

Visa Restrictions faced by Young People in Türkiye **Policy Brief**





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Contributing organizations:

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Background

Although visa issues have been a longstanding challenge in Türkiye, they have taken on new dimensions following the refugee crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Young people from Türkiye who wish to travel to European countries for volunteering, cultural exchange, or educational purposes face critical barriers in obtaining visas. Obstacles, such as difficulties in securing visa appointments, the need for extensive planning months in advance and requests for documentation that potentially violates personal data protection laws (e.g. detailed bank statements revealing financial status, family registration records, marital status, etc.), along with long processing times and high rejection rates, significantly restrict the freedom of movement for young people in Türkiye.

The visa rejection rate for applications from Türkiye stands at approximately 20.7%. When young people have their visa applications rejected, they not only face financial losses but also experience emotional strain. Their plans are disrupted, and their motivation to pursue future opportunities is significantly diminished. Appeal processes for rejected applications are both challenging and costly, as they require legal representation and the initiation of judicial procedures in the host country.

The obstacles and challenges related to visas create a contradictory situation for Türkiye-EU relations, reducing participation in EU-based educational and support programs like Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps (ESC). Young people who could contribute to society through volunteering face significant hurdles, and in some cases, are even prevented from participating.

Challenges

Young people in Türkiye face numerous challenges when planning to travel to European countries requiring visas. Key issues include:

Time Constraints: The visa application and approval processes are prolonged. Finding appointments through intermediary agencies has become increasingly difficult, with waiting times exceeding three months. This causes delays in processes that require prompt action, such as exchange programs, education, and participation in international meetings.

Financial Burden: Over the past decade, Turkish citizens have spent around 511 million euros on visa applications for European countries, excluding additional costs such as pre-booked accommodation and travel expenses.¹ Given the rising rates of youth unemployment and poverty in Türkiye, visa processes have become inaccessible for many young people.

Data Privacy Concerns: Applicants are required to submit documents such as detailed bank statements, family records, and marital status to determine their economic and social standing. This creates a data privacy risk and raises concerns about potential discrimination based on economic and social status.

Complex Visa Processes: Visa application and approval processes vary significantly between countries. The complex and inconsistent procedures make it challenging for young people to navigate the process. Bureaucratic language in application documents and, in some cases, the absence of native language options exacerbate these challenges. The trend of governments outsourcing visa processes to commercial entities also raises concerns.²

Youth Mobility as a Pillar of Youth Work

Youth mobility offers essential opportunities for intercultural dialogue, active citizenship, and personal development among young people.³ It addresses key issues such as increasing youth participation, fostering active citizenship, intercultural learning and dialogue, developing individual competencies, and enhancing youth employability. Therefore, implementing effective policies to support youth mobility and youth work is essential.⁴

The European Union Youth Strategy 2019–2027 highlights how youth mobility fosters connections, relationships, and the transfer of experiences that promote solidarity and

¹ Youth Services Center. (2024). *Citizens of Türkiye spent 511 million Euro to obtain a Schengen Visa*.

<https://kamp.gsm.org.tr/duyuru-detaylari/citizens-of-turkiye-spent-511-million-euro-to-obtain-a-schengen-visa>

² European Youth Forum. (2024). *Inclusive learning mobility: Addressing visa barriers for youth* (Motion adapted by the Council of Members). https://www.youthforum.org/files/240304_M-LearningMobility.pdf

The Coordinating Committee for International Voluntary Service. (2024). *Decolonising visa mechanisms*.

<https://ccivs.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/English-Decolonising-Visa-Mechanisms.pdf>

³ Youth Partnership. (2017). *Principles for quality learning mobility in the youth field*.

<https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261953/Brochure+EPLM.pdf/7edf348a-e204-02a4-c502-686a494fea99?t=1543228917000>

⁴ Youth Partnership. (2015). *Analytical paper: Learning mobility and social inclusion*.

<https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261689/Analytical+Paper+Learning++Mobility+Social+Inclusion+2015+Cairns.pdf/b0e76275-3afb-43e0-b793-06663e439e13?t=1447690949000>

growth within the EU.⁵ The strategy emphasizes the need to support the mobility of youth not only in EU member and candidate countries but also in the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkan countries. One of the key recommendations in the strategy is:

Enable access for all young people, as well as for youth workers, to cross-border mobility opportunities, including volunteering in the civil society sector, by eliminating obstacles and implementing support measures with special attention to young people with fewer opportunities.

In this context, young people from Türkiye who wish to participate in Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps projects encounter significant visa challenges. Meetings held with GoFor's member organizations have revealed that young people often cannot participate in accepted exchange programs due to visa issues. Prolonged visa processes also deter young people from engaging in subsequent project cycles, given the time-sensitive nature of educational and employment commitments.

Impact on Youth Organizations' International Advocacy Capacity

For youth organizations working on rights-based issues, international advocacy is essential. Amid Türkiye's increasing anti-democratization, youth rights violations are intensifying. Visa issues adversely affect the international advocacy capacities of youth organizations in Türkiye.

Participation in international meetings and workshops organized by the United Nations, Youth Partnership, the Council of Europe, and international umbrella organizations (such as Alliance, IGLYO, ILGA, and the European Youth Forum) is essential for youth organizations to voice the challenges faced by young people in Türkiye. These platforms also provide crucial opportunities for solidarity with youth organizations facing a shrinking civil space and to strengthen peer learning at the advocacy level.

Visa-related challenges disrupt youth organizations' participation in these international meetings due to uncertainty, financial costs, and timing issues. Consequently, youth organizations may prioritize individuals with existing visas over those with the relevant

⁵ European Union. (2018). *The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027*.
[https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:42018Y1218\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:42018Y1218(01))

expertise, hindering the development of international advocacy capacities and, at times, excluding qualified youth workers from attending relevant meetings.

The Impact on the Right to Education

Another area impacted by visa issues is young people's right to formal education. Turkish youth increasingly prefer foreign institutions for undergraduate and graduate studies. However, even an official acceptance from a university abroad does not guarantee a swift visa process. The number of students who must defer their education due to visa denials continues to grow.

This represents a clear violation of the right to education. Application processes for foreign universities already place significant financial and emotional burdens on young people. In addition to travel and accommodation expenses, the challenge of relocating abroad is a stressful process that impacts well-being. Simplifying the visa process for young people accepted into universities is crucial for upholding their right to education.

Recommendations

In this context, GoFor's policy recommendations on visa issues are as follows:

1. Visa procedures among European Union countries and other countries involved in EU youth programs should be harmonized, with a standardized, streamlined, and simplified visa process for young people.
2. Special visa categories should be created for different learning mobility programs, such as education, internships, volunteering, and exchange programs, with minimal fees for these categories.
3. Documentation requirements for processes involving an invitation/acceptance letter (e.g. exchange programs, formal education, internships, international meetings) should be simplified. Documents like detailed bank statements and family records enable discriminatory practices and should be excluded.
4. Visa validity periods should be extended for young people participating in long-term education programs, internships, or volunteering activities.

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