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Common - COVID-related development in transport and tourism: Ensuring smooth air travel under COVID-19 pandemic conditions - The European Commission's new recommendations for Member States on the checking of EU Digital COVID Certificates

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【概要：Summary】

Since the beginning of 2020, the air transport industry was increasingly affected by the lockdown measures related to the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the COVID-19 pandemic related restrictions. With the start of vaccination campaigns at the end of 2020 and the increasing number of vaccinated people, the air transport in the EU showed some signs of recovery also towards a possible summer vacation in 2021. Therefore, the European Commission proposed the introduction of the EU Digital COVID Certificate (formerly called Digital Green Certificate) to facilitate the free movement of people vaccinated against COVID-19, of people who received a negative test result, or people who recovered from COVID-19. The objective is to facilitate the free movement of those people within the EU during the COVID-19 pandemic under controlled conditions. The certificate can be used across all EU Member States as well as in Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland among others. Most recently, the European Commission has issued new recommendations and guidelines for EU Member States on the utilisation and checking of the EU Digital COVID Certificates to further streamline travel conditions in the EU. Based on the European Commission's Communication C(2021) 5594 final, the European Commission recommends a harmonisation of the fragmented handling of the utilisation and checking of the EU Digital COVID Certificate ("EU DCC") across all EU Member States. Such a defragmentation of the verification process will be necessary, if the number of air passenger further increases over the summer and in the future, while the pandemic continues.

The EU's travel and tourism sectors are expected to benefit greatly from the further optimised use of the EU DCCs, as air traffic volumes are continuously increasing, and EU citizens and residents enjoy again their freedom of movement. While these Commission recommendations are currently mainly relevant for air travel, the EU DCCs should be also gradually introduced by other transport modes like maritime transport (ferries and cruise ships), rail and road transport.

The operationalisation of the EU DCCs is considered a key tool to allow the free movement of people within the EU, while the COVID-19 pandemic continues.

【記事：Article】

1. Development in air travel under pandemic conditions

In spring 2020, during the EU's first COVID-19 pandemic lockdown phase, the EU Member States closed their borders to neighbouring EU Member States and to third countries. While the Member States' individual measures lacked coordination and did not stop the virus, it led to the total or partial suspension of flights, bringing tourist activities to a standstill in spring 2020. According to Eurostat (2021b), the pandemic's impact became visible in commercial air transport in March 2020, with a 44% decrease in the total number of commercial flights in the EU, compared with the same month in 2019.

With COVID-19 restrictions taking full effect, the most substantial falls in the number of commercial flights were recorded in April 2020 (-91% compared with the same month in 2019), May (-90%) and June (-84%) (Eurostat 2021b). During the peak summer months of 2020, there was only a partial recovery, with decreases of -64% in July and -53% in August 2020, and with further decreases in the months that followed. In June 2021, the number of commercial flights stood at 302.200 in compared with 663.000 in June 2019, which is about -54% compared to 2019 figures (Eurostat 2021b). This is an improvement to the months before, as in May 2021, the decrease was still -67% compared to May 2019. In June 2021, the air transport industry's number of commercial flights showed first signs of recovery (Eurostat 2021b).

According to Eurocontrol's Comprehensive Assessment of European aviation, there were 21,567 flights on 7 July 2021, representing 62% of 2019 levels and an increase of +19% over 2 weeks. This represents a renewed 2-digit traffic increase since early July after the first increase in early June 2021 (Eurocontrol 2021a). Air traffic between EU Member States increased over the last two weeks before 7 July 2021, as travel flows between North-West Europe and Southern Europe intensified. On 7 July 2021, France showed an increase of flights (departures/arrivals) of +27%, Spain +26%, Turkey +29%, Germany +21%, Italy +29% and Greece +35%, compared to two weeks before (Eurocontrol 2021a). According to Eurocontrol (2021b), in the most optimistic case, air traffic will not be expected to reach 2019 levels until 2024 at the earliest. This is considered being an optimistic outlook, given the current state of vaccine rollout progress and since most restrictions are still in place in summer 2021, despite encouraging progress on vaccinations.

However, persisting restrictions over the coming years due to patchy vaccine uptakes and/or renewed outbreaks of new virus strains could negatively impact passengers' confidence and air traffic could only reach 74% of the 2019 figures in 2024, with a full recovery not before 2029, according to Eurocontrol (2021b).

2. EU Digital COVID Certificates for reactivating tourism in Europe – under pandemic conditions

The travel restrictions introduced in spring 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic had a detrimental impact on the European tourism sector, which came to a full standstill, as all domestic and international travel was restricted.

The summer season (June-August) is a crucial time for the EU's tourism sector, and during an average summer season, residents of the EU Member States make 385 million tourism trips and spend around €190 billion on their holidays (Eurostat 2021a). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU tourism industry experienced a near stillstand after March 2020 for almost the entire year 2020, only disrupted by a few weeks of tourism travel under difficult pandemic restrictions in the 2020 summer vacation season (Eurostat 2021a).

Since the tourism industry is also an important part in the EU's economy with a share of 3.9% to

the EU's GDP in 2018 and 5.1% of the EU's total labour force with about 13 million employees, all possible measures need to be taken to revive the EU's tourism sector. However, its recovery in the 2021 summer season partially depends on the handling of travellers under pandemic conditions. Therefore, on 17 March 2021, the European Commission proposed a "Regulation on a framework for the issuance, verification, and acceptance of interoperable certificates on vaccination, testing and recovery to facilitate free movement during the COVID-19 pandemic (Digital Green Certificate)" (COM (2021) 130 final). It was expected to allow the EU's tourism industry to partially recover in summer 2021.

The Digital Green Certificate, meanwhile renamed into EU Digital COVID Certificate (EU DCC), is a single EU-wide standardised digital proof that a person has either been vaccinated against COVID-19, received a negative test result, or recovered from COVID-19. While it is not a precondition for exercising free movement rights and it is not a travel document, it should facilitate the free movement of these people within the EU (European Commission (2021a). Furthermore, the Commission also adopted a proposal to address the issuance of the Digital COVID Certificate to third country nationals legally staying or residing in EU Member States and who are entitled to travel within the EU (COM/2021/140 final). If such a third country national is in possession of a certificate, which is a sufficiently reliable proof of vaccination, or has been issued under a system that is interoperable with the EU DCC trust framework, it would facilitate travel within the EU. However, a Member State shall not be required to issue a certificate for a vaccine not authorised for use on its territory.

The EU Digital COVID Certificate (EU DCC) was introduced 1 July 2021. It contains a QR code with a digital signature to protect it against falsification. When the certificate is checked, the QR code is scanned, and the signature verified.

The European Commission has built a gateway through which all certificate signatures can be verified across the EU. The personal data of the certificate holder does not pass through the gateway. Those Member States, which were not ready to issue certificates in the new format by 1 July 2021 had still six weeks from that date to introduce the new EU digital COVID certificate format. National certificates in other formats will be accepted during the phasing-in period. Furthermore, according to the European Commission (2021b), EU Member States shall refrain from imposing additional travel restrictions on the holders of an EU Digital COVID Certificate, unless they are necessary and proportionate to safeguard public health. In such a case, the Member State must inform the Commission and all other Member States in a timely manner and provide reasons for such new measures. The Member States should publish this information 24 hours before the measures come into effect.

EU citizens and residents will be able to have their EU DCC issued and verified across the EU for 12 months. By facilitating the free movement of people within the EU, the EU DCC is also expected to help the EU's tourism sector to recover by allowing more seamless travel.

3. The new guidelines for checking EU DCCs

The introduction of a single, EU-wide standardised Digital Green Certificate is expected to facilitate the free movement of people within the EU, and to help the tourism sector to recover by allowing the people to travel seamlessly. Just ahead of the 2021 summer vacation season, an agreement on the common approach regarding the content, format, principles, technical standards, and the level of security of the EU DCC was reached, thereby avoiding unilateral measures of the EU Member States that would have had the potential to cause significant disruption of the free movement of people within the EU.

On 1 July 2021, the EU Digital COVID Certificate was introduced in the EU. As air travel has reached 62% of 2019 levels on 7 July 2021 (Eurocontrol 2021b), and a further rise in the number of air passengers is expected, the European Commission issued guidelines on how to deal with the increasing number of air passengers, as an increased number of Certificates will need to be checked by the EU Member States. The EU single aviation market needs the EU DCC as a tool to cope with the increased passenger flows over the summer months in 2021 and during the further recovery period, according to the European Commission's Communication (C(2021) 5594 final). While during the phase-in period of the EU DCCs, from 1 July to 12 August 2021, the EU Member States had time to introduce the DCCs and the necessary procedures, the EU Member States and the non-EU Member States Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, San Marino, Switzerland, and Vatican City are all already fully connected to the EU DCCs processing system.
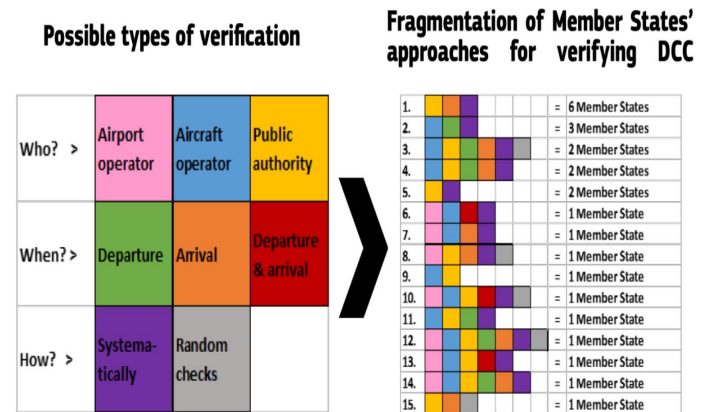
After the full introduction and successful start of operation of the EU DCC, the next step must be to further facilitate safe and seamless travel during the pandemic (C(2021) 5594 final).

In fact, the airlines are concerned about the need to check an increasing number of the passengers' EU Digital COVID Certificates. Currently, it depends on the holder's departure, transit, and arrival points how and how often a passenger's EU DCC is checked. According to the European Commission's Communication C(2021) 5594 final, Member States have different approaches to verify the EU DCCs.

There are different authorities and operators responsible for the verification of the EU DCCs. There are different times at which the verification takes place, at departure, at arrival or at both. Furthermore, Member States have different approaches as to how thoroughly they check the EU DCCs. Whereas some Member States check them systematically, others do random

checks. As a result, there exists a high level of fragmentation of Member States' procedures how to deal with the verification of the DCCs. These different procedures cause disturbance to a smooth processing of travellers in aviation (C(2021) 5594 final).

Fig. 1: Different approaches of Member States on the verification of EU DCC in aviation

Source: European Commission: https://ec.europa.eu/transport/sites/default/files/c20215594-covid-certificates.pdf

Therefore, based on the "Communication from the Commission Reaping the full benefits of EU Digital COVID Certificates: Supporting free movement of citizens and the recovery of the air transport sector through guidelines and recommendations for EU Member States" (C (2021) 5594 final), the European Commission seeks now to provide overarching principles, best practices, recommendations and guidance for EU Member States how to facilitate the verification of EU DCCs in aviation, considering the increasing number of air passengers in the peak summer travel season and beyond.

The European Commission recommends that after the successful initialisation of the EU DCC system, the verification process needs now to be streamlined to prepare for a further increase in the number of air passengers. While the EU's recommendations are mainly relevant for air travel, they should also be gradually taken up by

other transport modes including ferries, cruise ships, rail, and road transport, wherever possible.

Based on its Communication on a series of guidelines and recommendations in its Communication C (2021) 5594 final, which are addressed to EU Member States, the Commission recommends that the EU Member States should ensure complete, comprehensible, and timely provision of information to operators and travellers about the verification requirements and processes. They also should ensure that the information published on the Re-Open EU website is complete, up to date, and easy to understand (C(2021) 5594 final).

EU Member States should integrate the applicable travel rules in the verification processes and should make available and keep the travel validation rules always up to date at the EU DCC Gateway (C(2021) 5594 final). The EU Member States should use, where possible, electronic means of verification in accordance with the relevant eHealth Network guidelines (C(2021) 5594 final). Furthermore, EU Member States should ensure that the EU DCC verification is carried out as early as possible and preferably before the passenger arrives at the departure airport. According to the European Commission (2021c), to avoid duplication of checks by more than one actor (airline operators, public authorities etc.), the Commission recommends to checking the EU DCCs in a verification process prior to departure in a "one-stop" verification process, as it ensures the smoothest possible handling. Such a better-coordinated approach would help avoid congestion at airports and unnecessary stress for passengers and staff. The EU Member States should make sure operators are empowered to verify EU DCCs, and that they cooperate with airlines to facilitate integration of the verification process in check-in procedures in accordance with the provisions of the EU DCC Regulation (C(2021) 5594 final).

The EU Member States should also work towards better coordination of passenger locator forms (PLF) and closely cooperate with transport service operators to allow the verification the EU DCCs at the same time as the collection of other travel-related information, such as the PLF, with a target to introduce this feature in autumn 2021, according to the Commission's Communication C(2021) 5594 final.

According to the European Commissioner for Transport, Adina Vălean, "Reaping the full benefits of the EU Digital COVID Certificate" requires the EU-wide harmonization of the verification protocol. EU Member States should cooperate for introducing a "one-stop" system to check the EU DCCs and other travel-related information like the PLF for making a seamless travel experience for the passengers possible across the EU.

4. Conclusion

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, the general rise of air passenger numbers in the EU over the summer, and the expected further increase of air travellers in future will require all actors in air transport to ensure a seamless and harmonised handling of the EU DCC verification and other COVID-19 pandemic related documents.

The EU Member States will have to improve their handling of the EU DCC verification to avoid an increase of delays, caused by the currently fragmented processing and a parallel rise in the number of air travellers.

Accordingly, the European Commission has issued recommendations to the EU Member States for improving their protocols based on the Communication (C(2021) 5594 final), within the EU and beyond. The harmonisation and digitalisation of verification protocols for the EU DCCs is key to a smooth and seamless development of air travel under the conditions of a continuing pandemic.

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