

Pointing the finger

The European parliament needs to move fast to decide on standard measures for fingerprinting of children for passports, argues **Carlos Coelho**


New rules on standards for security features and biometrics in passports and travel documents issued by EU member states entered into force in 2004, and from June next year it will allow member states to take fingerprints from children from the moment they are born – even though, according to technical reports presented by some member states, it is not considered possible to properly collect the fingerprints of children younger than six.

If parliament follows the normal legislative procedure on this issue, and given the added complication of next year's European elections, there is a very strong chance that member states will be able to begin taking fingerprints from children before MEPs have been able to have their say on the issue. It would be regrettable if controversy about the age limit and demands from some MEPs to raise the age limit from six to 12 were to put the entire package at risk.


However, the use of fingerprints from very young children raises several concerns, and there is a growing body of evidence to support this. For example, several studies show that fingerprints of children aged 6-14 are considered to be of sufficient quality – better, indeed, than the quality of those over 50. However, these reports are not able to answer all the concerns of MEPs and that is why I support the demand for an in-depth study and propose setting up a revision clause that will bring this regulation back before parliament in three years. Any necessary changes, based on new evidence, could then be made accordingly. Until then, however, I would prefer to have an age limit of six – with the obligation of reconsultation in three years – rather than no limit at all, which would allow member states to take fingerprints from children of any age, as is the case already in some EU countries.



Soon everyone will have to have biometric passports



Another of my main concerns is the need to clarify the purpose of this regulation, making sure that any data collected for the purpose of issuing passports is used only for verifying the authenticity of the document as well as the identity of the holder.



Such verification will consist of the on-site matching of the holder's biometric data with the data stored on the passport. It is also important to ensure that the biometric data is correctly collected and that the processing of that data is restricted to the storage medium (the passport) and that the member states are not creating any databases containing this information to be used for other purposes, such as criminal investigations.

Fingerprints, in any case, are merely an additional security feature that should help to reinforce the link between the passport and its holder, and should not replace the need for a

passport when crossing external EU borders. There is also a particular need for better rules on the protection of children when crossing external borders, and a compromise between the three institutions is being brokered in order to ensure a common approach regarding the rules on the protection of children, in particular against child abduction and child trafficking.

I also think that we all agree on the need to have clear European rules aimed at protecting the rights of European citizens, avoiding any arbitrariness in the way that member states process and make use of any data that should have been collected only in order to provide citizens with a valid travelling document, and not for any other purposes.