



## Competing for Founders: What the EU's Visa and Talent Agenda Mean for Startups

Remarks on the EU Visa Policy Strategy and the Commission Recommendation on Attracting Talent for Innovation  
26 January 2026

### 1. Introduction: repositioning visa policy as a competitiveness tool

Allied For Startups (AFS) welcomes the adoption of the **EU Visa Policy Strategy** and the accompanying **Commission Recommendation on attracting talent for innovation** as an important and long-overdue step in aligning Europe's migration framework with its innovation and competitiveness objectives.

For the first time, the European Commission clearly frames visa policy not merely as a security or migration-management instrument, but as a **strategic lever for economic acceleration, innovation capacity and global competitiveness**. This shift is particularly significant for startups and scaleups, whose ability to grow, innovate and remain anchored in Europe depends directly on predictable, fast and accessible access to global talent.

The documents explicitly recognise startup founders, innovative entrepreneurs, researchers and highly skilled workers in innovation-intensive sectors as priority groups for Europe's future. This acknowledgement reflects the reality faced daily by Europe's startup ecosystems: **talent shortages are a structural constraint on Europe's capacity to compete globally**. For startups, which typically operate with limited resources and compressed timelines, fragmented and slow admission procedures are a growth barrier.

Taken together, the Strategy and the Recommendation send a clear political signal that the EU intends to **compete more actively for global talent** and that it understands talent mobility as a core component of its economic model rather than a peripheral policy area.

In practical terms, the Strategy and the Recommendation introduce several concrete and welcome improvements for startups and the innovation economy, including:

- **a clear political recognition of startup founders and innovative entrepreneurs as a priority category**, alongside researchers and highly skilled workers in innovation-intensive sectors;
- **a strong push to simplify and digitalise long-stay visa and residence permit procedures**, including remote submission, reduced documentation and acceptance of documentation in English;
- **an ambition to significantly shorten processing times**, with a clear benchmark of **30 days** for startup founders, innovative entrepreneurs, researchers and participants in key EU programmes;
- **the introduction of facilitated and fast-track pathways for founders**, notably when linked to recognised innovation ecosystems and EU-supported programmes such as Horizon Europe and the European Innovation Council;
- **stronger intra-EU mobility for innovation talent**, enabling founders, researchers and highly skilled workers to operate across borders more easily;
- **the extension of the Blue Carpet and Choose Europe logic to startup founders**, including access to EURAXESS, signalling a more holistic approach to attraction, integration and retention.

## **2. A positive step forward for startups and the innovation economy**

From an AFS perspective, the most significant and welcome element of the Commission Recommendation is the **explicit recognition of startup founders and innovative entrepreneurs as a distinct priority category**, combined with the call for facilitated and fast-track admission procedures tailored to their specific role in the economy.

By encouraging Member States to establish **accelerated pathways for startup founders and innovative entrepreneurs**, notably in cooperation with recognised innovation actors and EU-supported programmes such as Horizon Europe and the European Innovation Council, the Commission acknowledges that founders are not simply highly skilled workers seeking employment, but **company creators who generate innovation, employment and investment spillovers**. This represents an important conceptual shift, bringing migration policy closer to the realities of how startups are created and scaled in practice, and creating a long-overdue bridge between Europe's innovation funding instruments and its admission frameworks.

Closely linked to this, AFS particularly welcomes the encouragement for Member States to process long-stay visa and residence permit applications within **30 days**, including for **startup founders, innovative entrepreneurs, researchers and highly skilled workers in innovation-related sectors**. If applied consistently, this benchmark would constitute a structural improvement in Europe's attractiveness as a destination for founders. For early-stage companies operating under tight financial and operational constraints, the difference between a **30-day process and a 90-day or six-month process** can determine whether a hire, a relocation decision or even a company launch is viable at all.

AFS also welcomes the broader package of measures aimed at **simplifying and accelerating procedures**, including the digitalisation of applications, the possibility of remote submission, reduced documentary requirements and the acceptance of documentation in English. While often perceived as technical, these measures directly address long-standing pain points reported by startup founders across Europe. Their combined effect in reducing cost, administrative burden and uncertainty is substantial, particularly for small and fast-moving teams without dedicated legal or HR capacity.

Beyond admission, the extension of the **Blue Carpet and Choose Europe** logic to startup founders and innovative entrepreneurs, notably through opening access to the **EURAXESS** platform, is another important and welcome development. This reflects a more holistic understanding of talent attraction, which goes beyond entry conditions and addresses integration into local ecosystems. By providing visibility, networks and access to support services, Europe strengthens not only its ability to

attract founders, but also its capacity to retain them and enable them to build and scale sustainably within European ecosystems.

AFS further welcomes the strong emphasis placed on **facilitating intra-EU mobility for innovation talent**, including researchers, international students and EU Blue Card holders. Encouraging Member States to simplify and streamline mobility procedures, and to allow engagement in entrepreneurial and innovation-related activities across borders, reflects how startups actually operate. Innovation teams are increasingly distributed, cross-border and pan-European by design. Reducing internal mobility barriers is therefore essential to the emergence of genuinely integrated European startup ecosystems rather than a collection of loosely connected national markets.

Taken together, these **founder-focused measures** are embedded within a broader and welcome shift in EU policy thinking, in which **talent attraction is clearly positioned as a core component of Europe's competitiveness strategy**. Both the Strategy and the Recommendation are firmly anchored in the Startup and Scaleup Strategy, the AI Continent Action Plan, the Union of Skills and the forthcoming 28th regime, signalling a growing coherence between innovation, industrial and migration policies. The Commission rightly acknowledges that innovation-driven sectors such as artificial intelligence, deep tech, quantum technologies, clean technologies and biotechnology face persistent and structural skills shortages, and that startups and SMEs are disproportionately affected by these constraints due to their limited capacity to navigate complex administrative systems and absorb delays. By situating talent attraction in this context, the Commission moves beyond a generic skills debate and directly addresses the structural needs of Europe's innovation economy.

### **3. Remaining gaps and areas for further ambition**

While the overall direction of travel is clearly positive, AFS believes that further steps will be necessary to ensure that these initiatives translate into **tangible improvements for startups on the ground**.

A first and central challenge relates to **implementation**. The Recommendation is non-binding, and while this allows Member States flexibility, it also risks perpetuating the very fragmentation it seeks to overcome. Without **systematic monitoring, transparency and benchmarking**, there is a real risk that processing times and procedural quality will continue to vary widely across Member States. For startups operating across borders, this unevenness undermines predictability and weakens the credibility of the EU-level message.

AFS therefore sees a strong case for the next phase to include clearer mechanisms to track implementation, compare outcomes and identify best practices. Visibility on actual processing times, refusal rates and procedural bottlenecks would not only improve accountability, but also support mutual learning among Member States.

A second area of concern relates to **access to fast-track procedures for founders**. While cooperation with recognised incubators, accelerators and innovation agencies can be effective, it can also create new forms of gatekeeping. Founders outside formal programmes, bootstrapped entrepreneurs or cross-border teams may find themselves excluded despite their innovation potential. AFS encourages reflection on clearer and more consistent criteria for recognising startup founders and innovative entrepreneurs across the EU, as well as **greater mutual recognition between Member States**.

AFS also notes the strong emphasis placed on **safeguards related to security, misuse and technology leakage**. While these concerns are legitimate, particularly in sensitive sectors, safeguards must be applied in a proportionate and risk-based manner. **Early-stage startups** should not face a heavy level of scrutiny or administrative burden. **Clear guidance, transparent criteria** and predictable procedures will be essential to avoid unintended chilling effects on innovation.

Finally, AFS stresses that **talent mobility cannot be addressed in isolation**. Faster and simpler visa procedures for founders will have limited impact if they are followed by fragmented company law frameworks, complex cross-border operations or inconsistent rules on employee stock options and taxation. The reference to the forthcoming **EU Inc/28th regime** is therefore important, but must

be followed by concrete progress to ensure that talent attracted to Europe can not only enter, but also build, scale and stay.

#### **4. Looking ahead: from political signal to structural impact**

The Commission indicates that it will monitor the implementation of the Recommendation starting in 2026 and assess whether targeted legislative adjustments are needed if gaps persist. It also signals openness to adapting the long-stay visa framework to better reflect innovation and research ecosystems.

AFS welcomes this openness and stands ready to contribute evidence from startup founders and ecosystems across Europe. Europe is clearly saying the right things on talent. The priority now is execution, consistency and scale. If delivered effectively, this agenda can materially strengthen Europe's position as a destination for founders, innovators and builders. If not, it risks becoming another well-intentioned framework undermined by uneven national implementation.

AFS will continue to engage constructively with EU institutions and Member States to ensure that this initiative delivers real, measurable improvements for startups and Europe's innovation economy.