

Biometric Euro passports ready to launch

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European Parliament has okayed plans to phase in biometric passports in certain parts of Europe by 2012, with the UK, Ireland and Denmark excluded from the new regulation.

The scheme will see the introduction of computerised biometric passports including people's fingerprints as well as their photographs, an aspect that has been strongly opposed by civil liberties groups.

A biometric passport is a combined paper and electronic identity document that uses biometrics to authenticate the identity of travellers. Information about the passport holder is stored on a tiny RFID computer chip, much like information is stored on smartcards.

Like some smartcards, the passport design calls for an embedded contactless chip that is able to hold digital signature data to ensure the integrity of the passport and the biometric data.

Eventually, it is expected that all European passports will have digital imaging and fingerprint scan biometrics placed on the contactless chip.

France or Germany already issue smart identity cards that have fingerprint identification embedded.

The new rules stipulate that all EU countries should start issuing passports containing biometric elements as of 29 June this year. Children under 12 will be exempt. States have until 2012 to fully implement the rules and current passports will remain valid.

Technical specifications for the new passports have already been agreed by the European Commission and now become binding for the so-called Schengen agreement parties, which includes all the EU countries, except Denmark, Ireland and the UK.

These three countries are required to implement passports with machine-readable facial images instead. The UK has already started schemes that should see the introduction of biometric identification as well.

While biometric passports are harder to forge, security researchers argue that they can be hacked and also can lead to false positives.