

Visa Information System: Council Presidency and European Parliament reach provisional agreement on main elements



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 short-stay visa to enter the Schengen area.

The German Council Presidency and the European Parliament today reached a provisional agreement on the main political elements of a draft regulation amending the Visa Information System regulation. Discussions will now continue at technical level on the remaining aspects, which are expected to be agreed by the end of this year.

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 VIS 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 as before, but will also cover 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 scan of the biographical data page of the travel document will be included in the VIS. This will also facilitate the return of illegally staying third-country nationals whose data may be stored in the VIS: if their travel document is no longer available at the time of return, a copy of it may be recognised by third countries as proof of nationality.

Checks and access

Before issuing a visa or residence permit, the new rules would allow for enhanced background checks on the applicant in relevant security and migration databases, including the Schengen Information System (SIS), the Entry-Exit System (EES), European Travel Information Authorisation System (ETIAS), Eurodac, Europol data, ECRIS-TCN and relevant Interpol databases on travel documents. The VIS would automatically launch a query of these databases and any hits would be manually verified and followed up by the

competent authority.

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 help 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 will be able to verify whether or not third-country nationals who are required to hold a valid short-stay visa, long-stay visa or residence permit have one. The carriers will not have access to the VIS as such, but will be provided with an ok/not ok answer as to the existence of a valid short-stay visa, long-stay visa or residence permit.

Biometrics

With a view to combating child trafficking, under the new regulation the age for fingerprinting children will be lowered from 12 to 6 (with all the necessary safeguards). An upper limit will also be introduced, with fingerprints of persons above the age of 75 not included in the VIS. The current paper photo will be replaced by a live facial image with sufficient image resolution and quality to be used in automated biometric matching.

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 to check third-country nationals who need a short-stay 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 to amend the VIS regulation.