

Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council  
of 16 December 2008 on common standards and procedures in  
Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals

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PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL

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THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

Having regard to the Treaty establishing the European Community, and in particular Article 63(3)(b) thereof,

Having regard to the proposal from the Commission,

Acting in accordance with the procedure laid down in Article 251 of the Treaty<sup>(1)</sup>,

Whereas:

- (1) The Tampere European Council of 15 and 16 October 1999 established a coherent approach in the field of immigration and asylum, dealing together with the creation of a common asylum system, a legal immigration policy and the fight against illegal immigration.
- (2) The Brussels European Council of 4 and 5 November 2004 called for the establishment of an effective removal and repatriation policy, based on common standards, for persons to be returned in a humane manner and with full respect for their fundamental rights and dignity.
- (3) On 4 May 2005 the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted 'Twenty guidelines on forced return'.
- (4) Clear, transparent and fair rules need to be fixed to provide for an effective return policy as a necessary element of a well managed migration policy.
- (5) This Directive should establish a horizontal set of rules, applicable to all third-country nationals who do not or who no longer fulfil the conditions for entry, stay or residence in a Member State.
- (6) Member States should ensure that the ending of illegal stay of third-country nationals is carried out through a fair and transparent procedure. According to general principles of EU law, decisions taken under this Directive should be adopted on a case-by-case basis and based on objective criteria, implying that consideration should go beyond the mere fact of an illegal stay. When using standard forms for decisions related to return, namely return decisions and, if issued, entry-ban decisions and decisions on removal, Member States should respect that principle and fully comply with all applicable provisions of this Directive.

- (7) The need for Community and bilateral readmission agreements with third countries to facilitate the return process is underlined. International cooperation with countries of origin at all stages of the return process is a prerequisite to achieving sustainable return.
- (8) It is recognised that it is legitimate for Member States to return illegally staying third-country nationals, provided that fair and efficient asylum systems are in place which fully respect the principle of non-refoulement.
- (9) In accordance with Council Directive 2005/85/EC of 1 December 2005 on minimum standards on procedures in Member States for granting and withdrawing refugee status<sup>(2)</sup>, a third-country national who has applied for asylum in a Member State should not be regarded as staying illegally on the territory of that Member State until a negative decision on the application, or a decision ending his or her right of stay as asylum seeker has entered into force.
- (10) Where there are no reasons to believe that this would undermine the purpose of a return procedure, voluntary return should be preferred over forced return and a period for voluntary departure should be granted. An extension of the period for voluntary departure should be provided for when considered necessary because of the specific circumstances of an individual case. In order to promote voluntary return, Member States should provide for enhanced return assistance and counselling and make best use of the relevant funding possibilities offered under the European Return Fund.
- (11) A common minimum set of legal safeguards on decisions related to return should be established to guarantee effective protection of the interests of the individuals concerned. The necessary legal aid should be made available to those who lack sufficient resources. Member States should provide in their national legislation for which cases legal aid is to be considered necessary.
- (12) The situation of third-country nationals who are staying illegally but who cannot yet be removed should be addressed. Their basic conditions of subsistence should be defined according to national legislation. In order to be able to demonstrate their specific situation in the event of administrative controls or checks, such persons should be provided with written confirmation of their situation. Member States should enjoy wide discretion concerning the form and format of the written confirmation and should also be able to include it in decisions related to return adopted under this Directive.
- (13) The use of coercive measures should be expressly subject to the principles of proportionality and effectiveness with regard to the means used and objectives pursued. Minimum safeguards for the conduct of forced return should be established, taking into account Council Decision 2004/573/EC of 29 April 2004 on the organisation of joint flights for removals from the territory of two or more Member States, of third-country nationals who are subjects of individual removal orders<sup>(3)</sup>. Member States should be able to rely on various possibilities to monitor forced return.
- (14) The effects of national return measures should be given a European dimension by establishing an entry ban prohibiting entry into and stay on the territory of all the Member States. The length of the entry ban should be determined with due regard to all relevant circumstances of an individual case and should not normally exceed five

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- years. In this context, particular account should be taken of the fact that the third-country national concerned has already been the subject of more than one return decision or removal order or has entered the territory of a Member State during an entry ban.
- (15) It should be for the Member States to decide whether or not the review of decisions related to return implies the power for the reviewing authority or body to substitute its own decision related to the return for the earlier decision.
  - (16) The use of detention for the purpose of removal should be limited and subject to the principle of proportionality with regard to the means used and objectives pursued. Detention is justified only to prepare the return or carry out the removal process and if the application of less coercive measures would not be sufficient.
  - (17) Third-country nationals in detention should be treated in a humane and dignified manner with respect for their fundamental rights and in compliance with international and national law. Without prejudice to the initial apprehension by law-enforcement authorities, regulated by national legislation, detention should, as a rule, take place in specialised detention facilities.
  - (18) Member States should have rapid access to information on entry bans issued by other Member States. This information sharing should take place in accordance with Regulation (EC) No 1987/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 December 2006 on the establishment, operation and use of the second generation Schengen Information System (SIS II)<sup>(4)</sup>.
  - (19) Cooperation between the institutions involved at all levels in the return process and the exchange and promotion of best practices should accompany the implementation of this Directive and provide European added value.
  - (20) Since the objective of this Directive, namely to establish common rules concerning return, removal, use of coercive measures, detention and entry bans, cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States and can therefore, by reason of its scale and effects, be better achieved at Community level, the Community may adopt measures, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity as set out in Article 5 of the Treaty. In accordance with the principle of proportionality, as set out in that Article, this Directive does not go beyond what is necessary to achieve that objective.
  - (21) Member States should implement this Directive without discrimination on the basis of sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinions, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation.
  - (22) In line with the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 'best interests of the child' should be a primary consideration of Member States when implementing this Directive. In line with the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, respect for family life should be a primary consideration of Member States when implementing this Directive.

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- (23) Application of this Directive is without prejudice to the obligations resulting from the Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees of 28 July 1951, as amended by the New York Protocol of 31 January 1967.
- (24) This Directive respects the fundamental rights and observes the principles recognised in particular by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.
- (25) In accordance with Articles 1 and 2 of the Protocol on the position of Denmark annexed to the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community, Denmark is not taking part in the adoption of this Directive and is not bound by it or subject to its application. Given that this Directive builds — to the extent that it applies to third-country nationals who do not fulfil or who no longer fulfil the conditions of entry in accordance with the Schengen Borders Code<sup>(5)</sup> — upon the Schengen acquis under the provisions of Title IV of Part Three of the Treaty establishing the European Community, Denmark shall, in accordance with Article 5 of the said Protocol, decide, within a period of six months after the adoption of this Directive, whether it will implement it in its national law.
- (26) To the extent that it applies to third-country nationals who do not fulfil or who no longer fulfil the conditions of entry in accordance with the Schengen Borders Code, this Directive constitutes a development of provisions of the Schengen acquis in which the United Kingdom does not take part, in accordance with Council Decision 2000/365/EC of 29 May 2000 concerning the request of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to take part in some of the provisions of the Schengen acquis<sup>(6)</sup>; moreover, in accordance with Articles 1 and 2 of the Protocol on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaty establishing the European Community, and without prejudice to Article 4 of the said Protocol, the United Kingdom is not taking part in the adoption of this Directive and is therefore not bound by it in its entirety or subject to its application.
- (27) To the extent that it applies to third-country nationals who do not fulfil or who no longer fulfil the conditions of entry in accordance with the Schengen Borders Code, this Directive constitutes a development of provisions of the Schengen acquis in which Ireland does not take part, in accordance with Council Decision 2002/192/EC of 28 February 2002 concerning Ireland's request to take part in some of the provisions of the Schengen acquis<sup>(7)</sup>; moreover, in accordance with Articles 1 and 2 of the Protocol on the position of the United Kingdom and Ireland annexed to the Treaty on European Union and to the Treaty establishing the European Community, and without prejudice to Article 4 of the said Protocol, Ireland is not taking part in the adoption of this Directive and is therefore not bound by it in its entirety or subject to its application.
- (28) As regards Iceland and Norway, this Directive constitutes — to the extent that it applies to third-country nationals who do not fulfil or who no longer fulfil the conditions of entry in accordance with the Schengen Borders Code — a development of provisions of the Schengen acquis within the meaning of the Agreement concluded by the Council of the European Union and the Republic of Iceland and the Kingdom of Norway concerning the association of those two States with the implementation, application and development of the Schengen acquis, which fall within the area referred to in Article 1,

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point C, of Council Decision 1999/437/EC<sup>(8)</sup> on certain arrangements for the application of that Agreement.

- (29) As regards Switzerland, this Directive constitutes — to the extent that it applies to third-country nationals who do not fulfil or who no longer fulfil the conditions of entry in accordance with the Schengen Borders Code — a development of provisions of the Schengen acquis within the meaning of the Agreement between the European Union, the European Community and the Swiss Confederation on the Swiss Confederation's association with the implementation, application and development of the Schengen acquis, which fall within the area referred to in Article 1, point C, of Decision 1999/437/EC read in conjunction with Article 3 of Council Decision 2008/146/EC<sup>(9)</sup> on the conclusion, on behalf of the European Community, of that Agreement.
- (30) As regards Liechtenstein, this Directive constitutes — to the extent that it applies to third-country nationals who do not fulfil or who no longer fulfil the conditions of entry in accordance with the Schengen Borders Code — a development of provisions of the Schengen acquis within the meaning of the Protocol between the European Union, the European Community, the Swiss Confederation and the Principality of Liechtenstein on the accession of the Principality of Liechtenstein to the Agreement between the European Union, the European Community and the Swiss Confederation on the Swiss Confederation's association with the implementation, application and development of the Schengen acquis, which fall within the area referred to in Article 1, point C, of Decision 1999/437/EC read in conjunction with Article 3 of Council Decision 2008/261/EC<sup>(10)</sup> on the signature, on behalf of the European Community, and on the provisional application of, certain provisions of that Protocol,

HAVE ADOPTED THIS DIRECTIVE:

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- (1) Opinion of the European Parliament of 18 June 2008 (not yet published in the Official Journal) and Council Decision of 9 December 2008.
- (2) OJ L 326, 13.12.2005, p. 13.
- (3) OJ L 261, 6.8.2004, p. 28.
- (4) OJ L 381, 28.12.2006, p. 4.
- (5) Regulation (EC) No 562/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 March 2006 establishing a Community Code on the rules governing the movement of persons across borders (Schengen Borders Code) (OJ L 105, 13.4.2006, p. 1).
- (6) OJ L 131, 1.6.2000, p. 43.
- (7) OJ L 64, 7.3.2002, p. 20.
- (8) OJ L 176, 10.7.1999, p. 31.
- (9) OJ L 53, 27.2.2008, p. 1.
- (10) OJ L 83, 26.3.2008, p. 3.