

Global Immigration alert

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European Union

The European Commission adopts its first-ever EU visa strategy

Executive summary

On 29 January 2026, the European Commission adopted its first-ever EU visa strategy, introducing a comprehensive framework to make the EU's visa policy more strategic, secure, competitive and efficient. The strategy aims to strengthen Europe's security, enhance its global competitiveness, facilitate talent attraction and modernize the visa ecosystem through digitalization and interoperability.

The strategy includes a recommendation to attract talent for innovation, encouraging EU Member States to streamline long-stay visas and residence permits for highly skilled workers, researchers, students and innovative entrepreneurs as part of supporting the broader EU competitiveness initiatives.

Key developments

The strategy includes the following proposals:

- **Strengthening the EU's security:** New measures to use visa policy as a security tool across the EU:
 - Introduction of a modern system for granting visa-free status to nationals of partner countries in 2026, based on a new assessment framework.
 - Enhanced monitoring of existing visa-free policies under the reformed [Visa Suspension Mechanism](#) to prevent misuse.
 - Upgraded Article 25a mechanism: The EU's short-stay visa policy requires that third countries readmit their nationals who do not have a right to stay in the EU. The Commission annually assesses readmission cooperation of visa-bound third countries, reports to the Council and actively engages in dialogue to improve readmission cooperation with partners to encourage cooperation on return, readmission and security, to be implemented through a visa code revision in 2026.
- Potential targeted restrictive visa measures for hostile actions by third countries that threaten EU security.
- Stronger travel document security, including harmonized EU-level sanctions and definitions to combat document fraud.
- **Boosting prosperity and competitiveness:** Measures to promote economic growth, improve mobility and better attract international talent:
 - Full deployment of digital pre-departure and visa systems, including the European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS) for visa-free travelers by the end of 2026, and full digital visa procedures for visa-required applicants
 - Expanded multiple-entry visas with longer validity for trusted travelers and a common list of verified companies (i.e., an EU-level list of trusted, pre-vetted companies whose business invitation letters would be accepted with reduced scrutiny) to facilitate business travel
 - Exploration of enhanced EU rules for students, researchers and highly skilled workers, and potential frameworks for startup and scaleup founders
 - Support for non-EU nationals and employers via European Legal Gateway Offices
 - Increased EU funding to support visa processing for highly skilled third-country nationals
- **Modern visa tools:** To manage the millions of travelers entering the Schengen Area annually, the EU is advancing major digital modernization efforts. The EU aims to deploy interoperable EU-wide IT systems by 2028, enabling single-point queries across multiple databases and reducing visa abuse risks.

- **Recommendation on attracting talent for innovation:** The strategy encourages EU Member States to:
 - Adopt simpler, faster and more digital procedures for long-stay visas and residence permits.
 - Reduce administrative burdens by requiring fewer documents and providing shorter processing times.
 - Enable easier transitions from study and research to work or entrepreneurship.
 - Improve intra-EU mobility for talent.
 - Strengthen coordination between EU Member States, universities and research organizations. This supports broader EU initiatives such as Choose Europe, the Union of Skills, and the EU Startup and Scaleup Strategy.

Impact on employers

Employers that hire non-EU nationals, particularly highly skilled workers, researchers and innovators, should expect:

- Faster and more predictable visa processing, especially once digital visa procedures are fully deployed
- Increased access to multiple-entry visas for business travel, improving mobility and productivity
- New EU-funded support mechanisms, including Legal Gateway Offices, easing administrative burdens for employers navigating visa processes
- Potential policy changes that could further ease recruitment of startup founders, scaleup talent and advanced skill profiles
- Improved intra-EU mobility, making it easier to deploy non-EU talent across multiple EU Member States

Employers may monitor the 2026 Visa Code revisions and prepare for the phased rollout of new digital systems and security mechanisms.

Key steps

EY will continue to monitor these developments. Should you have any questions, we encourage you to contact one of our immigration professionals.

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