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Schengen: a guide to the European border-free zone

Cars waiting to pass a border control

The EU's passport-free travel space, known as the Schengen area, is one of the most tangible achievements of European integration. Learn about it in our guide.

What is Schengen?

The Schengen area is one of the pillars of the European project. Since its creation in 1995, when passport controls were abolished inside this zone, EU citizens enjoy the right to freedom

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of movement. This means that they can live, study, work and retire anywhere in the EU. Tourists and businesses also benefit from these rights.

Schengen countries

Schengen includes 26 countries: 22 from the EU and four from outside: Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and Liechtenstein.
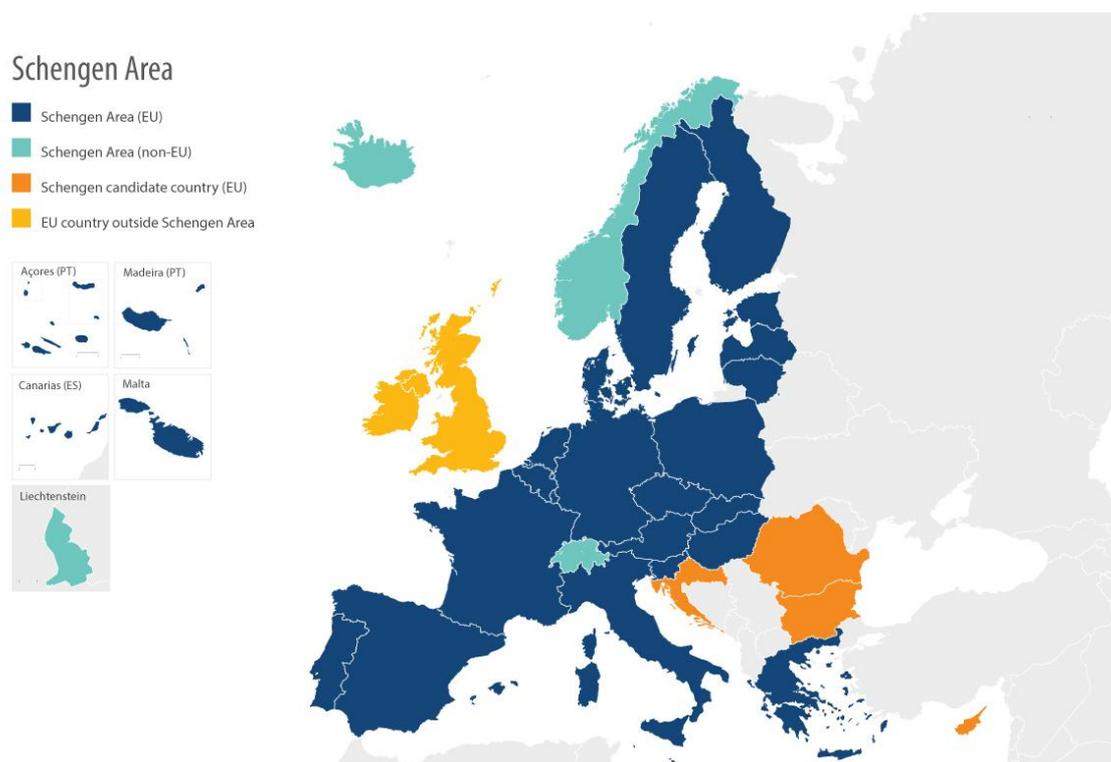
All EU countries are part of Schengen except from six: Ireland and the UK, which maintain opt-outs and operate their own common travel area; as well as Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus and Romania, which are due to join Schengen at some point in the future.

Purpose and benefits

Up to 3.5 million people travel across an internal EU border every day. Free movement may in practice entail different rights for different categories of people, from tourists to families.

All EU citizens can stay in another EU country as a tourist for up to three months with a valid passport or identity card. Also they can live in another member state for work, with the right to be treated in the same way as nationals of that country. Entrepreneurs benefit from freedom of establishment and students have the right to study anywhere in the EU.

Closing EU internal borders again could lead to an estimated cost of between €100 billion and e230 billion over 10 years and impede cross-border commuting for 1.7 million people.

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Map of the Schengen zone

Ensuring security

The Schengen rules abolish internal border controls, while harmonising and reinforcing protection of the area's external borders. Once inside the Schengen area, people can travel from one country to another without being subjected to border checks. However, national authorities may check people at or close to internal borders if police information and experience warrant stepping up surveillance temporarily.

Schengen also includes a common visa policy for short stays by non-EU citizens and helps participating states join forces in the fight against crime with the aid of police and judicial cooperation.

The Schengen Information System is being reinforced to deliver more security to Europeans. Discover the improvements in our infographics.

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The Schengen zone is one of the pillars of the European project ©AP Images/European Union-EP

External and internal borders

The functioning of the Schengen rules was affected by the increase of migration flows into the EU in 2015 and the heightened security concerns, including terrorist and serious cross border crime activities, leading to the re-introduction of border checks by several member states.

Parliament criticised the continuation of internal border checks in the Schengen area in a report adopted on 30 May 2018. Temporary internal border checks within the Schengen area have been in place for three years. MEPs are pushing for clearer conditions for their use as a measure of last resort.

Challenges and EU responses

Managing migration and the security of its external borders is a challenge for Europe. Up to 1.83 million illegal crossings were detected at the EU's external borders in 2015. Although this figure dropped to 150,114 in 2018, the EU tries to strengthen its external border controls and to deal more efficiently with asylum applications.

These challenges have triggered considerable developments in border management policy. This includes for example the creation of instruments and agencies such as the Schengen Information System, the Visa Information System, the European Border and Coast Guard

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Agency (Frontex), or a new entry and exit registration system at the Schengen zone's external borders.

Travellers who don't need a visa will in the future be screened before they arrive in the EU using the European Travel Information and Authorisation System (Etias) in order to detect criminals, terrorists or anyone else posing a risk before they arrive in the EU. These controls could start as early as 2021.

In addition, MEPs have approved plans to give the EU Border and Coast Guard Agency a standing corps of 10,000 border guards by 2027 to boost Europe's security.

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