

BIOMETRIC PASSPORTS

– the next step



Faced with regular instances of human trafficking particularly of children, the security concerns that have characterised the start of this millennium and illegal migration, technological developments in identification are being set for widespread use in the coming months and years. **By Julian Micallef.**

Discussions within the European Union's institutions have led to an obligation for all Member States within the Schengen area and Norway, Iceland and Switzerland to adopt the use of biometric passports. This is expected to start from later on this year, even though some countries have already started issuing such documentation. Countries which are not part of the Schengen area, particularly the United Kingdom, have also opted to introduce these passports. With such widespread support and implementation it appears that soon it will become a given that passports will have to include the relevant data. The biometric facilities being considered are those related to fingerprint and facial data.

The use of passports for children has also been

actively considered. Again, the issue of child trafficking has been at the forefront of such considerations. The principle is that each person must have a passport to ensure that s/he can be well identified and that existing loopholes closed as much as possible. However, in the case of biometric passports for children, this has been shown to be more difficult in the case of small children and even persons with disability who may not be able to provide fingerprints. Since the features of children are constantly growing, it has been agreed that children under the age of twelve are exempted.

Concerns over loss of privacy have been expressed, including by MEPs who discussed this piece of new legislation. However, reflecting the common view, most of the members of the European Parliament have weighed in their support for such passports, seeing them as a useful tool to combat criminality and terrorism. While a deadline by which the processes in Member States must begin (June 2009) is quite close, that does not mean that all passports will have to contain biometric features. Countries have until 2012 to fully implement the new legislation, by which time then all non-biometric passports will become invalid for travelling purposes.

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