

'A standard European passport' from 30 jours d'Europe (December 1974)

Caption: On 9 and 10 December 1974, in Paris, the Heads of State or Government of the Nine decide to establish a European passport union, the first step towards the introduction of a standard passport for European Community nationals.

Source: 30 jours d'Europe. dir. de publ. Fontaine, François ; Réd. Chef Chastenet, Antoine. Novembre 1975, n° 208. Paris: Service d'information des Communautés européennes. "Un passeport uniforme pour les Européens", auteur:Facomprez, Christiane , p. 14-15.

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A standard European passport

A document of standard design, colour and format will be the first step towards a European passport

Imagine 250 million Europeans, each with the same identically coloured passport. Imagine queues of passengers from the Community going through customs at the airport in Dakar, New York or Tokyo under a sign that says 'European passports only'. Imagine Tunisian, Malayan or Brazilian passengers having to comply with the exactly the same formalities when landing at Naples, Paris or Copenhagen.

Today's fiction is tomorrow's reality. The first step towards the passport union agreed on at the Paris Summit of the Heads of State or Government of the Nine in December 1974 will be taken by the end of the year, when the Council of Ministers of the Nine approve the introduction of a standard passport for citizens of Britain, Germany, France, Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg, Denmark, the Netherlands and Ireland.

At the beginning of the century there were no passports at all: a visiting card was all that was needed to travel from one end of Europe to the other, except for Russia. But since the First World War there have been several attempts to make passports international. The League of Nations set about the task in 1918, as did the United Nations in 1945 and the Council of Europe some 15 years ago, but they got nowhere.

Blue for the French, green for the Italians, red for the Belgians: gather up all the passports currently issued by the countries of the Community and you will find a wide range of colours, formats, numbers of pages, and bindings. Nine different passports valid for five years in some countries (Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands) and for ten in others (Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom). And even though a national identity card suffices for nationals of the Nine to travel throughout the Community, the fact remains that, outside the Common Market, they travel as Germans, Belgians or Irish, and not as members of the European Community. That is why the Heads of State of the Nine decided to create the 'passport union'. It is to be implemented in stages, since the issue is more complex than it appears at first sight. Creating a passport union involves not only issuing identical documents to nationals of the Nine, it also means coordinating legislation on foreigners and abolishing passport controls within the Community. These three processes will take several years.

Difficulties

Ever since the Paris Summit decision, discussions on its implementation have encountered serious difficulties, mainly involving the new members of the Common Market: Britain, Denmark and Ireland. The first difficulty is that the Convention signed in 1957 by Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Norway allows nationals of those four countries to move freely between their territories. On the strength of that agreement, the Danish Government has requested the extension of the passport union to its three neighbouring Nordic countries. This would mean that the Finnish-Soviet frontier would be an external border of the newly formed free-movement zone, making passport control at that frontier mandatory. But this raises a problem for the Finns, who have particularly liberal rules regarding entry to their country for Eastern Europeans.

Meanwhile, the British are worried about the efficiency of customs officers in Palermo or Marseilles, who might not recognise as British someone holding a British passport who was born in a Commonwealth country of parents from a former British colony. The British Government also argues that customs controls will still be necessary as long as customs duties continue to exist. As matters stand, customs duties have been completely eliminated only among the six founding members of the Community. The Irish, on the other hand, are in favour of maintaining substantive border controls but reducing internal checks on work permits, hotel registers, etc. So the move towards the passport union will be slow, and the introduction of a standard passport for all nine countries is only a first step.

The physical appearance and psychological impact of the new passport will strengthen the holder's ties with the Community, but it will still be issued by national authorities, and each of the nine countries will be free to determine and apply its own legislation in the matter.

The European passport could be issued in stages, starting from a given date, as and when current passports expire. But since Danish, Irish and British passports are valid for ten years, implementation of this first phase would last a decade, which is why some members of the European Commission are advocating a quicker approach.

What can citizens of Düsseldorf, Lyons or Liverpool expect from their new passport? Easy travel within the Community, hassle-free entry into foreign countries requiring a national passport and, eventually, equal treatment with respect to their Italian, Irish or Danish neighbours at customs posts outside the Community.

But we are not there yet. Although a standard passport displaying the name of the issuing state on its cover along with the statement 'Member of the European Community' should replace national passports as soon as possible, the fact remains that nationals of each of the Nine travelling abroad will still be subject to agreements concluded between their own country and those outside the Community. Equal treatment of Community citizens when entering other countries means the same treatment for nationals of all those third countries when they arrive at Community borders. There are many problems to be overcome before this will be possible.

Such reciprocity means that the Nine will need to have the same visa and immigration policies. In other words, their differing legislation on foreigners will have to be coordinated, and their current bilateral agreements will have to be replaced by agreements jointly concluded by the Nine. That in itself is an enormous task. Third countries, for their part, will have to recognise the Community countries as a single entity and European citizenship as a reality. So there is still a long way to go.

European citizenship will not begin to take shape until the European Parliament is elected by universal suffrage. And at the present time, with the exception of economic and social legislation, the Community does not have any jurisdiction with respect to the law governing persons.

Nevertheless, a first step in this direction will be taken by the end of the year when the Council of Ministers of the Nine approves the introduction of the standard passport. Once that is a reality, and a degree of coordination of the legislation on foreigners has been achieved, we can begin to discuss the abolition of passport controls within the Community.

Nine nations without borders is perhaps still a distant objective, but each step towards it will make the citizens of Europe more aware of their common destiny.

Christiane Facomprez