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From:	Commission Services
To:	Visa Working Party/Mixed Committee (EU-Iceland/Norway and Switzerland/Liechtenstein)
Subject:	Background note on EU Visa Policy Strategy

This background note presents a **preliminary and non-exhaustive list of ideas for actions** that could be included under the EU visa policy strategy and aims to gather the views of the Member States.

1. CONTEXT AND TIMELINE

As outlined in the Political Guidelines of President Von der Leyen 2024-2029 and in the mission letter of Commissioner Brunner, the new EU Visa Strategy, planned to be adopted in the **4th Quarter 2025**, will address how visa policy can further contribute to **securing borders, managing migration**, and promoting better **cooperation with non-EU countries**, in form of a Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. As set out in the Union of Skills, the strategy will also include measures to facilitate the arrival of top students, researchers and trained workers from third countries through issuance of long-stay visas and residence permits. This also echoes the recently adopted EU Startup and Scaleup Strategy which also includes measures to better attract talent necessary for the EU startup ecosystem to thrive, such as highly skilled students, researchers, entrepreneurs and trained workers from third countries to come to the

EU, for example by making the most of the [Students and Researchers Directive](#) and the [EU Blue Card Directive](#), in particular for startup founders (Q4 2025).

2. PROBLEM DEFINITION

In the face of an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape, the EU Visa Policy Strategy will leverage its policies to advance the EU's strategic interests and long-term objectives in line with the current objectives of the Commission. The EU's visa policy has emerged as a key instrument, not only facilitating the free movement of people, but also yielding significant geopolitical influence. With 9.7 million Schengen visas issued in 2024 and over 1.4 billion people from 61 countries benefiting from visa-exempt travel, the EU's visa policy plays a crucial role in promoting tourism, trade, and economic growth.

Nevertheless, there is potential to use the EU visa policy even more strategically since its impact extends beyond the realm of mobility, and it can serve as a vital tool for fostering **cooperation with third countries in areas such as security**, bolstering **border protection**, and ensuring efficient **migration management**. The Strategy aims to fully harness this potential.

The EU visa policy should also be modernised by streamlining the visa application process, reducing waiting times, and increasing processing capacity in third countries, the EU visa policy can **support business and tourism travel** to the EU more effectively.

The Strategy also aims to introduce a **new approach to visa exemptions** to ensure a fair, consistent, and well-coordinated application across all Member States. In addition, it will address emerging trends such as visa shopping to further reinforce the integrity and robustness of the EU visa policy.

As regards **long-stay visas and residence permits**, as set out in the Union of Skills, Member States continue to face challenges in attracting top talent from abroad needed to fill labour shortages in the EU and drive innovation. Overly lengthy or complex visa and legal migration procedures are often cited by employers and migrants as an obstacle to legal migration. More effective processing of long-stay visas and residence permits would help attract skills from third countries and support the effective implementation of the EU legal migration acquis.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE EU VISA STRATEGY

The strategy should propose actions supporting a modern and fit for purpose visa policy that would pursue the following objectives:

I. A modern visa policy that contributes to the EU's economic growth and competitiveness

- A simplified, effective and less burdensome visa application process to promote business opportunities and tourism;
- The effective processing of long-stay visas and residence permits to help attract skills from third countries, addressing skills shortages and fostering the development of top talent in the EU, with a focus on attracting researchers and innovative entrepreneurs and start-up founders.

II. A modern visa policy that strengthens EU security

- Reinforce the leverage of Article 25a of the Visa Code, linking visa policy to cooperation on readmission beyond short stay visas;
- Adopt a new approach on visa exemptions.

Those objectives will be supported by additional actions to make visa policy modern and future-proof, building upon the planned developments in the coming years, such as digitalisation, the revised Visa Information System and interoperability.

4. NON-EXHAUSTIVE LIST OF PROPOSED ACTIONS UNDER THE OBJECTIVES

The strategy will set out actions pursuing the two objectives outlined above, with each action primarily linked to one objective – while potentially supporting one or the other.

1. **Attracting talent for innovation by facilitating legal pathways for students and researchers, innovative entrepreneurs and start-up founders, and highly skilled workers** with:
 - a. a **Recommendation** to Member States to streamline and expedite legal pathways for these categories, solidify key rights to make these pathways more attractive, and improve access to information and coordination between relevant authorities
 - b. an **assessment of the relevant EU and national acquis**, to identify gaps and propose solutions with an EU added value
2. **Supporting Member States** in efficient processing of visa applications to attract talent for innovation with:
 - a. **dedicated EU funding** to assist Member States consulates in processing applications for residence permits and long-stay visas, from students, researchers, highly skilled workers, innovative entrepreneurs and start-up founders
3. **Facilitating travel for tourism and business** by introducing the legal possibility to grant **10-year multiple entry visas** to bona fide travellers for short stays, to facilitate travel for tourism and business purposes.
4. **Facilitating access to Schengen to boost EU competitiveness and simplification for Member States** by launching a long-term/ strategic discussion on the issue of stays in the Schengen area requiring access to different Member States for altogether **more than 90 days without exceeding 90 days in an individual Member State**. This issue concerns for example some non-EU professionals supporting EU-based businesses heavily relying on mobility between Member States (ex., lorry drivers, performing artists).

1. A new **modernized visa exemption system** by:
 - a. **Introducing a new assessment framework for granting visa exemptions**, including new and more precise assessment criteria, that are more closely linked to the grounds for suspension.
 - b. **Proposing a regular assessment cycle of all visa-free regimes** by enshrining the assessment by the Commission on a regular (e.g. 3-year) or extraordinary (when necessary) basis.
 - c. **Establishing faster and more efficient visa exemption processes** by introducing a new system for granting and withdrawing visa exemptions through delegated acts.
 - d. **Make full use of the new revised visa suspension mechanism**, in particular through the monitoring of visa policy alignment and citizenship investment programmes.
2. **Recalibrating the visa leverage on return and readmission, and considering an ad hoc approach to non-cooperation on security, and border management:**
 - a. **Introducing an easier and more flexible way to implement the Article 25a** mechanism by re-calibrating the measures within and between the two steps: e.g. suspension of fast-track visa processing and of multiple-entry visas for certain (e.g. diplomatic or service) or all categories of passports; and, in case of very serious situations, suspension of all visa issuance for certain or all categories of passports.
 - b. **Proposing additional changes in the legislation, such as exploring the** adoption of restrictive measures, based on the level of cooperation, for other types of long-stay visas and/or residence permits.
 - c. **Announcing non-legislative adjustments concerning relevant processes**, such as a minimum duration for implemented measures and a more consistent application of the possibility to withdraw proposals.
 - d. The potential articulation with the new leverage mechanisms foreseen in the Global Europe Instrument and the MFF proposal.
 - e. Bringing up the considerations of EU interest in overall relations.
 - f. **Approximating the logic of Article 25a to other areas**, such as developing ad hoc measures to respond to the lack of cooperation on security and border management.

3. **Introducing targeted restrictive visa measures by equipping the Commission with implementing powers** to propose binding measures to suspend, reject or ban visa applications from nationals of third countries with severely deteriorated relations with the EU, ranging from official travels to all travels for non-essential travel purposes.
4. Strengthening **travel document security** by:
 - a. Establishing a uniform list of accepted third-country travel documents for entry into the Schengen area.
 - b. Enhancing Member States' capabilities to access fingerprints stored in travel documents, with technical support from eu-LISA and Frontex.
 - c. Introducing harmonised definitions and criminal sanctions, along with entry bans, for document fraud across all Member States.

In addition to these two general objectives, the modernisation the Visa policy should be supported by additional structural measures:

1. Supporting Member States' implementation of the visa policy with an **EU Visa Support Office** within Frontex, to:
 - a. Support Member States with dedicated training to consular officers, document verification, risk assessments and country analysis.
 - b. Monitor the performance of consulates and their external service providers.
 - c. Temporarily reinforce consulates during peak seasons by deployments from a pool of officers.
2. Improving **oversight and accountability in visa procedures** by:
 - a. Increasing the steering by the Commission of the coherence and consistency with geopolitical objectives of **local Schengen adaptation decisions**.
 - b. Launching a first-ever **comprehensive study of outsourcing services practices and financing** of external service providers collecting visa applications.
3. The continued and strategic use of **EU funding** to support visa policy implementation.

Questions to Member States:

- Which actions would you recommend to attract and facilitate legal pathways for global talent, including students, researchers, highly skilled workers, innovators and start-up founders through visa policy?
- In your opinion, which actions would enhance the leverage of article 25a of the Visa Code?
- Which criteria would you like to see in a potential visa exemption methodology?
- Do you have any other comments on the draft actions proposed under the Strategy, would you have other actions that you would like to be included in the strategy?
