

Civil Liberties MEPs oppose merging Europol with police training college

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Europol should not be merged with the European Police College (CEPOL) because the two EU bodies should work separately, said the civil liberties committee on Thursday in a vote on new operating rules for Europol. It also strengthened Europol's data protection obligations and suggested setting up a body of MEPs and national MPs to monitor Europol's activities and its respect for fundamental rights.

The committee rejected the Commission's proposal to merge Europol with the European Police College (CEPOL). MEPs adopted their set of amendments to this draft law by 45 votes to 2, with 3 abstentions.

"The Europol I defend strikes the right balance between police action and a robust data protection architecture, with stronger parliamentary oversight," said the rapporteur, Agustín Díaz de Mera (EPP, ES).

More robust data protection

Europol should only process personal data for a specific purpose, data retrievals should be kept to a strict minimum and personal information should only be handled by authorised staff for as long as the purpose of collection remains valid, says the committee. It adds that Europol should keep detailed records of all data accessed and says the European Data Protection Supervisor (EDPS) should have an active role in monitoring compliance by Europol with its data protection obligations.

Europol should only be able to receive and process personal data held by other EU bodies, law enforcement authorities of non-EU countries and international organisations if "it is strictly necessary and proportionate for the legitimate performance of its tasks", says the text adopted on Thursday. Also, the agency should only transfer personal data to those entities if it is necessary for preventing and combating crime and if the recipient gives an explicit undertaking that the data will only be used for the purpose for which it was transmitted, says the committee.

Transfers of personal data to countries outside the EU and to international organisations would be governed by existing Europol cooperation agreements, "adequacy decisions" taken by the Commission or international agreements between the EU and third countries ensuring a proper level of data protection. The EDPS should be consulted promptly before and during the negotiations on any international agreement, MEPs underline.

Stronger parliamentary scrutiny

The civil liberties committee suggests creating a joint parliamentary scrutiny group, comprising MEPs and members of national parliaments, to monitor Europol activities. The agency's top officials, Commission representatives and the EDPS would be required to appear before the group on request to discuss matters related to Europol operations and its compliance with fundamental rights, in particular the protection of personal data.

Europol's annual activity reports, work programmes and evaluations should also be disclosed to MEPs and national MPs, who must have access to all relevant documents, including classified information.

Next steps and background

The full Parliament will vote on the new Europol rules at its 24-27 February session in Strasbourg. Parliament's first-reading vote will provide the mandate to start negotiations with the Council after the summer break.

The European Police Office (Europol) was established in 1995. The new operating rules seek to align the agency with the Lisbon Treaty, which establishes that Parliament and Council should jointly determine Europol's structure, procedures and tasks. Europol's seat is located in The Hague (Netherlands). The European Police College (CEPOL) was set up in 2005 and its current seat is in Bramshill (UK). However, the UK government has announced that it no longer wishes to host the seat on its territory and Parliament and Council have launched the procedure to look for a new seat.

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In the chair: Sophie in't Veld (ALDE, NL)

Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs

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