

Visa Information System: Council agrees negotiating mandate to strengthen the system

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In response to changing migration and security challenges, the EU is improving its Visa Information System (VIS), a tool used by authorities to register and check persons applying for a visa to enter the Schengen area.

EU ambassadors today agreed the Council's negotiating position on a proposal to amend the Visa Information System (VIS) regulation. On the basis of this mandate, the Council Presidency will start negotiations with the European Parliament once the latter has adopted its position.

We have a duty to ensure that those coming into the European Union do not pose a threat to our citizens and are not using false pretences to get round existing migration rules. The new VIS rules will help improve security, especially via the registration of long-stay visa and residence permit applications in the system.

Herbert Kickl, Minister of the Interior of Austria

The main aims of the amending regulation are to:

- further strengthen the security of the short-stay visa procedure
- include long-stay visas and residence permits in the database
- ensure interoperability between the VIS and other relevant EU systems and databases

Information in the VIS

Under the proposed new rules, the VIS will not only include information on short-stay visas but also on long-stay visas and residence permits, as these documents allow for free movement within the Schengen area. Registering these documents in a centralised database will help the authorities to verify their authenticity and validity.

In addition, a digital copy of the biodata page of the travel document would

be included in the VIS. This would also facilitate the return of illegally staying third country nationals whose data may be stored in the VIS since, even if their travel document is not available at the time of return, a copy of it may be recognised by third countries as proof of nationality.

Moreover, the list of recognised travel documents which entitle the holder to cross the external border would be integrated in the VIS, in order to allow for automatic verification of whether the applicant's travel document is recognised for this purpose.

Checks and access

Before issuing a visa or residence permit, the new rules would allow authorities to check the personal data provided against relevant security and migration databases, for example Eurodac, the Entry-Exit System and Interpol's stolen and lost travel documents database. The consultation of these databases would be automatically launched by the VIS, while any hits resulting from the check would be manually assessed by the responsible authority, who will decide on the appropriate follow-up.

The access of Europol and law enforcement authorities to VIS data, currently regulated under a 2008 Council decision, would also be integrated into the VIS regulation. Access to VIS data can allow law enforcement authorities to identify victims of crime or make progress in their investigations.

In order to fulfil their obligations under Schengen rules, international carriers should also be able to verify whether or not third country nationals who are required to be in possession of a valid visa or residence permit have one. This would not entitle them to access the VIS as such, they would simply refer a yes/no answer on the existence of a valid visa or residence permit.

Background

The Visa Information System, which has been operational since 2011, is a database to facilitate the short-stay visa procedure. It helps visa, border, asylum and migration authorities check third-country nationals who need a visa to travel to the Schengen area. It connects member states' consulates around the world, as well as all external border crossing points.

An overall evaluation of the VIS was carried out in 2016 by the European Commission. It concluded that the system meets its objectives, but that new challenges in visa, border and migration management require further development in a number of areas. On 16 May 2018, the Commission submitted a proposal amending the VIS regulation.

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