



CELBET

CUSTOMS EXPERT TEAM



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Year 2020 - to forget and to remember forever

Dogs as a COVID-19 test ?

Training for the virus detection by sniffer dogs



Jyrki Linna
Head of CEL BET

During exceptional times for everyone, CEL BET adapted to the current situation, adjusted the schedules and redesigns the actions within some of the tasks. As a whole, CEL BET has been able to proceed. In most cases this has happened virtually, but also physical activities have been carried out at the borders, like Short CEL BET Activities (SCA) which are described in this magazine.

Directors General of Customs administrations participating in CEL BET Steering Committee meeting in November, took note that several activities implemented within CEL BET are in line with expected objectives of the Commission Communication "Taking the Customs Union to the Next Level: a Plan for Action". This assessment is important to CEL BET when we move to the areas which can be of interest of 27 EU member states.

As an example:

In Border crossing point evaluation, we have developed diagnostic study tool with peer review as part of that process. This will enhance alignment of practises.

In risk management area our comparative studies on risk engines and quarterly collected and shared seizure data increase the exchange of data between CEL BET member states and through CRMS also with all EU member states.

In Customs Control area, our Joint activities aim at enhanced operational cooperation responding to emerging risks. We are arranging them regularly, also during pandemic.

In the area of Equipment, CCEI (Customs control equipment instrument) is said to be inspired by the work CEL BET has done.

In training, CEL BET has developed several training modules for Customs professionals and carried out train the trainer courses physically and virtually, and these are opening to all CEL BET member states. In several CEL BET MS, our training modules have been taken into national training programmes.

In the area of cooperation, we have developed the concept of mission and we will carry out several missions during CEL BET 3. This means that uniformed Customs officers will work in another CEL BET country by invitation and under lead of host country.

As team meetings and management meetings are virtual, the number of meetings has been much higher than what was scheduled for physical meetings. When we look at the horizon we can see the new normal, where our work will continue by both physical and virtual means. We will be attentive in finding balance, not to exhaust our experts, who are working for us also during these exceptional times.

Year 2020 was a year to forget – and to remember forever

Anna Hatala-Wanat, CELBET PR Expert

To instantly forget, of course, because of the pandemic, but it was also a year to remember. While we were fighting with the invisible enemy, many heroes in each professional area appeared. We, as a customs expert team, can tell a lot about the engagement of customs officers in such a risky duty during pandemic, keeping hand on pulse of economic flow and human traffic.

President of the European Commission Mrs. Ursula von der Leyen, highlighted the role, effectiveness and fruitful cooperation between the Commission and customs services: „The pandemic caused major disruption to travel and transportation in Europe. Various restrictive health measures introduced by Member States in March and April led to the closing of borders or to strict controls, and thousands of lorries were stuck in long queues. To maintain the flow of goods across EU internal borders, safeguard essential supply chains and protect transport workers, the Commission worked quickly with Member States to designate ‘green lane’ border crossings across the trans-European transport network so that lorries could cross the border within 15 minutes at most.

The Copernicus and Galileo Earth-observation and navigation programmes helped to pinpoint bottlenecks and keep transport moving. In October, the Commission extended the ‘green lane’ approach to multimodal transport, including rail and waterborne freight and air cargo, and stressed the need to ensure essential connectivity for passengers.



Photo: Petteri Lehtonen

In March, the Commission issued guidelines for border-management measures to protect health and ensure supplies of goods and essential services, including medicines and medical equipment for frontline medical personnel. These were followed in May by guidelines and recommendations to help Member States gradually lift the temporary border controls and travel restrictions, with all the necessary safety measures in place.”



Thanks to BCP Networks, CELBET experts have current information from the source-border crossing points had the possibility to compare the data and to exchange the experience in coping with the pandemic.

To sniff the COVID

How the dogs' talent can be used in war with the virus. Polish officers already know.

We know that the customs service dogs are reliable and one of the best tool in fighting with smuggling. Customs know how to get the best from their talent to sniff, but now the new possibility appeared: to use dogs as a COVID-19 test.

National Revenue Administration of Poland has decided to implement a training protocol for the detection of Sars-CoV-2 by sniffer dogs. The pilot training is being organized from 8 March till 30 April 2021 at the Canine Training Center in Kamion, central Poland.

The four teams that have been taking part in the pilot training, were selected based on the SIRA: Sniffer Dog's Index, the guides' features, their experience in combating crime and predisposition to work with sniffer dogs.

What kind of dogs were trained?

Three Labrador Retrievers and one English Springer Spaniel breed. The dogs selected for the pilot training had previously completed basic drug and tobacco detection trainings. We can say, that dogs have to forget their first tobacco and drugs education and learn new smell. Quite challenging but first pilot training results are promising.

The aim of the pilot phase is to try to learn them a new fragrance: volatile organic compounds, collected from people infected with Sars-CoV-2 and at the same time from healthy people. This helps dogs to smell a difference between the infected and healthy people; passanegers.



The training is based on behavioral methods and appetite enhancement, thanks to which we maintain the well-being of dogs and their ability to continue such important and needed service after the training.



Article was written with a support of Mr. Mateusz Połomski, Head of Unit of Canine Training Centre in Kamion, Poland.



TEAM's Activity

The pandemic time is an online meeting time, not only in CELBET life, but in majority of the institutions. Despite of the many obstacles, teams are collecting the data, analyzing, training, organizing joint actions and providing the results that reflect the current situation and influence the customs daily work at the border.

BCP Evaluation Team

The BCP Evaluation Team has been diligently working on two main topics during the last months:

- The team has conducted virtual trainings for the **BCP Diagnostic Study**. The training consists of three parts. There are altogether three training groups. At the end we have now 25 people in the pool of experts for the future **BCP Diagnostic Missions**
- The team will provide a list to be used as a check-list during the control of a passenger car and a truck. The scope of the task has been broadened to cover also the truck traffic as individual MSs were asking for it. Several meetings with RM and CC team members have been organized and the team has continued to work on the topic.

The checklist for the passenger cars will be ready by the end of April 2021 and the similar deliverable on truck traffic later in 2021.

In addition to these two topics BCP team has also been working on these issues:

- The planning to create a Diagnostic Study Tool for the Rail BCPs is ongoing. First meetings have been organized in February 2021.
- The team has explored existing practical solutions in prevention of corruption at the BCPs and provided the information for the Training team for the basis of the training to be developed. The task is completed.



Unfortunately, due to the situation with the COVID-19 it has been impossible to carry out the Diagnostic Studies or Monitoring Checks as planned.

Risk Management team

The Risk Management Team initiated collection of the seizures data from CELBET MS.

In cooperation with CELBET Training Team, “Interesting seizures” webpage at edu.celbet.eu was launched and it is updated every time after CELBET MS submit their description of the interesting seizures accompanied by photos.

Expert teams guide for proposers – Customs 2020 - of the training platform and share the data within their risk management structures and administration to relevant officers.

The team, together with Customs Control team, organized Short CELBET Actions (SCA) at the selected BCPs. The objective of a SCA is to provide better picture on the real situation at the external EU land border in all 11 CELBET countries.

The RM Team has started drafting a questionnaire to gather knowledge regarding the risk management in passengers traffic and control strategies in CELBET MS.

Three experts of RM Team participated in ICS2 Security Risk Rules Project Group – “Analytics Subgroup”.

The Risk Management team has contacted Europol in order to discuss and agree on the process of data sharing and cross-checking of the data before Joint CELBET Actions.





Customs Control Team

Due to the current situation with COVID-19 passenger traffic flow decreased significantly in all CELBET countries whereas cargo traffic flow remains almost at the same level. The number of detected smuggling cases in truck driver's cabin have increased in several countries. It is logical assumption that nowadays smuggling pressure and temptation to smuggle for truck drivers is high, also criminal organisations are looking for other ways for their illegal activities.

As a response to new emerging threats Customs Controls team organized two Short CELBET Actions (SCA) at the selected BCPs. The first SCA lasted three days on 3-5 November 2020 and was focused on truck cabins' controls, whereas the second SCA2 lasted on 16-18 February 2021 and was focused on empty trucks and cabins control. The objective of SCA was to provide better picture on the real situation at the external EU land border in all 11 CELBET countries.



It should be noted that due to safety reasons related to COVID-19 additional control activities were not mandatory from CELBET side, nevertheless, intensified control measures could be taken based on national decision. In addition, based on the suggestions from different colleagues, MSs were invited to involve canine teams and additional staff like mobile units or extra officers as support to the BCP's staff during SCA2. CELBET also collected information on the absent staff affected by COVID-19 during SCA2.

Short CELBET Action 1 results



20 343 trucks entered EU territory during SCA, 39 % (7 864) truck cabins have been checked during 2,5 days

53 irregularities have been detected in 7 MSs. The most popular detected goods were cigarettes – 12 750 pcs., alcohol – 14 litres, foodstuff – 10,5 kg, CITES (bear and badger fat ointment) – 700 ml, fuel – 50 litres, seeds – 62 kg and footwear – 9 pairs.

Short CEL BET Action 2 results

21 554 trucks entered EU territory through selected BCP's (only 1 211 more than during SCA1 although SCA2 lasted one shift (12 hours) longer,) 3 821 cabins and 2 307 empty trucks were checked during SCA2 using specially prepared checklist

44 irregularities (33 cases in cabins and 11 cases in cargo area) have been detected in 8 MSs comparing to 53 seizures of SCA1 (17% less). The most popular detected goods were cigarettes – 42 600 pcs. alcohol – 14 litres, textiles – 12 250 pcs, gold – 345 gr, perfumes – 275 pcs, cosmetics – 3,5 kg, medicines – 6,65 kg, undeclared cash – 22 600 EUR, and GPS signal blocker.



After two SCAs the following conclusions and recommendations have been made:

- COVID-19 pandemic did not affect commercial traffic, the traffic flow remained almost at the same level, slight decrease of traffic flow might be caused by very low temperature in some counties and off-season in February comparing to pre-Christmas season in November.
- During SCA2 absence of officers due to COVID-19 was not significant. Only two BCP's (in SK and PL) were heavily affected by absence of officers.
- Despite the COVID-19 pandemic many MSs were able to engage additional resources during SCA2. Canine teams were used in all MSs (at least at some shifts and some BCPs) whereas in 6 MSs additional staff was involved.

Results of both SCAs proved the risk of illegal activities committed by truck drivers.

- In addition, checklist for control of cargo area and truck cabin was provided as a supportive tool. It was recommended to use it by customs officers at BCP's during their daily work, out of the scope of SCA.
- One MS (PL) used the check-list for control of each truck. During each control, officer was obliged to tick the performed actions and sign the checklist. It is a practice which can be considered by other MSs to implement during the next joint activities.

In addition, despite the challenging period for all CEL BET countries, all MSs were able to participate in SCA, which is very much appreciated by CEL BET.



Training Team

In February 2021 two webinar trainings were organised by the Training Team: “Risk analysis – fake documents” in which 17 colleagues from 10 CELBET countries participated and the trainer was from Hungary; and “X-ray image analysing” webinar, delivered by Polish, Estonian and Hungarian trainers. Two customs officers per CELBET country had possibility to participate on this event.



What is most important and worth mentioning, in the future these trainings are going to be organised more often and not only for CELBET states, but – in cooperation with DG TAXUD – for all EU states and candidate countries under the CLEP program.

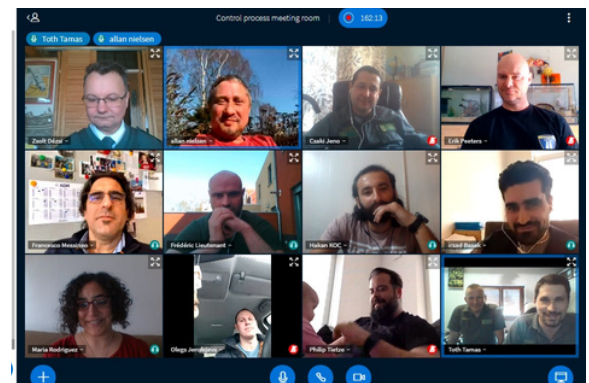
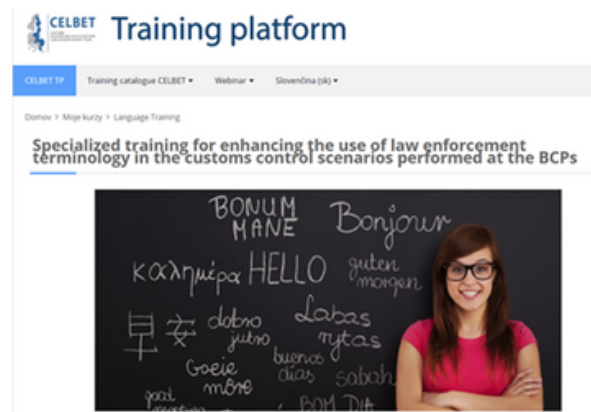




First eLearning session

CEL BET training team organized the first eLearning session: “Specialized training for enhancing the use of law enforcement terminology in the customs control scenarios performed at the BCP’s”. **38 students** from all CEL BET Member States signed in for a course. This three days eLearning course was the first part of a multiform learning. It was highly motivating to see that most of the participants joined in and performed well in their studies.

In addition to eLearning, Training team offered students a chance to practice their spoken English. The CEL BET Café was opened daily for a short break from written exercises to have a discussion with fellow students and built CEL BET training community, strengthening the relations between officers or built new one. The course was continued in April with webinars.

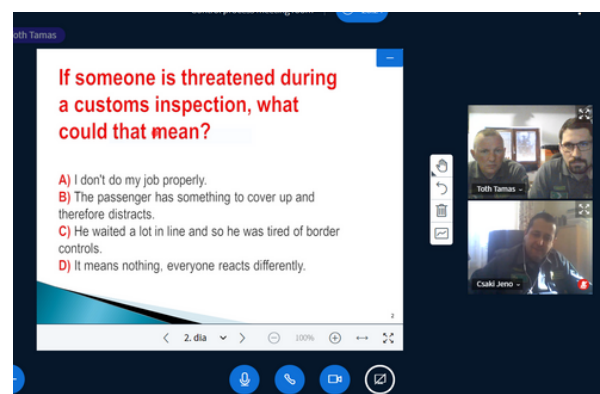


West, East, North and South of Europe as trainees

Customs control process webinars

Under the DG TAXUD CLEP programs, CEL BET organised two webinars on Customs control process topic. First, only for CEL BET countries, was organized on 23-24 March and second, for all EU and candidate countries, took place on 30-31 March.

These webinars were only a part of the full training because – as a pioneer, and also the longest training ever under the Customs programs – it was organised as a blended-learning approach. It means that the webinar will be followed by the e-learning part of the training program, in which the e-learning modules produced by the DG TAXUD and CEL BET will be used for self-learning on the CEL BET Training Platform.



The final part of the training program will be – hopefully – live, practical training in October, at the Hungarian-Serbian border. The trainers are from Hungary and Latvia and the trainees were from Spain to Turkey and from Sweden to Cyprus.

Equipment Team

How the EQ team is developing platform for sharing product information.

The platform includes new technical solutions and practical user experience on customs control equipment

EQ team is collecting market research results, product information and end-user experiences, which are shared on a platform for product information data base. The data base is available and its content is constantly expanding. In addition to the CELBET Procurement Expert Network (CPEN), those experts of the BCP Network, who indicated their interest were also given access to the platform.

The aim is to make access to the requested data as simple as possible, so EQ team made the product information directly available from a review document. Another common goal is to continuously expand the database, and EQ team expects the active involvement of CPEN experts. EQ team requests that when new equipment are procured or tested by the Member States, experts should draw up a product information form and share it with each other through the database.

Customs Control Equipment Instrument (CCEI) is of particular importance to the Member States, and the EQ team has therefore held a web meeting with representatives of DG TAXUD dealing with CCEI issues and agreed on continued cooperation. As the preparation for the use of CCEI is a priority issue in all Member States, the subject is a permanent agenda point at the meetings.



ETCIT and CELBET as partners

Cooperation with ETCIT Expert Team on new approaches to develop and operate Customs IT systems has started. The two expert teams are looking for the possibility of working together, which is currently identifiable in the area of the automated number plate recognition system. The collaboration is ongoing, joint virtual discussions are regular.

CELBET EQ team together with ETCIT experts made a questionnaire to study current situation of application and potential development of Automatic Number Plates Recognition Systems (ANPRS) in Member States (MS). The EU survey will be sent to all EU MS and the responses will show the extent to which Member States are willing to cooperate in this area. After analysing the replies to the questionnaire, it will be possible to identify CELBET Member States that may participate in a joint pilot.

On 24.03 by the invitation of ETCIT, EQ team leader Mr. Andras Bartha, attended Customs CIO (Chief Information Officer) Workshop. During the online meeting, which had 60 participants (including Head of the Belgian Administration of Customs & Excise) and COM (including Director, Digital delivery of Customs and Taxation Policies - TAXUD.B), EQ team leader made a presentation on Collaboration project for ANPRS (Automated

Number Plates Recognition System). The main goal of the presentation was to describe the perfect example for a collaboration of two operating expert teams when the IT requirements of CELBET have been identified and taken forward by ETCIT.

CELBET X-ray image and data exchange platform

The need for X-ray image and information exchange has two main reasons:

A significant amount of X-ray images should be used for training, especially those showing hiding places discovered by X-ray equipment. Manufacturers provide only basic trainings for X-ray operators, which are not sufficient for the purpose of image interpretation. In order to enhance the skills and abilities of officers in X-ray image analysing, the trainings must include real-life seizure cases. It is very important to collect as many different images and cases as possible, in order to prepare effective training content.

Enrolment options



Images can also be useful during practical work. The majority of X-ray scanners in CELBET MS work locally without any connection to other and/or similar equipment. It means officers operating the scanners could lack information about existing seizures in other BCPs on the same border strip and in other countries, whilst threats and tendencies being the same. Exchanging of X-ray images and information on seizures and using scanners improve their skills, awareness about smuggling trends and the overall effectiveness of non-intrusive inspections.



The team successfully launched the X-ray image and data exchange platform, which is used continuously. A network was developed for facilitating practical cooperation between the users enabling continuous conduct of rapid professional consultations and exchange of information. The platform currently has more than **30 active users**, **the database contains a complex description of more than 130 seizures made by scanners** and the database is constantly expanding with new uploads. Based on the feedback, the X-ray data and images available on the platform can be used effectively in the practical training of X-ray operators. In running the platform, CELBET X-ray Centre of Expertise from Poland plays a particularly active role, greatly facilitating cooperation in the field of X-ray inspections.

By the request of COM, the EQ team on the CELBET Training Platform prepared a test platform with the help of Slovak IT experts, where the exchange of information operated by CELBET can be tested by experts from other Member States (Belgium, France, Germany, Malta, Slovenia and Spain). The results of the pilot are expected to be used in the development of the CMRS2 managed by DG TAXUD. For safety reasons, the full database is not be available on the test platform, and only those CELBET Member States who volunteer to do so upload cases. Member States other than CELBET are represented during the pilot by experts from the contact groups on X-ray cooperation coordinated by COM, also on voluntary basis. The exchange of data doesn't cover the exchange of personal/nominal data.



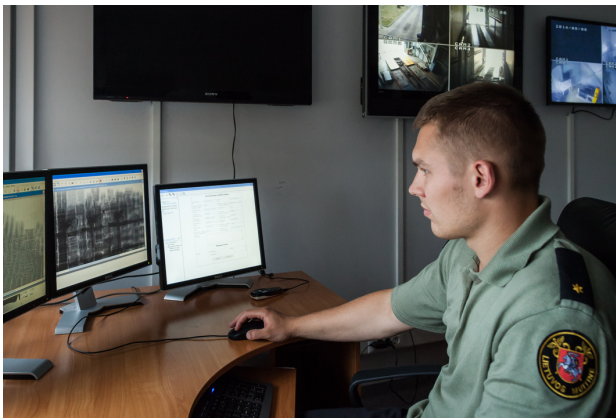
After the test period, colleagues who participated were very keen on the tested scan image library and agreed that both structure and user interface should be used as basis for the upcoming scan image library in CRMS 2. The platform is user friendly and well structured. The feedback of this exercise was sent to DG in April 2021.

The practical cooperation in the use of Non-intrusive Inspection Systems will be strengthened, seizure information and modus operandi detected by such equipment will be shared and the harmonized training of x-ray image interpreters based on common knowledge will be supported. For this purpose, the communication with the representatives of MS is the key and a solution for such a goal is establishing a Scanner Cooperation Expert Network, with scanner experts from all MS. Thus, the collaboration and communication between EQ team, MSs and the CELBET X-ray Centre of Expertise will be ensured.



The experts from the Scanner Cooperation Expert Network are engaged in the following activities:

- enhance the use of the X-ray Data and Image Exchange platform, improve its functionality and ease the sharing of modus-operandi and trends of illicit activities, through presentations and discussions on the matter;
- raise discussions, share information and know-how on the use of new technologies and successful combination of existing ones;
- share information on training needs, planned activities and solutions;
- help to identify experts for CELBET missions and encourage them to participate;
- engage a closer cooperation with the RALPH/ODYSSUD contact groups.



- ensure the communication between the experts from their organization and EQ team experts, when/if needed;
- disseminate the EQ team deliverable regarding this topic in their organization.

The outcomes of this network will consist in the development of another channel for communication, expected to bring added value in collecting information, enhance operational cooperation and share good practices on using customs detection technologies.



Also it will be a suitable platform for discussions on experienced practical difficulties and problems in that matter, in order to find solutions in solving them through common thinking.

The Network has been established and Member States have nominated their experts in the Network. The first virtual meeting with CELBET Scanner Cooperation Expert Network was held on 23 March 2021.



Cooperation Team

CEL BET Missions ready to launch!

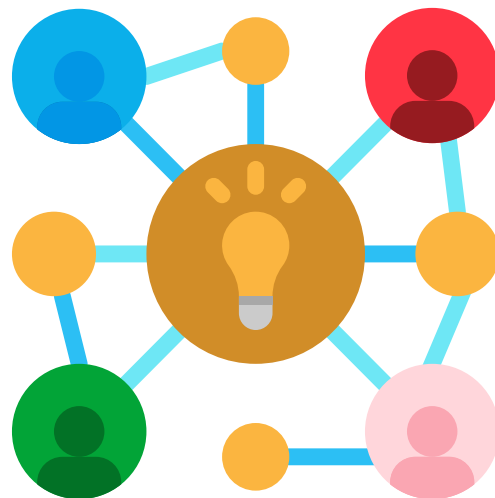
Cooperation Team is finalising implementation of the subtask on development of the Framework for **Customs Officers' Exchange and Missions**.

There is a concept of deploying customs officers from CEL BET countries at the territory of the other CEL BET countries. CEL BET MSs have been consulted on their opinion on the missions concept and supported it enthusiastically.

We believe it is the next step to climb up to the new level of coordination and cooperation among MSs - obtaining operational possibility in deployment of customs officers at the hot spots emerging at the EU external land border. The same time CEL BET Missions are fully in line with the EU Commission Communication "Taking the Customs Union to the Next Level" (especially regarding "mobility" programme enabling customs officers to work anywhere in the EU with mutual recognition of qualifications).

CEL BET Missions initiative is not only on deploying officers in a partner country. It is more on communication and coordination of the efforts made to arrange more significant joint actions of the MSs customs.

CEL BET Missions Framework, which is going to be presented during the upcoming Steering Committee, is a tool to facilitate deployment of the officers and arrange exchange of customs officers among MSs. However, the deployment and exchange are made for a precise purpose – to support development of the CEL BET actions following priorities appointed in CEL BET Implementation Plan



One of the most distinctive feature of the Framework is to ensure the balance among CEL BET teams and MSs in the process of the missions arrangements.

To collect relevant experience of Frontex in managing of the foreign officers missions Cooperation Team experts visited Frontex Focal Points. Process of planning, budgeting and launching of the missions has been designed and consulted with the Grant Coordinator to ensure smooth missions arrangement.

Draft CEL BET Mission procedure has been tested in a role-play mode performed by Cooperation Team members performing as actors of the procedure with participation of other teams representatives performing the role in their teams. Gaps and needs have been diagnosed and fixed. Templates of documents used during the arrangement and execution of the missions have been worked out to facilitate the process...

When travel restrictions introduced due to pandemic are lifted we are going to launch the first missions. Be ready to apply for the appointment as the CEL BET Mission Officer!



Let us remind you what is the aim of the MISSION:

The general aim is to exchange best practices and improve customs control performance in order to enhance the safety and security and facilitate the trade.

General objectives:

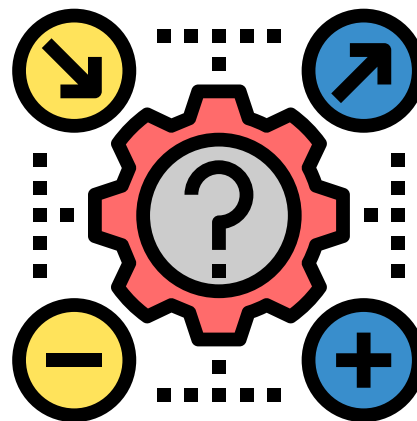
- to get acquainted with CELBET host country's control technology,
- to share the theoretical and practical methodology in host and guest customs administration for carrying out the control of goods and the appropriate equipment,
- to support operational activities performed at the hosting BCP
- to participate and support CELBET initiated activities (including JCA)
- to check interoperability of the control equipment
- to support implementation of the new procedures and technical solutions in risk management and operational control
- to promote and implement "act as one" approach

Feasibility Study Team

The team has elaborated a questionnaire consisting of eight sets of questions for each of the team leaders in the CELBET 3 project including also the HoC and Grant Coordinator.

The questionnaire referred to a number of issues including the needs and challenges of the current working environment of the CELBET Management and teams.

The team analysed the answers, in order to define the objectives and needs, which could be implemented in mid-term and long-term, e.g. in the framework of the permanent structure, taking also into consideration the growing role of customs in ensuring the security of borders and people.



The team took into account also the Final Report of the Think Tank "Foresight for EU Customs 2030+" and the outcome of the project group dealing with the future of customs in the EU 2040.



CEL BET tools in use

Over 150 sets of customs control tools have been delivered to all border crossing points on EU external border strips of CEL BET Member States.

Promotional action of CEL BET started in January. Posters „The strength of the team” and special customs control tools have been sent at one time to all CEL BET MS.

The aim of the action was to remind our stakeholders that we still, even during pandemic, pay attention to needs of customs officer from first line of control and that promotion may be found useful and practical.

We have very positive feedback from CEL BET Member States and there is high motivation to make new useful items and great satisfaction when hearing that the tools are in constant use on the first line of control.

Thanks to involvement of all PR Network members, delivery of the tools was possible and successful.

Bulgaria



Lithuania



Poland



Lithuania



Innovation on the field of controls

The Hungarian Tax and Customs Administration's vehicle inspection instructors have developed a new training methodology that will make seizure more efficient and effective.

by Zsolt Kovács

BCP Rösztke vehicle search specialist/ CEL BET trainer

In recent years, this methodology has also served as the basis for Bus search and Custom control process trainings organized by CEL BET.



The basic thesis of the methodology is that in addition to the physical part of the vehicle inspection, there is also a mental and an emotional part. Only the harmony of these three parts may result in effective seizure. The arising problems that are realized on the physical level can always be traced back to mental or emotional level (motivational) problems.

What does that really mean? The problem isn't how the customs officer finds the contraband hidden in the vehicle (physical level), but the key is on the mental and emotional level. The mental level includes the management of risk assessment information, vehicle selection, attention, and communication. The essential elements of the emotional part are motivation, teamwork and representation of professional values.

The methodology is capable of enabling novice customs officers to perform vehicle inspections efficiently and relatively quickly.

The following seizure is also a result of to this methodology:

A car of Serbian nationality entered at the Rösztke BCP. A customs officer, who had recently completed a vehicle inspection training course, selected the car for inspection. The vehicle was a 4-year-old Mercedes car in which, the chassis and fuel tank were converted. 43.5 kg of marijuana was found in the concealment. The instructor was also present during the car search. This seizure was a clear result of an effective training. For the time being, it was the largest drug seizure in 2021 by the Hungarian customs authorities.. So far... ..



How the exceptional circumstances of 2020 affected the traffic at the borders and caused changes to customs work in Finland

Year 2020 was exceptional world-wide due to the coronavirus pandemic. The traffic at Finnish borders decreased dramatically for light traffic, whereas heavy duty traffic stayed at same level as previous year.

by Iina Koukku, Finnish Customs.

Photos by Aku Hayrynen and Petteri Lehtonen.

The decrease in light traffic was the highest at the border crossing points in Eastern Finland. At the Western border, the traffic to and from Sweden decreased less than from Russia but more than the traffic from Norway. The share of all light traffic to and from Finland was about 55% at the Swedish border, 22% at sea border, 12% at Russian border and 10% at the Norwegian border.



When it comes to heavy duty traffic, the changes weren't as notable. The amount of trucks that arrived in Finland decreased by 5% from previous year. The traffic decreased at the Swedish and Norwegian borders but increased at the Russian and sea borders. Leaving heavy traffic decreased at all land borders but less in the harbours. The total of leaving heavy duty traffic decreased by 9% from previous year.



From mobile enforcement to stationary work in Tornio

Tornio is situated in North West Finland, at the border between Finland and Sweden. The pandemic has distinctly affected the traffic and work at the border crossing point. The invisible border between the two countries has become visible in the form of barriers. These have been placed in order to limit the traffic between the countries.

When compared to 2019, the traffic between Finland and Sweden decreased a lot. From Sweden to Finland, the traffic decreased by 51% in light traffic and 34% in heavy traffic. The traffic from Finland to Sweden decreased also by 51% in light traffic and 23% in heavy traffic.



– The decrease in traffic has been visible to the mobile group of Tornio, however, the most significant change to us has been shifting to round-the-clock stationary work. Our tasks have focused on enforcement of heavy duty traffic and increased smuggling of snus, Timo Siivola from mobile group of Tornio describes.



Light traffic is typical at Tornio's border crossing point, as Finns travel to Sweden in order to buy cheaper goods – refreshments, food and snus. You cannot buy snus in Finland and can bring only a limited amount for own use. According to Siivola, travellers have altered their buying behaviour when it comes to snus due to the pandemic. The statistics of 2020 show that the amount of snus brought to Finland during one trip is less than what it was previously. In addition, people travelling after snus spend more days in Tornio at a time and bring larger amounts of snus with them. Some have even crossed the border several times a day.

– Unfortunately, we have also seen more smuggling. The smugglers have been imaginative while figuring out new places where to hide the snus. Not all cross the border at border crossing points but some light traffic has shifted to the unsupervised areas where they move by boats or snowmobiles, Siivola sums up.

Even though the restrictions from the government prohibited travelling and hence lessened the light traffic, not all traffic vanished. For example, there are many people living near the border who work in the neighbouring country, and these people can cross the border.

– You need to have a good reason to cross the border. For some travellers this happened, but we have also heard quite a few stories for why people need to get to Sweden. Some days we have seen so many travellers coming to Finland that they have had to wait in line to get the coronavirus tests up to 90 minutes.



Customs officers support the work of health authorities at Nuijamaa

During 2020, the total traffic decreased also at the Eastern border of Finland. The amount of light traffic came crashing down from the level before travelling restrictions: the amount of cars leaving and arriving to Finland decreased by 78%. However, the amount of heavy duty traffic arriving to Finland increased by 3%.

Nuijamaa is one of the border crossing points at the Eastern border between Finland and Russia. For the customs officers, the most visible changes due to coronavirus pandemic has been the vanishing light traffic and limiting the time of border crossing for the allowed travellers to 7–21.30. Also, the arrival of health authorities to the customs facilities has been something new.

– Typically the light traffic between Finland and Russia is massive, as people travel by own cars or buses. As this traffic has decreased due to restrictions, also our customs inspections have decreased. However, the heavy duty traffic has stayed at the same level it was before the pandemic, describes Petri Kukkonen, Director of Nuijamaa Customs.



At Nuijamaa, the customs officers took safety actions once the pandemic started. They started using protective gear from the very beginning: there have been enough masks at all times but e.g. they waited to get coveralls



for months. Also in the very beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, the customer service areas were provided with disinfectants, wipes and protecting glasses between the customer and customs officer.

Like at other border crossing points, also in Nuijamaa the cooperation between other authorities tightened during the pandemic. Finnish Customs and Finnish Border Guards are accustomed to cooperate at Finnish borders, but in 2020 cooperation increased. A new player was the local health authority EKSOTE (South Karelia Social and Health Care District). All authorities agreed together of the ways of safe cooperation, and where to locate the health counselling and coronavirus testing.

– Our role in the fight against coronavirus has been supporting the health authorities. We have shared the informative material by Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare to travellers. We also share safety instructions in our information screens, which are located both inside and outside the Nuijamaa customs facilities. In addition, we have participated the national and local work groups where we have discussed the safety at borders and means to fight the virus, Kukkonen describes.

New study programme in Bulgaria

The National Customs Agency of Bulgaria and the UNWE organize new specialization “Legal regulation and customs control”

*by Katya Koutsarova, and Alexander Topalov,
National Customs Agency*

“Legal regulation and customs control” is the new programme, created jointly by the Bulgarian National Customs Agency (NCA) and the Institute of Post-Graduate Study to the University of National and World Economy (UNWE), which is the eldest higher economic school in Bulgaria and Southeastern Europe.



The new training programme is introduced for the first time during the 2021/2022 school year and starts with 20 students – customs officials, mainly from the specialized administration. It was developed especially for the Bulgarian National Customs Agency and is directed towards creation of complex legal knowledge, related to the customs activity and customs control. The individual subjects are formed on the basis of analysis of the practical experience, accumulated throughout the years, and the feedback, which the lecturers in the previous programme “International economic relations and customs policy” have with the students from the customs administration. Some of the subjects, taught so far, such as the international law and the legal regulation of the customs activity, are preserved also in the new specialty, but with an extended scope and with emphasis on the legal norms, which makes the programme exclusively appropriate for non-lawyers, who wish to systematize and broaden their expert experience.

The training content includes 14 subjects from the national, European and international law.

The training has a duration of two semesters in one school year and will be conducted online and in presence in the National Training Centre of the Bulgarian National Customs Agency.

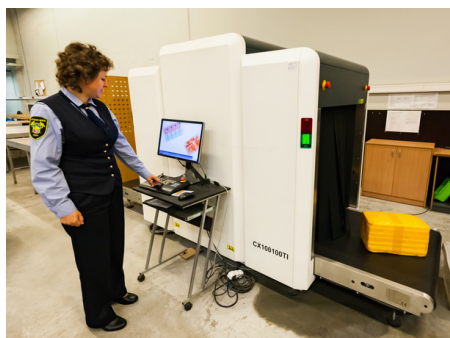
The programme is funded by the Bulgarian National Customs Agency, but the students sign a training contract to commit them to successful graduation and work in the administration for a period of three years following completion of training.

Important data in one place

Latvian customs administration implements a project of remote and centralised analysis of scanned images

*by Marika Salmina, National Customs Board,
State Revenue Service*

The use of cargo control X-ray equipment in the customs controls is one of the fastest and most effective means of detecting and preventing infringements of customs rules related to the illegal movement of goods across the external border of the European Union. Thus, the Customs Physical Control Support Centre has been established in the Risk Management Division of the SRS National Customs Board to ensure centralised analysis of scanned images of cargos and vehicles. Currently, 14 analysts are employed at the centre carrying out remote and centralised processing of risk information and assessing scanned images of vehicles that cross the EU external border at the road and port customs control points (CCP).



Customs controls rely largely on fast and safe analysis of the data processed by the information systems and obtained by technical equipment at the CCPs. Therefore, in addition to centralised analysis of images scanned at the CCPs, the Customs Physical Control Support Centre also ensures the processing of the risk information obtained from various information systems maintained by the SRS, other national law enforcement authorities and the EU. Furthermore, the centre hosts the central hub of the video surveillance systems installed at the CCPs.

The SRS resources are used more efficiently, and the internal control system has been improved. However, the most important advantage is the substantial increase in efficiency and effectiveness of customs controls. In 2020, approx. 37 million pieces of cigarettes were seized thanks to the risk analysis and assessment of scanned images carried out by the customs experts at the Customs Physical Control Support Centre.

Latvian customs administration appreciates the results achieved so far and continues to work towards an enhanced scope of centralised analysis of scanned images by increasing the number of analysts and ensuring that centralised analysis of images scanned with X-ray equipment at the road and port CCPs' would be carried out around the clock seven days a week. In the future, the intention is to extend the centralised analysis to scanned images of rail cargos by using advanced technologies of artificial intelligence.



Anything to declare ?

Seizures on the external border

Lithuania

Oil and gas industry equipment dispatched to the Russian Federation has been detained

*by Justina Kosaite, International Relations Division,
Customs Department, Ministry of Finance*

On 4.09.2020, Lithuanian customs officials detained equipment used in the oil and gas industry and prepared for export to the Russian Federation.

The consignment has been detained, because the goods therein are dual-use and an export license is required to be presented for such export.

The Lithuanian customs authorities have one

more reason to detain this consignment: it is suspected that the real value of the goods, whose declared value is more than one million euros, has been reduced.

The fountain fittings (a set of valves, the so-called Christmas tree), found in the consignment detained by the Lithuanian customs officials, comprise one of the most important mechanisms in the oil and gas industry. This equipment is intended for oil well works, it lifts oil liquid or natural gas from the wells to the surface. The equipment is believed to be designed for use in the oil and gas wells in the Arctic circle.



Large consignment of smuggled Ukrainian amber was detained in Medininkai

Customs officers quite often detain consignments with smuggled amber being attempted to be imported from the Kaliningrad region of Russia. However, on 23.11.2020, 105 kg of amber, suspected of being brought from Ukraine, were detained in Medininkai BCP.

Belarusian citizen having arrived to the Medininkai road post by a minibus. Upon checking the cargo, the customs officers found under the vehicle parts white plastic bags full of smaller bags with amber. In total, the officers found 95 bags full of the raw amber pieces of various sizes (some impressive in size and beauty). Their total weight was 105 kg and their preliminary value was 12 700 euros. The driver admitted that he was carrying the amber to Lithuania with the intention "to earn money". According to him, the amber itself is mined in Ukraine in illegal mines.



Lithuania

Consignment of smuggled antique coins was detained at Šalčininkai BCP

On 24.12.2020, the customs officers of the Šalčininkai BCP detained a consignment with ancient coins. The consignment was hidden among personal belongings by a Belarusian citizen having entered Lithuania by a cargo truck. According to preliminary estimates, both modern and antique coins were found among those seized.



There were mostly dozens of silver coins, which resembled ancient Arabic dirhams, many of which were `chopped`. Golden tsarists roubles were also found among the carried coins.

In addition to the coins, an ancient silver alloy reminiscent of the ancient Lithuanian three-edged currency kapa of the fourteenth century was found in the passenger's luggage.

The illegally transported goods were detained. They will be handed over for evaluation to the experts of the Cultural Heritage Department.

On suspicion of smuggling, customs officers detained at Vilnius Airport three consignments with ancient Greek and Roman helmets and armour

Unusual detention at Vilnius Airport: on 10.10.2020 customs officers, in postal consignments, found in three of them two ancient helmets and armour parts. Four ancient armour metal parts (leggings) were found in the consignments addressed to a British consignee.

An ancient soldier's helmet was found in the consignment destined to travel to France. According to preliminary findings, it was a Roman Montefortino-type helmet of Celtic origin used by the Romans as early as the third century B.C.



In the third consignment, the officers also found an ancient helmet. According to preliminary estimates, it was an ancient Greek infantry Chalcidian helmet started to be used in ancient Greece around the sixth century B.C. In online auctions, the price of such antiques ranges from several thousand to tens of thousands of euros.

Poland

The largest cigarette smuggling in history intercepted by National Revenue Administration and Border Guard

by Press Unit, National Revenue Administration

Three selected containers came to Poland by train from Belarus on 7.05.2021. During the control of the containers, it turned out that instead of the declared goods (vermiculite and heating elements), a record amount of cigarettes was hidden. In total, nearly 2.5 million packages of cigarettes without Polish excise signs, worth approximately PLN 37 millions (8,6 million EUR), were secured.



If the illegal goods were sold on the market, the State Treasury would lose over PLN 60 millions (14 millions EUR). This is not the only record smuggling recently revealed by the services of Tax and Customs Regional Office in Białystok and Border Guard: in February this year, jointly seized nearly 1.8 million packages of illegal cigarettes, worth over PLN 27.6 million, at the road border crossing point in Kuźnica.



Romania

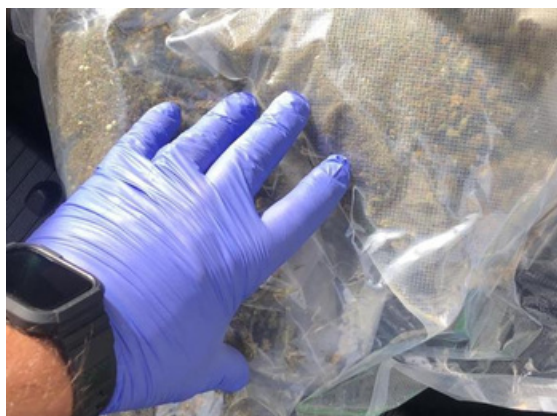
Customs work continues during pandemics, not `as usual` but often in unusual conditions. Customs officers are in the front line of the country's defence and smugglers do not take any break from their unlawful attempts to enter the markets with fake products.

by Raluca Mihail, Risk Management Office, Directorate for Customs Surveillance and Control, General Customs Directorate.

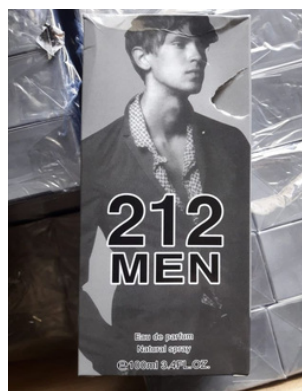
In Romania, two `hotspots` for customs smuggling are Bucharest and Constanța, the biggest port, with intense traffic.

On 9.02.2021, customs inspectors of the Bucharest Regional Customs Directorate seized an amount of 5.054.460 pieces of cigarettes. Their total estimated value is of approximately 830.000 Euro. They were seized during a joint operation conducted with Bucharest City Police.

During the operation the officers also discovered 2 kilos of vegetable yellow-green substances, suspect of being drugs. The investigation was taken over by the police, the charge being of criminal nature.



On 25.02.2021, as a result of a physical control of the goods in a container arrived from China, customs inspectors of Constanța Border Customs Office seized 1330 pieces of perfume bottles and 990 pieces of headphones for mobile telephones, suspect of violating intellectual property rights. Their total value, in case the goods were sold with the price tag of the original product, might have been approximately 231 000 Euro.



Slovakia

Record seizure

*by Drahomira Adamcikova,
Communication Department of Financial Directorate*

In February 2021 Customs Criminal office have uncovered historically the largest illegal cigarette factory in Slovak Republic. Customs officers seized 24 milion cigarettes, more than 44 tons of tobacco, including cigarettes making machines. The possible avasion was approximate 6 milions EUR. This seizure in Lučenec town (south part of Slovakia) represents more than of the 1/3 cigarettes seized in last 3 years in Slovakia. At least 18 people were involved in the crime, including 16 Ukrainians and 2 Slovaks, all they were detained directly in the action.



Hidden in wooden boards

Financial Administration of Slovakia discovered in February during an inspection of Ukrainian truck at the BCP Vyšné Nemecké 844,780 pieces of cigarettes of various brand without excise stamps. They were hidden in wooden cladding boards, and a dog trained to detect of tobacco products helped during the control. The investigator brought charges against a Ukrainian citizen. The financial evasion on duty and taxes was more than 140,000 EUR.





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**Photo cover taken by
Yordan Yochev**

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