

Schengen area: digitalisation of the visa procedure

2022/0132A(COD) - 27/04/2022 - Legislative proposal

PURPOSE: to create an EU platform for online visa applications and the introduction of a digital visa.

PROPOSED ACT: Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council.

ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT: the European Parliament decides in accordance with the ordinary legislative procedure and on an equal footing with the Council.

BACKGROUND: since the entry into force of the Visa Code in 2010 and the start of operations of the Visa Information System (VIS) in 2011, the **environment in which the visa policy operates has changed considerably**. On the one hand migration and security challenges have increased in recent years; on the other significant technological developments provide new opportunities to make the Schengen visa application process smoother for both travellers and consulates.

While visa processing is already partially digitalised, with applications and decisions being recorded in the VIS, **two important steps remain paper-based:** the visa application procedure and the visa sticker. These two steps are a burden for all stakeholders, from the central national public authorities to the consulates and applicants.

The March 2018 Commission communication on visa policy took on board the idea of ‘e-visas’. In addition, a project to develop an EU platform prototype was also carried out by the EU Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT Systems in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (eu-LISA) in 2020-2021.

When revising the EU Visa Code in 2019, the European Parliament and the Council explicitly stated the aim of developing a common solution to **allow Schengen visa applications to be lodged online** in the future, thereby making full use of the recent legal and technological developments.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which led to the slowing down of Schengen visa operations worldwide, prompted Member States to call upon the Commission to speed up work on digitalisation of visa procedures. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum proposed by the Commission in 2020 set the objective of making the **visa procedure fully digitalised by 2025**, with a digital visa and the ability to submit visa applications online.

The **main problems** identified by Member States' visa application and issuing authorities are:

- the length of the procedures and the accumulated costs for consulates to manage, process and archive (and eventually destroy) paper documents;
- the current procedure is also complex and cumbersome for visa applicants;
- the physical visa sticker is prone to forgery and fraud and can be stolen;
- there is an increased risk of ‘visa shopping’ by applicants;

- lastly, the global trend towards digitisation, as well as travellers' demands for increasingly fast, modern and simple procedures, could leave the EU lagging behind.

CONTENT: the Commission is proposing the **digitalisation of the Schengen visa process**, replacing the visa sticker, and introducing the possibility to submit visa applications online through the European online visa platform.

Under the proposal, visa applicants would be able to **apply for a visa online**, including paying the visa fee through a single EU platform, regardless of the Schengen country they want to visit. The platform would (i) automatically determine which Schengen country is competent to consider a given application, (ii) provide applicants with up-to-date information on short-stay Schengen visas, as well as all necessary information on requirements and procedures.

However, first-time applicants, repeat applicants every five years, applicants travelling with children and applicants who will be travelling on a different travel document than the one used for previous visa applications, would still need to present themselves to the consulate or visa application centre to provide biometrics and for identification purposes.

The EU visa application platform is expected to become operational on 1 January 2026. There would be a five-year transition period to allow Member States using their own national visa application platforms to phase out their national solutions and join the EU visa application platform.

The EU visa application platform would benefit Member States by decreasing time spent processing visa applications for consulates and filing the paper applications in the archive. The digital visa would improve the internal security of the Schengen area, as the visa sticker could no longer be falsified, and would considerably reduce the administrative burden on Member States' central authorities and consulates, who would no longer have to spend time and money on manufacturing, ordering and securely transporting visa stickers to the consulates.

The proposal would have a positive impact on EU travel and GDP with an additional **GDP of EUR 53.3 billion on the 2025-2029 period**, as it would mark the transition from a largely paper-based application process to a truly digital and largely harmonised process.

Overall, according to the cost benefit analysis carried out in the context of the impact assessment, **Member States would save EUR 553 million** in administrative costs on the 2025-2029 period.

BUDGETARY IMPLICATIONS: the cost of establishing the EU visa application platform will range between **EUR 33.8 million and EUR 41.2 million**. Each Member State will need to connect and update their national system(s) so they can use the services from the new centralised EU visa application platform. The Impact Assessment estimates this cost between EUR 270 000 and EUR 330 000 per Member State.