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Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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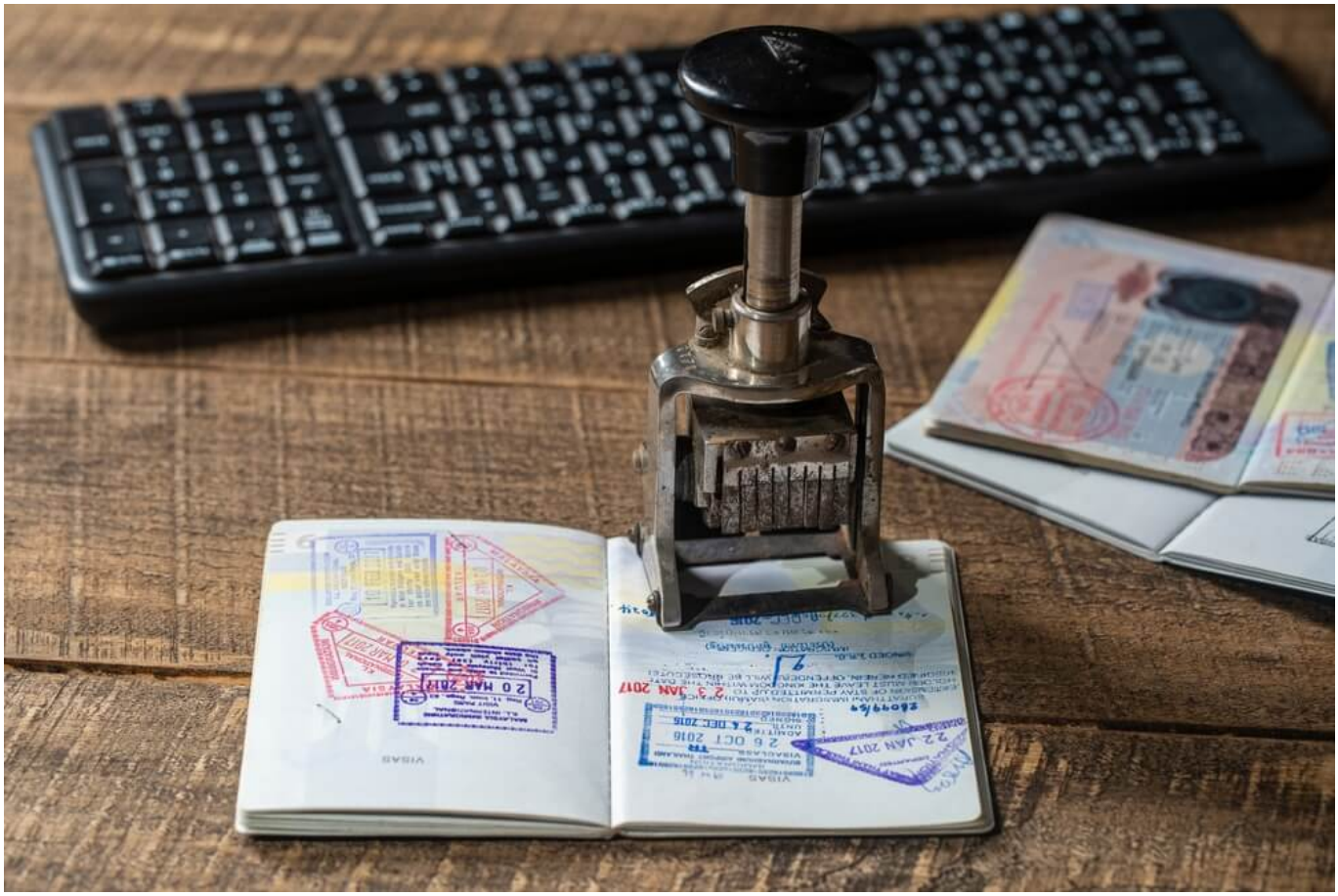
Travel without waiting – and without privacy



The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) and the technology company SITA published a report titled "Better Borders" in early November.

At first glance, it appears to be another optimistic document from an industry seeking government support.

However, the figures cited and the model proposed elevate this text to the level of a serious political document, not merely marketing material.

According to their projections, if the G20 countries, the European Union, and the African Union modernise border management by 2035 – through digital visas, biometric identification, and improved data exchange – the global economy could gain approximately $401 billion in additional GDP and around 14 million new jobs.

Travel and tourism already, according to WTTC data, account for more than a tenth of global employment and about a tenth of world GDP.

The industry argues that without significant modernisation of borders, growth will be constrained by outdated infrastructure and paper-based procedures.

The essence of their proposal is straightforward: the border would no longer be a physical location where people wait in lines but a digital infrastructure that begins well before arrival at the airport or land crossing.

The goal is to verify the passenger's identity before departure, assess risk in advance, and reduce the physical crossing to a formality managed by software and a camera, rather than a border official.

Travellers prefer digital borders

The report found that three-quarters of passengers would support biometric processing – fingerprint, facial, or iris recognition – if it shortened their wait and that the vast majority were willing to share their details in advance to pass through checkpoints more quickly.

These figures build the narrative that travellers actually prefer digital borders, not just states and industry.

The report cites examples from practice as models.

> “Better Borders” seeks to turn this set of practices into a global norm

US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has used biometric facial matching at hundreds of airports and ports for several years; when leaving or entering, the passenger stands in front of the camera, the system compares their image with the data from the travel documents, and contact with the officer is reduced to a minimum.

In the United Arab Emirates, authorities note that with digital visas and automated permit processing, processing times can be measured in hours rather than days.

Australia has long used "SmartGate" systems – gates that, using biometrics, reduce passenger processing to a few seconds.

“Better Borders” seeks to turn this set of practices into a global norm.

The complete digitisation of visas

The text refers to the complete digitisation of visas, the introduction of unique electronic travel authorisations (similar to the American ESTA or the Canadian eTA), the mass application of biometrics at borders, and systems for "pre-screening" passengers – practically checking before the plane takes off or before the train leaves the station.

The message is that borders should be seen as

a combination of data centres, algorithms, and interoperable databases, not as a counter with a stamp and a queue.

It is presented to states as an economic project, not a security operation.

> Lower operating expenses for states are also part of the equation

WTTC and SITA argue that a more fluid border crossing means more tourists, more business travellers, and more cargo transport, which translates directly into growth.

Lower operating expenses for states are also part of the equation, as automation should reduce the need for additional staff and speed up the process.

The perspective of civil rights

That approach is logical. Many airports today are technically modern, and aeroplanes are increasingly efficient, yet border procedures often remain rooted in the twentieth century.

Crowds at passport counters, waiting for visas, and duplicate checks all incur direct costs.

In a world where international travel is expected to grow, countries that do not modernise their borders risk becoming less attractive and losing a significant portion of their income.

The problem arises when the same infrastructure is considered from the perspective of civil rights.

The digital border, as proposed by "Better Borders", involves the mass collection, storage, and processing of travellers' biometric and personal data.

This affects not only citizens of developed countries but especially people from the global south, who traditionally face stricter visa regimes and more obstacles when travelling.

The report addresses these issues only superficially. It mentions "robust data protection mechanisms" and "alignment with local regulations", but does not explain how, for example, Europe's GDPR – a strict data protection regime – will align with much looser systems elsewhere.

> Once such infrastructure is established, the question is not whether there will be abuse, but when and how

It is even less clear what happens to passenger data from countries without strong regulators or the political power to negotiate information-sharing terms.

Once such infrastructure is established, the question is not whether there will be abuse, but when and how.

A system that verifies travellers' biometrics and personal data in real time is an ideal tool not only for combating crime but also for political profiling, discrimination, and targeted entry bans.

There are already numerous examples of travellers being placed on no-fly lists without clear explanation or subjected to additional checks due to nationality, ethnic origin, or previous travel. Digitisation does not solve this problem but can make it less visible.

In countries with a strong legal framework and independent institutions, this is a political issue that can be discussed publicly.

For states without such protections, the digital border can easily become another instrument of arbitrary treatment, especially if it relies on artificial intelligence systems with non-transparent performance criteria.

The distribution of the benefits

Another issue is the distribution of the benefits promised by the WTTC and SITA.

The $401 billion in additional GDP and 14 million new jobs appears impressive, but it does not indicate where that value will materialise.

It is realistic to assume that most of the profits will go to countries that are already established as tourist and business destinations, while poorer countries will remain as data providers and a "testing ground" for new surveillance technologies.

A global surveillance network

The most interesting aspect of the story is precisely this collision of narratives.

On one hand, the travel and tourism industry argues that there can be no growth without modernising borders, that travellers do not want queues and paperwork, and that digital systems are the only way to regulate the mass movement of people and goods.

The debate is no longer whether borders will be digital, but how that system will be controlled and who will have authority over the technologies and data it uses

On the other hand, there is a real risk that the same borders will become a global surveillance network, where every trip is treated as a potential threat until proven otherwise.

Governments will be under pressure in the coming years to adopt this vision.

It will be difficult to refuse packages backed by powerful industry groups, promising growth and efficiency.

At the same time, citizens will have diminishing insight into where and how their biometric data is stored, how their risk as travellers is assessed, and who has access to that information.

“Better Borders” is therefore more than an industry report. It is a clear blueprint for a world where borders are software platforms and the passenger is a set of data passing through a series of algorithmic filters.

In that world, some will pass quicker, others will be delayed, and some will be rejected at the outset.

The debate is no longer whether borders will be digital, but how that system will be controlled and who will have authority over the technologies and data it uses.

For now, the industry's voice is the loudest. In countries striving for tourism growth and capital inflows, the economic argument is compelling.

Serious politics, however, must address the question the WTTC and SITA report leaves aside: who controls the border when it ceases to be a physical line and becomes a network of servers, codes, and contracts between states and private companies?