

# Towards Common Values and Culture -

## Challenges and Solutions in Developing the Basic Training of the European Border and Coast Standing Corps Category 1 in the Pandemic Crisis

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### Abstract

The development of the Basic Training for the European Border and Coast Guard Standing Corps was in the final stage when the pandemic crises hit all of us dramatically in early 2020, and forced to find alternative solutions in carrying out the training in new circumstances. Urgent actions were needed to re-design the implementation of the Basic Training, as the situation at the external borders of the EU did not allow to compromise the rapid establishment of the Standing Corps. The good practices and lessons learnt will certainly play a key role when establishing the “new normal” in training and education. Furthermore, the leading role of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) in shaping common values and culture of the new formation is emphasized. The conference bulletin paper presents pragmatic oriented approach and explores the training and education solutions chosen at the time when the pandemic hit this activity and forced to change the training methods immediately and significantly.

**Keywords:** Frontex; European Border and Coast Guard Standing Corps; common core curriculum

### Introduction

Establishment of the European Border and Coast Guard Standing Corps has been recently the most visible change in the European approach in the management of the EU external borders. The political decision of the EU to have its own law enforcement officers for border protection and migration management and return-related tasks, has manifested a paradigm shift, also in the field of training and education. The European Border

and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) has a leading role in capacity building, for example in terms of providing training for the members of the European Border and Coast Guard Standing Corps category 1.

The European Border and Coast Guard Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2019/1896) gives the legal basis for the statutory staff of the standing corps. The European Border and Coast Guard standing corps are composed of four categories. However, only cat. 1 is statutory staff

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of the Agency, that is recruited and undergoes the basic training provided by Frontex. The staff of all other categories is seconded from the Member States. All categories may work together in the same Frontex operation(s).

The basic training for the very first iteration of the standing corps cat. 1 was planned to take place in early 2020 as six months long contact learning, but the COVID-19 restrictions forced to change the plans. The situation at the external borders did not allow significant delays nor cancellation of the training. As a solution, the training was restructured to start with online phase, to be followed later with a contact learning phase. Considering that building up the values and common working culture among the basic training students starts on a day one of the training, the solution taken was related to further exploration of methods allowing to achieve value-based learning outcomes in the online learning environment. As the result some specific actions were essential to facilitate the challenge of establishing common working culture during the online phase.

### Learning of values and working culture in the law enforcement context

Common values and proper working culture within the law enforcement are demonstrated every day on the duty, and outside of the duty hours. Values are what guide an agency and its employees (McCartney & Parent, 2015), and facilitate the ethical behaviour. Thus, the awareness and understanding of the core values of the agency by an individual plays a vital role in fulfilling the daily tasks. Taking into consideration that the law enforcement agencies have differing values depending on their function, they build up the unique character of agency. The values create united community that shares the same believes. Agreed by all members, the imparted values are concentrated throughout the agency and become a part of the agency's organisational culture. (McCartney & Parent, 2015).

Following Alvesson (2002), there is an enormous variation in the definitions of the organisational culture. Alvesson (Ibid.) continues by citing Borowsky (1994) and Ortnor (1984) saying that the word 'culture' has no fixed or broadly agreed meaning even in anthropology. Alvesson (2002) uses the term 'organizational culture' as an overall concept for a way of thinking, taking

an interest in cultural and symbolic phenomena. He (Alvesson, 2002) highlights the importance of symbols, rituals, myths, stories and legends, as well as interpretation of events, ideas, and experiences the groups are involved, and they live with. Moreover, Alvesson includes in the organisational culture the values and assumptions about the social reality (Ibid.).

Schein (2003) defines culture as a "pattern of basic assumptions that the group has invented, discovered or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration" (p.30). Moreover, if it has worked well enough, the assumptions will be considered as valid ones, as granted, and therefore to be taught to the newcomers as a correct way to perceive, think and feel (Schein, 2003). Following Schein (2003), we develop the patterns of perceiving, thinking and feeling that tend to hang together and provide meaning to our daily events. In this regard the basic training is like a "melting pot" – during the basic training all students, coming with very diverse professional and personal backgrounds, also from different national ranks and positions, should find a common pattern of basic assumptions by accumulating solutions to various problems they face, in managing both their external tasks in the learning context, and internal tasks of organising themselves to work and learn with each other (Schein, 2003). Common language and conceptual system, a common set of rules for relating to the environment and each other support the learning process (Schein, 2003). Therefore, the way of delivering the basic training by sharing and presenting the organisational cultural matters and common values is a key factor building the individual ability to operate in a unitary manner in demanding circumstances.

The recent (2021) study of Pedagogical Conditions of Organizational Culture Formation of Future Border Guard Officers (Shumovetska et al. 2021), explored the effectiveness of pedagogical conditions of organizational culture formation of future border guard officers in Ukraine, by observing the experimental (n=120) and control (n=118) groups of cadets within their border guard academy. According to the study (Ibid.), the organizational culture of border guard officers is conditioned by the specifics of their professional activities on border protection and differs from the cultures of others by the content of its structural components. Based on the study results, the formation of organizational culture to future border guard officers is effective when training intensifies value-motivational

attitude, promotes the development of teamwork skills and communication interaction, and develops organizational and managerial decision-making and leadership skills. Moreover, within the organizational culture of a border guard officer, the components of *personal* (value orientations, needs and interests), *cognitive* (knowledge and main requirements of organisational culture, mission of the agency) and *behavioural* (professional ability ensuring the effectiveness of the activity), were found essential. (Shumovetska et al. 2021.)

In the law enforcement environment building up the organisational culture starts from the basic training, which shall develop ethically sustainable attitude and respect for fundamental rights in all conditions. As stipulated in the International Human Rights Standards for the Law Enforcement, the law enforcement officials shall respect and protect the human dignity and maintain and uphold the human rights of all persons. (UNHCR, the International Human Rights Standards for the Law Enforcement). It may be said that basic training is the moment of incorporating of one's personal values to the agency's core values to understand the specificity of law enforcement duties. The training provider and all persons involved in the learning process have a huge responsibility in shaping the values and organisational culture. Promoting correct values remains equal obligation of both individuals and institutions.

Learning of working culture related matters and values in the context of first iteration of the European Standing Corps had a specific character, as students were already possessing law enforcement experience from their national authorities, and therefore were already having internalised national habits and approaches. Furthermore, the group was presenting rich European dimension in terms of national cultures and habits, still having the strong presence of each student's personal values. Undoubtedly, the variety of experiences and organisational culture differ depending on countries and authorities they come from. According to Schein (2003), the training may fail if the students return to the cultures that do not support concepts, values or assumptions learnt in the respective new training attended.

Common culture based on well-defined values becomes of special importance in critical periods such as COVID-19 pandemic, or significant moments when the new organisational formation is being established. The development and delivery period of the Europe-

an Border and Coast Guard Standing Corps Cat. 1 Basic Training was challenged by both mentioned situations.

As the training gathered over 250 students, coming from different countries and with different backgrounds, the group development was expected to be challenging. According to Tuckman (1965) the group development can be divided in stages, namely stages of forming, storming, norming, and performing. In the *forming* stage the group is established, and the tasks are allocated, the establishment of dependent relationships with the leaders, other group members, and pre-existing standards takes place. In the second phase, *storming*, the members are expressing their ideas, opinions, and viewpoints, which may differ from the ones from the others, and if not managed well, it may lead to confrontation inside of the group. According to Tuckman (1965) this stage is "*characterized by conflict and polarization around interpersonal issues*" (p.396). In the next stage, *norming*, the group has overcome the resistance, the feeling belonging to the group has increased, the working practices have been harmonised, rules and values are taking place, and people are finding their places in the group. Finally, in the performing stage, the roles are becoming functional, and the group is committed and focusing on the task. (Tuckman 1965.) It is worth to mention that Tuckman later developed two more phases, namely adjourning, and transforming.

### European Standing Corps training development

The European Border and Coast Guard Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2019/1896) is highlighting the importance of training based on common culture and values, and respect of fundamental rights. Furthermore, according to the Regulation (Art. 62.3), the Agency shall ensure that standing corps training follows the common core curricula.

The common core curricula, namely the Common Core Curricula for Border and Coast Guard Basic Training – CCC Basic (Frontex, 2017), and Mid-level Management Training in the EU – CCC ML (Frontex, 2019) are stipulated by the EU legislation, and they have been setting the obligatory border and coast guard training standards within the EU Member States and Schengen Associated Countries already since the establishment of the Frontex Agency. Being integrated into national training

systems for border and coast guards in the EU Member States and Schengen Associated Countries, the common core curricula are promoting high ethical values, respect for fundamental rights, ensuring the achievement of operational job-competences and facilitating the operational cooperation among national and EU authorities working on the borders. Interoperability is a necessary component for efficient cooperation thus, it is also important part of education of European border and coast guard. Utilising the Agency's curricula as a basis for the standing corps training development ensures that the core competences and training provided for the new formation are in harmony with the ones provided by the Member States to the national border and coast guards.

The Basic Training Programme for the European Border and Coast Guard Standing Corps Cat. 1 was developed between October 2019 and February 2020 in close cooperation with the Member States. The Programme provides the members of the standing corps with the necessary competences to operate in a unitary manner in any operational area, generating added value and fully respecting fundamental rights in all actions. One of the main objectives of the basic training is to develop a common border and coast guard culture and values as well as harmonised practices for the members of the standing corps cat. 1 who come from different law enforcement services of the EU, with a rich variety of professional backgrounds. The European dimension of standing corps cat. 1 training is enlarged by legal and ethical Agency's responsibilities to ensure that standing corps officers are well trained and fully prepared to perform tasks with executive powers and use of force (Articles 55.7, 82 and Annex V of the Regulation (EU) 2019/1896).

Originally the Basic Training Programme was designed as a full six months operational, highly practical contact learning. However, due to the pandemic, Frontex was in an urgent need to achieve (part of) the objectives via the online environment. Considering the situation at the external borders, cancelling, or significantly delaying the training was not an option.

Due to the pandemic the start of the first iteration of the Basic Training for the Standing Corps was re-scheduled from May 2020 to 14 June 2020. The basic train-

ing was redesigned into a three months online phase (14 June – 4 September 2020) and a three months of contact phase (14 September - 5 December 2020). The contact phase was run in parallel in two border guard training centres in Poland. The entire basic training was delivered by trainers from the Member States, staff of other EU Agencies as well as staff of Frontex. All together 252 standing corps officers graduated from the first iteration of the Basic Training.

The training solutions chosen at the time when the pandemic hit this activity were under unique pressure of high expectations related to the establishment of the new European formation. It seems relatively easy to arrange knowledge-based training and learning in the online environment, however, teaching, learning, and building up a common culture, internalising the common values utilising such an approach is still subject of educational research. Considering the newly established standing corps a priority was given to learn to ensure the fundamental rights in all circumstances, to create the feeling of being together and united with the other members in an online learning environment, to build up trust and capacity for interoperability of the first ever uniformed service of the EU.

As mentioned, the six-month long operational training was divided into three months of online and three months of contact phase. Nearly all knowledge and cognitive skills-based learning from each of Basic Training Programme modules were transferred to the online environment. Consequently, the practical skills, with some exceptions, were left to the contact phase. Such solution influenced among the others the assessment of the basic training, as numerous practical skills such as swimming, shooting or first aid could be only assessed during the contact phase. Separating the knowledge from the training of skills had pros and cons. On one hand, sometimes the time between the knowledge and the actual skills training was relatively long and therefore some refreshing lessons were needed on the contact learning phase. On the other hand, knowledge-wise the students were fully prepared for the skills training from the day one of the contact learning phase. The online part of basic training was built in Moodle platform, taking the advantage of the basic features of the software.

## Specific solutions for online learning phase

Several solutions were developed to achieve the learning outcomes related to physical training, value-based matters and team building related aims during the online learning phase.

The online part included a specific **physical training component** aiming to prepare students for the physically demanding contact learning phase and to balance the difference between two phases to possible minimum. The physical training part was accompanied by manual, instructional videos, and self-assessments cycles. The self-assessment reports were monitored by Frontex. The physical training was aligned for the purpose to maintain the physical condition at least on the entry level from the recruitment process and if possible, to develop further. Due to the pandemic related restrictions, all exercises were designed to be doable at home or outdoors.

**Trainers on duty system.** As it was seen crucial to provide the students with the experience of having a 'living person behind the screen', a trainer on duty system was established. It offered a quick and well-structured response system for students' questions. Each student was allowed and encouraged to send questions to the trainers either via the student group leader or individually. The trainers on duty provided the answers with a very short notice – in practice nearly 24/7 availability of trainers was provided. Furthermore, the trainers on duty had an immediate capability to provide extra online sessions on students' request, when needed. This option was used several times, and it proved to be efficient way to respond on ad-hoc needs addressed by the students or identified by the trainers.

**The trainers were representing nearly all Member States.** Due to their national duties and the COVID-19 influence, trainers were rotating, and the back-up was needed, which sometimes caused challenges in coordination. However, engaging operational staff from the external borders of the EU as trainers increased the credibility of the training, ensured the European dimension of the training, and made sessions interesting. It happened that sometimes trainers answered students' questions during their own duties directly from the field. Undoubtedly, a great job was done by all the trainers involved in terms of presenting excellent example of cooperation and interoperability for the students.

**Student group leaders' concept** was introduced already during the online phase and it continued during the contact learning phase. The students were organised in fourteen groups, with the student group leader in each group. The special attention was put to keep the gender, geographical and law enforcement-related balance in each group. The student group leader was rotated monthly, and participated in the weekly briefings with project manager, module coordinators and core trainers of the week, on behalf of the group.

What is important, the student group leaders met their groups separately online daily. The group leaders received valuable experience from leading a multinational group online, and the members became familiar of being commanded and coordinated in international law enforcement environment. All student group leaders made a great job in establishing and maintaining the encouraging, supportive, and respectful atmosphere in their groups. The born of the great group spirit was very evident and visible for everyone involved.

In addition to the information management via group leaders, each student was always allowed to contact trainers and other staff also personally, if necessary. Furthermore, each group had Frontex coordinator assigned. Lots of online group working tasks were given during lessons. The group work was coordinated and reported by the student group leader. The aim was to prepare the students to work together, to highlight the importance of growing the team spirit. Additionally, sharing good practices and experience from national service took place, the students were already helping each other (as it was reported in feedback), and getting prepared to meet the challenges together – a slogan "together we can make it" became very familiar for everyone involved.

The main challenge however was devoted to reaching value-based learning outcomes in the online environment, to establish the European border and coast guard community virtually.

**Dedicated sessions for the values and culture** were organised according to the training programme. As much as possible the case studies and role-playing scenarios were utilised to encourage active approach in solving situations that may cause ethical dilemmas. The online discussions were aimed to provide the support in handling such challenges by constructive thinking how to quickly analyse and resolve potential

moral conflict. The sessions resulted in fruitful debates among the first generation of standing corps on values and common European border and coast guard culture; encouraging emails and lots of online discussions followed; feedback after the module completion confirmed that such sessions were needed and highly appreciated.

**Weekly briefings, group leader coaching, dedicated introductory sessions for the upcoming module, feedback collection system, trainers' coordination, group tasks,** etc. are the examples of dedicated tasks undertaken during the online phase of basic training. The common culture, shared values and feeling of being united does not come automatically, as granted. It must be planned, it must be a visible aim, and the learning methods must support its achievement, it must be taken into account in all training, and the delivery has to be monitored and taken the care of at every step. That was the approach during the online phase applied by strong cooperation and shared responsibility for successful training process.

All the entities involved in the training delivery were fully engaged during the three months of online phase: from the top management to the staff responsible for supporting online learning. National trainers, being experienced in implementing the common core curriculum at the national level, shared now the common values and the EU border guard culture with the new standing corps officers. Common European border and coast guard culture and the attitude built on respect of fundamental rights trained with each edition of the common core curriculum, paid off at that time of basic training delivery. The community of border and coast guards under the umbrella of the Agency was ready on duty proving the real picture of cooperation and ethical standards.

## Contact Phase

Following the Tuckman's (1965) model of group development, *"forming–storming–norming–performing"*, the training designers' aim was that at least the initial stages of the group development has taken place already during the online phase, to be continued in the contact phase.

Evidently the goal was reached, as the result of the online phase was that when the contact phase started,

and 252 students met face to face for the first time, they were not strangers anymore. They had common understanding of the aimed values, and the leadership model functioned very well. During the contact learning phase, the pandemic hit the training again, and strict measures had to be implemented in both training centres. At that moment the cooperation, mutual trust and common spirit learnt already during the online phase, worked. The standing corps community stayed united. The cooperation between students and trainers remained very fruitful. During the contact learning phase, the training was conducted in two training centres, but even despite the physical distance between two training groups they act and behaved as one.

Due to national restrictions, the contact learning phase training had to be re-organised and the schedules for both training centres were changed many times, also due to the introduced travel ban and problems with trainers travelling. Numerous activities were conducted in simulated environment and several field visits were cancelled. The broadcasting sessions were provided for those in isolation. Nevertheless, the cooperation, great teamwork and high-level interoperability, and continuous support of all involved entities, including host authorities, allowed to reach successful graduation moment.

## Concluding remarks

The Common Core Curriculum for Basic Training in the EU provides the solid foundation on which the Basic Training for the European Border and Coast Guard Standing Corps Cat. 1 was developed. The core competences on common values, respect of fundamental rights, cooperation and interoperability are integrated into Basic Training of Standing Corps. Furthermore, deep involvement of national trainers, trainers from other Agencies and Frontex staff gave the excellent example of interoperability and cooperation in practice. That made conducive atmosphere to build up the common culture, to understand and promote values. Somehow, it provides the proof of constant need to have human factor engagement, instead of using the technology only, when aiming to reach value-based results in online environment. It must be admitted that although it was highly demanding time from the perspective of all entities involved, it was rewarded by feeling of success.

Looking from the perspective of organisational culture, the environment of students (and trainers) was composed of civil and law enforcement cultures from various countries and national services cultures. Besides, various, sometimes very strong organisational cultures from professional background of students have had influenced. The European common border and coast culture must find its own place upon that, by individual understanding of European duty for the common safety and security with full respect of fundamental rights. The basic training is the right moment to establish and internalise the common European border and coast culture on an individual and organisational levels within the standing corps learning.

The gained experience showed that reaching value-based learning outcomes in the online environment is possible till a certain extent. It required much more than turning the contact learning methods into the online ones, the way of thinking needed to be changed. High engagement and motivation of all stakeholders was of crucial importance in reaching the success.

The very first training of the newly established law enforcement formation is often perceived as return on expectations, in terms of what successful training delivers

to key stakeholders, to which degree their expectations have been covered. Results defined as the combination of the organisational purpose and mission, mean in government or military organization, accomplishing the mission within the resources allocated. However, seen from the broad and long-term perspective, the results are created through the culmination of countless efforts of people, departments, and environmental factors. Their visibility may take time. Leading indicators help to bridge the gap between individual initiatives and efforts, and organizational results (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2021). In case of law enforcement, the expectations are always very high (on each side: students – society – trainers – authority). The necessary guaranty of high expectation fulfilment is ethical code of conduct based on values and organisational culture.

The officers of the first standing corps iterations have been deployed from January 2021. They are on the EU borders, in Frontex HQ and in some other training centres supporting the delivery of the next iterations of Basic Training. Based on the collected and analysed feedback, and everyday duty reports it can be said that the methods applied, and the approach taken worked: common values and culture are shaped and promoted every day!

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