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More in-depth discussion needed on new measures for border management

The European Parliament adopted an own-initiative report offering its opinion on a new block of measures envisaged by the Commission, which, although still in the policy development stage, is likely to "bring substantial changes in the way border management is conceived and can have a huge impact in terms of data protection", the House says. The resolution was adopted with 600 votes in favour, 46 against and 30 abstentions.

Every year, 160 million EU citizens, 60 million third country nationals (TCNs) who do not require a visa, and 80 million requiring a visa, cross the EU's external border. The Commission is looking at introducing a combination of an entry/exit system for all TCNs, a Registered Traveller Programme (RTP) and a framework for the development of 'local' Registered Traveller schemes and Automated Border Control.

So-called 'overstayers' are central to the proposed entry/exit system and are supposed to represent the biggest category of illegal immigrants in the EU, the report drafted by Jeanine **HENNIS-PLASSCHAERT** (ALDE, NL) says. However, MEPs are requesting more information on the data collected by an external contractor estimating that 'there were up to 8 million illegal immigrants within the EU25 in 2006'.

Proposed entry/exit system will not stop illegal immigrants

The House says it "does not believe that the proposed system will put an end to the 'overstay' phenomenon as such". It points out that, although the proposed system and alert information might help to deter TCNs from overstaying, as well as providing data and information on patterns, further contact with law enforcement agencies is still necessary for an individual who overstays his or her period of admission to be apprehended.

Pointing to "lessons learned in the USA", the report notes that "it is more challenging to implement exit capability than entry, and in particular with regard to sea and land exit". MEPs have considerable concerns about the cost-effectiveness of such a system and therefore call on the Commission to provide additional information on the actual investments generated by such a system.

The report points out that the correct functioning of the entry/exit system will depend both materially and operationally on the success of the VIS and SIS II, and yet these instruments are not yet fully operational, it says.

Registered traveller status for 'low risk' travellers

MEPs support in principle the concept of a Registered Travel Programme for TCNs, a concept which would allow 'bona fide' and 'low risk' travellers to gain registered traveller status after a reliable travel history. They say it would help speed up traveller flows and prevent congestion at entry and exit points.

Press release

However, MEPs criticise the use of the words 'low-risk' and 'bona fide' travellers because "it would imply that a huge number of travellers are considered a priori as 'high-risk' or 'mala fide'" and therefore recommend the term 'frequent travellers'.

Noting that several Member States have already set up or are preparing such an RTP for TCNs, the report highlights the risk of ending up with a patchwork of twenty-seven systems based on different criteria, including those on data-protection and fees.

The UK, for example, together with the Netherlands, Germany, and FRONTEX are seeking to promote the 'International Expedited Traveller Programme' as a possible blueprint for other Member States.

MEPs are therefore urging the Commission to speed up the process, on the basis of best practices in Member States, and to make sure that Member States continue to act in conformity with Community law.

Biometrics raise concerns

Parliament also questions whether the proposed Electronic System of Travel Authorisation (ESTA) is absolutely necessary, asking for a thorough explanation of the rationale for it.

Finally, MEPs point out that biometrics are not in all cases accurate and therefore insist on a standard protocol for the use and exchange of biometric information and interface control agreements to describe how the protocol will be used.

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