

European passport: standards for security features and biometrics elements

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This Council Regulation is being proposed in response to a call from the Council of Thessaloniki seeking a coherent approach to EU biometric identifiers or biometric data for documents for third country nationals, EU citizens passports and information systems (VIS and SIS II). The Council recalls that minimum security standards for passports were introduced by a Resolution of the Member States in October 2000. The Resolution, however, needs to be updated and the most appropriate step would be through a Community measure. At the same time as updating the Resolution, the Council is seeking the introduction of biometric elements in passports in order to establish a reliable link between the genuine holder and the document. In accordance with the Schengen Agreement, this Regulation will apply neither to the United Kingdom nor Ireland. Denmark will decide within six months whether or not it wishes to participate in the programme.

The main elements of the proposal include the following features and provisions:

- The Regulation is limited to the harmonisation of security features, including biometric identifiers for the passports and travel documents of the Member States.
- The Regulation will only lay down specifications that are not secret.
- Member States will designate one authority responsible for producing passports and travel documents.
- The passports and travel documents will include a storage medium containing a facial image as well as fingerprints in interoperable formats.
- The Regulation will only apply to passports and travel documents issued by the Member States. It will not apply to ID cards or temporary passports.
- The new documents must have additional security features which include anti-forgery, counterfeiting and falsification standards; technical specifications for the storage of medium biometric information and its security including the prevention of unauthorised access and requirements for quality and common standards for the facial image and fingerprints.
- The biometric features used in the passports and travel documents may only be used for verifying the authenticity of the document and the identity of the holder by means of directly available comparable features.
- The Commission will be assisted by a Committee. The Regulation must be applied by the Member States at the latest 18 months following its adoption as regards the facial image and at the latest 36 months as regards fingerprints. The validity of passports and travel documents already issued shall not be affected.
- Lastly, an Annex is attached to the proposal which lays down the minimum level of security that Member States' passports and travel documents are required to provide.