One Person, One Passport

Biometrics help EU shore up borders

The European Union's decision to issue biometric passports to its more than 500 million citizens makes travel between the 27 member states easier. The high-tech "ePassport," or Passport 10, includes a microchip that can store the bearer's passport number, photograph, fingerprint, digital signature and retinal scan, if collected. The EU said its "one-person, one-passport" policy will also help combat terrorism, illegal immigration and human trafficking.
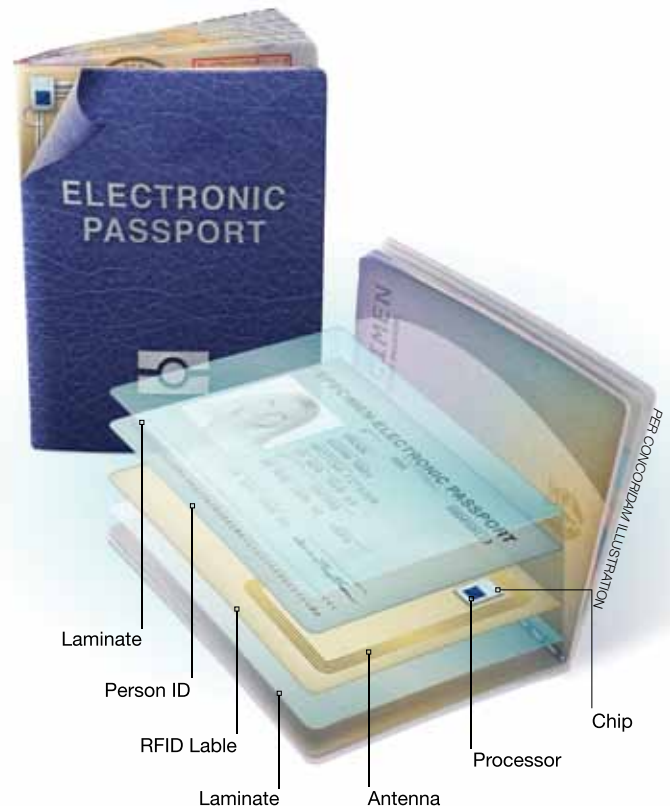
People age 12 and older began receiving the new passports in late June 2009. Under a January 2009 EU mandate, all member nations must implement the new passport by 2012.

Although the passport has suffered technical problems and criticism that it is not secure enough from counterfeiters, the goal is to increase passport and travel document security while establishing a more reliable link between the holder and the passport. This will ensure better protection against fraudulent use of the passport, the EU stated on its website.

Each passport also has intricately designed pages and a complex watermark that make it hard to forge. The chip stores key information about its holder, validating the document. Each country is responsible for issuing its own passports.

"I'm happy to let the citizens of this country know that their passport will open wider the doors of Europe and the world to them," Bulgaria's then-Interior Minister Mihail Mikov said in a Radio Bulgaria report. He received the country's first biometric passport. Bulgaria is one of five nations working with neighbor countries to find ways to combat organized crime and illegal migration. Like other EU nations, Bulgaria wants to enhance its border security and border-crossing stations to help deter illegal migration into the country and the union. A better passport is part of the solution to those problems. Collaborative efforts with neighbor countries to better control common borders are leading to an exchange of ideas, methods and technology. The efforts are strengthening relationships between countries and helping build closer ties with European police, justice and border-control agencies. Together, these actions help the EU step up the fight against terrorism, corruption and crime.

Non-EU nations in the region are also complying with the new requirements so their citizens can travel within Europe without visas. This brings them one step closer to full inclusion in the union and helps them with border and immigration controls. The European Commission even proposed ending in 2010 the need for visas for entry into non-EU nations Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro.

PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION

Laminate
Person ID
RFID Lable
Laminate
Antenna
Processor
Chip

Turkey, which is seeking EU membership, is planning to introduce biometric passports in June 2010, the country's *Hürriyet Daily News* reported in March 2010. "Prototype passports are ready. The physical preparations are under way in all consulates and police departments, and the required machines will be put into service in May," Foreign Ministry spokesman Burak Özügergin said.

In March 2010, non-EU member Switzerland started issuing biometric passports with the bearer's photograph and fingerprints. This brings the nation in line with its neighbors. "Switzerland is part of the Schengen area and is obliged to follow Schengen rules. It had until March 1 to issue biometric passports," Markus Waldner, project leader

Serbs can now visit countries in the European Union's Schengen zone with a passport rather than a visa. Belgrade's airport is reporting a 15 to 20 percent increase in travel to EU destinations.

for biometric passports at the Federal Police Office, said in a story on the news website swissinfo.ch. The country is one of the last to issue the ePassports. France and Germany, for example, also members of the Schengen European single-border treaty, have employed the documents since 2006.

However, there are still questions about the security of biometric passports. Millions of passports are stolen or missing, Interpol reports, and investigators testify to a lucrative worldwide network of passport forgers, including an Algerian organization that has supplied suspect passports to al-Qaida sympathizers. In one notorious case, Ahmed Ressam, imprisoned in a plot to bomb Los Angeles International Airport, was arrested in 1999 trying to cross from Canada to the United States with a forged passport. The EU acknowledges there will be glitches in its attempt to create a fake-proof system.

"We did our best to produce the perfect passport," Anton Donev, of the Bulgarian Identity Documents Directorate, said on Radio Bulgaria. The country's biometric passports will have some safeguards "that are practically insurmountable," he said. Croatia has taken the passport issue a step further by including fingerprints from both hands and the bearer's citizen identification number.

EU countries have invested much time, effort and money in producing secure passports. "It is extremely expensive and difficult to forge, although not impossible," said Magnus Svenningson, the CEO of Speed Identity, the company that provides the biometric data capture platform to the Swedish, Luxembourg and Lithuanian governments, in a March 2010 interview with the online EUobserver. What makes the document hard to counterfeit is that forgers would have to

clone the certified chip of the passport-issuing country. This requires machine-supported verification of the documents.

The new passports continue to raise privacy concerns. The EU sees the new passports as a step to strengthen the union and combat illegal activities. Some civil rights activists and nations are skeptical about whether the data in the biometric passports will be secure enough and fear government misuse of the information. To help ease fears with technology privacy issues, the EU launched its Privacy and Emerging Sciences and Technologies, or PRESCIENT, project in March 2010. The three-year study aims to use new computing and electronic-related technologies to create a framework for privacy and ethical considerations arising from the use of emerging technologies, the online magazine InfoSecurity reported in March 2010.

The biometric passport trend is catching on in non-EU nations desiring to join the union because they will ultimately be required to issue the passports. Union countries have also started issuing biometric identification cards. In April 2010, the EU sped up and standardized visa procedures applicable to 25 Schengen nations — allowing citizens to cross borders without visas. This zone includes 22 EU nations, plus Norway, Iceland and Switzerland.

The decision to introduce biometric passports will provide increased protection against crime and terrorism while allowing "unparalleled freedom to travel, work and live anywhere" within its borders — safely, the EU states on its official website. It will enable the union to standardize and integrate common security procedures among its member states. Just as important, ePassports will allow the EU to comply with International Civil Aviation Organization guidelines. □