

FRONTEX EVALUATION REPORT 2018

Joint Operation VEGA Children 2018

Operational Response Division
Field Deployment Unit Planning
and Evaluation Sector

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[signed]
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1. Background information

JO VEGA Children 2018 has been launched to tackle and combat criminality associated to the movement of children at the external air borders and to provide best practices on special protection needs for identified children during the operation.

With the support of Frontex Fundamental Rights Officer, along with the Frontex Consultative Forum, during the joint operation operational mixed teams composed of border guards and international experts were deployed at the hosting airports. By applying the Standard Operational Procedures based on the VEGA Handbook: Children at airports and taking into account the composition of mixed teams, the cooperation with International Organizations was assessed as good practice.

1.1. Brief risk assessment

Unaccompanied minors

There exist many reasons as to why children often arrive unaccompanied at the external borders of EU MS/SAC.

It is often the case that such children are being moved from their home country in order to join parents or family members who have already arrived in EU MS/SAC, and who are themselves in the process of seeking to regularise their stay and/or seeking refugee status.

Children are sometimes sent to EU MS/SAC because they may often be perceived by parents/family members as being deemed to be more vulnerable within existing refugee protection legislation, and as such are granted refugee status more readily than adults. The parents/family members then seek to join the child in the EU/SAC under a formal “Family Reunion” scheme.

Transporting a child into EU MS/SAC by air remains a more favoured means of transport. This is because air travel represents the safest and quickest method of transferring children, thereby minimising their exposure to potential threats caused by dependence on criminal structures and persons. It is also preferable to avoid transporting them through the more hazardous environments such as dangerous sea or illegal green border crossing.

Trafficking in Children

There are a number of intelligence gaps regarding the true extent of child trafficking into the EU. The most reliable statistical data for the EU has been published by Eurostat in 2015 edition on ‘Trafficking in Human Beings’. This report highlights the complexity of measuring trafficking in human beings mainly due to the differences which still exist in the process of recording data, as well as differences between national legal definitions. However, Eurostat report notes that over the period from 2010 to 2012 inclusive, over 1,000 minors were identified as having been or most likely were the victims of sexual exploitation. It is also believed that in most cases these children were in fact EU citizens trafficked on intra EU routes.

1.2. Operational aim

The Joint Operation VEGA Children 2018 was carried out at EU airports in order to identify children on the move at risk at air borders and referring them to welfare and child protection agencies while tackling the criminals accompanying them across the borders.

With the support of Frontex Fundamental Rights Officer, along with the Frontex Consultative Forum, during the joint operation, operational teams were deployed at the hosting airports, consisting of border guards and International organizations experts.

The operational aim was pursued in full compliance with the relevant EU law, including the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the relevant international law, the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees from 1951, the respect for fundamental rights - in particular access to international protection and compliance with the principle of non-refoulement and taking into account the recommendations of the Frontex Consultative Forum.

During the joint operation all hosting airports have ensured the smooth implementation of operational activities providing all necessary support and allowing deployed officers and International organizations experts to be part of the local teams and to bring their contribution to the implementation of the standard operational procedures during their deployments.

All participants followed the rules stated in the Frontex Code of Conduct and the Operational Plan (a copy of it was revised by the Fundamental Rights officer before the start of the joint operation). No negative incidents related to the respect of Human and Fundamental Rights were recorded. Furthermore, cooperation among deployed participants and hosting authorities was reported as good during the joint operation

1.3. Period of implementation and operational areas

Following the concept of previous years JO VEGA Children 2018 was split into 2 operational phases.

- **The first operational phase** was carried out from 29 May 2018 until 10 July 2018. The general briefing was organized on 29 May and the debriefing on 10 July 2018.
- **The second operational phase** was carried out from 29 August 2018 until 09 October 2018. The general briefing was organized on 29 August and the debriefing on 09 October 2018.

During the Joint Operation for both phases, in total **23 hosting airports** agreed to participate in the activities and to be included within the operational area.

1.4. Participants

The following Member States, International and Non-Governmental Organizations participated in the joint operation:

- Host Member States 14: Spain, Czech Republic, Portugal, Belgium, Austria, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Finland, Sweden, Poland, Latvia, Romania, Italy, France.
- Participating Third Countries 6: Albania, Kosovo¹, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.
- 23 Hosting airports.
- Officers (26 Team Members, 2 EU observers and 14 TC observers)
- 9 experts of International organizations were deployed in mixed teams

The following International Organizations participated in the joint operation:

- International Organization for Migration (IOM) and Save the Children.

¹ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence

1.5. Financial information

The planning phase provided an initial budget of 450,000 Euro which has decreased during implementation phases. By 5 November 2018, the budget of the Joint Operation VEGA Children 2018 totalled 425,000 Euro.

2. Achievement of objectives

Following the provisions of the Frontex Single Programming Document 2016-2019, the Joint Operation VEGA Children 2018 was carried out at EU and non-EU airports in order to combat child trafficking at air borders, identifying children on the move at risk and referring them to the welfare and protection institutions. This activity was implemented by applying the standard operational procedures based on the VEGA Handbook: Children at airports and in order to:

- Coordinate multipurpose joint activities that sustain the operational presence in areas at the external borders exposed to specific pressure as assessed by risk analysis impact.

The Joint Operation VEGA Children 2018 objectives were, as follows:

1. **To apply the Standard Operational Procedures based on VEGA Handbook: Children at airports.**
The objective has been achieved.
2. **To raise awareness on children at risk**
The objective has been achieved.
3. **Enhance operational cooperation.**
The objective has been partially achieved.
4. **To enhance tailored interagency cooperation and cooperation with IOs and NGOs.**
The objective has been partially achieved.
5. **To identify risks affecting children on the move during the operational activity.**
The objective has been partially achieved.

3. Operational results

Only 12 of participating airports recorded incidents in JORA template. These airports reported in total 53 incidents as follows:

Out of the 53 reported incidents, only 19 actually matched the defined targets of the Joint Operation as defined in the Operation Plan.

Irregular migration and cross border crime related, facilitators, criminals of serious crime apprehended, etc.

During the JO, five persons and a Nigerian football club were suspected of being involved in children smuggling.

Trafficking in children

There was only one incident in relation to children trafficking.

Female Genital mutilation

No incidents reported.

Unaccompanied minors

The airports reported 11 confirmed incidents of unaccompanied children. The global number of unaccompanied children was low and in accordance with the predictions made by the Tactical Focussed Assessment.