



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

DIRECTORATE-GENERAL MIGRATION AND HOME AFFAIRS

## DIGITALISATION OF THE VISA PROCEDURE

### Consultation paper for the travel and tourism industry

#### Disclaimer

*This is a working document only for consultation purposes and does not prejudice the official position of the Commission on the issues covered. The views reflected in this consultation paper do not constitute a formal proposal by the Commission.*

#### 1. BACKGROUND

While the current visa process is already partly digitalised, as applications and decisions are processed in VIS, two important steps remain paper-based, namely submitting the visa application with the required supporting documents and the issuing of the visa sticker, which is affixed to the travel document.

The concept of visa digitalisation or e-visas introduces the possibility to apply for a visa online and the replacement of the current (paper) visa sticker by a digital document.

Already in 2017, discussions on fully digitalising the visa process began in the Council focusing on two aspects: (1) replacing the physical visa sticker by a ‘digital visa’ and (2) providing the possibility to apply online for a visa as an alternative to paper-based application.

Then, the [March 2018 Commission communication on visa policy](#) took up the debate and announced a feasibility study on digital visa procedures and the intention to assess options and promote pilot projects which would prepare the ground for future proposals. As a follow up to the communication, in the autumn of 2018, the Commission launched a consultation with relevant stakeholders on the further digitalisation of visa processing.

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

Finally, the [New Pact on Migration and Asylum](#) proposed by the Commission sets the objective of making the visa procedure fully digitalised by 2025, with a digital visa and the ability to submit visa applications online.

Significant evidence for this initiative has already been gathered through a [study on the feasibility and implications of options to digitalise visa processing](#) concluded in September 2019.<sup>1</sup> It provides a good overview of the potential and the challenges of visa digitalisation, including a detailed analysis of possible technical options. The [Inception Impact Assessment](#) was published on the Commission's 'Have your say' portal for gathering preliminary feedback - the feedback period ended on 1 January 2021.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. POSSIBLE CONTENT OF AN INITIATIVE ON VISA DIGITALISATION

To apply for a Schengen visa, applicants today have to fill in an application form, gather the necessary supporting documents and then take an appointment at a consulate or – in most cases – a visa application centre managed by an external service provider, to submit the application, give their biometrics and pay the visa fee (in cash, by credit card or bank transfer).

The initiative would introduce a number of novelties for visa applicants and Member States. The aim of the initiative is to enable applicants to use an online portal to apply for a Schengen visa in the future. The visa portal would allow the applicants to:

- fill in the digital application form online,
- upload the supporting documents and a copy of the passport,
- pay the visa fee online,
- book an appointment (where necessary),
- sign and submit the application electronically,
- track their application status online and
- receive a notification when a decision has been taken.

Booking an appointment to visit the consulate or visa application centre might still be necessary for first-time applicants and then every 5 years to give fingerprints and have a photo taken, as well as each time the visa applicant has a new passport. If they don't fall into any of these cases, repeat visa applicants would therefore be able to complete the entire application process online, without visiting the consulate or visa application centre.

The visas would be issued in a secure digital format, instead of the paper visa sticker affixed to the passport. Applicants would be notified on the decision taken by the consulate (if the visa is issued, refused etc.) by email or other electronic means. The notification would contain the data currently found on the visa sticker, as well as possibly a barcode. A secure verification tool, which would be part of the digital visa portal, would enable applicants both to verify the status of their application and the validity of their visa after issuance.

Specifically, these five policy options will be examined further:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/4cb4fbb8-4c82-11ea-b8b7-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

<sup>2</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12758-Digitalisation-of-visa-procedures>

**Option 1: EU “soft law”.** This option would support Member States’ initiatives to develop online application tools. Currently some Member States have already introduced or are planning to introduce such tools, many of them covering only parts of the visa procedure. The EU “soft law” approach would involve: encouraging Member States’ initiatives and designing voluntary common standards for online application tools; providing recommendations, monitoring of, and reporting on compliance with such requirements. A digital visa cannot be implemented with “soft law” tools, since the use of the visa sticker is a legal requirement of the Schengen acquis.

**Option 2: Minimal EU legislative changes and digital visa.** Under this option, an EU legislative instrument would remove legal obstacles and establish minimum standards for online visa application procedures at national level. These standards would apply only for Member States choosing to introduce national online application tools on a voluntary basis. The applicants would still be required to show up at the consulate (or visa application centre) every 5 years to provide their biometric identifiers (facial image and fingerprints) and be identified with their passport. The paper visa sticker would be replaced by a digital visa and a web service for visa holders to check the validity of their visas.

**Option 3: EU online application portal (optional for Member States) and digital visa.** Under this option, the EU legislative instrument would establish a common EU visa application portal whose use would be voluntary for Member States. Member States could also use their own visa online application tools. Due to security reasons, applicants would still be required to show up at a consulate (or visa application centre) every 5 years to provide their biometric identifiers (facial image and fingerprints) and be identified with their passport. During those 5 years, applications could be submitted fully online. A digital visa would replace the paper visa sticker.

**Option 4: EU online application portal (mandatory for Member States) and digital visa.** This option is the same as option 3, but the use of the common EU visa application portal would be mandatory for Member States after a transitional period (during which they could continue to use their own tools).

**Option 5: EU online application portal (mandatory for Member States), fully digital procedure and digital visa.** This option is the same as option 4, but without a transitional period for Member States to use existing visa online application tools. Moreover, the applicant would identify him/herself online and submit his/her fingerprints, facial image and copy of travel document using a smartphone application. Appearance in person would be required only in very special circumstances.

**Figure 1** Comparison of options

| Baseline scenario                              | Alternative policy options   |   |  |   |  |
|--|--|---|--|---|--|
|  | Option 1: EU “soft law”  | Option 2: Minimal EU legislative changes and digital visa | Option 3: EU online application portal (optional) and digital visa | Option 4: EU online application portal (mandatory) and digital visa | Option 5: EU online application portal (mandatory), fully digital procedure and digital visa |
| No policy or legislative changes at EU level   | Support MSs’ initiatives to develop online application tools   | Minimum standards for online visa application procedures  | Common EU visa application portal (EU VAP)                         |   |  |
| No full online application procedure           | No full online application procedure   | National online application tools on a voluntary basis    | Use of EU VAP voluntary for MS / National online application tools | Use of EU VAP mandatory for MS                                      |  |
| No digital visa                                | No digital visa  | Digital visa and web service                              |  | after a transitional period   | without a transitional period  |
| Show up at the consulate for every application | Show up at the consulate only every 5 years to provide biometric identifiers and be identified with their passport |   | No need to show up at the consulate                                |   |  |

### 3. QUESTIONS

This consultation paper is aimed at collecting your views at the consultation meetings on these issues on the basis of the questions listed below.

- (1) Would the introduction of an online application procedure and a digital visa facilitate the existing (Schengen) visa application procedure and reduce possible administrative burdens for applicants? Which of the five options outlined above would better serve this purpose?
  - (a) 4 or 5 [not 3 b/c convergence already hard]
- (2) What are the possible benefits of online visa applications and digital visas for the travel and tourism industry? Do you expect digitalisation of visa processing to increase travel and tourism to the EU and thus to promote growth and employment? Do you have any evidence to quantify such impacts?
  - (a) Cost (visiting consulate more expensive than foreign trip)
  - (b) Security
  - (c) Scope for more convergence re documentary support, including acceptance of digital docs / scanned docs
  - (d) Consider how group applications would work: qv ADS scheme
  - (e) Yes – we have some evidence so can send report
  - (f) Yes – would increase volume:
    - Competitive (Australia and New Zealand make it easy): multiple entry a good idea
    - Opportunity to provide welcome throughout process, and deliver other information e.g. related to condition in destination
    - You don't have to lodge your passport pending application (especially for frequent travellers)
- (3) Should the initiative only cover Schengen (short-stay) visas or also national (long-stay) visas? Why?
  - (a) No objection to longer
- (4) What are the possible challenges related to internet accessibility and computer literacy for applicants in third countries when moving towards a digital visa procedure? How can these challenges be addressed and overcome?
  - (a) Mobile processing capability?
- (5) What particular problems might visa holders and private entities (e.g. hotels, employers) face, when moving towards a digital visa (instead of a paper visa sticker affixed to the passport)? How could these problems be overcome?

- (a) NB. documentary support: e.g. proof of accommodation when it is booked by an intermediary; now people make a booking to support application then cancel it
- (b) Integrate or at least don't get in the way of health credential processing

The Commission also welcomes written contributions by 24 March. Please send those contributions to: [Elettra.DI-MASSA1@ec.europa.eu](mailto:Elettra.DI-MASSA1@ec.europa.eu)