Communication on the

Development of a prototype for an

EU Online Visa Application Platform

Why was the project carried out?

The EU aims to **digitalise Schengen visa procedures** and for this purpose the European Commission carried out a study to assess the feasibility and implications in 2019[1]. This **study analysed the feasibility of digitalising the visa application process**, using one common platform for all Schengen Member States, as well as the introduction of a digital visa to replace the current sticker.

One of the recommendations of the study was to develop a prototype to support the digitalisation initiative by demonstrating the feasibility of a common EU online visa application platform.

Eu-LISA, the European Commission and Member States' representatives set up and carried out a project for the development of the prototype from September 2020 until October 2021.

The project has demonstrated the feasibility of an EU Online Visa Application platform that will better secure and reinforce trust in the Schengen Area by:

- providing a harmonised, digital and seamless visa procedure for applicants;
- offering a common and efficient application management platform for Member States' central and consular authorities;
- supporting a coherent visa application process with Visa Application Centers.

What is the visa digitalisation prototype?

The prototype is small-scale version of **what a future EU Online Visa Application platform could offer**.

It shows the potential of a harmonised, digital and seamless visa procedure for applicants and a common platform for Member States' visa authorities to efficiently handle the intake of applications.

What are the main features of the new platform?

The prototype envisages **one common platform** where all visa policy information is published and maintained at EU-level, enabling applicants to find out whether they need a visa, to consult general information on application procedures, and to get Member State-specific information such as locations where applications can be submitted, including contact details and opening hours.

A PERSONAL SECURE ACCOUNT FOR APPLICANTS
From their **personal secure account** applicants can submit their visa application digitally by filling in the application form online, uploading the necessary supporting documents and paying the visa fee. At any time, applications can be saved as a draft and retrieved for completion at a later stage.

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[1] Study on the feasibility and implications of options to digitalise visa processing, 2019, available: https://op.europa.eu/s/pgU6.

This personal secure account also allows applicants to check whether their previously collected fingerprints are still valid, to receive notifications during the processing of the application (e.g. to provide additional information) and when a decision has been taken. The prototype also allows applicants to submit and manage group applications, request a visa extension or revocation, as well as to view all their previous applications, visas obtained or refused, irrespective of the Schengen country where they applied for a visa.

MANAGING AND REVIEWING APPLICATIONS MORE EFFICIENTLY

The prototype offers Member States' visa authorities the possibility to manage applications more efficiently. The **automated quality checks** carried out by the platform during the application process (including check for fingerprints) result in more complete and error-free applications and as such, smoother processing by Member States visa authorities.

Visa authorities can use the platform to **communicate with applicants** through a secure channel, e.g. to request additional documents which they can then link to the application, (automatically) assign applications to staff on the basis of certain criteria thereby efficiently balancing the workload. Once the platform has performed the automated checks and an application is deemed admissible, it will automatically be transferred to the national visa system of the competent Member State for the purpose of examination and decision-making.

BETTER COLLABORATION DURING THE DECISION PROCESS

Furthermore, the prototype allows Member States to grant certain access rights to staff of visa application centres to support them in carrying out the tasks delegated to them by Member States. Member States can adjust the information that specifically applies to them, such as country information and application specific requirements (fees, required supporting documents). User permissions for consular staff of staff of Visa Application Centres can be set by Member States themselves, both at local (consulate) and central level.

The prototype also facilitates bilateral visa representation by redirecting visa applications submitted in a certain third-country to the representing Member State.

Almost all the steps that applicants, consulates and Visa Applications Centers can perform through the prototype are operational and seamlessly interconnected. Only the steps that require interaction with existing external systems have been visualised by using mock ups.

Main outcomes and results

The prototype project has demonstrated that **a common EU application platform is feasible**. The concept of 'a digital visa application' became more refined and tangible, and it engaged stakeholders across Europe to collaborate and provide input.

The prototype was well received by Member States during the testing phase and considered **very user-friendly**. It showed that an EU application platform would yield many benefits.

POTENTIAL AREAS TO IMPROVE

Some areas for improvement and considerations for the future also emerged during the testing phase. When developing the future common EU Online Visa Application Platform, the user experience for applicants, consulates and central authorities should be further improved.

Additionally, the platform should be compatible with Member States' specific visa organisational structures, and data protection aspects should be carefully considered. This feedback helped to shape the prototype and can serve as a baseline for a future implementation of the Online Visa Application Platform.

What comes next

The work on the prototype has been taken into account in the Commission's proposal on digitalisation of visa procedures, in particular regarding the technical, budgetary and legal requirements for a future EU Online Visa Application platform.

Member States' insights and suggestions gathered during the unassisted testing sessions should be considered in future initiatives.