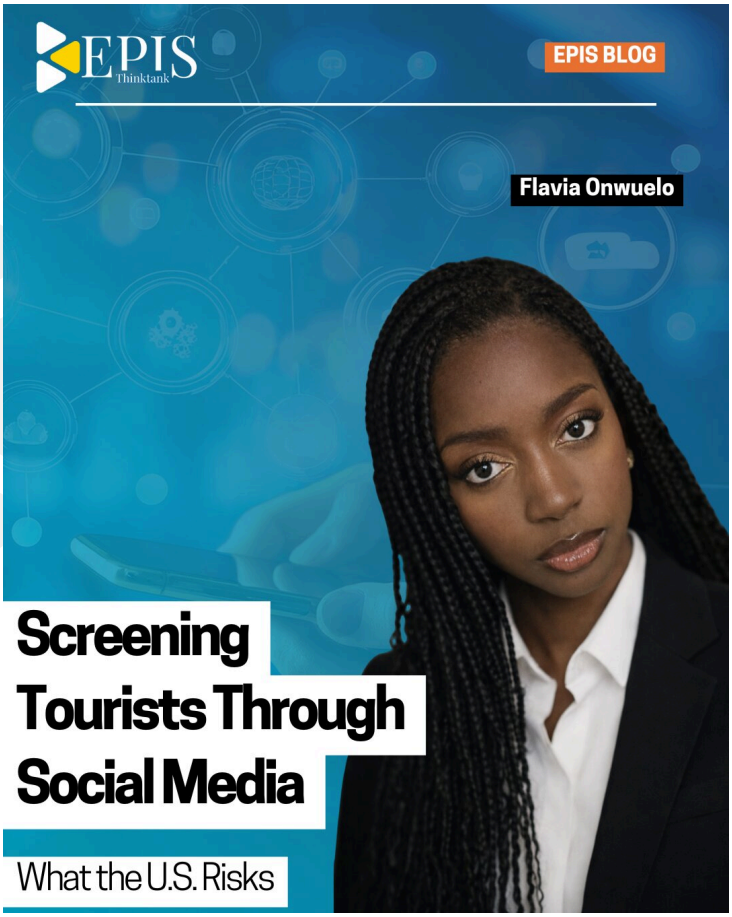
Screening Tourists Through Social Media

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If you're European, traveling to the United States as a tourist usually feels relatively easy: you're not going through a full visa process, you're applying for ESTA (Electronic System for Travel Authorization), booking flights, and going. In fact, when we hear of US border restrictions, we often picture migrants from other countries which are already under heavy restrictions.

However, on December 10, 2025, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) published a Federal Register notice proposing changes to what it collects for ESTA. Basically, the CBP says it is adding social media as a mandatory data element for ESTA, and that applicants would have to pro-

vide their social media from the last five years. As of today, many European countries are in the Visa Waiver Program which enables the ESTA application, such as Italy, Germany, Spain, France and others. But, what about privacy, freedom of expression and tourism?

Trump's era: security comes first

The Federal Register, the U.S. government's official journal for regulatory notices, states this proposal is closely linked to the Executive Order 14161, which dates to January 20, 2025. Signed directly by the U.S. president, the main focus of this executive order is the protection of the United States from foreign terrorist and other national security and public safety threats.

Then, a few days later the issuing of the proposal of the CBP, on December 16th, the Whitehouse published a proclamation titled: "Restricting and Limiting the Entry of Foreign Nationals to Protect the Security of the United States". In practice, a target list of countries of Africa and the Middle East will face strong restrictions and bans to enter the US territory. This context pretty much explains the existence of this proposal; it shows the governing logic of the moment: security comes first.

However, through the ESTA social media requirement, the administration is expanding the idea that security equals more information. And that's precisely where the concrete risks begin. This notice is a shift in category because it proposes turning what used to be an optional disclosure into a mandatory requirement and not just "current accounts," but a five-year window of your personal free speech and social life.

Why mandatory social media for tourists crosses the line

Esta was designed for short trips, tourism, work purposes, and family visits. This means that the requirement of 5 years of social media disclosure is an excessive burden for tourists. The main idea is that checking someone's social media is not the same action as checking someone's passport. Nowadays, social media reveals someone's social life, community, humor, political opinions, personal memories, and what matters is that people's stances on social media continuously change, with legitimate and human contradictions.

What makes this proposal unsettling is its ambiguity. What actually counts as a threat on social media? Did you like a post about a conflict because you support violence or because you are following the news? Did you repost a slogan 5 years ago without fully understanding it? When criteria are not clear, people will start guessing what might look "bad" and changing themselves, which leads to self-censorship. If I know my entry could be influenced by my online presence, I will post less about politics and maybe delete some old posts. Basically, this is a rational human response to a system which is ambiguous.

Then, there's the risk of misinterpretation made by automation. Social media strictly needs context: sarcasm, cultural references, irony, and language nuances can be misread. In fact, the proposal in question raises questions on its actual feasibility: the number of travelers under VWP is very large, and it's very probable that's this checking will be made by artificial intelligence and not under human scrutiny. Automated systems don't reliably capture tone, irony, language nuance, culture, and instead treat everything as clean data.

Privacy apart, what about its implications on the tourism sector?

This proposal, if approved, will deeply affect the U.S. tourism in a particularly delicate time. As a matter of fact, the U.S. is about to enter a huge visibility window for global travel: the 2026 FIFA World Cup will be jointly hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico, and Los Angeles will host the 2028 Olympic Games. Tourists are incredibly sensitive to signals that make a destination hard to reach and characterised by complex administrative controls.

In fact, right now tourism to the U.S. already looks fragile. The news agency Reuters reported that the U.S. registered a 6% decline in foreign visitors in 2025, even while global tourism spending rose. That's the context in which making social media disclosure mandatory becomes more than a privacy issue. For a lot of people, especially first-time visitors, the logic is simple: if a trip comes with extra pression and fear, they will just pick a different destination which feels easier. That's also the reason why IITA (International Inbound Tourism Association) have now warned that mandatory social media would add friction in a moment where the U.S. is trying to recover its attractiveness as a destination and ultimately cause huge economic impacts.

To conclude, what the CBP is proposing can be considered as a very intrusive requirement. It ties admission to someone's social media identity with the uncertainty that the latter will be interpreted fairly. Undoubtedly, this measure is a significant shift especially for visa-waiver travellers (including many Europeans) who rely on ESTA for ordinary short trips. Furthermore, it could create huge repercussions on the now fragile tourism sector of the United States. Security does matter, but proportionality counts too.