Security for our citizens: to focus on SIS

By *Carlos Coelho, MEP*

The Schengen information System ('SIS') started operating in 1995, the same year internal borders were *de facto* abolished to create the Schengen area. This is no coincidence. To ensure this new freedom was enjoyed in security, a range of compensatory measures was agreed, including SIS. For citizens to move freely, states needed to cooperate more in security matters.

In the absence of internal controls we have to trust each other regarding the common management of external borders. In the past 15 years, the evolution of SIS was structured - rather than reactive, on the heat of the moment -, it involved all stakeholders - rather than devised in a grim office -, always looking ahead, to ensure it was prepared for future challenges.

In 2001 we prepared SIS to the connect Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway and Iceland. In 2007, to connect Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. This was an immense technical, budgetary and legal challenge, filled with political implications: joining the Schengen area is dependent on having SIS up and running.

At the same time, we also accounted for more efficiency, introducing new technological features, such as fingerprints, and introducing new types of alerts, such as stolen securities and means of payment.

By doing so, the system adapted to growing types of crime, providing also more information to the authorities. It also guaranteed better information, by allowing alerts on people and objects to be linked. Moreover, it accounted for citizens' rights, preventing misidentifications (the so-called "*john smith*" syndrome).

Indeed, throughout the expansion of SIS, I have always abide by the idea "bigger system, better safeguards". Fighting to guarantee citizens' rights, setting up control mechanisms and limitations, but also ensuring citizens were properly informed of the functioning of system and of their rights.

The same goes for the technical management of the system. Already in 2004, Parliament, upon my proposal, called for the establishment of an EU-agency to manage SIS. Thus replacing the sole control of the French State over the central system, which is based in Strasbourg. Another important element is mutual trust. Mutual trust was and remains key to the good functioning of SIS.

The system is only as good as the information insert in it by the competent authorities. To that end much contributes the new Schengen Evaluation Mechanism ('SEM'). When we voted it in Parliament, we guaranteed that it would assess every Member State in all the key areas for Schengen, including the functioning of SIS. As a rapporteur, I made it a priority to ensure this became a european procedure and did not remain in control of Member states.

Today, the European Commission leads these evaluations, ensuring impartiality in the assessments, guaranteeing rules are complied, problems are fixed and, thus, for example, France can trust Portugal. Naturally, however, mutual trust is a permanent objective, that needs to be fostered continuously, if for nothing else, due to the changes in the System.

This became quite evident in the past few years, as it was clear there was a lack of information exchange regarding terrorism. Information which if in the system could have been better used.

Today, SIS is the biggest, most used, best-implemented database in the area of freedom, Security and Justice. It is central to the most recognized European success by our citizens: free movement.

It secures our external common border and improves our internal security, being the main instrument for police and judicial cooperation amongst Member States. It connects, live, 29 Countries (25 Member-states and 4 associated states) and over 4.000 authorities, sharing 70 million alerts on people and objects across the Schengen area.

The current proposals on the table, presented by the Commission last December, come to ensure the system remains future-proof, guaranteeing security and freedom for our citizens. There are three proposals: one regarding borders, another regarding police and judicial cooperation and a third one regarding returns of third-country nationals.

The proposals on border controls and police cooperation follow the mid-term evaluation foreseen in the existing framework and aim to tackle the challenges identified there but also those identified in the

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European Agenda on Migration and the European Agenda on Security.

Indeed, SIS is a horizontal system and I am confident these changes will allow for more cooperation and better information. First, there will be more tools to tackle the so-called refugee crisis. Member States will have to introduce alerts on return decisions, and there will be more access to the European agencies working on the ground. Second, there will be more tools to fight against terrorism and serious crime. Such as biometric data or the obligation to introduce alerts on people wanted for terrorism.

Third, there will be more tools to protect children, as there will be a specific alert for children in danger of parental abduction. Last, but not least, the proposals aim to strengthen the architecture of the system. There is a focus in ensuring the quality of data, data security, data protection and the smooth running of the system.

I do believe Parliament can improve these proposals and I do hope we will do so before the end of 2017. The security of our citizens and the Schengen area have relied significantly on SIS in the early days of free movement. Today, too.

It is my firm conviction that it will remain so in the days ahead. Rather than focusing on systems that are expensive, very-long term and with doubtful added-value, we need to focus on SIS.