Ops to Europe: How to Get a Third Country Operator (TCO) Approval

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If you want to operate commercially into the EU (or certain associated states), you'll need a Third Country Operator (TCO) Authorisation from EASA. The process is free and straightforward if you meet ICAO standards – just a bit time-consuming to get all the paperwork together.

What is it, and who needs one?

A Third Country Operator is **any non-European aircraft operator conducting commercial air transport flights into the EU**. That includes BizAv charter flights intending to operate commercially. **Private flights are exempt**.

There's also a provision for "one-off" or short-notice non-scheduled commercial flights without a TCO authorisation. These are strictly limited to urgent public interest missions – such as humanitarian, disaster relief, or air ambulance flights – and can be approved for operations of up to 12 weeks.

What's being assessed?

The regulation requires TCOs to hold an authorisation issued by EASA to confirm they meet international operational and safety standards in line with ICAO requirements.

Common Gotchas

- Do you have a **Safety Management System** (SMS)? Even if SMS is not required by your local regulator, EASA expects these applicable international standards to be complied with when operating to the EU.

- You need a **Flight Data Analysis Programme** (FDAP) if your aircraft's MTOW is greater than 27,000 kg (59,500 lbs).

- Do you comply with the reinforced **cockpit door regulations**?

- Are you compliant with **Mode S Elementary, ADS-B Out, and Mode S Enhanced Surveillance**? Or do you have a plan in place to retrofit?

If you're a Part 121-style operator from a well-regulated state, you'll likely already meet these standards. **Part 135 operators may need to address a few gaps**.

You can check who already has a TCO here: EASA TCO Holder List.

How closely will EASA check?

EASA applies a **risk-based approach** when reviewing applications. This takes into account:

- Your own safety performance and history

- The safety record of your State of Operator and State of Registry

- Your level of exposure to European citizens

Operators from well-regulated states with a clean record and modern fleet – for example, an Australian operator with no incidents – will generally face less scrutiny than those from higher-risk environments.
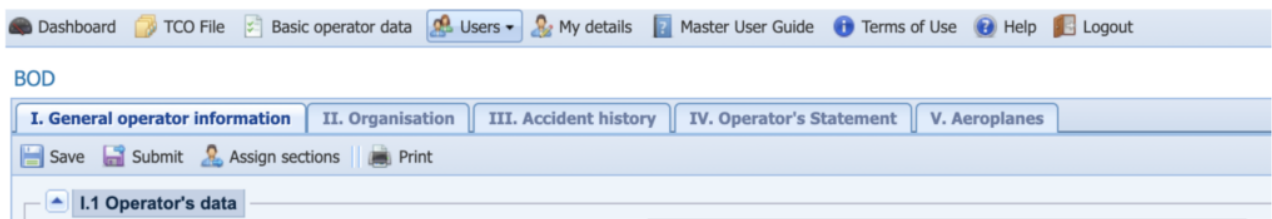
Note: **You do not need IS-BAO certification to obtain a TCO**. If you have it, great, but EASA assesses each application individually and may request extra info if needed.

How to get a TCO?

The good news? It's still **free to apply**, and the process is straightforward if you have your paperwork ready. Here's how it works in 2025:

It's actually pretty simple to apply:

1. **Submit your application** – Download the latest application form from the EASA website, complete it, and email it to **tco.applications@easa.europa.eu** (cc **tco@easa.europa.eu**) – electronic submissions only. Attach the mandatory documents: Certificate of Incorporation, Air Operator Certificate (AOC) or Air Carrier Certificate (ACC), and Operations Specifications (Ops Specs).

2. **Complete the Basic Operator Data** – Once you receive login credentials for the TCO web-interface, log in immediately and **complete the Basic Operator Data within 7 days**. It takes a few hours, so gather AOCs, insurance certificates, and aircraft documents in advance. The portal is still clunky, so hit "save" often. Keep your fleet and contact details up to date.

3. **Submit and respond to follow-ups** – **EASA's technical evaluation can take up to 30 days**. They may ask follow-up technical questions; you'll need to reference your manuals and reply via the portal.

4. **Get your approval** – Once satisfied, EASA will issue your TCO authorisation. **It has no expiry date, but continuous monitoring applies**, so be ready to respond to periodic information requests.

For most operators, getting and keeping a TCO is free. **EASA only charges fees if your risk profile warrants it** – for example, if they need to hold a technical meeting (from €10,000) or conduct an on-site audit (from €19,000 plus travel costs).

What's next after approval?

Maintain compliance – EASA monitors operators through ramp checks and document reviews, so be prepared at all times. Keep your TCO portal information up to date, and respond promptly to any EASA communication.

Remember, your **TCO authorisation is simply EASA's safety thumbs-up**. **You may still need to arrange the usual overflight/landing permits from each EU Member State**, depending on the nature of your flight and the national rules in place. In other words, TCO gets you through the safety gate, but you still have to knock on the door of each country you plan to operate to.

Extra Reading:

- EASA TCO Website
- EASA TCO FAQs