processing of the increasing number of visa applications.

The current visa fee has not changed since 2006, while the number of visa applications processed by Member States has increased by more than 50% between 2009 and 2016. At the same time the financial resources available to Member States for visa processing (per application) have remained

static or even diminished due to budget cuts following the economic crisis. Currently, the visa fee does not cover the administrative expenses of the Member States in terms of staffing, premises and equipment. Insufficient financial and human resources can lead to long waiting times and deadlines in processing visa applications, in particular in peak travel seasons.

An increase in the visa fee will ensure that Member States have the sufficient financial resources to maintain adequate numbers consular staff and trained experts worldwide. This will help to process visas quicker and more efficiently while ensuring that security and irregular migration risks are carefully detected. The increase will also allow Member States to further upgrade their IT equipment and software to provide fast and client-friendly procedures to visa applicants.

The proposed increase of the visa fee to €80 brings it in line with the level where it would be today if the visa fee had been aligned with the general EU-wide inflation rate since 2006. By international standards, the fee would remain low (please see below).

The increase of the visa fee will not have any impact on the lower visa fee (€35) set in the Visa Facilitation Agreements concluded between the EU and a number of third countries, such as Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

### **How does the revised visa fee compare to the fees charged by other countries?**

The proposed €80 fee remains relatively low by international standards and therefore remains competitive.

As a comparison, a tourist visa to the United States costs USD 160 (€133) and €125 for China. Travellers to Australia or India have to pay €90 for their visa, while those going to New Zealand will be charged NZD 170 (€100). A visa to Canada costs CAD 100 (€67). More details are available in the [impact assessment](#) accompanying the proposal for a revision of the Visa Code (see annex 5, part 3).

### **How will the new link between the visa policy and cooperation on readmission work in practice?**

Over the past years, the EU has been stepping up its activities to support Member States in returning irregular migrants to their countries of origin. Even though readmission of own nationals is an obligation under international law, Member States have been experiencing difficulties in returning irregular migrants or travellers who overstayed their EU visa.

The Commission first explored the use of visa policy as an important leverage in cooperation on readmission in the 2015 Action Plan and further reiterated it in 2016 Communication on Partnership Framework. Given that visa-free travel has become a key political priority for many partner countries, the EU common visa policy can be a powerful tool, among others in the EU's hands, to achieve better cooperation on migration.

Following the call of EU leaders in June 2017 to achieve real progress in return and readmission policy, the Commission is today also stepping up the joint EU efforts by making better use of the leverage of the common visa policy.

The new rules will provide for a regular assessment of how non-EU countries cooperate on readmission, taking into account indicators such as:

- The number of return decisions issued to citizens of a given non-EU country who are irregularly present in the EU;
- The number of actual returns as a percentage of the number of return decisions issued; and
- The number of readmission requests accepted by the non-EU country as a percentage of the number of applications submitted to it.

Member States which encounter substantial and persistent readmission problems with a given non-EU country may also notify the Commission of such a situation. In such cases, the Commission needs to assess the notification within one month.

On this basis, the Commission may introduce stricter conditions, upon its own assessment or following a Member State's notification, for the processing of visa applications coming from nationals of the country in question. Such measures could have an impact on the level of the visa fee to be charged, the number of supporting documents to be submitted, the processing time, or the length of validity of the visa to be issued. These stricter conditions could apply at first to certain categories of travellers only, such as diplomats, before being generalised to all nationals of the non-EU country concerned.

The Commission will continuously assess how the non-EU country concerned cooperates on readmission and will adapt or stop applying such stricter conditions accordingly.

### **What will happen to nationals of non-EU countries which do not cooperate on readmission? Can they still obtain a visa to travel to the EU?**

The restrictive implementation of certain procedural rules and the general rules on the issuing of multiple-entry visas will not call into question applicants' basic right to submit an application for a visa or to be granted a visa. When the Commission, together with the Member States, decides that the mechanism should be triggered, the restrictive implementation of certain rules will be adapted to the particular situation in each non EU-country. This could have an impact on the level of the visa fee to be charged, the number of supporting documents to be submitted, the processing time, or the length of validity of the visa to be issued.

### **What will the new rules for issuing multiple-entry visas be?**

Multiple-entry visas allow the holder to travel repeatedly to the EU during the period of validity of the visa. These frequent visits contribute positively to the EU's economy and growth, people-to-people contacts and cultural exchanges. The current rules on multiple-entry visas, however, give Member States' consulates a large margin of discretion when issuing them. This can lead to competition among Member States in attracting tourists, to bilateral agreements or arrangements with third countries and to 'visa shopping' (travellers chose to apply for visas in consulates where it is believed the chance of receiving a multiple entry visa with long validity is the highest). In the absence of mandatory rules setting out when and how multiple entry visas should be issued, regularly travelling businesspeople could end up having to apply for a visa each and every time they need to travel. Such practices undermine the basic principles of a common visa policy and are not conducive for trade and the economy.

The Commission is therefore proposing that frequent travellers with a positive visa history are issued multiple-entry visas with an increasing length of validity, starting from 1 year up to a maximum of 5 years, when they apply for subsequent visas. These rules will be mandatory and applied by all Member States when issuing visas. Thorough and repeated verifications of applicants' fulfilment of entry conditions will be carried out and only persons with a positive visa track record will be issued multiple-entry visas with a long validity.

### **Why is the Commission introducing the possibility to issue short-stay visas at the external borders?**

Currently, visas issued at the external borders are an exception. In order to promote short-term tourism, the Commission is today proposing to allow Member States to issue visas at the external land or sea borders on a temporary basis.

Member States will be able to issue such visas only under strict conditions and safeguards to minimise irregular migration and security risks. Member States intending to introduce such temporary schemes should notify the Commission in advance and clearly define the categories of beneficiaries and the geographical scope. The visas issued under such temporary schemes would only allow access to the territory of the issuing Member State for a stay of maximum 7 days.

In any case, all travellers, whether EU or non-EU, travelling with a visa or without, have to undergo systematic checks against relevant databases at the EU's external borders.

### **How will the travel and tourism industry benefit from the new rules?**

The EU is among the world's leading tourist destinations. The tourism and travel industry play a key role in the European economy, currently contributing approximately 10% to the EU's GDP. Visa-required travellers represent a steadily increasing number of tourists in the EU. Unfortunately, lengthy visa procedures deter many of them from embarking on their trip to Europe. It is estimated that 21% of potential tourists from emerging markets abandon their plans to travel to Europe due to slow processing of visas.

The proposed changes introduce a number of simplifications to the visa application procedures, including the new rules on multiple-entry visas, electronic filling in and signing of the application, and short-term visas issued at external EU borders. While keeping security safeguards in place, it will be easier for travellers to organise their EU trips ahead of time as well as arrange more spontaneous visits, with a processing time now reduced to 10 days. This will benefit the travel and tourism industry, making it more competitive and boosting the EU's economy.

### **When will it be possible to apply for a Schengen visa online?**

The current visa application process is already partly electronic, but the submission of the visa application and the issuing of a visa sticker remain mostly paper-based. The Commission will launch feasibility studies on further digitalisation by the end of 2018. Discussions with the European Parliament and the Member States will continue in parallel. On that basis, the application process could eventually become fully electronic.

### **Why did the Commission decide to withdraw its previous proposal to revise the EU visa rules?**

In 2014 the Commission proposed a [recast of the Visa Code](#), mainly aimed at further harmonisation of the rules and facilitation of travel for legitimate travellers. However, the negotiations on the Commission's proposal did not make progress due to diverging positions in the European Parliament and the Council.

Meanwhile, as explained above, the EU has been facing increased security and migratory challenges, calling for a more efficient and secure visa policy that can adequately respond to present and future security and migration challenges.

In this context, the Commission decided to withdraw the 2014 recast proposal and is today presenting a new proposal to amend the Visa Code, taking into account the new security and migration landscape. The new proposal adapts the current rules to new technological, security and migration challenges, at the same time making it easier for tourists and business travellers to come to Europe. The proposed changes will contribute to the overall growth of the EU economy.

### **Which countries will the new EU Visa Code apply to?**

Once the proposal enters into force, the changes will apply to all EU Member States applying the common visa policy in full as well as the four Schengen associated States (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland). Bulgaria, Croatia, Ireland, Cyprus, Romania and the UK do not take part in the visa policy.

The proposed changes will only apply to travellers from countries for which a visa is required to travel to the EU. The changes will not apply to travellers from countries benefitting from visa-free travel.

### **What are the next steps?**

The proposed changes will now be discussed in the European Parliament and the Council. They must be agreed by both co-legislators before the new rules become law.

In parallel, the Commission will launch a feasibility study and initiate discussions with the European Parliament and Member States on how the visa application process can be fully digitalised. This will take place before the end of 2018.

### **For More Information**

Press release: EU Visa Policy: Commission puts forward proposals to make it stronger, more efficient and more secure

Factsheet: [A stronger, more efficient and secure EU visa policy](#)

[Communication on adapting the common visa policy to new challenges](#)

[Proposal for a Regulation amending a Community Code on Visas \(Visa Code\)](#)

- [Annexes to the proposal for a regulation](#)
- [Commission Staff Working Document: Impact Assessment](#)
- [Commission Staff Working Document: Executive Summary of the Impact Assessment](#)

[DG Migration and Home Affairs' website – Visa policy](#)

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