

Perspectives of the European Union as Travel Document issuer

Introduction

Good morning ladies and gentlemen,

I'm very honoured and pleased to be invited by ICAO at this symposium because it gives me a unique opportunity to present the new form of the laissez-passer (LP) of the European Union (EU). In the next couple of minutes, I would like to share with you the reflections that have triggered a huge transformation in the way travel documents are handled by EU-institutions and in particular for their staff travelling for the service or being posted in a foreign country.

Historical background

After 9/11 and the attacks in New York and Washington DC with hijacked aircrafts, it was obvious for everyone that a reliable link between a passenger and the travel document that this passenger presented at boarding time was compulsory. For sure this was not the case with the old form of the EU Laissez-Passer. A travel document must be secured in its issuance process to prevent fraudulent use and it must doubtlessly tie the genuine holder with some of its characteristics. Hence the incorporation of biometric data in an electronic machine readable travel document (eMRTD).

More recently, many of the EU Member States faced terrorist attacks on their territory, perpetrated by people entering the Union illegally; our border control officers struggle with abnormal flows of refugees whose confident identification is often impossible.

My job as a Security Officer includes risk management and whoever has done this before knows that you have to evaluate the likelihood and the impact of an undesired event and take measures to avoid the risk or diminish it to an acceptable level. In our case of issuing travel documents for EU-staff, we committed to comply with ICAO specifications and with EU standards applicable to national electronic passports issued by our Member States. This commitment provides a response to all risks in relation with forgery, falsification or alteration of travel documents. By the end of 2013, the Council of the EU adopted a new regulation – Council Regulation 1417/2013 - laying down the new form of the Laissez-Passer issued by the European Union (EU LP in short). This new form of the Laissez-Passer of the European Union is a very secure document that would require a huge effort should someone try to produce a fake one, seeing the number of security features it incorporates.

We also committed to issue the new EU LP before November 25th 2015 to respect the deadline for abandoning documents in circulation with no machine readable zone (MRZ). For those who remember the old form of the EU LP and have seen the current one, they can easily imagine that the EU-institutions had to close a technical gap of more than 40 years! Changing from a simple booklet with handwritten-data and a punched photography to a full-compliant electronic passport with biometric capture of fingerprints and facial image was a revolution for our staff and members. The risk is no more in the authenticity of the document but in the issuance procedures.

For enrolment, as an international organisation, we don't manage a register of identities but rely on the national ID-cards and passports as breeder documents to ascertain the identity of the applicant. The personalisation process is depending on three parties for issuing an EU LP (the external contractor, the European Commission and the Joint Research Center) which makes corruption more difficult. So what did the EU reach with this new form of the Laissez-Passer?

Benefits and achievements

Allow me first to remind briefly the legal basis of the Laissez-Passer of the European Union: the LP is defined in Article 6 of the Protocol on the Privileges and Immunities of the European Union, one of the annexes of the EU-Treaties. It's a travel document that must be recognized by the EU-Member States and that can be recognized by other countries, and this according to bi-lateral agreements. It can only be used within the context of serving the Union. For staff and their family on long stay outside the Union – typically people posted in an EU-delegation for a couple of years- , the LP is also THE document to be used for proper notification and residency in the hosting country.

In November 2015, the first produced EU LPs were used by EU-officials and the European Commission (EC), together with the European External Action Service (EEAS), launched its communication campaign to have the new travel document known around the world.

For staff and their family in delegations – (the EU has around 140 diplomatic missions in third countries) – the new form of the EU LP is an unquestionable document stating their diplomatic status and is treated like a diplomatic passport. Since the introduction, in certain countries where it was not mandatory for the notification of diplomatic agents, it has become obligatory. Being ICAO-compliant and fully interoperable with inspection systems at border controls has increased the number of countries recognizing it as a valid travel document, which is facilitating our EU-staff's lives on missions.

Moreover, this compliancy with the standards of EU-national passports has opened a straightforward process to include the document in free visa waiver programmes. A clear achievement is shown by the agreement signed with the People's Republic of China. More and more countries accept to issue free visas in the new LP, as it is easily traceable, thus travelling has become easier and safer.

This has also a positive impact on safety of our people when they are sent to sensitive regions being it for humanitarian aid, cooperation or development reasons. As safeguarding the security of our staff is one of our top priorities, unavoidably we must prepare ourselves for immediate evacuations. The fact that the EU LP is becoming a global player and that it offers the possibility for free visa or facilitated visa procedures, evacuation routes are more accessible, easier to plan as there is no unnecessary and complicated administrative hindrance.

The future

With this Regulation 1417 of end 2013, the EU expressed its willingness to have the document validated worldwide and it is in that context that it will participate in ICAO's public key directory (PKD) as of next year.

At EU-level, we will start the implementation of a SPOC (Single Point of Contact) in order to allow the EU-Member States authorities to get an extended access to the fingerprints data on the chip of an EU

LP and consequently a one-to-one matching verification of the identity of the passenger, enhancing the security of travellers and contributing to fraud detection. Like national administrations, the EU participates in the interoperability and compliancy tests for electronic passports.

We also know that a document providing some advantages is a candidate for forgery. So far, no notification of fake LPs has been reported but that doesn't mean this will never happen, especially if it is treated like a diplomatic passport. The contract that the EC signed on behalf of the EU in 2015 for the production and personalisation of the EU Laissez-Passer foresees a new design of the document at mid-term, so around 2020. This is typically a measure to mitigate the risk of counterfeiting the EU LP by shortening the lifetime of one travel document's version.

Conclusion

This journey of the new form of the European Union Laissez-Passer is not finished, ladies and gentlemen: we still need to increase the level of recognition of this document, especially by airline companies, to facilitate the travel of our staff on mission abroad the Union. I will conclude by repeating that it was a phenomenal transformation for the EU institutions and agencies to cope with the new form of the laissez-passer, but all those efforts are rewarded by safer and easier travelling for our staff. Issuing a secure document trusted by others is vital for safe travelling and the EU is committed to do so. I thank you for your attention.