

How biometrics, photos and instant data sharing help fight irregular migration

You may have seen such scenes in spy and adventure movies. The movie's protagonist is trying to make it on a plane or cross the border of a country illegally. He appeals to a variety of ways: using forged ID or zipping himself into a suitcase, or disguising himself with a cap and sunglasses so that no one will recognize him. But, he feels so nervous that drops of sweat treacherously run down his face, betraying him as a criminal.

The dramatic art of these scenes really builds a sense of high tension. Similar screenplay is seen in the real life of border guards, but without any adventure romance. This is day-to-day work. The border guard services of various countries have advanced so much over the past few decades that it is not a problem for them to identify an offender with a forged passport or a "client" of Interpol.

This also can apply to Ukrainian border guards. Since 2016, the project "Support for Migration and Asylum Management in Ukraine" (IMMIS) has been implemented. This is the largest of all the similar projects funded by the European Union in the region. Its budget is EUR 27 million. The International Organization for Migration (IOM), the State Border Guard Service, the State Migration Service of Ukraine, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Police of Ukraine participate in it.

Its main goal is to help government agencies manage migration by automating many processes, which previously were paper-based, in particular in the field of border control. Thus, two problems are solved – the efficiency of migration and border management in Ukraine is enhanced and the opportunities for red tape and corruption are sharply reduced.

UPZhyttya talked to the head of the border control organization department of the State Border Guard Service of Ukraine, Major General Yuriy Lysiuk, and learned how border guards work, what equipment they use, and also how many people were caught with forged passports at the border over the past year.

How does a border guard work?



For most people, a border guard is a person in a khaki uniform. We see them at the airport when we fly somewhere, or when we travel on a bus tour across the border. The employee checks the passport and wishes the traveler a safe journey. It might seem as if it is not difficult.

In fact, a border guard has a huge list of responsibilities – from checking documents to identifying potential criminals. Each item on the list is an enormous responsibility. And making a decision on the entry of a person into the country is one of the most responsible things on this list.

"Irregular migration has been, is and will probably continue to be long one of the biggest threats faced by border guards at the state border, including at border crossing points. The State Border Guard Service is becoming one of the main obstacles on the way of irregular migrants who choose the territory of Ukraine both as a transit country or a final destination country for living," Major General Yuriy Lysiuk said.

In his work, the border guard constantly deals with stressful situations in which keeping a clear head, clarity of mind and even cunning is needed. But what other qualities should a border guard have?

"A high-level specialist in checking papers and identifying forged ones is the expert in the psychology of an offender crossing the state border, the person who speaks foreign languages, as well as has zero tolerance for corruption," Lysiuk said.

Now, new enrollment titled "the New Face of the Border" has started at the State Border Guard Service, with the support of IOM. As the Major General said, it is intended to raise the prestige of border guards in the eyes of the country's population:

"Today, we come to the conclusion that the most effective way to get an impartial, motivated specialist on the passport control line is competitive selection, additional motivation and maintenance, career prospects."

Technology on guard for security

The IMMIS project has been operating in Ukraine from 2016 until 2021. It makes border guards work easier and more efficient.

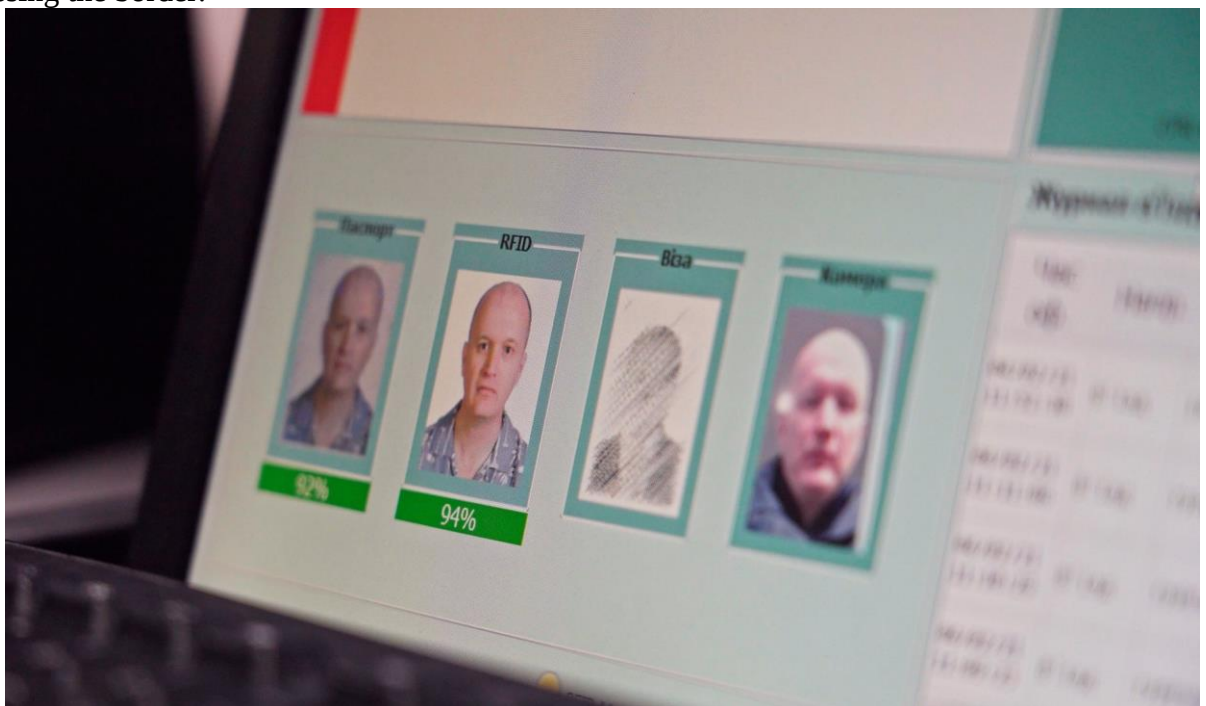
It has become much easier to control migration flows. Technology helps in this, to store and process these huge amounts of data, in particular, modern storage systems for biometric data that the border guards collect from representatives of 70 countries of migration risk during control. The exchange of information between departments within the country and beyond has become almost instantaneous. This became possible thanks to the Arkan inter-agency integrated system, which unites 20 different government institutions.

So, border guards can be prepared for any unexpected event. For example, IMMIS has improved the system that provides all information about passengers on a flight to Ukraine. Border guards receive all the necessary data in an instant, as soon as a person has checked in for a flight in another country. This system also helps to check whether this person is wanted by the Ukrainian police and by Interpol.

"This system is very effective. For example, since the beginning of 2021, border guards have recorded 360 alerts, including 176 on persons and 168 on passports," Lysiuk said.

Also one of the most high-efficient technological innovations – facial recognition systems – has been successfully tested at the Boryspil airport. There is a high probability that it will soon appear at all border crossing points of Ukraine.

A photo of a person taken during the passage of passport control is instantly compared with a photo recorded on the electronic chip of a biometric passport, which the person shows, with the help of special software. It prevents a person, who looks like the real passport holder, from entering the country. The algorithm even recognizes twins, so there is practically no chance of illegally crossing the border.



"This is a perfect tool based on the system of automatic identification of a person by the facial image. The camera in the inspector's cabin takes a photo of the person who crosses the border, and using special software, matches the image with the photo in the passport. The results of the system are impressive. The system works without any errors, at least so far there have been no such cases," the Major General said.

The equipment of border guards, compared to the past, has made a significant step forward. There are highly efficient devices, as well as compact, portable ones – devices for reading fingerprints, automatic readers of biometric passports, computers with connection to various databases, which are used to check faces:

"Technologies and means are various. Most of them are now available to Ukrainian border guards, and some, according to our European partners, are better than in many EU countries."

Statistics

The coronavirus pandemic has cut number of irregular migration cases almost threefold, but there were enough untrustworthy travelers.

"In total, in 2020, border guards revealed more than 1,000 irregular migrants at the "green" border lines and more than 8,000 of them at checkpoints. Mainly they were breakers of the rules of stay on the territory of Ukraine. There were also enough forged documents – 32 passports belonged to other people and more than 2,000 invalid documents," Lysiuk said.

If we take attempts to enter the country illegally, the border guards counted 5,200 of them last year, and 1,300 were recorded in three and a half months of this year. Migrants resort to various methods:

"Some foreign citizens seeking to enter the Schengen countries through Ukraine use false passports of EU citizens, or invalid temporary or permanent residence permits, and sometimes resort to forgery of records in passports."

According to Lysiuk, the appearance of IMMIS and cooperation with foreign partners have brought benefits to the Ukrainian Border Guard Service for years to come:

"We work very closely with the border guards of neighboring states (except for the aggressor state, of course), as well as with such international institutions as Frontex, IOM, EUBAM. These are joint control at checkpoints on the state border, joint operations, information exchange, mutual visits for the purpose of training and exchange of experience, etc. With time, by joint efforts, we are building a system in which the issue of irregular migration will be diminished to the level of statistical."