

FRONTEX EVALUATION REPORT 2017

Joint Operation VEGA Children 2017

Operations Division
Joint Operations Unit
Air Border Sector

Approved at Warsaw

[signed]
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1. Background information

JO VEGA Children 2017 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 until the referral mechanism is activated 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, cooperation with International Organizations was implemented.

1.1. Brief risk assessment

Unaccompanied minors

There exist many reasons as to why children often arrive unaccompanied at the external borders of Member States¹. 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 Member States, and who are themselves in the process of seeking to regularise their stay and/or refugee status.

Children are sometimes sent to the Member States 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 Member States under a formal “Family Reunion” scheme.

Transporting a child into the Member States by air remains Member States 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 crossings.

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 was 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 exploitation². It is also believed that in most cases these children were in fact EU citizens trafficked on intra EU routes.

Since 2012 Frontex has sought to systematically record all incidents of human trafficking at air borders as well as to seek a dedicated operational activity to identify incidents at airports. A number of incidents have been positively identified. However, it remains the case that confirmation of an incident is usually only obtained following a full investigation and subsequent judicial process.

¹ For the purposes of the present document, the term “Member State” includes also the States participating in the relevant development of the Schengen acquis in the meaning of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and its Protocol (No 19) on the Schengen acquis integrated into the framework of the European Union.

² Eurostat: *Trafficking in Human beings (Published in 2015 - statistical data from all 28 EU Member States and the following countries: Iceland, Norway, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey.*

Briefings in respect of these areas were provided to the operational staff and International organizations experts.

1.2. Operational aim

The Joint Operation VEGA Children 2017 was carried out at EU airports in order to identify children on the move at risk at air borders and refer 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. Furthermore, Frontex took into account recommendations of the Frontex Consultative Forum and those provided in previous similar activities.

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.

1.3. Period of implementation and operational areas

Following the concept of previous years JO VEGA Children 2017 was split into two operational phases.

- The first operational phase was carried out from 31st May 2017 until 10th July 2017. The general briefing was organized on 31th May and the debriefing on 10th July 2017.
- The second operational phase was carried out from 30th August 2017 until 10th October 2017. The general briefing was organized on 30th August and the debriefing on 10th October 2017.

During the joint operation, for both phases, in total 22 hosting airports agreed to participate in the activity 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:

- 17 Member States participated
- 3 Third Countries participated
- 34 officers (24 team members + 4 EU advisers + 6 TC observers)
- 32 International organizations experts were deployed in mixed teams

The following International Organizations participated in the joint operation:

- International Organizations: International Organization for Migration (IOM) and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

1.5. Financial information

The total committed budget of the Joint Operation VEGA Children 2017 was **479,497** EUR.

2. Achievement of objectives

Under the umbrella of the Frontex Programme of Work 2017 this activity contributed to the following corporate goals and prioritized key objectives, as set in the Frontex Single Programming Document 2016 - 2019.

- 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 2017 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 **achieved**.
4. To enhance tailored interagency cooperation and cooperation with IOs and NGOs.
The objective has been **achieved**.
5. To identify risks affecting children on the move during the operational activity.
The objective has been **partially achieved**.

3. Operational results

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

At the 22 airports included in the operation there were 15 confirmed cases of unaccompanied minors being detected. During both phases of the operation 6 persons were suspected of being involved in child smuggling. There were 5 arrests and 6 separate investigations opened into the smuggling of children via airports into the EU during the operation.

Trafficking in children

There were no incidents of trafficking in children reported.

Female Genital mutilation

There were three incidents of young girls children whose parents declared that their daughters were at risk of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Prior to the operation the Frontex Guest Officers and the airports were briefed and apprised about the risks associated with the practice which is unlawful in the EU.