



Greece Just Gave a Glimpse of How the EU's "Voluntary" Digital ID Wallet Will Gradually Become Mandatory

Description

EU : The EU Commission has repeatedly stated that EU citizens will not face discrimination or exclusion for not using its new digital identity wallet. However, the Greek government just signaled its intent to do just that.

Unbeknown to most EU citizens, digital identity is now a legal reality across the 27-nation bloc. On February 28, the European Parliament gave its final approval to the European Commission's Digital Identity Regulation with a comfortable majority of 335 votes to 190, with 31 abstentions.

The EU Council of Ministers gave its blessing on March 26. According to the Commission, the next step will be its publication in the Official Journal and its entry into force 20 days later, which by my calculations will be in just three days' time.

The EU regulation obliges all member states to make a digital identity wallet available to every citizen who wants one. That is how the new system is currently being marketed — as an optional extra for citizens who want to avail of its many benefits.

The wallet can be used to store people's surnames, first names, dates and place of birth, gender, or nationality as well as enable Europeans to identify themselves online.

Its touted benefits include making it easier to access public and private-sector services across EU borders, helping to streamline [bureaucracy and reduce the risks](#) of digital fraud and other forms of cyber crime.

This, one might think, would be a big news story given the potential of digital identity to transform, for better or worse (my money's certainly on the latter), myriad aspects of EU citizens' lives.

Yet it has been met by a wall of silence in both the mainstream and social media. As I noted in my 2022 book *Scanned*, once digital ID systems are established mission creep is all but guaranteed.

[Don't take my word](#) for it; take that of the part state-owned French defense contractor Thales Group, a

company that derives most of its profits from weapons and war but is also one of the leading forces behind the development of digital identity programs worldwide, including the EU's:

Thales Group laid it out in an internal blog authored by its head of digital identity services portfolio, Kristel Teyras.

The ambition is huge; both in terms of scale — as it applies to all EU member states — and also in the power it would grant to citizens throughout the Bloc. For the first time, citizens would be able to use a European digital identity wallet, from their phone, that would give them access to services in any region across Europe.

Note Teyras' use of the verb "would be able to" in the second sentence. As German financial journalist Norbert Häring points out, "if we want to remove the gloss... we would only have to replace 'be able to' with 'have to.'"

"That sounds a lot scarier, doesn't it," asks Häring.

As the following infographic from the World Economic Forum shows, a full-fledged digital identity system, as currently conceived, could end up touching just about every aspect of our lives, from our health (including the vaccines we are supposed to receive) to our money (particularly once central bank digital currencies are rolled out), to our business activities, our private and public communications, the information we are able to access, our dealings with government, the food we eat and the goods we buy. It could also offer governments and the companies they partner with unprecedented levels of surveillance and control powers.

Voluntary or Not?

In a 2018 report on digital IDs, the WEF admitted that while verifiable digital identities "create new markets and business lines" for companies, especially those in the tech industry that help to operate the ID systems while no doubt vacuuming up the data, for individuals they "open up (or close off) the digital world with its jobs, political activities, education, financial services, healthcare and more." It is the part in brackets — the "closing off" of the digital (and to a certain extent, the analog) realm — that should trouble us all.

But according to the Commission, EU citizens have nothing to fear. The Digital Identity Wallet, it says, will be used on a strictly voluntary basis, and "no one can be discriminated against for not using the wallet."

Yet that is exactly what the EU said about the digital COVID-19 certificate it unleashed across the EU in the summer of 2021.

The Green Pass legislation stipulated that "[t]he issuance of certificates should not lead to differential treatment and discrimination based on vaccination status or the possession of a specific certificate."

Yet within months of its launch it was being used by member states to ban people from travelling, accessing many public spaces and, in some cases, even from being able to work.

In Austria the government locked down around two million people for not being vaccinated — at a time (November 2021) when it was already clear that the vaccines were exceedingly leaky.

As with the vaccine certificate, the initial goal regarding the digital ID wallet is to achieve as broad an uptake in as short a time as possible.

And the government of Greece just provided a hint of how that might be achieved: by making access to certain public services and spaces — in this case, sports stadiums — contingent on possession of the digital ID wallet. From the government's official ticketing website (machine translated):

From April 9, 2024, the Gov.gr Wallet, the Digital Wallet we have on our mobile phone, will be the necessary “tool” for every sports fan who wants to follow his favorite team. The way fans enter stadiums and stadiums throughout the country will now be done through the Gov.gr Wallet...

Based on the Joint Ministerial Decision of the Deputy Minister of Sports Yiannis Vroutsis and the Minister of Digital Governance Dimitris Papastergiou, the new way of entering the stadiums with the Gov.gr Wallet ticket will come into effect from April 9, 2024.

However, at the request of Sports Associations and Clubs, in order to be properly prepared and to give the necessary adaptation time to the fans, it will be possible to enter the stadiums, both in the way that was done prior to April 9, as well as with the ticket in Gov.gr Wallet, until the end of the current season.

Of course, this policy directly contradicts the Commission's repeated assurances that the digital identity wallet is purely optional and that EU citizens will not face discrimination for not using one.

In a recent press release, the Commission states that in the horse-trading over the digital identity legislation, “MEPs secured provisions to safeguard citizens' rights and foster an inclusive digital system by avoiding discrimination against people opting not to use the digital wallet.”

So, does that mean EU authorities will be rebuking the Greek government for announcing its intent to discriminate against sports fans who don't want to use the digital identity wallet, even before the EU regulation comes into force?

Almost certainly not. On the contrary, the Commission has probably already given its tacit approval to the Greek government's new rules. If the recent experience with the COVID-19 certificates is any guide, many other governments will soon be following suit with their own forms of exclusionary measures.

The threat of exclusion from being able to use basic services, carry out basic administrative procedures or, as in this case, access public spaces will be the primary means by which the EU hopes to achieve critical mass with its digital ID program.

As Ekathimerini reports, making digital ID mandatory for entrance into stadiums is seen as a way of “expanding” the application's use. According to Greece's Digital Governance Ministry, 1,877,032 people have so far downloaded the digital identity wallet since its launch in July 2022. That is roughly 17% of the population.

At the same time, the EU is in direct talks with the US on aligning their digital identity standards.

As While Washington significantly lags behind Brussels this area, with most digital ID efforts taking place at the state level through the roll out of mobile driver's licenses (mDLs), both sides are working on making technical standards for digital identity compatible.

Echoes of Aadhaar?

The EU is not the first government to have launched a digital identity program on the premise that it will function on a purely voluntary basis. India's Aadhaar system, the world's largest biometric digital ID system, was initially introduced as a voluntary way of improving welfare service delivery. But the Modi government rapidly expanded its scope by making it mandatory for welfare programs and state benefits.

The mission creep didn't end there. Aadhaar has become all but necessary to access a plethora of private sector services, including medical records, bank accounts and pension payments.

Other scenarios in which the Modi government has mandated Aadhaar to facilitate government services include income tax filing, mobile SIM card registration, know your customer (KYC) verification for mutual fund investments, and applications for "digital life certificates."

Plans are also afoot to link voter registration to Aadhaar, despite the system's glaring security flaws (some of which we covered in this article). Besides the acute vulnerability of its data storage and access systems, Aadhaar has many other downsides, as I noted in Scanned:

For a start, it tracks users' movements between cities, their employment status and purchasing records. It is a de facto social credit system that serves as the key entry point for accessing services in India.

While the system has helped to speed and clean up India's bureaucracy, it has also massively increased the Indian government's surveillance powers and excluded over 100 million people from welfare programs as well as basic services.

A growing number of human rights organizations have flagged concerns about the worldwide rush by governments and their private sector partners to roll out digital identity systems.

In June 2022, the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, a "hub for human rights study" at New York University (NYU) School of Law, published a 100-page report warning about the growing dangers posed by digital identity programs.

The report, titled Paving a Digital Road to Hell?, examined the role of the World Bank and other international networks in promoting the use of digital ID in recent years.

"Instead of providing a birth certificate, these new systems will help to create "digital public infrastructure" as part of a "digital stack" to "enable paperless, cashless, remote, and data-empowered transactions"...

Meanwhile, governments in the Global South are taking on large debts and spending millions in public

funds on contracts with private vendors to build biometric systems that can all too easily become systems of exclusion, surveillance, and repression.

The [World] Bank takes great pains to state that biometrics are not required. But by emphasizing their benefits throughout its documentation, the ID4D Initiative has helped to normalize the extensive use of biometrics in digital ID systems.

This report singles out the World Bank and its Identity for Development (ID4D) initiative for opprobrium while also noting that the program was started with a “catalytic investment” from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Omidyar Network, as well as governments such as the UK and France.

“We have noted that the World Bank and its ID4D Initiative do not stand alone in pursuing the digital ID agenda. They exist within a global network of organizations and individuals,” including philanthropic foundations, financial institutions and “private biometrics corporations like Idemia, Thales, and Gemalto”.

The report recommends a range of actions, including slowing down processes so that more care is taken and making discussions around digital ID systems more public.

As I have previously noted, digital identity programs and central bank digital currencies are among the most important questions today’s societies could possibly grapple with since they threaten to transform our lives beyond recognition, granting governments and their corporate partners much more granular control over our lives.

Given what is at stake, they should be under discussion in every parliament of every land, and every dinner table in every country in the world. The fact they aren’t speaks volumes about whose interests they are meant to serve.

by Nick Corbishley

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