



## Analysis

# Frontex launches “game-changing” recruitment drive for standing corps of border guards

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*On 4 January 2020 the Management Board of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) adopted a decision on the profiles of the staff required for the new “standing corps”, which is ultimately supposed to be staffed by 10,000 officials.<sup>1</sup> The decision ushers in a new wave of recruitment for the agency. Applicants will be put through six months of training before deployment, after rigorous medical testing.*

### What is the standing corps?

The European Border and Coast Guard standing corps is the new, and according to Frontex, first ever, EU uniformed service, available “at any time...to support Member States facing challenges at their external borders”.<sup>2</sup> Frontex’s Programming Document for the 2018-2020 period describes the standing corps as the agency’s “biggest game changer”, requiring “an unprecedented scale of staff recruitment”.<sup>3</sup>

The standing corps will be made up of four categories of Frontex operational staff:

1. Frontex statutory staff deployed in operational areas and staff responsible for the functioning of the European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS) Central Unit<sup>4</sup>;
2. Long-term staff seconded from member states;

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<sup>1</sup> Management Board Decision 1/2020 of 4 January 2020 on adopting the profiles to be made available to the European Border and Coast Guard Standing Corps,

[https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Key\\_Documents/MB\\_Decision/2020/MB\\_Decision\\_1\\_2020\\_adopting\\_the\\_profiles\\_to\\_be\\_made\\_available\\_to\\_the\\_EBC...pdf](https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Key_Documents/MB_Decision/2020/MB_Decision_1_2020_adopting_the_profiles_to_be_made_available_to_the_EBC...pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Frontex, ‘Careers’, <https://frontex.europa.eu/about-frontex/careers/frontex-border-guard-recruitment/>

<sup>3</sup> Frontex, ‘Programming Document 2018-20’, 10 December 2017,

<http://www.statewatch.org/news/2019/feb/frontex-programming-document-2018-20.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> The ETIAS Central Unit will be responsible for processing the majority of applications for ‘travel authorisations’ received when the European Travel Information and Authorisation System comes into use, in theory in late 2022. Citizens who do not require a visa to travel to the Schengen area will have to apply for authorisation to travel to the Schengen area.

3. Staff from member states who can be immediately deployed on short-term secondment to Frontex; and
4. A reserve of staff from member states for rapid border interventions.

These border guards will be “trained by the best and equipped with the latest technology has to offer”.<sup>5</sup> As well as wearing EU uniforms, they will be authorised to carry weapons and will have executive powers: they will be able to verify individuals’ identity and nationality and permit or refuse entry into the EU.

The decision made this January is limited to the definition of profiles and requirements for the operational staff that are to be recruited. The Management Board (MB) will have to adopt a new decision by March this year to set out the numbers of staff needed per profile, the requirements for individuals holding those positions, and the number of staff needed for the following year based on expected operational needs. This process will be repeated annually.<sup>6</sup> The MB can then further specify how many staff each member state should contribute to these profiles, and establish multi-annual plans for member state contributions and recruitment for Frontex statutory staff. Projections for these contributions are made in Annexes II – IV of the 2019 Regulation, though a September Mission Statement by new European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen urges the recruitment of 10,000 border guards by 2024, indicating that member states might be meeting their contribution commitments much sooner than 2027.<sup>7</sup>

The standing corps of Frontex staff will have an array of executive powers and responsibilities. As well as being able to verify identity and nationality and refuse or permit entry into the EU, they will be able to consult various EU databases to fulfil operational aims, and may also be authorised by host states to consult national databases. According to the MB Decision, “all members of the Standing Corps are to be able to identify persons in need of international protection and persons in a vulnerable situation, including unaccompanied minors, and refer them to the competent authorities”. Training on international and EU law on fundamental rights and international protection, as well as guidelines on the identification and referral of persons in need of international protection, will be mandatory for all standing corps staff members.

### **The size of the standing corps**

The following table, taken from the 2019 Regulation, outlines the ambitions for growth of Frontex’s standing corps. However, as noted, the political ambition is to reach the 10,000 total by 2024.

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<sup>5</sup> Frontex, ‘Careers’, <https://frontex.europa.eu/about-frontex/careers/frontex-border-guard-recruitment/>

<sup>6</sup> Article 54(4), Regulation (EU) 2019/1896 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 November 2019 on the European Border and Coast Guard and repealing Regulations (EU) No 1052/2013 and (EU) 2016/1624, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32019R1896>

<sup>7</sup> ‘European Commission 2020 Work Programme: An ambitious roadmap for a Union that strives for more’, 29 January 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_20\\_124](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_124); “Mission letter” from Ursula von der Leyen to Ylva Johansson, 10 September 2019, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/mission-letter-ylva-johansson\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/mission-letter-ylva-johansson_en.pdf)

	<b>Category 1 Statutory staff</b>	<b>Category 2 Operational staff for long-term secondments</b>	<b>Category 3 Operational staff for short-term deployments</b>	<b>Category 4 Reserve for rapid reaction</b>	<b>Total for the standing corps</b>
<b>2021</b>	1,000	400	3,600	1,500	6,500
<b>2022</b>	1,000	500	3,500	1,500	6,500
<b>2023</b>	1,500	500	4,000	1,500	7,500
<b>2024</b>	1,500	750	4,250	1,500	8,000
<b>2025</b>	2,000	1,000	5,000	0	8,000
<b>2026</b>	2,500	1,250	5,250	0	9,000
<b>2027 onwards</b>	3,000	1,500	5,500	0	10,000

Category 2 staff – those on long term secondment from member states – will join Frontex from 2021, according to the 2019 Regulation.<sup>8</sup> It is foreseen that Germany will contribute the most staff, with 61 expected in 2021, increasing year-by-year to 225 by 2027. Other high contributors are France and Italy (170 and 125 by 2027, respectively).

The lowest contributors will be Iceland (expected to contribute between one and two people a year from 2021 to 2027), Malta, Cyprus and Luxembourg. Liechtenstein is not contributing personnel but will contribute “through proportional financial support”.

For short-term secondments from member states, projections follow a very similar pattern. Germany will contribute 540 staff in 2021, increasing to 827 in 2027; Italy’s contribution will increase from 300 in 2021 to 458 in 2027; and France’s from 408 in 2021 to 624 in 2027. Most states will be making less than 100 staff available for short-term secondment in 2021.

### **What are the profiles?**

The MB Decision outlines 12 profiles to be made available to Frontex, ranging from Border Guard Officer and Crew Member, to Cross Border Crime Detection Officer and Return Specialist. A full list is contained in the Decision.<sup>9</sup> All profiles will be fulfilled by an official of the competent authority of a member state (MS) or Schengen Associated Country (SAC), or by a member of Frontex’s own statutory staff.

Tasks to be carried out by these officials include:

- border checks and surveillance;
- interviewing, debriefing\* and screening arrivals and registering fingerprints;
- supporting the collection, assessment, analysis and distribution of information with EU member and non-member states;

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<sup>8</sup> Annex II, 2019 Regulation

<sup>9</sup> Management Board Decision 1/2020 of 4 January 2020 on adopting the profiles to be made available to the European Border and Coast Guard Standing Corps, [https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Key\\_Documents/MB\\_Decision/2020/MB\\_Decision\\_1\\_2020\\_adopting\\_the\\_profiles\\_to\\_be\\_made\\_available\\_to\\_the\\_EBC....pdf](https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Key_Documents/MB_Decision/2020/MB_Decision_1_2020_adopting_the_profiles_to_be_made_available_to_the_EBC....pdf)

- verifying travel documents;
- escorting individuals being deported on Frontex return operations;
- operating data systems and platforms; and
- offering cultural mediation

\*Debriefing consists of informal interviews with migrants to collect information for risk analyses on irregular migration and other cross-border crime and the profiling of irregular migrants to identify “modus operandi and migration trends used by irregular migrants and facilitators/criminal networks”. Guidelines written by Frontex in 2012 instructed border guards to target vulnerable individuals for “debriefing”, not in order to streamline safeguarding or protection measures, but for intelligence-gathering - “such people are often more willing to talk about their experiences,” said an internal document.<sup>10</sup> It is unknown whether those instructions are still in place.

### **Recruitment for the profiles**

Certain profiles are expected to “apply self-safety and security practice”, and to have “the capacity to work under pressure and face emotional events with composure”. Relevant profiles (e.g. crew member) are required to be able to perform search and rescue activities in distress situations at sea borders.

Frontex published a call for tender on 27 December for the provision of medical services for pre-recruitment examinations, in line with the plan to start recruiting operational staff in early 2020. The documents accompanying the tender reveal additional criteria for officials that will be granted executive powers (Frontex category “A2”) compared to those staff stationed primarily at the agency’s Warsaw headquarters (“A1”). Those criteria come in the form of more stringent medical testing.

The differences in medical screening for category A1 and A2 staff lie primarily in additional toxicology screening and psychiatric and psychological consultations.<sup>11</sup> The additional psychiatric attention allotted for operational staff “is performed to check the predisposition for people to work in arduous, hazardous conditions, exposed to stress, conflict situations, changing rapidly environment, coping with people being in dramatic, injure or death exposed situations”.<sup>12</sup>

Both A1 and A2 category provisional recruits will be asked to disclose if they have ever suffered from a sexually transmitted disease or “genital organ disease”, as well as depression, nervous or mental disorders, among a long list of other ailments. As well as disclosing any medication they take, recruits must also state if they are taking oral contraceptives (though

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Press release: EU border agency targeted “isolated or mistreated” individuals for questioning’, *Statewatch News*, 16 February 2017, <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2017/feb/eu-frontex-op-hera-debriefing-pr.htm>

<sup>11</sup> ‘Provision of Medical Services – Pre-Recruitment Examination’, <https://etendering.ted.europa.eu/cft/cft-documents.html?cftId=5841>

<sup>12</sup> ‘Provision of medical services – pre-recruitment examination, Terms of Reference - Annex II to invitation to tender no Frontex/OP/1491/2019/KM’, <https://etendering.ted.europa.eu/cft/cft-document.html?docId=65398>

there is no question about hormonal contraceptives that are not taken orally). Women are also asked to give the date of their last period on the pre-appointment questionnaire.

### **“Never touch yourself with gloves”**

Frontex training materials on forced return operations obtained by *Statewatch* in 2019 acknowledge the likelihood of psychological stress among staff, among other health risks. (One recommendation contained in the documents is to “never touch yourself with gloves”). Citing “dissonance within the team, long hours with no rest, group dynamic, improvisation and different languages” among factors behind psychological stress, the training materials on medical precautionary measures for deportation escort officers also refer to post-traumatic stress disorder, the lack of an area to retreat to and body clock disruption as exacerbating risks. The document suggests a high likelihood that Frontex return escorts will witness poverty, “agony”, “chaos”, violence, boredom, and will have to deal with vulnerable persons.<sup>13</sup>

For fundamental rights monitors (officials deployed to monitor fundamental rights compliance during deportations, who can be either Frontex staff or national officials), the training materials obtained by *Statewatch* focus on the self-control of emotions, rather than emotional care. Strategies recommended include talking to somebody, seeking professional help, and “informing yourself of any other option offered”. The documents suggest that it is an individual’s responsibility to prevent emotional responses to stressful situations having an impact on operations, and to organise their own supervision and professional help. There is no obvious focus on how traumatic responses of Frontex staff could affect those coming into contact with them at an external border or during a deportation.<sup>14</sup>

The materials obtained by *Statewatch* also give some indication of the fundamental rights training imparted to those acting as deportation ‘escorts’ and fundamental rights monitors. The intended outcomes for a training session in Athens that took place in March 2019 included “adapt FR [fundamental rights] in a readmission operation (explain it with examples)” and “should be able to describe Non Refoulement principle” (in the document, ‘Session Fundamental rights’ is followed by ‘Session Velcro handcuffs’).<sup>15</sup> The content of the fundamental rights training that will be offered to Frontex’s new recruits is currently unknown.

### **Fit for service?**

The agency anticipates that most staff will be recruited from March to June 2020, involving the medical examination of up to 700 applicants in this period. According to Frontex’s website, the agency has already received over 7,000 applications for the 700 new European Border Guard Officer positions.<sup>16</sup> Successful candidates will undergo six months of training before deployment in 2021. Apparently then, the posts are a popular career option, despite the seemingly invasive medical tests (especially for sexually active women). Why, for instance, is

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<sup>13</sup> Frontex training presentation, ‘Medical precautionary measures for escort officers’, undated, <http://statewatch.org/news/2020/mar/eu-frontex-presentation-medical-precautionary-measures-deportation-escorts.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Frontex, document listing course learning outcomes from deportation escorts’ training, <http://statewatch.org/news/2020/mar/eu-frontex-deportation-escorts-training-course-learning-outcomes.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Frontex, ‘Careers’, <https://frontex.europa.eu/about-frontex/careers/frontex-border-guard-recruitment/>

it important to Frontex to know about oral hormonal contraception, or about sexually transmitted infections?

When asked by *Statewatch* if Frontex provides in-house psychological and emotional support, an agency press officer stated: “When it comes to psychological and emotional support, Frontex is increasing awareness and personal resilience of the officers taking part in our operations through education and training activities.” A ‘Frontex Mental Health Strategy’ from 2018 proposed the establishment of “a network of experts-psychologists” to act as an advisory body, as well as creating “online self-care tools”, a “psychological hot-line”, and a space for peer support with participation of psychologists (according to risk assessment) during operations.<sup>17</sup>

One year later, Frontex, EASO and Europol jointly produced a brochure for staff deployed on operations, entitled ‘Occupational Health and Safety – Deployment Information’, which offers a series of recommendations to staff, placing the responsibility to “come to the deployment in good mental shape” and “learn how to manage stress and how to deal with anger” more firmly on the individual than the agency.<sup>18</sup> According to this document, officers who need additional support must disclose this by requesting it from their supervisor, while “a helpline or psychologist on-site may be available, depending on location”.

Frontex anticipates this recruitment drive to be “game changing”. Indeed, the Commission is relying upon it to reach its ambitions for the agency’s independence and efficiency. The inclusion of mandatory training in fundamental rights in the six-month introductory education is obviously a welcome step. Whether lessons learned in a classroom will be the first thing that comes to the minds of officials deployed on border control or deportation operations remains to be seen.

Unmanaged responses to emotional stress can include burnout, compassion-fatigue and indirect trauma, which can in turn decrease a person’s ability to cope with adverse circumstance, and increase the risk of violence.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, aside from the agency’s responsibility as an employer to safeguard the health of its staff, its approach to internal psychological care will affect not only the border guards themselves, but the people that they routinely come into contact with at borders and during return operations, many of whom themselves will have experienced trauma.

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<sup>17</sup> Frontex, ‘Frontex mental health strategy’, 20 February 2018, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/89c168fe-e14b-11e7-9749-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

<sup>18</sup> EASO, Europol and Frontex, ‘Occupational health and safety’, 12 August 2019, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/17cc07e0-bd88-11e9-9d01-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-103142015>

<sup>19</sup> Trauma Treatment International, ‘A different approach for victims of trauma’, <https://www.ti-intl.org/#our-work-section>

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