



Access denied: The EU's discriminatory visa regime is undermining its reputation in Africa

by Katherine Pye, 2 April 2025

EU leaders claim people-to-people links between Europe and Africa are a strength, but the EU's visa policy tells a different story. The EU should reform the Schengen visa system to boost its soft power.

The European Commission says that the EU's partnership with Africa is [one of its top priorities](#). Africa's rapid economic development has made it the [second fastest-growing](#) region globally after Asia: last year, 11 of the world's 20 fastest-growing economies were in Africa. Yet EU leaders worry – with good reason – that their geopolitical adversaries and competitors are becoming preferred trade, investment and security partners for many African countries.

Europe's increasingly stringent approach to migration has become a major source of friction with African governments, and its visa policy is also doing considerable damage to the EU's image among Africa's intellectual, cultural and business elites. There is no evidence that the EU's attempts to reduce irregular migration by making it harder for travellers to get Schengen visas are working. The EU should therefore revisit its approach to visas. The fact that African citizens want to visit, study and do business in Europe is an element of soft power, on which the EU could capitalise to gain influence on the continent.

In 2022, 30 per cent of African Schengen visa applications were rejected by the EU – up from [18 per cent](#) in 2014. This is significantly higher than the global rejection rate of 17.5 per cent. Some of Africa's largest economies – notably Algeria and Nigeria – had Schengen visa rejection rates of between [40 and 50 per cent](#). While one might have expected the number of Africans applying for visas to increase with its growing population, the number went down from 2.2 million in 2014 to 2.05 million in 2022. Rejection rates have risen dramatically in the past decade even as the overall number of applications has decreased.

Short-term visa rejections do not stop migration

Schengen visas are used by tourists, businesspeople and professionals visiting the EU for 90 days or less. Unlike longer term work visa policies (which are set individually by member states) all 29 Schengen countries apply the same rules for 90-day visas. According to the EU and European embassies, the high rejection rate is due to the risk of recipients overstaying. But there is little or no public data available on the number of non-Europeans on Schengen visas who overstay, and overstaying is [hardly mentioned](#) in Frontex's reports as a cause for concern in relation to illegal migration. In any case, the EU is implementing the [Entry/Exit System \(EES\)](#) in October 2025, a new IT system which will monitor all Schengen arrivals and departures, detecting breaches of visa conditions automatically.

Non-EU nationals already face heavy penalties and future entry bans if they overstay and there is no evidence to suggest that the EU's high visa rejection rate reduces overstaying. Many of the measures the EU takes to reduce overstaying are weakly substantiated. For example, EU member-states require extensive documentation such as bank statements from candidates, to prove their ability to spend often more than €100 minimum per day. These figures are prohibitively high for the vast majority of earners in the Global South, even though there is no proof that more affluent candidates are less likely to overstay.

If overstaying is such a grave concern that EU member-states deny visas to so many Africans, why does the issue barely feature in EU discussions on border security? The EU's punishing visa regime has more to do with forcing cooperation in another area: readmissions. Since 2019 the EU has used a '[visa leverage mechanism](#)', which explicitly links visa accessibility to co-operation from African countries on readmission of deported migrants. For a number of years, the EU has been [trying to conclude](#) agreements with African countries which would oblige them to take back migrants deported from Europe. So far, the EU has only succeeded in concluding an agreement with Cabo Verde, while negotiations with Nigeria, Tunisia and Morocco have stalled. Even African countries that informally co-operate with the EU on readmission only take a [very small number](#) of migrants back.

African governments have little incentive to co-operate on readmission because returns are expensive, [unpopular](#) and politically costly, particularly to countries that rely on remittance income from diasporas in Europe. Anxious to make some headway, the EU has opted to use Schengen visas as leverage. The Commission now regularly assesses co-operation from third countries on readmission, and where it finds it unsatisfactory the Council can decide to increase processing times, issue fewer multiple-entry visas and increase application fees from the baseline of €90 to up to €120 (as it did with [the Gambia](#) in 2022). This bargaining strategy has yielded few rewards: readmissions co-operation is [politically unsustainable](#) for African governments and also [demonstrably ineffective](#) in reducing migration flows. Meanwhile, because the vast majority of migrants the EU wants countries to take back come from Africa, the visa leverage mechanism results in a system that inevitably discriminates against African visa applicants. If the EU cares about improving its public image in Africa, it should decouple readmission targets from visa accessibility. Moreover, it is possible that a less punishing travel regime could lead to better faith discussions on migration in the future.

How the EU's visa regime undermines its soft power

The current system harms the EU's image among a large group of people. World-famous African [architects](#), [lecturers](#), [scientists](#), [musicians](#) and award-winning [artists](#) are constantly denied visas to present their work at international conferences, festivals and exhibitions. They have been publicly

criticising Europe's draconian visa regime for years, to little avail: it has become a matter of course for internationally renowned professionals to have their visa applications rejected at the last minute with minimal explanation. African businesspeople have [warned](#) that restrictions on short-term visa-free access to Europe are hindering their ability to network and explore international business ventures. Some professionals have given up on attempting to go to events in the EU altogether. Others have opted to take up long-term employment in Europe, rather than trying to make shorter visits, exacerbating the brain drain, as the Alliance for Medical Research in Africa argued in a [recent paper](#).

There is also a geopolitical dimension to the visa question. In the past 10 years, Russia has concluded visa-free travel agreements with [South Africa](#), [Namibia](#) and [Botswana](#), and most recently [announced](#) the extension of a simplified e-visa programme to Kenya, Eswatini and Zimbabwe. These announcements came in the same year that Ireland ended visa-free travel from South Africa and Botswana. While few African citizens travel to Russia, and many Africans based in Russia have described facing high levels of [racism](#), Russia probably sees its visa agreements as a tool for positive messaging and a basis for further co-operation.

A separate issue is the EU's costly and inequitable payments system. Applicants are not refunded the price of the visa if their application is rejected, which has meant European home affairs departments have retained millions of euros – €130 million in 2023 – in what researchers have called '[reverse remittances](#)'. About 42 per cent of that figure was paid by applicants from Africa, even though the continent accounted for only 24 per cent of applications. The European Commission recently [hiked application fees](#), which brought the cost of a short-term Schengen visa application to €90. Applicants must demonstrate proof that they have bought return flights and paid for accommodation in Europe, and often visas are denied at the last minute, too late for applicants to be refunded these costs.

While China similarly demands that all African visitors apply for a visa, application fees are much cheaper: a single-entry short-term visa to China costs around €6 from [Nigeria](#) and around €9 from [Ethiopia](#). In the aftermath of COVID-19 China has been bringing visitor visa costs down globally to encourage tourism. Regional powers such as Iran permit visitors from all African countries to acquire e-visas or visas on arrival. Indonesia provides visas on arrival to Kenyans, Mozambicans, Tanzanians, Rwandans and South Africans, while India's short-term e-visa programme extends to these countries and others in West and Southern Africa.

If winning hearts and minds in Africa is as important to the EU as leaders claim, and amid concerns that Africa is "[fertile ground](#)" for Russian and Chinese disinformation, it would make sense for the EU to start improving its image by tackling the visa issue – the biggest grievance for African citizens. Parliamentarians in the UK – which has a similarly hostile short-term visa regime – have drawn attention to the political ramifications of the country's visa policy. A 2020 cross-party parliamentary [report](#) found that "no single issue does more potential damage to the image or influence of the UK in Africa than this visa question." Poorly evidenced [European travel bans](#) on African countries during COVID-19 have cast a long shadow: many Africans were completely cut off from family in Europe for years. Since for many Africans the first (and for most, the only) encounter with Europe is a visa rejection letter, the EU should start viewing its visa policy as partly a public diplomacy issue.

EU leaders have [claimed](#) people-to-people links between Europe and Africa demonstrate the strength of their partnership, but the Schengen visa policy, as it stands, gives precisely the opposite impression to most Africans. Most African countries have far stronger diasporic, linguistic and cultural links with Europe

than with other powers due to the legacy of colonialism. And for now, Europe remains a more popular holiday, work and study destination for Africans than China or Russia – though this should not be taken for granted.

In 2020, six of the [top 20 destinations](#) for African students were in the EU, with France accepting the highest number: 126,000. Before the COVID-19 pandemic China was in second place, with over 81,000 students in 2018, a number that had [grown](#) significantly over the previous decade. Turkey took eighth place in 2020 with almost 29,000, but in 2023 the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs [declared](#) that 61,000 Africans were studying at Turkish universities, announcing plans to intensify links with institutions in Africa. In 2023, Russian President Putin [announced](#) that the number of African students studying in Russia had nearly tripled in the last five years to reach 35,000, and pledged to increase higher education co-operation with Africa. It is clear that the EU's geopolitical rivals see the movement of people as a tool of soft power: Europe should respond accordingly.

How the EU can revise its approach

It would not take much to improve the current situation. A good first step would be reducing processing times and simplifying the visa application process. The EU has already agreed to move forward with a [digital application procedure](#) for all third-country nationals from 2026, whereby applicants can upload documents without handing in their passports or [enduring long waiting periods](#) for an embassy appointment. In theory, this will reduce pressure on EU consulates and embassies and reduce waiting times. But member-states should ensure that the digital system also delivers faster decisions. It would also help if governments issued multiple-entry visas for an extended timeframe to successful candidates, saving them from applying every time they want to travel.

The EU should also bring application prices down to their pre-2020 levels, consider introducing graduated Schengen visa fees (with the lowest fees for the lowest income countries) or at the very least refund part of the application fee for unsuccessful candidates. The current system is inequitable and results in tens of millions of euros flowing from citizens of the poorest countries into the coffers of EU member-states.

More broadly, the EU and member-states should improve transparency about the grounds for rejecting applications. Seemingly arbitrary decisions with minimal explanation fuel accusations of racism, and it is not uncommon for rejected applicants to have to resort to lengthy [court cases](#) to get full disclosure on why they were rejected. The EU should also reconsider the requirement for candidates to prove affluence, given the absence of evidence that wealthier candidates are less likely to overstay. In cases where African professionals are invited to Europe for conferences, with sponsorship from an institution, it makes little sense to require them to document their financial means extensively, or reject candidates who cannot do so.

It is time for the EU to stop assuming that all African citizens travelling to Europe for tourism, to grow their international networks and for professional events intend to overstay. But unfortunately, Schengen visas have become another area in which the EU's fixation with migration conflicts with its geopolitical and soft power interests. Migration is a politically charged issue in Europe, with border security high on the agenda. However, the EU's current visa regime is failing on its own terms. The EU's readmissions policy is ineffective and EU citizens and businesses in turn are missing out on opportunities to engage with Africa, a continent which in 2050 will account for [nearly a quarter](#) of the world's labour force.

As research by the CER has [already found](#), nativism and closed borders will carry a heavy economic price tag for Europe, with its ageing population. Current visa policy also reinforces a regrettable perception that a significant portion of African citizens already have: that the EU is a remnant of a discriminatory and neo-colonial world order. That is a perception that China and Russia will be happy to support, and to exploit for geopolitical ends.

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