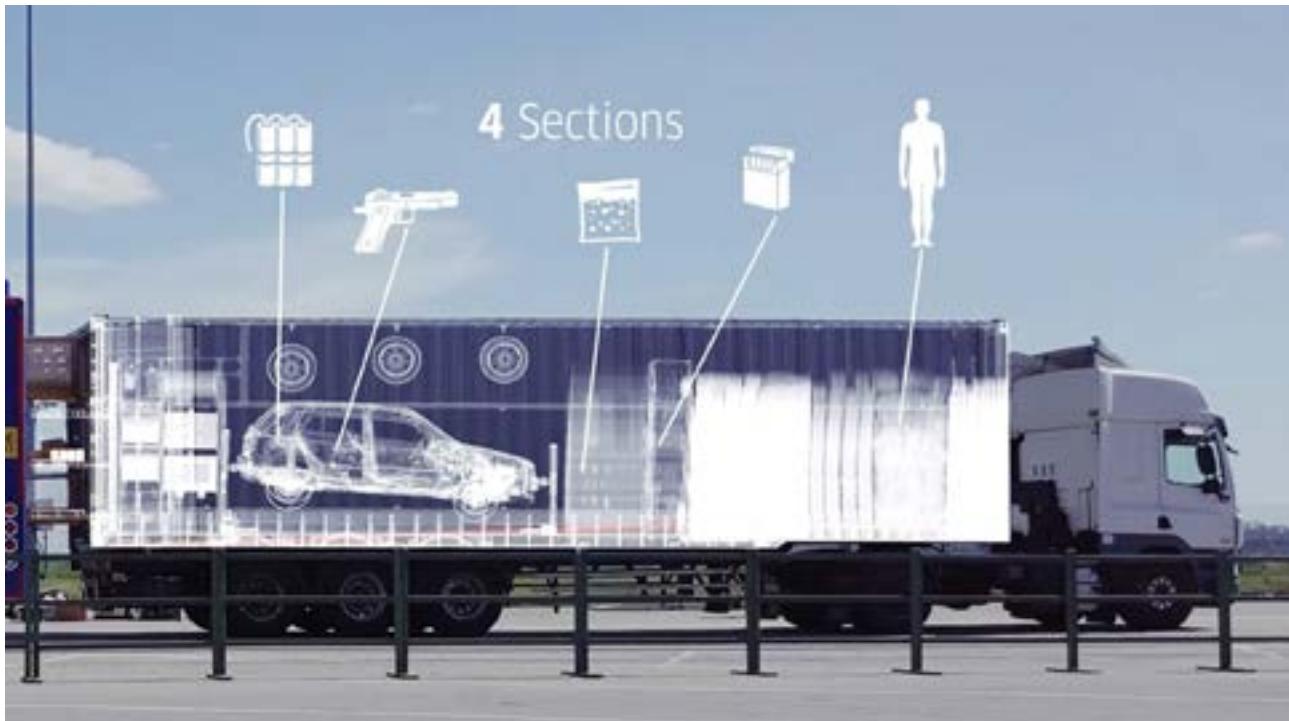


X-Ray Technology Is Key to Combating Europe's Illicit Trade Problem



The issue of illicit trade in Europe has been [well documented on this blog](#). Europe is one of the wealthiest markets in the world, and each year criminal organizations direct vast inflows of illicit goods into the continent. Last year alone, 22.6 billion illicit cigarettes came into the European Union from outside the EU's borders. The vast stretches of borders connecting Europe to Asia and the Middle East make stemming this illicit activity an immense task.

However, Europe's border control agencies have developed unparalleled levels of expertise in dealing with illicit trade. This is being supported by a wave of innovative businesses that are creating the next generation of anti-illicit technology. X-ray technology has proved to be a particularly powerful tool, allowing border security agents to detect smuggled goods on an unprecedented scale.

To find out more about this new wave of anti-illicit trade technology, we spoke to Vytautas Vitkauskas, CEO and founder of Lithuania-based technology company INTA.

How is X-ray technology helping border agents tackle illicit trade?

Vytautas Vitkauskas: X-ray has been a very exciting technology development for customs officials and border agents. Traditionally, smugglers have been able to take advantage of the fact that it is impossible to inspect every square inch of a car, plane or boat by hand. Criminal gangs have always been innovative in ensuring that no matter how hard you look, you can't find any illicit cargo.

X-ray allows us to instantly get a clear view of everything within a space. Even if something is hidden, we can spot irregularities, and then we know which areas to search by hand. It's improving our speed and accuracy in finding smuggled goods.

What are the challenges in using X-ray technology?

VV: After 14 years of selling advanced telecommunications and X-ray products to government agencies, we realized that regardless of how good any piece of technology is, it will be a person that has to analyze the image and decide whether there is something inside. But there is a lack of funding to pay for adequate - let alone advanced - training for customs officials. Too often, customs officials base their analysis on teachings from out-of-date instruction books. This isn't sufficient to thwart smugglers - when they have one way to hide something and get caught, the next day they will think of another way, and it won't be repeated.

So, with funding from PMI IMPACT, we produced a special standard test container where we set up a lot of different kinds of smuggling situations with drugs, cigarettes, firearms and other items. We used the most advanced smuggling techniques that we know and that we have seen being used recently. Our aim is to ensure that training and innovation on our technology are never stagnant and that we are developing as quickly as the criminal gangs are.

What inspired you to get involved in anti-illicit trade?

VV: Illicit trade has always played a very prominent role in Lithuanian society. I remember growing up when we were still part of the Soviet Union. During this time, many Lithuanians engaged in illicit trade, especially after Perestroika came into force in 1985, and we were permitted to go to Eastern European countries like Poland and Germany once a year. We'd bring back goods and sell them locally. Salaries were very low, and the opening up of Eastern European markets meant that it was possible to make three years' salary in one trip. Naturally, smuggling became a big part of how we got by as a nation.

Things have changed now. Border security is intrinsically linked with Lithuanian sovereignty, and we see the protection of our borders as fundamental to our security as a nation.

What do you think is needed for Europe to defeat criminal gangs involved in illicit trade?

VV: I strongly believe that there are two main components in fighting illicit trade. First and foremost, you need to employ people who are invested in the fight against illicit trade. Everybody understands that border security officers often aren't paid well - especially in Eastern Europe. In Ukraine, the salary of a customs officer is roughly \$150 per month. The cost of living may be low, but if you have a family to look after it is tough to get by on just \$150. Then, criminal gangs come along and offer these guys money just to close their eyes. In order to stop this from happening, we need to be able to incentivize people to make it stop. This needs to be a priority.

The biggest challenge is that those who are working on the border will always have fewer resources than organized criminals. Yes, we need more investment in developing anti-illicit trade technology. But this alone is not enough; it is very important to invest in the people who are working with the technology. Despite this being the age of AI, most technology needs to be operated one way or the other by a person. That person needs to be motivated, incentivized and well-trained. Then you can fight illicit trade.

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