



The opportunities for criminal cooperation between the investigative authority of the National Tax and Customs Administration and the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center based on working experiences and best practices

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Abstract

Aim: The Southeast European Law Enforcement Center (hereinafter: SELEC) is a centre for criminal cooperation between police forces and customs services of the Balkan and other neighbouring countries, including Hungary, primarily for the prevention and combating of serious and organised crime that may have a cross-border element or that is actually or presumably cross-border in nature. The main objective of the present study is to identify and isolate the main potential factors that could serve as motives for the National Tax and Customs Administration's Directorate General of Criminal Investigation (hereinafter: NTCA investigative authority) in its international criminal cooperation with the SELEC.

Methodology: Following the analysis of the secondary literature and the knowledge base of the good practice and work experience observed in the above-mentioned organisations, the main motivational factors corresponding to the study objectives were identified, isolated and further considered.

Findings: based on secondary research and the knowledge base of observed good practice and work experience, three factors - namely *speed*, *accuracy* and *cost-effectiveness of information exchange* - can be identified as the main

English-language republication. The Hungarian version of this article was published in *Belügyi Szemle* 2025, S11. DOI link: <https://doi.org/10.38146/BSZ-AJIA.2025.v73.S11.pp41-63>

motives for criminal cooperation between the NTCA investigative authority and the SELEC.

Value: If the findings of this study are accepted, it can be concluded that speed, accuracy and cost-effectiveness of information exchange may be the three main factors that motivate criminal cooperation between the NTCA investigative authority and the SELEC. Further reflection on the findings may suggest that the use of the Law Enforcement Centre's information channels may further assist in supporting both the strategic objectives of the NTCA investigative authority in particular. In order to take full advantage of the above, and particularly given the flexibility and efficiency of informal liaison, it would be worth considering the delegation of a permanent SELEC liaison officer from the NTCA Investigative Authority.

Keywords: Southeast European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC), National Tax and Customs Administration Directorate General of Criminal Investigation (NTCA), international criminal cooperation, criminal legal assistance, criminal data request

Introduction

In today's accelerated, globalised, Americanised, Europeanised - and countless other adjectives that can be associated with processes of convergence - world, there is not only an increasingly intensive flow of goods, services, economic goods and people across borders, but also, by necessity, of other factors such as information (Dávid et al., 2007), cultural components and, not least, behavioural norms and habits. It is not surprising, therefore, that criminality is not sensitive to the geographical boundaries of nation states, against which international criminal cooperation - or cooperation between the Member States of the European Union (EU) - can be one of the means of effective action.

This paper highlights one of the organisations for international and EU Member States' cooperation in criminal matters, the SELEC, which is based partly on EU cooperation and partly on cooperation between third countries (Balkan and other neighbouring countries). Following this presentation, the paper will present the methodology, results and conclusions of the research carried out at the headquarters of the Law Enforcement Centre from 13 to 26 October 2022, with the help of the project BBA-5.2.1/10-2019-00001, *Europol Visits and International Study Visits to International Organisations*. The research in question focuses on the main factors that could motivate Directorate General of Criminal

Investigation of the National Tax and Customs Administration to cooperate with the SELEC in the field of international criminal cooperation in order to prevent, detect and investigate serious and organised crime and cross-border crime. Another important part of this thesis is to further reflect on these main potential motivating factors in the context of knowledge management.

Literature review

The concept of criminal cooperation between international and EU Member States and its manifestations

International cooperation in criminal matters means assistance between states in criminal cases with an international element, for example where the persons or evidence to be interrogated as accused are/may be located abroad or where the authorities of other countries are conducting parallel criminal proceedings in a specific case (Csemáné et al, 2017) The former notion is somewhat nuanced in the *dictionary of police science* (Boda, 2019), when it refers to bilateral or multilateral, ad hoc or continuous activities between law enforcement authorities involving authorities of several countries or international organisations. This activity can be understood as a sub-system of international law enforcement relations, where cooperation is interest-based and sustained by mutual benefits (Szendrei, 2019). The aforementioned assistance can be related to ongoing and future criminal proceedings, and the exchange of information in this context is not limited to data that can be used as evidence in proceedings, but should also be understood as the exchange of information necessary for criminal intelligence, or even law enforcement in a broader sense (Szendrei, 2019).

Cross-border crime, which is the subject of criminal proceedings, is an inevitable feature of our fast-paced, globalised world, and one way of combating it is through international cooperation, both within the European Union and between other countries. Although it is true that participation in international criminal cooperation is an important part of state sovereignty, i.e. no country can be forced to do so, the vast majority of sovereign states have recognised that crime - especially serious and organised crime - and effective action against terrorism can only be achieved within this framework (Blaskó & Budaházi, 2019; Dávid et al., 2007).

The literature distinguishes between the following two types of international criminal cooperation (see Blaskó & Budaházi, 2019; Nagy, 2014; Páhi, 2019; Szabó, 2018):

- 1) international law enforcement bodies as the organisational framework for joint action, and
- 2) legal instruments as the formal framework for joint action.

Until the early 20th century, the classic organisational framework for international cooperation in criminal matters was bilateral cooperation between states and law enforcement authorities. However, the First International Congress of Criminal Police, held in Monaco in 1914, was a major breakthrough in this field (Hegyaljai, 2023), as it was then that the idea of creating a so-called crime information centre, also known as a fusion centre, was raised, which eventually became known as the International Criminal Police Organization, known as Interpol, in 1923. The *raison d'être* of these centres is that information received from the cooperating participants is brought together in the centre, 'fused', and can then be used to add value, to highlight interconnections or to coordinate operations. In addition to the aforementioned Interpol, which has a global remit, a number of other regional fusion centres have been established, of which - in view of Hungary's involvement - the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol), the Police Cooperation Convention for Southeast Europe (PCC SEE) and SELEC, which is the subject of this study, are worth highlighting (Csaba, 2017; 2018; Dávid et al., 2007; Deák et al., 2021; Szabó, 2012).

Páhi (2019) classifies the forms of international criminal cooperation as a legal institution into the following categories:

- 1) non-judicial assistance type cooperation, ratified into Hungarian law by Act LIV of 2002 on International Cooperation of Law Enforcement Agencies ;
- 2) the rules on the validity of foreign judgments provided for in Chapter IV (Enforcement Assistance) of Act XXXVIII of 1996 on International Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters (hereinafter referred to as 'the Act'), or
- 3) international mutual legal assistance criminal matters, which was also ratified into Hungarian law by the above-mentioned Nbjt.

According to Blaskó & Budaházi (2019), when dealing with the topic - in relation to the EU - we cannot ignore the Act CLXXX of 2012 on criminal cooperation with the Member States of the European Union.

In view of the objectives of the present study and, not least, the limitations of its scope, I consider it important to highlight, from the multitude of legal instruments of international and EU Member States' criminal cooperation, primarily procedural legal assistance, which is essentially nothing other than a request from a foreign state or the execution of a request sent by another country in order

to carry out procedural acts, transport objects and persons, or communicate registration data (Görgényi et al., 2016). Procedural legal assistance between the Member States of the European Union takes place within the framework of the European Investigation Order (hereinafter: EIO)¹ (Nagy, 2014). Procedural legal assistance can also be understood as a broader concept, international criminal legal assistance, which includes procedural legal assistance in the narrow sense and all its forms mentioned in Table 1 (Blaskó & Budaházi, 2019), such as international or European arrest warrants

Table 1.
Grouping of legal instruments for international and EU criminal cooperation

Non-legal aid type cooperation	
Ratification	Act LIV of 2002 on International Cooperation of Law Enforcement Agencies.
Legal institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • direct exchange of information, • exchange information with the law enforcement agency of an EU Member State, • setting up a joint crime detection team, • the use of a person cooperating with a law enforcement agency, • the use of undercover investigators, • cross-border surveillance, • hot pursuit, • the employment of a liaison officer, • intelligence gathering on the basis of international cooperation, • cooperation with the special intervention unit of a Member State of the European Union.
Rules on the validity of a foreign judgment	
Ratification	Chapter IV of Act XXXVIII of 1996 on International Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters.
Legal institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recognition of a foreign judgment, • taking over the enforcement of a custodial sentence imposed by a foreign court, • transfer of the enforcement of a custodial sentence imposed by a Hungarian court, • taking over the enforcement of a custodial measure ordered by a foreign court and transferring the enforcement of a custodial measure ordered by a Hungarian court, • receiving the execution of confiscation or forfeiture, • the transfer of the execution of confiscation or forfeiture, • Receipt of the execution of the permanent inaccessibility of electronic data, • transfer of the implementation of the permanent inaccessibility of electronic data.
International mutual legal assistance in criminal matters	
Ratification	Act XXXVIII of 1996 on International Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters.
Legal institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • international arrest warrant and extradition, • transfer or receipt of criminal proceedings, • receiving or transferring a custodial sentence or the execution of such a measure, • confiscation of property, forfeiture or execution of a sentence or measure having equivalent effect, • the permanent inaccessibility of electronic data or the receipt or transfer of the execution of a penalty or measure having equivalent effect, • procedural legal aid, • report to a foreign state.

1 Chapter IV of Act CLXXX of 2012 on criminal cooperation with the Member States of the European Union.

EU cooperation in criminal matters	
Ratification	Act CLXXX of 2012 on criminal cooperation with the Member States of the European Union .
Legal institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • European Arrest Warrant and surrender, • procedural legal assistance such as the European Investigation Order (EIO), setting up a joint investigation team, • the validity of a national judgment, enforcement assistance, transit and the European protection order.

Note. Table is made by the author.

Status, objectives and main tasks of the SELEC

Among the organisational and formal frameworks for international and EU Member States' cooperation in criminal matters, I would like to highlight the SELEC. This law enforcement centre has the status of an international legal entity, the purpose of which is to provide support to the Member States and to strengthen cooperation in the prevention and combating of crime, with particular attention to serious crime and organised crime, where there is an actual or presumed cross-border element, within the framework of cooperation between the competent authorities, especially police and customs authorities. In order to achieve these objectives, the Commission shall in particular:

- contributes to the collection, analysis, exchange and dissemination of criminal information;
- strategic analyses and threat assessments related to its objectives;
- alerting and informing Member States of links between suspects, offenders or offences within the jurisdiction of the SELEC; and
- promotes and helps develop law enforcement methods, techniques and best practices through training courses and conferences.²

Legal background and organisational structure of the SELEC

Its founding documents include the *Convention on the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center* (hereinafter referred to as 'the Convention'), declared on 9 December 2009, and the *Protocol on the Privileges and Immunities of the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center*, signed on 24 November 2010, which were signed in Bucharest, on the occasion of the Convention on the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center, signed in Bucharest, on 9 December 2009. The Convention on the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center, signed in Bucharest on 9 December 2009, and the Protocol on the Privileges

² Act LVI of 2011, Articles 2, 3, 5(1).

and Immunities of the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center, signed in Bucharest on 24 November 2010, ratified by Act LVI of 2011 on the promulgation of the Protocol on the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center.

The SELEC became operational on 7 October 2011. Its headquarters are located on the 10th floor of the Romanian Parliament building in Bucharest. The official working language of the organisation is English. Its members include the following countries and organisations:

- 1) Of the 13 countries that signed the Convention in 2009, 11 are now full Member States: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Northern Macedonia, Greece, Hungary, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia and Turkey (four of which, Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary and Romania, are also Member States of the European Union and Europol).³
- 2) Operational partners with this status may send representatives to the SELEC headquarters at their own expense (six partners): the UK, Interpol, Italy, Saudi Arabia, Slovakia, the USA and the United Kingdom, to implement a cooperation agreement.
- 3) Observers who, although not allowed to take part in operational activities, among other things, may attend Council meetings if invited (14 countries, six organisations): Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Belarus, France, Georgia, Germany, Israel, Japan, Netherlands, Israel, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland, Ukraine, United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), European Union Integrated Border Management Assistance Mission (EUBAM), International Organization for Migration (IOM), Gulf Cooperation Council – Criminal Information Center to Combat Drugs (GCC-CICCD) and World Customs Organization (WCO).
- 4) Other cooperating organisations to build and strengthen mutually beneficial relationships, such as Japan Tobacco International, the Hungarian OTP Bank, the International Atomic Energy Agency, or Philip Morris International ([URL1](#)).

The Law Enforcement Centre is organised into the following units: the Council, the Secretariat and the National Units.

The Council is the main decision-making body of the SELEC. Each member state nominates one representative and one alternate representative to the Council, and its chairperson is elected annually from among the member states in the order of precedence.

3 Croatia and Slovenia have since left the SELEC.

To effectively fulfil its mission, the SELEC is managed by the Director General, who is supported by the Directors. Under the supervision of the Director General and Directors, the officials work. The Director General, Directors and Officers constitute the Secretariat of the SELEC.

Member States shall establish national units to implement the objectives of the Convention. The national units shall consist of a police and/or a customs liaison officer and a national contact point. The liaison officers carry out their day-to-day work at the SELEC headquarters in Bucharest, in cooperation with their member states and other units of the law enforcement headquarters. The national contact point is the sole contact office of the Member State concerned and constitutes the sole and official channel for the flow of information between the competent authorities of the Member State and the liaison officer. Hungary's national unit is, at the time of writing, represented by a Police Liaison Officer and the National Contact Point is the National Police Headquarters International Criminal Cooperation Centre (NICEOC) ([URL2](#)).

SELEC's cooperation activities in the field of criminal law

The Law Enforcement Centre sets up permanent working groups on priority areas of crime that go beyond individual cases, led by the designated Member State as the 'coordinating country'. The following standing working groups are currently in place:

- Task Force on Fraud and Smuggling,
- Task Force on Trafficking in Human Beings,
- Task Force on Vehicle Theft,
- Drug Crime Task Force,
- Container Safety Working Group,
- Task Force on Environmental and Nature Crimes,
- Financial and Computer Crime Task Force,
- Counter Terrorism Task Force.

Hungary's national unit is currently coordinating the Task Force on Vehicle Theft and the Task Force on Environmental and Nature Crime. Although NAV does not currently provide coordination for any of the working groups, it participates in meetings of the working groups when necessary, on the initiative or by invitation.

In addition to the activities of the permanent working groups, the SELEC coordinates multilateral cooperation between Member States on specific investigations, allowing for the request of criminal data for information not subject to

prosecution or judicial authorisation, the preparation and organisation of operational meetings⁴ and the launch of joint investigations.⁵ In such cases, contact with the SELECs may be made directly through the Liaison Officer, but the formal request for criminal information or request an operational meeting shall be in the form of a transcript to be submitted to the Director of NEBEK. The mandatory elements of the request for data/request for an operational meeting include: the case file number; the indication and description of the legal location of the offence concerned; a brief history of the facts showing that the requested data/operational meeting is for the purpose of preventing and combating serious and organised crime which is likely to have or does have a cross-border element; and, in the case of joint investigations, the requirement that investigations in the Member States have been ordered in the cases concerned and that there is a cross-border link between the perpetrators or other physical evidence.

As regards the SELEC's facilitation of cooperation on specific issues, it is worth pointing out that the expenses of operational meetings (including per diem, accommodation and travel expenses) are financed by the Law Enforcement Headquarters. Furthermore, every six months, there is the possibility to apply for prosecutions by the police and customs authorities of the Member States for criminal offences involving more than one Member State and involving some form of SELEC cooperation. The most successful applicants will receive cash and in-kind rewards.

The NAV investigative authority has already been awarded a tender, and in the underlying criminal proceedings, on the initiative of the Romanian investigative authority, using data obtained during criminal data requests and operational meetings, the financial investigators of the NAV Criminal Investigation Directorate General Central Investigation Department dismantled a criminal organisation consisting of perpetrators of Hungarian, Moldovan and Romanian nationality. The perpetrators were operating an illegal cigarette factory on two sites in Szolnok. As a result of the coordinated operation carried out on 16 November 2012, the members of the authority seized around 1.65 million packets of tobacco, cigarette paper, packaging material and forged seals, preventing nearly one billion forints in budget damage.

4 An operational meeting is essentially a face-to-face meeting between investigators, customs officers, prosecutors, etc. involved in a case, usually in order to carry out a more complex criminal data request or procedural action.

5 Joint investigation does not refer to the joint investigation team ratified by Act LIV of 2002 on International Cooperation of Law Enforcement Agencies, or the joint investigation team defined in Act CLXXX of 2012 on Criminal Cooperation with the Member States of the European Union or Act XC of 2017 on Criminal Procedure, but to the regular cooperation (criminal data requests, operational meetings, etc.) within the framework of the SELEC on specific cases.

Other SELEC activities

In addition to the main activities of the Law Enforcement Centre, it is worth highlighting its tasks in the areas of data, communication, education and analysis.

- If the police or customs authorities of the nation concerned seize something in the course of their procedural activities which they consider to be of material interest to another SELEC member state, they send a so-called ‘seizure notification’. The sending of such a notification is not mandatory, but an option, but failure to do so may create a serious information gap. If sent, it will include the place and time of the seizure, the quantity and description of the seized property, the police/customs department involved in the seizure, the details of the persons and vehicles involved in the proceedings, and other relevant documents (e.g. photograph, copy of travel document, etc.). On the basis of the seizure notification, Member States may thus carry out a criminal history search of their own records in order to establish possible links with ongoing cases.⁶
- In order to coordinate simultaneous procedural actions in several Member States and to conduct videoconferences, a so-called Operational Central Unit has been set up, which allows for real-time, multi-directional multimedia communication over both open and secure channels (Schachter, 2020).
- The law enforcement centre also provides training and organises professional conferences and working group meetings. Among these activities, it is worth mentioning the training course launched in 2020, during which students will carry out vehicle searches in a virtual environment at a simulated border crossing point to detect illegal cigarette shipments (Schachter, 2020).

Material and method

During the investigation of the relationship between the investigating authority of the NAV and the SELEC, I had the following secondary and primary data at my disposal:

- open-source publications, both paper and electronic, legislation, websites, listed in the *Bibliography* section;
- the documents, data, information and observed good practice and work experience provided to me during the research carried out during the study visit to the SELEC headquarters in Bucharest from 13 to 26 October 2022,

6 Article 3(c) of Act LVI of 2011.

- in the framework of the project BBA-5.2.1/10-2019-00001, *Europol Visits and International Study Visit Series to International Organisations*; and
- best practices and work experience observed during more than a decade and a half of investigative service with the investigative authority of the NAV - and its predecessor institution.

After processing the secondary data and analysing and synthesising the knowledge (primary data) revealed by the best practices and work experience observed in the above-mentioned organisations, I aimed to identify and isolate the main factors that could serve as motives for the investigative authority of the NAV in the international criminal cooperation with SELECs in order to prevent, detect and investigate serious and organised cross-border crime. An important part of this thesis is also to further reflect on these main potential motives in the context of knowledge management.

Results

The process of cooperation with SELEC on specific cases

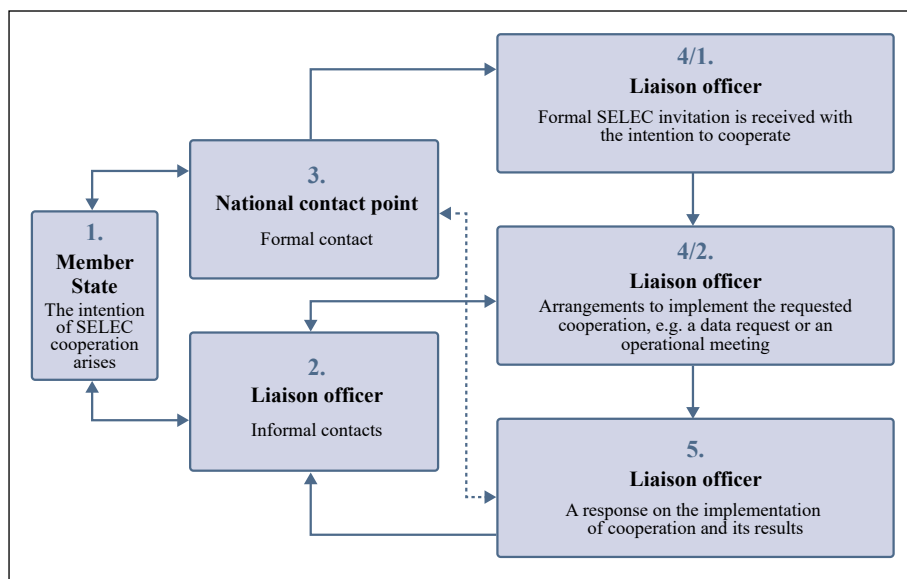
Based on Pallagi (2022) and the observed good practice, the process of cooperation with the law enforcement centre through the channels described above can be broken down into the following logical and procedural stages in specific cases (Figure 1):

- 1) The intention to cooperate is expressed by the national authority concerned, which may be primarily directed at:
 - for criminal data requests;
 - for an operational meeting;
 - clarifying and specifying the details of other forms of international criminal cooperation (e.g. procedural legal assistance, mutual legal assistance, etc.) between Member States, which are not within the competence of the SELEC.
- 2) The head of the Member State body concerned or, with his/her permission, the rapporteur of the case concerned, will contact the SELEC Liaison Officer:
 - the purpose of the contact is, first and foremost, an informal consultation and discussion of the case, in which the liaison officer, with the assistance of the liaison officer, can clarify the scope of the data available to the recipient country, its procedural rules and other relevant circumstances. This will help to clarify and specify the subject of the requested

cooperation and to optimise the time and other resources needed to carry it out efficiently, in order to ensure that (for example, in the case of a request for criminal data) only the information relevant to the requesting party is received in the shortest possible time and in full.

Figure 1.

The process of cooperation with the SELEC on specific issues, with emphasis on formal and informal channels



Note. Figure created by the author based on Pallagi (2022) and observed good practice.

- 3) The ‘initiating’ Member State sends the request for a criminal data request or an operational meeting in the form of an official transcript to the SELEC via the national contact point, in the case of Hungary the Director of NEBEK.
 - This act concerns the ‘case initiation’, but further messages can be exchanged directly via the liaison officer.
- 4) The data request/request is received by the Liaison Officer, who will take action as follows.
 - In the case of a request for criminal data, it will obtain the requested data through the liaison officer of the requested Member State, on the basis of the prior consultation (point 2).
 - The request for an operational meeting is submitted for approval by the Directors to the Director General of the SELEC, who typically takes

- a decision to approve or reject it within 48 hours. Following approval by the Director General, the Liaison Officer will arrange for the preparation and organisation of the operational meeting.
- For other forms of international criminal cooperation not within the scope of the SELEC, in order to ensure its effective implementation, clarify/define its content, deadlines, technical details of its transmission, in accordance with the criteria set out in paragraph 2.
- 5) The liaison officer will send his/her reply to the ‘initiating’ Member State directly or, where appropriate, via the national contact point.
- In the case of a request for criminal data, as a general rule, there is a 30-day time limit after receipt of the request for cooperation through official channels. However, practical experience shows that in most cases the exchange of information is completed within 10 days. Of course, this time is greatly influenced by the complexity of the case and the number of Member States (authorities) involved in the request. It is not uncommon for a simple request for criminal information from a Member State authority to be answered within 1-2 working days, or even within 24 hours in cases of extreme urgency. The rapid and flexible exchange of information thus serves the purposes of the organisation and the relevant law enforcement authorities of the cooperating States.

The subject of cooperation with SELECs, in the light of the activities of its Hungarian national unit in Q1-Q3 2022

Within the framework of the activities of the Hungarian national unit of the Law Enforcement Centre, I had insight mainly into the administrative work of the unit for the quarters I-III of 2022 (in Q1 of 2022 in full, in Q2 and Q3 of 2022 focusing on seizure notifications, criminal data requests and operational meetings).

Based on the data processed, Member State measures identified in the seizure notices typically targeted drugs, cash, cigarettes, weapons and other items during the period under review.

The data in Figures 2 and 3 also show that the majority of Member States make use of the possibility to issue seizure notices, which in 75% of the documented cases were for three items - drugs, cash and cigarettes.

The criminal data requests processed are mostly:

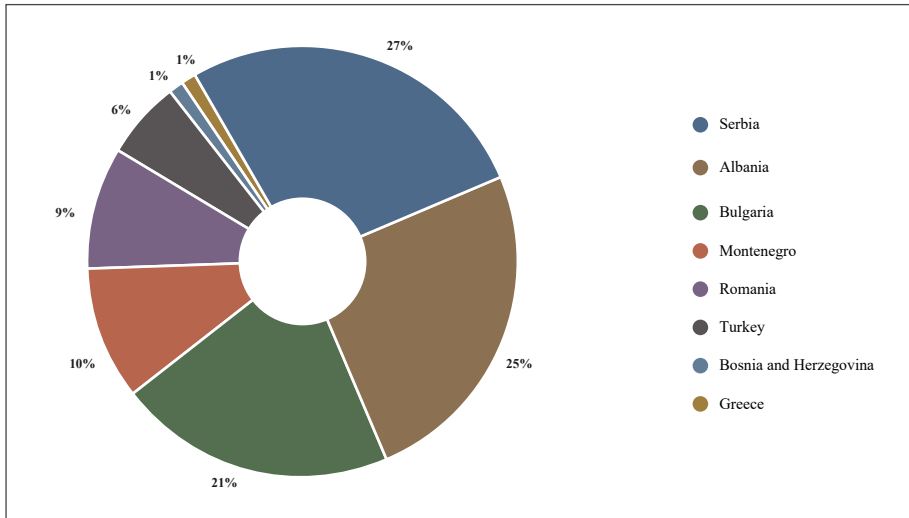
- the identity of the perpetrators and potential witnesses, their actual whereabouts, contact details, photographs of them and their criminal priority;
- focused on how the offence was committed (in particular, links with other offenders, criminal organisations; business partner company details; travel

information and border registration data; photographic or camera records; findings made during official checks on the consignments under investigation); and

- data on the means used to commit the offence (e.g. data on vehicles and their owners; relevant data on companies and their managers and owners; possible wanted information on travel documents).

Figure 2.

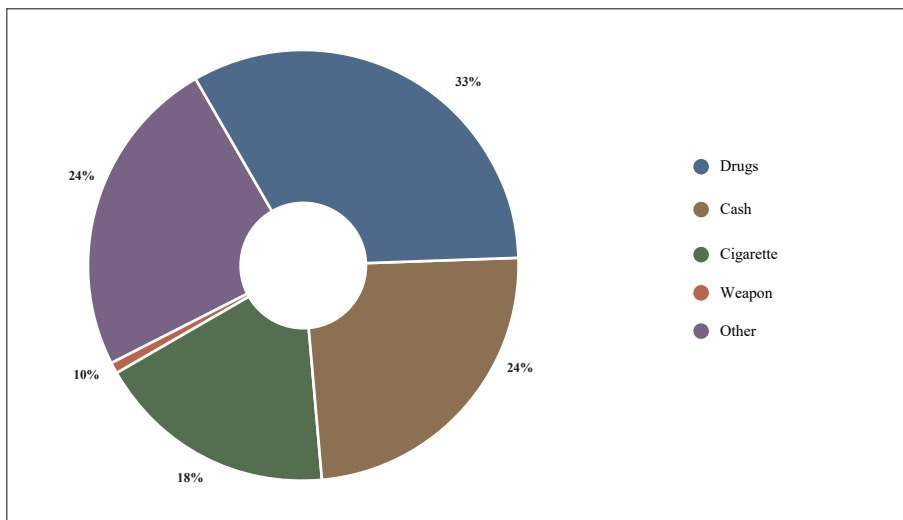
Distribution of SELEC Member State authorities sending reservation notifications in Q1-Q3 2022



Note. Figure created by the author.

Figure 3.

Subject of measures by SELEC Member States identified in seizure notifications in QII 2022



Note. Figure created by the author.

In addition to the obvious intention of exchanging information, the following motivations were observed in several cases when requesting criminal data:

- the preparation and rapid and effective execution of the forms of international cooperation in criminal matters described in Table 1, with particular attention to procedural assistance, the European arrest warrant, the international arrest warrant and the European arrest warrant;
- the preparation and organisation of operational meetings, which in some cases are the subject of, and in some cases are a consequence of, the execution of more complex criminal data requests; and
- to collect data and information criminal/law enforcement reports, studies, research and best practices prepared by SELEC or other organizations.

Among the criminal data requests/provided during the period under review, six exchanges of information were identified as falling within the competence of the NAV, which were data requests from the customs and law enforcement sectors.

It is worth mentioning the operational meetings conducted in the first three quarters of 2022, as there were three of them in which a Hungarian cooperating party was present (Table 2).

Table 2.*SELEC operational meetings with Hungarian participation in Q1-III 2022*

Date of	Location	Cooperating parties		Subject of action
2022. 02. 09.	Szeged	English police body	Serb police body	People smuggling
2022. 03. 17.	Timisoara	English police body	Romanian police body	Fraud, money laundering
2022. 06. 30.	Budapest	English police body	Albanian police body	Drug trafficking

Note. Table is made by the author.

In the context of the good practices observed during the visit, it is also important to mention that international law enforcement cooperation, and in particular coordinated operations with the authorities of several Member States, are also important features of cooperation with the support of SELEC, and contribute to the understanding of crime in the region and to the monitoring of the dynamics of change in a way that cannot be achieved otherwise.

When examining the activities of the Hungarian national unit of the SELEC for the first three quarters of 2022, it is important to take into account the 2019. The COVID 19 epidemic, which broke out at the end of the year and still caused small and large waves of infections at the time of writing, significantly limited the procedures of the police and customs authorities of the Member States, which resulted, among other things, in a decrease in the number of criminal data requests and seizure notifications, and the conduct of events requiring personal presence, such as operational meetings.

Conclusions, proposals

In my opinion, after processing the secondary data presented above and analysing the knowledge (as primary data) of the best practices and working experience observed in the investigated organisations, the following three main factors can be identified as motives for criminal cooperation between the investigative authority of the NAV and the SELEC.

1) The speed of information exchange

Whether through the SELEC communication channel or other forms of international or EU Member States' criminal cooperation, it is preceded by informal consultations with the liaison officers of the Member States concerned, which can result in its completion within 24 hours for less complex cases. This allows

the liaison officer to clarify whether the information requested is available and, if so, with which Member State authority, and to contact the head/officer of that authority via the liaison officer of the other party with a view to completing the exchange of information as quickly and accurately as possible.

2) The accuracy of information exchange.

By exploiting the informal interfaces described above, the information gap between requested and received data can be narrowed down without creating either information gaps or information overlaps. A lack of information can hinder an effective investigation, while a surplus of information can hinder an effective investigation, given the time and costs (e.g. translation fees) of processing redundant information. Less effective and inefficient investigations may ultimately also affect the so-called ‘competitiveness’ of the investigating authority.

3) Cost-effectiveness.

This is not only reflected in the accuracy of the information exchange, which has an impact on costs, as described above, but also in the fact that the costs of holding operational meetings supporting criminal data requests in complex cases are financed by the Law Enforcement Centre, and there is also the possibility of winning the tender awards described above.

It is true that, according to the data processed during the research, the investigative authority of the NAV was involved in a small number of cases pending before the Hungarian national unit of the SELEC between I and III 2022. However, based on the success story of the dismantling of the illegal cigarette factory in Szolnok, which was implemented and rewarded within the framework of SELEC cooperation, and the active cooperation with the police investigating authority in connection with criminal cases under the jurisdiction of the NAV, we can conclude that the speed and accuracy of information exchange and the cost-effectiveness of such cooperation can be evaluated as a stimulating factor between the NAV investigating authority and the SELEC. This is true both in the case of cooperation within the jurisdiction of the Law Enforcement Centre and in the case of traditional forms of international and EU Member States’ criminal cooperation in the prevention, detection and investigation of serious and organised and cross-border crime.

In further reflecting on the three main factors identified and isolated above, it may also be worth considering the following.

- The strategic objective of the NAV investigative authority, beyond the obvious intention of strengthening international criminal cooperation and⁷,

7 NAV Strategic Objectives for Crime V. point 2.

is to reduce the number of backlog cases,⁸, one way of which, in my view, could be to reduce the number of protracted investigative acts and their execution time, with particular attention to time-consuming procedural acts that are established through international and EU Member States' criminal cooperation. The aim is also to increase the competitiveness of the organisation,⁹ which, in addition to increasing effectiveness and efficiency, also means optimising costs. This applies to translation costs as well as to the accuracy of information exchange, to the support for operational meetings and to the rewards that can be awarded in tenders.

- The exploitation of the potential for cooperation is shown by the statistics which report the submission of 26 requests for mutual legal assistance/ODIHR and other cooperation by the investigating authority of the NAV to the authorities of the SELEC Member States in the first three quarters of 2022. In the past five years, NAV financial investigators have prepared or initiated the issuance of nearly 800 official case files involving the issuance of a warrant of arrest or arrest warrant with SELEC Member State involvement (with particular reference to the nationality, place of birth or documented or suspected residence of the person sought),¹⁰ which also suggests that the Hungarian national unit of the Law Enforcement Centre has played an important role.
- The data processed in the course of the research also revealed that requests for criminal data between the police investigative authority and the SELEC were for information of a nature that was considered relevant in the context of investigations under the competence of the NAV (for example, personal data of perpetrators and potential witnesses, their actual locations, or the way in which the crime was committed and the means used to commit it).
- Last but not least, in order to take full advantage of the benefits described above, in particular the flexibility and efficiency of informal contacts, I think it would be worth reconsidering the delegation of a permanent SELEC liaison officer from the NAV investigative authority, as such an expert has been supporting the work from Bucharest for years.

8 NAV Strategic Objectives in Criminal Matters VII. point 2.

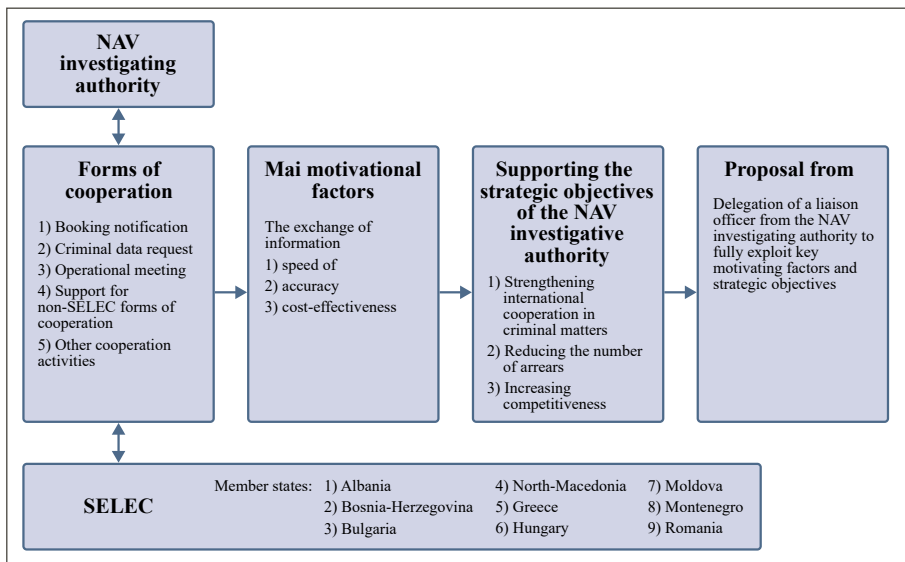
9 NAV Strategic Objectives in Criminal Matters Point III.

10 Based on the data provided by the Directorate General of Criminal Investigation of the NAV, the author's request for data and the provisions of Section 74 (2) and (3) and Section 76 (1) k) of Act CXXII of 2010 on the National Tax and Customs Administration.

Summary

The preparation of this publication was supported by the project BBA-5.2.1/10-2019-00001, *Europol Visits and International Study Visits to International Organisations*. The research, carried out at the SELEC headquarters in Bucharest from 13 to 26 October 2022, revealed three factors that justified the justification for the NAV investigative authority to cooperate with the SELECs in criminal matters. These were the speed of information exchange, the accuracy of the data obtained and its cost-effectiveness. The use of SELEC information channels can further assist the NAV investigative authority in achieving its main strategic objectives (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Relevant elements of potential cooperation between the NAV investigative authority and the SELEC



Note. Figure created by the author.

The large number of international requests issued by the NAV investigative authority to the authorities of the SELEC Member States and the large number of forms of cooperation between EU Member States justify the continuous maintenance and use of the channel. Criminal data requests leading to the acquisition of significant information in the context of investigations within the competence of the NAV, formal and informal consultations and consultations,

the benefits of flexibility and organisational efficiency also call for reconsideration of the delegation of a permanent SELEC Liaison Officer.

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Online links in the article

URL1: *Southeast European Law Enforcement Center szervezeti felépítése* [Organizational structure of the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center]. <https://www.selec.org/organization-structure/>

URL2: *Nemzetközi Bűnügyi Együttműködési Központ hivatalos oldala* [Official website of the International Criminal Cooperation Center]. <https://www.police.hu/hu/a-rendorsegrol/testulet/teruleti-szervek/nemzetkozi-bunugyi-egyuttmukodesi-kozpont>

Laws and regulations

Act CLXXX of 2012 on Criminal Cooperation with the Member States of the European Union
Act LIV of 2002 on International Cooperation of Law Enforcement Agencies

Act LVI of 2011 on the Promulgation of the Convention on the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center, concluded in Bucharest on 9 December 2009, and the Protocol on the Privileges and Immunities of the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center, concluded in Bucharest on 24 November 2010

Act XC of 2017 on Criminal Procedure

Criminal Strategic Objectives of the National Tax and Customs Administration

Reference of the article according to APA regulation

Szabó, B. (2025). The opportunities for criminal cooperation between the investigative authority of the National Tax and Customs Administration and the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center based on working experiences and best practices. *Belügyi Szemle*, 73(SI1), 139–160. <https://doi.org/10.38146/BSZ-AJIA.2025.v73.SI1.pp139-160>

Statements

Conflict of interest

The author has declared no conflict of interest.

Funding

The research on which the publication is based was carried out by the author with the support of the project BBA-5.2.1/10-2019-00001 ‘Europol Visits and International Study Tour Series at International Organisations’, at the headquarters of the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center, between 13 October 2022 and 26 October 2022.

Ethics

No dataset is associated with this article.

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