The background is a photograph of a person in a field, wearing a dark jacket and a light-colored shirt, looking down at a device in their hands. The person is standing in a field of tall grass and wildflowers. The image is slightly blurred, giving it a sense of movement or a candid moment.

Frontex Evaluation Report

on return operations conducted
in the 2nd semester of 2024

Done by: Return Division

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Done at Warsaw
...../06/2025

.....
Signature
Hans Leijten
Executive Director

European Border and Coast Guard Agency – Frontex

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Frontex Evaluation Report

**on return operations conducted
in the 2nd semester of 2024**

Done by: Return Division

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1. Executive summary

The Frontex Evaluation Report on return operations conducted in the second semester of 2024 shows an increased level of support of the Agency to the Member States in the implementation of both voluntary and forced returns.

Frontex assisted **10% more returns** than in the first semester of 2024 (29 469 vs. 26 794 returnees), and **43% more returns in the whole year, compared to 2023**.

64% of the third country nationals returned voluntarily, which confirmed the trend observed in the first half of the year. **Expanded cooperation** between the Agency and Member States' authorities and the **increasing needs of the Member States** in the field of return were the main factors causing this growth.

While scheduled flights remained the main means of transportation for returns (80%), more persons (growth of 2%) were returned in the semester by charter flights, which are mainly used for large groups and/or high-risk profile returnees. Charter flights joined by more Member States, those returns where escorts from the same non-EU country of return were deployed, or where voluntary and forced returnees travelled together, proved to be more efficient than the operations implemented by just one Member State, because they generally had a higher number of returnees onboard.

Frontex is positioning itself more and more as a reliable **partner of the Member States**, by providing **tailor-made,**

innovative and flexible solutions to address their needs while ensuring overall EU efficiency. **In the spirit of shared responsibility**, the Agency systematically assessed with the Member States the best operational and technical solutions for each operation, to ensure effectiveness, (cost)efficiency and overall EU added value of returns.

Frontex also continued to structurally invest in the promotion of voluntary returns and post arrival and post-return/reintegration measures. The growing use of the **EU Reintegration Programme** and the increasing number of deployments of **Return Specialists** conducting counselling sessions for the returnees, reinforced the Member States' capacity in implementing the EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration. At the same time, the support provided by the **FRESO** to voluntary and forced returns has the potential to further expand the number of returns transiting in other Member States, in a spirit of EU mutual support.

Frontex remains committed to uphold the fundamental rights of the returnees during the implementation of all types of supported returns. At least one forced-return monitor was present on board of 74% of the Frontex coordinated returns by charter flights. 65% of them were provided by Frontex from its dedicated pool of monitors. These constitute a slight increase compared to the 1st semester of 2024, when 73% of charter flights was monitored (and 62% monitors were from the Frontex pool).

2. Introduction

Without entering into the merits of return decisions, for which responsibility lies with the Member States' competent national authorities, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency ("Frontex") assists the Member States¹ in implementing voluntary-based² or forced returns of third country nationals ("TCNs") who have exhausted all legal avenues to legitimise their stay in the Schengen area.

Returns are implemented by air,³ either on scheduled⁴ or charter flights. The Agency can support the Member States in the organisation, implementation, and financing of returns, and can organise return operations on its own initiative.⁵ If so, Frontex is responsible for the coordination of returns at operational level and can provide technical and operational support also through the deployment of specific profiles of the European Border and Coast Guard standing corps officers ("standing corps").

Member States request the Agency's support to returns via the Frontex-Assisted Returns ("FAR") module of the Integrated Return Management Application ("IRMA").⁶ Each request is assessed by the Agency against the criteria indicated in the Management Board Decision 24/2023⁷: security aspects, respect for fundamental

rights, cost-effectiveness, operational conditions and flexibility, time-effectiveness, coherence with the external EU policy on return, and environmental sustainability. The assessment of these criteria may lead to approval or rejection of the return need, or to proposing alternative technical or operational solutions, if available. For instance, in some cases the Agency can offer to use scheduled flights instead of a charter flight, providing alternative dates and/or routes for the return, etc.

As per Article 50(7) of the Regulation, the executive director shall evaluate every six months the results of return operations to enhance the quality, coherence, and effectiveness of future return activities. Therefore, this report evaluates the results of returns organised or coordinated by Frontex **between 1 July and 31 December 2024** (hereinafter: the second semester of 2024). This report does not cover returns carried out on national level without support of the Agency.

This report is based on qualitative and quantitative data available in FAR and gathered during network meetings with Member States' return authorities organised by Frontex.

¹ European Union (EU) Member States and Schengen Associated Countries (SAC).

² In this report, 'voluntary-based return' applies to those returns where the non-EU national illegally staying on the territory of EU Member States voluntarily decides to return either with or without having received the return decision. It therefore encompasses both voluntary return and voluntary departure.

³ No land return operations were supported by Frontex in 2024.

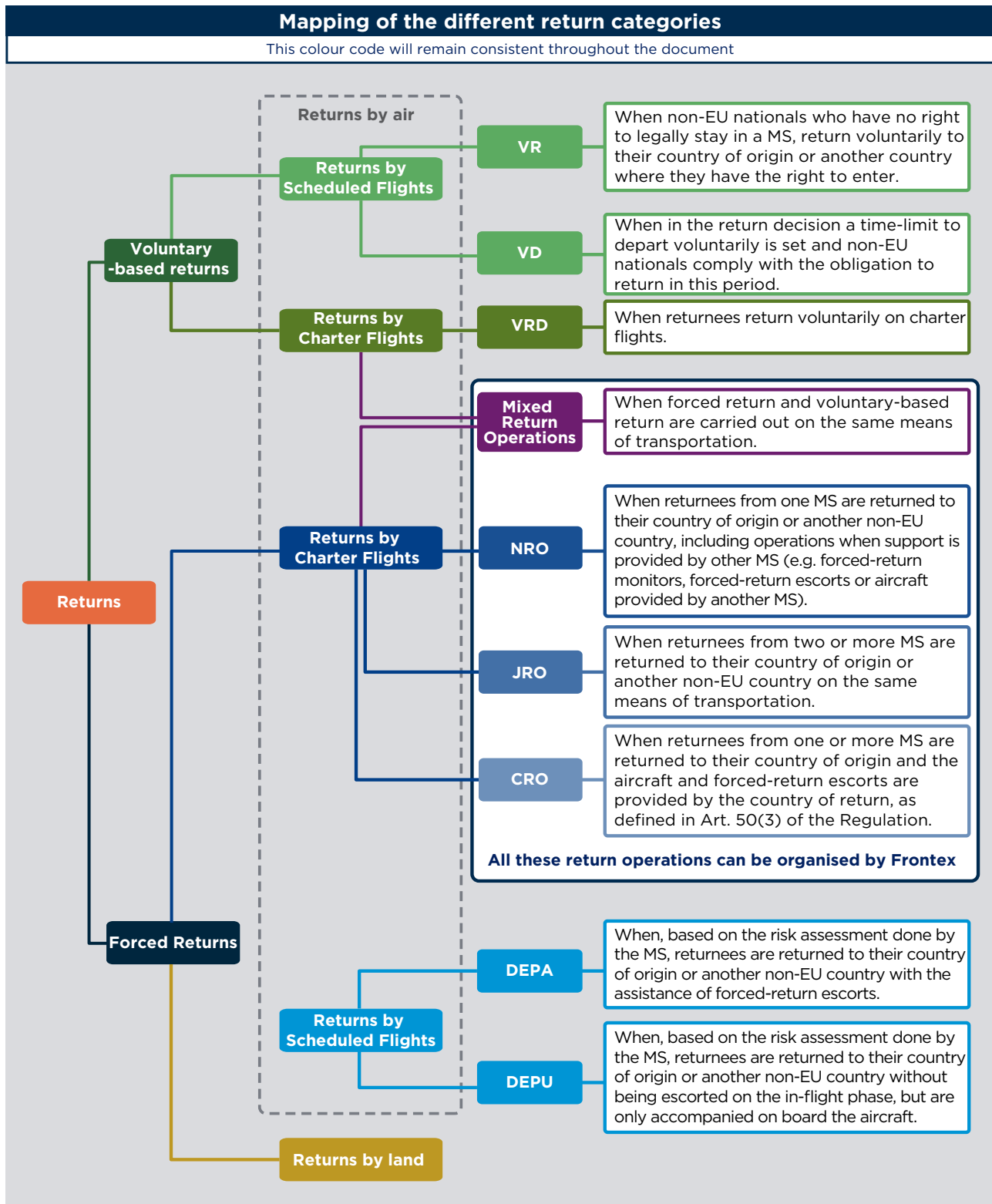
⁴ Regular commercial flights.

⁵ No return operations were organised by Frontex on its own initiative in 2024.

⁶ As set out in the Management Board Decision 24/2023 of 21 July 2023 adopting the modus operandi of the rolling operational plan for Return.

⁷ Management Board Decision 24/2023 of 21 July 2023 adopting the modus operandi of the rolling operational plan.

3. Overview of returns



Overview of returns

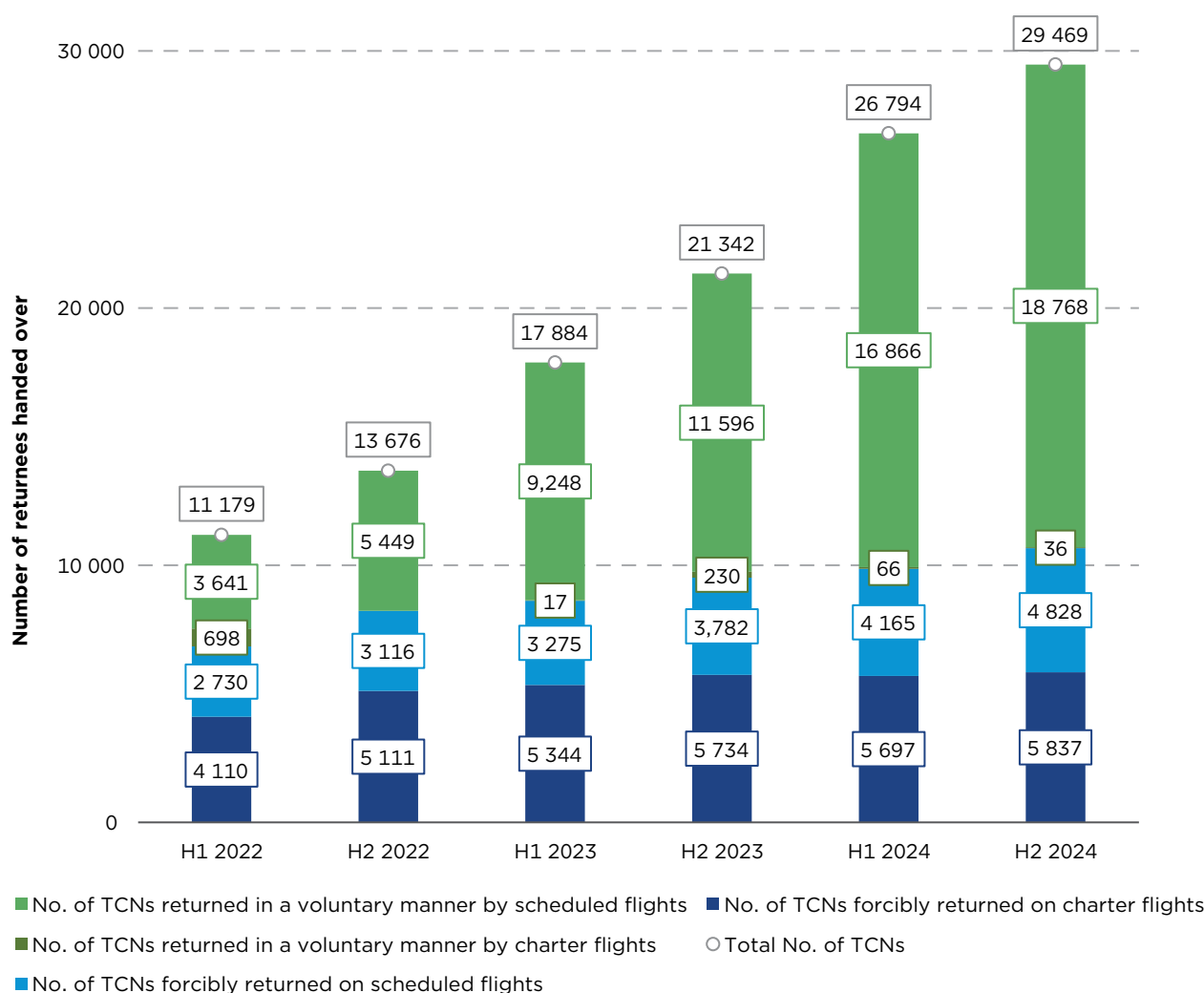
In the second half of 2024, Member States **returned** with the assistance of Frontex **29 469⁸** third country nationals, **10% more** compared to the first semester of 2024. An **average of 4 912 third country nationals were returned per month** (it was 4 466 in the first semester of 2024 and 3 558 in the second semester of 2023).

All returns were implemented by air: **80% on scheduled flights (23 596 third country nationals)** and **20% on charter flights (5 873 third country nationals)**. 54 authorities of **29 Member States⁹** used the Agency's

support for **scheduled flights**, whereas **22 Member States¹⁰** made use of the **charter flights** services. **64% (18 804 third country nationals)** of the returns supported by Frontex were **voluntary returns** and **36% (10 665 third country nationals) forced returns**, which confirms the general trend registered in the previous semester.

In the whole 2024 Frontex supported the Member States in returning 56 263 third country nationals, (+43% in comparison to 39 226 TCNs in 2023).

Number of non-EU nationals returned per semester

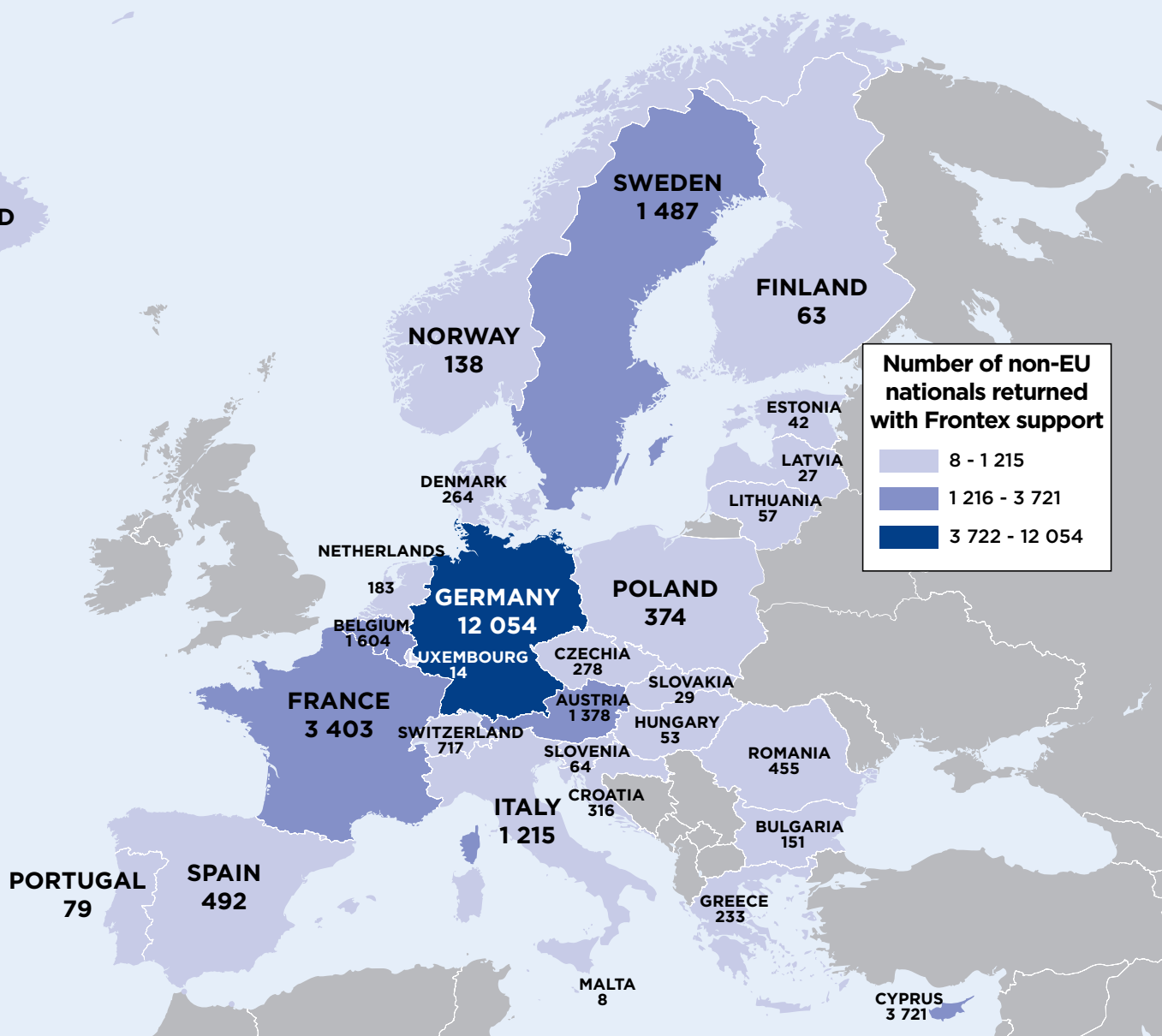


⁸ Data may be subject to minor changes due to late validations of data in FAR by Member States.

⁹ Among all MS and SAC, no support was provided to Ireland and Lichtenstein

¹⁰ Czechia, Estonia, Croatia, Ireland, Liechtenstein, Latvia, Malta, the Netherlands and Slovakia did not participate in charter flight activities in this semester

The below map shows the number of non-EU nationals returned in the reporting period per Member State.

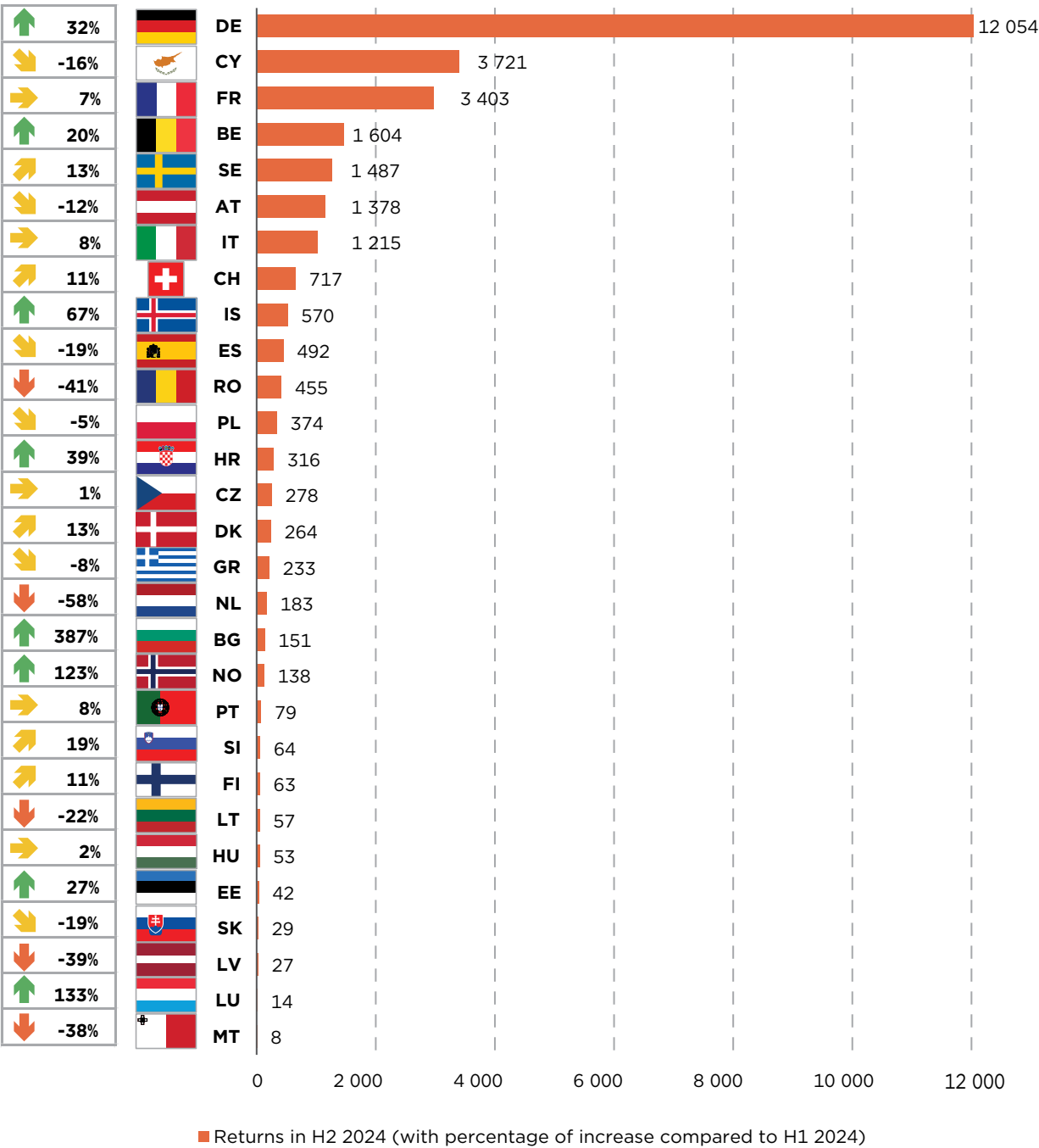


Overview of returns

Most of the Member States have increased the number of non-EU nationals returned with Frontex support when compared with the first semester of 2024. The biggest growth originates from Germany, Belgium and Iceland, whose numbers raised by 32%, 20%, and 67% respectively.

65% (or 19 179 third country nationals) of the total number of Frontex-supported returns in the second semester of 2024 **was implemented by three Member States: Germany, Cyprus and France.**

Member States per number of non-EU nationals returned with Frontex support in H2 2024

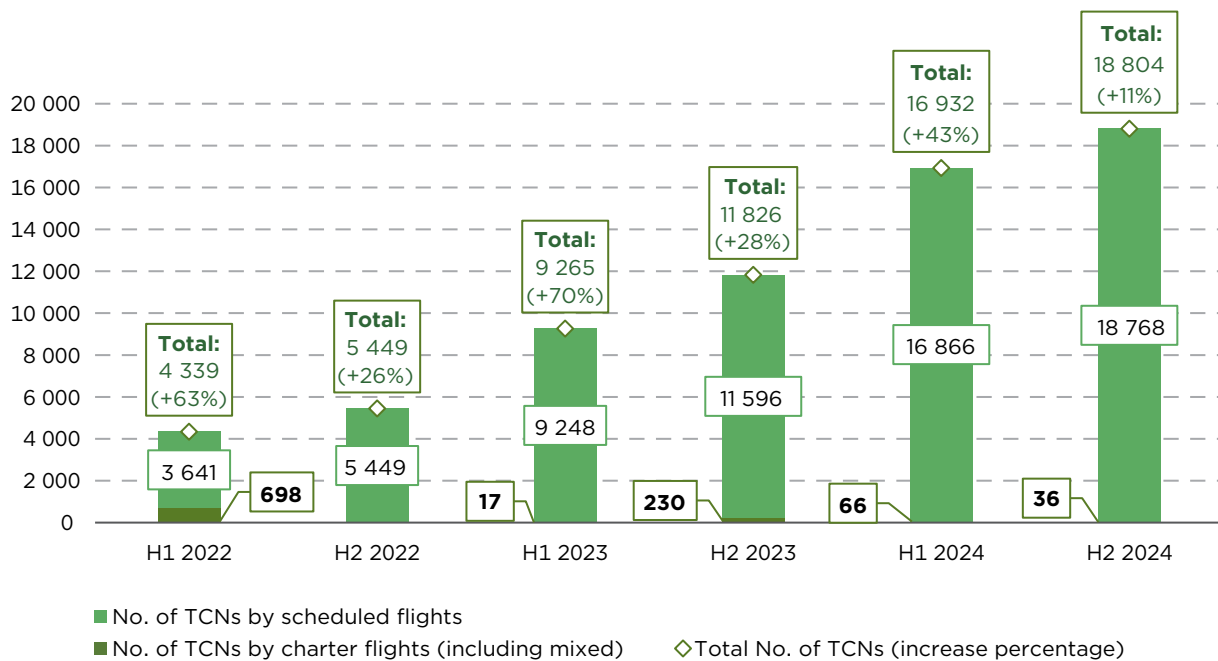


3.1 Voluntary returns

The number of voluntary returns assisted by Frontex in the semester reached almost 19 000.

In the whole 2024, voluntary returns accounted for **64% of all returns supported by the Agency**, which is the highest share ever reached (35 736 third country nationals returned).

Number of third country nationals voluntarily returned per semester



Frontex has made structural investments in activities that contributed to the rising numbers of migrants choosing to return voluntarily. Among others, a **comprehensive service of return counselling of migrants by the Return Specialist (RS)**,¹¹ complemented by an array of **post-arrival and post-return activities offered under the EU Reintegration Programme (EURP)**.

consists of informing third country nationals about the return process while promoting voluntary returns and offering possibilities for reintegration. 54 RS deployments with the task return and reintegration counselling took place during the evaluated period. RS with this task were deployed to CYP, BGR, HRV, ISL, PRT, ROU, POL.

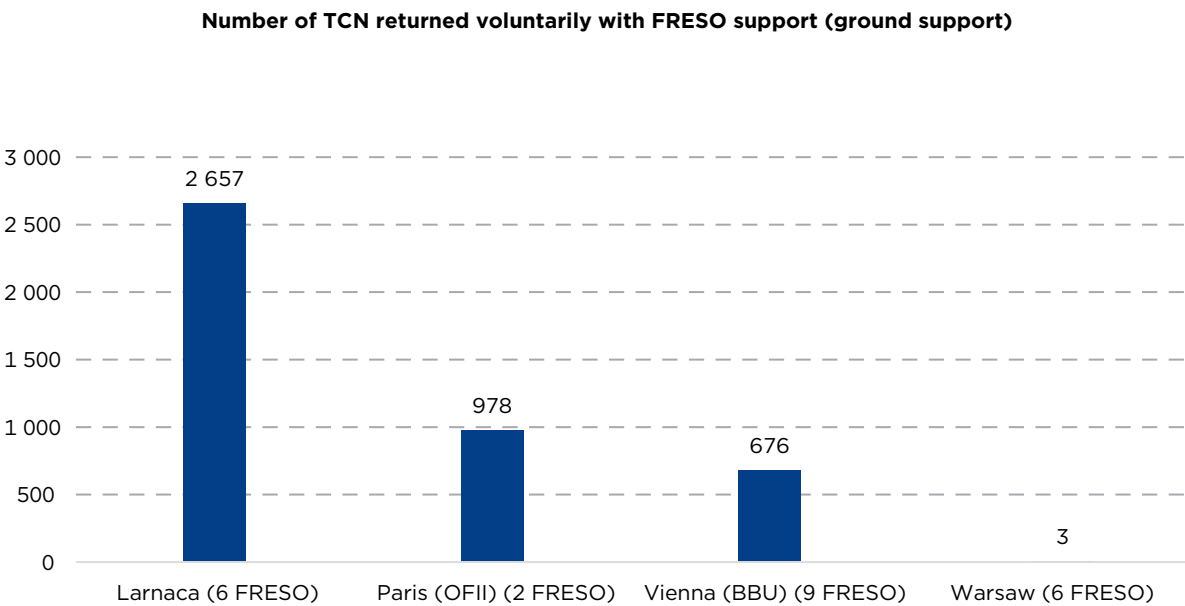
- Return Specialists conducted 8 491 individual counselling sessions, which resulted in 4 337 declarations to return voluntarily. **Return and reintegration counselling**
- In the 2nd half of 2024, a total of **6 038 persons returned voluntarily got either post arrival and/or post return/reintegration assistance within the EURP**.

¹¹ Return Specialists are a profile within the Standing Corps according to MB Decision 5/2023 of 25 January 2023 'adopting profiles to be made available to the European Border and Coast Guard standing corps for 2024'.

Overview of returns

The voluntary return of third country nationals is further facilitated by the deployment of Frontex Return Escort and Support Officer (FRESO), who provide ground support during the pre-departure phase to voluntary returns departing from the airport of the Member States.

In the semester, FRESO contributed (by providing ground support) to the voluntary return of **4 314 third country nationals** from FRA, AUT, CYP, and POL, as presented in the chart below.



The difference in the number of third country nationals supported by FRESO can be explained by differences in procedures and the responsibility assigned to the FRESO in each host MS. In Vienna (BBU) for example, FRESO pick up voluntary returnees from the whole territory of Austria, while in Larnaca the FRESO only guide the returnees at the airport. Also, in the case of the FRESO deployment at Warsaw airport, the FRESO are also involved in supporting forced returns, which is the primary task assigned to them (see 3.2).

Frontex also provided **trainings to 36 colleagues** from Germany, Iceland and Lithuania on the use of the relevant

FAR operational module of IRMA to be used to organise voluntary returns. It contributed to the increase of voluntary returns implemented by these two countries: Iceland's usage grew by 65% and Germany's by 49%. Lithuania's numbers on voluntary returns did not show an increase yet.

Voluntary returns are the preferred type of returns in the EU legal and policy framework, as they are considered more **humane** and **sustainable**.

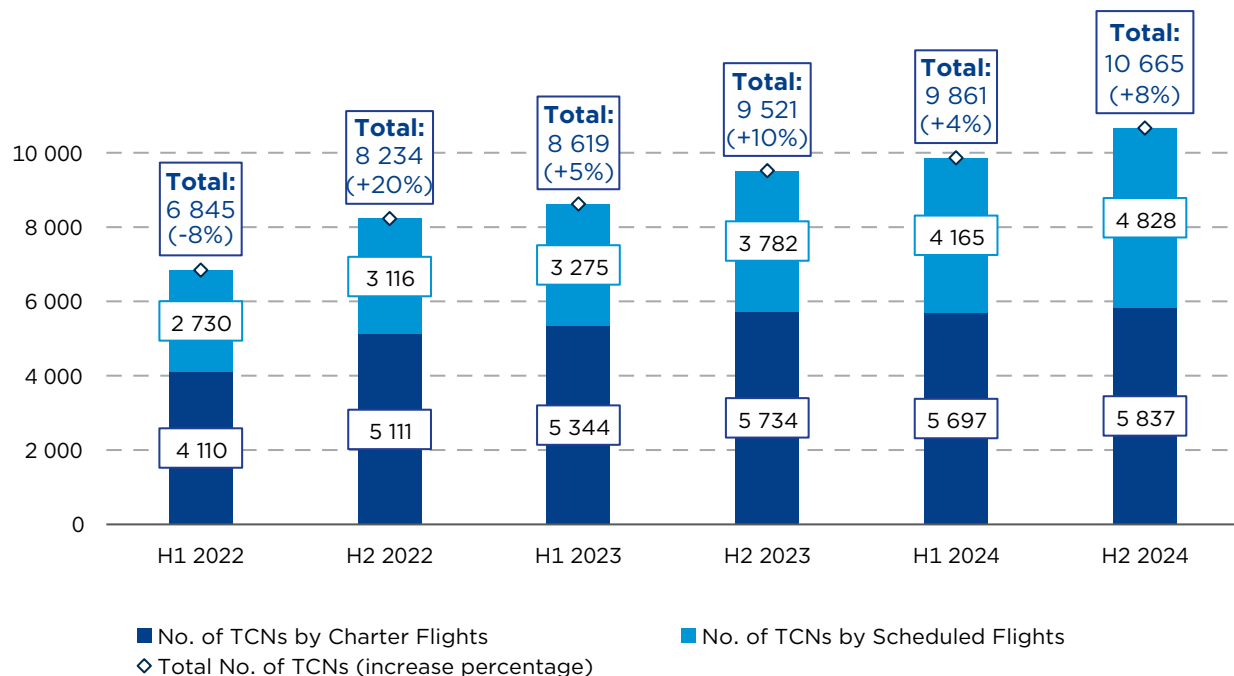
3.2 Forced returns

Frontex provided support to Member States in the return of more than 10 000 third country nationals, which accounts to 36% of the total Frontex supported returns.

In 2024, a total of 20 526 third country nationals were forcibly returned with the support of the Agency, which is the highest number recorded ever in one year.

Forced returns are often the only way to return illegally staying third country nationals. This may be caused by a non-cooperative behaviour of the person to be returned, a high-risk assessment or risks to public security.

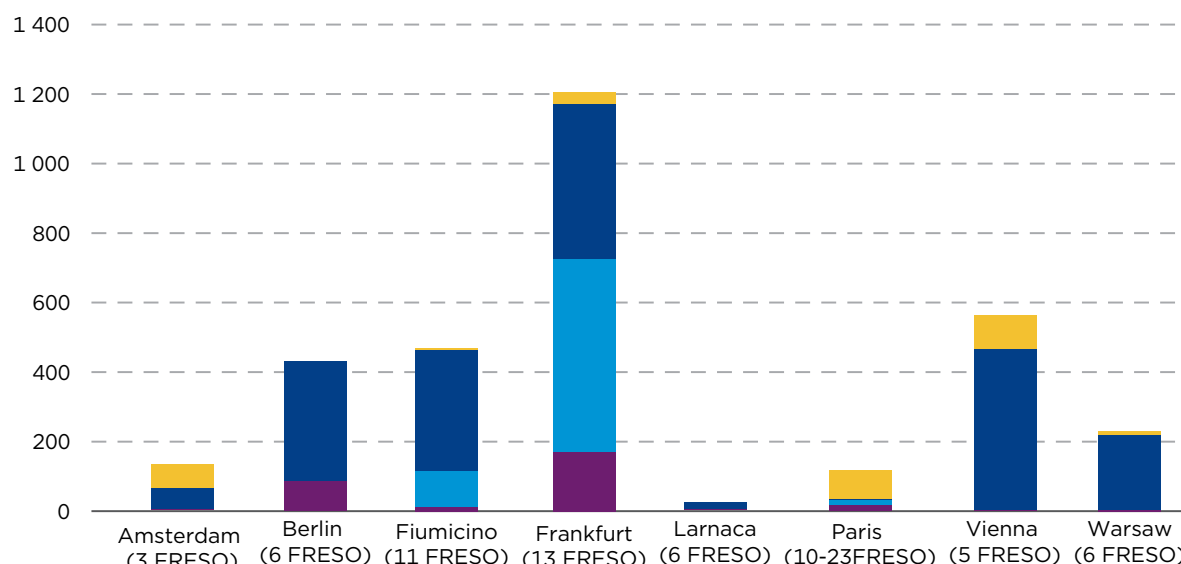
Number of third country nationals returned on forced returns per semester



Frontex Return Escort and Support Officer (FRESO) facilitated the forced return of third country nationals. FRESO provide ground support to national and Frontex-coordinated return operations and fulfil escorting tasks on charter and scheduled flights coordinated by the Agency.

This semester, FRESO escorted 952 returnees during 38 Frontex coordinated return operations by charter flights as well as 36 returnees via scheduled flights. Furthermore, FRESO supported the transit of 296 returnees in Frontex-coordinated return operations. Lastly, in the given semester, FRESO provided ground support to 1 962 third country nationals returning either via charter or scheduled flights. The chart below displays detailed numbers per deployment location.

Number of TCN forcibly returned with support of FRESO per type of activity



transit	68		4	32		82	97	10
ground support	59	343	350	447	18	4	466	218
escorting tasks [BUT]			103	557		14		
escorting tasks	5	88	12	170	5	15	2	3

4. Evaluation of returns

Scheduled flights were the most common means of transportation for Frontex-supported returns (80%):

- Scheduled flights are the most dignified and sustainable way to return third country nationals to their country of origin, with respect to the fundamental rights;
- They are mainly used for low-risk returnees who often return voluntarily or do not require the deployment of forced-return escorts.
- The geopolitical situation in certain countries of return may favor the use of scheduled flights, because they draw less, or no public and media attention compared to charter flights;
- Some third countries may not even be reached by other means than scheduled flights, as they refuse charter flights for return purposes;
- Scheduled flights offer a useful solution which can be arranged in a short time and with flexible conditions (such as cost-free changes in schedule or cancellations);

Charter flights have a number of advantages in the context of forced returns especially, for instance for high-risk third country nationals: disruptive passengers

who cannot be returned on scheduled flights can be returned in a safe and secure way, whilst upholding EU standards during the flights and respecting the returnees' fundamental rights. In case it is needed, medical staff and specialised personnel accompanying sick returnees or vulnerable groups may also be involved in the flight.

Charter flights offer an appropriate solution also when there are many returnees to the same destination to be return at the same time. The routing of a charter flight can be accommodated to the needs of participating Member States and complex routes with multiple destinations and stopovers both within and outside of Member States may be planned. Each type of a return by charter flight has its own advantages:

- national return operations (NRO) take advantage of political bilateral agreements between individual Member States and specific countries of return;
- joint return operations (JRO) foster cooperation among Member States at the EU level and are, in principle, more cost-efficient than NRO;

- collecting return operations (CRO) rely on cooperation with European neighbourhood countries and are implemented with the participation of the authorities of the returnees' destination countries, which solution on one side favours the collaboration with the given country of return, while on the other side facilitates communication between the returnees and the escorts and allows for a smoother transition in the return process.

Member States are fully aware of the differences and advantages of the two methods of implementing returns and use them in line with their needs and based on the assessment done in cooperation with Frontex. For each return, the Agency suggests cost-effective technical and operational solutions, for instance to arrange a return by a scheduled flight instead of a charter flight, provide alternative dates and/or routes for the return, propose to organise a JRO instead of a NRO, adapting the size of aircraft according to the number of returnees etc.

Geopolitical events – closing and opening of airspaces - impacting airlines globally have different effects on charters and scheduled flights. For instance, **some**

scheduled-flight tickets were cancelled or postponed because of the last-minute cancellations by airlines due to observed instability in the destination country or even the region. This was mostly the case for the Middle East and some African countries as some airlines were forced to suspend their offers. Consequently, alternative, equally cost-effective routes had to be identified. **In parallel, the economic impact for charter-flight operations was even more significant due to increase of prices of the flight's insurance strictly connected with such geopolitical instability.**

Despite complicated international circumstances in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and some countries in Africa, Frontex was able to support **return operations to 123 third countries**, reflecting a strong commitment to facilitating smooth returns to various regions of the world.

In both cases, the Agency's 24/7 service desk was constantly informing Member States about cancellations or changes for scheduled flights, at the same time providing necessary support for the organisation of charter flights, even with modified routes.

4.1 Scheduled flights

Scheduled flights numbers increased thanks to **improved cooperation between Member States and Frontex**, which resulted in more MS Institutions using the FAR system.

The vast majority of voluntary returns are implemented by scheduled flights. Member States use this service primarily as it allows the responsible return authorities to organise returns on short notice (many commercial flights' routes are available in FAR). Regular commercial flights accelerate the return process due to simplified procedures and it is also easier for the migrants as they travel as regular passengers. Furthermore, agreements with air carriers concluded by Frontex offer flexible favourable conditions and cost-free changes and cancellations.

Although many new entities from Member States started using scheduled flights system for forced returns, some Member States are still reluctant and/or have internal, structural hindrances that hamper (more extensive) use of FAR for forced returns.

Frontex successfully implemented targeted operational solutions to carry out voluntary returns with **transits in airports outside the Schengen area**, thus preventing risks of absconding and secondary movements within the EU, or last-minute requests for asylum during transit, which would have hampered the return and caused a burden to other Member States.

Recommendation

When high-risk returnees are not allowed on scheduled flights, or when there are limited connections to a destination country, and there is a charter flight going to the same region, the two types of returns can be used complementarily, but the returnees must be escorted until final destination.

Returnees can travel a first leg of the operation on a charter flight to the destination country of the charter and **continue to their final destination via scheduled flight.** The second part of the journey can be implemented with or without the need of escorts, depending on the risk assessment. In the reporting period several returns

to West African destinations were carried out in this way. Although the total number of these flights remain low, they still represent a solution in the portfolio of the Agency, used to solve operational issues of the Member States which could not be settled otherwise.

Member State can request transit by air via another Member State in line with Council Directive 2003/110/EC. The request for DEPA (escorted returnees) or DEPU (unescorted returnees) transit by air and the associated assistance measures under Article 5(1) of the said Directive shall be made in writing by the requesting Member State.

Unaccompanied forced return operations (DEPU) could improve if Member States would enhance their mutual support when transit by air is requested from them. In several cases, transit requests get denied due to the lack of resources or other reasons. One possible solution for the MS of transit is to request the Agency to deploy FRESO. **Frontex encourages Member States already hosting FRESO deployments to systematically allow these experts to facilitate the transit of returnees from other Member States.**

To carry out returns in an effective manner, Frontex must adapt to the different administrative frameworks in each Member State. The Agency is investing in cooperating with the different national and local authorities responsible for organising returns. In particular, the Agency has dedicated more human resources to organise open discussions and experience exchanges with colleagues at different level, to tackle their most pressing issues. This allowed

to address more technical issues that different Member States' entities had on a day-to-day basis, which brought positive results.

Frontex increased and deepened the cooperation with partner air carriers, to further improve the service and solve operational issues by taking advantage of more flexible solutions.

4.1.1 Use of tickets

A crucial instrument to measure the effectiveness of returns by scheduled flights is the number of tickets used for returns and those eventually changed or cancelled.

Planned scheduled flights can be modified or cancelled for different reasons. In the semester, **76% of the tickets were effectively used** (85% for voluntary returns vs. 54% for forced returns). Third country nationals returning voluntarily are cooperative, represent no risk of potential disruptive behavior, and fly as regular passengers, which decreases the likelihood for cancellations. On the other

hand, forced returns are connected to structural factors increasing the risk of (last minute) cancellations, such as uncooperative, uncooperative behaviour on departure, absconding, etc.

Nevertheless, **ticket cancellation (not effectively used) does not always mean that the return as such was cancelled**. 31% of the tickets were cancelled because of a need to change date or time of the return, and in 10% of the cases, the return was eventually implemented at a later time.

Recommendation

Investing in a more accurate individual risk assessment, tackling more effectively the risks of absconding (e.g. with alternative measures to detention) and strengthening counselling could further improve the effectiveness of returns.

Main reasons for cancellation of scheduled flights:

Reasons for cancellation	Forced Returns	Voluntary Returns	Grand Total
Need to change schedule	20%	44%	31%
Returnee absconded	20%	16%	18%
Returnee refused to depart	11%	14%	13%
Flight cancelled	12%	7%	10%
Lack of travel document	8%	7%	8%

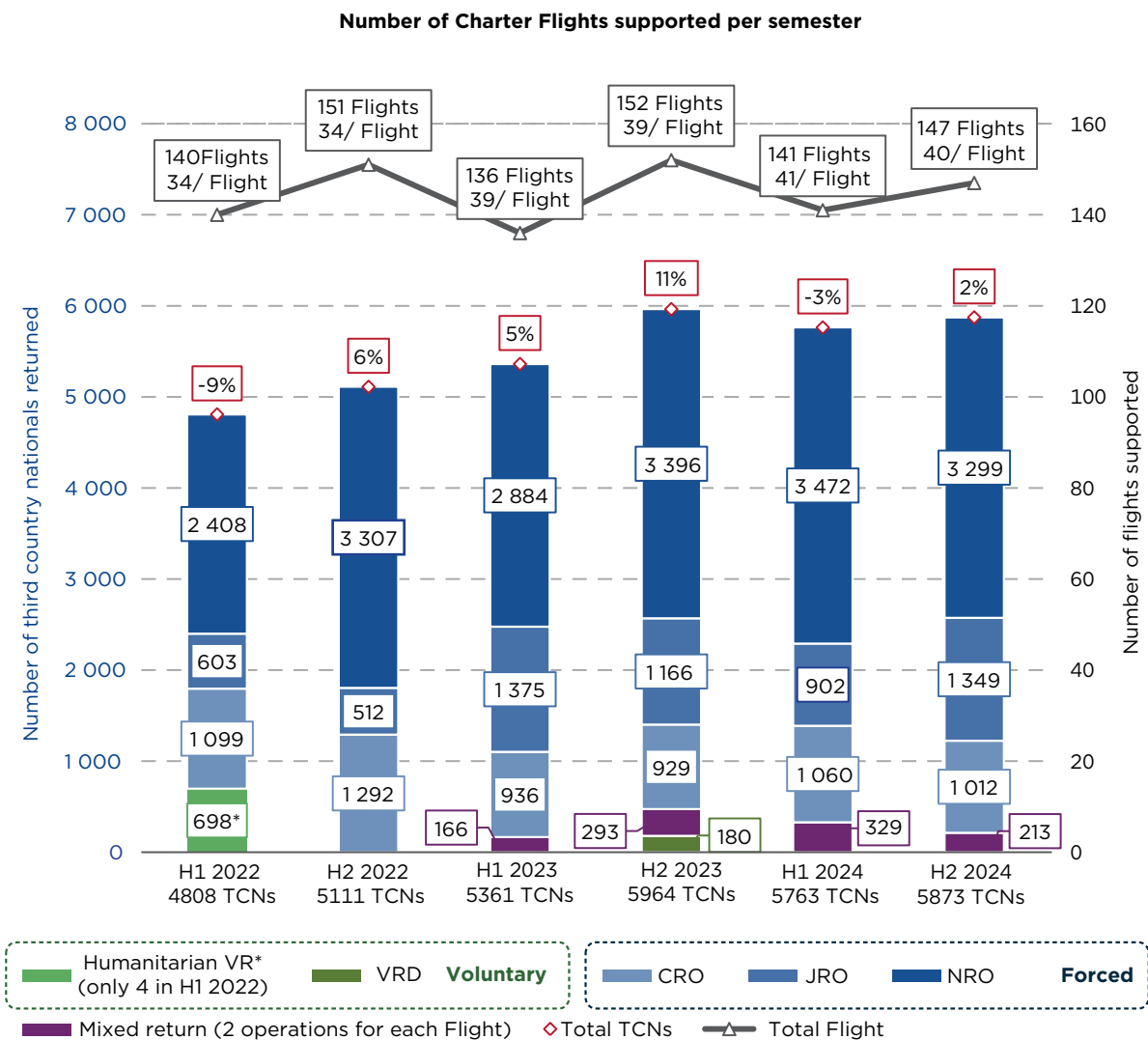
Keeping the high level of services provided to Member States was challenging, considering the significant increase in the number of requests in 2024. By using the scheduled flights system, Member States do not pay for any cancellation fees, no-show fees, or unused and non-refundable tickets. The conditions catered to the Agency enhanced the Member States' return capacity and made returns more efficient.

It is expected that the return activities supported by the Agency will further increase, provided that all Member States start using the system to its full extent. Dedicated training and meetings are periodically organised by Frontex, in order to better understand the needs of these Member States, enhance their capacity and meet their requests.

4.2 Charter flights

In the second half of 2024, the number of persons returned on charter flights with the support of the Agency increased by 2% compared to the previous semester. On average, 40 third country nationals were returned per charter flight. Considering that the number of supported flights increased from 141 to 147 in this semester, the small decrease of the average number of returnees per flight compared to the previous semester

(from 41 TCN/flight to 40 TCN/flight on average) is still considered as a good result. Frontex encourages the use of CROs, JROs, and mixed operations, as they proved to be more efficient than NROs: the average number of returnees on board these flights were generally higher: 51 for CRO, 47 for JRO, and 107 for mixed operations compared to 34 for NRO.



Evaluation of returns

Member States showed full engagement in assessing together with Frontex the route/destination(s) of the flights, possible stopovers and the size/availability of the

aircraft, as well as encountered challenges, in order to seek common solutions and create synergies aimed at enhancing the capacity of their return system.

Recommendation

Reducing the number of escorts when there is a drop in the number of returnees and using tools to maximise the occupancy of the available seats, i.e. by creating a “reserve list” of returnees can mitigate the risk of last-minute decrease in the number of passengers.

4.2.1 Occupancy of charter flights

As already mentioned in previous evaluation reports, in order to assess the effectiveness of returns by charter flights it is important to analyse their seat occupancy, while taking into account that in such type of returns only a certain number of seats can be allocated to returnees due to operational and security reasons:

- a certain ratio between returnees and escorts must be respected to ensure a safe and secure implementation. The average ratio is two escorts per each returnee, but it varies depending on the specific risk assessment made by the organising and participating Member States;
- a certain number of seats must be reserved for additional staff, such as medical doctor and paramedics, monitors, possible interpreters, Frontex staff and observers, etc;
- certain seats cannot be accessible to returnees, for instance those close to the cockpit and to the emergency exits.

Considering the above, on an aircraft with 190 seats an average of 50/60 seats could be assigned to returnees, which accounts for around 25-30% of the total. There are of course exceptions to this rule, mainly linked to the specific risk assessment of each operation, which may

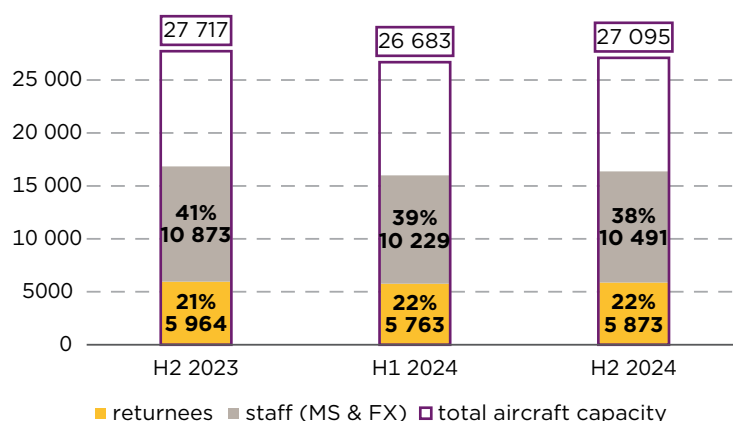
for instance imply the need to increase or the possibility to decrease the number of escorts onboard.

In the reporting period, the share of seats used for returnees has remained at 22%. Those effectively used by the Member States both for returnees and participants has been steady at around 60% for the past three semesters.

Nonetheless, it must be considered that the Agency supported some less cost-efficient charter operations, with only a few returnees on board who posed a threat to national/European security, following the political priorities set by the European Commission. In other cases, the Agency supported small-scale, less cost-efficient operations used to reopen the route to certain countries of return, as explained above. This contributed to the role of the Agency as a partner of the Member States, actively participating in the decision-making on return operations.

Moreover, some destination countries impose a cap on the number of returnees allowed per charter flight, which may be significantly lower than the capacity of the aircraft. **All these factors influence the aircraft's needed capacity and costs of an operation, while the share of seats by returnees may seem relatively small.**

Charter flight occupancy rate per semester



While ensuring full occupancy of an aircraft is not always possible, Member States are encouraged to:

- Plan return operation by charter well in advance, in order to give more time to other Member States to assess their possible participation and make arrangements, thus ensuring the presence of more returnees on board.
- Create a “reserve list” of returnees to mitigate the risk of last-minute decrease in the number of passengers.
- Always select the right size of the aircraft, considering the route to cover, possibilities for technical stopovers during the flight, availability of aircraft (which may be limited during high travel seasons).
- Assess the number of forced-return escorts necessary to ensure safety and security on board. This number depends on the risk assessment performed by the Member States as well as the length and complexity of the operation.

Another solution promoted by the Agency is to plan two countries of return in the same return operations.

In those flights possible last-minute replacements of returnees may be facilitated by the presence of two different nationalities. In the second semester of 2024, 44 return operations by charter flights with a double destination were supported, compared to 27 in the first semester. Some of these return operations by charter flights are now organised as such as regular practice. Particularly successful were return operations with double destinations to West Africa, and more recently, on Frontex initiative, to South Asia.

In the second semester of 2024, Germany increased by 10% the average number of third country nationals returned by charter flights with double destinations to West Africa, when compared to the first 6 months of the year (39 returnees vs. 43): 5 operations with 8 participating Member States and with 217 returnees in the second semester of 2024, compared to 4 operations with 6 participating Member States returning 155 third country nationals in the first semester of the year.

Recommendation

Double destination return operations are encouraged as they allow mitigating the sudden or unexpected decrease in the number of third country nationals returned, bringing more flexibility and a higher efficiency to returns.

4.2.2 Cancellation and efficiency challenges

In the second semester of 2024, 80% (82% in the previous semester) of the seats for returnees on charter flights requested by Member States in FAR were effectively used. The reasons for reductions in the number of returnees included absconding, asylum requests, appeals against the return decision, or medical reasons. In such cases, Member States were not always able to replace returnees timely, especially on flights in which no other Member States participated. Cancellations and difficulties in ensuring full seat occupancy happened more frequently on flights to those non-EU countries with a lower rate of successful identification of their nationals.

34 “return needs” for charter flights were cancelled in FAR. Frontex rejected the request of Member States to organise charter flights in 4 cases (12%) for optimisation purposes, three were cancelled to add a second destination to the

flight and one was cancelled because there were not enough returnees for the operation to be efficient.

Member States requested 25 cancellations (73%). Most of these cancellations happened due to administrative or organisational reasons in the Member States or external circumstances which prevented national authorities from implementing the return operation.

Finally, 5 return operations were cancelled due to a lack of landing permit or other approvals from local authorities (15%), which well reflects the difficulty to organise charter flights to some destination countries. Additional diplomatic efforts and cooperation with these countries would be necessary to decrease the number of such cancellations.

Evaluation of returns

Cancellation reason in 2 nd half of 2024	CRO	JRO	NRO	Grand Total
Frontex cancellations		4		4 (12%)
Optimisation reasons		4		4
Member States cancellations	1	3	21	25 (73%)
Administrative reasons		1	18	19
As per organising Member State request	1	2	3	6
Non-EU country related cancellations		3	2	5 (15%)
No landing permit issued		3	1	4
no approval received from third country			1	1
Grand Total	1	10	23	34

Although striving for efficiency in returns is one of the Agency's goals, returns by charter flights should not be evaluated solely from the perspective of (cost) efficiency or the number of people on board. Logistical, security, and political factors should also be considered. The efficient organisation of charter flights requires a

responsible approach by both Frontex and Member States to implement realistic and structured planning and adopt appropriate measures to ensure sound management of EU and national funds. Frontex is committed to continuously explore with Member States all avenues to further enhance the effectiveness of all supported returns.

4.2.3 Joint return operations (JROs) and national return operations (NROs)

Despite the fact that 34 operations initially offered as JROs were carried out as NRO due to lack of interest or feasibility for other Member States to join them, the number of TCNs returned via JROs in the semester increased from 16% to 23%.

While JROs promote joint EU efforts and foster cooperation between Member States in return, NROs allow specific Member States to return large number of returnees to destinations when JROs may not be accepted by the local authorities. Furthermore, NROs are organised also when they represent the only way to open (or reopen after a suspension) new destinations for returns, which of course has still a big relevance also from EU perspective.

EURLO is a specialised liaison officer deployed to third countries to support the organisation and implementation of returns as well as the identification of illegally staying third country nationals. EURLOs can also support return related capacity building and facilitate the implementation of reintegration and post arrival and post return assistance.

With the assistance of EURLO, Frontex managed to support NRO to destinations that remained unavailable for years, which afterwards opened the doors to the organisation of joint return operations carried out by more MS.

Frontex offers concrete operational solutions to facilitate Member States' participation in JROs: arranging the transfer of non-EU nationals to the main point of departure (either by a connecting charter or any other means) or facilitating arrangements at Member States' airports to organise the boarding of returnees from other Member States.

Recommendation

Frontex encourages Member States to participate in the already planned flights instead of organising additional ones on a national level, fostering cooperation on EU level as well as reducing the environmental impact of the flights.

4.2.4 Mixed charter flights

Mixed return operations combine forced and voluntary returns on the same aircraft. A number of dedicated requirements related to the respect of fundamental rights and security need to be fulfilled for such a return to take place. In particular, a thorough risk assessment and operational safeguards are agreed in advance of the flight with the Agency's Fundamental Rights Officer ("FRO"), that also regularly monitors such flights with own staff aboard.

In the semester 2 mixed flights were implemented. 177 non-EU nationals were returned forcibly along with 36 persons who left on a voluntary basis.

On one of these flights, for the first time there was a participating Member State joining the voluntary return component of the mixed return operations by charter flight. This represented a breakthrough for more Member States to trust the concept and join in the future, bringing more flexibility for this kind of operational setup and improving their cost-efficiency. With this mixed return operation by charter flight, Frontex supported the return of 112 third country nationals (84 forced, 28 voluntary) to South America on one single flight. Furthermore, the aircraft was chartered by Frontex with more advantageous conditions than those that had been proposed to the organising Member State.

Recommendation

Organising mixed return operations is encouraged as this type of return is associated with organisational flexibility and cost-efficiency for the Member States and for the Agency.

4.2.5 Collecting return operations (CROs)

In the second semester of 2024, 20 CROs were organised by 2 Member States to 3 third countries of the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkans. These figures are in line with the first semester of 2024.

CROs have recorded an increased efficiency regarding the number of TCNs returned on a single return operation. This is also due to an increased interest of other Member States, who regularly join these flights, whereas in the past CROs saw the participation of the organising Member State only. The average number of TCNs returned on a single CRO increased by 17% when compared to 2023 (from 44 TCNs to 52).

CROs are a distinct type of charter flights, for which the means of transport and return escorts are provided by the third country of return. Overall, CROs are considered cost-effective, have a low impact on Member States' resources, and increase the responsibility and ownership of non-EU countries in the return process.

Frontex invests in a closer cooperation with destination countries under the CRO concept to promote EU standards on return flights, enhance the capacities of partner countries, and improve their own return systems through dedicated training.

4.2.6 Chartering of aircraft

Frontex continued to charter aircrafts when requested by the Member States via its Framework Contract (FWC). Herewith, Frontex primarily supports Member States who have little or no capacity at national level. In the second semester of 2024, Frontex chartered a similar number of aircraft as in the first semester (6 main charter flights and 7 connecting flights, vs. 7 main charter flights and 4 connecting flights).

Connecting charters are provided to the Member States participating to a joint return operation, they are in need to

reach the main charter to embark on the return operation. Usually these are limited number of returnees. In such occasions, the Agency assesses whether scheduled flights can be used instead, but if the number of returnees is more than 2, most airlines will not accept to transport them on ordinary scheduled flights, hence the need of opting for a connecting charter.

The assessment of the Agency though, always aims at guaranteeing cost efficiency. In the reporting period, the Agency cancelled a previously granted charter flight, since

the requesting Member State could not guarantee the presence of the returnees on board. The Agency asked the requesting Member State to opt for an aircraft chartered on national capacity instead, to be reimbursed after the operation. On operation date, the requesting Member State eventually did not have any returnee available (they had all absconded).

The possibility to use either national capacities or Frontex framework contract allows to rationalise the cost of charter-flights by opting for the most efficient options between the two. Frontex is set to adapt its FWC in 2025, in order to further improve its capacity to fulfil the needs of the Member States.

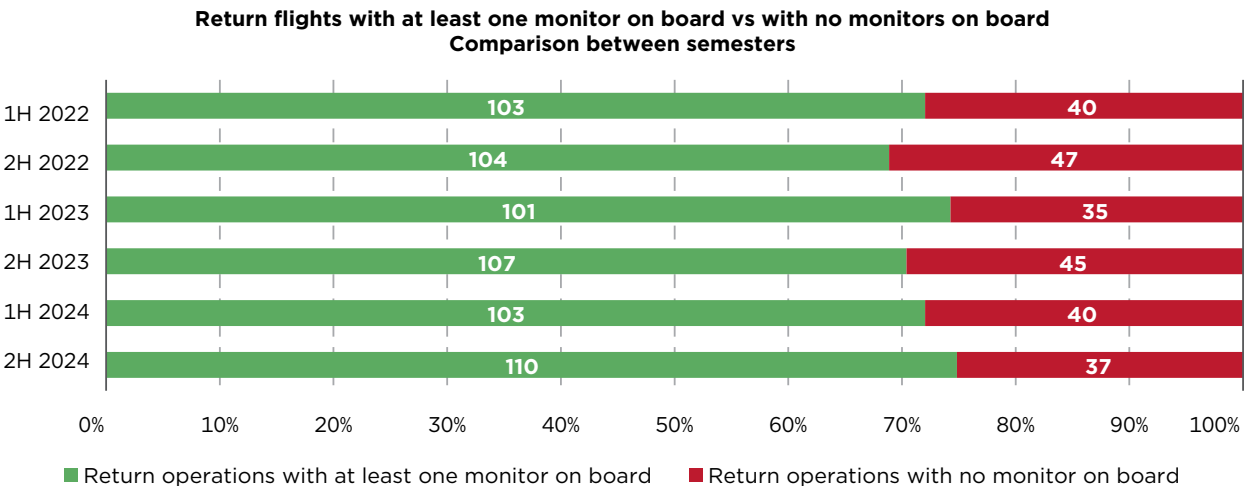
5. Safeguards

5.1 Monitoring of returns and related developments

According to Article 8(6) of the Return Directive, Member States shall provide an effective forced-return monitoring system. The Agency continues to encourage Member States to ensure the participation of forced-return monitors from their national monitoring institutions in return operations. If the national institution is not in the position to provide a monitor, Member States may request the Agency to provide monitors from the Frontex pool of forced-return monitors. This pool consists of monitors nominated by Member States, who received training by the Agency, and are ready to be called to monitor

return operations, from the pre-departure phase until the handover.

At least one forced-return monitor was present on board of 75% of all Frontex coordinated return by charter flights in the second half of 2024. 65% of the monitors were provided from the Frontex pool. These constitute a slight increase, as 73% of charter flights had been monitored in the 1st semester of 2024, and 62% of the monitors were provided from the Frontex pool.



FRO also provides fundamental rights monitors, who take part in independently selected return operations. Similar to the monitors from national institutions, the fundamental rights monitors can also be nominated to the Frontex pool of forced-return monitors. In this case they receive the dedicated training for forced-return

monitoring, and upon Member States' request, they can be assigned to monitor a return operation.¹² Additionally, fundamental rights monitors can be deployed to any operational activity of the Agency, including Frontex-supported return operations, to monitor compliance with fundamental rights.¹³

¹² As set out in Article 51 of the Regulation (EU) 2019/1896.

¹³ As set out in Article 110 of the Regulation (EU) 2019/1896.

In the reporting period, 20 fundamental rights monitors were present on 18 charter flights, including joint, collecting, and national return operations as well as on two mixed return operations by charter flight. The participation of monitors from FRO was partially provided in return operations when no national monitor was present on board, and no request for monitors from the pool was received from the participating Member States.

It should also be highlighted that FRO printed and distributed to Member States rollups about the complaint mechanism, with the aim to strengthen the returnees' access to information in multiple languages on their right to complaint during any activity supported by the Agency. The rollups do not differ from the posters, flyers, and brochures on the complaint mechanism already in the possession of Member States, but they are to be displayed in the waiting areas of the airports more commonly used for returns supported by Frontex and are also more visible to returnees.

One of the outcomes of the audit launched by the Internal Audit Service of the European Commission, was the

recommendation that Frontex systematically collects information regarding how Member States informed returnees about their right to complain. The Agency is planning to gather this information within FAR, which will also become the reporting tool for the collected statistics. The auditors' recommendation will be fully implemented in the first quarter of 2025.

In line with the requirements set in the Fundamental Rights Action Plan, the Agency requested Member States to collect in advance the written confirmation of staff who participate in return operations supported by Frontex, stating they have read and acknowledged the Frontex Code of Conduct for Return Operations and Return Interventions.¹⁴ Additionally, in the Direct Contact Points for Return (DCP) meeting held in October the Agency reminded Member State representatives that the condition to make use of Frontex support in returns is respecting the regulating rules, emphasizing that escort leaders must be aware of the Implementation Plan of the given return operation, and other operational documents.

5.2 Fundamental Rights Officer's recommendations from the first half of 2024

Each Frontex Evaluation Report on Returns includes observations by the FRO, which are compiled based on the reports of the monitors who have participated in return activities. Member States and the Agency are

called to implement recommendations from the FRO observations. Here is an update on the progress made in connection to the last FRO recommendations:

Recommendation

1. Member States to prioritise effective de-escalation techniques, before resorting to the use of force and coercive measures.

State of play:

Various Frontex guidelines and standards highlight the overarching criteria of necessity and proportionality when applying the use of force, as is also reflected in training materials for FRESO, escort leaders and national escort officers. Return-related trainings for escort officers also include sessions on communication, de-escalation techniques, together with a particular focus on the complaint mechanism. Additionally, in various fora the

Agency is continuously reminding Member States that the systematic use of force (where returnees are structurally, and indiscriminately put in restraints regardless of necessity, proportionality, and irrespective of the risk assessment based on their individual behaviour) is a forbidden practice, since the element of necessity would be missing.

¹⁴ Code of Conduct for Return Operations and Return Interventions coordinated or organised by Frontex.

Recommendation

2. Member States to ensure a sufficient number of female escorts, and preferably a female doctor/nurse for return operations involving female returnees.

State of play:

The Agency advises Member States to consider the individual circumstances of returnees when assigning escort officers to return operations, including the gender of the returnees. It is therefore mandatory to assign female

escort officers when women are returned. Furthermore, additional recommendations are also described in the 'Guide for JROs by air coordinated by Frontex', which is currently being reviewed by the Agency.

Recommendation

3. Encouraging escort leaders to provide to monitors a summary of the briefing and debriefing in English, in case another working language is used.

State of play:

In the DCP meeting held in October 2024, the Agency and the FRO highlighted the relevance of the participation of monitors in return operations and reminded Member States that escort leaders and escorts need to support the work of forced returned monitors. As monitors observe return operations with a fundamental rights approach

according to a set of criteria, they may enquire about specific actions taken during the return operation, while they should also be informed about the contents of the briefing and debriefing, to be held in a language understood by the monitor, in order to allow for a thorough monitoring report.

Recommendation

4. Consideration to be given to the participation of a child psychologist/social worker in the pre-departure phase of return operations with children.

State of play:

In accordance with Art. 80(3) of the Regulation to ensure that the best interests of the child are respected, the Agency assists Member States in the safe and dignified return of children throughout the entire procedure. Based on consultation with Member States, the Agency created the "Good Practices in Returning Children with Families" document to be used as a reference for return practitioners in different stages of the return process where families with children are involved.

Frontex launched a dedicated project called "Toolboxes for Vulnerable Groups in Return" to support Member States' staff working with vulnerable groups. The first toolbox for children and families in return aims to inform and prepare children and families about the different procedures in return, to lower the stress caused by a

return. The toolbox ensures that the adequate preparation of children for return starts already in the pre-return phase, well in advance before the flight.

Books for children in different age groups, for parents and guardians, and for migration officers have been developed in close collaboration with experts in child psychology and children's rights, as well as the FRO. The manuals and guidebooks are available in multiple languages (printed and digital format), and are being distributed to the Member States. A microsite for vulnerable groups in return is publicly available within the Frontex website. In the microsite, digital versions of the books, audiobooks of the Manual for Parents and Guardians and the animated video of the children's version can be found (16 languages).¹⁵

¹⁵ [Vulnerable groups Toolboxes - Frontex | Return Division](#)

Recommendation

5. The Fundamental Rights Office, together with Member States' monitoring institutions and pool monitors, to aim at increasing the monitoring of return operations, coordinated by Frontex.

State of play:

The Agency uses all available channels to invite Member States to designate monitors and by this to increase their presence in operations, including NROs. While some Member States ensure the presence of a monitor on every NRO, other Member States do not provide a national monitor, and do not request monitors from the pool either. In such circumstances, occasionally FRO

appoints fundamental rights monitors to NROs based on Art. 110 of the Regulation to ensure consistent monitoring.

In the second half of 2024, fundamental rights monitors participated in 9 national return operations, 2 collecting return operations, 5 joint return operations & 2 mixed operations (forced and voluntary).

Recommendation

6. Frontex and Member States, to organise trainings for pool monitors and specialised trainings for escorts relating to handling returnees with violent behaviour.

State of play:

The Agency and FRO work jointly on the fine-tuning of training courses with a fundamental rights component, mostly dedicated to the standing corps officers, to make sure that such messages are also transferred to Frontex staff supporting returns. Relevant provisions on the use of force are included in the operational plans and the Codes of Conduct, whose provisions are binding for all the participants on return operations.

Frontex invites specialised trainers as well as monitors to participate in return-related trainings. During the specialised trainings such as the Escort Leader courses, FRESO and national escort officers' trainings, monitors actively participate in both the theoretical sessions led by Member States' trainers, as well as the practical courses. The Agency will continue its close cooperation with FRO to safeguard the fundamental rights of the returnees.

Recommendation

7. Frontex and Member States to continue providing trainings for escort officers and other participants in return operations on child friendly communication.

State of play:

The Agency and FRO have enhanced the structure of the return-related trainings delivered to Standing Corps and to Member States' officers. The revised structure covers fundamental rights during return operations coordinated by Frontex and provides the participants with a broader understanding on human rights principles.

The training sessions detail in-dept guidance on approaching and supporting vulnerable groups, focusing on the best interests of the child and the complaint mechanism.

Recommendation

8. Ensure coordination between national bodies regarding individual circumstances of returnees (i.e., concerning their family status, travel documentation, health condition, etc.).

State of play:

Provisions on considering individual conditions of returnees and paying specific attention to the treatment of vulnerable persons are included in the Frontex operational

activity plan for returns and the Code of Conduct¹⁶ which are binding for all the participants – Frontex, as well as Member States' staff.

Recommendation

9. Provide returnees with relevant information, counselling and medical assistance well in advance to ensure a safe and dignified return, as well as proper preparation of returnees in view of their return.

State of play:

The Agency encourages Member States to inform returnees, where the risk assessment does not indicate otherwise, about the date of return once it is organised, and provide them an opportunity to ask questions regarding the return. Additionally, Frontex is also cooperating with the European Union Agency for Asylum in an initiative to establish an information provision portal, which aims to provide communication guidelines for practitioners in the field of migration, including practical tips on engaging with non-EU nationals in both forced and voluntary-based returns.

The Return Division is working closely together with FRO to raise awareness on safeguarding fundamental rights. FRO is visiting the locations where RS are deployed on a regular basis. Since 2023, awareness sessions on fundamental rights have been arranged and held in cooperation with FRO. So far in 2024, two sessions have been held for deployed RS in Greece and Cyprus with representatives from FRO and national authorities. Caritas, UNHCR and other relevant organisations were invited and participated in the sessions.

Recommendation

10. Provide clear information and instructions about EU Reintegration Programme (EURP) or any other type of reintegration packages given to returnees well before departure (e.g., if a signature is required to obtain cash allowance, this should be clearly communicated to returnees during the pre-return phase).

State of play:

One of the outcomes of the audit launched by the Internal Audit Service of the European Commission, was the recommendation that Frontex systematically collect information whether return and reintegration counselling was provided to each individual returnee. The Agency is planning to gather this information in the form of disclaimers in FAR, which is expected to be implemented in the first quarter of 2025.

The EURP is a key deliverable of the EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration. It is active in 38 non-EU countries and currently being used by 34 authorities in 29 Member States. Since its inception there is a constant increase of caseload due to continued

efforts by Frontex to help Member States' onboarding to the EURP. Simultaneously, the EURP further expanded its communication materials to reach irregular migrants. One of the examples is the brochure on reintegration assistance for returnees that is available for Member States in 19 different languages. In addition, the Agency has implemented 3 Return and Reintegration Counselling training iterations for both Standing Corps (1) and Member States' staff (2). This curriculum aims to enhance knowledge and skills in counselling activities and is part of the larger objective to increase the awareness of irregular migrants on reintegration possibilities, as well as to increase the number of voluntary returns.

¹⁶ Code of Conduct for Return Operations and Return Interventions coordinated or organised by Frontex.

6. Conclusions and outlook

In the second semester of 2024, Frontex support to Member States in the implementation of returns continued to grow. Returns increased by 10% in comparison to the previous semester, allowing the safe return of more than 56 000 third country nationals in the whole year.

The overall efficiency of supported returns also increased, thanks to the joint efforts of the Agency and the Member States in constantly optimising the use of resources by choosing the most convenient, time and cost-effective operational solutions that fit the complex and dynamic return framework.

The extensive use of scheduled flights for voluntary returns was the driving force behind the high number of assisted returns. This type of return also ensures a fast and efficient return while safeguarding fundamental rights and well-being of the returnees.

Based on Member States' estimated needs and latest trends, in 2025 the Agency may support the return of 60 000 third country nationals. The share of Frontex supported returns at EU level has passed 45% of all the returns from the EU. The target may further increase should the Member States start using more extensively the support provided by Frontex also for forced-returns by scheduled flights, relying less on national framework financed by AMIF.

Frontex is committed to reinforce its role as a reliable partner of the Member States, in the common efforts to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of an EU returns system. In case of scheduled flights, the Agency will seek to optimise the use of resources and by improving the commercial agreements with the airlines. For the returns by charter flights, Frontex will also define with the Member States criteria for applying 'thresholds' in the financing of costs, so to fully implement the principle of shared responsibility also in the use of EU funds.

Operational support in the field will be enhanced by increasing the deployments of RS and FRESO in Member States, based on their request and needs. This is considered to be particularly relevant also in the light of the implementation of the return border procedures foreseen by the Pact on Migration and Asylum.

The Agency is committed to maintain high standards of safeguards for forced and voluntary returns, to ensure safety in each return operations for both, the third country nationals and the participating staff, monitoring compliance with fundamental rights during return operations and access to information about the individual complaint mechanism.

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