

Visa information system VIS: establishment, information exchange between Member States

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The Commission, in accordance with Article 6 of Council Decision 2004/512/EC establishing the Visa Information System, herewith submits to the Council and the European Parliament the eighth progress report on the development of the Visa Information System (**VIS**). The report covers the work carried out by the Commission in **2011**.

The main conclusions may be summarised as follows:

Development and testing of the central system (2011): during the reporting period, two testing phases were successfully completed, the first of which involved seven participating countries and the second involved 16 of them (the same seven and nine additional ones). The two testing phases were completed later than originally scheduled, but still within the reporting period, due to re-runs of some tests that proved the stability and robustness of the system. In the end, both series of tests were determined to have met the contractual requirements.

The system actually started operations on 11 October 2011 in the visa-issuing consular posts of the Schengen states in North Africa (Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia). In accordance with the amended Schengen Borders Code, 20 days after the start of operations, i.e. on 31 October 2011, Member States started checking all visas against VIS at least with the visa sticker number at all Schengen border-crossing points.

Development of the Biometric Matching System (BMS): the BMS became operational together with the VIS on 11 October 2011. The Final System Acceptance period of five months started on the following day. In the period between 11 October 2011 and 31 December 2011, the BMS stored a total of 170.138 fingerprint sets. A large majority of these fingerprints were submitted by France, Germany, Italy and Spain. Member States continued to use the software kits provided by the BMS contractor for their fingerprint capturing devices. Some Member States significantly improved fingerprint quality in the first months. The quality of fingerprints submitted by some Member States still needs improvement, though. Member States have also started verifying fingerprints at border crossing points, which is optional during a transitional period of three years in accordance with the Schengen Borders Code.

Handover of the central system to the French authorities (C.SIS): following the successful completion of all testing phases, the central system was gradually handed over to the French authorities in Strasbourg (C.SIS) over a threeweek period in September 2011. This process included various technical activities on the VIS and BMS.

During a transitional period before the Management Authority (the European Agency for the management of large-scale IT systems in the area of justice, freedom and security) takes up its responsibilities as from 1 December 2012, the Commission will be responsible for the daily operational management of the system. In line with the VIS Regulation, the Commission may entrust the operational management of the VIS to national public-sector bodies in two different Member States.

A contract has been concluded with the national authorities of France for the provision of services related to operational management. Contracts have also been concluded with France and Austria concerning infrastructure at the central site in Strasbourg and the back-up site at St Johann im Pongau respectively.

Start of operations of the VIS in regions other than North Africa: a number of Member States made use of the possibility to go ahead with the roll-out of the VIS in regions other than the first region, on the condition that they notify the Commission beforehand. The first three regions for the start of operations of the VIS are North Africa, the Near East and the Gulf Region. North Africa covers Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia.

On 11 October 2011, all Member States successfully connected to the VIS in North Africa. Sweden was the first Member State with a registered transaction at 06.00 UTC. On the first day, minor technical issues at national level were solved almost immediately. Germany was the first country to issue a visa with fingerprints. As from 31 October 2011, Member States started checking the visa sticker number against the VIS at their external border crossing points, as foreseen by the Schengen Borders Code. By the end of the reporting period, the VIS had successfully processed 299.648 visa applications, of which 229.124 resulted in Schengen visas issued, while 33.451 visas were refused. These figures concern the use of VIS in North Africa as well as in other parts of the world for the Member States.

In terms of impact on multiple visa applications by the same person, **by the end of the reporting period 468 cases of potential visa shopping – in which refused applicants lodged a new visa application - were detected in the VIS.** One of these cases concerns five visa applications lodged by the same person in different consular posts. Two cases concern four applications and seven cases concern three applications. The remaining 458 cases contained two applications each. In one case, three different consular posts were involved over a period of four weeks and were able to link the applications together.

Planning and budget: the total available commitment appropriations for the VIS in 2011 amounted to **EUR 31.2 million** of which 95.06 % were used. Due to the reduced test support services and the shift of the payments linked to the final system acceptance to 2012, only 79.49 % of the payment commitments were used.

Risk management: the methodology for risk management remained unchanged during the reporting period. Each month the Commission identified the most important risks in the project (at central and national level) and presented them to Member States at the monthly VIS National Project Managers' meetings. In this task, the Commission was assisted by its Quality Assurance contractor.

As in 2011, risks were also discussed in the context of the Friends of the VIS. The Commission worked together with the two Member States holding the Presidency of the Justice and Home Affairs Council formation to assess the main risks and to categorise them according to their impact on the project. Actions were identified for each risk in order to mitigate them. The Commission maintained a high-level register and followed up the implementation of actions.

At the end of 2011, the most critical risks identified were the following: a) system capacity being consumed quicker than foreseen due to Member States rolling out to other regions ahead of the planned gradual rollout; b) handover of the central VIS from the C.SIS to the EU Agency responsible for the management of IT systems, and c) fingerprint quality during operations. For all risks, mitigation actions are identified and the Commission, Member States, and the Main Development Contractor work closely together to limit the impact of these risks on the overall project.

To conclude, the year was characterised by the **successful start of operations of the system in North Africa** on 11 October 2011 with all participating countries. The VIS has been running smoothly since its start of operations and all available statistics demonstrate that Member States are making full use of the system. The VIS has also proven its usefulness in **detecting multiple visa applications by a single person** at two or more consulates. The Commission has informed the LIBE Committee of the European Parliament on a regular basis regarding the development and state of play of the VIS project and will continue to do so in the future.