



Making travellers' lives easier

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Focus

Strengthening air passenger rights, increasing the capacity of Europe's airports and the quality of their services, introducing more competition to EU's rail sector, as well as new rules for pilots' flying hours will keep MEPs busy for the rest of their term or even longer. Find out more about Parliament's work concerning travel-related issues in this feature.

Passenger rights

Better information on delayed or cancelled flight, more effective complaint handling procedure, as well as rules on hand luggage and solutions for passengers stranded if an airline goes bankrupt are part of planned changes to strengthen the air passenger rights which will be considered by MEPs in the coming months.

In addition to air passenger rights, travellers also benefit from rights when travelling by rail, road and sea, and from March 2013, by bus.

Airports and pilots

New rules governing decisions on how best to protect local residents against aircraft noise and allocate take-off and landing fairly and flexibly were approved by the Parliament in its first reading vote on 12 December 2012. Plans to open up ground services at major EU airports to more competition were backed by MEPs in a plenary vote on 16 April 2013.

Changes to pilots' flying hours will have to guarantee that working conditions and passenger safety outweigh commercial considerations, say MEPs, ahead of a Commission proposal to reduce the length of time a pilot can fly. New rules should address the problem of pilot fatigue.

Railways

MEPs are also considering six draft laws ("Railway package") designed to complete the Single European Railway market by harmonising technical provisions, giving all operators access to national rail networks by 2019 and ensuring full interoperability on a truly European network overseen by independent regulators.

Railway package: putting Europe's rail sector on the right track

Trains might be safer and less polluting than other transport modes, but only 6% of passengers opt to travel this way. The EU's fourth railway package aims to make rail travel more attractive by creating more competition and a common certification scheme for trains. These plans are currently being debated in Parliament. Find out the facts about Europe's rail sector in our infographic.

Europe's rail network remains fragmented along national lines and largely dominated by integrated rail companies that operate both the network and the trains running on it. This can make it difficult for new operators to enter the market.

The fourth railway legislative package intends to put an end to this by insisting on a greater separation between rail network management as well as the transport part of the business. In addition any operator should be able to enter the domestic rail market. These plans are currently being scrutinised by Parliament.

The new rules would also establish faster EU-wide certification for railway cars and locomotives, saving operators time and money and which should lead to lower ticket prices for passengers.

Both Parliament and member states have to approve the new rules before they can enter into force. The EP's transport committee is due to vote on a recommendation on 26 November, while all MEPs are expected to vote on it during the plenary session in January 2014.

Airport ground-handling: EP adds staff safeguards to competition cost plan

Plans to open up ground-handling services at major EU airports to more competition by increasing the minimum number of service providers were backed by Parliament in a vote on 16 April. To guarantee high efficiency of services and prevent social dumping, MEPs added minimum quality standards and safeguard clauses for staff transfers to the Commission's initial proposal.

The amended proposal was adopted by 455 votes to 239, with 18 abstentions.

Parliament inserted minimum service quality standards, which must be respected by the ground-handling companies operating at European airports serving over five million passengers. "This will include the maximum waiting time for baggage check-in, maximum time for delivery of first and last items of baggage, and holding minimum stocks of de-icing fluid," explained rapporteur Artur Zasada (EPP, PL).

More competition, but fair working conditions

Under the amended proposal, a minimum of three ground-handling operators, up from two today, should provide support services for airlines in airports handling more than 15 million passengers and/or 200,000 tons of freight per year. There will also be a strict separation of accounts for the airports providing their own handling services.

MEPs added certain social provisions, which should also apply to subcontractors. In the event that service providers are changed, member states will have to ensure that staff for airside services are transferred to the new service provider and collective agreements respected.

In 2011, 21 EU airports served more than 15 million passengers. These included London Heathrow, London Gatwick, Manchester, Dublin and London Stansted.

Next steps

Parliament will start talks with Council to find a compromise agreement on the "airport package", which includes two more legislative proposals on rules for allocating take-off and landing slots and noise-related operational restrictions. These amended proposals, aiming to increase airport efficiency, were approved at Parliament's first reading in December 2012.

Procedure: Co-decision (Ordinary Legislative Procedure), 1st reading

Ground services at airports: more competition and higher quality

New rules to make baggage handling, refuelling and other ground services at large EU airports more competitive were narrowly approved by transport committee members on 19 March 2013. They also inserted service quality standards and social provisions to prevent any deterioration of working conditions. Parliament will have the final say in a plenary vote in April.

More competition between providers of ground services

MEPs agreed that at least three companies (up from two today) should operate in airports with 15 million passengers and/or 200,000 t of freight per year.

"In my proposal, I raised the minimum number of providers to three for the airports with over 15 million passengers per year. Thus, by increasing the number of providers, we can both improve quality and lower prices," said Artur Zasada, a Polish member of the EPP group who wrote a report on the Commission proposal, after the vote.

Minimum quality standards

MEPs also inserted common criteria for minimum quality standards that will have to be respected by companies willing to operate at airports.

"This will include the maximum waiting time for baggage check-in, maximum time for delivery of first and last items of baggage, minimum stock of de-icing fluid at each airport or a minimum number of staff members able to provide information at the gate," said Mr Zasada.

"When luggage is lost at the airport, passengers often blame the airline or the airport. This is not entirely correct. More often than not, the faceless company offering this type of service at the airport is at fault," he added.

Passenger rights: "We are determined to close the loopholes in the present legislation"

Passenger rights are a great way to protect people travelling through Europe, but current legislation is far from perfect. Parliament is looking how to beef up rules on anything from compensation to helping customers from bankrupt airlines. Brian Simpson, chair of the EP's transport committee, discussed in a Facebook chat on 27 February what they would focus on: "We will be determined to close loopholes in the present legislation. The enforcement bodies have not been doing their job properly."

Compensation

Many Facebook fans asked how the compensation rules for cancellations and delays could be improved. Mr Simpson said this could be achieved by closing the loopholes that exist at the moment. He added he believed that airlines have been using a clause known as force majeure, or unforeseen circumstances, to avoid paying compensation.

Liquidation

People also raised questions about when the liquidation, which limits how much liquid air passengers can take with them on flights, would be ended. Mr Simpson, a British member of the S&D group, replied: "We have developed machines that can detect explosives in liquids, which is why I'm confident we can start lifting the ban next January."

Buying tickets online

Mr Simpson admitted there was a problem with buying tickets for a flight online: "When you book online the first price you see should be the final price. Problem is, airlines show the cheapest flight and then add the bits on as you go through the process. What I would like to see is regulations that make the highest possible price be the first price you see!"

Bankrupt airlines

One of the questions was about what Parliament could do for passengers stranded with no help of compensation due to the airline going bankrupt. Mr Simpson said: "The EP has called for a fund to be set up administered by the Commission to repatriate EU citizens in the case of airline bankruptcies. That fund could be paid for by adding just one euro to every airline ticket, but unfortunately the Council of Ministers and airlines are not fans of this idea."

Body scanners

The chair of the transport committee also believed there were good reasons for using body scanners at airports. "I oppose X ray body scanners because of the risk to health that these machines could pose. I have no problems with other scanners used," Mr Simpson said. "The issue is security. Whether we like it or not, terrorists still see aviation as a target. We have to remain vigilant and the airport is the last line of defense. It is important that the various national intelligence agencies do their work in preventing terrorist attacks. Airport machines are just one tool in the box for keeping aviation safe, but they are needed in the current climate."

Airports: groundhandling rules need further debate, say MEPs

New rules governing decisions on how best to protect local residents against aircraft noise and allocate take-off and landing fairly and flexibly were approved by MEPs on Wednesday. A proposal to further increase competition among groundhandling service suppliers at key airports was referred back to the transport and tourism committee for further discussion on how to improve the efficiency of airport services.

Rather than reject the Commission's proposal on groundhandling services, as recommended by the Transport Committee, Parliament asked the committee to pursue its work on it, so as to boost their efficiency and quality in airports used by more than 5 million passengers per year.

"The main aim of this proposal is to prepare the sector for global competition and to introduce minimum standards of quality," said rapporteur Artur Zasada (EPP, PL) in the debate preceding the vote.

Said El Khadraoui (S&D, BE) called for its rejection. "We should leave it up to the member states to decide on further opening of the market," he said, echoed by Wolf Klinz (ALDE, DE). "It's not the mere numbers of companies, but the local particularities, the qualifications of workers and the working conditions which are decisive", Mr Klinz added.

Protecting local residents against aircraft noise

Specific noise abatement objectives will have to be set for each airport, but common rules will have to be followed to achieve them, according to a new regulation on noise-related operating restrictions, adopted by 501 votes to 155 with 8 abstentions.

To enable local authorities to choose the most cost-effective noise mitigation measures, MEPs inserted a requirement that they take account of health, economic and social aspects and follow the "balanced approach" established by the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO).

The European Commission should be enabled to evaluate proposed operating restrictions, but "it would be the wrong way to let the Commission suspend member states' decisions", said rapporteur Jörg Leichtfried (S&D, AT) before the vote. MEPs left it up to local authorities to decide whether to take the Commission's opinion in account.

Allocating slots fairly for best use of airport capacity

Parliament also approved landing and take-off slot allocation and exchange rules (secondary trading) designed to ensure that unused slots are made available to interested operators as soon as possible and in a transparent way, but without prejudice to connections between regional airports and major hubs.

MEPs rejected the Commission's idea to increase the "Use-it or Lose-it" threshold of 80% to 85% of allocated slots and instead opted to strengthen the penalty system in order to dissuade air carriers from holding slots without using them or taking too long to return them to the pool.

Focus

"Allocation must be impartial," insisted rapporteur Gioammaria Uggias (ALDE, IT), explaining that "we therefore provided for slot coordinators to be completely independent from airport and airline operators".

The Uggias report was adopted by 565 votes to 69 with 26 abstentions.

Procedure: Co-decision (Ordinary Legislative Procedure) 1st reading

MEPs call for improvement of passenger rights

Each year millions of Europeans travel in and outside the EU, using planes, trains, buses and boats. As passengers they have certain rights, but these are often little known or even ignored. In a resolution adopted on 23 October 2012, MEPs called for passengers to be given better information on all types of transport and urged the Commission to improve the complaint procedure and eradicate unfair pricing conditions.

"Passengers should be better informed about their rights when they book a trip," said Georges Bach. The Luxembourgish Christian-Democrat, who wrote a non-binding report on passenger rights, continued: "Online airfares should be more transparent. We also need to improve information during travel."

Mr Bach recommends setting up info points in departure and arrival halls to tell people about delays, cancellations or other problems, and also calls for a single complaint form with fixed time limits for processing.

Main problems

What hardships do people experience most while travelling by plane or train? An informal survey conducted by Mr Bach at the European Parliament revealed that about half of the problems were about delays, missed connections and cancellations.

Other problems were related to inadequate information, luggage handling, failure to assist people with reduced mobility and unclear online pricing. Almost a quarter of air travellers who complained received no reply, while 15% of rail complaints went unanswered.

Complex system of rights

Passenger rights are laid down in several EU regulations. Depending on the mode, rights differ as regards the extent of assistance to stranded passengers, compensation, definitions of delays and possible exceptions.

Last year, the Commission published a communication to help carriers and national authorities apply and enforce EU rules in a more coherent way across all transport modes.

Mr Bach said: "We need a single cross-cutting passenger rights regulation, but this should be our midterm goal (*in 5-10 years*). Because currently we have different experiences and some of the rules are not yet in force." New rules for ship and bus passengers will enter into force from December 2012 and March 2013 respectively.

Next steps

To close any loopholes, Commission plans a revision of air passenger rights, to be tabled by the end 2012 or early in 2013.

Basic rights in all transport modes

- non-discrimination in access to transport
- free assistance for disabled passengers
- quick and accessible complaint handling system
- correct and timely information about ticket price, rights and journey circumstances
- reimbursement, rerouting or rebooking in case of long delays, cancellations or denied boarding

Tourism in the EU

The EU is constantly working to improve passenger rights and over the next few months the European Parliament will be working on improvements to rights for air travellers as well as voting on the railway package, which aims to open up national rail markets. Thursday 27 September is International Tourism Day so what better time to take a closer look at where people go on holiday.

For example, did you know that the Louvre is the most visited museum in the world, or that London is the most visited city and France the most visited country in the EU? After checking out the infographic for more details, click on the links to find out more about what the EU has done on passenger rights.

Five things you should know when travelling a road

We all love to travel, but do you know what to do if things go wrong? When there is an emergency, your flight gets cancelled or you lose your passport? There are EU rules in place to make travellers' lives easier. Here are a few key points to remember.

If you are in need of emergency assistance (police, fire, medical):

call 112 – this is the free EU-wide emergency phone number which is also operational in Turkey, Croatia and Montenegro

Don't forget your free European **healthinsurance card**, which you can get from your national health insurance provider:

- it entitles foreign travellers to urgent medical aid in all 27 EU member states plus in Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland
- under the same conditions and at the same cost (which in some countries means free) as people insured in that country

If your flight or train is delayed or cancelled, you are entitled under EU rules to:

- reimbursement in case of a long delay, cancellation or denied boarding
- assistance (from meals to hotels) while waiting for a delayed journey or rerouting

Learn more about your **passenger rights** by clicking on the link on the right

If you are arrested, lose your passport or need other **consular assistance** outside the EU, but your country has no diplomatic mission in that country:

- contact any other EU member state's embassy or consulate
- you are entitled to help from them under the same conditions as their nationals

Last but not least: no need to switch off your phone while in another EU member state because from 1 July you can talk and surf the internet at a lower cost than before. Learn more about new **roaming** charges by clicking on the link on the right.

Bonnes vacances!

MEPs quiz experts over plans to ease congestion at EU airports

Half of all flights could face delays by 2030 if nothing is done to ease congestion at Europe's busiest airports, according to the European Commission. The airports package launched by the Commission aims to tackle this problem as well as improve services to passengers and aircraft as investment in airport often takes decades from planning to completion. The Parliament's transport committee found out from representatives of the aviation sector on 8 May what they thought of the ambitious plans.

About the airports package

The airports package is about tackling congestion and improving groundhandling services at Europe's airports. As such it covers anything from airports slots, groundhandling services to noise at airports.

European air traffic is expected to grow significantly, which could result in congestion and even more travel delays. To solve this problem without further airport expansion, the Commission proposes to reform the system of allocating **airport slots**, which are the permissions airlines need to land or take off at an airport on a specific date and time. The Italian Liberal-Democrat Giommaria Uggias is in charge of steering this part of the proposal through the Parliament.

Another proposal of the package aims to increase competition among providers of baggage handling, refuelling and other **ground services** at airports. Polish Christian-Democrat Artur Zasada covers this on behalf of the Parliament.

The third legislative piece aims to improve clarity and transparency of procedures used by local authorities to set aircraft **noise** limits. Austrian Social-Democrat Jörg Leichtfried is in charge of this on behalf of the Parliament.

Debate about airport slots

There was a lively discussion about airports slots when the Parliament's transport committee invited aviation experts on 8 May. Introducing secondary trading of slots between airlines would allow airlines to directly buy and sell slots to each other, but not everyone is convinced this would work.

Matthew Baldwin, a representative of the Commission, was in favour of it: "Our busiest airports are just not being used as they should. That's why we want to promote amongst other things slot mobility through secondary trading. It should help to ensure that slots go to airlines which can make the best use of it."

Simon Smith, an expert on air traffic policy and regulation at Steer Davies Gleave consultancy, argued that airlines that hold slots for 20 years are not necessarily the ones who will use them most efficiently. "Now it's very difficult for competitors to enter the most congested airports. Ryanair and Easyjet have only been able to grow by avoiding the most congested airports." Introducing secondary trading of slots between airlines could make a significant difference in some of the most congested airports, he said.

Mr Uggias, the MEP covering the airports slots proposal on behalf of the Parliament, commented: "Secondary market for slots is supposed to improve flexibility with timing and that will undoubtedly improve things. We need clear separation of the (*slot*) coordinators from airport authorities and from other stakeholders."

However, Athar Husain Khan, Deputy Secretary General of the Association of European Airlines, was sceptical about the plan's potential. He said: "Slots regulation will not increase airports capacity. Building infrastructure is what increases airports capacity."

European aviation sector

Focus

- 20 out of EU's 1,740 airports generate 40% of all flights (2006 data)
- Source: European Commission, Eurocontrol
- The aviation industry directly employs about 700,000 people in Europe
- Almost 800 million passengers used EU airports in 2010 (about three times more than in the early 90s; 1/3 of world market)

EU should nurture small airports as drivers of regional growth, MEPs say

EU aviation policy must pay special attention to the needs of regional airports, says a resolution adopted by Parliament on 10 May. Their potential to boost regional development and reduce congestion at major airports could be unlocked by integrating them in the Trans-European Transport Networks (TEN-T), MEPs believe.

Regional airports are vital for territorial cohesion and social and economic development, especially in regions where other means of transport are lacking, notes the resolution. They attract new businesses and offer opportunities for regional tourism as well as specialised freight transport.

However, the crisis has taken its toll on regional airports, said Rapporteur Philip Bradburn (ECR, UK) during Wednesday's debate. They are "currently priced out of the market, leading to greater consolidation between major airports and airlines, the result being less choice and higher prices for customers," he added.

"This must be counteracted by removing economic barriers and better defining their role in the transport network," he said, calling on the Commission to speed up work on the "Single European Sky" initiative and to design a network in which regional airports could help to alleviate capacity crunches in bigger airports.

Integrating regional airports in the TEN-T would furthermore create incentives for private financing and encourage member states to invest in better ground connections, especially high speed trains, MEPs believe.

However, to improve the overall quality of services, certain practices of dominant low-cost airlines need to be tackled, urges the resolution, namely excessive booking fees and hand-luggage restrictions that discourage travellers from using goods in airports.

MEPs "applaud Spain's decision to outlaw these practices" as they ruin local retail sales and say common upper weight limits should be imposed on airlines. Charges for overweight baggage should be capped, too, they add.

Procedure: Non-legislative resolution

New deal to cut mobile roaming prices, including data services

The cost of using mobile phones, smartphones and tablets when travelling abroad within the EU will fall sharply from 1 July this year, under an agreement with the Council endorsed by Parliament on Thursday. The new rules will also enable clients to buy roaming services from suppliers other than their home service suppliers and open up the market to new entrants, so as to boost competition and thus reduce prices.

The proposal will enter into force on 1 July 2012, replacing the 2007 regulation, which expires on 30 June 2012.

"Using mobile devices abroad remains expensive. During the summer holidays, our citizens will be able to take advantage of more favourable tariffs. Parliament has succeeded in its call for cheaper roaming prices for consumers, and in particular for data roaming. In addition, from July 2014, consumers will be able to choose an operator other than their national operator for roaming services. The new rules will also help to open up the market to new entrants and so increase competition", said rapporteur Angelika Niebler (EPP, DE), in the debate in plenary on Wednesday. The agreement was adopted by 578 votes to 10 with 10 abstentions.

New roaming price ceilings

Under pressure from MEPs, the cost of using data services will be capped at 70 Euro cents per megabyte from 1 July 2012 and will then fall in stages to 45 cents in 2013 and 20 cents on 1 July 2014. There is currently no limit to the prices operators can charge for mobile data services to retail consumers (see table below).

New retail caps on voice calls will reduce the cost of a one-minute call to 29 cents from 1 July 2012 and 19 cents from July 2014, down from the current maximum of 35 cents. Text messages will also be cheaper, falling from the current maximum price of 11 cents to 9 cents on 1 July this year and 6 cents on 1 July 2014.

Preventing "bill shocks"

Alerts in the EU to prevent "bill shocks" will be extended to also cover people travelling outside the Union. As from 1 July 2012, people will get a warning message when they approach 50 Euros of charges in a month (excluding VAT), if the foreign network is compatible.

Boosting competition on the roaming market

The new deal also proposes for the first time measures to boost competition.

From 1 July 2014, customers will be able to buy their domestic and roaming services separately, from different operators, if they so wish, whilst keeping the same phone number. They will not be charged for switching providers and their home country provider will be obliged to inform them of this right.

Furthermore, as from 1 July 2012, virtual mobile network operators (MVNOs), i.e. those who do not have their own networks, will have the right to access other operator's networks at wholesale prices in order to provide roaming services. This will encourage more operators to compete on the roaming market.

Next steps

The new rules will be adopted by the Council of Ministers in June and apply with direct effect in all EU Member States from 1 July 2012. The European Commission must review the functioning of these rules by 30 June 2016.

Retail ceilings (charged to consumers) excluding VAT

	Current	1 July 2012	1 July 2013	1 July 2014
Data (per mega yte)	none	70 cents	45 cents	20 cents
Phone calls made (per minute)	35 cents	29 cents	23 cents	19 cents
Phone calls received (per minute)	11 cents	8 cents	7 cents	5 cents
SMS (per SMS)	11 cents	9 cents	8 cents	6 cents

Wholesale ceilings (charged between operators) excluding VAT

	Current	1 July 2012	1 July 2013	1 July 2014
Data (per mega yte)	50 cents	25 cents	15 cents	5 cents
Phone calls (per minute)	18 cents	14 cents	10 cents	5 cents
SMS (per SMS)	4 cents	3 cents	2 cents	2 cents

Procedure: Co-decision (1st reading)

MEPs push for clear and enforceable air passenger rights

Airlines should give stranded passengers better information and immediate help, MEPs say in a resolution adopted by Parliament on 19 April 2012. They called on the Commission to tighten the rules on help and compensation for flight cancellations or delays, including luggage delays over six hours.

"While EU legislation has already gone some way towards improving the rights of air passengers, more needs to be done to get them a fair deal and to ensure broader rights for all travellers," said rapporteur Keith Taylor (Greens/EFA, UK) before the vote. The definitions of "extraordinary circumstances" and "cancellation", in particular, need to be clarified, he added, to oblige airlines to take their responsibilities.

Improve information services and assistance

Air carriers should be obliged to ensure that stranded passengers can turn to competent contact personnel in each airport and over the telephone who can give them useful information on alternative travel options and take immediate decisions on assistance, rerouting and rebooking, says the resolution.

MEPs call on the Commission to draw up a standard form for complaints in all EU languages, to be handed to passengers in the event of disruption. Passengers stranded when airlines go bankrupt should be repatriated free of charge, they add.

Advertised prices must be final prices

The resolution also urges the Commission to harmonise rules on hand luggage and to put an end to unfair commercial practices such as unclear pricing and non-optional-extra fees when booking online, unilateral rescheduling of flights and price discrimination against passengers based on their country of residence. The trip's environmental impact should be indicated on airline tickets.

Passengers should have the right to withdraw or change their ticket reservations free of charge within two hours and get full access to information about their "Passenger Name Record" (PNR) data and be informed of how their PNR data are used and with whom they are shared, says Parliament.

MEPs insist that passengers with reduced mobility or with disabilities must be granted carrier-free access to air travel, including the right to use mobility devices. Finally, safe child seats should be provided on each plane.

The resolution was passed with 509 votes in favour, 20 against, and 53 abstentions.

Procedure: Non-legislative resolution

EU air traffic in figures

New rules to govern the transfer of EU air passengers' personal data (PNR) to the US were approved by MEPs on 19 April 2012. The agreement covers data use, storage and protection. Take a look at our infograph to find out more about what's going on in European airspace and airports.

Parliament gives green light to air passenger data deal with the US

A new agreement on the transfer of EU air passengers' personal data to the US authorities was approved by the European Parliament on 19 April 2012. The deal sets legal conditions and covers issues such as storage periods, use, data protection safeguards and administrative and judicial redress. The agreement will replace a provisional deal in place since 2007.

The EU-US Passenger Name Record (PNR) agreement was adopted with 409 votes in favour, 226 against and 33 abstentions. A significant minority of MEPs voted against the deal due to concerns over data protection safeguards, including rapporteur Sophie in 't Veld (ALDE, NL), who withdrew her name from the report. A proposal to refer the agreement to the European Court of Justice was rejected by MEPs.

Retention period and purpose

Under the new agreement, US authorities will keep PNR data in an active data base for up to five years. After the first six months, all information which could be used to identify a passenger would be "depersonalised", meaning that data such as the passenger's name or her/his contact information would be codified.

After the first five years, the data will be moved to a "dormant data base" for up to 10 years, with stricter access requirements for US officials. Thereafter, the agreement says, data would be fully "anonymised" by deleting all information which could serve to identify the passenger. Data related to any specific case will be retained in an active PNR data base until the investigation is archived.

PNR data will be used mainly to prevent, detect, investigate and prosecute terrorism and serious transnational crimes. Transnational crimes are defined as crimes punishable by three years of imprisonment or more under US law. PNR data will also serve "to identify persons who would be subject to closer questioning or examination".

Sensitive data

Sensitive data such as those revealing the ethnic origin, religious beliefs, physical or mental health or sexual orientation of a passenger could be used in exceptional circumstances when a person's life is at risk. This data is most frequently tied to a religious meal choice or requests for assistance due to a medical condition. This data will be accessed only case by case and will be permanently deleted after 30 days from receipt, unless it is used for a specific investigation.

Judicial redress

Should their data be misused, EU citizens will have the right to administrative and judicial redress in accordance with US law. They will also have the right to access their own PNR data and seek rectification by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), including the possibility of erasure, if the information is inaccurate.

Background

PNR data are collected by air carriers during the reservation process and include names, addresses, credit card details and seat numbers of air passengers. Under US law, air companies are obliged to make these data available to the DHS prior to passenger departure. This applies to flights to or from the US.

In May 2010, Parliament postponed its vote on a PNR agreement with the US applied provisionally since 2007, mainly due to data protection concerns. MEPs then urged the European Commission to negotiate a new deal, which the Commission did in 2011.

Focus

The European Parliament adopted a PNR deal with Australia in October 2011. The EU is currently negotiating a PNR agreement with Canada.

Procedure: Consent

MEPs question Commission over problems with biometric passports

The high number of falsified documents in Europe casts doubt on whether biometric passports, with personal data such as fingerprints, really do help to prevent fraud and tampering. After reported problems with biometric passports in France and the Netherlands, MEPs in Strasbourg questioned the Commission on Thursday 19 April about the security of biometric passports and how to improve it.

About biometric passports

The EU introduced biometric passports in 2004 to fight fraud. This means that travel documents issued by member states must include a storage medium with biometric data, such as fingerprints and a picture of the face.

Risks identified by Parliament

The EP identified the following weak points during a revision of the biometric system in 2008:

- the reliability/usefulness of fingerprints taken from children and the elderly
- the level of confidence in the process of collecting biometric data
- shortcomings in identification systems and the error rates in member states
- lack of experience in the use of these new technologies
- the stages of the issuing procedure, such as presenting documents, collecting biometric data and checks at borders may hold the risk of fraud

The EP therefore suggested another three-year revision period in 2008 and asked the Commission to conduct studies in each of these areas. These studies are expected to be concluded this year.

Problems encountered with biometric passports

In France 500,000 to 1 million of the 6.5 million biometric passports in circulation are estimated to be false, having been obtained on the basis of fraudulent documents.

In the Netherlands, an examination of 448 cases by local authorities in Roermond found that 21% of the fingerprints were non-verifiable and therefore useless.

What the Commission will have to clarify

In the wake of the difficulties with biometric passports in France and the Netherlands, MEPs invited the Commission to the plenary session on 19 April 2012 to answer questions about their efficiency. They also asked if it would now consider re-evaluating the rules governing the issue of biometric passports in the EU.

Life-saving emergency eCall system should be mandatory, say MEPs

All new cars must be fitted by 2015 with eCall devices to alert the rescue services to road crashes automatically, using the 112 public emergency call system, say MEPs in a resolution adopted on Tuesday. This system would enable rescue services to arrive faster, saving lives and reducing injuries, adds the non-binding resolution.

"The European Parliament has given its clear support for all motorists in Europe to benefit from an emergency call system free of charge. Since the voluntary approach has failed, we urge the Commission to propose legislative measures as soon as possible to ensure the eCall system will be mandatory in all EU countries by 2015", said co-rapporteurs Olga Sehnalova (S&D, CZ) and Dieter-Leucht Koch (EPP, DE).

The resolution regrets delays in the voluntary deployment of eCall to date and the small proportion of cars fitted with it (only 0.4%). It urges the European Commission to table legislation to make the eCall system mandatory by 2015. MEPs also call on the Commission to consider extending this system to other vehicles, such as motorcycles, buses, coaches and trucks in the near future.

Golden hour

The in-vehicle eCall system uses 112 emergency call technology to alert the emergency services automatically to the location of serious road accidents. This should save lives and reduce the severity of injuries by enabling qualified and equipped paramedics to get to the scene within the first "golden hour" of the accident, says the resolution.

The eCall system could save up to 2,500 lives a year and reduce injury severity by 10 to 15%, it adds.

Free of charge

MEPs believe that the public eCall service should be mandatory and available free of charge to all drivers in Europe, irrespective of the make of their vehicles.

Technology is ready

MEPs point out that the necessary technology is available and that common EU-wide standards have been agreed. They therefore call on the Commission to table legislation requiring EU member states to upgrade their emergency response service infrastructure so that it can handle eCalls by 2015.

Data protection

The resolution stresses that the eCall service must not be used to monitor a person's movements or determine his or her location unless that person has been involved in an accident. The main purpose of the system is to improve incident management, the text adds.

The resolution was adopted by a show of hands.

Procedure: non-legislative resolution