



PRESS RELEASE

Changes in Schengen visa application process

As part of the worldwide introduction of the Visa Information System (VIS)¹, the Schengen States will launch the VIS in Ukraine (and in other Eastern Partnership countries) on 23 June 2015. The VIS has already started in sixteen (out of 23) world regions² since October 2011. By end November 2015 all Schengen consulates worldwide will be connected to VIS.

The major change for Ukrainian citizens from 23 June 2015 is that all applicants would need to appear in person in order to provide **biometric data** (fingerprints and digital photography), which is a simple and discreet procedure. This concerns the applications for the short-term Schengen visas (max. 90 days in 180 days).

For subsequent applications within 5 years the fingerprints can be copied from the previous application file in the VIS, eg. the fingerprints will be provided for the period of 5 years for any subsequent Schengen visa application (for example for the long-term multiple entry visa)³.

Exemptions from the obligation of fingerprinting are provided for:

- children under the age of 12;
- persons for whom the collection of fingerprints is physically impossible;
- Heads of State and members of the national Governments (with their official delegations and spouses) if they travel for official purposes.

In practical terms, this means that the first (in person) visit after 23 June 2015 to the respective Schengen State Consulate as well as of visa applications centres would be prolonged by a few minutes, which will be necessary for the provision of biometric data.

Otherwise, the current procedures (including visa fee, forms) remain unchanged.

Nevertheless, the need to introduce the new system might lead to potential disruption of the visa application process due to overload at the beginning of this process. Applicants should be aware of this potential inconvenience.

The purpose of this global VIS introduction process is to better protect applicants against identity theft and to prevent document fraud and visa shopping. For example, fingerprinting is widely used inside the EU to make various documents (IDs, passports) more secure. Using biometric data to confirm a visa holder's identity will result in more accurate, faster and secure checks by border guards.

¹ The Visa Information System (VIS) is a system for the exchange of data on short-stay visas between Schengen States. The main objectives of the VIS are to facilitate visa application procedures and checks at external border as well as to enhance security.

² It has been already introduced in Africa, the Middle East, the Americas, Australasia, South-East Asia, Central Asia, Western Balkans and Turkey.

³ However in some cases, such as reasonable doubts regarding the identity of the applicant, the consulates will still have to collect fingerprints within this period of time.

Frequently Asked Questions:

Q: Are the Schengen visas issued before 23 June 2015 valid?

A: **Yes**, they remain valid.

Q: If I already have a biometric passport, do I also need to submit my fingerprints?

A: **Yes**, the owners of biometric passports also have to show up in person when applying for the first time after 23 June to apply for a short-stay Schengen visa.

As a matter of fact, there are two different systems storing biometric data not linked to each other. The biometric passports with fingerprints of its holder are issued by **Ukrainian authorities**. The VIS is operated **NOT** by Ukrainian authorities, but by **Schengen states' authorities**, which have no access to the data stored in the chip of the Ukrainian biometric passports.

Q: Will the VIS procedure lead to an increase in the visa fees?

A: **No**, visa fees remain the same as of today.

Q: Does this new requirement represent a new barrier for Ukrainian applicants? Isn't it aimed against Ukrainian citizens?

A: No, not at all. This new measure is actually aimed to make the whole process safer. The fingerprints will be taken only first time and then they would be used during 5 years for any subsequent Schengen visa application.

The very **same** requirements and procedures will soon concern **all** applicants **all** over the world. Ukrainian applicants are treated equally like any other nationals worldwide.

Q: Does this change mean that visa-free regime for Ukraine is postponed?

A: Not at all. These are two **unrelated** processes. The introduction of biometrics is a worldwide process, while liberalisation is a bilateral process between the EU and Ukraine. This process is merit-based, which means that once Ukraine fulfils all its commitments, the visa-free regime for Ukrainian citizens having biometric passports will be introduced.

Q: What will happen to those people, who are refusing to provide fingerprints for various reasons?

A: Unfortunately, they will not be issued a Schengen visa if they fail to provide biometric data. There are, however, several categories of citizens, who do not have to provide these data:

- children under the age of 12;
- persons for whom the collection of fingerprints is physically impossible
- Heads of State and members of the national Governments (with their official delegations and spouses) if they travel for official purposes.

Q: Is there any additional advice for an applicant requesting a Schengen visa ahead of the launch of the VIS?

A: Travellers planning to apply in June should be aware that few days before 23 June 2015 some of the Schengen States consulates issuing visas might be closed and/or limit the collection of the documents from applicants due to installation work linked to the new system.

If you plan to travel end of June/early July, please, consider submitting your documents a few weeks ahead.

Consulates and visa application centres will need to train own staff, adjust and master new working procedures, for which they might need extra time.

Q: What would be the role of the visa application centres?

A: The role would remain unchanged, eg. they will assist consulates of Schengen States that are working with them in the preparatory stage of the application process. These centres will be equipped with electronic devices for collecting biometric data, which will be directly sent to the consulate of the respective Schengen country and then stored in the VIS database.

Q: Would it be still possible to apply for Schengen visas via certified travel agencies?

A: For the first time after 23 June applicants have to show up in person in the consulate (or visa application centres) in order to provide their biometric data. The next consequent visa applications within next 5 years could be done through travel agencies.

Visa applicant's biometric data cannot be collected by commercial intermediaries (e.g. travel agencies).

Q: How is my biometric data protected in the VIS?

A: Strict data protection rules are defined in the VIS-related rules and are subject to the control of national and European data protection authorities.

Data is kept in the VIS for maximum 5 years starting on the expiry date of the visa, if a visa has been issued; or on the new expiry date of the visa, if a visa has been extended; or on the date a negative decision is taken by the visa authorities.

Any person has the right to obtain communication of the data recorded in the VIS related to him/her from the Schengen State which entered the data into the system. Any person may also request that inaccurate data related to him/her be corrected and that data unlawfully recorded be deleted.

In each Schengen State, national supervisory authorities monitor independently the processing of the personal data registered in the VIS by the Schengen State in question.

The European Data Protection Supervisor monitors the data processing activities by the VIS Management authority.

Q: Who will have an access to the VIS?

A: Schengen States' authorities responsible for the issuance of visas, border and immigration checks, and asylum procedures have a direct access to the data stored in the VIS.

As a rule, VIS data cannot be transferred or made available to third countries or to international organizations.

Since 1 September 2013, Schengen States' law enforcement authorities may request access to the data stored in the VIS under very strict legal conditions and only for the purpose of prevention, detection, or investigation of terrorist and other serious criminal offenses. Europol will also have access to the VIS for the same purposes.

Q: Where can I get more information on the VIS?

A: Visit the following link - <http://ec.europa.eu/vis>.