

**Council of Europe International Cooperation Group
on Drugs and Addictions**



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**ASSESSMENT OF THE WORK ACCOMPLISHED WITHIN
THE COOPERATION GROUP OF SOUTH-EAST
EUROPEAN AIRPORTS (2015-2022)**

Expert Report

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Expert Report

The present assessment of the Cooperation Group of South-East European Airports (hereinafter: “CGSEEA”) was carried out by Lidija Vugrinec¹ in her capacity as independent expert, upon the request of the Pompidou Group of the Council of Europe (hereinafter: “the Pompidou Group”).

This assessment report starts with a summary, followed by chapter 1 with a short description of the objectives, structure and activity areas of the CGSEEA based on which the key questions and guiding principles for the assessment have been identified.

Chapter 2 describes the assessment methodology and activities.

In chapter 3, an overview of desk review is presented, whilst the chapter 4 elaborates on the results of an online survey (questionnaires) among CGSEEA members. Chapter 5 describes findings from the interviews and a focus group with members of the CGSEEA, followed by chapter 6 which discusses the findings (including a SWOT analysis).

Finally, recommendations for future actions are presented in chapter 7.

1. Introduction

During the 29th annual meeting of the Pompidou Group’s Cooperation Group of Drug Control Services at European Airports (Strasbourg, 2014) an intensive discussion took place on developing regional activities that would accommodate the needs of South-East European (SEE) airports, on the basis of specific regional needs and contexts. The initiative, which was launched by the Croatian delegation, received wide support of all delegates from the countries of the region and beyond. As a result, the proposal to set up a Cooperation Group of South-East European Airports was adopted within the permanent activity format ‘Drug Policy Cooperation in South-East Europe’ of the Pompidou Group. Under the Pompidou Group Work Programme 2019–2022, a yearly practical joint action facilitated by the CGSEEA was introduced as one of the expected results of this cooperation.

The aim of the CGSEEA, operational from 2015 on, is to strengthen regional cooperation in the fight against drug trafficking and respond to the specific needs of the region. At the annual meetings of the CGSEEA, the participating police and customs officers from 13 countries and Kosovo*² discuss regional trends and modus operandi of drug trafficking by air, share practical experiences and agree on the main strategic lines of cooperation. Additional technical meetings are organised on an ad hoc basis, in order to support joint operations implemented by the law enforcement agencies collaborating in the Group. The CGSEEA contributes to the discussions held

¹ The author has also acted as independent expert in the setup of the mandate, functioning and working methods of the CGSEEA and facilitated early work in 2014-2016.

² Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Turkey.

*All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

in the Pompidou Group's main Cooperation Group of Drug Control Services at European Airports and in General Aviation regarding regional developments.

2. Methodology

2.1. Scope of the assessment

The assessment is meant as a critical analysis of the work of the CGSEEA in the period from 2015 until the end of 2022, when the current terms of reference detailing the objectives and expected results of the Group's work expires. It builds on several annual short assessments of the CGSEEA's work, existing meeting documents as well as substantial input obtained from the members themselves. The aim is to provide relevant information to the Pompidou Group and participating countries involved in the work of the CGSEEA regarding the added value, results and role of the Group. This assessment is not a simple collection of facts and figures but a stock-tacking of the opinions and experiences of officers (typically middle management) who work at the operational level and who are involved in the work of the CGSEEA³. The results and recommendations reflect the feedback and priorities of the stakeholders.

The information gathered helps to answer the following questions:

- *Objectives/priorities*: Did the CGSEEA address the objectives/priorities put forward by its members appropriately, e.g. by clear problem definitions and clearly defined actions?
- *Conditions*: Were circumstances and international support provided sufficient to realize the plans and actions formulated in the CGSEEA working documents, e.g. by providing the necessary instruments and resources, by dividing and defining the responsibilities of involved law enforcement authorities and by facilitating smooth cooperation between the members? Has the existing coordination structure proven to be appropriate and efficient?
- *Results*: Did the implementation of the CGSEEA Joint Declaration result in the realization of the envisaged actions?
- *Process*: Did the process of activity formulation and implementation run properly (management, involvement/input from stakeholders, etc.)?

2.2. Data triangulation

A method of data triangulation⁴ was chosen for this assessment. Data triangulation is a scientific method that makes use of multiple indicators and data sources to get a reliable picture in a short period of time. It brings together various data sources, and combines various methods to collect this data. This helps to avoid and correct biases of a single source of information that might cover only part of the analysed phenomenon. It gives a more complete picture, including the provision of context information, which facilitates a better understanding of a complex phenomenon. To incorporate as many different views as possible, all customs and police officers which participated in the core CGSEEA activities were invited to take part in this assessment, regardless of whether they were at some point officially nominated to the Group by

³ The list of customs and police officers nominated as permanent members and contact points for this Group can be found in the continuously updated CGSEEA Directory of operational contacts.

⁴ Heal R. and Forbes D. (2013). Understanding triangulation in research. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/255952608>

their respective authorities or referred by the nominated member based on their involvement in the Group's background work.

The methods for data triangulation used in this assessment are the following:

- Desk review (analysis of available documentation, e.g. CGSEEA Joint Declaration, meeting reports, operational plans and results of operations, previously conducted online surveys).
- Survey (online questionnaires among members).
- Follow-up interviews with members and a focus group
- SWOT analysis.

2.3. Desk review

The desk review is an important part of the assessment. By collecting, organizing and synthesising available information, it enables an understanding of the context, priorities and trends, and equally importantly, identifies gaps to be addressed. An analysis of available literature is available in chapter 3.

2.4. Questionnaire

The first part of the assessment was an online questionnaire presented to stakeholders, focusing on the following aspects:

- What is the state of play?
- Personal judgment of the result/outcome (global judgment of the result offering a scale from 1 to 5, from excellent to poor, asking for explanations of the interviewee's rating).
- Proposal for follow-up actions (what is the relevance/priority).

The online questionnaire was available at a dedicated platform from 25 March until 5 May 2022. The link to the questionnaire was sent to officially appointed members of the CGSEEA as well as to other customs or police officers who at least once participated in one of the CGSEEA activities (in total 45 customs and police representatives). Sixteen stakeholders from 11 countries completed the questionnaire, five representing police, one national anti-drug agency and ten customs services. Most respondents answered (almost) all questions while others chose to fill in only questions set up as mandatory to successfully complete the questionnaire.

2.5. Interviews

Interviews were held with 9 respondents, both police and customs representatives from 6 countries, covering all key aspects of the CGSEEA structure and operations. These took place in the period 11 May-26 May 2022.

The information collected through the questionnaires served as background information for follow-up interviews and a focus group with different stakeholders. The interviews focused on clarifying possible unclear issues and diverging answers given to the questionnaire.

In the frame of the interviews a SWOT analysis was used to evaluate the **S**trengths, **W**eaknesses, **O**pportunities, and **T**hreats as regards the scope and working methods of the Group, covering the following issues:

- Strong points of the CGSEEA and its realization (implementation structure, human and financial resources)
- Weak points
- External supporting factors
- External impeding factors
- Priorities for the future

The results of the SWOT analysis are presented in chapter 6.

2.6. Focus group

To cross-check information, solve diverging answers and discuss recommendations/priorities for the future work of the CGSEEA, it was considered ideal in the planning process to have at least one focus group with 4-6 stakeholders of different profile and level of engagement in the CGSEEA activities, especially those who did not reply to the online questionnaire nor participated in the interviews. Due to the rather low responsiveness to the invitations to provide input, it was more realistic to organize a focus group with officers who have participated in the CGSEEA from the beginning and have in-depth knowledge on its strong points and shortages, and who could give a good input for the future work of the group.

A focus group was held with five respondents (three customs and two police officers) from five countries, with slightly differing intensity of involvement in the CGSEEA work.

The results of the desk review, questionnaires, interviews and a focus group are integrated in chapter 6 and 7: Discussion of findings (including SWOT analysis) and Recommendations.

3. Results of desk review

The desk review enabled an insight into the functioning of the CGSEEA analysed against its main objectives and working methods.

Following documents have been consulted to provide this analysis: Joint Declaration on CGSEEA, reports from all annual and technical meetings, results of the meeting evaluations, available reports on joint operation, Overview of seizures of illicit drugs and money in CGSEEA countries in the period from 2015-2018, CGSEEA Directory of operational contacts, Revised statute of the Pompidou Group, Pompidou Group Work Programmes 2015-2018 and 2019-2022, Inventory of Activities and Outcomes accomplished during the work cycle 2015-2018, Terms of reference for Pompidou Group activities under the 2019-2022 Work Programme.

At the inaugural meeting held in Zagreb (April 2015), a Joint Declaration was adopted, which recognised the need to establish the Cooperation Group of South-East European Airports, as a platform for discussion on specific issues and emerging trends as well as transfer of knowledge and best practices within the Drug Policy Cooperation in South-East Europe network of the Pompidou Group. It also set key objectives for the CGSEEA:

- a) to streamline working methods by development and harmonization of tools and systems to improve drug detection in South-East European airports,
- b) to enhance the operational capacities through specific technical meetings in various formats following specific requests or identified immediate needs,

- c) to improve the operational results related to the fight against illicit drug trafficking by timely exchange of operational information.

Following the conclusions of the inaugural meeting, Permanent Correspondents of the SEE countries were invited to nominate two country representatives to the CGSEEA, bearing in mind multidisciplinary representation of airport law enforcement agencies, i.e. airport customs and airport police. Nominated representatives (primarily from main international airports) were, together with other relevant national authorities (other national airports and central coordination authorities) listed in the Directory of operational contacts to facilitate smooth communication between airport authorities across the region in their daily work. The advantage of this directory is that it contains direct contact details of professionals actually working in airports and not those of high-level officials in police or customs headquarters. Members are periodically invited to cross-check information related to their respective airports and to inform on any relevant changes.

The original composition of the CGSEEA included the following 13 countries and territories: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Montenegro, North Macedonia (FYROM at the time of setup), Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Turkey and Kosovo*. Cyprus joined the group as an observer already at the 2nd annual meeting in Athens, and formally participated from the 4th annual meeting.

3.1. Annual meetings

The Joint Declaration together with the conclusions of the 1st CGSEEA meeting outlined the format of cooperation and working methods. It was decided to have one annual plenary meeting and technical meetings in various formats (consultative, practical cooperation, training/capacity building) on an ad hoc basis, following specific requests or identified immediate needs. Until the end of 2022, in total 8 plenary meetings and 7 technical meetings will have taken place. In view of the scarce resources of SEE countries for regional networking and cooperation, it was agreed that the Pompidou Group will ensure overall coordination and organisation of yearly meetings in collaboration with the hosting country, and cover expenses for participation insofar voluntary financial contributions for supporting this regional format are provided by Pompidou Group member states.

Due to the sensitive nature of the drug control work in airports and aviation, the meetings were held in camera without media or public participation. Meeting reports and presentations were made available for members only and the authorities they represent.

During the analysed period both annual and technical meetings have been held back-to-back once per year, with regular rotation of the hosting country. They are chaired by representatives of hosting airport authorities, whilst the vice-chair is a host from the previous year. Details on the concept of the meetings, relevance of topics, frequency, engagement, role of chair and vice-chair etc., are discussed in chapter 4. It is worth noting the relatively stable participation of the nominated CGSEEA members in the meetings, with the exception of Albania and Romania which do not actively participate in the Group's work.

Overview of annual plenary and technical meetings (dates, hosting country/venue, topics, number of countries, number participants):

Annual meeting	Timeframe	Hosting country/venue	Key topics	No. countries	No. participants
1st (without technical component)	27-28 April 2015	Zagreb, Croatia	Inaugural meeting; networking opportunities of SEE airports, joint declaration	11	31
2nd	17-18 May 2016	Athens, Greece	New challenges; legal developments; protection and transfer of personal data; business case DAIDALOS	12	32
3rd	20-21 April 2017	Podgorica, Montenegro	Integrated border management; Passenger Information Units (PIUs); risk management	11	33
4th	24-25 October 2018	Skopje, North Macedonia	Operational data exchange: PNR/API, operating PIU; police-customs cooperation; new trends (NPS, Darknet)	12	33
5th	28-29 May 2019	Budapest, Hungary	Operational cooperation; New trends and techniques in smuggling illicit drugs	12	33
6th	12-13 November 2020	Online via Blujeans platform due to Covid-19 related restrictions	Latest trends; training for staff on cargo inspection; changes in operational work due to pandemic Training on NPS by INCB	11	24
7th	13-14 October 2021	Larnaca, Cyprus	Latest trends and case	9	32

			studies on illicit drugs and precursors; capacity building: countering drug precursors shipments, profiling techniques		
8th	4-5 October 2022	Ljubljana, Slovenia	Detecting synthetic drugs, cooperation with other regional formats, behavioural analysis	n/a	n/a ⁵

At the last plenary and technical meetings held in October 2021, participants pointed out that the agenda needs to maintain a balance between improving capacities of officers on topics of interest and take into account the responsibilities of members in leading positions who are less implicated in profiling and case management. Results of the post-meeting online assessment questionnaire showed that the group members are equally interested in learning about recent trends, modus operandi and informative presentations about drug-related topics (e.g. money laundering, open source intelligence) and improving their technical skills. Maintaining a balance may require slightly extending the time allocated for the meetings.

3.2. Joint operations

During the second annual CGSEEA meeting in Athens, a joint police-customs operation in the airports of the participating' members was agreed under the code name DAIDALOS. The first operation took place in September 2018. General goals of the operation were to raise the awareness on drug trafficking via air, enhance operational cooperation among airport police and customs authorities of the region, promote cooperation among participating CGSEEA countries, increase the intelligence flow, intercept drug parcels, arrest perpetrators and collect intelligence on transnational organized crime groups.

During the reporting period 5 joint operations were carried out with the average participation of 10 out of the 14 member countries. The 2020 and 2021 operations took place amidst COVID-19 pandemics. Whilst this demonstrates the high commitment of participating entities towards maintaining continuity of joint work, travel restrictions related to the pandemic greatly affected the operations. Where possible, focus from control of passenger traffic shifted to interception of postal parcels and cargo planes during the operational period.

Joint operations typically ran over a period of 2-3 weeks, including a pre-operational, operational and post-operational phase, coordinated by one of the participating

⁵ The 8th annual meeting is due to take place after finalisation of this report.

countries based on a previously agreed operational plan. A detailed overview of the seizures, types of substances, legal follow-up and challenges encountered is included in the operational report and discussed at the annual technical meetings. It has proven to be a good practice over the years that the country hosting the annual meeting coordinates the joint operation in the following year.

Overview of joint operations (time period, coordinating country, number of participating countries, outcomes as reported by the participating entities):

Name of operation	Time period	Coordinator	Participating Countries	Outcomes
DAIDALOS 1	September 2018	Croatia	10	31.988 of entities checked 24 persons arrested
DAIDALOS 2	April 2019	Greece	11	17.121 of entities checked 8 persons arrested
DAIDALOS 3	September 2020	North Macedonia	11	24.403 of entities checked 8 persons arrested
DAIDALOS 4	September 2021	Hungary	8	26.524 of entities checked 8 persons arrested
DAIDALOS 5	July 2022	Cyprus	9	n/a ⁶

In addition to the seized substances, these operations have resulted in closer cooperation between South-East European countries as evidenced by accounts of the group members. Targeted controls during the operational phases, as well as the preparation and evaluation of the operations have necessitated an additional commitment from the officials involved despite their already charged workload, which they agreed to take up in order to contribute to the fight against drug trafficking at regional level. Chapter 4 provides details on support which participant have in their authorities and by their superiors while conducting CGSEEA joint operations.

Some of the main challenges observed during the DAIDALOS operations were change of trafficking methods due to the rise of Darknet and the use of postal parcels; timeline and length of the operation were not optimal; lack of necessary human resources and motivation at some participating airports; lack of access to PNR in some cases; and appearance of new types of drugs without updated equipment and training.

Some of the CGSEEA members take part in the Co-operation Group of Drug Control Services at European Airports and in General Aviation (Airports Group) and Expert Group on General Aviation of the Pompidou Group, where they have an opportunity to present the activities and results of the CGSEEA. Links between those different airport communities are discussed in chapter 4.

⁶ Not available at the time of finalisation of the report.

4. Findings from the questionnaire

This chapter presents findings from the online questionnaire⁷. It contains 29 questions, covering following areas: country and authority represented by the respondent, nature of personal involvement in the CGSEEA; purpose/objectives of the CGSEEA and expectations from the group; annual and technical meetings (structure, relevance of topics, meeting dynamic / level of interactions, follow up of the meeting conclusions); joint operations (conduct, outputs, national capacities and support); partnership and cooperation at different levels; obstacles, opportunities, added value and future perspective.

4.1. Participation

The questionnaire was completed by 16 customs and police officers from 11 countries and territorial entities: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Slovenia, Turkey and Kosovo*. The largest number of respondents represents customs services (10), five are police officers (mainly border police) and one respondent comes from the national anti-drug agency.

One quarter of respondents participates in the CGSEEA since its establishment in 2015, and another 25% joined the group in 2019. 19% have been involved in the CGSEEA since 2017-2018, and 6% joined the group in 2016 and in 2021.

All respondents participated at the meetings organized in the frame of the CGSEEA. Two of them chaired the group and three co-chaired the group. 11 respondents (69%) were actively involved also in the joint operations organized by the CGSEEA and 6 persons (37,5%) responded that besides the joint operations, the CGSEEA provided them a framework for other forms of cooperation with other participating countries. Among the other roles within the CGSEEA, one respondent was coordinating joint operation, whilst the second initiated the formation of the group.

If looking more closely at the frequency of meetings participation, only two respondents participated in all CGSEEA meetings that took place till the finalisation of this report (7 annual meetings in total), whilst more than half of the respondents (8 out of 15) attended at least two meetings.

4.2. Achievement of purpose and objectives

The following set of questions was looking into personal opinion of respondents on the degree to which the purpose and objectives of the CGSEEA have been met, as well as on their expectations from this cooperation initiative.

Nearly half of the respondents (44%) think that the CGSEEA has fully achieved its purpose and became a platform for discussion on specific issues and emerging trends, transfer of knowledge and best practices within the SEE Network of the Pompidou Group, as foreseen in the Joint Declaration. Another 31% think that the purpose has been mostly met, whilst remaining 25% believe that it has been met partially.

Following examples provided by respondents reflect their opinion (12 answers)⁸:

⁷ The model questionnaire is available in Appendix 1.

⁸ Responses have been paraphrased in some cases to enhance understanding of readers not directly involved in the group's work, without modifying their meaning.

- *On several occasions, information shared during the meeting resulted in fine-tuning the customs risk assessment system or focused control of certain traffic or goods.*
- *Presentation about legal steps and implementation steps for trafficking cases has helped others.*
- *Appreciated exchange of information (e.g. methods of trafficking).*
- *Direct contact with group members and cooperation in different cases.*
- *The CGSEEA gave me chance to exchange ideas with colleagues that face the same difficulties and discuss methods of working (e.g. the educational program of Croatian customs). It also enhanced collaboration among police and custom authorities both at national and international level.*
- *Focus is on the transfer of knowledge and information between police and customs.*
- *It enables to build contacts with colleagues in the region, and start cooperation based on trust since we can meet face to face and know each other thanks to CGSEEA.*
- *INCB OPIOIDS and INTERCOP platforms, of which I became a member thanks to being a part of CGSEEA are a great source of drug-related information.*
- *Contacts and confidence in members were established for future cooperation.*
- *In the past, we got to know each other thanks to the annual meetings, and we shared a lot of useful information with each other. For example: 4 cases, big quantity fake medicine from Bulgaria which was based on information exchange within CGSEEA.*
- *Cooperation on real cases.*

Based on the responses and examples given, it can be concluded that an important added value of the group has been its functioning as a platform for establishing personal contacts and building a confidence among CGSEEA members. This enabled exchange of knowledge, and even more importantly, exchange of information in real time.

Regarding the objectives set in the CGSEEA Joint Declaration, the largest part of the respondents believes that all three of them have been mostly met. More precisely, 62% of respondents think that the working methods have been mostly streamlined, by development and harmonization of tools and systems to improve drug detection in South-East European airports. Furthermore, 44% of the respondents is on the opinion that operational capacities have been enhanced to a great extent through specific technical meetings in various formats following specific requests or identified immediate needs. This objective has been fully met according to the opinion of 31% of respondents. Regarding the third objective, improving operational results related to the fight against illicit drug trafficking by timely exchange of operational information within the CGSEEA, 31% of the respondents believe that it has been completely achieved, followed by 56% of those who think it has been mostly achieved and 13% of respondents opting for partial achievement.

Nine respondents provided concrete examples to support their opinion on key objectives of the CGSEEA:

- *Timely exchange of operational information resulted in concrete seizures. Best practices are identified through the meetings.*
- *Experience sharing and improving the network within CGSEEA during the annual meetings has been crucial.*
- *Exchange of knowledge.*
- *Joint Operations opened the collaboration with colleagues and countries never reached before, especially countries that are not part of the European Union.*

- *CGSEEA has met my expectations in professional terms but also in terms of exchange of practical experiences.*
- *It makes real time information exchange possible among colleagues.*
- *The right information at the right time is valuable in every business, and even more essential to drug detection.*
- *Information that we exchange internally through the confidential platform Telegram.*
- *Exchanging ideas, modus operandi, understand way of thinking of members.*

Once again, exchange of knowledge, ideas and information as well as networking was emphasised as an added value of the CGSEEA which contributed to more effective operational work.

4.3. Fulfilment of expectations

Almost all respondents (15 out of 16) described their expectations when initially joining the network:

- *To learn from the best practices of other countries and exchange information both on trends and specific operations.*
- *New knowledge, exchange of experiences, different working methods.*
- *To help others, gather the latest developments in the region and make new contacts to collaborate.*
- *To join international cooperation.*
- *Meeting with group members and information exchange.*
- *To improve the operational results related to the fight against illicit drug trafficking by timely exchange of operational information.*
- *To have access to a platform of experts from neighbouring countries and have the chance to meet personally, in order to start an operational collaboration which will enhance our goal of supply reduction.*
- *The same expectations I was presented with through the previous documents of the CGSEEA.*
- *Sharing good practice and practical info.*
- *To know colleagues who are fighting against narcotics smuggling and being aware of the trends and modus operandi recently used in terms of narcotics smuggling by airway.*
- *No expectations because I was new to the work on drug control at the time.*
- *No big expectations because I did not have all information about tasks in the CGSEEA.*
- *Establish personal contacts for future cooperation.*
- *I joined in 2018 and I still consider proper communication with each other to be the biggest strength of the group and I look forward to it in the future.*
- *Creation of trustful network.*

Most of the respondents had similar expectations from the CGSEEA, mainly to establish contacts with colleagues at other airports in order to learn from each other and to exchange the information on new trends and developments, but also on specific cases that would facilitate their operational activities.

More than half of the respondents (56%) reported that the CGSEEA completely met their expectations in the last seven years of its existence. One quarter of respondents (25%) considers that their expectations have been mostly met and for remaining 19% expectations from the group have been met only partially.

4.4. Format and content of the annual meetings

Questions 10 to 12 related to the plenary and technical meetings, looking into respondents' view on the meeting structure, relevance of the topics, meeting dynamics and level of interactions, follow up of the meeting conclusions and sharing of the meeting outcomes with their colleagues and other relevant national authorities.

When it comes to the annual plenary meeting, most of the respondents (62%) are fully satisfied with its structure (rated as excellent), followed by 19% who think that the structure is very good or good. Topics of the annual meetings are considered very relevant for 50% of respondents, 37,5% think that topics are relevant and 12,5% (2 respondents) seem to be ambivalent regarding this question as the topics are for them neither relevant nor irrelevant. The same distribution of answers was found in a following sub-question on the dynamics and level of interaction at the annual meetings: 50% found them very dynamic/interactive, 37,5% rated it as very good and 12,5% as good. Half of the respondents rated follow up of the meeting conclusions as excellent, 31% as very good and 19% as good. Respondents were given the opportunity to provide their suggestions to improve the concept of annual CGSEEA meetings. 9 members of the CGSEEA expressed their constructive opinion as follows (2 additional respondents did not have suggestions):

- *In my opinion, law enforcement agencies should continue to pay special attention to metacommunication and risk assessment, so I suggest involving experts on the above topics.*
- *Workshops on specific items which will give the opportunity for fruitful discussion even for matters which seem simple.*
- *Workshops on specific topics.*
- *Increase of interaction level for some of the participants.*
- *More guest speakers (experts in field)*
- *Increase group meetings at least twice a year.*
- *Discussions are usually done after the meetings and that is what helps the most.*
- *The meetings must have more free time.*
- *Given that each topic had its own importance, there was little time to elaborate on the topics adequately.*
- *More case studies would be useful to learn from each other's operational capacity and working methods.*

Although all aspects of annual plenary meeting have very good ratings, respondents suggested more focused meetings where topics of a special interest could be elaborated more in-depth, while keeping the interactive segments and sufficient time for discussion that are already applied in the agenda.

The structure of the technical meetings was found excellent for 62,5% of respondents, very good for 12,5% and good for 25%. Relevance of the topics goes from 62,5% ("very relevant") towards 25% which rated them as relevant to 12,5% ("neither relevant nor irrelevant"). Half of the respondents is fully satisfied with the meeting dynamics and level of interaction, 31% rated it as very good and 19% as good. Follow up of the conclusions of the technical meetings as rated as excellent by 62,5% of respondents, 12,5% marked it as very good and 25% as good. 6 respondents provided constructive suggestions to improve technical meetings (one respondent did not have suggestions):

- *During the meeting more presentation of interesting case studies with new modus operandi and latest trends, engagement of an official channel for exchange of information e.g. Interpol.*
- *Discussing confidentiality.*

- *Get independent analyst to assess our cooperation/JCPO.*
- *At least 1 more day is needed.*
- *Topics to be more specific.*
- *Pay more attention to find officers working operationally at airports, in some countries police or customs has no authority in counter-narcotics efforts at the airport in terms of international flights.*

The vast majority of respondents (94%) share outcomes of the meetings with their colleagues or other relevant national authorities and only one respondent gave negative reply (6%). To an open question with whom they share the meeting outcomes fourteen replies were noted. The meeting outcomes and other relevant information collected at the meetings are mainly shared with their superiors and colleagues at their work but also with other airports in their country. Some respondents share the outcomes with the national headquarters of their respective authorities, and a few also with other law enforcement authorities.

Similar to plenary meetings, technical meetings are very appreciated. However, there is also space for further improvement possibly with discussions on specific topics of interest, including case studies (e.g. on new modus operandi and latest trends), paying special attention to questions related to confidentiality.

4.5. Results of joint operations

The next set of questions (13-17) was related to joint customs police operations organised in the framework of the CGSEEA. Exactly half of the respondents (8 out of 16) were engaged in preparation of the joint operations under the code name DAIDALOS and 83% (12 replies to this question) have actively participated in the CGSEEA joint operations. Some of those respondents were involved only in preparation/organisation of the joint operation(s) and implementation of the operational plan(s), whilst a few of them also coordinated joint operation at the regional level or acted as a national focal point or coordinator of activities in their respective countries.

Half of the respondents noted that the CGSEEA joint operations brought concrete results like seizures and/or arrests made by their authority⁹. In the interviews it was stressed that seizures were low or none at some airports also because due to high control at the airport illicit traffickers avoid smuggling drugs by air and prefer green borders or seaports. Most respondents (67%) share the outcomes of joint operations (confidentially), mainly with their superiors, headquarters and national law enforcement authorities. In some cases, there is no need to share the result of the operation with other relevant authorities since customs and police implement the operation hand-in-hand. Based on the outcomes of CGSEEA joint operations, 75% of respondents informed that they organise follow up activities e.g. training for customs and police officers, joint customs police operations at national level, adaptation of profiling methods according to newly detected trends.

A significant part of respondents (37,5%) reported lack of adequate technical capacities and support of their national authorities for conducting operational activities in the frame of the CGSEEA. Five respondents gave concrete examples which emphasised the shortage in human resources, lack of officers trained for detection of illicit drugs, outdated or non-existent specialised technical equipment and lack of interest in joint operations.

⁹ The results of DAIDALOS operations are available in the reports on each joint operation (the 5th report was in the process of preparation at the time of writing).

4.6. Effect on partnership and cooperation at different levels

Respondents were also asked to rate the extent to which the CGSEEA cooperation platform has strengthened partnership of their national authority with:

- a) other airport law enforcement authority(-ies) at their national level (31% significantly strengthened, 31% fairly strengthened, 38% somewhat strengthened)
- b) other airport services at their national level (19% significantly strengthened, 12,5% fairly strengthened, 37,5% somewhat strengthened, 19% slightly strengthened, 12,5% not strengthened at all)
- c) other relevant law enforcement authorities at the airports of the CGSEEA member states (44% significantly strengthened, 19% fairly strengthened, 31% somewhat strengthened, 6% slightly strengthened).

According to the replies, the CGSEEA most significantly facilitated closer collaboration between law enforcement authorities of different airports across CGSEEA member states but also between law enforcement authorities at individual national airports, notably between police and customs authorities. Interestingly, two respondents stated that joint work in the framework of the CGSEEA did not contribute to strengthening partnership between law enforcement entities at national airports, while at the other airports some efforts have been undertaken to establish or revitalise such partnership using CGSEEA as an international basis for closer cooperation.

Ten respondents provided examples of the partnership which derived from the CGSEEA network:

- *Through cooperation with other CGSEEA members in the framework of the Pompidou Group, joint detections and controlled deliveries were possible.*
- *With the continuous sharing of information and trends, it is possible to be up to date with the events in the region, limiting the opportunity for organised crime groups to easily switch routes and airports without being detected.*
- *Exchange of information with Balkan Countries.*
- *Exchange of information within the internal group. (2x)*
- *Joint customs-police operation on national level.*
- *Exchanging information on seizures, suspicious packages and parcels.*
- *Better cooperation between border police and customs (2x), especially after the operations.*
- *Real-time information on different cases from members, new ways of smuggling, etc.*
- *Possibility to take up contact and obtain a quick response in case of necessity.*

Only one out of sixteen respondents believes that another regional cooperation initiative is potentially overlapping with the CGSEEA activities in the South- East Europe, mentioning SELEC in further clarification, others confirm that the CGSEEA has demonstrated its uniqueness as a cooperation platform.

When it comes to participation in the Co-operation Group of Drug Control Services at European Airports (the main Airports Group of the Pompidou Group), only 37,5% take part in it and the majority of 62,5% did not have an opportunity to get involved. Later in the interviews some respondents stressed the lack of finances as the main reason for not participating at the Airports Group meetings whilst some others never received an invitation. Cooperation between the CGSEEA and the Airports Group was rated as excellent by 31% of respondents, 25% thinks that it is very good, 31% perceives it as good and for 13% (one respondent) it is poor.

In order to enhance cooperation between the CGSEEA and the Airports Group, respondents suggested to invite more experts from the European airports to the CGSEEA meetings but also to facilitate participation of the CGSEEA members at the Airports Group meetings. There was also a suggestion to organise joint customs-police operations twice a year, to organise trainings at larger airports and to facilitate more frequent communication, possibly on a three-month basis.

According to the noted replies, 44% of respondents enjoys the full support of their superiors to actively participate in the CGSEEA network, 25% have fair support, 19% good support and 13% or two respondents are poorly supported by their superiors. During the interviews a few respondents stated that their management is not much interested in the work of the CGSEEA including the joint operations undertaken by the network but also do not obstruct them. However, when it comes to individual cases where specific information from the CGSEEA members would be more than welcome, they ask the member to promptly contact their colleagues from the CGSEEA and ask for the support, therefore capitalising on the group's work.

Coordination of the CGSEEA by the Secretariat of the Pompidou Group was rated as excellent by 69% of respondents, 6% thinks that it is very good and 25% see it as good.

When it comes to communication, 25 % of respondents believes that there is a need for more clear communication protocols in day-to-day communication of the CGSEEA network and during the joint operations, the majority (44%) is not in favour of introducing more formal procedures and 31% do not have an opinion. Interviews clarified why most of the respondents think that additional communication protocols are not needed. In their opinion, any formalisation in communication would slow down the exchange of information and the reactivity/rapid responsiveness within the network which relies on mutual confidence of the members and with almost no formalities (except when strictly needed for a case) is an added value of the group. A significant 62,5% of respondents communicate with their colleagues from the CGSEEA network on professional platforms other than that provided by the CGSEEA, while the rest of the respondents do not.

4.7. Opportunities and obstacles for future work

The last set of questions (26-29) looks into opportunities, obstacles, added values and expectations from the CGSEEA in the future. The answers are used for the SWOT analysis together with the information collected in the interviews and a focus group. In this section a brief overview of the provided answers is presented.

Respondents see many opportunities in cooperation within the CGSEEA which mainly revolve around fast exchange of operational information based on direct contacts and trust between the members, operational cooperation enhanced by the personal relationship that grows among the members, sharing of good practices and staying informed/building a knowledge on new trends and developments, building of a stronger network, increase of cooperation with other platforms, better response to new activities of organized crime groups and improvement of capacity of counter narcotics efforts in the region.

Although a few respondents do not note any obstacles, for many others the following obstacles are seen in mutual communication between the participating countries: varying degree of involvement of the members/the countries they represent, the network is highly based on personal efforts, appointment of officials for the group who have low knowledge in drug related issues, disinterest, local capacity and differing national legislations which can limit cooperation, lack of time for engagement due to

day-to-day work and responsibilities, insufficient technical equipment and knowledge of the new species of goods, only sporadic communication.

The most frequently mentioned added value which respondents see in participating in the CGSEEA is the possibility of direct contact between members based on personal relationship built within the network, which enables fast communication, and the use of the network as an official framework for cooperation to justify rapid joint action. Furthermore, the respondents very much appreciate sharing the knowledge, experience and information on new trends, trainings, elaborating cases and new communication channels.

All experts who participated in the assessment are in favour of continuing cooperation within the CGSEEA in the future. In this regard, respondents expect improved communication between the participating countries, strengthened collaboration methods, further improvement of closer cooperation between members on occurring specific cases, more frequent sharing of good practices and case studies, continued networking among the members and even upgrading the cooperation, technical support and more joint operations, more direct communications, more frequent CGSEEA meetings, more people joining the meetings. Respondents also noted that cooperation should become a way of work on a daily basis and that given the complexity of their work and the dangers that threaten our societies in every aspect of the various drugs, anything new to their work would be welcome.

5. Findings from the interviews and the focus group

5.1. Interviews

To better understand outcomes of the questionnaires and to elaborate on strong and weak points of the Group's work, but also on future opportunities and possible obstacles that might prevent optimal operation and further development of the network, semi-structured interviews with the CGSEEA members were conducted in the second phase of the assessment. Together with the findings of the questionnaire, this enabled the author to formulate recommendations for further improvement of this network, with a view to its sustainability.

Invitations to an interview were sent to all appointed members of the CGSEEA (two representatives per country, 26 persons in total), and 9 members actually took part in the interviews. Interviews were guided by pre-formulated leading questions¹⁰ which reflected on how a specific issue has evolved over time and taking into account issues highlighted in the questionnaire¹¹.

Interviewees largely agree that today CGSEEA significantly contributes to the **safety and security** in their countries and the region through its activities and direct cooperation of individual members on almost daily basis. It was highlighted that every country has different culture, situation, capacities and operational framework which must be taken into consideration in planning and executing regional activities aimed at tackling illicit trafficking in drugs. An interviewee pointed out that *"human rights might have an impact on search at the airports. Balance between human rights and safety is here, but limiting"*, especially in the context of emerging situations like the conflict between the Russia and Ukraine which we witness nowadays.

¹⁰ The list of leading questions can be found in Appendix 2.

¹¹ In further discussion direct quotations of interviewees have been occasionally used.

All interviewees see a great **value** in the CGSEEA, especially in making connections with colleagues at other airports, emphasising that the information obtained within the group is often crucial for initiating some investigations and its positive results. It was highlighted that prior to establishment of this group, there was a huge need for reliable contacts in the region. *“The first aim of the group was to establish contacts and develop personal acquaintances as a prerequisite for exchange of sensitive data, which has been achieved.”*

In comparison to other similar initiatives, this group has an advantage *“because of its friendly, professional, practical aspect; we speak the same language, understand each other because we do the same work; it is the only initiative where you have 24h access to the network”*. The CGSEEA Directory of operational contacts is found to be one of the most useful documents for several respondents. In addition, it is beneficial *“because the group operates under umbrella of the Airports Group.”* Slovenia was given as an example where Ljubljana airport no longer has regular flights to most of the participating countries. At the same time, although may seem that there is no need to stay in the group, but in reality there are numerous other advantages of being a member (e.g. info on modus operandi noticed at other airports, possibility to contact colleagues from participating airports about suspect passengers etc.). Another representative highlighted that a significant amount of seizures is linked to cargo flights and in 90% of cases initial information came to the country in question from the CGSEEA network. Equally important is information on newly detected modus operandi, which is frequently shared among the group, often within one day.

The CGSEEA has played a significant role in **fostering collaboration** of competent airport authorities at the regional level but also at the national scale. The majority of interviewees stated that customs-police operation at their local level was already very good, but the CGSEEA further strengthened that partnership. Others managed to overcome some of the cooperation obstacles previously present between police and customs entities working at the same airport. At the next CGSEEA meeting, Cyprus is about to present their cooperation practice which might be beneficial for smaller countries.

Interviewees noted that most of them are active on different communication platforms e.g. Supercops and Customs Enforcement Network Communication Platform (CENcomm). However, in the frame of the CGSEEA cooperation members set up a group on Telegram which is according to their opinion safe, fast and enables communication in real time. It is also considered to be *“more convenient for use when participants are not at work”* and there is an emergency requiring rapid reaction. Such communication platforms enable avoiding complex and long procedures of information exchange through official channels.

Interestingly but not surprisingly, several interviewees emphasised the importance of social events in the frame of the CGSEEA meetings, which *“give to the participants an opportunity to get to know each other better and to reduce the barriers between them if they exist”*.

A few interviewees stressed that they had a limited experience with the CGSEEA since they took part only in one meeting, and they believe that their predecessors were not active enough in the group and have not transmitted them all relevant information when they were appointed to the group. However, they took part in a joint operation which they see as a good tool for enhancing cooperation of SEE airports in operational activities.

Regarding the **capacity-building component**, most of the interviewees consider both plenary and technical meetings to be equally important for the operation of the group

and increasing the capacities of individual participants as well as their respective authorities. Some interviewees are more in favour of plenary meetings with presentations on new or emerging trends (e.g. new psychoactive substance, novelties in risk analysis) and *“more case studies from which we could learn something new”*. A need for more teamwork was also stressed. Several interviewees stated that the Group provides an opportunity to learn from each other, which in some cases led to modifications in the working methods of their authorities, albeit at different levels. They try to adapt information collected at the meetings to their needs. One representative gave an example where a case presented at the plenary meeting inspired them to use a similar model and shed light on a case they were dealing with at the time.

Regarding the **follow up of the conclusions** of the CGSEEA meetings, interviewees consider that the *“goals set up 7 years ago have been realised; exchange of experiences and information is now crucial”*. Meeting conclusions continue to be discussed on Telegram.

Regarding the role of participating countries in **initiating and managing activities** of the CGSEEA, some interviewees believe that it depends on the profile and character of individuals. *“The personality of each member makes a big difference, impact on success of the group”*. Overall, the majority is satisfied with the input of the countries which so far had an opportunity to lead joint operations. *“Some countries are very active and act like motivators of the group, while others use it as a platform for exchange of information.”* *“A few countries possibly need to be motivated for more active involvement.”* It is considered that some countries should appoint their representatives, which would be able to take active part in the group on a longer-term basis. One of the suggestions was that the *“Pompidou Group contacts authorities of those countries and to use this assessment report for that”*. One interviewee emphasised a need for a stronger leadership in joint operations. One participant suggested a more formal, pyramidal structure in managing activities. It was suggested that a team of 2-3 delegated persons from a small group of neighbouring countries with an appointed team leader coordinates joint group activities. As already pointed out via the questionnaire, some countries would prefer more official correspondence as for each action they need approval of their superiors. Others believe that formalisation of the group work would slow down communication, and fast exchange of information was one of the main reasons why this initiative was launched in the first place. Besides, the quality of shared information would probably not be at this level. One interviewee does not see any specific value of the joint operations because the CGSEEA already provides a good cooperation platform throughout the year for performing their daily work.

The majority of interviewees share a sense of **belonging to the group**, which was in some cases strongly emphasised and which contributed to the mutual trust built among group members. *“When someone achieves a good result, we are all happy because usually more people contribute to it.”* *“All people currently participating in the group are highly responsible and dedicated to a common goal.”*

Some of the participating airport authorities closely follow trends in neighbouring countries and the region and try to use this information to fine-tune their activities. The joint operation DAIDALOS is considered to be a good source of **information** according to some interviewees. Most airports are also involved in Aircop (UNODC) where they send information on the work of the airports in tackling criminal activities, including trafficking in drugs. Interviewees do not see benefits in collecting data from the responsible airport authorities on their regular work because it would be very difficult

to estimate what is a solely a result of the CGSEEA cooperation. Joint operations on the other hand are one of the clear indicators of the group's results.

Following the **COVID-19** outbreak, air travel has decreased sharply and the number of passengers has significantly fallen at the airports worldwide. According to observations by the participants, the pandemic has contributed to the growth of e-commerce parcels, due to an increased number of people shopping from home. This includes online sales of drugs predominantly on the dark web, making access to drugs simpler than ever. Contactless drug transactions, such as through mail have also increased, a trend possibly accelerated by the pandemic. Thus, the airport services and authorities have been confronted with a sudden change that has steered them off their regular course and requested prompt changes in their daily work. Due to health-related safety measures, the CGSEEA annual meeting was held online in 2020 and some CGSEEA members were not able to travel abroad also in 2021, when the annual meeting was held in Cyprus. Communication between the participating airport authorities was also slowed down, with the tendency to recover once Covid-related restrictions eased up.

With respect to **further improvement of the group's work**, a few interviewees suggested organising a high-level meeting of the CGSEEA for senior officers, heads of airport law enforcement services or potentially officials at the national police and customs headquarters to present the work of the CGSEEA and make them aware of the problems related to carrying out risk assessment. Another proposal by several interviewees is to organise exchange visits to work jointly with their counterparts and get a closer insight in their working methods (3-4 days). One interviewee called it a team building which could *"facilitate fostering relationships and exchange of experiences"*. There were several suggestions for raising visibility of the group at national levels and internationally (e.g. WCO, UNODC, Aircops meetings). Several interviewees pointed out the importance of support by their superiors in implementing CGSEEA activities. It depends on *"how much are they into international activities, not only local"*, clarified one participant. Specific documents on the scope, work and results of the CGSEEA could be produced for that purpose. It has also been suggested to have at least one meeting every 6 months.

Some interviewees took the opportunity to come forward with some **general problems and obstacles**, which they encounter in their daily work, indirectly preventing them to be more active in the CGSEEA. These issues mainly concern structural and organisational problems of individual law enforcement airport services (e.g. there is no Passenger Information Unit, staff is not sufficiently trained for detection of drug smuggling cases, lack of basic knowledge on new psychoactive substances) and technical shortages such as lack of drug testing kits or certain equipment (e.g. RTG and scanners). Certain passenger reservation information provided by air carriers operating flights prior to departure to the relevant law enforcement authorities has a tremendous role in preventing, detecting, investigating, and prosecuting criminal activities that are transnational in nature, like trafficking in drugs. The Passenger Information Unit (PIU) has the critical task of identifying high risk passengers, based on the passenger information received from aircraft operators. Advantages of having PIUs and use of PNR have been thoroughly discussed within the CGSEEA and airport law enforcement services services which still do not use them might not equally participate in the joint activities of the group. Listing obstacles in their work, some interviewees proposed to organise a training of trainers for the CGSEEA members so they could transfer acquainted knowledges to their colleagues at the national level and ensure wider increase of capacities.

5.2. Focus group

Within this assessment task a focus group was organised to discuss more in-depth some key issues related to the CGSEEA value, structure, operation and future perspective. It was comprised of five CGSEEA members from five countries, three representing customs and two police authorities.

The discussion was initiated with exploration of the coordination mechanism of the CGSEEA based on the lived experience of the participants. The Joint Declaration adopted in 2015 foresees an annual rotation of a chairing country. Participants of the focus group agreed that such a concept is boosting participation and activity level of a country which has taken up the role to coordinate the group in a given year. This usually entails a higher commitment of the host country to invest human, material and occasionally financial resources in the meeting (with significant support from the Pompidou Group Secretariat) It has also become a successful practice that the host country takes responsibility for coordinating the CGSEEA joint operation in the year that follows which is once again a demanding and challenging task, especially in the terms of human resources and significant amount of the administrative work. It has been suggested to slightly change this model and have two countries of two authorities (police and customs) to jointly chair the group and its activities.

Regarding the joint operations, the most challenging is to find a suitable timeframe to ease the burden on responsible staff of a leading country but also of the other participating countries. At the end of the year, there are usually more international activities, including various operations and the summer months are difficult due to increased airport traffic and staff holidays. It has been proposed to plan joint operations in the future in June or in the second half of September. Leading countries would appreciate technical support in organising and conducting joint operations. It has been suggested that only more experienced countries with optimal resources (human, technical and financial) engage in coordinating roles in general.

Participants noted that if the group continues to repeat itself with the same activities and the mode of work year after year, no serious progress should be expected. There is a need for change/evolution, and one of the proposals was to exchange of officers during the joint operations to build the mutual trust, enhance the cooperation and exchange of knowledge and best practices, consequently also increasing the operational results and outcomes.

Another issue which participants touched upon was regarding their superiors. In some countries, chiefs of the law enforcement airport services who are not involved in the joint operation are prone to obstruct them. Similar to what has been heard during the interviews, the focus group suggested a high-level meeting to inform of the purpose, activities, outcome and added values of the CGSEEA and thereof increase its visibility.

One of the problems emphasised by the focus group is unstable representation of some countries in the CGSEEA, frequent rotation of appointed members and passive participation in some cases, not only for appropriate reasons such as promotion or retirement. Especially ideas for motivating non-active members from the region, notably Romania and Albania were discussed. Another proposal was to ask Interpol and CELEC to allow a presentation during their annual meeting to introduce CGSEEA and its activities. The aforementioned organisations could also be invited to take part in the CGSEEA joint operation in some way. This could open the possibility to reach also Romanian and Albanian authorities.

Participants stated that the reports on the conducted joint operation have not been sufficiently used. There is a need to reconsider data collection and reporting, notably

“who do we want to reach and how the data could be better used for the benefit of the CGSEEA but also in the national contexts”.

Considering the annual CGSEEA meetings, participants believe that there are too many presentations on the agenda and suggest selecting one or two topics that would go more in-depth.

Participants reflected on **possible future activities**: especially a workshop on cooperation with carriers (to include also aircraft engineers) and a workshop on risk assessment (concealing methods, behavioural analysis) were mentioned. Ideally, such workshops should last at least two days and should include two participants per country, representing both customs and police. Another option, which would enable far larger coverage of target audience, would be a training of trainers (one week).

Finally, the main value of the CGSEEA were discussed. For non-EU countries, a major benefit is to obtain knowledge and ideas on how processes work at the EU level and increase their capacities and working methods. Participants once again confirmed that the highest value of this initiative is trust and close contact between members which opens a possibility for immediate exchange of information and action.

6. Discussion of findings (SWOT analysis)

Overall, the vast majority of participants of this assessment found that the purpose and objectives of the CGSEEA have been fulfilled, and the format and working methods have mostly or fully met their expectations.

Information gathered through online questionnaire, interviews and a focus group have been used for carrying out a SWOT analysis the results of which are presented below.

6.1. Strengths

Regarding the main strong points of the group’s work, respondents pointed out trust and confidence among colleagues, a strong partnership and personal contacts which together enable real-time cooperation, and immediate joint actions in tackling drug-related crime. The possibility for fast and secure exchange of information and experiences is perceived as a privilege of the CGSEEA members since such type of communication is not available on other platforms. Although this is not official correspondence and is therefore often underestimated as a form of cooperation, it enables access to key information which helps solving urgent situations and cases. Members from various cultural environments act as one mind in tackling drugs, regardless of historical, political or other differences persisting in the region. Furthermore, the respondents very much appreciate sharing operational knowledge, experience, best practices and information on new trends, trainings, the possibility to discuss specific cases in detail and new communication channels introduced.

Good coordination of the CGSEEA by the Secretariat of the Pompidou Group was also found to be a strong point for success.

6.2. Weaknesses

Some countries frequently change their representatives which puts an obstacle to building trust and connecting with the group. Another weakness is lack of interest in

cooperation perceived in the case of some countries where nominated representatives are less motivated to actively take part in the network. It has also been noted that some appointed officials do not have adequate knowledge in drug-related issues which prevents them from fully participating in the group. Efforts were made by the Pompidou Group Secretariat to officially request nominations from non-participating countries but so far with yielded only partial results.

Although some respondents do not see any major obstacles to cooperation, for others obstacles were primarily observed in mutual communication between some of the participating countries (e.g. due to diplomatic or political relations). Consequently, the work of the group hinges on a core group of permanent members who initiate and carry most of the initiatives. Irregular communication not using the full potential of the secure channel set up for this purpose was also mentioned pointed out.

Limited local capacity has also hindered cooperation in some cases. Lack of staff at the airport services, insufficient technical equipment and inadequate knowledge of the new types of substances together with non-supportive superiors are seen as the most serious obstacles at the local level. Leverage of the Pompidou Group as a Council of Europe entities was used in 2019 and 2020 to officially inform superiors of the results of the CGSEEA and stress its added value and the importance of stable membership in the group. This should be continued, and possibly other ways of increasing support could be explored.

Collaboration is also hampered by the fact that everyone has key responsibilities that need to be done in their day-to-day work (work overload) paired with the fact that formal cooperation enjoys priority (e.g. at EU level). This also reflected in the challenge of finding the right timing for joint operations. Differing national legislations and legal limitations in some countries related to exchange of personal data with foreign authorities were pointed out as one of the most challenging issues.

Moreover, insufficient visibility of the CGSEEA, especially at local levels, in some countries presents an obstacle for more active engagement.

6.3. Opportunities

Most respondents were very enthusiastic regarding opportunities for continuing and even further strengthening the work of the CGSEEA. Secure exchange of information already provides possibility to achieve better operational results. However, exchange of customs and police officers between participating airports could offer the possibility to better understand different contexts, learn from each other and strengthen partnership.

It was proposed to invite expert(s) from non-participating countries to conduct an assessment at interested CGSEEA airports to support positive changes and enhance work. Furthermore, developing a program for training of trainers that would enable transfer of specific knowledge locally to a wider audience is another opportunity where CGSEEA could support the increase of local capacities at a larger scale. Another suggestion was that each member of the CGSEEA should organise at his/her airport a permanent contact point (e-mail address, telephone, mobile) operating 24/7 where all members of the group and their colleagues from the participating airports could promptly get information in case of urgent queries. Since airports services work around the clock, this idea should be easy to implement but depends on the organisation of each airport.

Regarding the annual CGSEEA meetings, there is an interest in developing a more focused agenda that would allow to explore 1-2 topics more in-depth or to introduce 2-day workshops on topics of special interest (e.g. cooperation with couriers, concealing

methods, behavioural analysis, and personnel protective equipment for officers). Such opportunities would allow more structured exchange of knowledge and good practices, and further upgrading the knowledge on new challenges and trends.

There were several proposals for activities that aim to increase visibility of the CGSEEA in participating countries and at international level (especially organisations specialised in tackling organised crime): organising a high-level meeting in the near future; sending official invitations to less active countries to join operations and initiatives led by the CGSEEA; promoting positive effect of the CGSEEA on operational outcomes at participating airports (in daily work).

Increasing collaboration and synergies with other cooperation platforms/initiatives could positively contribute to tailoring better responses to new activities of organized crime groups and improving capacity of counter narcotics efforts in the region.

In the future, respondents expect improved communication between the participating countries, strengthened collaboration methods, further improvement of closer cooperation between members on occurring specific cases, more in-depth sharing of good practices and case studies, continuing the networking among the members and even upgrading the cooperation, technical support, more joint operations, more direct communication, more frequent CGSEEA meetings, more people joining the meetings. Respondents also noted that cooperation should become a way of work on a daily basis and that given the complexity of their work and the significant threat that easy access to drugs pose to our societies, anything new to their work would be welcome.

It is to be noted that current and future opportunities provided by the Pompidou Group to facilitate the work of the CGSEEA (e.g. covering of expenses for organisation of and participation in meetings, workshops, study visits) depend on commitment and support by its member states and their willingness to offer financial support in the form of voluntary contributions.

6.4. Threats

Only a few threats have been highlighted which mainly relate to the economic aspects: possible budgetary restrictions; cuts or limitations in financing (“if members are not interested / active enough or poor results”). Global effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and other similar crisis situations in the future might also negatively reflect on the activities and further operation of the group.

As an external factor lack of stable funding for the group can also be noted. Current and future opportunities provided by the Pompidou Group to facilitate the work of the CGSEEA (e.g. covering of expenses for organisation of and participation in meetings, workshops, study visits) depend on commitment and support by its member states and their willingness to offer financial support in the form of voluntary contributions.

7. Recommendations

Based on the previously described findings, following recommendations for future work of the CGSEEA have been made:

Regarding improvement of working methods and format,

1. The core format, structure and activities of the group should be kept.
2. Possibilities for motivating less active countries for full participation in the group's work should be explored – e.g. invite countries to appoint representatives which correspond to the standard profile of the CGSEEA members and ensure their long-term participation, when possible; organise consultations with individual countries of concern to more closely present the work of the group and jointly explore possible obstacles and opportunities for overcoming them.
3. In support of stable and long-term participation of members, a standard and commonly agreed profile could be designed to which all members of the group could correspond (e.g. originating from the customs or police airport service; solid knowledge of drug markets and trafficking trends; affiliation with national law enforcement agencies; access to supply-related and profiling data at airports) and shared with nominating authorities.
4. Communication within group members should stay informal on a daily basis to ensure fast exchange of information. At the same time, the possibility to introduce clearer communication protocols for joint operations should be discussed to encourage less active or hesitant members.
5. Directory of operational contacts should continue to be regularly updated and shared with the members.
6. Plenary session of annual meetings could be focused on 1-2 topics per meeting to enable in-depth insight into specific issues/case studies.
7. Separating the technical meetings from the annual meetings should be considered if budget and other circumstances allow, in order to ensure adequate time for building capacities and upgrading operational capacities. The possibly to include more case studies with new modus operandi and latest trends in the agenda of the technical meetings should also be considered.
8. Reporting on joint operations could be better structured and streamlined, for example by developing a standardised template in online format. Recording the number of arrests must be clarified for the next operations, given the differences between arrest power of officers working at different SEE airports. It is recommended to report separately on the number of cases and arrests, and efforts should be made by the countries themselves to improve the overall quality of data reporting.
9. Efforts should be made to motivate participants to regularly share meeting outcomes with their colleagues and superiors (e.g. by producing a short appealing document with a brief overview and key conclusions in addition to the regular meeting report).

Regarding future activities,

10. If budgetary constraints allow, the exchange of officers to work jointly with their counterparts at other airports and get a closer insight in their working methods (3-4-day visits) could be facilitated by the group.
11. A program for training of trainers could be developed that would transfer specific knowledge locally to a wider audience at relevant airport services.
12. Organising an independent assessment by external experts (possibly from a non-participating country) at interested CGSEEA airports could be considered to support positive changes and enhance work.
13. A strategy should be developed for improving visibility of the group in participating countries and at the international level (especially among organisations specialised in tackling organised crime). One of the activities for promoting the CGSEEA could be a high-level meeting for senior officers (e.g. heads of law enforcement airport services or potentially officials at the national police and customs headquarters) to present the work of the CGSEEA and raise their awareness of the problems related to conducting risk assessment as well as the importance of regional cooperation.

Appendices

APPENDIX 1

QUESTIONNAIRE ON THE COOPERATION GROUP OF SOUTH-EAST EUROPEAN AIRPORTS

This Questionnaire was designed as a part of methodology to assess the work of the Cooperation Group of South-East European Airports (hereinafter: CGSEEA) which is operating under auspices of the Pompidou Group of the Council of Europe (hereinafter: PG) and to give recommendations for its further improvement. The assessment targets period from 2015, when the CGSEEA was set up, until the end of 2021.

The information collected through the questionnaire shall serve as background information for follow-up interviews with members of the network. The interviews shall focus on the results of the questionnaire to clarify possible unclear issues and diverging answers.

Please respond to all questions and fill in boxes where your personal opinion is required.

You will need approximately 15 minutes to answer all questions.

Thank you for your kind cooperation!

1. Please choose your country:

Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Kosovo [All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.], Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Slovenia, Serbia, Turkey

2. Which national authority are you representing?

3. Which year did you personally joined the CGSEEA?

2015-2021

4. In which capacity have you been participating in the CGSEEA (it is possible to select multiple choice)?

Chair, Co-chair, Participated in the meeting, Participated in joint operations, Cooperation with the other country(-ies) in the frame of the network, Other

If you have answered "other", please specify.

5. Can you recall how many CGSEEA meetings did you attend?

6. In your opinion, to which extent has the CGSEEA met its purpose, as written in the CGSEEA Joint Declaration: "... a platform for discussion on specific issues and emerging trends, transfer of knowledge and best practices within the SEE Network of the Pompidou Group."?

1-5 (not at all – slightly - partially- mostly-completely)

Please provide an input on concrete examples which support your opinion on the purpose of the CGSEEA.

7. In your opinion, to which extent has the CGSEEA met its key objectives, as written in the CGSEEA Joint Declaration:

a) to streamline working methods by development and harmonization of tools and systems to improve drug detection in South East European airports

1-5 (not at all – slightly - partially- mostly-completely)

b) to enhance the operational capacities through specific technical meetings in various formats following specific requests or identified immediate needs

1-5 (not at all – slightly - partially- mostly-completely)

c) to improve the operational results related to fight against illicit drug trafficking by timely exchange of operational information

1-5 (not at all – slightly - partially- mostly-completely)

Please provide an input on concrete examples which support your opinion on key objectives of the CGSEEA.

8. Please shortly describe your expectations from the CGSEEA when you joined the network.

9. To which extent your expectations from the CGSEEA have been met?

1-5 (much less than expected – less than expected – matched expectation – exceeded expectation – greatly exceeded expectations)

10. Please rate the annual CGSEEA meetings, specifically:

a) structure of the meetings

1-5 (very poor–poor-good-very good-excellent)

b) relevance of the topics

1-5 (completely irrelevant – irrelevant – neither relevant nor irrelevant - relevant – very relevant)

c) meeting dynamic / level of interactions

1-5 (very poor–poor-good-very good-excellent)

d) follow up of the meeting conclusions

1-5 (very poor–poor-good-very good-excellent)

Please provide your suggestions to improve the concept of annual CGSEEA meetings (e.g. more workshop type sessions, discussions, dynamics ...).

11. Please rate the technical CGSEEA meetings, specifically:

a) structure of the meetings

1-5 (very poor–poor-good-very good-excellent)

b) relevance of the topics

1-5 (completely irrelevant – irrelevant – neither relevant nor irrelevant - relevant – very relevant)

c) meeting dynamic / level of interactions

1-5 (very poor–poor-good-very good-excellent)

d) follow up of the meeting conclusions

1-5 (very poor–poor-good-very good-excellent)

Please provide your suggestions to improve the concept of technical CGSEEA meetings (e.g. confidentiality).

12. Do you share outcomes of the CGSEEA meeting with your colleagues and other relevant national authorities?

Yes

No

If yes, with whom do you share outcomes of the meetings?

.....

13. Have you or your colleagues been involved in the preparation of CGSEEA joint operations?

Yes

No (please proceed to question 18)

If yes, please briefly describe your involvement

14. Have you actively participated in CGSEEA joint operations?

Yes

No

If yes, in which capacity?

15. Has involvement of your authority in the CGSEEA joint operations resulted with concrete outputs such as seizures, arrests etc.?

Yes

No

If yes, please briefly elaborate what data is available for such cases.

16. Do you share outcomes of the joint operations with relevant national authorities?

Yes

No

If yes, please specify with whom do you share outcomes of the joint operations.

17. Based on the outcomes of the joint operations, do you organize any follow up activities at the national level?

Yes

No

If yes, please briefly elaborate on that.

18. Do you have adequate technical capacities and support of your national authority for conducting operational activities organized in the frame of the CGSEEA?

Yes

No

If no, please briefly elaborate the obstacles.

19. In your opinion, to which extent has the CGSEEA cooperation platform strengthened partnership of your national authority with:

a) other airport law enforcement authority(-ies) at your national level
1-5 (not strengthened at all – slightly strengthened - somewhat strengthened - fairly strengthened – significantly strengthened)

b) other airport services at your national level
1-5 (not strengthened at all – slightly strengthened - somewhat strengthened - fairly strengthened – significantly strengthened)

c) other relevant law enforcement authorities at the airports of the CGSEEA member states
1-5 (not strengthened at all – slightly strengthened - somewhat strengthened - fairly strengthened – significantly strengthened)

Please give some examples of the partnership which derived from the CGSEEA network.

20. Are you familiar with other similar initiatives that are potentially overlapping with the CGSEEA activities in the South- East Europe?

Yes

No

If yes, please briefly describe such initiatives, areas of overlapping and potential for streamlining the activities and cooperation.

21. Do you participate in the Co-operation Group of Drug Control Services at European Airports (the Airports Group)?

Yes

No

If yes, how would you rate cooperation between the CGSEEA and the Airports Group?

1-5 (very poor–poor-good-very good-excellent)

Please give your suggestions for possible future strengthening of cooperation between the CGSEEA and the Airports Group

22. To which extent your superiors support your participation in the CGSEEA network?

1-5 (not at all – slightly support - somewhat support - fairly support – significantly support)

23. How would you rate the coordination of the CGSEEA by the Secretariat of the PG?

1-5 (very poor–poor-good-very good-excellent)

24. In your opinion, is there a need for more clear communication protocols in day-to-day communication of the CGSEEA network and during joint operations?

Yes

No

I don't know

25. Do you professionally communicate with your colleagues from the CGSEEA network also in the platforms other than those provided by the CGSEEA?

Yes

No

26. What opportunities do you see in cooperation within the CGSEEA?

27. What obstacles do you see in cooperation within the CGSEEA, in any?

28. What is the added value that you see in participating in the CGSEEA?

29. What are your expectations from the CGSEEA in the future?

THANK YOU FOR ANSWERING THE QUESTIONNAIRE!

APPENDIX 2

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW ON THE COOPERATION GROUP OF SOUTH-EAST EUROPEAN AIRPORTS

Dear member of the Cooperation Group of South-East European Airports (hereinafter: CGSEEA),

Thank you for accepting to take part in the assessment of the CGSSEA which has been operating under auspices of the Pompidou Group of the Council of Europe (hereinafter: PG) since 2015. My name is Lidija Vugrinec and I was contracted by the Pompidou Group to assess work of the CGSEEA over 8 years. The assessment targets period from 2015 onwards (anticipating activities in 2022).

Your opinion on the general structure and work of the CGSEEA, which you have provided in the online questionnaire, is highly appreciated. To better understand outcomes of the interviews and to more clearly elaborate on strong and weak points of the Group but also on future opportunities and possible obstacles that might prevent optimal operation and further development of the network, semi-structured interviews with the CGSEEA members have been foreseen in the second phase of the assessment. This would allow formulating recommendations for further improvement of this network and its sustainability. The results are intended for use by the Pompidou Group and the participating CGSEEA countries.

During the interview I will be asking you some questions about your opinions and experiences with the CGSEEA mandate, work frame and cooperation framework I will be taking notes as we talk. I hope it is okay for me to audio-record our conversation so that I can be sure to capture everything you say. Please feel free to let me know if you do not want to be audio-recorded. Be rest assured that all the information you provide in this interview will be treated confidentially.

The interview will last for about 20-30 minutes.

Here is the list of questions which will guide us through the interview (reflecting on how this has evolved over time since you became involved):

1. Can you describe the role of the CGSEEA in tackling illicit trafficking in drugs (and related criminal activities) and contributing to the safety and security in your country and the CGSEEA region?
2. How do you perceive existing cooperation mechanisms of the CGSEEA in supporting and fostering close collaboration of competent authorities at the airport(s) in your country and with the airport authorities in the CGSEEA region?
3. How would you describe capacity building component of the CGSEEA (with a reflection on informative content vs. specific trainings on improving technical skills)? Can you think of some examples where CGSEEA activity stimulated changes in working methods of your authority?
4. Can you please elaborate how are the conclusions of the annual and technical meeting followed / implemented?
5. How do you see the relevance of CGSEEA in collection, analysis and interpretation of data/information the on illicit trafficking in drugs and related criminal activities (obtained during joint operations or regular work of the relevant

authorities)? What would be the benefits for your country and the CGSEEA region?

6. Can you describe the role of participating countries in initiating and managing activities of the CGSEEA? How do you perceive sense of the ownership and shared responsibility in the network?
7. How has COVID-19 impacted the operations and activities of CGSEEA in the past two years?
8. Do you have any thoughts on how CGSEEA can further improve its work going forward?
9. Could you please provide three main strengths, three main weaknesses, three main opportunities and three main threats facing CGSEEA (SWOT analysis template enclosed)?
10. Do you have anything you would like to add to this interview?

APPENDIX 3

SWOT Analysis Template

Please identify the three main strengths, three main weaknesses, three main opportunities and three main threats facing CGSEEA

3 main strengths

3 main weaknesses

3 main opportunities

3 main threats

