



# WHO WANTS TO TRAVEL TO EUROPE? THE SCHENGEN WALL FOR TURKISH NATIONALS

**Meltem Müftüler-Bac**

## **Executive Summary**

When Turkey began its accession talks with the European Union in 2005, the Turks accepted the news with much enthusiasm, specifically the Western-leaning Turkish elite. For professional, educated Turks, Turkey already belonged to the European identity, and the accession negotiations would result in the final endorsement of this sense of community. It was expected that exchanges between Turkey and Europe socially, culturally, and economically would intensify with the accession process underway. Civil society organizations, business groups, and universities would have increased social interactions with their European counterparts. There would have been greater mobility from Europe to Turkey and, vice versa, leading to new partnerships. With these increased social, economic, and cultural interactions, a new road would have been paved for a mutual understanding between Turkey and Europe. It is with great sadness that we note in 2014 not only has this hopeful view of the future not materialized but this image has instead turned out to be the impenetrable wall created by Schengen visa applications for Turkish nationals. In a matter of 9 years, Turkish perceptions of the EU as a liberal democratic partner was shattered by the long lines of Turks - academics, doctors, professionals, students - waiting in front of the consulates of the EU member states.

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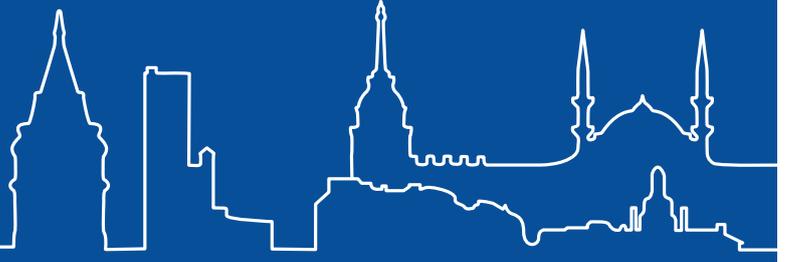
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The interpretations and conclusions made in this article belong solely to the authors and do not reflect IPC's official position.

When Turkey began its accession talks with the European Union in 2005, the Turks accepted the news with much enthusiasm, specifically the Western-leaning Turkish elite. For professional, educated Turks, Turkey already belonged to the European identity, and the accession negotiations would result in the final endorsement of this sense of community. It was expected that exchanges between Turkey and Europe socially, culturally, and economically would intensify with the accession process underway. Civil society organizations, business groups, and universities would have increased social interactions with their European counterparts. There would have been greater mobility from Europe to Turkey and, vice versa, leading to new partnerships. With these increased social, economic, and cultural interactions, a new road would have been paved for a mutual understanding between Turkey and Europe. It is with great sadness that we note in 2014 not only has this hopeful view of the future not materialized but this image has instead turned out to be the impenetrable wall created by Schengen visa applications for Turkish nationals.

*Unlike the British or American visa procedures, these Schengen countries most often have no appointment hours, prompting all those who want to travel to Schengen destinations to spend significant time simply to obtain a visa.*

All applicants, without any exceptions, are required to give all records of their commercial, financial activities, and intimate details of their personal life in order to gain entry to a European country. Yet, despite the time and effort involved, notable business people were turned down when applying for visas. While their products and goods entered the European market freely under the 1995 Customs Union Agreement, they could not follow their products to attend European fairs. Academics invited to give seminars, attend conferences, or to sign mutual cooperative agreements were denied

entry into EU countries. Alternatively, after hours of waiting in line and submitting piles of documents explaining their credentials, they received visas for 2 days that might cover only that precise meeting. Students heading to universities under Erasmus exchange agreements discovered that they could not continue their education for a semester in a European institution because their visa applications were rejected. Famous writers who were invited to give seminars in Europe were denied visas because the consulates they applied to did not recognize their name after having written their bestselling novels under a pseudonym.

*For most people, the Schengen application became a nightmare and a humiliating experience. As a result, the general feeling towards visa applications in Turkey has become quite negative.*

For example, the incident in which a businessman had a heart attack and died in 2012 while waiting in line in front of the French Consulate in Istanbul [1] constitutes one of the many examples of Turkish hardship in getting visas.

This was particularly surprising considering that Turks moved freely in European countries without visas until the 1980s. However, by the mid-1990s, the European-wide application of the Schengen rules concerning Turks visiting EU member states - with the exception of UK and Ireland - was more or less completed, making travel to the Schengen zone highly problematic.

In the last 20 years, horror stories of well-known professors, journalists, or business people who applied for a Schengen visa became common knowledge. Obtaining a Schengen visa even for the Turkish elite proved to be no easy feat, requiring multiple trips to consulates or visa service providers. Despite their credentials, most of these people might end up getting a visa for only 3 days or whatever the duration of their visit actually entails. As a result, a substantial portion of these people choose to minimize their trips

to Europe altogether and look for alternative destinations. Given that Turkey is the 15th largest economy of the world, with a comfortable upper middle class and professionals, this surely must constitute an economic loss for the EU countries. Yet, it is not only this potential economic costs of missed business deals and opportunities, but also missed opportunities for new cooperation patterns, innovative deals, and increased societal understanding. What is more, if one compares the Turkish experience with the American or British visa procedures to the Schengen visas, there is a stark contrast. To give particular examples from academia, since almost all academics are able to receive ten-year visas from the USA, most choose to apply and attend American conferences as opposed to European conferences.

*The academic cooperation between the Turkish professors and their American counterparts benefits from this mobility whereas these academics no longer attend European conferences nor do they pursue cooperative arrangements with the European institutions due to the aforementioned visa problems.*

What is the point of signing an academic agreement when you cannot get a visa to go to that meeting or the visa process takes longer than the actual meeting itself?

The ongoing difficulties of obtaining Schengen visas for Turkish citizens act in such a way that there is a sharp decline in the Turkish elites' support of the EU. Even more worrying is the deep sense of humiliation and frustration felt by the pro-European Turkish elite when substantiating their need to travel to Europe or disclose their private details both financially and personally to complete strangers in order to convince officials to issue visas. And imagine that most of these Turks who do travel to European destinations need to go through this ordeal every 3-6 months or once a year if they are fortunate enough to have a multiple entry visa valid for a year.

A brief look at the European Stability Initiative report on the rejection rates in EU consulates in Turkey as shown in Table 1 is in order to get an idea of the difficulty of getting a Schengen visa.

Table 1: Rejection rates of short-stay visa applications in Turkey 2012 [2]

EU member state	Applications rejected (%)	Applications received
<b>Belgium</b>	13.2	11,526
<b>Sweden</b>	10.2	8,831
<b>Germany</b>	8.3	167,263
<b>Netherlands</b>	7.4	45,535
<b>Austria</b>	6.7	14,305
<b>Czech Republic</b>	4.8	21,689
<b>Poland</b>	4.6	6,904
<b>France</b>	4.0	98,333
<b>Spain</b>	2.4	39,029
<b>Greece</b>	0.9	92,992
<b>Italy</b>	0.8	115,785
<b>Hungary</b>	0.8	10,483
<b>All Schengen countries</b>	<b>4.7</b>	<b>668,835</b>

*Unsurprisingly, the highest rejection rates are in countries where there is a substantial Turkish immigrant population, as these countries are more concerned about the possibility of Turks flooding into European countries.*

In the EU member states with a high Turkish immigrant population, the governments face a significant constraint in allowing more Turks into their countries. This means that even if the European officials agree with the Turkish demands on visa liberalization, they also acknowledge the difficulties they face at home: "Yes, you [Turkey] are right [in demanding visa liberalization]. But it's very difficult for us to convince our public." [3] The table above also does not reflect the duration of

the visas issued by these consulates. For instance, even if a Turkish academic is able to get a visa to give a seminar in Berlin, it is most often a single entry visa with limited duration, meaning that the Turkish academic needs to return to the consulate for another visa application in a matter of weeks. The acceptance rates, therefore, are misleading as most Turkish professionals who do travel to European destinations need to do so repeatedly.

While European concerns with regard to the possible flow of Turks into European territories is a major concern for the EU not to adopt a visa-free travel for Turkey, this is still no justification for the ongoing onslaught of visa applicants and their inhumane treatment simply to get a visa. In other words, it is still possible to control European borders without alienating the Turks. Indeed, there should be a simple way of issuing maybe five-year visas for multiple entry for certain professional groups in Turkey, as they are in no way a threat to the social order of the EU. If European Union officials could follow in the footsteps of the US or the UK in issuing such long-term, multiple entry visas to academicians, business people, journalists, artists, perceptions of the EU in Turkey would significantly be altered.

A simplified procedure of application for Turkish professional groups and the issuing of multiple entry, long-term visas should not be tied to the Turkish readmission agreement or the eventual visa-free travel for Turks. A different modus operandi is needed for granting freedom of mobility to Turkish nationals who are not asylum seekers, possible migrants, terrorists, or social menaces.

It is, therefore, a step in the right direction that the EU has already made its intent known to facilitate visa applications for professionals in Turkey.

On 21 June 2012, the European Council invited the Commission to establish a dialogue with Turkey for the specific aim of visa liberalization. In December 2013, the European Commission and the Turkish government agreed on visa liberalization. According to this agreement, the EU agreed to facilitate travel for frequent travelers, specifically if the visa applicants are known to the European authorities, and this should qualify them to benefit from a simplified procedure. Yet, even though the simplified procedure implies that the consulates could demand only a handful of data for visa applications, this is never the case. It is the prerogative of the visa services officials to ask for as many documents as possible ranging from one's financial records to all kinds of personal details in order to issue a visa.

This means that these recent developments on visa liberalization and facilitation between the EU and Turkey remain largely on paper, thus there is very little progress that is reflected onto the everyday lives of Turkish citizens wishing or needing to travel to Europe. Consequently, the more Turkish nationals spend time waiting in line for their Schengen visa applications, the more they have to share the intimate details of their professional and personal life with perfect strangers, the further apart they feel from the European Union. This alienation of the most pro-European groups in Turkey through maltreatment has serious repercussions on Turkey's relations with the EU.

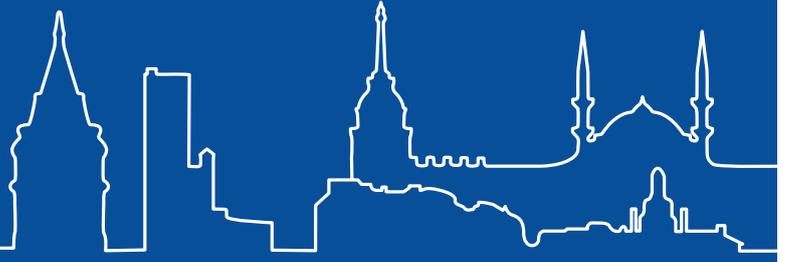
## END NOTES

1 | “Vize Kuyrugu oldurdu: Visa Line killed him”, September 5, 2012. <http://www.gazeteport.com.tr/haber/109869/vize-kuyrugu-oldurdu>.

2 | Trust and Travel, Easing the Visa burden for Turkish citizens in Five steps, European Stability Initiative, February 24, 2014. [http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=156&document\\_ID=147](http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=156&document_ID=147).

3 | [http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail\\_getNewsById.action?newsId=303205](http://www.todayszaman.com/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=303205).

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