

FRONTEX EVALUATION REPORT 2015

JO Flexible Operational Activities in Return 2015

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Joint Operations Unit
Return Operations Sector

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[signed]
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1. Background information

1.1. Brief risk assessment

The Attica Project was implemented initially in Athens during the 4th quarter of 2009. The first steps in establishing the return Coordination Office were taken. The Attica Project 2010 started with screening activities at the Greek-Turkish maritime border, where the trend of “nationality swapping” initially emerged and where the Frontex coordinated joint operation Poseidon Sea was implemented.

The displacement of the migratory flow from the Greek-Turkish maritime border towards the Greek-Turkish land border (after 2010) and to a lesser extent to the Bulgarian-Turkish land border (after 2012) has led to the extension of the Attica Project from the Greek-Turkish maritime border to other border sections, with the permanent deployment of screening teams in Greece and a flexible deployment in Bulgaria.

From 2010 until the summer months of 2012, the distribution of irregular migratory flows transiting or originating from Turkey and mainly targeting the Greek-Turkish land border continued with similar patterns. However, this trend changed at the beginning of August 2012, when the Hellenic authorities launched operation Aspida at the Greek-Turkish land border, which led to a partial displacement of the irregular migratory flow initially towards the Greek-Turkish maritime border, especially to the Aegean islands close to the Turkish coast, and from July 2013, towards the Bulgarian-Turkish land border. In March 2013, regular screening processes were also launched in Bulgaria within the framework of the Attica Project 2013, involving the deployment of screening experts and interpreters.

In November 2013, the Bulgarian authorities implemented an operation at the land border with Turkey, deploying additional manpower and assets. As a consequence of the operation, the number of apprehended irregular migrants sharply decreased, while the number of irregular migrants increased at the Greek-Turkish sea border. The presence of screening officers during the JO Poseidon Sea 2012 and 2013 added value to the joint operation, clearly contributing to identification of the nationality of all irregular migrants that arrived on Lesbos and Samos Islands, where the Attica project was implemented.

The screening activities conducted in the operational areas of the JO Poseidon Land and the JO Poseidon Sea indicated that the presence of screening teams deter migrants from claiming a false nationality: for instance, when they realise they are going to be screened by experts, they usually claim their real nationality. During 2013, the main claimed nationalities amongst sub-Saharan migrants were Malian and Rwandan, due to the ongoing conflicts in these areas. In regard to Afghans, they were inclined to state their real nationality (low rate of nationality swapping) while Moroccan and Algerian nationals claimed to be from Palestine or Syria. In addition, some Iranian nationals claimed to be Afghan.

Based on the abovementioned factors and taking into consideration the irregular migratory pressure at the Greek-Turkish maritime and land borders and at the Bulgarian-Turkish land border, it was recommended to continue the Attica Project in the above mentioned operational areas. The data gathered from screening interviews are also important for analytical purposes, offering a better perspective concerning irregular migratory flows.

In 2014, the screening activities conducted in the operational areas of the JO Poseidon Land and the JO Poseidon Sea indicated that the presence of screening teams deters migrants from claiming a false nationality.

It is estimated that the level of nationality swapping amongst migrants arriving on the Greek Eastern Aegean Islands throughout 2015 was significant. It is hard to give exact figures, as the number of available screeners was rather limited throughout the year compared to the number of arrivals on the islands, and therefore many migrants were not screened for nationality at all; and even when and where case screeners were available, their workload had a negative impact on the effectiveness of detecting falsely claimed nationalities. As nationality swapping has serious consequences in terms of security, it was important to vastly and rapidly increase screening capacities on the Greek Eastern Aegean Islands which were primarily

targeted by irregular migrants. Thus, by the second half of December 2015, nearly 100% of the migrants arriving from Turkey by sea were screened.

1.2. Operational aim

The operational aim was to support Greece and Bulgaria in return capacity building.

Capacity building activities related to the pre-return and screening assistance were implemented according to identified needs in operational areas coordinated by Frontex.

The focus of attention was on further developing the existing return structures and procedures with the long term aim of an end to end organizational return structure and full sustainability in return management.

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

1.3. Period of implementation and operational areas

The Joint Operation took place from 26 March 2015 until 31 December 2015

Screening activities transferred to Poseidon Rapid Intervention on 28 December 2015

The operational activities were carried out at the following locations:

In Greece:

- Athens-Return Coordination Office (RCO) established at the Aliens Directorate of Attica
- Greek-Turkish sea border (Islands of Samos and Lesbos, Chios, Kos and Leros)
- Greek-Turkish land border (Police Directorates of Alexandroupolis and Orestiada)

In Bulgaria

- Sofia -Return Coordination Office (RCO) established at the Migration Directorate of the Ministry of Interior "Unit Countering Illegal Migration"
- Bulgarian-Turkish land border (regional Police Directorates Elhovo, BPU Elhovo).
- Sofia (Detention Centre "Busmantsi")

1.4. Participants

Host member states: 2

- Greece
- Bulgaria

Home member states: 16

- GR: 2 participating authorities, no Specific Financial Decision issued
- BG: 2 participating authorities, no Specific Financial Decision issued
- NL and RO: 2 participating authorities each
- AT, DK, EE, ES, FR, IT, LV, PL, PT, SI, SK, UK: 1 participating authority each.

Deployed resources:

Screening experts:

- 27 deployments of guest officers (GO) and 20 deployments of seconded guest officers (SGO), all with the profile of a screening expert took place (totally 2,851 deployment days); one officer had multiple deployments.
- Some planned deployments of Home MS/SACs experts were extended and some transferred to other operational locations to meet the operational needs.

Interpreters:

- 101 deployments of interpreters from DK, IT, NL and UK took place (totally 5,818 deployment days); some interpreters had multiple deployments.

Escort multiplier trainers were deployed to support national trainers;

- 2 experts from DE and 1 expert from AT supported the recently trained national trainers in Sofia (BG) during the national training workshop for 19 Bulgarian escorts (total 21 days)

No involvement of Third countries or other Union agencies and bodies or international organizations.

No specific technical equipment has been deployed.

1.5. Financial information

Monika

2. Achievement of objectives

Objectives	Indicators	Achieved / partly achieved / not achieved
Enhance border security. Enhance operational cooperation. Enhance exchange of information. Establish and exchange best practice.	Number of screening interviews carried out by Host MSs compared with deployed screeners (GR, BG)	Achieved
	Increased number of Host MSs screening experts actively participating in screening (GR, BG)	Achieved
	Accurate and timely JORA reporting, review use of screening forms to meet the needs for registration, screening and acquisition of travel documents (GR, BG)	Partly achieved
	Support the centralized office for return issues (BG). Support reaching full sustainability with screening (GR, BG). Support establishing a national pool of interpreters (GR, BG) Support national screening training programs (GR, BG)	Partly achieved

3. Link to other Frontex activities and best practices

The joint operation worked in harmony with the following Frontex coordinated joint operations taking place in the same geographical areas.

- JO Flexible Operational Activities Land 2015
- JO EPN Poseidon Sea 2015
- JO REX 2015

The mutually beneficial cooperation between the operational teams, in particular in the exchange of relevant information between the screening officers (JO FOA-R) and the debriefing experts (JO FOA-L and JO EPN-PS) led to the achievement of the objectives in the respective operations.

Return Operations Sector (ROS)

- Coordination and co-financing of JROs with the participation of Greece and Bulgaria as well as JRO organized by Bulgaria and Greece;
- Knowledge and experience gathered is valuable for follow-up operation(s)

TRU organized in July 2015 a National Multipliers Training in return Matters. In this training three participants from Bulgaria participated. In September 2015 these trained officers organized a national training for Bulgarian escort officers in Sofia. During this training three Frontex trainers were mentoring and supporting the Bulgarian trainers.

4. Operational results

Bulgaria:

- Continuation of successful implementation of permanent screening activities as an integral part of national procedure;
- Permanent Frontex deployments of both screening experts and interpreters; national sustainability in screening activities reached in the detention center Busmantsi, Sofia.
- Screening performed by joint screening teams of guest officers, national screeners or national officers supported by Frontex deployed interpreters;
- Screening activities carried out in full compliance with the relevant EU law, including the Charter of Fundamental Rights;
- Screening performed during the first 24 hrs. after apprehension, but also inside of the detention centres after the first 24 hrs, excellent cooperation with the detention centres;
- Successful implementation of the first national escort training in Sofia, organized and lead by Frontex trained Bulgarian escort trainers - planning and realization supported by Frontex.
- Successful planning, organization and implementation of a Frontex coordinated joint return operation.
- The Frontex Return Capacity Advisor supported the Bulgarian Return Capacity Unit.
- The Frontex Return Capacity Advisor supported the host Member State in specific return related matters to build overall capacity.

Greece:

- Continuation of successful implementation of permanent screening activities as an integral part of national procedure at the Greek-Turkish sea borders;
- Improved infrastructure and working conditions at the Greek-Turkish sea border;
- Screening activities carried out in full compliance with the relevant EU law, including the Charter of Fundamental Rights;
- Continuous improvement and changes to the screening activities to meet the increased flow of migrants at the Greek-Turkish sea border;
- The advanced level document experts deployed by Sea Borders Sector supporting screening activities;
- At the Greek-Turkish land border, the Greek screening experts performed screening interviews independently, with the minimal support from the Frontex deployed interpreters;

Bulgaria & Greece:

- 16 MS/SAC provided assistance to Greece and Bulgaria with the following screening experts: 20 Seconded Guest officer deployments, 27 guest officer deployments, MS/SAC and Host MS screeners were supported by 101 interpreter deployments in order to support the host countries with the migratory influx;
- Screenings of newly apprehended irregular migrants, resulting in the assumption of their nationality as the first step in returning them;
- Very good collaboration between the screening teams, advanced level document experts and debriefing teams;
- Excellent use of the common pool of interpreters to support the screening and debriefing teams;
- High level of expertise of deployed MS/SAC screening officers;
- Interpreters deployed from 4 different member states;
- Interpreters' skills were a key element for successful screening;
- Exchange of knowledge, best practice and professional experience between the guest officers, the interpreters and the Greek as well as the Bulgarian officers;

EU added value of the Joint Operation

The Joint Operation supported Greece and Bulgaria with screening activities, with the aim to increase the confidence and expertise of the local screening officers as well as the overall management of the screening process.

The screening interviews in the Hosting MSs resulted in an assumption of the irregular migrants' nationality; which should facilitate the national authority continue with the documentation and return process, when the migrants are deemed returnable.

To achieve successful returns it is recommended to follow a well-developed process, starting with screenings, followed by identification (documentation) interviews, acquisition of travel documents and finally organizing the means of return, resulting in successful removals.

Expert screening teams from Home MS/SAC worked in partnership with national authority screenings teams. Together the experience and professionalism of all the officers involved ensures screening activities are carried out in full compliance with the relevant EU law, including the Charter of Fundamental Rights;

The operational team was central to the effective implementation of screening activities on three additional Greek islands starting with Chios in April and Kos and Leros in July.

During the implementation phase of the joint operation, much focus was placed on supporting the Greek authorities react to the migration flow on the islands. The ever increasing flow of migrants required additional reinforcements, and support modifying existing screening practice to incorporate the national registration process. Screening processes were adapted to cover the national registration process and a nationality check to identify nationality swapping.

For the first time, Bulgaria took on the responsible role of being the organizing member state for a Frontex coordinated joint return operation. The return flight started on 23rd September 2015 and had 5 other participating member states, 29 irregular migrants in total (15 from Bulgaria) were successfully returned to Islamabad. In addition, following the participation of three Bulgarian officers in Frontex multiplier escort training, the trained officers organized and carried out the first ever national escort training course in Sofia. This operational team supported the training on the spot and also by deploying three Frontex training experts to guide the trainers. The Host MS successfully trained 19 national escort officers and facilitate participation of the Bulgarian Ombudsman on this training course.