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**CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE OF THE CONVENTION
FOR THE PROTECTION OF INDIVIDUALS WITH REGARD TO
AUTOMATIC PROCESSING OF PERSONAL DATA
(T-PD)**

**Opinion on
the Data protection implications of the processing of
Passenger Name Records**

Directorate General of Human Rights and the Rule of Law

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The Consultative Committee of the Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data (ETS n°108, hereinafter referred to as 'Convention 108'),

Recalling the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and in particular Articles 8 (right to respect for private life) and 13 (right to an effective remedy), as further elaborated by the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights and Article 2 (freedom of movement) of Protocol No. 4,

Having regard to Convention 108 and other relevant Council of Europe instruments in the field of data protection such as Recommendation (87)15 regulating the use of personal data in the police sector and Recommendation (2010)13 on the protection of individuals with regard to automatic processing of personal data in the context of profiling,

Noting the rapid spread at global level of information technology systems and legislations concerning the transmission by air carriers of personal data of their passengers to public authorities for law enforcement and national security purposes,

Resolved to support respect for human rights with regard to the processing of personal data of air transport by public authorities responsible for the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of terrorist offences and serious crimes,

Adopted the present opinion:

1. Introduction

The 32nd Plenary meeting (1-3 July 2015) of the Consultative Committee of Convention 108 decided, in light of the growing concerns raised by reactions to the recent terrorist attacks and threats, to prepare the present opinion, having notably considered the issues addressed in the report "Passenger Name Records (PNR), data mining and data protection: the need for strong safeguards"¹.

The Bureau of the Committee, during its 36th (6-8 October 2015), 37th (9-11 December 2015) and 38th meetings (22-24 March 2016) worked on the preparation of the Opinion, which was examined by the 33rd Plenary meeting of the Committee of Convention 108 after written consultation of the delegations and interested stakeholders.

The Committee of Convention 108 understands that, in the recent context of accrued menace of terrorist attacks, the fight against terrorism must be reinforced. It underlines the importance of combating terrorism efficiently and effectively while ensuring respect for human rights, the rule of law and the common values upheld by the Council of Europe. The Committee notes the willingness of governments to establish systems allowing the screening of personal data relating to air passengers as one of the means to prevent terrorism and other serious crimes, as an element of their efforts to ensure the security of the population. In this context, the Committee considers it necessary to recall the data protection principles

¹ Report prepared by Mr D. Korff with the contribution of Ms M. Georges: [http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/dataprotection/TPD_documents/TPD\(2015\)11_PNR%20draft%20report%20Douwe%20Korff%20&%20Marie%20Georges_15%2006%202015.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/dataprotection/TPD_documents/TPD(2015)11_PNR%20draft%20report%20Douwe%20Korff%20&%20Marie%20Georges_15%2006%202015.pdf)

that are applicable to such systems, underlining that the interference with human rights, including the right to the protection of private life and to the protection of personal data can only occur when the necessary conditions have been fulfilled.

Article 8 of the ECHR and Article 9 of Convention 108 have set the conditions that must be respected when a limitation to the rights to private life and data protection is considered. Such a limitation must be in accordance with a clear law and must be necessary in a democratic society for a legitimate aim (such as national security, public safety or the prevention of crime).

2. Description of PNR data

Several types of passenger data exist and for the purposes of the present opinion, the Committee will focus on Passenger Name Records (PNRs).

PNRs are records used in the air transport industry for commercial and operational purposes in providing air transportation services. The PNRs are created by airlines and travel agencies², relating to travel bookings in order to enable an exchange of information between them and in accordance with the passengers' requests. Such records are captured in many ways as the reservations³ can be created in Global Distribution Systems (GDS), Computer Reservation Systems (CRS), or the airline's own reservation system. Data fed into an airline's Departure Control System (DCS) upon check-in by the passenger (i.e. seat and baggage information) can also be added automatically to an existing PNR when the CRS and DCS are integrated in a single system.

Although PNRs were originally introduced for air travel, CRS can now also be used for bookings of hotels, car rental, boat and train trips.

The format and content of a PNR, due to the common needs of multiple actors, has been progressively harmonised and standardised by the International Air Transport Association (IATA) which provides support in the design of passenger data programs.

The PNR information is collected from passengers and contains part or whole of the following items:

- Full name⁴
- address and contact information (phone number, e-mail address, IP address)
- type of travel document, number, country of issuance and date of expiry⁴
- date and country of birth⁴
- nationality⁴
- country of residence
- travel itinerary (dates, place of departure and arrival)
- address for the first night spent in the country of destination
- method of payment used, including billing address and credit card details

² In the future, "non-carriers economic operators" (i.e. travel agencies and tour operators) may be obliged to provide PNR data to the national competent authorities.

³ Among traditional global distribution systems, Amadeus is the only one located in Europe, with Headquarters in Spain, its Data Centre in Germany and its Research and Development Centre in France. It is owned and used notably by Air France, Iberia Airlines, Lufthansa, British Airways and Scandinavian airlines and over 60 other carriers across the globe are affiliated to it.

⁴ Information verified on the basis of passport information presented by the passenger.

- frequent flyer data and benefits (free upgrade or ticket)
- an open field with general remarks ("Special Service Request", "Optional Services Instruction" or "Other Service Information") such as all available information on unaccompanied minors, dietary and medical requirements, seating preferences, languages, details of disability, and other similar requests.
- an individual reference (PNR record locator code)
- information on the travel agency/travel agent
- ticket information (number, date of reservation, date of issuance, one-way tickets)
- fare details and the restrictions possibly applying to this fare (and related taxes)
- names and number of other passengers travelling together on the same PNR
- travel status of passengers, including confirmations, check-in status, 'no show' or 'go show' information;
- seat number and other seating information
- code share information
- split/divided information (where the itineraries of several passengers under a PNR are not similar and changes must be brought to the booking for one passenger of an existing PNR)
- baggage information
- historic of all changes to PNR information listed above.

In practice, the content of each existing PNR will greatly vary as the number and nature of fields to complete will depend on the itinerary (e.g. in case of round-trip itinerary covering several towns in a same country or in several countries), the offer of services by airlines and the reservation system used (over 60 fields to be completed for some of them).

The fact that the information collected is provided by passengers, or by others on their behalf and that such information is not systematically checked (to the exception for instance of flight information provided by the airlines and passport information, when passports are not forged), is also to be considered, in relation to the principle of data accuracy. There is a potential for error: a PNR may contain incorrect information about an individual, which could, in some circumstances, raise suspicion.

Airlines may have a legal obligation to transfer all or part of PNR data to the competent public authorities in order to identify persons suspected of involvement in terrorist activities or serious crimes.

3. **Legality**

While PNRs can be of benefit to the competent public authorities in pursuing a legitimate aim, a number of conditions have to be met in order for the interference with the rights to private life and data protection to be permissible.

Pursuant to the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights relating to Article 8 of the ECHR such interference is only permissible where it is in accordance with the law and is strictly necessary and proportionate to the legitimate aim pursued.

While the assessment of the necessity of the interference, and the proportionality of the measures considered, have to be carefully examined in light of various elements, the Committee will briefly recall what the ECHR considers to be covered by the condition of legality. The requirement that any interference be 'in accordance with the law' (or 'provided for by the law' as prescribed in Article 9 of Convention 108) will only be met when three conditions are satisfied:

- the measure must have some basis in domestic law,
- this law must be clear and precise enough to be accessible to the person concerned (it must obviously be public), and
- have foreseeable consequences (enabling the person, if need be with appropriate advice, to regulate her or his conduct and act accordingly)⁵.

In the context of processing of PNRs by law enforcement authorities, the criterion of the quality of the law implies a very precise and strict definition of the legitimate aim pursued.

4. **Necessity and proportionality**

Any prescribed or envisaged measures on processing PNR data by the competent public authorities, in light of the interference that they may entail with the rights of the data subjects, must be subject to scrutiny of their necessity and proportionality. The Committee calls for the examination of objective elements enabling to assess such necessity, the proportionality of the measures prescribed as well as the efficiency and effectivity of the system (which should be demonstrable where such systems already exist).

The processing of PNR data – providing the unique benefit of enabling the identification of individuals of interest – is the general and indiscriminate screening of all passengers, including individuals who are not suspected of any crime, by different competent authorities and concerns data initially collected for commercial purposes by private entities. In light of the degree of interference with the rights to private life and data protection that would arise from such processing, the fact that this processing is a necessary measure in a democratic society for a legitimate aim has to be clearly evidenced and the appropriate safeguards must be put in place. A specific demonstration of the necessity is needed for the collection and further use of PNR data.

The European Court of Human Rights underlined that “while the adjective ‘necessary’ [...] is not synonymous with ‘indispensable’, neither has it the flexibility of such expressions as ‘admissible’, ‘ordinary’, ‘useful’, ‘reasonable’ or ‘desirable’.”⁶

While the State has a margin of appreciation in choosing the necessary means to achieve its legitimate and necessary aim, it must assess whether the interference created by such measures corresponds to a ‘pressing social need’⁷. The assessment of the proportionality of the derogation needs to be based on the examination of a wide variety of elements such as the definition of clear and limited purposes, of the scope of application of the system, of the nature of the data concerned, the nature of the processing, the modalities of access to and conservation of the data, etc.

Deciding on the validity of the Data Retention Directive (regarding the retention of communication data), the Court of Justice of the European Union underlined⁸ that “the

⁵ ECHR *Kennedy v. the United Kingdom*, § 151; *Rotaru v. Romania*, 28341/95, §§50, 52 and 55; *Amann v. Switzerland*, § 50; *Iordachi and Others v. Moldova*; *Kruslin v. France*, § 27; *Huvig v. France*, § 26; *Association for European Integration and Human Rights and Ekimdzhiiev v. Bulgaria*, § 71; *Liberty and Others v. the United Kingdom*, § 59, etc.

⁶ *Handyside v. UK*, 5493/72, §48.

⁷ *Olsson v. Sweden*, 10465/83.

⁸ *Digital Rights Ireland*, C-293/12 of 8 April 2014, §52.

derogations and limitations in relation to the protection of personal data must apply only in so far as is strictly necessary”.

In case of existing systems of processing of PNR data by the competent public authorities, greater transparency on the assessment of the efficacy of such systems should be sought with a view to enabling a sound independent assessment of the necessity of the system. While such transparency should be detailed, it should not defeat the legitimate purpose. For instance, objective and quantifiable information regarding results achieved, such as the number of arrested persons, terrorist threats which could be avoided, other deterrent effects, the modification of criminals' behaviours (e.g. abandoning originally intended criminal acts), the likelihood of substantially increased costs and difficulty of perpetrating crimes (like terrorist attacks) would help inform an assessment as to whether a PNR system is necessary.

A regular review at periodic intervals of the necessity of the PNR system to pursue its appropriate justification in time should be carried out.

5. Application of the principles and safeguards

(a) Purpose limitation

Given the level of the interference with the rights to private life and data protection posed by the processing of PNR data by competent public authorities, the purposes need to be clearly and precisely predefined by law on the basis of objective criteria which limit the transmission of the data only to the competent authorities as well as the further use of such data.

PNR systems are generally justified on the basis of the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of terrorist offences and other serious crimes (such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, child trafficking, money laundering), or international crimes (such as crimes against humanity, torture, or genocide) and a clear delimitation of those legitimate aims and corresponding notions is needed in order to strictly circumscribe the use of such systems.

The definition of ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorist offences’ is of particular complexity (see the relevant UN Conventions, the Council of Europe Convention on the prevention of terrorism of 2005 and its 2015 additional protocol). In the absence of a clear delimitation, this terminology should be restrictively construed. Should that not be the case, the purpose of the PNR system would remain too vague and the principle of proportionality would not be respected.

In exceptional cases, the prevention of serious threats to the public (for instance for the prevention of the spread of a dangerous contagious disease) could also justify the use of PNR data.

(b) Competent authorities

In order to guarantee the proportionality of the interference with the rights of the persons concerned, the public authorities receiving the PNR data should be the authorities responsible for the previously defined legitimate purposes.

Furthermore, the establishment of dedicated coordination units (such as the 'Passengers Information Units' in the EU scheme) contributes to preventing a mix between judicial and surveillance activities but the competencies of such units need to be strictly and narrowly defined and made public.

Competent national authorities legally authorised to process PNR data should be listed and that information should be made public.

(c) Passenger's personal data

The data transmitted and further processed by the competent public authorities need to be relevant, adequate and proportionate (Article 5 of Convention 108) to the purposes for which they are processed. The transmitted data must be clearly defined (the elements of the PNR that are to be transmitted must be exhaustively listed), on the basis of objective criteria, and limits to the subsequent use of such data must also be established.

PNRs contain information that is needed to facilitate a passenger's travel, and may include a number of sensitive data which could serve to indicate racial origin, political opinions or religious or other beliefs or data relating to a person's health or sexual orientation, not only under certain 'coded' data but also under the open field containing general remarks (such as dietary or medical requirements, or the fact that a political or religious association benefited from reduced fares for the travel of its members) which could lead to direct discrimination.

While the competent authorities receiving such data in the PNRs can be allowed to process it in exceptional and strictly justified circumstances (no assessment can be run on the basis of a criteria linked to any sensitive data), the Committee considers that a prohibition of the systematic use by the competent public authorities of such sensitive data should be established as a principle.

(d) Data transmission

Two different methods of transmission of the data from the commercial sector to the competent authorities of the public sector exist:

- the 'pull' method whereby public authorities directly reach into ('access') the reservation system and extract ('pull') a copy of the required data from it;
- the 'push' method whereby the operator transmits ('pushes') the required PNR data into the database of the authority requesting them.

The Committee considers that the 'push' method, with the operator being fully responsible for the quality of the data and the conditions of transmission, is to be preferred as it offers greater data protection safeguards than the 'pull' one.

(e) Data matching and mining

The processing of personal data may concern all passengers and not only the targeted individuals suspected of involvement in a criminal offence or posing an immediate threat to national security or public order.

The PNR data may be compared ('data matching') to databases⁹ (i.e. of convicted persons for serious crimes, of persons under investigation for suspicion of terrorist activities, of lost and stolen passports) held by the competent authorities according to the law, in order to identify suspects or offenders as well as the persons linked to such potential suspects or offenders ('contact chaining').

PNR data may also be processed with the intention of identifying anyone who 'might' be involved in, or who 'might become' involved in criminal activities defined by the law establishing the sharing of PNRs with the competent authorities e.g. individuals travelling to become foreign terrorist fighters. This may be achieved by 'data mining' according to selectors or according to predictive algorithms.

This assessment of passengers by data mining may raise the question of predictability, in particular when operated on the basis of predictive algorithms using dynamic criteria which may constantly evolve in light of self-learning capacities.

The development of data mining algorithms should be based on the results of regular assessments of the likely impact of the data processing on the rights and fundamental freedoms of data subjects.

The basic structure of the analyses should be based on predefined risk indicators which have been clearly identified in advance.

The relevance of individual results of such automatic assessments should be carefully examined on a case-by-case basis, by a person in a non-automated manner.

(f) Conservation of data

The period of retention of the PNR data must be clearly specified and limited to the time absolutely necessary for the purpose prescribed as it must be "based on objective criteria in order to ensure that it is limited to what is strictly necessary"¹⁰. Such criteria should be made publicly available.

Masking out¹¹ some elements of the data which identify the passenger, after a pre-determined period of time, which is as short as possible, can mitigate the risks entailed by a longer period of conservation, such as for instance abusive access, of the data on all passengers.

⁹ Databases created, operated and kept up-to date according to the law.

¹⁰ Digital Rights Ireland, C-293/12 of 8 April 2014 §64.

¹¹ 'Masking out' means rendering invisible certain data elements enabling to identify a person.

It should be recalled that masked out data still permits identification of the individuals and continues as such to constitute personal data, and that its conservation should also be limited in time in order to prevent a permanent and general surveillance.

(g) Rights of information, access, rectification and deletion

The Committee recalls that according to Article 1 of both the ECHR and Convention 108, the rights to privacy and data protection have to be secured for every individual within the jurisdiction of the contracting Parties, irrespective of her or his nationality or residence.

The person whose PNR data is being transmitted to the competent authorities is entitled to know what processing is done by such authorities (nature of the data, for which purpose and how, for how long), has a right of access and to ask for rectification or deletion of personal data.

While such rights can be limited under the restrictive conditions previously mentioned (where it is in accordance with the law and necessary in the interest of a legitimate aim), the Committee recommends that persons who are not suspected of having committed, or being about to commit, a terrorist offence or other serious crime enjoy the full exercise of those rights. Persons who are suspected of having committed, or being about to commit such offences may at least request the correction of inaccurate data and the deletion of unlawful data.

Any limitation of those rights must be made known to passengers at the time of collection of their data and during the whole processing activity by the competent public authorities.

Where data concerning a passenger have been collected without her or his knowledge, and unless the data are deleted, that person should be informed, where practicable, that information is held about her or him as soon as the object of the purpose for collection is no longer likely to be prejudiced.

The persons concerned should be informed on how to exercise their rights and what remedies are available.

(h) Security

As required by Article 7 of Convention 108, appropriate security measures shall be taken for the protection of personal data. This notably implies that the PNR system shall be held in a secure physical environment, with high-level intrusion controls and a strict access (to a limited number of persons) control (such as layered logins and the production of an audit record of access). Furthermore, communication of the PNR data to the competent authorities must be protected by technical and procedural means (e.g. strong cryptography, effective procedures for managing keys, etc).

(i) Transborder Data flows

The Committee recalls that any PNR data transfers to States that are not Parties to Convention 108 must satisfy the conditions established to guarantee the appropriate protection of data subjects in such States.

(j) Remedies

It is an essential requirement of the case law of the European Court of Human Rights that “effective remedies” against violations of fundamental rights exist and be available to individuals (and not solely to nationals of the particular country concerned). While the Court of Justice of the European Union expressly mentions the requirement for redress before a tribunal, the European Court of Human Rights ruled¹² that the absence of judicial control does not necessarily constitute a violation of the rights at stake as long as other strong safeguards are provided for by the legislation (for instance independent oversight by authorities vested with sufficient powers and competence to exercise an effective and continuous control).

Article 10 of Convention 108 requires that Parties “establish appropriate sanctions and remedies for violations of provisions of domestic law giving effect to the basic principles for data protection” set out in the Convention.

The Committee supports the need to provide for effective redress to the individual, which would cover both administrative and judicial remedy. The Committee also highlights the importance, as a pre-condition to an effective remedy, for the person concerned to be fully informed regarding the processing of her or his personal data and underlines the difficulties which exist in providing effective remedies against algorithm-based decisions and challenging inferences based on data analysis (false positives and other discriminatory measures).

(k) Oversight and transparency

It is clear from the case law of the European Court of Human Rights that the oversight of the authorities responsible for surveillance should be performed by an independent and external body.

The Committee underlines the role of the competent data protection authorities, which should not only be consulted in the normative process of adoption of the related laws and regulations but could also assess the compliance of a PNR system with data protection rules on the basis of individual complaints that they could receive, or on their own initiative.

Other specialised independent authorities (such as a parliamentary commission) in charge of overseeing law enforcement and intelligence agencies can also have a role in controlling the scope of application of the system, its efficiency and perform case-by-case controls regarding the rationale of the retention of the passenger’s data and the duration of this retention.

Supervision by independent data protection authorities, by specialised independent authorities in charge of overseeing law enforcement and intelligence agencies, as well as through independent assessments of the efficiency by the competent authorities themselves could lead to greater transparency and accountability of the powers and competencies of a PNR system.

¹² Klass and Others v. Germany, §§ 55-56; Kennedy v. the United Kingdom, § 167.

In addition, dedicated data protection officers should be designated within the competent authorities processing PNR data with a view to ensuring compliance and accountability of the system (with a regular evaluation of the risks at stake and systematic audits of the PNR), the data processing and communication of the data, its updating and deletion, as well as the information provided to passengers. Data protection officers could also have a role as contact points in case of complaints or requests by the persons concerned. They are encouraged to raise awareness on “good practices”.

6. Conclusions

In view of the special interference with the rights to data protection and privacy that PNR measures may represent, the legality, proportionality and necessity of a PNR system need to be strictly respected and demonstrated, thus implying notably the following:

- transparent demonstration in a measurable form of the necessity and proportionality of the system in light of the legitimate aim pursued;
- accurate and strict definitions of the legitimate aim pursued are required and processing of PNR data is only allowed for the defined limited grounds (prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of terrorist offences and other serious crimes, or in exceptional cases, prevention of serious threats to the public);
- publicity of the competent public authorities (ideally dedicated coordination units);
- transmission of data via ‘push method’ with a clear definition of the initial retention period and appropriate security measures;
- prohibition of the systematic use of sensitive data;
- limitation of the data mining to predefined risk indicators , with case-by-case examination of the relevance of the results in a non-automatic manner;
- legal and only necessary limitations to the rights of information, access, rectification and deletion of the individuals;
- competence of the data protection authorities (to be consulted and able to assess the PNR system as well as to deal with individual complaints);
- availability of effective administrative and judicial remedies for the individuals;
- independent and external oversight of the PNR system;
- periodic review of the PNR systems by the competent authorities.