

What is the price of security now?

Edgar Beugels, head of Frontex's research and development unit, oversaw ED4BG's third panel discussion, entitled "The price of borders" and soon realised the panel was fractured in two.

On one side he had Gavin McCairns, Australia's first assistant secretary at the Risk, Fraud and Integrity Division of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection, and Sadhbh McCarthy, director of the Centre for Irish and European Security, squaring off with Dr Frank Paul of the European Commission, and Raphael Ron, President and CEO of New Age Security Solutions.

Dr Paul began by addressing Beugels' question about the cost of policing Europe's borders when the vast majority of travellers are of no threat to security, offset against the tiny minority of irregular border-crossings, when he asked "Does it pay off?"

"We have invested roughly two billion euros over the past decade," he said, outlining IT systems like the Schengen and Visa Information Systems (SIS and VIS) which may one day contribute to making border crossings for pre-vetted individuals almost totally automated.


Taking into consideration the projected two-to-threefold increase of travellers from countries such as China and India, currently seeing a surge in wealth which will make a huge proportion of their populations able to travel, Paul stressed a need to speed up the border-crossing process without making Europe "unwelcoming."

Rather than increasing the number of guards, pre-processing and pre-control should be at the heart of the smart borders package, and on whether the extra 1.3-1.5 billion euros needed was worth the investment, Dr Paul had a simple answer: "Absolutely yes."

In support of Europe's plan, Raphael Ron echoed Dr Paul's criticism of a "one size fits all" solution calling it outdated and "doomed to fail." With greater risks of terrorism and organised crime in today's world, the same methods used for decades had to be updated: "We have better technology to deploy [...] to ID the so-called 'bad guys'."

Acknowledging Australia's unique conditions, in particular the lack of a contiguous land border, Gavin McCairns still believed more efficient and cheaper data collection in its universal visa system was preferable: "Big data and predictive analytics is the bridge between intelligence and surveillance."

With 10 years of stored data on traveller habits and patterns, he compared Australia's system with the Amazon.com business model, to predict and flag risks, and hastened to say, "The computer cannot spot the sweat on someone's brow, only a good border officer can."





Sadhbh McCarthy's view on costs was that it was not only about the money. "Mostly I think we should think about the social and ethical costs," she said, highlighting issues of justification, legitimacy and proportionality when attempting to secure Europe's borders. There was a danger, she warned, in the current climate of austerity, of exaggerating the risks of irregular migration and threatening fundamental human rights.

"There is a growing hostile climate towards immigrants, both legal and illegal," she said, and overstating the risks posed by the tiny minority of people who do not follow the rules, "feeds that dangerous and inflammatory rhetoric," something that is "very un-European."

Edgar Beugels gave the floor back to Dr Paul to respond to the issue of ethics and he countered by saying, "we are very much attached to values." And on the more abstract cost of irregular migration and over-stayers, he underlined that these people are, "in an extremely vulnerable situation."

"They're the people who work on construction sites [...] They're the people who work in the sex industry, being exploited. And these are huge societal costs," he asserted, adding that the only ways to tackle this were through automation, biometrics and a registered entry-and-exit system.

Raphael Ron agreed that risk-based intelligence gathering for the purposes of security was a tricky area when related to civil rights, "in fact it's a minefield," and warned against any over-reaction to perceived threats.

Mr McCairns returned to his core point of finding less costly methods and described a brainstorming experiment with his staff to find a more efficient system "for no money." Using free open-source software, within six months and for only AUD 50,000, the team built a prototype border-risk-identification system which a year later, after some calibration and adjustment, was implemented at all Australian airports, "for a total cost of less than one million [Australian] dollars."

Regarding results, the system handled rising volumes with fewer staff and refusal-of-entry decisions increased by 42%, he asserted.

Ms McCarthy applauded the Australian example, contrasting it with Europe's technocentric proposals as, "a much more sensible way [...] because you're actually managing risk rather than controlling populations."

With the swiftness of Mr McCairns' story still ringing in the audience's ears, a Greek border officer wanted to know why things take so long to progress in the European Union. Dr Paul and Ms McCarthy agreed that a big bureaucracy such as the EU has a pace determined by its member states, hampered by, in Dr Paul's words, the fact that, "There is no comprehensive European policy on regular migration," as agreement cannot be found across the Union.

In the absence of a consensus, Edgar Beugels wrapped up the debate commending the positives of both approaches discussed.