



MEPs clash with Council over Schengen zone security

By Judith Crosbie
judithcrosbie@economist.com

A ROW has broken out between the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers over access to documents which describe how ready the new member states are to join the Schengen zone of border-free travel.

The dispute has prompted some MEPs to question the readiness of some member states to join the Schengen zone and raised fears about the EU's security.

The civil liberties committee was due to debate the matter yesterday (12 September), with Council and European Commission representatives expected to give their assessment at a closed-doors session. But the Council wrote to the Parliament saying that it could not provide its assessment to MEPs because of the secret nature of the discussion. It suggested instead that MEPs could come to the Council buildings and examine relevant documents.

But MEPs complained that it was unacceptable for Parliament to be expected to give an opinion without proper access to the evaluation. "I refuse to say everything is all right if Council behaves in this way," said Carlos Coelho, the Portuguese centre-right MEP who is drafting Parliament's report on the expansion of the Schengen zone.

"How can I say to citizens 'there is no problem we are going to lift the borders', if I tell them the matter is so secret that we are not allowed to see the assessments?"

Coelho said that treating the documents in such a top secret manner suggested that some of the new member states were not ready to have the Schengen borders lifted. "I fear there are some problems with the evaluation," said Coelho.

Nine of the ten countries that joined

the EU in 2004 (all but Cyprus) are scheduled to have the controls at land and sea borders with their EU neighbours dismantled by the end of the year, while air border controls are to be dismantled next March. The timing is controversial since a new computer system to accompany the extension of the Schengen zone, known as SIS II, has been delayed. Portugal instead came up with a way to admit the new member states into the existing system, a scheme known as SIS-one-for-all.

Poland is understood to be the only state with remaining difficulties but excluding Poland would be politically explosive. An EU diplomat said that Poland, the largest of the new member states, had been accepted as ready on "political grounds". "Eight are good and nine are ready. They [Poland] are ready to join," the diplomat said, adding that Poland's problems would continue to be assessed after the country joined, to ensure that any difficulties were addressed.

The diplomat added that "some old southern member states also have less than good border security".

Commenting on the possibility that some member states might be admitted to the border-free zone although they were not fully prepared, Coelho said: "Please remember that we are playing with the security of European citizens and it's not a game to play. It's not a matter of [member states] being nice to each other. There has to be effective respecting of the rules."

Malta had yet to have all assessments of its preparedness carried out, he said.

Constança Urbano de Sousa, justice and home affairs co-ordinator for the Portuguese presidency, insisted during the committee debate that the information on new member states' preparedness was highly sensitive. "The restricted information is very precise on the situation of member states doing the assessments,"



A guard at Terehova, 250 kilometres east of Riga, on Latvia's border with Russia, which at the end of this year will become a point of entry into the Schengen zone/REUTERS

she said. But MEPs pointed out that Parliament had previously held confidential Council documents, allowing only committee members to view them.

A group involving representatives of the three EU institutions will meet at the beginning of October to try to solve the problem, a Parliament official said.

Fundamentally wrong?

Elections in Poland and British intransigence slow up talks on an EU treaty

Pages 6 and 7

Tartan tactician

Alex Salmond, Scotland's first minister, seeks independence for Scotland and separate EU membership

Page 10

On the brink

EU ministers weigh up the size of the financial markets crisis

Page 32