



Biometric visas: children under twelve won't have to give fingerprints

Biometric visas, like biometric passports, should improve security provided the fingerprints they include are reliable. Children under twelve will be exempted from the requirement to provide fingerprints, as MEPs wished, following an agreement, negotiated by Sarah Ludford (ALDE, UK) with the Council and adopted by the European Parliament.

The European Visa Information System (VIS) is intended to facilitate the procedure for issuing visas while preventing "visa shopping" that is simultaneous applications for visas in more than one EU country. For the system to work well, common consular instructions are needed to ensure that all Member States issue visas on the same basis and that the visas contain the same features.

The European Parliament adopted a recommendation approving a Council common position, as negotiated with rapporteur Sarah **LUDFORD** (ADLE, UK). The VIS infrastructure, which is now being set up, will run technical tests from October this year, and should be operational in 2010 in Member states consular authorities in North Africa, and later on in other regions.

The purpose of biometric features - a photograph and ten fingerprints, as recommended by the International Civil Aviation Organization - is to enable the identity of visa applicants to be verified and to establish a reliable link between visa holders and their passports so as to prevent the use of false identities.

Exemption for children under twelve

During negotiations with the Council, MEPs successfully argued for children under twelve to be exempted from the requirement to give their fingerprints. At present there is no available large scale study that documents the reliability of juvenile fingerprinting. MEPs insisted on a prudent minimum age limit in order to ensure that the biometrics are reliable for the VIS to work as intended. On 14 January this year, the European Parliament voted for a similar exemption for biometric passports. The age limit will be re-examined in the light of the findings of the study that the Commission has undertaken to carry out at Parliament's request.

Sharing of equipment for collecting biometric data

MEPs would like to see new methods of organisation to ease the registration of visa applicants and reduce costs to Member States. A special type of representation, purely to receive applications and collect biometric data, would be set up. In this way Member States would not need to equip every one of their consulates with biometric collection equipment. "Co-location" or "Common Application Centres" would also help strengthen consular co-operation locally. However, Member States would remain free to provide their diplomatic and consular offices with such equipment if they wished.

Outsourcing only as a last resort, and under strict conditions

Press release

In exceptional circumstances, Member State may co-operate with an external service provider if, because of a very high number of visa applications, it is impossible to organise the collection of biometric identifiers in appropriate conditions or to ensure sufficient geographical cover in the country concerned in another way. MEPs have successfully insisted that the condition for imposition of a 'service fee' when using an external service provider, on top of the visa fee, is that visa applicants should always have the possibility of direct access to the consular offices. MEPs have furthermore successfully insisted on minimum safety requirements that must be included in the contracts between the Member States and those external providers.

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