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 of movement. This means that they can live, study, work and retire anywhere in the EU. Tourists

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1 I 6

and businesses also benefit from these rights.

Schengen countries

All EU countries are part of Schengen except for Ireland, which has opt-outs, as well as Cyprus which is due to join Schengen at some point in the future. EU countries have agreed to lift border controls at air and maritime borders for people travelling from and to Bulgaria and Romania as of 31 March 2024.

In addition, four non-EU countries are also part of the Schengen area: Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and Liechtenstein.

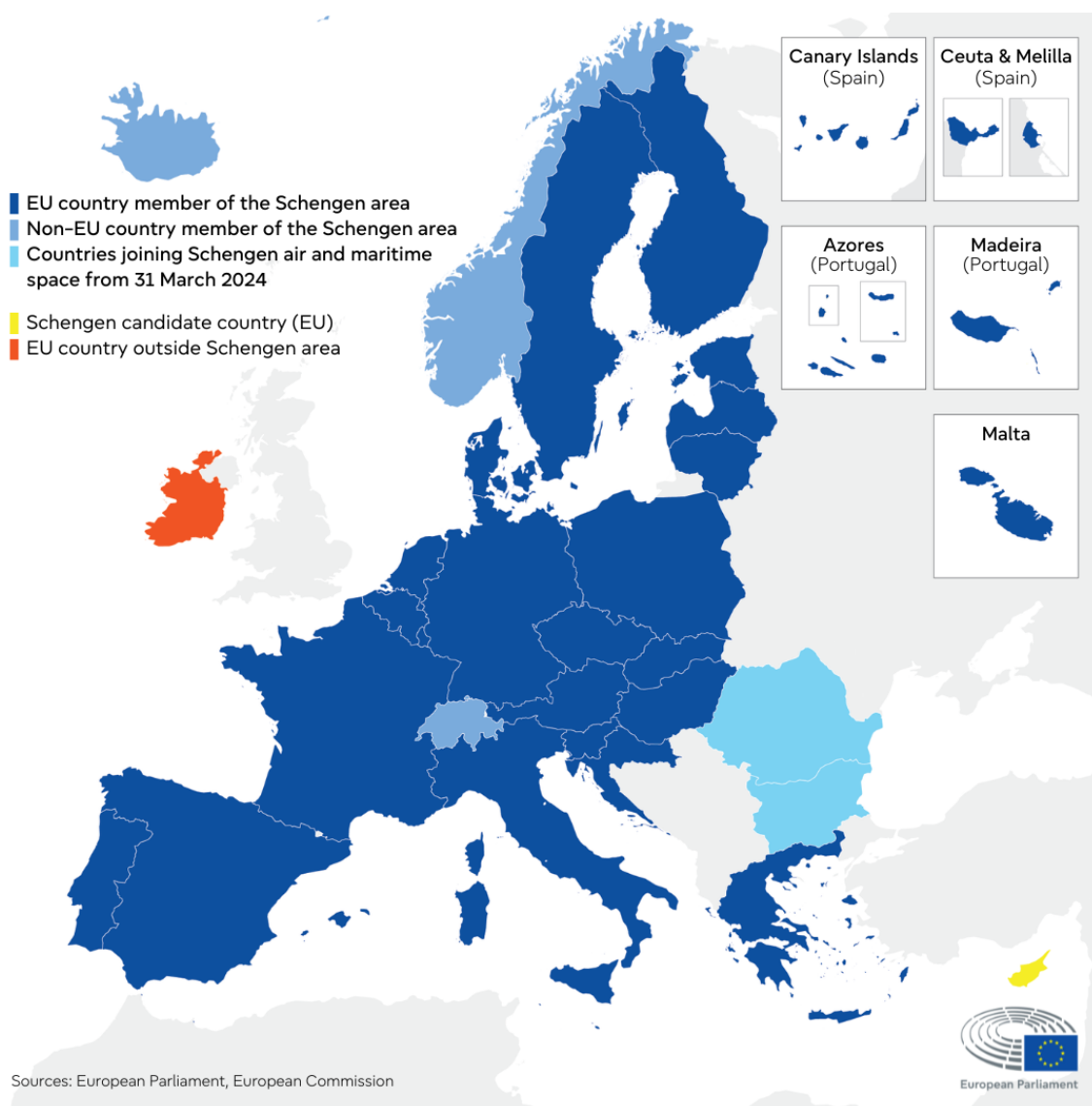*Find out more about the Schengen area's enlargement*

Purpose and benefits

Millions of 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 internal EU borders again would impose heavy costs and impede cross-border commuting for 1.7 million people.

Check out how Covid-19 affects freedom of movement in the EU

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2 l 6

- EU country member of the Schengen area
- Non-EU country member of the Schengen area
- Countries joining Schengen air and maritime space from 31 March 2024
- Schengen candidate country (EU)
- EU country outside Schengen area

Canary Islands (Spain)

Ceuta & Melilla (Spain)

Azores (Portugal)

Madeira (Portugal)

Malta

Sources: European Parliament, European Commission

European Parliament

Map of the Schengen area, showcasing current members, EU countries that are not currently a part of it, and a candidate country

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

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3 | 6

cooperation.

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

***Read more about** how Europol is better equipped to fight crime and terrorism*

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. The outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020 also pushed several EU countries to bring back internal border controls, in an attempt to control the spread of the virus.

Parliament has repeatedly criticised the continuation of internal border checks in the Schengen area and wants to allow them only as a measure of last resort. In a resolution on EU coordinated action to combat the pandemic adopted in April 2020, Parliament urged member states to adopt only necessary and proportionate measures when introducing and prolonging internal border controls', stressing the need to get back to a fully functioning Schengen area.

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4 I 6

In December 2021, the European Commission proposed an update of the rules governing the Schengen area, aiming to ensure that reintroducing internal border controls remains a measure of last resort and promote the use of alternative measures instead such as targeted police checks and enhanced police cooperation.

After working on the proposal, the European Parliament adopted its position on 20 September 2023 and decided to open negotiations with the Council. MEPs have on several occasions argued against the frequent reintroduction of controls, which hampers the free movement of people across the EU.

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 about 355,300 in 2023, 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 Agency (Frontex), or an entry and exit registration system at the Schengen zone's external borders.

In a resolution adopted in July 2021, Parliament approved the renewed Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) budget for 2021-2027, which was increased to €9.88 billion. The fund contributes to strengthening the common asylum policy, develop legal migration, in line with member state needs, support the integration of third-country nationals, and fight irregular migration. It also serves to push member states to share the responsibility of hosting refugees and asylum-seekers more fairly.

The fund works closely with the new Internal Security Fund (ISF), focusing on tackling cross-border threats, such as terrorism, organised crime and cybercrime. The ISF was also approved by Parliament in July 2021 with a budget of €1.9 billion.

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. Etias is expected to be operational as of mid-2025.

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5 | 6

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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6 I 6