



Security features and biometrics in passports

Children under twelve should no longer have their fingerprints included on passports issued in the European Union, the European Parliament says in a co-decision report adopted with 594 votes in favour, 51 against and 37 abstentions. But they should have their own passports, so as to combat trafficking in children, say MEPs. Biometric passports will be introduced in the whole EU (+ Iceland, Norway and Switzerland) on the 29 June.

The European Parliament adopted plans to amend a 2004 regulation laying down biometric features to be included in passports and other travel documents, including the holder's fingerprints. The European Parliament adopted a compromise position agreed with Council last year.

In the aftermath of the events of 11 September 2001, the Commission was asked by Member States to take immediate action to improve document security. The EU decided, therefore, to integrate biometrics in European passports. These identifiers comprise a facial image and fingerprints, making it possible to combat fraud and falsification more effectively. The regulation, already adopted, which will come into force in June, establishes technical specifications such as :

- additional security features notably with a view to combating counterfeiting and falsification;
- the storage medium and its security;
- common quality requirements for the facial image and the fingerprints.

However, during pilot projects carried out in some Member States it was found that children's fingerprints are not of sufficient quality, especially those of the youngest children, which can change greatly as they grow older. In its draft text, the European Commission therefore suggested to introduce an exemption for children under twelve. A similar exemption was agreed for people deemed physically unable to give fingerprints.

The rapporteur and Council presidency agreed that fingerprints should not be taken from children under the age of 12. However, countries already taking fingerprints from children under that age, but not below 6, can continue to do so for four years .

In cases where it is impossible to take fingerprints, Member states may deliver a temporary passport having a validity of twelve months or less.

One person, one passport

To combat trafficking in children, the draft legislation also proposes introducing the principle "one person, one passport": until now a passport issued to a parent has often also covered the children by adding their names - but the microchip contains only the parent's biometric data. The Regulation does not provide a legal base for setting up or

maintaining databases for storage of these data in Member States.

UK government position

The UK is excluded from participation in this Regulation as it is a development of the Schengen acquis in which the UK does not take part. However, the Government supports the inclusion of fingerprints in passports and travel documents as a means of providing better identification. The UK has stated its intention to keep in step with the Regulation to ensure that UK passports are not seen as 'second class' compared with those issued by other Member States.

Germany started collecting fingerprints in March 2007. The Netherlands are testing it since 2004. In France, it is available on request since April 2006.

Contact :

Baptiste CHATAIN

BXL: (32-2) 28 40992

STR: (33-3) 881 73603

PORT: (32) 498.983.590

EMAIL: libe-press@europarl.europa.eu

Richard FREEDMAN

E-mail: press-EN@europarl.europa.eu

BXL: (32-2) 28 41448

STR: (33-3) 881 73785

PORT: (+32) 498 98 32 39