

Young Generation Policy Brief

Bridging the Gap

A New EU Visa Path for Turkish University Students

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Executive Summary

Despite the EU's commitment to youth mobility and people-to-people engagement, Turkish university students continue to face substantial barriers when seeking short-term access to the Schengen area. Turkish students are processed within a broader short-stay system shaped by concerns over irregular migration, overstaying, asylum claims, and informal entry into labour markets. Documentary burdens, financial costs, uncertainty over appointments, and limited predictability in outcomes make mobility difficult to plan and weaken the EU's mobility agenda at the point where many young people experience it most directly.

This policy brief argues that the status quo is increasingly difficult to defend, while broader exemption-based reforms remain politically and legally unrealistic under current conditions. It evaluates three policy options and recommends an Ultra-Facilitated Student Visa Pilot led by willing member states. The proposed pilot would create a limited, monitorable, and reversible visa track for students enrolled in accredited Turkish universities. By reducing documentary burdens, improving appointment access, and making visa procedures more predictable within the existing Schengen framework, this option offers the most credible route to more credibility of the EU in one of its core normative agendas.

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INTRODUCTION

For many young people in Türkiye, the European Union is encountered not only as a geopolitical actor, but also through concrete questions of access and opportunity in a wider European space. In this respect, short-term mobility matters politically as well as practically. Yet for Turkish university students, one of the most immediate and tangible ways of encountering the EU is not through declarations, programmes, or symbolic appeals, but through the visa regime that structures access to Europe. It is in this everyday encounter that the gap between the EU's language of youth engagement and the practical experience of mobility becomes especially visible.

The obstacles are not trivial. Turkish students seeking short-stay access to EU member states often face demanding documentation requirements, financial costs, uncertainty regarding appointments, and limited predictability in visa outcomes. These barriers matter not only because they complicate travel, but also because they shape how the EU is experienced and interpreted by young people and civil society actors in Türkiye (and beyond). When access is repeatedly experienced as burdensome, opaque, and uneven, visa policy ceases to be a merely technical issue. It becomes a politically meaningful site at which the EU's commitment to inclusion, people-to-people engagement, and youth mobility is tested in practice.

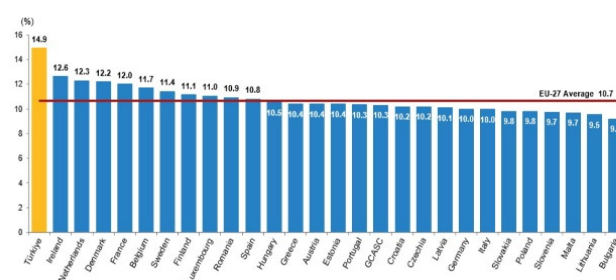
This policy brief examines how the EU could begin to address that mismatch through a legally feasible and politically realistic reform of short-stay mobility for Turkish university students. It evaluates three policy options: a near visa-free model for students from accredited universities, a broadly coordinated ultra-facilitated visa procedure, and a limited pilot led by willing member states. The analysis argues that the most ambitious model offers the strongest symbolic signal but faces substantial legal and political obstacles, while broader procedural facilitation would require a level of coordination that may be difficult to secure under current conditions.

The brief therefore recommends Option 3: an Ultra-Facilitated Student Visa Pilot led by willing member states. The aim is not to abolish screening or disregard member-state concerns, but to create a limited, verifiable, and policy-relevant route for a clearly defined group of applicants. By keeping the visa requirement in place while testing targeted facilitation through a time-bound and monitorable pilot, this option offers a realistic way to reduce practical barriers and align operational practices more closely with the EU's stated commitment to youth engagement and people-to-people contact. If proven successful, the Visa Pilot could be extended to other arenas beyond education.

CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

The European Union has long presented youth mobility, people-to-people contact, and academic exchange as important instruments of its external engagement. Policy frameworks such as the EU Youth Strategy, Erasmus+, and related youth cooperation initiatives present mobility as a means of fostering inclusion, participation, mutual understanding, and longer-term societal connection.¹ In principle, Turkish youth should be among the relevant addressees of this approach: Türkiye combines a comparatively young population profile with strong participation in higher education and substantial demand for international exchange.²

Figure 1. Comparison of the proportion of youth population in Türkiye and European Union member states, 2024³



¹ Council of the European Union, *Council Resolution on the European Union Youth Strategy 2019–2027 (2018/C 456/01)*; European Commission, *Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2025*, Version 1 12/11/2025 (2026).

² Elena Sánchez-Montijano, Ayhan Kaya, and Melike Janine Sökmen, "Highly Skilled Migration between the EU and Turkey: Drivers and Scenarios," *FEUTURE Online Paper* No. 21 (2018).

³ Source: Statistical Office of the European Union (Eurostat) Database, 2024; Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat), *Youth in Statistics*, 2024, based on the Address Based Population Registration System, 2024. Note: 'Youth' refers to the 15–24 age group. EU-27 average is shown in the original TurkStat visualisation. GCASC=Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus.

At the same time, the policy context in which Turkish students seek access to Europe is shaped by the Schengen short-stay visa regime. Under the EU Visa Code, short-stay visas govern entry to the Schengen area for stays of up to 90 days in any 180-day period.⁴ This framework covers many of the forms of temporary mobility that matter to university students during their years of study, including conferences, academic events, short visits, cultural travel, and other forms of short-term movement that do not amount to long-term residence. The issue addressed here is therefore not residence for degree study, but the conditions under which university students in Türkiye can access Europe for short-term travel more broadly during their period of study. Still, many of the problems described also concern students who study abroad for a year, which is in many university-to-university settings a preferred form of exchange.

Türkiye remains a visa-required third country for education related stays of young people.⁵ Turkish students are not singled out as students; they are processed within the same broad entry regime as the wider applicant population. Any realistic assessment of the problem must begin from that legal and institutional fact.

This regime should not be understood as a stand-alone technical instrument. It is embedded in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice, where mobility is governed alongside external border control, asylum, migration management, and internal security concerns. For that reason, the restrictive effects of the current system do not stem primarily from an explicit intention to suppress student exchange. Rather, they arise because student applicants are assessed within a broader policy field shaped by concerns over irregular migration, overstaying, asylum claims, and informal entry into labour

markets.⁶ The central policy problem is therefore one of insufficient differentiation: Turkish university students are not treated as a narrower and more verifiable category of applicants whose short-term mobility could be facilitated in a more targeted way.

Much of the difficulty also lies in visa practice rather than in the formal visa obligation alone. Documentary requirements, financial costs, recurring uncertainty regarding appointments and outcomes, and limited predictability in the use of multi-entry visas make short-term mobility difficult to plan.⁷ These barriers are especially significant for students, whose travel often depends on academic calendars, short notice, and limited financial resources. In this respect, the problem is not simply that entry remains regulated, but that the current system often produces a high level of procedural friction and uncertainty for a group whose mobility is usually temporary, time-sensitive, and relatively easy to verify.

A similar tension appears in relation to Erasmus+ and other EU-supported mobility frameworks. These programmes promote educational exchange, inclusion, participation, and equal opportunity, but they do not remove the separate legal requirement of short-stay entry under Schengen rules. As a result, the EU may support mobility at programme level while access remains difficult, slow, or unpredictable at the point of entry.⁸ This gap between programme-level commitments and entry-level practice can weaken the credibility of the EU's mobility agenda in the eyes of Turkish students.

The wider political environment helps explain why this mismatch persists. Since 2015, migration has become one of the most politically contested issues in the EU, encouraging more restrictive and risk-sensitive approaches across a number of member states.⁹ Domestic political pressures and

⁴ European Parliament and Council of the European Union, *Regulation (EC) No 810/2009 establishing a Community Code on Visas (Visa Code)*, <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2009/810/2024-06-28>.

⁵ European Parliament and Council of the European Union, *Regulation (EU) 2018/1806 listing the third countries whose nationals must be in possession of visas when crossing the external borders*, <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2018/1806/2025-12-30>.

⁶ Burak Erdenir, "Schengen Visa Deadlock: The Unresolved Case of Turkish Citizens," *Uluslararası İlişkiler / International Relations* 22, no. 85 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.33458/uidergisi.1601910>; Ayhan Kaya, "Right-Wing Populism and Islamophobia in

Europe and Their Impact on Turkey-EU Relations," *Turkish Studies* 21, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2018.1499431>.

⁷ Esin Aksay Aksezer, Kutlay Yağmur, and Fons van de Vijver, "A Qualitative Study of Erasmus Program Challenges and Paradoxes Based on the Experiences of Students from Turkey," *Yükseköğretim Dergisi* 11, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.2399/yod.20.730970>.

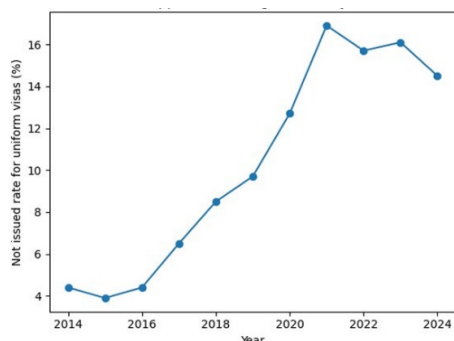
⁸ European Commission, *Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2025*.

⁹ Kaya 2020; Elodie Thevenin, "Between Human Rights and Security Concerns: Politicisation of EU-Turkey and EU-Libya Agreements on Migration in National Parliaments," *European Security* 30, no. 3 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2021.1947804>.

broader concerns about Türkiye's political trajectory further narrow the political space for differentiated arrangements.¹⁰ On the Turkish side, considerable quality differences across higher-education institutions and the uneven development of quality-assurance mechanisms make robust accreditation and reliable verification especially important for any facilitation scheme.¹¹

For these reasons, reducing barriers for Turkish university students is not simply a matter of making travel easier. It is a question of whether the EU can create a more proportionate and operationally credible form of upholding self-proclaimed goals. In a relationship otherwise marked by political stagnation, youth mobility remains one of the few areas in which practical cooperation and longer-term societal contact can still be sustained. It also matters because short-term travel and people-to-people contact are among the most concrete ways in which broad EU commitments to openness, inclusion, and cooperation become visible in everyday life.

Figure 2. Schengen short-stay visa refusal rates, 2014–2024 (applications lodged in Türkiye)¹²



POLICY OPTIONS

This section presents three policy options for reducing short-term mobility barriers faced by Turkish university students. All three options seek to improve access under the political and legal constraints of the Schengen system, but they differ in

ambition, geographical scope, implementation logic, and administrative demands. The options are built on a common institutional framework: Turkish universities would be able to participate voluntarily, provided that they meet a defined set of technical and procedural criteria. On the technical side, participating institutions would need reliable student-record systems, secure digital verification tools, and sufficient administrative capacity to interact with consulates and relevant EU-linked platforms. On the procedural side, eligibility would depend on a limited set of safeguards, such as a publicly available non-discrimination policy, a formal student complaints mechanism, transparent written disciplinary rules, and basic protections for student organisations. These criteria are not intended to amount to an open-ended EU judgement on Türkiye's domestic politics. Their purpose is to create a verifiable and politically defensible basis for distinguishing a narrower category of student applicants from the wider short-stay visa population.

To minimise political friction, accreditation should rely as far as possible on concrete and internationally recognisable indicators rather than broad normative evaluations. In practice, this could include participation in Erasmus+, compliance with Erasmus Charter standards, digital verification capacity such as the European Student Card Initiative, student-record reliability, and the documented presence of basic procedural safeguards.¹³ Such an approach would not fully depoliticise the issue, but it would narrow the grounds of contestation and make a differentiated mobility mechanism easier to justify administratively and politically.

Option 1: Near Visa-Free Access for Students from Accredited Universities

Highest Normative Impact — Highest Legal and Political Costs

Under this model, students enrolled in accredited universities in Türkiye would benefit from a form of near visa-free short-

as the number of uniform visas not issued divided by the number of uniform visa applications lodged at Schengen consulates in Türkiye. This is a consulate-location series and should not be interpreted as a nationality-based rejection rate for Turkish citizens.

¹³ European Commission, *Erasmus Charter for Higher Education 2021–2027: Guidelines*; European Commission, *European Student Card Initiative*, <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/european-student-card-initiative>.

¹⁰ European Commission, *Türkiye 2024 Report* (SWD(2024) 696 final).

¹¹ Özge Onursal-Beşgöl, "Translating Norms from Europe to Turkey: Turkey in the Bologna Process," *Compare* 47, no. 5 (2017).

¹² Source: Author's visualisation based on European Commission, "Short-stay visas issued by Schengen countries" (consulate statistics, 2014–2024), https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/schengen/visa-policy/short-stay-visas-issued-schengen-countries_en. Note: The rate is calculated

term access to participating member states. Eligibility would be confirmed through institutional or digital verification, replacing most elements of the ordinary visa process with a much lighter ex ante procedure.

Its attraction lies in symbolic clarity. It would align EU practice most directly with its stated commitment to youth mobility and people-to-people engagement, while removing much of the bureaucratic and financial burden currently associated with short-term travel.

Its weaknesses, however, are substantial. Because Türkiye remains within the visa-required short-stay regime, any model approaching visa-free treatment would face serious legal and political obstacles. It would require a level of agreement among member states that is difficult to imagine under current conditions and would be highly vulnerable to resistance in a policy area shaped by migration and security concerns.

Option 2: Broadly Coordinated Ultra-Facilitated Visa Procedure for Students from Accredited Universities

Strong Practical Impact — Greater Coordination Requirements

Under this model, the short-stay visa requirement would remain in place, but a broadly coordinated facilitation procedure would be introduced for students enrolled in accredited Turkish universities. Following digital verification by their institution, eligible students would benefit from reduced documentary requirements, prioritised appointment access, clearer and more standardised information, and a more predictable use of multi-entry visas where the relevant conditions are met.

This option works within the existing visa framework while seeking to create a more consistent facilitation standard across a wider range of participating member states. Its principal strength lies in practical impact. It would address the most important barriers faced by students without requiring exemption-based legal change.

Its limitation lies in implementation. A broad and relatively consistent procedure would require sustained coordination among member states and consulates. Its effectiveness would depend on administrative capacity, institutional trust, and a level of procedural consistency that may be difficult to secure in a politically sensitive field.

Option 3: Ultra-Facilitated Student Visa Pilot by Willing Member States

Lowest Political Risk — Most Controllable Design

Under this model, a limited coalition of willing member states would introduce a time-bound and geographically restricted ultra-facilitated short-stay visa track of up to a year for students enrolled in accredited Turkish universities. The visa requirement would remain in place. Eligible students would benefit from reduced documentary requirements, prioritised appointments, clearer procedures, and a more predictable approach to multi-entry visas where the relevant conditions are met.

The defining feature of this option is not simply facilitation, but controlled experimentation. The pilot would begin with a limited number of participating member states and accredited universities. Its scope, duration, and monitoring criteria would be defined in advance. Participating states would be able to assess appointment times, documentary burdens, refusal patterns, the use of multi-entry visas, and relevant compliance indicators before deciding whether continuation or expansion is justified.

Its main strength is political and administrative controllability. Because the measure would remain within the existing visa framework and would not require immediate EU-wide implementation, it can be defended as a reversible and evidence-based first step. Its weakness is narrower reach: only students travelling to participating states would benefit during the pilot phase. Even so, it offers a more realistic route to visible procedural improvement under current conditions.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

To assess the three policy options in a transparent and policy-relevant way, this brief discusses six criteria that reflect both the EU's stated mobility commitments and the legal, political, and administrative constraints of Schengen governance. The purpose is not to identify an ideal solution in the abstract, but to determine which option can most credibly improve short-term mobility for Turkish university students under current conditions.

- **Effectiveness** refers to the extent to which an option reduces the barriers students face in practice when seeking short-term access to the EU. This includes not only whether access becomes formally easier, but whether documentary burden, uncertainty, and

broader procedural friction are meaningfully reduced.

- **Fairness and Value Alignment** refers to the extent to which an option is consistent with the EU's stated commitments to openness, inclusion, educational exchange, and people-to-people contact. Fairness does not mean identical treatment for all applicants. It refers instead to whether differentiated treatment can be justified through transparent, proportionate, and policy-relevant criteria for a narrower and more verifiable category of student applicants.
- **Legal Viability** addresses the extent to which an option can be implemented within the existing Schengen and Visa Code framework, without requiring politically unrealistic legal change. This criterion matters because some options are normatively attractive but difficult to reconcile with Türkiye's status as a visa-required third country.
- **Political Acceptability** concerns the likelihood that EU institutions and member states would be willing to support, tolerate, or at least not strongly resist the option. This includes sensitivity to domestic migration politics, security concerns, and the reluctance of many governments to create arrangements that could be interpreted as weakening control in a politically contested policy area.
- **Administrative Feasibility** refers to the practical demands an option would place on consulates, universities, and national authorities. This includes the reliability of student verification, the manageability of procedures, the availability of digital infrastructure, and the ability to implement the measure consistently across institutional settings.
- **Scalability and Sustainability** concerns whether an option can function beyond a one-off gesture. A credible measure should be capable of being maintained over time, monitored for effectiveness, and, where appropriate, expanded to additional universities or member states without losing political or administrative coherence.

Taken together, these criteria make it possible to evaluate the options not against an unrealistic benchmark of unrestricted mobility, but against a more relevant question: which model can create a more proportionate, workable, and politically

defensible form of differentiation for Turkish university students within the existing short-stay regime?

EVALUATION OF POLICY OPTIONS

Assessing the three policy options against the mentioned criteria reveals a clear trade-off.

Option 1 performs most strongly in symbolic and normative terms. Near visa-free access would align EU practice most directly with its stated commitment to youth mobility and people-to-people engagement, while removing a large share of the bureaucratic and financial burden currently associated with short-term travel. However, it performs weakest in terms of legal viability and political acceptability. Because Türkiye remains within the visa-required short-stay regime, any model approaching exemption-based treatment would face serious legal and political obstacles. Under current conditions, Option 1 functions more convincingly as a benchmark for maximal normative alignment than as a realistic near-term reform.

Option 2 performs strongly in terms of practical impact. It would retain the visa requirement while introducing a broadly coordinated facilitation procedure for students enrolled in accredited Turkish universities. By reducing documentary burdens, prioritising appointment access, clarifying procedures, and improving the predictability of multi-entry visas where the relevant conditions are met, it would address the forms of friction that matter most in practice. Its principal limitation is implementation. A broadly coordinated model would require sustained cooperation among member states and consulates, as well as a relatively high level of procedural consistency across institutional settings. These demands may be difficult to meet in a politically sensitive field.

Option 3 offers a narrower but more controllable approach. Like Option 2, it retains the visa requirement and seeks to reduce practical barriers through targeted facilitation. Unlike Option 2, it does not depend on broad implementation from the outset. It would begin as a time-bound and geographically restricted pilot led by a limited coalition of willing member states. Its scope, monitoring criteria, and review process would be defined in advance. This makes Option 3 more modest in reach, but also more credible as a reversible and evidence-based first step.

The principal weakness of Option 3 is its limited coverage. During the pilot phase, only students travelling to participating member states would benefit, and the symbolic signal of openness would remain narrower than under the

more ambitious alternatives. Nevertheless, the pilot would allow participating states to assess appointment times, documentary burdens, refusal patterns, the use of multi-entry visas, and relevant compliance indicators before deciding whether continuation or expansion is justified.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

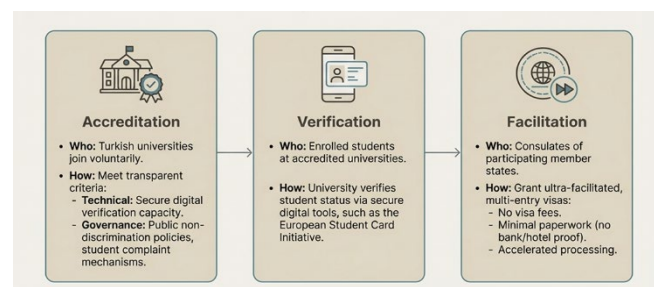
Adopt Option 3 — An Ultra-Facilitated Student Visa Pilot by Willing Member States

Based on the above evaluation, this brief recommends Option 3: an Ultra-Facilitated Student Visa Pilot led by willing member states. The proposal does not depend on an ideal political environment or on a broader breakthrough in EU–Türkiye relations. It identifies a limited and operationally credible way to reduce short-term mobility barriers for Turkish university students within the existing Schengen framework. The pilot would need to operate through facilitation mechanisms available under the Visa Code and, where adapted local rules are required, through the relevant Commission implementing procedure.¹⁴

The proposed pilot is deliberately narrow in scope. It does not seek to abolish screening, remove the broader short-stay visa requirement, or assume that youth mobility sits outside migration and security concerns. Rather, it would create a more proportionate form of differentiation for a narrower and more verifiable category of applicants. The recommendation is not based on the claim that Turkish students should be treated as risk-free, but on the argument that they should not be processed only through the same broad logic applied to the wider applicant pool when targeted facilitation is both possible and justifiable.

Operationally, the pilot would create an ultra-facilitated short-stay visa track for students enrolled in accredited Turkish universities. Implemented by a limited coalition of willing member states, the pilot would provide a controlled space for testing targeted facilitation without requiring immediate EU-wide agreement.

Figure 3. How the Ultra-Facilitated Student Visa Pilot Works¹⁵



The pilot would also offer practical advantages for participating states. Because the scheme would apply only to a clearly defined and digitally verifiable category of applicants, it could reduce administrative friction for consulates while improving predictability for students. Its limited scope would make it easier to monitor, evaluate, and adjust over time. Indicators such as appointment times, documentary burdens, refusal patterns, the use of multi-entry visas, and relevant compliance indicators could be reviewed before any continuation or expansion is considered. This reversibility is one of the models principal strengths in a politically sensitive field.

Option 3 is therefore the most credible policy advice preserve people-to-people contact, and align the EU's operational practices more closely with its stated commitment to youth engagement.

¹⁴ European Commission, *Handbook for the Processing of Visa Applications and the Modification of Issued Visas (Visa Code Handbook I)*, Commission Implementing Decision C(2024) 4319.

¹⁵ Source: Authors' visualisation.

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About the Project

ValEUs brings together 20 universities from five continents, combining their strong expertise in EU studies across a wide range of academic disciplines. The Jean Monnet Network will foster joint research capacities, develop innovative teaching collaboration, and engage in societal policy debate to establish impactful policy recommendations. ValEUs is funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Commission (2024-2026).

Imprint

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