

# Law Enforcement Officials' Opinion on the Security Situation and Cooperation on the Danube - Based on the "DARIF 2022" International Questionnaire Survey

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*The aim of the study is to analyse the bilateral and multilateral law enforcement cooperation between the Danube Member States and the relevant international stakeholders. A key issue for the security of the European Union and the Schengen area is the joint strengthening of the security of the Danube river. In the most important transnational maritime areas (Black Sea, Baltic Sea), there is a regulation based on the operation of a common centre for law enforcement coordination, which allows a rapid and efficient exchange of information between the Member States in order to combat organised crime. The Danube is one of Europe's most important waterways, but the absence of a multilateral international agreement on the cooperation and coordination signed by all the Member States to ensure continuous cooperation and exchange of information is believed to have a negative impact on border security. The research was carried out by an online questionnaire survey among 201 persons in staff from the participating organisations of 10 Danube Member States during the DARIF joint operation, which was conducted from 12-16 September 2022 and extended until 30 September 2022. The questionnaire was prepared in Hungarian, English, and in German, Slovak, Croatian, Serbian, Romanian, Bulgarian and Ukrainian languages, to encourage respondents to participate in the survey. The questionnaire survey among the Danube law enforcement agencies confirmed that the lack of a permanent Law Enforcement Coordination Centre and Cooperation Forum is a significant security deficit in the countries of the Danube Region. The creation of a network of national contact points specialising in international information exchange on the Danube is necessary; it is not sufficient to make better use of the existing network of direct information exchange channels (e.g. Police and Customs Cooperation Centres).*

**Keywords:** Danube, security, law enforcement cooperation, DARIF joint operation, security deficit

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## Introduction

The international professional literature has been focusing on key maritime security issues (e.g. illegal migration, stopping piracy at sea, combating terrorism and drug trafficking) for the last two decades, mainly due to transnational threats. It was also noted that, although much needed, a comprehensive EU Maritime Security Strategy has not yet been developed.<sup>2</sup> The Danube – which is Europe's second longest, but clearly the most important river, directly involving 10 countries but covering 14 by its catchment basin – has been overshadowed by maritime issues. This has happened despite the fact that a coherent regional strategy<sup>3</sup> has been in place since 2011 to develop some of the policies of the Danube countries, but its 'security' priority area, despite initial successes,<sup>4</sup> currently includes fewer and smaller projects than in other thematic areas, so that the long-term goals previously set (such as the establishment of a law enforcement centre linking all the countries concerned) have not been yet achieved.

Over the past decade, it has become clear that river waterways pose serious security challenges for law enforcement agencies. The geopolitical situation of the region, the increasing illegal migration from the Black Sea region towards the EU, global public health threats, the expanding cross-border organised crime using more and more new methods have found an important "arteria" in Danube navigation.<sup>5</sup>

Analysis of the law enforcement functions of Danube border control suggests that a significant proportion of crime committed at the river is linked to cross-border crime, making international police-customs cooperation a prerequisite for effective law enforcement. During large-scale joint law enforcement operations on the Danube, rapid and direct exchange of information is carried out in real time. Operational cooperation and the establishment of the Temporary Coordination Centre is a new dimension of international cooperation on the Danube, which will enhance the effectiveness of law enforcement.<sup>6</sup>

Hungary – as a full member of the Schengen Convention – is the first spot of border control and risk management on the Danube for threats coming from outside (from Serbia). Croatia is also a Schengen Member from the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2023, which means that vessels entering from the south will not have to stop on the Danube again. Our law enforcement agencies working at the external water borders are experiencing a significant latency in detecting criminal activities on Danube vessels, coupled with a lack of specific cooperation frameworks. To compensate for this, border control should become more and more detection and risk analysis based in the close future.<sup>7</sup> (The European Union has also opted for early detection, analysis,

<sup>2</sup> GERMOND 2011: 563–584.

<sup>3</sup> European Parliament 2010.

<sup>4</sup> KOEV 2014: 22–30.

<sup>5</sup> BALOG et al. 2015: 6.

<sup>6</sup> KALMÁR 2021: 293–301.

<sup>7</sup> KALMÁR 2022: 121–138.

awareness raising, resilience building, prevention, crisis response, consequence management, which should be the focus of common policy in the next period.)<sup>8</sup>

All of the above may result in a kind of security deficit at the Schengen external border on the Danube controlled by Hungary, which should be eliminated as soon as possible by effective measures. The development of effective proposals for future measures requires an international perspective. Some studies have already looked at the relationship between the Danube shipping sector and law enforcement, only by asking the shipping community about the problems that slow down and complicate river trade. The researchers identified administrative obstacles mainly.<sup>9</sup> In addition, however, in a new study, the researchers found – based on interviews with representatives of shipping companies and freight forwarders – that even at the Schengen external border, the search of barges entering the area is not sufficiently effective, and then even less thorough, rather than random, as they move towards the internal borders. An officer of the Danube water police in Vienna admitted that “the only way to check vessels and goods is when they arrive at their final destination”. Another interviewee said that “you can transport anything by barge, no one really knows what can be found under the bulk cargo”.<sup>10</sup>

So, what are the reasons for the above opinions, what are the challenges and problems faced by the law enforcement agencies of the Danube countries and what are the possible solutions? Considering that the opinions of the law enforcement organisations involved in the control of Danube river transport have not yet been asked on these issues, the present study can be considered a missing piece.

As a police officer in Baranya County, I am one of the organisers of the annual joint Danube law enforcement operations organised by the Ministry of the Interior of Hungary since 2014. During these operations, each participating state delegates a guest officer to the Temporary Coordination Centre in Mohács and hundreds of police officers (mainly water, border police and customs officers) participate in coordinated controls along the entire stretch of the Danube during three days of operations. The operation, which took place in September 2022, provided a good opportunity to carry out an international questionnaire survey to get the opinion of law enforcement officers on improving water border control and security, cooperation and the efficiency of information flow. The result of the research is published for the first time here.

Before starting the research, four research questions arose. What is the risk of certain offences occurring on board of ships in the Danube Member States, and passenger or freight transport is more affected by crime? How can river safety be improved? What is the opinion of the law enforcement organisations of the Danube Member States on the possibilities for international law enforcement cooperation and information exchange, and the technical development? How can the organisation

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<sup>8</sup> European Commission 2020.

<sup>9</sup> PFOSE 2018: 27–37.

<sup>10</sup> SCATURRO–KEMP 2022: 48.

and implementation of the DARIF joint river operation be further developed in the future?

In the light of the above, I have associated hypotheses with the questions that I consider to be the most important, so that the results of the research can show their validity. In total, I set out to prove or disprove four hypotheses.

1. On the Danube River, crime is more prevalent in freight transport. The greatest risk is in the smuggling of excise goods. Cigarette smuggling detected on board ships has a very high latency and is generally considered a widespread phenomenon in all Danube countries.
2. Irregular migration linked to the river is present in the Member States, most of which share the same *modus operandi*.
3. Cooperation is the main condition for the effectiveness of law enforcement organisations in the field of river security.
4. Among the levels of cooperation, international cooperation is the weakest in the Member States and therefore the one that needs most improvement. The most important obstacles to its promotion are funding problems and political decision-making barriers. In the Danube Region, the lack of a permanent Law Enforcement Coordination Centre and Cooperation Forum is a security deficit. There is a need for a network of specialised Danube National Contact Points rather than better use of the existing direct information exchange channels and network of criminal cooperation channels.

## Research method

The empirical research was carried out by filling in an online questionnaire and collecting anonymous data. Research permission was granted by the agreement (no. BMSZÜ/1413/2022) concluded with the Hungarian Ministry of the Interior on research within the framework of the traineeship programme.

The subjects of the questionnaire survey were law enforcement officers working in the Danube ports in Austria, Germany, Slovakia, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Moldova and Hungary. In the Danube Member States, a large number of professional and non-professional staff from various organisations are involved in the control of river vessels. They include police (border and water police, investigative and special services), border guards, customs, disaster management, but also in some countries staff of the transport authority, naval office, river inspectorate, fisheries inspectorate, port authorities or captaincies, public health and phytosanitary stations. Respondents included both female and male staff.

The data gathering was conducted between 12 and 30 September 2022. The questionnaire, which took 5–8 minutes to complete, was filled in by 201 people from 10 countries. All completions were full and valid.

The questionnaire was first elaborated in Hungarian and English. It was then translated into German, Slovak, Croatian, Serbian, Romanian, Bulgarian and Ukrainian, in order to encourage respondents to participate in the survey. The raw texts, translated by computer translation programs, were reviewed and corrected by guest officers delegated to the joint operation, in order to produce grammatically and lexically perfect questions and answers, excluding the possibility of different police officers in different countries interpreting any questions differently. The questionnaire was available to member countries in their own national languages (German for Austrian and German colleagues, Romanian for Moldovan and Romanian colleagues). The English version might be completed in any country.

Each questionnaire was uploaded to the free Google Forms program, which generated a link to each one. The links were distributed by the Ministry of the Interior, through the Secretariat of Priority Area 11 of the Danube Region Strategy, and with the help of liaison officers delegated to Hungary during the joint operation. The responses were sent anonymously to a password-protected Google account.

The questionnaire included several different types of questions. For the questions to be answered, it was possible to choose between two or three answers. For questions coded b2, b3, c2, d3, d4, e3 and f1, responses were on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 meaning the weakest and 5 the strongest formulation. The questionnaire relied on attitude testing<sup>11</sup> for some questions. The experiences and personal perceptions, attitudes, professionalism of the participants in the survey were measured by rejecting or accepting evaluative statements to form a picture of the quality and intensity of evaluative attitudes.<sup>12</sup> Agreeing or disagreeing with statements was measured by responses to questions b4, b5, d5, on a 6-point scale.

The answers to the questions were entered in Google Forms software, after that they were downloaded by Microsoft Excel and the responds of the 10 countries were organised in one chart. For the scaled questions, scores from 1 to 5 were summed up and divided by the number of respondents to determine the average score of the response. Responses were then analysed in an Excel spreadsheet using IBM SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) Statistics software and charts were created to illustrate each response, and conclusions drawn from them were used to prove or confute previously formulated hypotheses.

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<sup>11</sup> ALLPORT 1972: 179–198.

<sup>12</sup> HALÁSZ et al. 1979: 20.

## The result of the survey

### Demographic information

After the introductory sentences of the questionnaire, I asked for basic demographic data in the first part. The answers showed that 84% of the 201 respondents were male and 16% were female. Their distribution by country is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by country

Country	Frequency	Percent
Austria	6	3.0
Bulgaria	27	13.4
Croatia	5	2.5
Germany	10	5.0
Hungary	79	39.3
Moldova	5	2.5
Romania	17	8.5
Serbia	16	8.0
Slovakia	15	7.5
Ukraine	21	10.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>201</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Compiled by the author.

A significant proportion of the police officers who responded have a long professional experience, 73.1% of them having worked in a law enforcement agency or authority for between 11 and 30 years. A long career in river policing is generally typical of the members of the authorities that carry out river vessel inspections, which are predominantly based on experience and apply a permanent methodology.

### Security threats, criminal risks in control of vessels

In the second section of the questionnaire, I asked about the risk of unlawful acts on board ships, each respondent of course drawing on their own experience based on their own stretch of the Danube.

88% of the respondents clearly see a higher risk of crime in freight transport compared to passenger transport. In the response to question b2, the risk of smuggling of goods was the most common of the offences listed, but high scores were also given to poaching and environmental damage, as well as assisting illegal immigration (smuggling of human beings, illegal employment) (Figure 1).

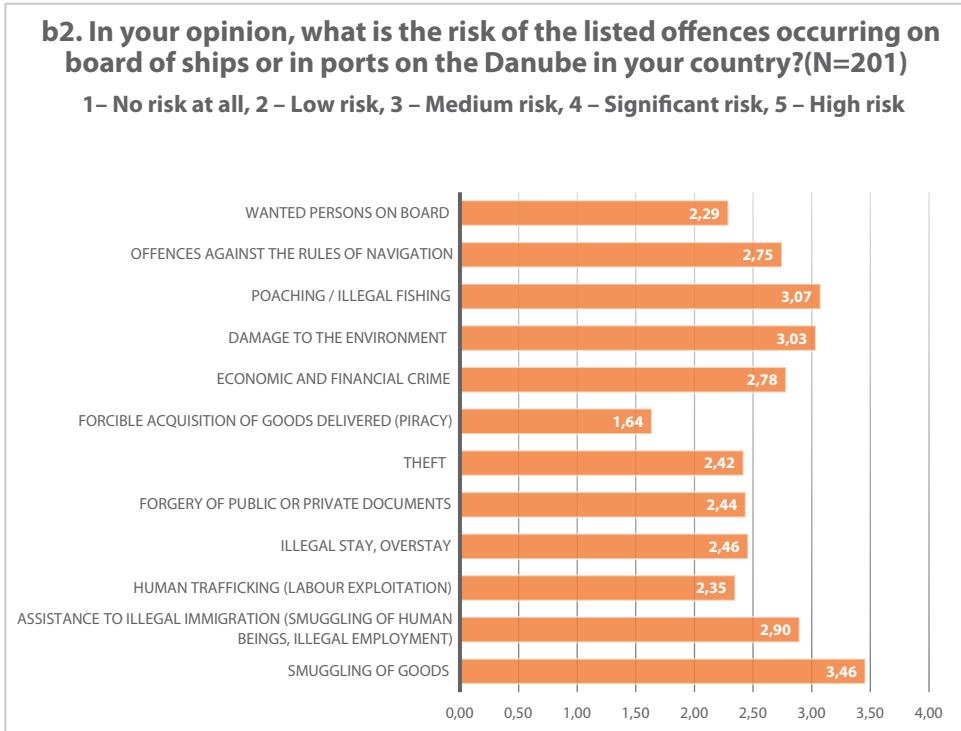


Figure 1: Risk of the listed offences occurring on board of ships or in ports on the Danube (average point)

Source: Compiled by the author.

It can be seen that the risk of smuggling is the highest on board ships. Subsequent responses from respondents also showed that the most frequently detected contraband (monthly) by law enforcement agencies is cigarettes and other tobacco products, while the detection of alcohol and fuel/heating fuel is also significant. There is hardly any illegal shipment of radioactive substances and artefacts (Figure 2).

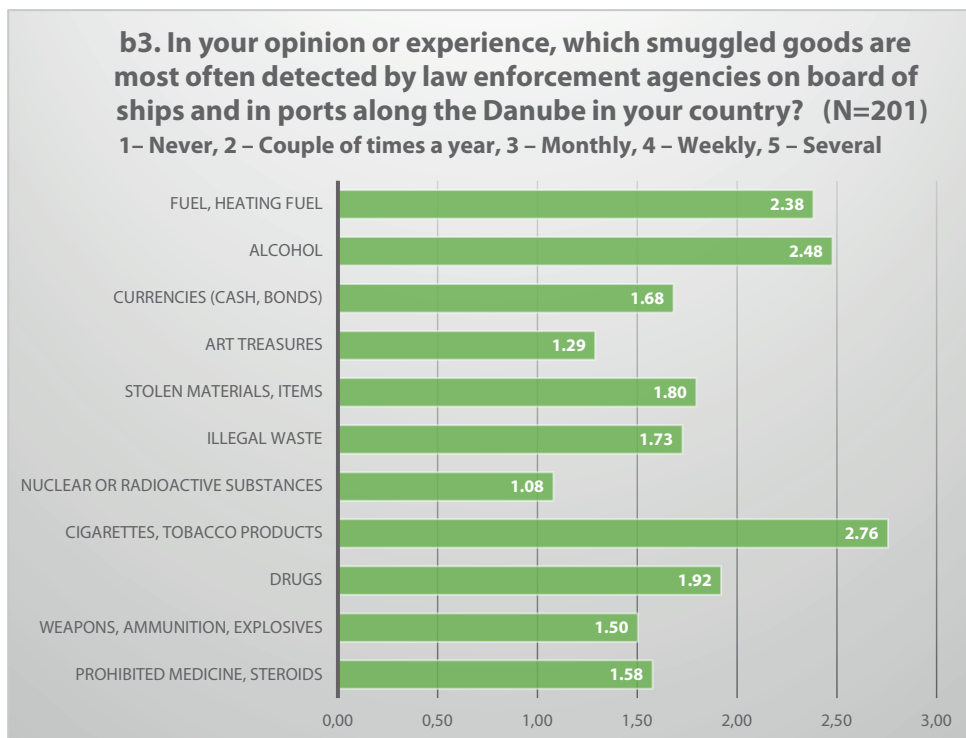


Figure 2: Frequency of smuggling of listed goods on ships and in ports (average point)

Source: Compiled by the author.

In addition, 64% of the respondents agreed with the statement that. “There is a very high latency rate for cigarette smuggling detected on ships.” This means that some of these offences remain hidden from the authorities, according to the Hungarian experience, simply because the bulk cargo of large hulls cannot be searched by technical means, and the solution of unloading ports requires high levels of human intelligence and risk analysis to control them.<sup>13</sup>

Illegal immigration is also strongly present in the Danube Region. This phenomenon on board vessels is only typical in Romania, in the Danube Delta region, from the Turkish coast.<sup>14</sup> However, this research also confirms that irregular migrants also appear at the Danube borders of other Member States, mainly on their way entering a country (Figure 3).

<sup>13</sup> KALMÁR 2022: 133–134.

<sup>14</sup> KALMÁR 2022: 129.



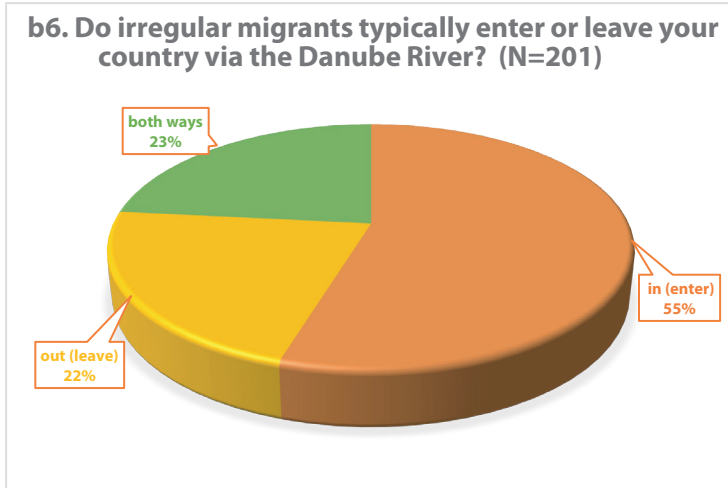


Figure 3: Distribution of responses to question “Do irregular migrants typically enter or leave your country via the Danube River?” (%)

Source: Compiled by the author.

More than 75% of law enforcement officers in the Member States found that irregular migrants crossed the river by boat, while other methods of irregular crossing – such as swimming across, using a ferry or hiding on the boat, or unauthorised inclusion of migrants on the crew list – were rare, accounting for around 4–7% (Figure 4).

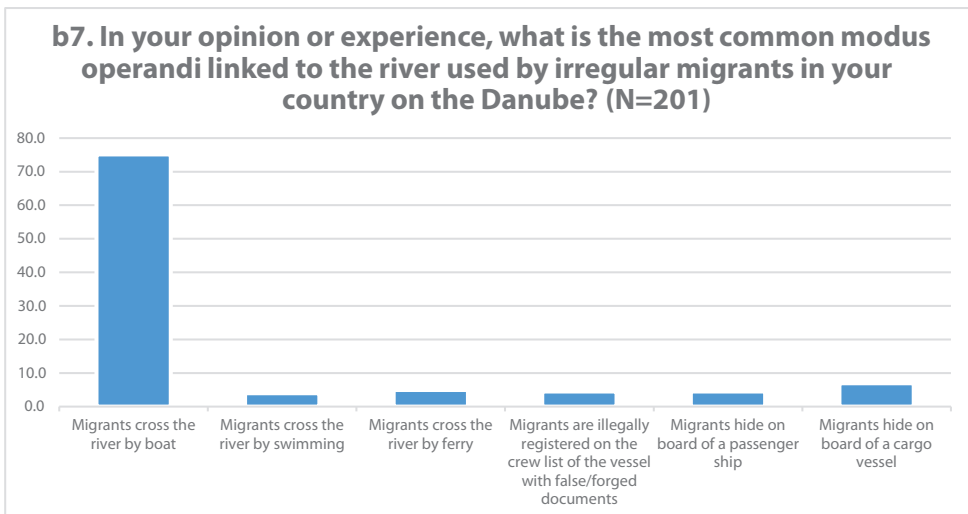


Figure 4: Common modus operandi linked to the river used by irregular migrants (%)

Source: Compiled by the author.

## Increasing the security of the river

In the field of the security of the river, 38% of the respondents preferred the number of officers, 34% said cooperation was the most important factor for the effectiveness of law enforcement organisations, while 28% said technical equipment. However, the picture is nuanced by the fact that those Danube states demand it, where there are lower financial resources and negative fluctuation trends (e.g. Serbia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Slovakia), so they perceive human resources as a more important prerequisite, while increased cooperation would boost river security according to Austria, Germany or Moldova. According to the strong opinion of Ukrainian police officers, technical equipment should be improved, this could be explained by the fact that they have the highest proportion of smuggled goods hidden on board ships, which means they need advanced contraband detection equipment (Figure 5).

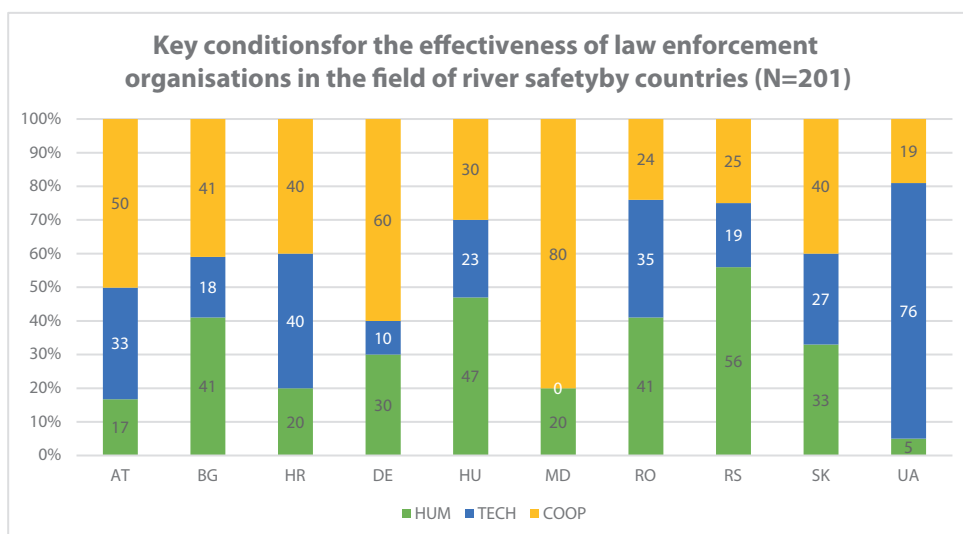


Figure 5: Percentage of responses to question “In your opinion, is the key condition for the effectiveness of law enforcement organisations in the field of river safety rather a question of human resources, technical capacity or cooperation?” by countries (%)

Source: Compiled by the author.

When asked what measures should be taken at national level to improve the safety of navigation on the Danube, the highest proportion of respondents considered the acquisition of modern searching equipment to be important, which shows that the applicable ship inspection equipment is outdated in most countries. This may be due to the fact that Member States concentrate their resources and equipment

mainly at land borders to prevent smuggling in human beings. The most important measures follow:

- modern patrol vessels for law enforcement agencies
- more intensive exchange of information between national authorities
- increasing the number of law enforcement officers (Figure 6)

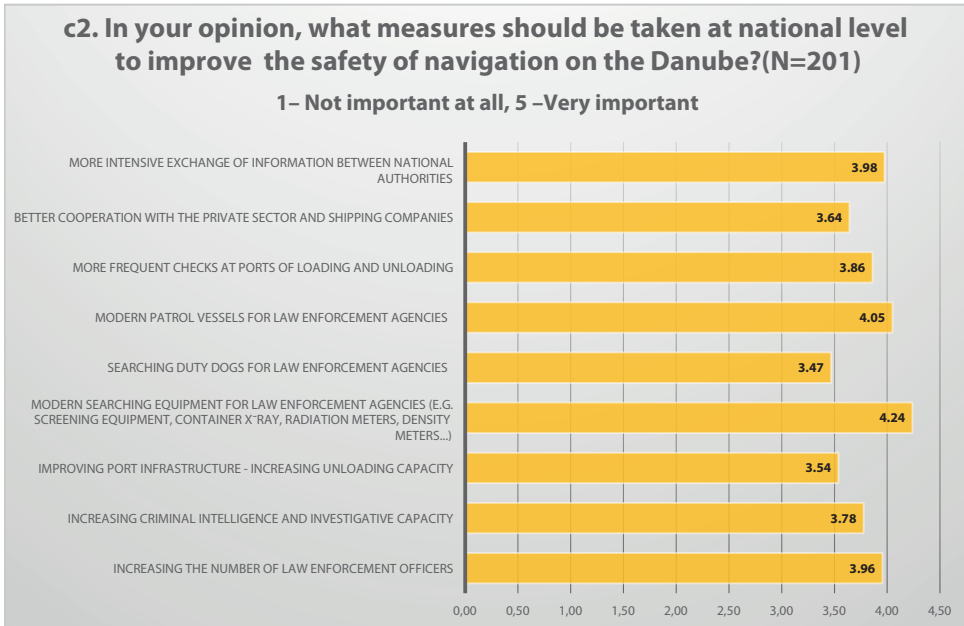


Figure 6: Percentage of responses to question “In your opinion, what measures should be taken at national level to improve the safety of navigation on the Danube?” by countries (%)

Source: Compiled by the author.

### **International Danube law enforcement cooperation and information exchange**

According to the surveyed representatives of the law enforcement agencies of the Danube States, between three levels of cooperation (intra-agency, inter agency and international)<sup>15</sup> the latest needs the most improvement in the implementation of integrated border management, but the situation of the other two is not encouraging (Figure 7).

<sup>15</sup> European Commission 2010: 23–24.

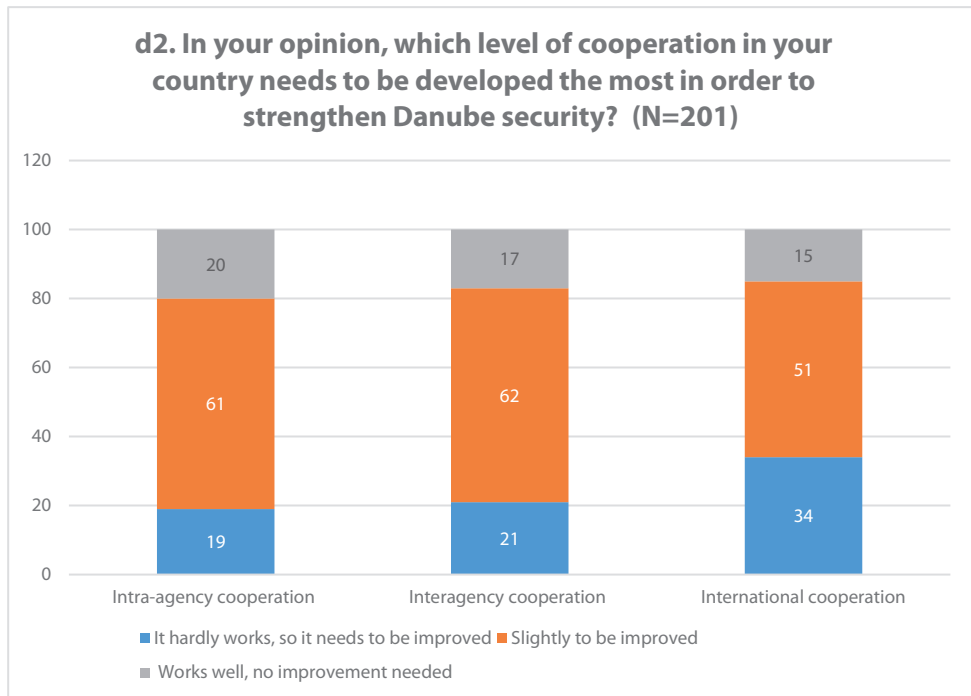


Figure 7: Percentage of responses to question “In your opinion, which level of cooperation in your country needs to be developed the most in order to strengthen Danube security?” (%)

Source: Compiled by the author.

According to the respondents’ opinion and experience, their country cooperates with the neighbouring Danube country most in obvious activities such as management meetings, exchange of statistical data, radar and camera information at joint border contact points, and joint bilateral or multilateral law enforcement operations. International cooperation is more costly and time-consuming, so joint investigation teams, joint training and exchanges of experience, and joint risk analysis hardly ever formed (Figure 8).

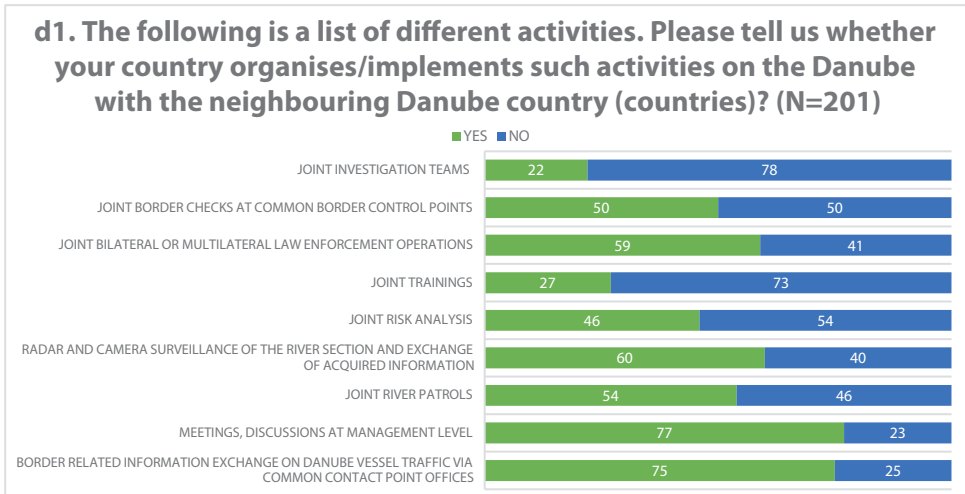


Figure 8: Percentage of responses to question “Please tell us whether your country organises/ implements such activities on the Danube with the neighbouring Danube country (countries)?” (%)

Source: Compiled by the author.

When asked “Which factors are the main obstacles to the effectiveness of international law enforcement cooperation on the Danube?” the respondents complained mainly about slow political decision-making, the scarcity of financial resources and the lack of a permanent law enforcement coordination centre, which brings together all the Danube states (Figure 9).

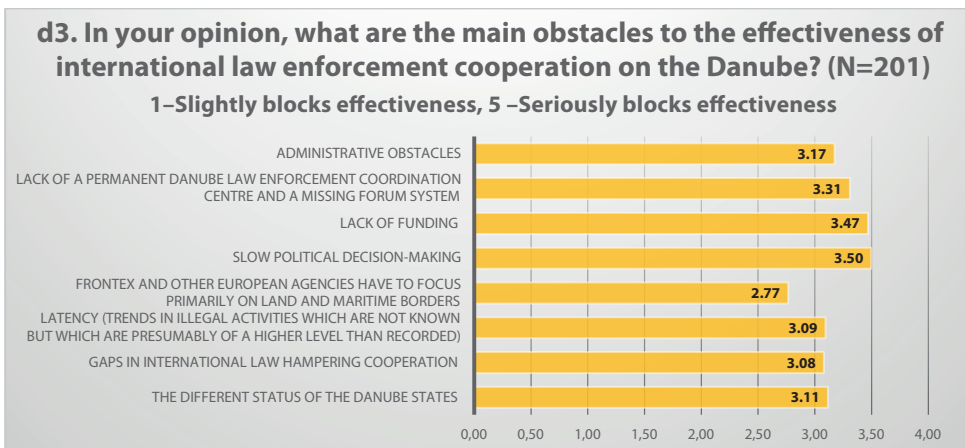


Figure 9: Percentage of responses to question “In your opinion, what are the main obstacles to the effectiveness of international law enforcement cooperation on the Danube?” (%)

Source: Compiled by the author.

I asked if they agreed with the following statement, examining the attitudes of the respondents: “The lack of a permanent Danube Law Enforcement Coordination Centre and Cooperation Forum (which would be similar to the Black Sea or the Baltic Sea Centres) causes a security deficit.” Respondents are more likely to agree with the statement, but a large majority of them, 31%, fully agreed with it (Figure 10)!

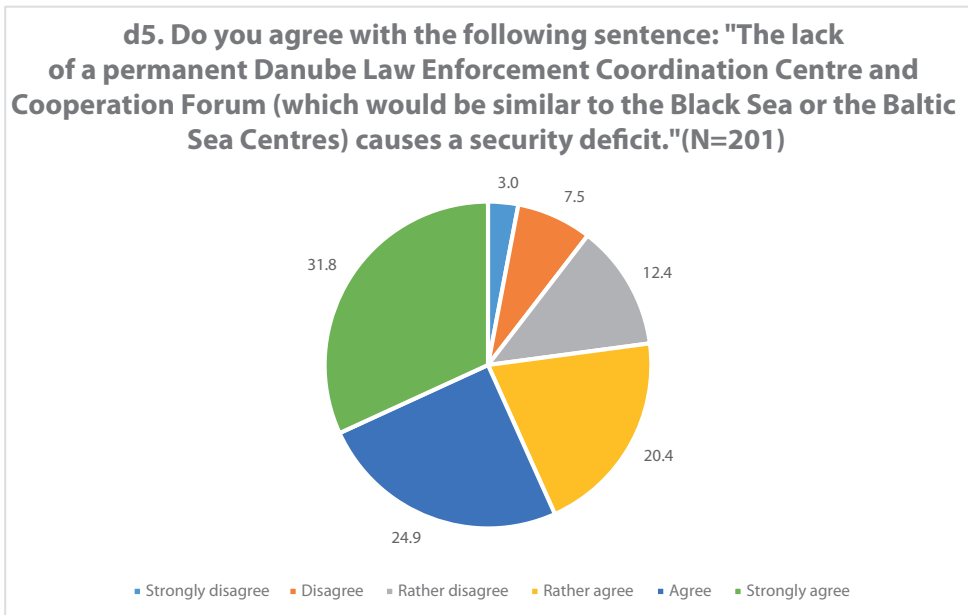


Figure 10: Do you agree with the following sentence “The lack of a permanent Danube Law Enforcement Coordination Centre and Cooperation Forum (which would be similar to the Black Sea or the Baltic Sea Centres) causes a security deficit” (%)

Source: Compiled by the author.

In this context, a significant majority – 149 out of 201 respondents (74.1%) – agreed that a specific network of special national contact points is needed for international

information exchange on the Danube, i.e. it is not enough to make better use of the existing customs-police-police cooperation centres (Figure 11).

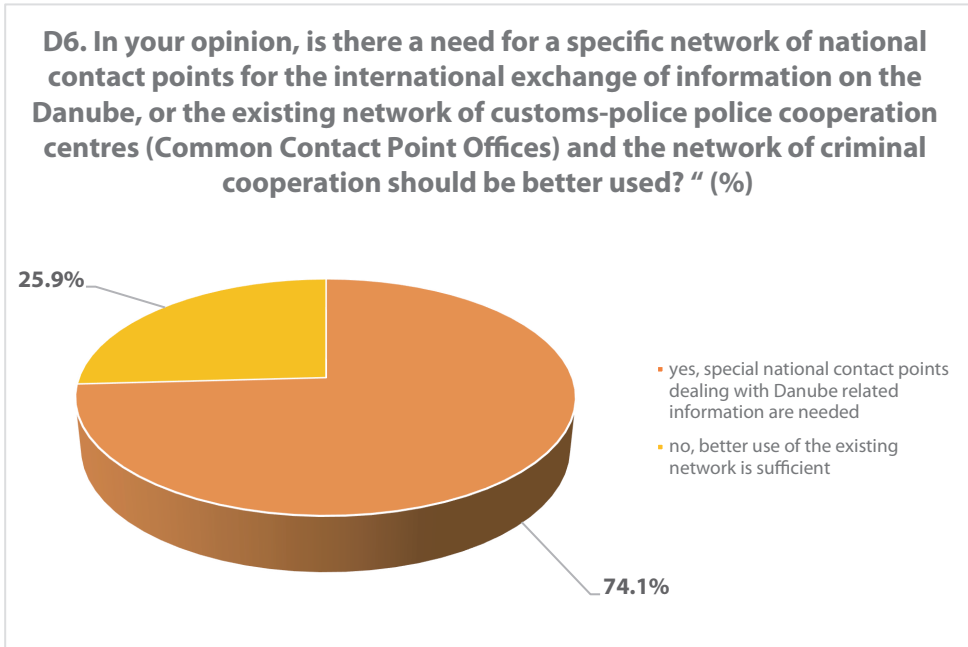


Figure 11: “In your opinion, is there a need for a specific network of national contact points for the international exchange of information on the Danube, or the existing network of customs-police police cooperation centres (Common Contact Point Offices) and the network of criminal cooperation should be better used?” (%)

Source: Compiled by the author.

### **Possibilities for the technical development of the Danube law enforcement**

In the last part of the survey, I examined the ideas of how to improve water checks. To the first question, 157 people (78.1%) replied that this is an activity that will always require human supervision and intervention, automated systems completely cannot perform river border checks. These include, otherwise, the ‘ABC’ (Automated Border Control) gates, which carry out border checks based on biometric data and have already been tested on marine vessels, but these crossings are not fully feasible

at the only Schengen external water border crossing point on the Danube.<sup>16</sup> This is confirmed by the fact that the answers to the following question show that 59.2% of professionals believe that vessel searching technology will be able to be modernised to a greater extent than the control of a person's traffic.

In case of technical developments, experts believe that in the future, it is necessary to take into account primarily the physical characteristics of transport vessels, the characteristics of the goods transported and the level of risk of passengers and crew, and least of all to take into account the need to reduce human resources in any case (Figure 11), i.e. they recognise that this is and will remain a staff-intensive task. Preventing a reduction in the number of law enforcement officers is also justified considering the size and increasing traffic trends of passenger and cargo ships on the Danube.

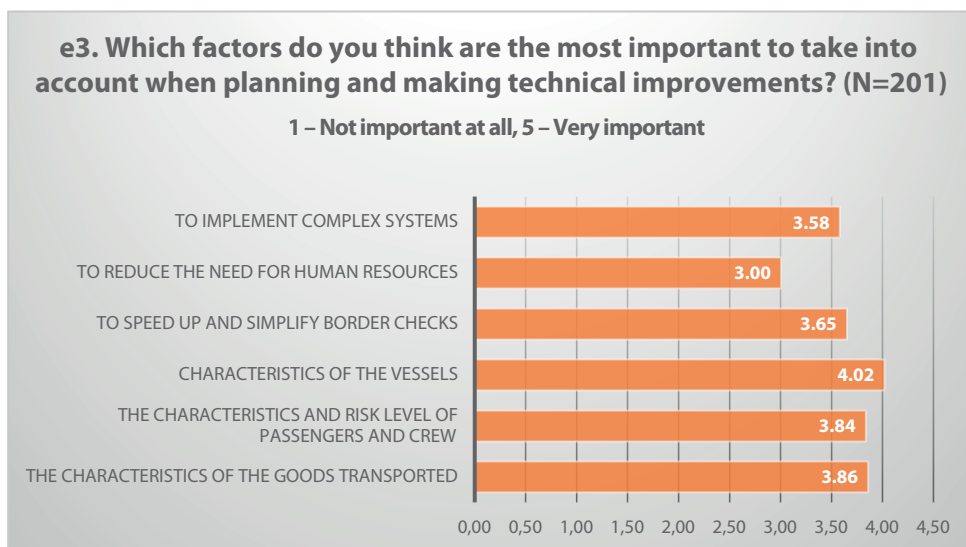


Figure 12: “Which factors do you think are the most important to take into account when planning and making technical improvements?” (average point)

Source: Compiled by the author.

### ***The DARIF joint river law enforcement operation and its implementation, effectiveness***

The organisation of the joint law enforcement operation DARIF 2022 is a joint responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior and the Hungarian Police, so I was

<sup>16</sup> BALLA et al. 2021: 14–16.



curious to see what tasks the law enforcement specialists of 10 countries see as more important and less important in order to be able to work more efficiently in the future. The responses revealed that since there is no specific network of information contact points on the Danube, it is most important to maintain the existing liaison officer network of the operation. Although informal, it transmits information efficiently and quickly, which is gaining ground in law enforcement communications among end users.<sup>17</sup>

According to the respondents, it is also important to organise joint operation at the Danube at least once a year, covering all countries, and to support it by developing a special IT (Information Technology) application for the exchange of police and other law enforcement information (Figure 13).

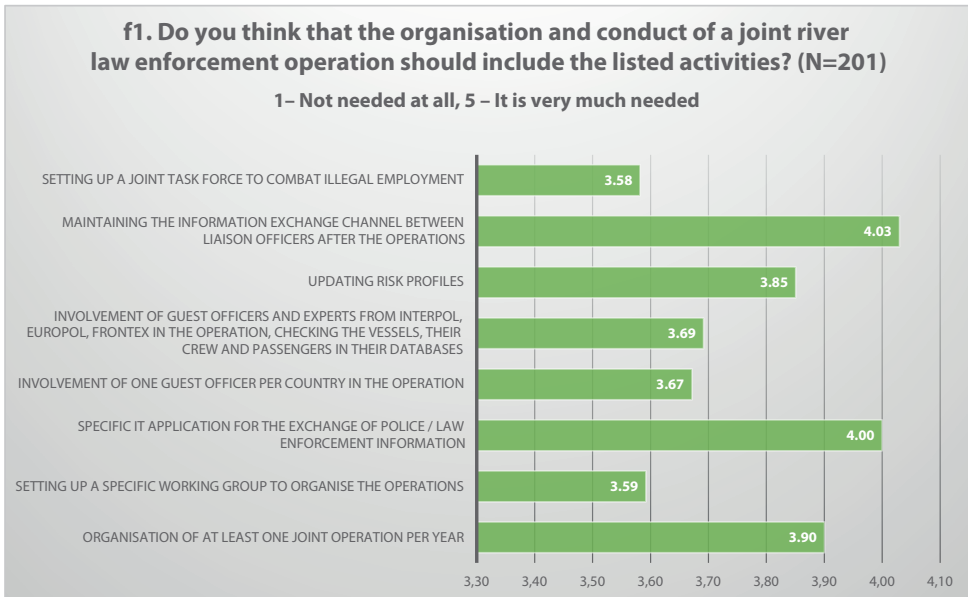


Figure 13: “Do you think that the organisation and conduct of a joint river law enforcement operation should include the listed activities?” (average point)

Source: Compiled by the author.

## Conclusions

The results of the research showed that not only in Hungary, but also in the entire Danube section, on cargo ships, there is the greatest risk in the smuggling of goods,

<sup>17</sup> KEMÉNY 2021: 118.

including cigarettes and other excisable products. Cigarette smuggling also has a very high latency, presumably an extremely small proportion of it is detected by the Member States, a widespread phenomenon in most Danube countries. Illegal migration infects shipping on the Danube to a small extent. Irregular migrants mostly see the river as an entry point and use rubber boats in almost all member countries. Other methods of committing illegal border crossing (e.g. hiding on a boat) are not really typical not only in Hungary, but also in other countries. Based on them, the correctness of the first two hypotheses was proved.

In most countries, the security of the Danube river is considered by a greater proportion of law enforcement agencies to be a matter of adequate human resources rather than cooperation or technical means. In this respect, opinions varied between countries according to the financing of border management and the ability to attract possible capacities. Countries with sufficient staff currently involved in the law enforcement controls of shipping see greater potential for developing cooperation than those where there are not enough border or water police or even customs officers. The above can be assessed as the fact that the third hypothesis was only partially verifiable.

Among the levels of cooperation in integrated border management, the development of international cooperation should be promoted in the future in order to increase efficiency. The exchange of law enforcement information on the Danube is currently mostly about management meetings and the exchange of simple border traffic data, radar and camera images, rather than joint risk analysis, joint investigations or joint training. The bilateral or multilateral joint operations carried out make law enforcement and law enforcement activities related to water transport on the Danube more efficient.

The lack of a permanent law enforcement coordination centre and cooperation forum creates a security deficit. To remedy this, it is not enough to make better use of the existing information exchange network (mainly bilateral police cooperation points) and, due to the current difficulties in channel selection, a specific national contact network specialising in the exchange of information on police control of navigation on the Danube would also be needed. Based on the foregoing, the correctness of the fourth hypothesis was also confirmed.

The findings of the research are comparable to the few previous results published on the subject. In cooperation with the ministries of the interior of Bulgaria and Germany, an EU-funded tender entitled *Establishment of the Structure of the Danube River Forum – DARIF* was implemented between 2013 and 2015 on the initiative of Hungary. Within this framework, expert working groups mapped the criminal risks inherent in water transport on the Danube, the functioning of law enforcement controls on passenger and freight transport, the functioning of data exchange and information systems and organised the first joint operations. According to the representatives of the ten countries participating in the DARIF project, the successful cooperation started should be continued, which could be based on the Danube River

Forum, which has been running for two years. They also stated that a network of national contact points for the safety of the waterway and a permanent coordination centre should also be established. It is necessary to eliminate shortcomings in international law and to apply the existing international treaty more effectively. The organisation of joint law enforcement operations and training should be supported. They also aimed to standardise and simplify documents and procedures, while building an IT system to support the activities of public authorities.<sup>18</sup>

The expert recommendations formulated at the end of this project show an essential correlation with the results of the research, the use of which in law enforcement can occur in several directions. On the one hand, when organising actions such as DARIF 2022 Joint Operation in the future, for their development, the present results can be taken into account. In addition, the results of the empirical research provide an excellent basis for the development of a transnational project proposal funded by the new Interreg Danube Region Programme 2021–2027.

Finally, it is important to point out that knowledge is somewhat limited by the fact that, although the questionnaire responses came from all ten Danube Member States, they were not numerically balanced, despite the linguistic incentives. The opinion of Hungarian law enforcement officers was present in almost 40%, while only 5–6 responses were received from some countries (Croatia, Moldova, Austria). Nevertheless, the opinion of 201 international experts dealing with policing on the Danube was extremely important, and their answers reveal opinions on the most important issues of river security in the Danube Region.

Different law enforcement agencies in the states bordering the Danube carry out checks of varying depths in inland navigation, yet they face the same criminal challenges, which are mainly induced by the fact that cargo shipping carries with it the latent, undercover nature of smuggling in huge tugboats and barges. This is also a risk due to the changing security situation in our current world, which is increasingly moving towards hybrid threats. In the opinion of the majority of the law enforcement society, the use of special information exchange channels would be necessary in order to develop the unsatisfactory international cooperation. The most difficult situation is Hungary on the Danube due to the surveillance of the Schengen water border, because the problems raised by the research are causing security deficits at the external border. However, taking effective measures to eliminate this is a shared responsibility of the ten riverside countries.

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<sup>18</sup> BALOG 2015: 61.

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