

Visas: numbering of visas

2008/0074(CNS) - 14/04/2008 - Legislative proposal

PURPOSE: to amend Regulation (EC) No 1683/95 laying down a uniform format for visas as regards the numbering of visas.

PROPOSED ACT: Council Regulation.

BACKGROUND: the visa number is an integral part of the uniform format for visa. It is inserted in order to identify the individual visa issued to a third country national by one of the Member States. The number is printed on the sticker during the production process before personalisation in order to identify lost or stolen blank documents. It also serves to register visa stickers in order to control stocks and issued visas.

The International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) has set out standards, for machine-readable travel documents and in particular a list of country codes. In accordance with the ICAO standards, the first line of the machine-readable zone must include the 3-letter ICAO country code of the issuing State and the second line the visa number (using nine entry positions). The uniform format for visas has to be machine-readable and therefore ICAO compliant, in order to speed up the control process at the border.

As the visa number used in the second line of the machine-readable zone is limited to 9 characters, some problems occurred in the past with the current visa numbering. Firstly, Member States interpreted the numbering in their own way (some using more than 9 characters which could not fit into the machine-readable zone and was therefore only partly filled in), which met the requirements of their own visa sticker production process, but was not fully compliant with both Regulation (EC) No 1683/95 (see [CNS /1994/0163](#)) and ICAO specifications. Consequently the visa number could not be read by machines and had to be entered manually in the system or could not even be retrieved. In addition, other incoherencies further complicated the machine-readable visa system.

Until now these differences were not that important as the visa is only visually inspected at the border or checked by reading the machine-readable zone. However, once the Visa Information System (VIS) is in place, verification at external border crossing points will in principle be performed using the visa sticker number in combination with the fingerprints of the holder. The VIS will retrieve the relevant application file for this visa from the visa sticker number and will then verify whether the fingerprints of the person presenting the visa at the border match those entered by the consular post in the application file. In the majority of cases, the request to the VIS will be introduced by reading of the machine-readable zone of the visa. The VIS has therefore to rely on a unique visa number, which is a coherent number printed on the visa sticker and in the machine-readable zone.

Consequently, it is necessary to change the current numbering of visas in order to have a unique visa sticker number thus avoiding several visa records coming up during the verification process, instead of the only relevant application file.

This is the subject of this proposal.

CONTENT: the proposed regulation recommends that the numbering of the visa sticker, which is printed during the production process, must be adapted to the new requirements of the VIS and its legal basis. The visa sticker number in the system must be unique in order to identify the correct application file against which fingerprints are to be compared during verification.

In this context, the proposal aims to amend Regulation (EC) No 1683/95 in order to:

- provide for all the technical modifications in order to allow for the planned change of the serial numbering on the visa sticker;
- provide for amendments to Regulation (EC) No 334/2002 in order to align the sticker of the uniform format for visas (see [CNS/2001/0232](#)) with the new visa sticker as planned by this proposal;
- describe the overall implementation framework: the VIS should be ready to operate in May 2009 and will go live thereafter once Member States have confirmed they have made the necessary arrangements. For this reason, it is proposed that this regulation enters into force on 1 May 2009, notwithstanding that the stocks of visa stickers can be used up in regions not yet linked to the VIS.

After the adoption of this Regulation, the Commission will proceed as soon as possible with the establishment of the required technical specifications so that the decision can be taken in due time. The technical specifications will adapt the uniform format as required by placing the country code in a space directly under the national visa number.