

Assistance from Airlines

Sharing flight passenger data has protected Europe from terrorist attacks

By per Concordiam Staff

Since 2007, an agreement between the European Union and the United States to share passenger information on commercial flights has foiled transnational crime, such as human and drug trafficking. Most importantly, the Passenger Name Record (PNR) agreement has identified potential terror plots targeting both continents.

But in April 2013, the European Parliament's Civil Liberties Committee, citing privacy concerns, voted against a renegotiated PNR with the U.S. The EU has also expressed concerns that Russia is requiring airlines to provide passenger information for flights destined for Russian airports.

Under EU rules, passenger data cannot be transferred to non-EU countries unless there is an international agreement with those nations. "The commission is very concerned about the measures the Russian authorities want to implement," a spokeswoman for EU Home Affairs Commissioner Cecilia Malmström told the BBC.

But nine EU countries led by France and Germany support a modified PNR, which could curb terror plots and prevent budding radicals from traveling to conflict zones.

"One of the most useful tools to trace such people, when they go to Syria or elsewhere and when they come back, would be a PNR," French Interior Minister Manuel Valls and his Belgian counterpart Joelle Milquet told Agence France-Presse in a written statement.

The modified system would "allow authorities to follow the movements of such people to identify those, often young and vulnerable, who might risk their lives by going to conflict zones" and that it would prevent "acts of terror in Europe and other serious crimes," Valls and Milquet said.

Young European extremists are fighting in Syria and other conflict zones, the ministers said, and they could return home to France and Belgium with radical indoctrination and military training. "Not all these people are extremists or terrorists, but we have enough grounds to have our concerns," Valls said.

Britain, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden also are supporting a modified PNR.

PNR data is collected during reservation and check-in for flights entering and leaving the EU and includes a passenger's name, address, phone number and credit card information. Travel dates, itinerary and ticket information are also included. More than 500 million records are collected every year.

"PNR data constitute a valuable weapon in the fight against terrorism and serious crime," the British Parliament's European Union Committee concluded in a 2007 report.

"Their continued use is both necessary and justified."

The PNR agreement has been a valuable counterterrorism tool, stymying hundreds of terror plots since September 11, 2001. In 2009, PNR information was used to identify a man planning to attack Mumbai, India, as he booked a flight from the U.S. to Germany, according to a report by The Heritage Foundation. In 2006, London police stopped a



Passengers check departure times at Fiumicino airport in Rome in October 2013. Some Europeans object to the sharing of airline passenger data, but security experts credit such sharing with stopping terrorist attacks.

group of terrorists plotting to use liquid explosives to bomb nine planes flying from the United Kingdom to the U.S.

Over the years, PNR data has also disrupted human trafficking and exposed drug smuggling operations, according to a 2007 British Parliament report.

Cooperation is the key to the success of the PNR. The U.S. shares leads with EU law enforcement agencies on crime and terrorism that affects EU countries. Sharing passenger information helps "law enforcement authorities prevent, detect, investigate and prosecute serious crimes, including acts of terrorism," according to a 2011 EU council report.

PNR data sharing, according to the report, also has led to a "better understanding of the composition and operations of terrorist and other criminal networks." □