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(EU/Iceland and Norway)

Subject : REPORT
- Operation VISA

Delegations will find attached the report on "Operation VISA" received from the Danish-led project group.

EUROPOL



Operation 'VISA'

**Visa Control Investigation in
Schengen International
Airports with EUROPOL
support**

Final Report

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1 Executive Summary

Operation VISA – Visa Control Investigation in Schengen International Airports – was a pan-European project in the field of combating illegal immigration into the EU, initiated by the recent Danish EU Presidency. The operation was implemented in accordance with the Guidelines for Joint Operations which were adopted in SCIFA+ in July 2002.

All Schengen states as well as the United Kingdom and Ireland took part in the project by designating a total of 22 airports of various size and traffic volume. EUROPOL supported Operation VISA as regards data collection, analysis and overall evaluation.

The focus of the operation, in light of the plan concerning the administration of the external EU borders adopted in the JHA Council on 13 June 2002, has been to determine the scope and nature of the forgery and abuse of Schengen visas through detailed analysis of information gathered in the airports of the participating countries during a limited period of time (four weeks in November-December 2002). Other aims of the operation have been to illustrate whether changes in current control procedures are required, as well as to enhance co-operation between the competent authorities in charge of the issue and control of visas.

The analysis of the operational results suggest that the occurrence of Schengen visa abuse by non-Schengen travellers targeting the participating airports is extremely limited, although flaws in the quality of the gathered data undoubtedly limit the extended value and use of the operational results. Generally speaking, there is anecdotal evidence that the specific visa types are subject to abuse, but that was not reflected in the operational outcome. Some 29,000 Schengen visas issued for the purpose of either (1) Business, (2) Sports/Culture or (3) Study/Education were checked during the operational period. There was no indication of any involvement of organised crime in any of the reported cases. Of the 183 individuals refused entry to the Schengen area, there were only three known cases where investigations had been initiated which showed that the visa requirements were not met. Of these, only one single case suggests overt criminal intent.

On the basis of the operational outcome of the project, EUROPOL, in co-operation with the Danish Project leader, has conducted an overall evaluation of Operation VISA to determine whether the aims and objectives – as agreed in SCIFA+ prior to the commencement of the operation – were met. The evaluation has shown that the aims and objectives of the operation as set up by the Danish Project leader were not entirely met, due to a number of reasons which are presented in detail in this report.

The overall outcome of Operation VISA clearly highlights the importance of proper preparatory measures being taken before the launch of operations of this magnitude, e.g. the absolute necessity of producing a Threat Assessment followed by a Feasibility Study in order to objectively determine and define the actual scope of the presumed criminal problem. Furthermore, the outcome gives evidence that the successful implementation of pan-European so-called High Impact Operations is vitally dependant on the full commitment of the participating countries for the duration of such projects.

2 Introduction

2.1 Background

Operation VISA – Visa Control Investigation in Schengen International Airports – was a project which was initiated by the recent Danish EU Presidency on the basis of the conclusions of the European Council in Seville on 21 and 22 June 2002 as well as the Road Map for the follow-up to the conclusions.¹

The operation, running between 18 November and 13 December 2002, was initially introduced by the Danish Project leader at the SCIFA+² meeting on 22 July 2002, at which it gained support among the meeting participants. The Project Plan was subsequently presented at the SCIFA+ meeting on 16 September 2002.³

The so-called ‘Guidelines for Joint Operations’, which were adopted by SCIFA+ in July 2002, were consulted by the Danish Project leader during the planning phase of Operation VISA.⁴

A total of 17 countries took part in Operation VISA – the 15 EU Member States together with the two Schengen States Norway and Iceland – with a total of 22 participating airports. Five countries – Austria, Denmark, France, Norway and Sweden – designated two airports each to take part in the operation (see Annex 1 for a complete list of participating airports).

Besides the involvement of the control authorities in the participating airports, the visa issuing authorities in the participating Schengen states and their diplomatic missions abroad, Operation VISA has been supported by EUROPOL in terms of collation, analysis and dissemination on a weekly basis of the gathered information, as well as the subsequent evaluation of the entire project. Furthermore, the EUROPOL Liaison Officers were assigned the task of forwarding inquiries between the appointed ‘National Contact Units’ throughout the duration of the operation.

Following the adoption of the project in SCIFA+, a National Project Group comprising of representatives from the competent Danish authorities was set up. During the preparatory phase, this group has held meetings with representatives from EUROPOL to discuss *inter alia* the division of labour and responsibilities, the data requirements as well as the implementation of the operational and the evaluation phases of the project. To this end, the Danish Project Group, in co-operation with EUROPOL, created a set of forms to be used during the operation in order to facilitate the collection of the data needed to analyse and assess the current situation.

A Preparatory Meeting was consequently held at EUROPOL on 30 October 2002, in which representatives from all participating Schengen states except Iceland were present. Subsequent to the presentation made by the Danish Presidency representatives of the operational plan and the forms, all countries unanimously agreed to fully participate in Operation VISA.⁵

¹ Council of the European Union, doc ref 10525/1/02 JAI 152, 11 July 2002. Reference is also made to the *Plan for the management of the external borders of the Member States of the European Union*, doc ref 10019/02 FRONT 58 COMIX 398, 14 June 2002.

² Strategic Committee on Immigration, Frontiers and Asylum

³ Council of the European Union, doc ref 11905/02 FRONT 90, 11 September 2002.

⁴ Council of the European Union, doc ref 11401/02 FRONT 79, 29 July 2002.

⁵ Meeting Minutes, EUROPOL, doc ref 5125-20021030.

2.2 Aims and Objectives

According to the Project Plan submitted to SCIFA+ in September 2002⁶, the aim of the operation has been to investigate the possible misuse of visas issued by either the holder's own central authorities/diplomatic missions abroad or by a different Schengen State for business, education and sports purposes in order to expose the extent of the problem and to that end:

- reveal any false/forged visas and genuine visa issued on an incorrect basis in order to uncover the scope of the problem;
- illustrate whether changes in current control procedures are required; and
- enhance co-operation between the authorities in the European Union Member States (MS) in charge of the issue of visas (central authorities and MS missions abroad) and control of the visas issued at the borders, respectively.

2.3 Methodological Limitations

Due to the vast number of Schengen visas being issued for various purposes – reportedly 10 million every year – the Danish Project leader deemed it necessary to impose certain limits to this operation. To this end, it was decided to only include visas issued for the purpose of (1) Business, (2) Studies/Education or (3) Sports/Culture, which means that visas issued for the purpose of tourist and family visits – which constitute the great majority – were excluded from closer examination in the framework of Operation VISA.

This decision was taken based on a number of reasons:

- intelligence from a number of MS suggesting that visas issued for the purposes of (1), (2) and (3) are among the types of visa that are frequently being used to accomplish fraudulent entries into the Schengen area;
- it was considered as unworkable, due to the large volumes, to carry out close examinations – including the verification of the information given by the extra-Schengen traveller in terms of any references and/or guarantees – of tourist and family visas; and
- visas issued for the purposes of (1), (2) and (3) allow for the close examination and subsequent verification of the validity of the visa by contacting companies, education institutions, sports associations etc in question.⁷

Another major limitation has been the fact that a number of participating countries – France, Germany, Italy and The Netherlands – were forced to limit their participation in the operation due to the large number of passengers travelling into the Schengen area through their main airports, as this would otherwise lead to an excessive workload for the immigration officers involved.⁸

⁶ Council of the European Union, doc ref 11905/02 FRONT 90, 11 September 2002.

⁷ Operational Plan Op VISA, October 2002. Reference is also made to the Meeting Minutes from the Operational/Strategic Senior Expert Meeting on Illegal Immigration, held at EUROPOL on 1-2 October 2002 (doc ref 5125-20021001-02CO), as well as the Overview Report for Op RIO II (EUROPOL, doc ref 2530-99, 23 May 2002).

⁸ Meeting Minutes, EUROPOL, doc ref 5125-20021030. See also chapter 4 Evaluation for further details on the reasons for limiting the participation.

As a result, France, notwithstanding the fact that they participated with two airports, limited their participation to certain areas of the airports. In the case of Germany, the anticipated resource implications lead to the limitation in space of their participation to one of four operational areas at Frankfurt am Main Airport, as well as to the limitation in time to eight hours a day. Italy nominated Rimini Airport as the Italian airport taking part in the operation, although there are a number of other international airports in Italy that have far greater number of passengers arriving from non-Schengen destinations. The Netherlands, taking part with Amsterdam Schiphol Airport, limited its participation to restricted areas of the airport for controlling the absolute numbers, but addressing visa abuse across the whole airport.⁹

It should also be noted that the United Kingdom and Ireland have participated in Operation VISA on equal terms with the Schengen States, although not being members of the Schengen area. The only difference was that they were not asked to forward inquiries to any of the Schengen States – and vice versa – to request the examination of the validity of a visa.

⁹ Although justifications for any limitations being imposed were given in most evaluation reports, it should be mentioned that such limitations among some of the MS most heavily affected by persons seeking access to the Schengen area have without doubt had a negative effect on the final operational outcome.

3 Operational Results

In this chapter, the overall results of the month long operational period are presented.¹⁰

As a general introductory remark, it can be concluded that the operational results can only be described as disappointing, and it should be noted that there were several inconsistencies with the reported numbers of refused migrants as detailed later in the report, which directly impacts on the validity of any conclusions to be drawn from the operation.

Equally unsatisfactory has been the number of inquiries initiated between the different countries and, perhaps more importantly, the low number of completed inquiries of those actually commenced.

Furthermore, as the vast majority of the data obtained during the course of the operation were statistical the results are best presented in a similar manner. Unfortunately, these results must also be treated carefully, since the gathered information cannot be deemed a wholly accurate representation of the current situation of the overall visa abuse affecting the Schengen Member States.

3.1 Entry and Refusal Overview

During the operational month, the 22 participating airports controlled approximately 29,000 individuals using Business (68%), Sports/Culture (17%) or Study/Education (15%) visas. Of the 17 participating countries, France, Austria and Belgium reported the largest numbers of travellers (58%). The fact that Germany (Frankfurt am Main) and The Netherlands (Schiphol) are not among these is explained by both having to limit the control of persons within the operational framework as previously described (see section 2.3).

Due to the low number of forwarded inquiries, as well as several discrepancies in the material¹¹, it is only possible to say that of the 29,000 non-Schengen travellers checked in the framework of the operation, a relatively insignificant number of 183 persons were refused entry. The majority of those (161 individuals) carried Business visas. This represents less than one percent of the total number of travellers who passed through the participating airports during the operational period.

The breakdown of the reasons for refusal shows that France and the Netherlands reported most cases. Nearly half of all the refusals were based on 'Purpose Not Proved' (83 cases). Of these cases, France was the reported issuing country for nearly half of the Business visas being used to travel into the Schengen area.

Interestingly, of the 40 cases of refusal based on a false passport (all but one were carrying Business visas), France had issued 23 of these and also intercepted 22 of them.

¹⁰ Reference is also made to the four Weekly Reports that were produced by EUROPOL in co-operation with a representative of the Danish Project leader during the operational period (EUROPOL, docs ref 2530-111/112/113/114).

¹¹ The main discrepancy has been the fact that the figures given for refused migrants submitted as part of the weekly statistics in 'Form C' did not correspond to the breakdown of the reasons for refusal on the lower half of the same form.

Conversely, in 31 cases of refusal stated to be based on a 'false visa' (all Business visas), Germany had reportedly "issued" 11 of these, which were mainly intercepted in France.

3.2 Investigations

Throughout the course of the operation, a total of 90 investigations into visa abuse were initiated, of which 47 were national and 43 forwarded bi-lateral investigations. Details of 51 of these were subsequently forwarded to EUROPOL, of which 40 included the complete details.

Austria initiated 31 national investigations, while Denmark forwarded the largest number of bilateral investigations (17), mainly to Sweden in relation to a group of Chinese migrants who were eventually permitted to continue their journey.

In none of the reported cases did the reporting countries indicate that there was suspicion of any involvement of organised crime.

In only three cases where the complete details were sent to EUROPOL were visa requirements not met, with a further four cases where this was reported as 'unknown'. These cases were reported by Austria, Denmark and Sweden. At the Vienna International Airport in Austria, a Nigerian migrant had used false documents to obtain a Schengen visa at the French embassy in Tel Aviv. In Denmark, a Chinese migrant was heading for a language course in Brussels for which they had already recuperated their fee. Finally, in Sweden, one Iranian migrant travelling on a business visa claimed asylum on arrival at the airport.

Nine countries did not initiate any national or bi-lateral investigations, including some of the larger airports in France, Belgium and Germany. In some cases, the reason for this was given in their evaluation, as shown below.

Given the relatively low number of followed-up cases, it has not been possible to identify any trends indicative of Schengen visa abuse, including:

- which embassies migrants target;
- which countries they use for travelling; and
- where they are intercepted in relation to the specific visa they hold.

The difficulty of identifying any trends is compounded by the lack of specific detail when reporting on the visa issuing authority and country. The details given have proved insufficient in attempting to reveal where the problems in visa abuse may be originating from.

In the cases reported, comparison shows that there are no clear similarities with any routes identified during the previous High Impact Operations RIO I and II beyond the general observation of Copenhagen and the Swiss airports being used as transit airports into the EU, although it should be reiterated that in none of these cases were there any indications of the involvement of organised crime.

The only other case of potential interest was a large group of Chinese migrants (18) intercepted in Schiphol Airport in The Netherlands supposedly on a business trip around France. A request was made to France by the Dutch authorities for further information, but no response was reportedly received during the operational period.

3.3 Final Remark

Based on the overall outcome of Operation VISA, it seems clear that the operational results might have been different if some fundamental elements had been different.

- It may be argued that the operation would have highlighted far more operationally valid indications of Schengen visa abuse if tourist visas had been included in the operation, even with some airports restricting the operational phase both spatially and temporally.
- It is likely that the operational outcome would have been different if procedures and legislative issues impeding certain countries from co-operating fully had been dealt with earlier in the process, or if the countries in question had chosen not to participate in the operation.
- It has become apparent that the relatively long chain set up for the processing of requests in the framework of this operation has affected the results negatively. As this was one of the key issues that this project was trying to address, it is a matter that has emerged in the national evaluations (see next chapter).

In addition, the lack of good operational results is partly a consequence of the fact that there were discrepancies in the data forwarded to EUROPOL with the result that only very limited analysis could be made with the information. Any intelligence analysis performed has also been hampered by the fact that there were no cases of suspicion of facilitation whatsoever and that in the three cases where visa requirements were reportedly not met, only one suggests overt criminal intent.

4 Evaluation

This chapter draws on the comments provided by the participating countries in response to the Evaluation Questionnaire sent by the Danish Project leader before the end of the operational period. The questionnaire was designed by the Danish Project leader, following a proposal from EUROPOL, to evaluate the entire operation in relation to the stated aims and objectives as regards Schengen visa abuse.

EUROPOL received completed Evaluation Questionnaires by 16 of the 17 participating countries representing the findings and experiences in 21 of the participating airports.

4.1 Preparations

All reporting countries unanimously agreed that the description of the objective was clear, both as adopted by SCIFA+ and as laid down in the Operational Plan.

Belgium highlighted that the description of the objectives of the operation corresponded exactly to the limitations discussed and agreed upon at the SCIFA+ meeting on 16 September 2002.

Similarly, most countries agreed that, despite being limited, the preparation time given was sufficient. *The Netherlands* did raise the issue that before operations of this magnitude are planned, the airports themselves should be consulted to determine in what ways they would in fact be affected in terms of resource implications etcetera. This was also mentioned by *the United Kingdom* at the Preparatory Meeting in October 2002.

France listed the preparatory measures they were able to achieve during the period after receiving all relevant documentation, noting that the time was too short to prepare optimally for the implementation of the operation, or to notify the consulate services of their Embassies regarding the issuing of visas.

4.2 Reporting Mechanisms & Communication Channels

The importance of assigning National Contact Units for this type of pan-European operation was confirmed. Several countries highlighted the significance of having a central co-ordinating point in each participating country with a clear overview of the operational findings. These units were also seen to efficiently streamline and in some cases speed up the process of completing investigations. In only one case were the procedures for forwarding inquiries explicitly considered too long.

In all Evaluation Questionnaires, the Liaison Officers at EUROPOL were regarded by their own MS as having fulfilled their intended role and no significant language problems in connection with the processing of forms and inquiries were reported. Where these did occur, they were resolved locally.

The forms and definitions were generally received positively, although *The Netherlands* noted that the so-called 'Form C' did not allow specification of the actual country where the visa of any person refused entry was issued. The value of the definitions lay in the establishing of common terms of reference, facilitating correct completion of the forms. Nonetheless, several countries mentioned that it was not necessary to use the definitions

during the operation. *Portugal* was the only country to assert that the definitions were not useful or relevant since the operation involved looking at very specific passengers, i.e. holders of very specific visa types.

4.3 The Effects

According to the submissions, all of the participating airports were selected on the basis of either the number of passengers, the number of flights, or quite simply because it is the main international airport of the specific country with flights arriving from extra-Schengen countries.

France, Germany and The Netherlands participated with either part of the appointed airports or with restricted time periods. This was largely due to the large numbers of passengers travelling through the airports on a daily basis, as well as the risk of extended delays if the whole airport had participated. *France* also commented that this limitation was imposed on the basis of the number of passengers carrying Schengen visas and arriving from or leaving for countries associated largely with illegal immigration.

According to the competent authorities in *Italy*, Rimini Airport was reportedly selected due to the high possibility for the authorities to check all passengers in transit. Given the size and relative importance of this airport – there are a number of other international airports in Italy that have far greater number of passengers arriving from extra-Schengen destinations – the nomination cannot be regarded as being entirely in line with the preconditions laid down in the operational plan.¹² This was subsequently reflected in the operational results.

The Netherlands was the only country to report the need for additional staff to compile the reports for EUROPOL, although several countries had implemented contingency plans before the operation was launched.

During the operation, a surprising number of airports – including some of the larger ones – did not report any entry refusals or subsequent investigations. According to the respective Evaluation Questionnaires, this is partly due to existing work methods in some of the participating countries, e.g. *Belgium, Germany and Luxembourg*, which reportedly affected the way statistics could be reported to EUROPOL in the framework of Operation VISA.

There is a definite division of opinion regarding the benefits of the operation and the matching of expectations. Only a small number of countries responded either that they had benefited from the operation and that the operation had met their expectations, or the opposite view without expressing any form of reservation. Some countries, e.g. *Germany, Sweden and Norway*, matched their expectations to the restricted types of visa, which meant that there was no surprise that there were lower number of refusals.

Virtually all the countries mentioned that they had expected more inquiries, and *Finland* reported that the low level of replies to their requests was frustrating and may have been the main reason why no more inquiries were made. *Luxembourg* also mentioned that they received no answers to their requests.

¹² “In order to secure the best possible basis for the subsequent analysis, those airports should be chosen, according to experience, where a large number of passengers from whom a visa is required, are arriving.” (page 5)

In their evaluation, *Sweden* reported that the operational results were probably due to the choice of visa which is less likely to be obtained by fraud than tourist visas, which *Germany* and *Norway* also asserted should have been included. *Belgium* explained that their national border procedures meant that it was difficult to start inquiries in the manner required by Operation VISA, which also affected the operational results.

Broadly speaking, as noted by *the United Kingdom*, there is anecdotal evidence that the specific visa types are subject to abuse, but the operation did not reflect that.

Another problem, highlighted by the fact that the participating countries were requested in the Evaluation Questionnaire to resubmit their operational figures, was the fact that the numbers forwarded to EUROPOL as part of the weekly statistics from ‘Form C’ did not correspond to the breakdown of the reasons for refusal on the lower half of the same form. Similarly, the figures submitted in the Evaluation Questionnaire often did not match the figures forwarded during the course of the operation.

4.4 Co-operation Between the Competent Authorities and Experiences Gained

The question of whether Operation VISA contributed to the general enhancement of co-operation between authorities in charge of the issuing and control of visas could not be evaluated. This was partly due to the design of the Evaluation Questionnaire that was sent out by the Danish Project leader. For the same reason, the issue of whether the operation resulted in any added value for the above-mentioned competent authorities could not be assessed.

As regards contacting visa-issuing authorities in their own country, the participating countries commented either that they already had good contact with these prior to the commencement of the operation or that the low number of inquiries meant that it was not necessary to make contact with these authorities. Other countries reported that they regularly contact these as a matter of course. A number of countries mentioned that had there been more need for contact, this would probably have improved co-operation between the airports and the visa-issuing authorities.

Similarly, most countries commented that procedures are already in place enabling the possibility of launching national inquiries in their country. *The Netherlands* added that the low number of inquiries coupled with the lengthy procedure of reporting as set up for the purposes of Operation VISA did not enhance the benefits and, if an inquiry was launched, the delay in obtaining the response was too long.¹³

France noted that all inquiries made within the operational framework were made after the border control officials had already done their checks at the airports, so in fact the so-called ‘Form D’ did not improve on existing control measures.

The participating countries reportedly did not feel that they gained much – if any – experience regarding other countries’ visa-issuing procedures. A few countries indicated that this was due to prior knowledge of these. Judging by the responses to the Evaluation Questionnaire, there was agreement that the operation did not indicate whether the procedures of visa-issuing procedures and visa control procedures were in need of modification.

All the Schengen countries except *France* supported the idea of a central visa database, which would not only play a crucial role in speeding up investigations, but would also

¹³ In light of the aims and objectives, this obviously related to a key aspect of the operation and, as such, will be revisited in the conclusions of this report.

allow immediate checking of whether a particular visa was legally issued. It would also represent a significant tool in combating in particular the phenomenon of so-called ‘visa shopping’ at EU level. This sort of EU level database could play a vital role at both border-crossing points as well as at airports. *The United Kingdom* reported that they would benefit if they had access to such a database and has already supported a feasibility study into its creation, although they will not make any further assessment until a concrete proposal by the MS has been forwarded. *France* noted that the ‘Réseau Mondial Visa’ (RMV) is used by border guards in charge of trans-border controls. *Ireland* also did not respond to positively to this question.

Several countries also commented on the potential usefulness of elaborating an overview of the different visa-issuing procedures in the various Schengen countries. In conjunction with this, it should be noted that the Seville European Council recommended the introduction, as soon as possible, of a common identification system for visa data on the basis of a feasibility study to be submitted in March 2003. In parallel with the finalisation of this feasibility study, a draft proposal is expected in March 2003 with a view to establish a legal framework for such a database.¹⁴

Denmark also mentioned that increased communication between the different visa authorities could prevent similar mistakes being committed in the different Schengen states. *Sweden* noted that entry control procedures should be more effective and should include person control and organised crime control as well as document control. *Finland* questioned whether the lack of replies to their inquiries hinted at a basic problem in co-operation between the various competent authorities in the MS and the Schengen area.

4.5 The Role of the Media

The role of the media was explicitly discussed in the Preparatory Meeting at EUROPOL, held on 30 October 2002, in which it was clearly stressed by the Danish Project leader that no contact with the press was to be made prior to the end of the operational phase, in order not to jeopardise the results of the operation.¹⁵

Despite this common understanding among the participating countries, a Norwegian newspaper published information during the second operational week, on 27 November, disclosing details on the operation, such as its codename, the Norwegian airports participating and timeframe for the operation. This information was subsequently mirrored in a Swedish newspaper on the Internet. It is not known to EUROPOL whether the information was released elsewhere.

Based on the operational outcome as reported to EUROPOL by *Norway* for its participating airport Oslo Gardemoen, it can be argued that the subsequent operational results were affected negatively by the press leak. Although additional in-depth analysis would be needed to investigate this further, it serves to reiterate the potential effect media leaks have on on-going law enforcement operations.

¹⁴ Council of the European Union, doc ref 14944/02 POLGEN 69, 3 December 2002.

¹⁵ Meeting Minutes, EUROPOL, doc ref 5125-20021030.

5 Conclusions

Based on the findings in this report, it can be concluded that the aims and objectives listed by the Danish project leader were not entirely met during the course of the operation, nor was it possible to assess the threat posed to the EU by this type of visa abuse.

The overall feasibility of Operation VISA was not assessed as well as it could have been prior to the commencement of the operation. This became evident at the Preparatory Meeting held at EUROPOL on 30 October 2002, where several of the participating countries indicated that they were going to have difficulties in complying with the requirements of the operation and as a result imposed limitations to their participation. This has directly impacted on the operational outcome. Before an operation of this magnitude is launched on a Pan-European level, it is therefore important that the project leader conducts an accurate and thorough Threat or Risk Assessment outlining the actual crime problem followed by a Feasibility study.

The operational results of Operation VISA have been limited and they do not permit the drawing of any well-founded conclusions with respect to visa abuse in the Schengen area as well as the United Kingdom and Ireland. Nor does the overall outcome allow for the performing of a complete analysis on abuse of the specific visas in question during the operational period.

The lack of good operational results is partly a consequence of the fact that there were discrepancies in the data forwarded to EUROPOL with the result that only very limited analysis could be made with the information. Any intelligence analysis performed has also been hampered by the fact that there were no cases of suspicion of facilitation whatsoever and that in the three cases where visa requirements were reportedly not met, only one suggests overt criminal intent.

Furthermore, throughout the course of the operation, a total of 90 investigations into visa abuse were initiated. The relatively low number of followed-up cases could indicate that visa requirements in most cases were met, but it could also indicate that too few investigations were initiated.

The overall outcome of Operation VISA might have been different if:

- Tourist visas had been included in the operation, even with some airports restricting the operational phase both spatially and temporally. This would have highlighted far more operationally valid indications of Schengen visa abuse.
- Procedures and legislative issues impeding certain countries from co-operating had been fully dealt with earlier in the process, or if the countries in question had chosen not to participate in the operation.
- There had been a shorter set up for the processing of requests in the framework of this operation.

Concerning the predefined aim of illustrating whether any changes in current control procedures are required, it can be confirmed that the participating countries almost unanimously asserted that there is a clear need to develop a central visa database in which all issued visas are registered and indexed. Furthermore, there is a unified and explicit wish for the elaboration of an overview of the different visa-issuing procedures in place in the respective countries. Both of these would be fundamental steps towards combating visa abuse in the Schengen area and would contribute to the acceleration of

visa control procedures, which many of the participating countries assert is currently too protracted.

The question of whether Operation VISA contributed to the general enhancement of co-operation between authorities in charge of the issuing and control of visas could not be evaluated, due to the poor operational results as well as the way in which the Evaluation Questionnaire was designed, which did not allow for this effect to be reported on. Similarly, the issue of whether the operation resulted in any added value for the above-mentioned competent authorities could not be assessed.

Despite the relatively limited operational and analytical results of Operation VISA, the unprecedented nature of the operation, coupled with prudence in defining and limiting the operation, have resulted in some very valuable arguments, which may be used to support and guide other High Impact Operations in the future, so that they may have more impact. Moreover, these arguments may be used to initiate discussions at either national or EU level regarding overall migration control issues aimed at countering Schengen visa abuse.

Annex 1 – Participating Airports

Participating Airports	Comments
Austria - Graz-Thalerhof	
Austria - Vienna International Airport	
Belgium - Brussels Zaventem	
Denmark - Billund Airport	
Denmark - Copenhagen Airport	
Finland - Helsinki Vantaa	
France - Paris Charles de Gaulle	Limited to certain areas of the airport
France - Paris Orly	Limited to certain areas of the airport
Germany - Frankfurt am Main	Limited to one of four operational areas and to eight hours a day.
Greece - Athens Eleftherios Venizelos	
Iceland - Keflavik Airport	
Ireland - Dublin	
Italy – Rimini	
Luxembourg - Findel	
The Netherlands - Amsterdam Schiphol	Limited to certain areas of the airport for controlling the numbers but addressing visa abuse across the whole airport.
Norway - Oslo Gardemoen	
Norway - Torp	
Portugal - Lisbon	
Spain - Madrid Barajas	
Sweden - Landvetter Gothenburg	
Sweden - Stockholm Arlanda	
The United Kingdom - Manchester	