



# National quality control mechanism in the field of border management

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## Abstract

**Aim:** The aim of this study is to explain the rationale, purpose and benefits of developing a national quality control mechanism in the field of border management.

**Methodology:** The authors present in their paper the necessity and role of a quality management system in border control that meets the Schengen requirements.

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The work starts by introducing the integrated border management system, followed by the basics of its structure and operation, and the presentation of its high professional standards.

**Findings:** The establishment and subsequent implementation of a national quality control mechanism, which is also the objective of Hungary's National Integrated Border Management Strategy, is essential for the effective functioning of the integrated border management system.

**Value:** The establishment of a quality control system will ensure the continuous high-level implementation of border control in line with the Schengen requirements. Besides this our plan is also to develop a quality assurance system that can be operated as best practice not just national but at EU (international) level.

**Keywords:** National quality control mechanism, integrated border management, Schengen evaluation mechanism, quality assurance

## Introduction

In the field of border security, the development of national quality control mechanisms has long been lacking among the actors of European integrated border management. In the EU regulatory environment, there is relatively little support available for the establishment of an innovative and complex quality control system<sup>1</sup>, although the intention to do so is not a new idea.

Based on Regulation (EU) 2019/1896 of the European Parliament and of the Council, an important element of the European Integrated Border Management is the quality control mechanism ensuring the implementation of EU law on border management,<sup>2</sup> therefore Hungary's National Integrated Border Management Strategy<sup>3</sup> aims to develop a national quality control mechanism as an objective (Herczeg, 2024).

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- 1 Quality control in general refers to the verification of compliance with quality (in our case Schengen and border control technical) requirements at any point in the process being controlled. In our understanding, and for the purposes of this study, the specificities of border management are best suited to the development of a quality management system, which includes the management and regulation of an organisation from a quality perspective. Quality assurance as part of quality management ensures that the system developed is suitable for use in Schengen evaluations. The study uses the concepts of quality management in the above context.
  - 2 Regulation (EU) No 2019/1896 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 November 2019 on the European Border and Coast Guard Agency and repealing Regulations (EU) No 1052/2013 and (EU) 2016/1624 (Frontex Regulation) Article 3(1)(k)
  - 3 1891/2021. (XII. 13.) Korm. határozat Magyarország Nemzeti Integrált Határigazgatási Stratégiájáról {1891/2021. (XII. 13.) Government Decision on the National Integrated Border Management Strategy of Hungary}

The three pillars of quality control in the strategy are as follows: the most important element is the verification of established national practices in line with the Schengen principles, the second element is the verification of compliance with the responses to the weaknesses identified in the Schengen evaluation and the third element is the verification of the responses to the Frontex<sup>4</sup> vulnerability assessments.

On 17 May 2022, the European Commission published the BMVI-2021-TF1-AG-NQAM ‘*Call for proposals to support pilot projects for the development and launch of national quality assurance mechanisms*’.

Based on the request of the Ministry of Interior, members of the Ludovika University of Public Service Faculty of Law Enforcement Department of Border Policing and the European Integrated Border Management Department of Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava prepared the details of the project, which was supported by the European Commission. The implementation of the project, which is planned to last 24 months, started on 01 April 2023.

The development of the national quality control mechanism will be carried out in the project ‘*Development of the Hungarian – Slovak quality assurance mechanism in the field of border management*’ 101102709 - HSQA<sup>5</sup>, implemented under the thematic resources of the Border Management and Visa Policy Instrument (Vájlok & Vedó, 2023). The project aims to fully develop the first pillar and align it with the operation of the second and third pillars. As the results of the project may not only be implemented in Hungary, but also can be used in international level, therefore Slovak partners were invited to participate in the development.

The leading agency is the Ministry of the Interior of Hungary, while Slovakia is represented by the Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava. The Hungarian expert’s working group of the project consists of 22 officers, all highly experienced professionals from the Ministry of Interior, from the National Police Headquarters, from the University of Public Service and the police headquarters of the counties with Schengen external borders. The Slovakian team consists of 6 highly experienced, professional officers.

The Hungarian and Slovakian working groups share the project-related tasks. The Slovak side has taken the responsibility on air borders and the Hungarian side on land and water (river) borders.

The key objectives of the project are:

- Establish and operate a national quality control mechanism for the implementation of border control at a level that meets the EU’s requirements, is certified and complies with the Schengen monitoring requirements;

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4 European Border and Coast Guard Agency.

5 Hungarian, Slovak development of quality assurance mechanism on border management.

- the development of a system of national quality control mechanisms that can be accepted as ‘best practice’ at European (international) level;
- to use the project result as a role model for a national quality control mechanism that can be applied to other law enforcement/administrative areas on a large scale;
- Develop a long-term, sustainable and mandatory training framework for national border control staff on the EU quality control mechanism, vulnerability assessment and the national quality control mechanism.

The main outcome of the project will be the production of an internationally applicable quality management manual, which will form the basis of an accredited quality management system.

In any case, it is also worth noting that, regardless of the novelty of the procedure, only the former Hungarian Border Guard HQ has so far developed a similar evaluation system applicable to quality control, when it introduced its self-evaluation system based on the common evaluation framework in 2004 and applied a full quality management system from 2007 (Teke, 2007).

## Self-evaluation of the border control system

The evaluation and assessment of the border control system and border management within the Schengen area is particularly important. The European Union last amended or renewed the Schengen-type evaluation system in 2022. The relevant regulation<sup>6</sup> underlines in its introductory part that the functioning of the Schengen area without internal border controls requires the effective and efficient application of the Schengen acquis by the Member States. This acquis includes all the legislation on the basis of which the border management system in the Schengen area has been established and is operated. In order to ensure the proper functioning of the system, in addition to the direct Schengen evaluation, the European Union has mandated Frontex to develop a so-called vulnerability assessment, which has already placed the evaluation of the Schengen acquis on two important pillars. These are the direct implementation of the Schengen evaluations and the Frontex vulnerability assessment. However, the European Union has also included the role and responsibility of the Member States in the

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6 Council Regulation (EU) No 2022/922 of 9 June 2022 on the establishment and operation of an evaluation and monitoring mechanism to verify the application of the Schengen acquis and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1053/2013.

process by creating a third pillar in the Frontex Regulation, according to which if there is a national quality control mechanism, this should also be taken into account in the Schengen evaluation process. This third pillar could be implemented through the self-assessment of the border management system and the development of a national quality control mechanism in the framework of the HSQA project.

As far as Hungary is concerned, following its accession to the European Union, there have also been continuous preparations for joining the Schengen area, i.e. it developed the conditions for the free movement of internal borders (Balla et al., 2024).

There were no recurring inspections after accession, but a team including members of the Schengen Evaluation Committee from DCAF<sup>7</sup> carried out an inspection visit to Hungary in 2008. The interesting aspect of this visit was that the body, which carried out democratic control over the functioning of the armed forces, did so in a manner similar to the Schengen evaluation (although with a different purpose). They assessed the same areas, based on the findings of the Schengen evaluation, using similar methods. The difference, of course, is that the findings of this body do not impose any obligation on the Member States.

Further Schengen-type pre-announced, planned evaluation were carried out in Hungary in 2012 and 2019. In addition to these pre-announced events, one so-called unannounced evaluation took place in 2017. The last periodic inspection was organized and carried out by the EU Commission in Hungary in the summer of 2024 and a Schengen evaluation was carried out in Slovak Republic in autumn 2024. During this audit, the Commission's senior experts were informed about the joint project's process and development of the two countries focusing on national control mechanism and quality assurance.

In the future, as a result of the new legislation, so-called monitoring visits are expected to become an integral part of the Schengen evaluations. The monitoring visit will differ from the recurrent Schengen evaluation in that it will only assess the implementation stages and results of the action plan drawn up in response to the recommendations made by the Schengen audit. This type of audit is new to the system and has only been carried out in three Member States so far. The development and implementation of the national control mechanism, including the implementation of border management quality self-assessments, is also a priority during these visits (Krinár & Odlerová, 2024).

In order to carry out the self-assessment of the border management system, it was essential to select experts with a broad theoretical and practical knowledge

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7 Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (Geneva, Switzerland).

of all the central and cross-cutting elements of the European integrated border management. This knowledge was ensured on the one hand by the experts' career paths, i.e. experience in border management, and on the other hand by their receptiveness to innovation, which is very important professional competences (Balla, Vájlók & Vedó, 2022).

On the Hungarian side, the 22 experts participating in the project represent the whole range of activities of the border police service (management, executive level, training and education, etc.) from the ministry, central, regional and local levels. All this diversity is also reflected in the selected experts' duty stations, both in the border surveillance function of the stations and at the various types of land border crossing points (motorway, road, rail, river crossings) (Balla, 2021).

On the Slovakian side, mainly lecturers, academics from the Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava have been assigned to conduct the project's air border security related tasks (Balla et al., 2024).

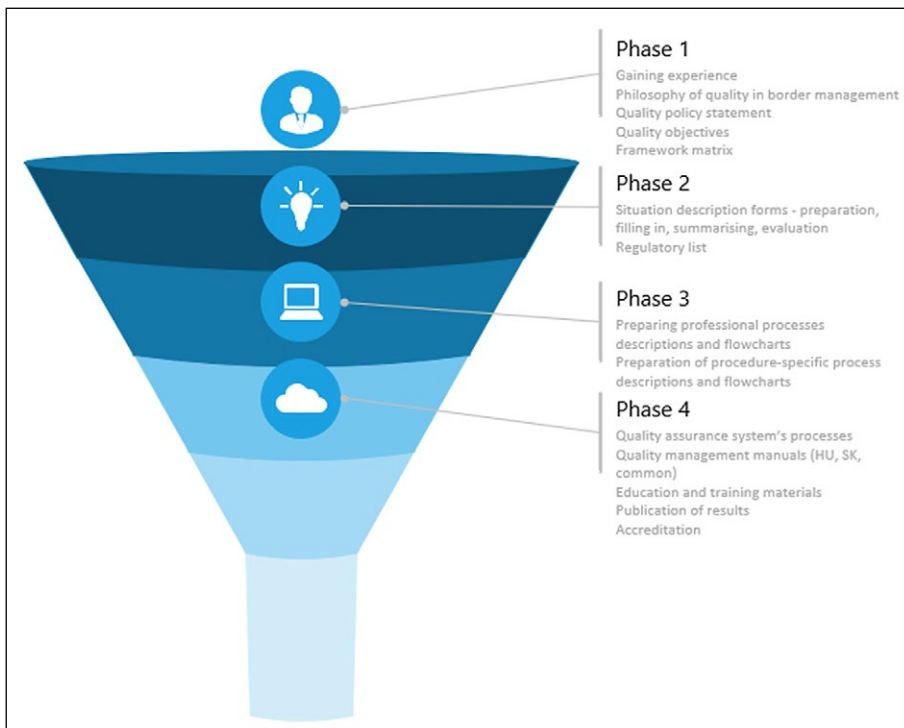
The methodology for conducting self-assessments is designed to produce results that are uniformly measurable, interpretable, comparable and evaluable in terms of results in an objective form. To this end, a template for a situation description form was prepared and completed by all experts at their duty station where they were serving as a sample for a pre-research survey (Balla et al., 2024). As a research method and tool, the situation description form was successfully tested and the results showed that no major corrections were necessary. Overall, the criteria presented in the form can be derived from the Frontex Regulation and the Return Manual<sup>8</sup>. The self-assessment criteria are analyzed in detail in terms of regulation, control (process management), performance of professional tasks, conditions (personnel, equipment, technological, and procedural), supervision, monitoring/compliance assessment, analysis/evaluation and intervention, with a score of '0' (not adequate), '1' (partially adequate/needs improvement) and '2' (fully adequate).

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8 Commission Recommendation (EU) 2017/2338 of 16 November 2017 on the establishment of a common 'Return Manual' to be used by the competent authorities of the Member States in carrying out their return-related tasks.

**Figure 1**

*HSQA funnel showing the different stages in the development of a national quality control mechanism*



*Note.* Edited by the authors.

During the processing and analysis of the primary data recorded in the situation description form, it became apparent that the criteria developed in the form are not fully applicable to all border police functions. This relevance could be easily assessed or excluded in cases where it was not possible to fill in the criteria for the border police service in question due to a lack of legal mandate (e.g. not all regional police headquarters along the external border have a detention center for aliens at the time of the research). However, the problem of the division of tasks between local and regional authorities in procedures, especially in the field of alien policing, was a common one. In particular, where the local body is not entitled to order more than one measure because the rules of competence laid down in the legislation make it the responsibility of the superior body. As a result, in this case, the aggregation of the data forms produced an incorrect result. To resolve this, it was necessary to introduce a 'no data' in the relevant criteria and to complete the form with a competence analysis.

The pilot condition situation description forms were summarized in advance by a small group of experts using Microsoft Excel. The reason for this was twofold: firstly, because of the interpretation problem arising from the aforementioned jurisdictional differences. Secondly, to ensure that the accurate and complete filling in of the forms was presented in a comprehensive and easily verifiable visual way, and to detect any errors, data gaps or omissions. On the basis of the previously developed ‘branch map’, a separate summary Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was prepared for each specialized area for border surveillance, border check at river, rail, road and motorway crossings, as well as for the regional and centralized specialized management areas.

**Figure 2**

*'Branch diagram' showing the aggregation methodology of the situation description forms*

Level	Field of expertise	Situation assessment forms	Aggregated data				
Central level	Professional management	CENTRAL LEVEL – PROFESSIONAL MANAGEMENT ON NATIONAL LEVEL			AGGREGATED DATA OF BORDER CONTROL PROFESSIONAL MANAGEMENT		
Regional level	Professional management	PROFESSIONAL MANAGEMENT ON REGIONAL LEVEL	AGGREGATED DATA OF REGIONAL LEVEL MANAGEMENT				
		PROFESSIONAL MANAGEMENT ON REGIONAL LEVEL	AGGREGATED DATA OF REGIONAL LEVEL MANAGEMENT				
Activities on local level	Border Surveillance	LOCAL LEVEL – ORGANIZING LAND BORDER SURVEILLANCE – WITHOUT A TEMPORARY BORDER SECURITY FENCE	AGGREGATED DATA OF LOCAL LEVEL – LAND BORDER SURVEILLANCE	AGGREGATED DATA OF LOCAL LEVEL – BORDER SURVEILLANCE			
		LOCAL LEVEL – ORGANIZING LAND BORDER SURVEILLANCE – WITH TEMPORARY BORDER SECURITY FENCE					
		LOCAL LEVEL – BORDER SURVEILLANCE – ORGANIZING BORDER SURVEILLANCE ON BORDER RIVERS	AGGREGATED DATA OF LOCAL LEVEL – BORDER SURVEILLANCE ON BORDER RIVERS				
	Border check	LOCAL LEVEL - BORDER CHECK - MOTORWAY BORDER CROSSING	LOCAL LEVEL - BORDER CHECK - MOTORWAY BORDER CROSSING	AGGREGATED DATA OF LOCAL LEVEL – MOTORWAY, HIGHWAY BORDER CROSSINGS		AGGREGATED DATA OF LOCAL LEVEL – LAND BORDER TRAFFIC CHECK	AGGREGATED DATA OF LOCAL LEVEL – TOTAL BORDER TRAFFIC CHECK (LAND, WATER, AIR)
			LOCAL LEVEL - BORDER CHECK - HIGHWAY BORDER CROSSING POINTS	AGGREGATED DATA OF LOCAL LEVEL – TEMPORARILY BORDER CROSSINGS AND LOCAL BORDER TRAFFIC			
			LOCAL LEVEL - BORDER CHECK - TEMPORARILY BORDER CROSSING POINTS	AGGREGATED DATA OF LOCAL LEVEL – RAILWAY CROSSINGS			
			LOCAL LEVEL - BORDER CHECK - LOCAL BORDER TRAFFIC	AGGREGATED DATA OF LOCAL LEVEL – RAILWAY CROSSINGS			
		LOCAL LEVEL - BORDER CHECK - RAILWAY BORDER CROSSING POINTS	AGGREGATED DATA OF LOCAL LEVEL – RAILWAY CROSSINGS				
		LOCAL LEVEL - BORDER CHECK - RIVER CROSSING POINTS					
		LOCAL LEVEL - BORDER CHECK – GAT	AGGREGATED DATA OF LOCAL LEVEL – AIR BORDER CROSSINGS				
LOCAL LEVEL - BORDER CHECK – OPENING OF TEMPORARILY AIR BORDER CROSSING POINTS							
LOCAL LEVEL - BORDER CHECK – AIR BORDER CROSSING POINTS							

Note. Edited by the authors.

After consultation with the local and regional experts who filled in the forms, and after the necessary data had been clarified and in some cases completed, the results were entered into the Microsoft Forms data aggregation system via a link provided by the training experts of the Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava, from where the data are evaluated by a system containing several aggregation algorithms developed by Slovak experts (Košíč et al, 2024).

## Compliance assessment of border control

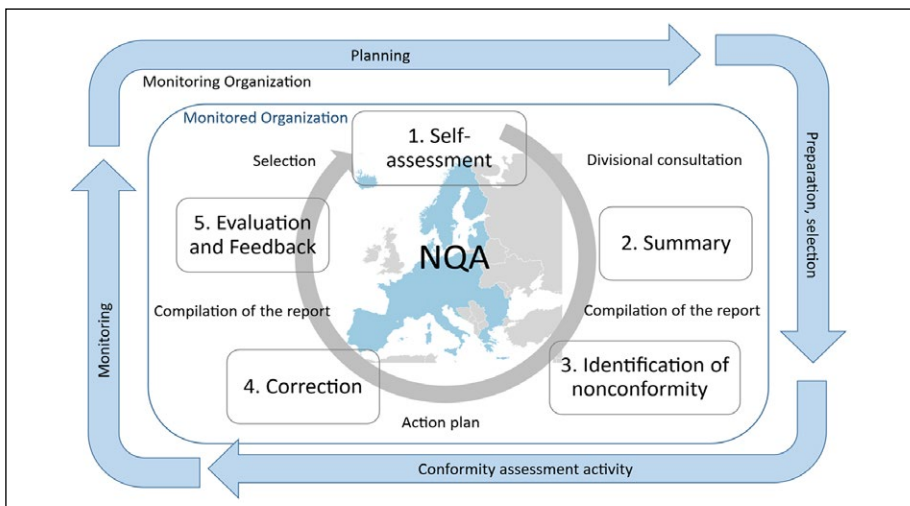
The national quality control mechanism consists of a self-assessment by the organization carrying out the border control (see the sites and methods described in the previous chapter) and an audit made by an independent inspection body. The self-assessment is carried out by experts (internal auditors) selected and trained according to defined competences (Balla et al., 2024b) and they report on its results. The auditor's findings are fed back to the auditee's professional forums and the process of addressing non-compliance and preparing action plans begins by the organization. On the other hand, the results of the self-assessment will be used and examined by the independent monitoring organization, which, through its internationally recognized accreditation, will ensure an impartial and factual assessment. The function of the independent monitoring organization is to determine whether the self-assessment and the resulting measures are in line with the requirements of the quality management manual and whether the audited organization complies with the requirements for risk management and prevention. It does not examine the technical content of the nonconformities recorded at each site, which are dealt with in detail within the internal processes of the auditee. Due to the specificities of border control (e.g. the nature of law enforcement, international dimension, EU level regulations, security and data protection aspects), it is appropriate to establish an independent inspection body within the central administration. In Hungary, this takes place within the Police, and thus within the Ministry of Interior, which exercises management and supervisory rights over border control, but without direct powers of instruction over these processes. In the Slovak Republic, the independent control body is the Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava. This body will audit self-assessment results of Border Police authorities allocated in airports. Academy of the Police Force in Bratislava will provide a course in this field – train the trainers. The training of trainers will be a course accredited by the Accreditation Commission of the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic. The trained trainers will be persons from the individual units of the Border and Alien Police Bureau and will be responsible for the subsequent training of police officers who will perform self-assessment. The aim of this course is to provide guidance for trainers, enabling them to train officers to carry out self-assessment in line with the Quality Management Manual. The preparation for the work is a very important part of the procedure, because only well-trained officers can do a credible self-assessment. The course will provide not only knowledge, but also skills and competences for better training of officers. The Bratislava Police Academy will be responsible for supervising and monitoring this kind of

pre-self-assessment training. The reason for this decision is that the Academy is an independent body from the Border and Alian Police Bureau and has well-trained instructors with pedagogical knowledge who can provide and manage this type of training. Another important organization in the procedure is a body that will audit the process of self-assessment and its results.

International accreditation will make the established national quality control mechanism operational in all EU Member States, which is to be guided by a common quality manual. This manual will be the real final product of the project. This manual sets out the tasks and best practices for the national implementation of the quality control mechanism for border management and provides recommendations for the preparation of the necessary documents and forms. The accreditation will be carried out in the framework of the European Accreditation Multilateral Agreement (EA MLA), taking into account the European and international standards<sup>9</sup> published as national standards and in a format agreed by the international and European accreditation bodies<sup>10</sup>. This will allow other Member States to implement the mechanism in a simple and cost-effective way, thereby increasing the efficiency of planned developments in the field of integrated border management in Europe (Tóth & Vedó, 2024).

**Figure 3**

*How the national quality assurance (NQA) mechanism works*



*Note.* Edited by the authors.

9 MSZ EN ISO/IEC 17011.

10 For the EA MLA network member countries.

The national quality control mechanism is based on the legitimacy of professionalism. Legality is determined by compliance with and enforcement of obligations and rights arising from international treaties, the EU Schengen acquis, and national border control legislation.

In addition to legality, compliance is a key word to ensure that the results of the national quality control mechanism, the measures taken or planned, and the resulting status assessment and non-compliance detection provide an objective picture of the national border control system.

Compliance and its outcome can only be accepted if they are based on credible data and verified facts. The appropriate selection of self-assessment and monitoring staff, their prior training should contribute to ensuring the professionalism of the national quality control mechanism. The selection and appointment process should be regulated in such a way as to guarantee objective and impartial work and also organizational independence.

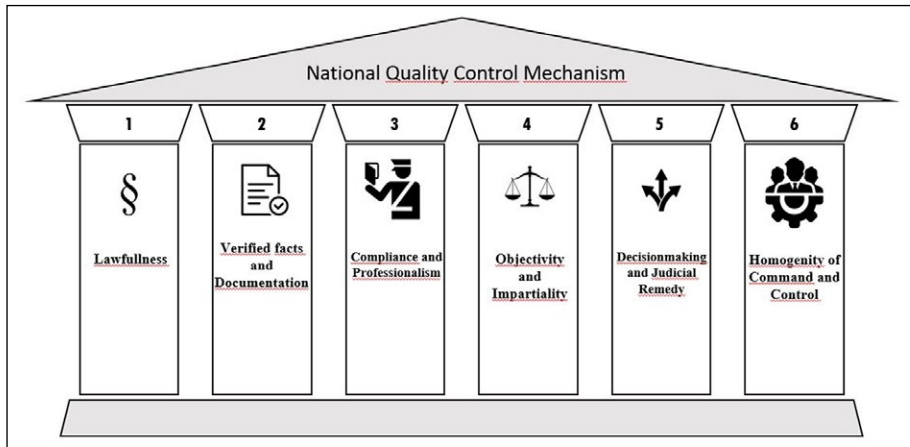
The documented nature of the national quality control mechanism ensures that the facts and data on which the results are based are verified and retrievable<sup>11</sup>. The documents of self-assessment and conformity assessment are handled in a controlled and careful manner, guaranteed by the audited and monitoring organization's rules on file management and the confidentiality declarations of the parties concerned. Making evidence-based, professionally validated, relevant and unbiased decisions ensures a continuous and up-to-date status. The possibility of appealing against decisions ensures a fair and transparent process. Coherence of governance and management will allow the mechanism to be functional by ensuring that the professional management and implementation of border control activities at all levels are based on the same principles, that the resulting burden is shared, that solutions to problems are sought jointly and that solutions are based on common decisions.

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11 This is in line with the principle of the evidence-based approach in clause 4(f) of ISO 19011:2018.

**Figure 4**

*Pillars of the national quality control mechanism*



*Note.* Edited by the authors.

The above-presented pillars ensure the achievement of the national quality control mechanism's priorities. Priority quality objectives are set annually, based on the results of Schengen evaluation and the national quality control mechanism. The quality objectives set for the development period are:

- 1) Establish a national quality control mechanism for the implementation of border control at a certified level in line with the European Union's expectations and in line with the Schengen monitoring requirements.
- 2) The operation of a certified national quality control mechanism at all levels in line with EU requirements as an integral part of the integrated border management system in the border control activities.
- 3) Developing a system of national quality control mechanisms that can be accepted as 'best practice' at EU (international) level.
- 4) Laying the foundations for a national quality control mechanism that can be applied broadly to other law enforcement/administrative areas related to border management.
- 5) Develop a long-term sustainable and mandatory training framework for national border control staff on the EU quality control mechanism, vulnerability assessment and national quality control mechanism.

## Summary

The method presented will be used by the two participating Member States to develop a national quality control mechanism for integrated border management. In addition to implementing the national mechanism in the two countries involved, a common standard will be created through European accreditation, which will allow for a simplified implementation of the mechanism in all Member States. The development work will also result in a common manual to serve as a reference for the national authorities of the Member States to develop their own national mechanisms. The mechanism currently being developed is limited to being used by border control authorities, but in the future, it will be possible to extend its application to all actors in law enforcement or public administration. A prerequisite for this is that an inspection structure independent of all the authorities concerned has already been set up at this stage.

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## Reference of the article according to APA regulation

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## Statements

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### Ethics

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