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Coelho's report on Schengen Enlargement to be adopted by the European Parliament

The European Parliament is set to adopt tomorrow Carlos Coelho's report on the proposal for a Council decision on the full application of the provisions of the Schengen acquis in nine more countries (Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia).

The Schengen area enables citizens to move freely within the EU's territory. Checks at internal and sea borders of the new Schengen countries will be abolished from 21st December 2007, and restrictions at airport borders from the end of March 2008. This means when EU citizens cross EU internal borders, they will no longer need to present their passport for inspection.

During the debate preceding the votes, in the presence of the Portuguese Secretary of State for Home Affairs José Magalhães, rapporteur Carlos Coelho MEP reminded the House that "the Schengen area is one of the greatest successes in the history of European integration. Abolishing internal borders and, at the same time, implementing several compensatory measures, such as the reinforcement of checks at external borders, the police, border and judicial cooperation, and the creation of the Schengen Information System (SIS) are the best way to enable freedom of movement".

Like the European Union, Schengen has been expanded. Today, not only the 5 founding Member States participate, but also 15 more including 2 non-EU countries: Norway and Iceland (Ireland and the United Kingdom are only partial participants). According to Carlos Coelho: "This is an historic event: the greatest enlargement in Schengen history, removing at the same time the internal borders of 9 new Member States."

Carlos Coelho MEP congratulated the new Member States for having joined the Schengen area, highlighting the systematic and engaged effort made to fulfill all strict Schengen requirements. The Portuguese MEP also said that "Although some problems were highlighted in the reports of December 2006, almost all of them have been already overcome."

According to Carlos Coelho, the absence of internal borders not only allows for a "better control at external borders and a good exchange of information via the SIS". It also requires "mutual trust among all members who have to strictly implement the adopted

common rules". Guaranteeing an efficient control at our borders is "ensuring the security of all EU citizens".

In fact, the security of the Schengen area depends on the rigour and efficiency that each Member State applies to controls at its external borders, and also, on the quality and speed of the exchange of information via the SIS. Any weakness or incorrect functioning of any of these elements is liable to jeopardise the security of the Union.

Therefore, it is imperative to "solve small remaining problems. Although they do not constitute an obstacle to abolishing internal borders, they have to be solved." For this reason, the European Parliament, based on Carlos Coelho's proposal, will adopt a political Resolution co-signed by 5 political groups, asking to be informed of details about all pending issues within a limit of 6 months, and asserting that a global evaluation of the functioning of the Schengen Area, involving all new and old Member States, should be prepared within 2 years.

Carlos Coelho MEP also thanked the Presidency-in-office for its "engagement and collaboration", and particularly to the Portuguese government and the Portuguese Secretary of State, José Magalhães, for the solution found with the SISone4all which enabled these nine Members to be connected to the SIS ones. The Portuguese MEP recalled: "If it hadn't gone this way, facing the delays of SIS-II, it wouldn't have been possible to have Schengen enlargements this year."

The rapporteur concluded with two final notes:

"The first note regards the European Commission. I would like to remind all here that, once again, the creation of SIS II continues to be a priority for the European Parliament, not in order to facilitate the new Member States' access to the system (an issue which was solved with the SISone4all), but mainly because, inside the EU framework, it will enable a more efficient use of data, therefore improving citizens' security, through the inclusion of biometric data or the interlinking of alerts, based on more advanced functions and cutting-edge technologies."

"As far as the Council is concerned, it is regrettable that it is necessary to again point out that, at the beginning of the consultation process with the European Parliament, the Council has not respected once again, the cooperation principle with the Parliament, refusing to send evaluation reports prepared by experts, invoking security reasons. Although a compromise was found to temporarily solve the situation, it is urgent to find a solution for the future which enables the European Parliament to have access to all documents on which its opinion is asked. It is absurd to deny the European Parliament material with which it performs its legislative competences.

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