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Frontex's Role in Return Operations

Perspectives from Sweden

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Daniel Silberstein, Suzanne Planchard &
Henrik Malm Lindberg

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Preface

Since 2023, Delmi has been conducting a project funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) on return as an international migration policy, with a particular focus on coordination within and across national borders.

This report presents the findings of the third and final sub-project, which examines how cooperation between Sweden and Frontex functions in practice and to what extent Swedish authorities make use of the support provided by Frontex. The study is based primarily on interviews with officials from the Swedish Police Authority, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service, the Swedish Migration Agency, the Government Offices, Frontex, and the European Commission's Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG Home).

Among its observations, the report notes that Swedish actors generally hold a positive view of Frontex and that Sweden is among the EU countries making extensive use of Frontex's support in the area of return. However, it also identifies uncertainties, particularly regarding the role and deployment of the standing corps.

The report and the AMIF project have received constructive feedback from a reference group with the following members: Bettina Chu from Dansk Flygtninge-hjælp, Elisabeth Lindholm from Strömsund Municipality, Karin Ödquist Drackner from the Swedish Red Cross, Mikaela Eriksson from the Swedish Ministry of Justice, Niko Remes from the Swedish Migration Agency, Madelaine Seidlitz, human rights lawyer specialising in international refugee and migration law, Svetlana Ripler from the Swedish Police Authority, Alexandra Segenstedt from the Swedish Red Cross, Hugo Rickberg from the Swedish Migration Agency, Christina Jespersen from the Return and Reintegration Facility in Brussels, Åsa Johansson from the Swedish Migration Agency, Lina Backman from the Swedish Police Authority, Peter Kamenko from the Swedish Police Authority, Kristina Hellgren from the Swedish Migration Agency and Ola Henriksson from the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

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The work was supervised by Joakim Palme, Chair of Delmi, together with Annika Sundén and Anna Lindblad, both members of Delmi's committee. At the Delmi secretariat, Research Coordinators Anna Hammarstedt and Andreas Savelli, along with Agneta Carlberger Kundoori, Head of Secretariat, reviewed the content. An earlier version of the report was also reviewed by external experts: Johan Ekstedt (Institute for European Studies, Université Libre de Bruxelles) and Bernd Parusel (Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies).

Stockholm, November 2025

Joakim Palme
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Director, Delmi

Summary

Frontex is sometimes described as the operational arm of the EU's policy on returns and has received significant attention in recent times. This report examines how cooperation between Sweden and Frontex on returns functions and to what extent the relevant government agencies are using the support that Frontex offers. In addition, the report will discuss the discrepancy and tension between national self-interest and joint capacity-building at the European level. This is the third and final sub-study of Delmi's AMIF-funded project *Return as international migration policy: coordination within and across national borders*.

The report is based primarily on interviews with domestic actors at three government agencies – the Swedish Migration Agency, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service and the Swedish Police Authority– which are all active in the area of returns. The common factor for the respondents is that they collaborate or interact with Frontex in various ways. These accounts provide valuable insights into the perspectives of those working in close proximity to Frontex (in the following, also referred to as 'the Agency'), and help to highlight and address questions related to effectiveness, sustainability and humane treatment in the return process in the context of the work that Frontex and the Member States perform together. The two conceptual tracks of formal and informal, and use and non-use, respectively, are used as analytical tools to highlight different dimensions of the cooperation and thus to understand why actors choose to use or refrain from using Frontex services and resources.

In order to understand the relationship and the collaboration that takes place between Sweden and Frontex, one should first note that Frontex has grown very strongly over the past decade and its return activities have gone from being a small and marginal support structure in its operations to becoming an important tool for coordinating how EU Member States implement sustainable, humane and effective returns. Over time, Frontex has gone from being a coordinating body to becoming much more of an operational body with a bigger mandate and greater capacity. This cooperation occurs in a politically sensitive area subject to high levels of media attention – namely returns – which also involves multiple arenas and various national authorities/government agencies and includes relationships with the countries of origin of returnees.

The interviews with informants working primarily at the three government agencies, as well as observations and interviews in the connection with a Frontex-funded return operation, pointed to the many common features of how the agencies work and cooperate with Frontex. Overall, the government agencies were positively inclined towards the Agency and to using its resources, and the doubts that were expressed came from within the Swedish Police Authority. The main benefit that was noted was that Frontex can fund these activities – that is, return operations – which would otherwise have been funded by Sweden and that thereby we can regain funds that Sweden has contributed to the EU via its national contribution. But the fact that Frontex funds them does not make return operations less logistically demanding for Swedish government agencies. On the contrary, it makes them more so, and some questions are raised about the operational effectiveness of Frontex operations.

One of the most important and rapidly growing parts of Frontex is the standing corps, a permanent operations unit consisting of both directly employed and seconded staff. It has been advised that Frontex will grow rapidly in the coming years. This area is an example of Swedish government agency representatives not having seen any need to receive the corps for strategic reasons, i.e. the risk that Sweden will lose control over its border controls, and for more operational reasons, i.e. that the corps would not be as effective as local staff. The obstacles mentioned include secrecy rules and language barriers, which would prevent seconded staff from working independently. The greatest scepticism is expressed by the Swedish Police Authority respondents.

One area where respondents reported far more advantages than disadvantages is the training provided by Frontex. Here, the Agency is seen as a valued partner and the training courses in turn are seen as facilitating return work and strengthening the knowledge and skills of the Swedish government agency's own staff. There is also an advantage here in that Swedish government agencies are active in developing the common core curricula and other course materials that can also benefit other Member States and help strengthen their capacity. In comparison with hosting and seconding staff from/to the standing corps, the value of Frontex's training courses is more clearly and better anchored within each of the Swedish government agencies.

The interaction and collaboration with Frontex occurs at both the strategic and operational levels and at the former level, this includes the Frontex Management Board. The main strategic, future-oriented issues are not always dealt with sufficiently and there is also a perception that the Agency exerts too much control over the agenda and meetings. Here, however, there is reason to point

out the informal work that happens, mainly in connection with Management Board meetings, where alliances are built with like-minded countries that affect the formal work of the Board and improve opportunities to have an impact.

What more general conclusions can be drawn from the study? To begin with, there are two important tensions worth noting. *A) National interests versus European collaboration; B) Discrepancy between policy and practice.*

Swedish migration management cannot be seen in isolation; it coexists with and is mutually dependent on the European level. However, collaboration with Frontex is often viewed and valued from a national perspective. Although some respondents stress the importance of an integrated European system and recognise this interdependence, most relate the role of Frontex and its resources to concrete, domestic, operational needs. There is a tension between the domestic and the European at different levels, ranging from the management level and in the Management Board, in how the standing corps are viewed, and right down to the actual enforcements – the Frontex-funded return operations.

The discrepancy between policy and practice is well-established in implementation research and concerns the fact that what is established at the policy level – nationally or at EU level – in terms of objectives, instructions and priorities, does not always align well with the practical conditions and needs that characterise the routine work of the Swedish government agencies. The EU policy level has strategic objectives and ambitions that are sometimes difficult to implement operationally, the standing corps being an example of this. Frontex has a complex mission to both support and coordinate Member States' efforts, while acting independently in some instances. National government agencies have their own priorities, resources and legal frameworks that do not always harmonise with EU directives or Frontex's actions. Coordination can therefore be hampered and some of the factors we have identified behind this include differences in legal mandates, differences in political will, limited resources and capacity, and finally the division of responsibilities between government agencies.

Finally, we have identified some areas where there is reason to provide policy recommendations for different actors to consider. We argue that, given the strong expansion that has occurred, there is reason to continue to make haste slowly, and to focus on Frontex's existing core missions in border control, return, and the protection of fundamental rights. There is an already proposed evaluation and analysis of costs, operational needs and the effects of a possible expansion on the quality of border management. This should reflect

how both decision-makers and operational staff see a further expansion of Frontex and how it could affect their own government agency.

Furthermore, seconded national staff may have acquired new knowledge and insights which could be better utilised than is currently the case. To facilitate this, knowledge and skills shared should be documented and evaluated in order to increase the operational benefit and to disseminate any good examples and *best practices* among the border management agencies.

The question of effectiveness needs to be discussed because we do not actually know whether the existing interaction and collaboration between Swedish government agencies and Frontex *is* effective, partly because effectiveness is rarely defined or explained in policy and governing documents of various kinds. One suggestion to partially remedy this situation is to carry out continuous evaluations of Sweden's collaboration with Frontex. Prepare annual reports on the utilisation rate and effects of the collaboration with Frontex as well as internal evaluations in order to monitor and measure the effects.

Finally, this study shows that more research and knowledge is needed, because the collaboration between Frontex and government agencies in the Member States is an under-researched area, in academia and in the policy realm. Knowledge is still lacking about the nature of the cooperation and how it is perceived in the pre-departure phase, which is important for carrying out return operations sustainably, effectively and humanely.

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Abbreviations

AMIF	Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund
CADRE	Capacity Development and Training or Return Counsellors
CRO	Collecting Return Operation
e-CODEX	e-Justice Communication via Online Data Exchange
DG Home	Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs
EBCG	European Border and Coast Guard
ECDC	European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control
ECRIS-TCN	European Criminal Records Information System - Third Country Nationals
EES	Entry/Exit System
ETIAS	European Travel Information and Authorisation System
EU	European Union
EUAA	European Union Agency for Asylum
EURLO	European Return Liaison Officer
EURODAC	European Asylum Dactoscopy
EUROSUR	European Border Surveillance System
FAR	Frontex Application for Return
FRA	EU Agency for Fundamental Rights
FRESO	Forced Return Escort and Support Officer
FRM	Fundamental Rights Monitor
FRO	Fundamental Rights Officer
Frontex	European Border and Coast Guard Agency
FSWG	Frontex Scrutiny Working Group
HLRTR	High Level Round Table on Return
IRMA	Integrated Return Management Application
JHA	Justice and Home Affairs Council
JITs CP	Joint Investigation Teams Collaboration Platform
JRO	Joint Return Operation
NFPOC	National Frontex Point of Contact
NOA	National Operations Department, Swedish Police Authority
NRO	National Return Operation
NTC	National Training Coordinator
NTE	National Transport Unit (Swedish Prison and Probation Service) ¹

¹ Since September 2025, the National Transport Unit (Swedish acronym NTE) has been reconstituted within the Swedish Prison and Probation Service and is now the Transport Department (Swedish acronym TA).

OLAF	European Anti-Fraud Office
OPC	Operational Centre
SIS	Schengen Information System
VIS	Visa Information System

1. Introduction

Fundamental to a regulated migration system is that individuals who do not have the legal right to remain in a country actually return to their home countries. In recent years, the issue of return has gained increasing prominence in Sweden and at the European level.

Although return has long held a special status with specific directives, the issue became increasingly central in European migration policy in the wake of the 2015 refugee crisis.² A more comprehensive approach to return has led to an expansion of the mandate of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex since 2015. Today, the Agency is a lynchpin in European collaboration on border and migration issues, with the power to support Member States in their work with return. Frontex can now assist Member States throughout the return process – from preparations and return operations to reintegration in the country of origin. Frontex has become more of an enforcement arm (often called the operational arm) of the EU's return policy with a growing portfolio of optional support functions, even though decision-making remains with the Member States.

Frontex's expanded capacity, financially as well as operationally, has sparked a major academic discussion. However, the research has focused mainly on the Agency's mandate in relation to the Member States, operational interventions at the EU's external borders, and the consideration given to human rights.³ Kalkman (2021) notes that there is limited research on the role of Frontex in the actual return process.

In research on Frontex and return, the operational phase, i.e. return operations, has received significantly less attention. This is notable, given that return operations lie at the heart of the return process itself, but also because in recent years Frontex has developed into a key player in this area, with ever closer cooperation with the Member States. The Swedish Government has highlighted the issue of return and adopted a *whole of government approach* where all relevant government agencies and ministries are required to work actively to streamline and increase the enforcement of returns.⁴

² See also the 2008 Return Directive (European Parliament and Council, 2008).

³ See, for example, a literature review by Kalkman (2021).

⁴ See for example (Regeringen, 2024a; Polismyndigheten, 2021; Polismyndigheten, 2024a; Hammarstedt & Luthman, 2025). A whole of government approach means that different ministries and government agencies and parts of public administrations cooperate and use a variety of methods and tools to solve an identified problem that they all have.

Research and government inquiries into returns in Sweden have highlighted the importance of well-functioning interagency cooperation to increase the rate of enforcement. The Swedish Agency for Public Management's review of return activities also explicitly points out that the government agencies "need to improve their collaboration in operations for which [...] Frontex is responsible" (2022, p. 10)⁵. However, there is a lack of deep knowledge about how Swedish actors utilise these European resources, and how the collaboration works at that level from the perspective of the government agencies involved.

Sweden's utilisation of the common resources offered by Frontex has also been a motive for the study. Sweden is currently one of the more frequent users of Frontex support for the return of third-country nationals among the Member State. But that has not always been the case. When the Swedish National Audit Office (2020) summarised how return operations were functioning, it noted that only 128 people were transported from Sweden in 2018 in a form where Frontex provided support.⁶

In light of this, the objective of this report is to contribute a deeper understanding of the interaction between Swedish actors and European partners when collaborating on returns. Through interviews with key actors, mainly at the national but also at the European level, we investigated how Frontex's support is designed and used, and how Swedish actors perceive this collaboration in the area of return.⁷ In view of the raised political ambition to make returns more effective, this report also aims to contribute to a discussion of how this collaboration can continue to evolve, looking at current and potential future support from the Agency.⁸

⁶ In 2018, a total of 128 people were transported from Sweden as part of a JRO, CRO or Scheduled Flight according to the Swedish National Audit Office (2020, p. 63).

⁷ This includes both voluntary and forced returns, but given the more complex context of forced returns, this area is given more scope in the report.

⁸ *Agency* is used in this report to denote Frontex, on the one hand because Frontex is an EU agency and on the other hand because that is the term often used in the literature.

Purpose and questions posed

This study is part of a project funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and aims to increase our understanding of how collaboration at different levels can facilitate **effective, sustainable** and **humane** return processes.⁹ The main project titled *Return as international migration policy: coordination within and across national borders* consists of three thematic sub-projects that each address different, but interlinked, aspects of how diplomatic tools and international cooperation – intergovernmental within the Nordic region as well as between Sweden and the EU – can promote and facilitate effective return processes.

Terms such as **effective, sustainable** and **humane** are often emphasised in policy documents that set out the objectives for return work, making them worthy of scrutiny. None of these terms has any clear definition; they are not used consistently and, in addition, they are multidimensional. Nevertheless, we need to scrutinise them because being more effective is the primary objective, and is prioritised in policy, at both the national and European levels. A number of tensions can exist between the ambition of more effective processes and work in the enforcement phase,¹⁰ and the need to champion humane and legally certain processes. But tensions can also exist in other dimensions and between different interpretations of effectiveness. Although this report does not aim to scrutinise closely how effective returns are, neither generally nor in specific cases, it is nevertheless a facet of this investigation.

⁹ In the return policy area, **effectiveness** is often described in numerical terms, with the *number* of enforcements being the decisive factor. For enforcements to be effective, they must also be **sustainable**, measured by returnees having become self-sufficient and reintegrated into the community to which they return, or that returnees do not irregularly (unlawfully) migrate to the country that enforced their return. There is also no widespread consensus on what is a **humane** return, but a starting point could be legally certain processes and that independent monitoring and complaint mechanisms exist for forced returns (see for example (Hammarstedt & Luthman, 2025) for a more detailed review of these three key terms). In this report, the main focus lies on the enforcement part of returns and therefore it does not deal with sustainability in any detail (see (Vera Larrucea, Malm Lindberg, & Asplund, 2021) (Vera Larrucea & Luthman, 2024) and (Hammarstedt & Luthman, 2025) for a more detailed analysis of sustainability in the area of return). See also (Riksrevisionen, 2020) and (Statskontoret, 2022).

¹⁰ Returns are enforced by 'return operations', which are the actual implementation phase. However, return as a whole should be understood as a process ranging from the denial of an individual's application for a residence permit until the individual is returned to their country of origin and – in some cases – has re-established themselves in their community. The sending country's work in this process thus involves several steps: from the denial decision, through enforcement, to potential support for reintegration or re-establishment in the individual's home country.

In the broader context of European harmonisation in the area of migration, we have chosen to focus on a more defined segment of this collaboration: enforcement and return coordinated by Frontex. As noted in the Introduction, there is little knowledge about the collaboration between Sweden and Frontex in the area of return. Return is a broad term that encompasses multiple phases: from the denial decision to enforcing a return and, in some cases, reintegration into the country of origin. In this study, we limit ourselves to analysing this collaboration in connection with the enforcement phase by means of ‘return operations’¹¹, where Frontex plays a central role. By focusing on this part of the return process and identifying the current forms of collaboration between Frontex and Sweden in the planning and implementation of return operations and interventions, we aim to contribute knowledge about how this collaboration functions in practice. The purpose is to investigate how this collaboration is perceived by Swedish actors, to what extent it can be considered effective, humane and sustainable, and to highlight best practice as well as provide suggestions for improvement where such opportunities exist. Previous Delmi reports, but also other recent reviews and evaluations, have clearly shown that collaboration is a decisive factor for more effective returns.¹² This report investigates how Swedish staff in various roles in government agencies are utilising Frontex’s resources in the area of return and how these Swedish actors view the support and collaboration offered by Frontex. In addition, the report will discuss and present a number of policy recommendations for improving collaboration in the area of return and, more specifically, how Frontex and its resources could be utilised effectively.

Research questions

The report is based on the following questions:

- What forms of collaboration between Frontex and Sweden can be identified in the area of return operations?¹³
- How and to what extent do Swedish actors use support from Frontex for their efforts in the area of return operations?
- What is the relationship between Swedish actors and Frontex in return operations? How do Swedish actors view this relationship?

¹¹ In government agency terminology, returns are both voluntary and forced, but as previously dealt with in Delmi reports, these terms are not at all dichotomous. In both categories there are varying degrees of (in)voluntariness.

¹² See previous footnote.

¹³ The wording ‘area of return operations’ has been chosen in the study’s questions in order to capture aspects that are related to enforcement in returns, but are not necessarily included in the operational phase, strictly speaking. The purpose of this wording has been to enable a broader analysis of the organisational, strategic and communication dimensions surrounding the actual steps involved in an enforcement.

In addition, the study investigates some of the tensions that exist in the area that do not readily lend themselves to the form of a simple question. The first concerns the well-established and well-analysed balance between national (own) interests and common EU objectives in the European research. The second is a discrepancy between policy and practice, a theme that implementation research has noted and a consistent theme when policy is implemented in the field. The third and final one is the dimension of the objectives of the EU's return policy: effective, sustainable and humane. These three more analytical perspectives will be touched upon in the study and are addressed explicitly in Chapter 6.

Structure of the report and its limitations

The report is structured as follows:

- *Key concepts.* This chapter introduces and discusses the concepts used in the analytical framework for the empirical analysis (Chapter 2).
- *Method and materials.* This chapter provides a description of the study's methodology including the selection of informants. (Chapter 3).
- *Frontex – a growing EU agency.* This chapter, presents Frontex, its origins and mission, as well as Sweden's return work in order to provide context. The research in the area is also woven into this chapter. (Chapter 4).
- *Perspectives on Frontex activities.* This chapter presents and analyses testimonies from the informants and other source material in seven sections, each dealing with different aspects of the collaboration and interaction between Sweden and Frontex. (Chapter 5).
- *Results and conclusions.* This chapter summarises the most important results of the report in relation to its goal and questions. (Chapter 6).
- *Suggestions and policy recommendations.* Finally, concrete suggestions on how the collaboration between Sweden and Frontex can be further developed and improved are presented and discussed. (Chapter 7).

A challenge in the writing of this report was how to limit the investigation. At first glance, it may seem relatively easy to isolate the area of return and the enforcement phase in the interaction between Swedish actors and Frontex. In practice, however, it has proven difficult because several aspects – such as training, communication with Frontex and the work of its Management Board – often affect the way work in the area of return and return operations is done, but also extend beyond the enforcement phase and touch on more areas of the collaboration.

During the interviews, the *pre-departure* phase was also highlighted by several actors, as it has a direct impact on how return operations are implemented. Despite this, the report's authors have chosen to largely exclude individual-centred return interventions¹⁴, and this largely precludes the *pre-* and *post-departure* phases.

Gathering themes around the collaboration in return operations into shorter empirical sections (Chapter 5) has also been a means of limiting the scope of the investigation. These sections deal with the Agency's support in return operations, how a Frontex-funded operation is implemented, Sweden's admission of and secondment to Frontex's standing corps, the communication channels between Swedish government agencies and the Agency, training and capacity-building efforts, Swedish actors' attitudes to the role and future mandate of Frontex, and the strategic work being carried out to highlight the issue of returns within Frontex's Management Board. There was data available to address a broader thematic framework, but for reasons of economy, these issues have been given a more limited and subsidiary role in this report.

¹⁴ Individual-centred return interventions can include pre-departure and guidance counselling, help with travel documents, various types of individual assessments, and reintegration interventions and support.

2. Key terms and concepts

Jori Pascal Kalkman (2021) notes in his literature review of Frontex that most of the studies are in the research area of *securitisation*. Securitisation is a branch of research in international relations that often emphasises that security is not only about threats in an objective sense, but also perceived or experienced threats.¹⁵

In his literature review, Kalkman argues (2021) that Frontex was founded to organise the Schengen area's border management in a better, more coherent and efficient way. This mission includes coordinating and supporting the work of the Member States and cooperating with them. In order to investigate how the coordination, support and collaboration between Member States and Frontex takes place – in particular Frontex's collaboration with Sweden – we have chosen to use the terms **formal/informal** and **use/non-use** in this report. These terms are used to highlight different dimensions of the collaboration, and to deepen our understanding of the relationship between Frontex and Sweden.

Formal and informal collaboration

This report uses the terms formal and informal interaction/collaboration as analytical tools and instruments for understanding the collaboration between Sweden and Frontex in the enforcement phase. The relationship between formal and informal is a topic that has been the subject of much attention in EU research.¹⁶

Cardwell and Dickson (2023) use the term **formal informality** to describe the EU's governance of migration.¹⁷ This refers to arrangements that give the impression of being formal, but which lack transparency, institutional support and the procedural safeguard mechanisms that are a normal feature of formal

¹⁵ For example, organisational and leadership literature, crisis studies and police research. (Kalkman, 2021, pp. 165; 170-172).

¹⁶ See for example (Slominski & Trauner, 2018; Sahin-Mencutek & Triandafyllidou, 2025).

¹⁷ The authors make a distinction between **migration governance** and **migration management**. Migration governance refers to the legal, political and institutional frameworks, such as laws, rules and international agreements; while migration management focuses on the practical and operational aspects of the migration system (Cardwell & Dickson, 2023).

agreements. The EU's 2016 agreement with Türkiye¹⁸ is highlighted as a clear example of this type of formal informality – an agreement of considerable political importance, but which lacks many of the legal and institutional safeguards usually associated with formal agreements within the Union (Cardwell & Dickson, 2023).

Although Cardwell and Dickson analyse formal informality at an overarching level, exemplified by the EU–Türkiye Statement, the term is used in this report to highlight the interaction between Frontex and Sweden in the area of return operations. Therefore, starting point is that formal agreements in migration governance often include informal elements. Thus, it is the interplay between **formal** and **informal** elements that together create the conditions for interaction and collaboration between the actors at the operational level.

Sahin-Mencutek and Triandafyllidou (2025) show that practices which are not formally regulated – such as *pushbacks*¹⁹ or delays in processing asylum applications – can become informally institutionalised through repeated use over time. This report draws inspiration from their research in order to understand how informal structures can become entrenched over time. Their research helps us to understand how repeated and recurring informal practices in return processes, such as coercive measures, can gradually become institutionalised and accepted both within and between organisations.

The emergence of Frontex can be understood as a compromise between two competing models for collaboration: one purely intergovernmental and one more integrated and supranational, according to Horii (2015). While Frontex is an EU agency with limited formal powers, it functions as a permanent organisational hub for interaction. The Agency has been able to utilise both formal mechanisms, such as influence to acquire expanded powers and tasks through changes in its mandate; and informal mechanisms, such as joint training courses, workshops and working groups. In turn, this has promoted interaction between other border management agencies and Frontex. This increased interaction and sharing of knowledge has been important for the emergence of a common European system of border management. In relation to Sahin-Mencutek and Triandafyllidou (2025), these processes can be

¹⁸ The EU's agreement with Türkiye aimed to reduce irregular migration from Türkiye to the EU. Under the agreement, Türkiye would take back migrants who arrived irregularly to the Greek islands, in exchange for the EU's promises of financial aid, visa liberalisation for Turkish citizens, and to resettle Syrian refugees from Türkiye.

¹⁹ *Pushback* is a term which means that migrants and asylum seekers are forced back across a border without respecting their right to seek asylum or have their case heard, which violates international law, particularly the principle of non-refoulement.

understood as expressions of informal practices which, over time, become incorporated into organisations and government agencies.

Informal processes and practices often provide more flexibility, which allows for adaptation to changing circumstances, and can help to establish and deepen collaborations (Kleine, 2010). But the absence of formal structures can also entail certain risks such as unclear responsibilities, a lack of legal certainty, and a lack of mechanisms to ensure accountability and transparency (Christiansen & Piattoni, 2003).

Use and non-use

If formal and informal collaboration constitute one pillar of the report, the terms use and non-use constitute the other pillar that will help us understand Sweden's **use** of the support that Frontex offers with the aim of understanding the interaction between Sweden and Frontex. Jacquot and Woll define use as "practices and political interactions which adjust and redefine themselves by seizing the European Union as a set of opportunities, be they institutional, ideological, political or organisational" (2003, p. 4). **Use** is understood in the present report as an intentional act, i.e. acts that aim to achieve clearly defined objectives. Therefore, these acts cannot be understood solely as available options (Jacquot & Woll, 2003; Jacquot & Woll, 2010).

Building on Jacquot and Woll, Slominski and Trauner ask how much leeway EU Member States have in a semi-integrated field such as the EU's migration and asylum policy (2018, pp. 102-103). They then introduce four concepts: **strategic usage**, **discursive usage**, **strategic non-usage** and **discursive non-usage**. The most common form according to Slominski and Trauner (2018) is **strategic usage**, which is understood as a goal-oriented action given the existing resources and limitations. They also note the existence of **strategic non-usage**, which is a conscious choice *not* to use EU resources and support in return operations. By interpreting EU rules that are vague or open to interpretation to their advantage, Member States can make their return work more effective based on their own national priorities (Slominski & Trauner, 2018, pp. 102-103). In this report, we simplify the concepts introduced by Slominski and Trauner. Instead of distinguishing between **strategic** and **discursive**, the concepts of **use** and **non-use** are used when we investigate how Sweden uses, and respondents reason about, the forms of support that Frontex offers.

Strategic **use** can be expressed in legislative reforms where Member States adapt their rules to be able to utilise the support or enable expanded collaboration. It may also involve pooling resources or other collective measures related to the migration process or border management.

At the same time, "Member States may also embark on a strategic 'non-use' of EU resources [such as legislation, coordination, cooperation, and operational and financial support] in order to increase their problem-solving capacity and political leverage" (Slominski & Trauner, 2018, p. 104). Thus, it may be beneficial for a Member State to refrain from using EU resources, **non-use**, either to achieve explicit objectives, such as enforce more return decisions, or to achieve informal objectives, such as avoiding taking back individuals under the Dublin Regulation.

Fratzke (2015) points to a significant discrepancy in the Dublin system between Member States that request and those that accept transfers. This is an example of parallel use and non-use, where some States invoke the Dublin Regulation to carry out transfers within the EU (use), while other States use the ambiguities in the same regulatory framework to *not* receive transfers (non-use). This is made possible by the fact that the migration area is only "[...] half-heartedly integrated at the EU level when perceiving a crisis" (Slominski & Trauner, 2018, p. 114), which means greater leeway for the Member States.

But situations may also arise where national structures and processes are not compatible with Frontex, meaning that the use of the Agency is seen as less effective than national alternatives. Actors and organisations may also have different objectives and priorities, for example, Frontex may pursue a line diametrically opposed to that of the Swedish government agencies.

In addition, opportunities for use or non-use are not evenly distributed among actors; some have more leeway than others (Jacquot & Woll, 2010). Organisations can also utilise **disengagement**, where an actor can formally accept the established norms and rules, but in the implementation these are effectively bypassed (Ekstedt, 2024, ss. based on Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In this report, we interpret the discrepancy described by Ekstedt (2024)²⁰ as an expression of actors possibly finding themselves forced to, or at least feeling obligated to, accept the set norms and rules for the collaboration between Sweden and Frontex. But in practice, they disengage from these accepted norms and rules in the implementation.

Using the terms **use** and **non-use** as analytical tools, this report assumes that the Member States attempt to address perceived challenges and achieve their objectives, whether these are formal or informal. Here we assume that the **use** of Frontex occurs if actors – individuals or organisations – see this as the most effective way to achieve both their own aims and return policy objectives. However, this does not mean that States automatically try to evade responsibility

²⁰ Ekstedt's argumentation is based on Meyer & Rowan (1977).

through non-use. Instead, national actors might be guided by their own organisational priorities or objectives which lead them to choose alternative solutions that appear to be the most effective for them.

One aspect of this study is understanding what constitutes a strategic action. Individuals and organisations are assumed to make conscious choices about use or non-use based on their objectives and priorities. However, situations may arise where an actor chooses **use** in an initial phase, for example when new forms of support or collaboration are initiated, but that how they act changes if the collaboration is not compatible with the actor's objectives (Jacquot & Woll, 2010). Thus, **use** and **non-use** can be a consequence of strategic action, but can also be ad hoc or be affected by the circumstances or the leeway they believe they have.

3. Method and materials

The aim of the study and the questions focus on collaboration, interaction and, in a broader sense, the relationship between Swedish government agencies and Frontex (Bryman, 2012, pp. 66–72). To answer the questions and achieve the aim of the study, we have collected and processed different types of material. Several different methods were used in the data collection and in conducting the study and its analysis, but there are of course some limitations with the chosen approach that also need to be addressed.

Interviews

The material for this study consists primarily of 40 interviews conducted with officials working in different capacities on return matters at government agencies, ministries, Frontex and the Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME). Although policy documents can provide a valuable overview of what the interaction and cooperation look like, semi-structured interviews can provide a deeper understanding of context and the situation as a whole in which the documents exist (Hammarstedt & Luthman, 2025, p. 65; Howell, 2013, p. 130). In his research on Frontex, Kalkman has (2021) noted that relatively few studies are based on interviews with staff from the Agency. Instead, research is often based on written sources such as legislation, newspaper articles, EU documents and other official documents. This study has instead chosen to emphasise national staff who interact in various ways with the Agency, providing a supplementary perspective on the role and function of Frontex in return operations.

To reach the respondents, snowball sampling was used. Initially, a number of key people were identified through established contacts at the relevant ministries and government agencies. The respondents were then asked to recommend colleagues or other relevant actors to ask to participate, which expanded the original sample.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted digitally, via Skype or Zoom,²¹ and usually lasted about an hour. However, the interviews conducted in connection with observations were shorter and usually lasted about half that time. To identify suitable themes to address in each interview, information from previous interviews was combined with initial questions where the

²¹ One interview took place at the respondent's workplace; another respondent wanted to answer the questions in writing.

respondents themselves were asked to describe their tasks, how they work with returns and, where applicable, how they cooperate and interact with Frontex. Having a semi-structured approach had the advantage of us being able to ask follow-up questions and explore interesting themes that the respondents themselves raised. This flexibility was important and, like Hammarstedt and Luthman (2025), we can conclude that it is necessary when investigating a field that is as yet relatively unexplored – such as Swedish interaction and collaboration with Frontex.

By allowing the initial questions about responsibilities and tasks to guide the interview and the themes that could be addressed; and by providing the opportunity to ask follow-up questions that were not covered by the question battery, the respondents were able to bring up additional problem areas or themes. This led to further areas being opened up for discussion.

Processing of interview material

The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Klang AI. Then manual listening and editing were performed. After a read-through, a number of recurring themes were identified. These then formed the basis for the various empirical sections of this study. With these themes as a starting point, the transcripts were read once again to identify and use relevant quotes and results. In order to structure and process the material further, we used keywords and phrases linked to the empirical themes that we identified.

The report and quotes were then sent to all respondents for review. After reviewing the material, the respondents have had the opportunity to add to and approve their participation. They have also been able to choose how they want to appear in the report. This has resulted in variance in how the respondents are identified: some are identified by name, title and government agency; others by number, title and government agency; and some by number and government agency only.²²

²² One respondent has chosen to be completely anonymised and is coded as #26 respondent at government agency.

Table 1. Number of respondents

Government agency/Ministry	Number of respondents
Swedish Ministry of Justice	2
Swedish Police Authority	13
Swedish Prison and Probation Service	7
Swedish Migration Agency	6
DG HOME	2
Frontex	2
Observation	8
Total	40

Note: Most respondents were interviewed on only one occasion. The stated number of respondents from Frontex is two. One of these sent a written response. One of the respondents was interviewed for two separate positions that they held, hence they are counted on two occasions (one at each government agency).

Many of the staff we contacted at Swedish government agencies, ministries and DG HOME chose to participate in the interviews. One of the biggest challenges was to get in touch with respondents at Frontex. After a thorough survey, seven people were identified that we had an interest in getting in touch with. The hierarchical dimension of Frontex was an important starting point when we sought contact with its officials. The Agency chose not to participate in interviews, but instead requested written questions that could be answered in a prepared form and sent back in writing. This is precisely the kind of problem that other researchers have also observed when they have approached Frontex officials.²³ Like other researchers, we only got access to a few respondents rather than different officials with a variety of experience within the organisation. Frontex justified this approach by stating that the Agency seeks coherent and thorough responses, rather than conveying the personal opinions of individual officials.²⁴ From the Agency's perspective, our interpretation is that this can be explained by the complex environment in which Frontex operates, dealing with intergovernmental and sometimes sensitive issues.

²³ See (Kalkman (2021, p. 176), Slominski (2013), Aas and Gundhus (2015), Bigo (2014), Busuioc (2016), Pallister-Wilkins (2015), and Perkowski (2018)).

²⁴ In e-mail correspondence between the authors and Frontex officials.

Coding of interviews

In addition to qualitative processing, the interviews were also coded and analysed quantitatively in order to illustrate the study's results and identify patterns between the government agencies. A total of 25 respondents were coded because one respondent from the Swedish Police Authority did not receive the questions covered in the variables.

The coding was based on three main themes: **the use of Frontex**, **views on the potential work of the standing corps in Sweden** and **communication channels to Frontex**. These themes were chosen to accord with the aim, results and questions asked in the data collection.

The use of Frontex was covered by the question *"How is the collaboration with Frontex functioning?"*. The question was put to all 25 respondents and captures how they perceive and use Frontex in their work. The variable was coded as a dummy variable, where the value 1 corresponds to a positive view of the collaboration, and 0 a more sceptical attitude. In the one case where a clear answer could not be interpreted, no observation was coded, in order to avoid distortion of the data.

To give a more nuanced picture of the government agencies' experiences, two **categorical variables** were also coded: *positive aspects of the use of Frontex* and *challenges with the use of Frontex*, which in turn covered six categories (1–6), each category covering responses from the respondents on a specific theme. The coding was done broadly to ensure anonymity. The variables are based on the questions *"What do you see as the benefits of the collaboration with Frontex?"* (24 responses) and *"What shortcomings do you see in the collaboration with Frontex?"* (22 responses).

Views on the potential future work of the standing corps in Sweden was covered by the question *"What is your view on whether Sweden should host members of the standing corps?"*. This variable too was coded as a dummy variable, where 1 indicates a positive attitude and 0 indicates a sceptical one. To further understand the sceptical attitudes, a supplementary categorical variable (1–5) was created representing the reasons for this response. These categories were also broadly coded to ensure anonymity. Among the respondents, 16 were sceptical, 2 were positive and for the rest no response was reported.

Finally, **communication channels to Frontex** were also coded, based on whether the respondent stated that they use formal or informal communication channels. The variable was coded as a dummy variable where 1 indicates informal communication channels and 0 formal. Of 25 respondents, 8 reported using

informal communication channels, while 17 used formal channels, or did not respond to the question. Two types of informal communication channels were identified: informal meetings and personal contact. These were not analysed further as the number of observations was too small for meaningful analysis.

Table 2. Coding of variables

Variable	Categories
Use (0/1)	Sceptical (=0) Positive attitude (=1)
Positive use (1-6)	Frontex reimbursement of costs (=1) Knowledge enhancing (=2) Coordination and collaboration (=3) Efficiency (=4) Sympathetic attitude and flexibility (=5) Booking systems (=6)
Challenge to use (1-6)	Inefficiency (=1) Changes in budget (=2) Work-culture differences (=3) Ineffective communication (=4) Lack of clarity (=5) Focus on economy (=6)
Standing corps in Sweden (1/0)	Sceptical (=0) Positive (=1)
Challenge for standing corps (1-5)	Resource-intensive (=1) Security, secrecy and systems (=2) Different regulations (=3) No need (=4) Don't see the benefit (=5)
Use of informal communication channels (0/1)	Formal communication channel (=0) Informal communication channel (=1)

Note: Table 2 shows how the different variables have been coded. Broad categories make it possible to analyse patterns between government agencies without revealing the identity of individual respondents.

Documentation

In order to be able to place, relate and check the respondents' testimonies, we had also collected written material in the form of reports, annual reports, appropriations directions, minutes of meetings, training course catalogues and the like. Depending on the scope and relevance of the documents, they have either been read in full or searched using keywords.²⁵ The material consisted

²⁵ The keywords varied depending on the content of the text, but as an example, "Frontex", "migration", "expulsion", and "return" (their Swedish equivalents) were used in searches of annual reports from Swedish government agencies to be able to locate relevant paragraphs.

partly of official documents that are available on the government agencies' websites and partly of documents that the respondents made available following our requests.

Official documents and annual reports from both Swedish government agencies and Frontex gave us a preliminary understanding and an opportunity to identify themes prior to the interviews. The respondents' answers then guided the thematization in the empirical parts of the report (Bryman, 2012). Based on the themes identified, searches were conducted in the material. What was considered relevant to the study was then combined with the respondents' answers.

Observation

In September 2025, two employees at the Delmi Secretariat were given the opportunity to carry out a participant observation during a Frontex-funded return operation to Uzbekistan. The return operation was originally listed as a JRO, but Sweden ended up being the only participating country and the operation consequently became an NRO.

In the preparatory phase, we were able to benefit somewhat from previous interviews, expertise within the Delmi Secretariat, and official documents²⁶. A meeting was also held at the National Transport Unit's²⁷ office in Solna during which the escort leaders (1st and 2nd) and the back-up team leader planned the return operation. We got a briefing at this meeting on how the operation was planned and what different steps could be observed during the operation.

The return operation was classified as a 'major operation', which meant that the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE's planning operations chartered an aircraft for the enforcement. A total of 62 people participated in the operation, including two escort leaders (first and second), two medical staff, one monitor (from the Swedish Migration Agency), one team leader for the back-up team, eleven back-up team profiles, 43 escorts, as well as one FRO and one Seconded National Expert from Frontex. The operation returned 24 individuals from Sweden to Uzbekistan.

²⁶ The official documents used in the preparatory phase consisted mainly of: (Fundamental Rights Officer, 2023a; Fundamental Rights Officer, 2023b; Kriminalvården & Polismyndigheten, 2022; Fundamental Rights Officer, 2024a; Fundamental Rights Officer, 2024b).

²⁷ The National Transport Unit (NTE) is an activity within the Swedish Prison and Probation Service. In September 2025, an organisational change resulted in the unit being reconstituted as the Transport Department (TA). Since the interviews and material collection were conducted prior to this change, this report consistently refers to the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE, not the new department.

Following clarifications from Frontex, the observation was able to cover the entire return operation. This meant that we were present at the release from the Prison and Probation Service's office, the extradition from the detention centre, security and passport control, boarding, the actual journey and the handover in Uzbekistan. The opportunity to observe the entire return operation helped to provide a concrete understanding of how the process works in practice. The observations also enabled a comparison between the respondents' descriptions and the actual implementation of a return operation, which in turn strengthened the analysis.

During the operation itself, our role was strictly limited to observation; we were not permitted to conduct interviews with either staff or returnees. Our observations focused on the Frontex Code of Conduct, relevant guidelines and regulations, as well as working methods and strategies in practice. During the operation, eight people with various qualifications and tasks were identified, and these individuals were then contacted for further semi-structured interviews after returning home. All respondents have been anonymised because they function as *street-level bureaucrats* in a sensitive context. To further ensure anonymity for those with unique tasks or roles, these respondents were assigned two identification numbers: one for the observation (**# Observation**) and one for the government agency interview (**# Agency**).

Strengths and limitations of the chosen method

All methods have their inherent strengths and limitations. This study has chosen to give a lot of space to Swedish officials working at various government agencies who collaborate and interact with Frontex in their professional lives. This means that the investigation mainly highlights the collaboration and relationships between Sweden and Frontex from a national perspective. Although Frontex voices appear in the material and some documentation from the Agency has been integrated into the study, it was difficult to access all the data that we would have liked to have had. As previous research has pointed out, Frontex's approach – to not give us access to individual officials but instead provide written, coordinated responses – has meant a certain limitation in this respect.

Respondents were selected using snowball sampling, which was necessary in order to identify relevant officials within the project's time frames. However, this kind of sampling is based on personal contacts, and where the researchers lack full control over the composition of the sample, it may entail a risk of homogeneity of opinions in the sample where the individuals tend to confirm each other's views. This limitation is strengthened by the fact that the circle of individuals working with, and making decisions on, enforcement in Sweden is

relatively small, and that officials often move between the different government agencies and ministries responsible for these matters. Therefore, many in this relatively small circle have long-term professional relationships.

Completely avoiding this limitation is difficult. However, to enhance the reliability of the analysis, testimonies and assessments were verified against supporting documentation as far as possible, and some statements and phenomena have been interpreted with support from previous research.

Finally, there is an important limitation of the chosen method that also has to do with how quickly the phenomena we were investigating change. Data collection began in the second half of 2024 and by the time the study was completed at the end of 2025, there were data provided during the interviews that were out of date or entirely obsolete. The respondents were not always aware of ongoing changes or processes that had been recently concluded, or in some cases the situation had changed between autumn 2024 and autumn 2025. This indicates that Frontex is being recast rapidly and that parts of the study can be seen as perishables.

4. Frontex – a growing EU agency

European cooperation on migration and border issues has developed over time and in pace with the perceived need to protect the Union's external borders having grown. The European Union is committed to offering its citizens an area of **freedom, security and justice** under Article 3(2) of the Treaty on European Union (Europeiska Unionen, 2012). In order to achieve this objective, the Union has taken on tasks in areas such as border control, migration, asylum, policing, and mutual recognition of the decisions of courts of law. These policy areas are particularly sensitive because they are considered fundamental to national sovereignty. Although an agency structure has emerged at the European level, Member States have often been reluctant to hand over too much responsibility and powers to supranational agencies (Fernández-Rojo, 2021; Carrera, den Hertog, & Parkin, 2013, p. 343).

However, the Schengen Agreement and free movement within the Union, combined with increased migration pressure at the EU's external borders, increasing numbers of applications for asylum, and cross-border crime have combined to create a rising need to be able to interact and deal with these matters jointly. The European Union's approach has thus been to create a larger European agency and administration structure that focuses primarily on **supporting** the Member States in implementing the EU's regulatory framework.²⁸ Decision-makers at European level have often lauded the advantages of and need for a more coherent, streamlined and equal approach to many migration policy issues.

²⁸ In the area of border control and migration, it is mainly the following agencies and systems that support Member States in their implementation of the EU's regulatory framework: the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), the European Border Surveillance System (Eurosir), the European Agency for Asylum (EUAA), the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), Eurojust, Europol, the European Union Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT Systems in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (eu-LISA), the European Asylum Dactyloscopy database (Eurodac), the Schengen Information System (SIS), the Visa Information System (VIS), the Entry/Exit System (EES), the European Travel Information and Authorization System (ETIAS) which is expected to become operational from the end of 2026, the European Criminal Records Information System – Third Country Nationals (ECRIS-TCN), e-Justice Communication via Online Data Exchange (e-CODEX), and the Joint Investigation Teams Collaboration Platform (JITs CP).

The European administration structure consists of multiple EU agencies,²⁹ many of which are key players both inside and outside the EU's geographical area, working for **freedom, security and justice**. These agencies, which lie under DG HOME, are of particular importance because their respective areas of activity can potentially affect the fundamental rights of individuals, in particular third-country nationals and asylum seekers, as well as the powers of national authorities (Carrera, den Hertog, & Parkin, 2013).

While this chapter primarily provides background to our study, it also includes research relevant to understanding the nature of Frontex and to providing a framing for our research questions. The Agency has a broad and comprehensive mission. However, the elements that make Frontex relevant for returns are that it is tasked with coordinating and financing return operations and return interventions³⁰ within the EU. In order to understand the relationship and the collaboration that occurs between Sweden and Frontex, the design and mission of the Agency needs to be explained. The Return Directive provides the most important underlying regulatory framework that these structures are intended to help maintain.³¹ The chapter goes on to describe how Frontex is organised and its actual governance, which in turn leads to the broadening of its mission that has taken place and how this should be understood and interpreted. Finally, Sweden's work with enforcement and return is dealt with, and in particular the organisation and division of tasks between government agencies.

²⁹ These include Frontex, EUAA and Europol.

³⁰ The term 'return interventions' appears in policy and project descriptions in the area of migration – in particular in the context of AMIF-funded operations and Frontex's activities. The interventions consist of various activities to support, enable or improve the return process for individuals who do not have the right to stay in a country. This may include **individual-centred interventions** (counselling, psychosocial support, reintegration support, or assistance with travel documents), **structural support** (e.g. cooperation with third-country government agencies, deployment of liaison officers, improved logistics solutions or JRO), but it may also involve **capacity-building activities** (e.g. training of staff, development of procedures, or participation in the Frontex Return Mobility Programme).

³¹ See European Parliament and Council (2008).

4.1. The Return Directive

In 2008, the European Parliament and the European Council adopted the Return Directive. It lays down common standards and procedures that Member States must apply when returning illegally staying third-country nationals³² in the Union (European Parliament and Council, 2008). Its main purpose is to ensure effective and humane returns at the European level that ensure that the fundamental rights of third-country nationals are respected and provided for in the return process (Klaassen & Rodrigues, 2021). The Directive obliges Member States to issue a return decision for all illegally staying third-country nationals in the Union.³³ The Directive also stresses that returns ought to be voluntary. A person who is required to return under such a decision must therefore be given the opportunity to leave the EU voluntarily within a specified time frame.³⁴

When the Return Directive was adopted, it had been preceded by lengthy negotiations. Fornalé (2012) describes how the pursuit of a uniform system led to legislation that leaves scope for national interpretations. On multiple occasions, this scope for interpretation has led to national courts referring questions to the Court of Justice of the European Union (Klaassen & Rodrigues, 2021). The judgments in those cases can have far-reaching consequences for all Member States, as the Return Directive is binding European legislation. In some cases, the judgments have entailed a strengthening of the rights of irregular migrants, particularly in those Member States where the national legislation is more restrictive and where illegal stays have more often been equated with criminal activity (Fornalé, 2012).

The Return Directive is closely interlinked with Frontex's mission. The Directive sets out common standards and procedures in the return process and emphasises principles such as just and transparent proceedings, voluntary

³² In the section on the Return Directive, the wording used is '**illegally staying**'. **Illegal stay** means that a person is staying in a country without a valid permit, and can occur in a number of ways: the person has never had a valid visa or residence permit; the person has had a visa or residence permit that has expired and has not been renewed; or the person has been refused their application for a residence permit but is staying in the country anyway. **Irregular migration** is a broader concept covering all forms of migration that take place outside the rules and laws applicable to entry to and residence in a country. Illegal stay is a form of irregular migration, but irregular migration can also include other acts such as crossing borders without permission.

³³ There are several exceptions where the person who is the subject of a return decision can be exempted from the return, such as ongoing residence permit processes, appeals against return decisions, humanitarian reasons and other personal circumstances (European Parliament and Council, 2008, s. Article 6).

³⁴ According to the Directive, an appropriate period is between 7 and 30 days. (European Parliament and Council, 2008, s. Article 7).

return, and the regulation of coercive measures. Frontex's mission is to support the Member States in implementing the EU's border management measures, including those laid down in the Return Directive (Frontex, 2022a). By coordinating the implementation of the common provisions, Frontex contributes to the achievement of the objectives in and the implementation of the Return Directive.

4.2. The origins, organisation and governance of Frontex

The changing global situation at the beginning of the 2000s, combined with the enlargement of the EU (in 2004), generated concerns about and dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of the European border control mechanisms among established Schengen countries. This prompted the European Commission to present a proposal in 2004 for a regulatory framework, mission and mandate, which in turn laid the foundations for Frontex (Council of the European Union, 2004).

The purpose of the new Agency was to create a new and more effective model for controlling potential migration flows (Ekelund, 2014; Leonard, 2009). Each Member State was still responsible for carrying out border controls and managing border surveillance. The initial mandate of the Agency was limited to **supporting** and **assisting** the Member States to implement operational aspects of border management, and to **coordinating** Member States' operations (Council of the European Union, 2004; Marinai, 2016; Niemann & Zaun, 2023; Carrera, den Hertog, & Parkin, 2013). The development of Frontex's mission and mandate will be dealt with in later sections after its current structure has been described.

Administrative internal governance and organisation

In the literature, only a few studies can be found on the internal organisation of Frontex. Kalkman (2021) notes that there is a lack of knowledge about how questions are discussed internally at the Agency. In order to provide a basic understanding of the Agency, we have outlined some of the pillars of Frontex's organisation and governance here.

Management Board

The Frontex Management Board consists of representatives from the national border authorities of the EU Member States, four associate members of the Schengen Area, plus two representatives of the European Commission. The Management Board is convened by its Chair and meetings are held five times each year.

The Board is tasked with supervising Frontex's activities and ensuring that its activities comply with the rules and guidelines. It is also responsible for establishing and monitoring the Agency's budget, as well as appointing the Executive Director and Deputy Executive Director. The regular meetings of the Management Board and the official documentation from these is intended to ensure transparency in decision-making processes (Frontex, u.d.(a)).

Some of the criticisms levelled at Frontex relate to accountability and legitimacy, in relation to the role of the Board as well. Pandit (2012) draws parallels with how power is conferred in liberal democracies, where elected representatives delegate power to ministers and from there to executive government agencies. These government agencies are then expected to be able to explain and justify their actions upwards in the hierarchy, where politically elected representatives are ultimately accountable to the voters.

In the case of Frontex, this chain of accountability is less clear. Its method of organising and political accountability is described by Pandit (2012, p. 401) as 'sitting uncomfortably', as the Executive Director is accountable to the Agency's own Management Board, which in turn consists of officials from national border authorities. This means that political accountability becomes indirect, since the officials are accountable to their respective government agencies and, by extension, to national ministers. According to Kalkman (2021), this means that Frontex is subject to national political interference rather than being accountable to EU institutions.³⁵ Furthermore, Gkliati shows (2021) that Frontex has no obligation to report to or inform national legislatures. In practice, this means that there is a lack of transparency in the operational activities of the Agency.

Executive Director

The Executive Director³⁶ is appointed by the Management Board and is responsible for preparing and implementing the strategic decisions made by the Board. The Executive Director must also make decisions on the operational activities of Frontex and assure the day-to-day administration of the Agency. In addition, the Executive Director is responsible of any other tasks defined by the Regulation or assigned by the Management Board.

³⁵ According to Kalkman, a potentially better control mechanism would have (2021) been the European Parliament but, at present, they can monitor Frontex's activities to only a very limited extent. For more about how the European Parliament has dealt with the question of accountability, see the section on the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament. For more about how Gigli (2024) describes the budget as potentially a suitable policy instrument for the European Parliament, see the section on Budget.

³⁶ Since March 2023, and at the time of writing, Hans Leijtens is the Executive Director.

The Frontex Executive Director is assisted by three Deputy Executive Directors, who each have an area of responsibility: administration and information management, operational planning and returns, and capabilities.³⁷

A great deal of criticism against the Agency has concerned non-compliance with international rules and inadequate respect for human rights. After several audits of the Agency's activities³⁸, this criticism culminated in an investigation by the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) which resulted in the dismissal of the Frontex Executive Director, Fabrice Leggeri, in April 2022. The OLAF report identified a number of serious irregularities and found that Frontex had been involved in illegal 'push-backs' and that its management and the then Executive Director had been aware of the irregularities but failed to take action (European Anti-Fraud Office, 2022). The management had thwarted its Fundamental Rights Officer (FRO) in multiple ways, as well as people at the Commission and European legislators who were considered "[...] to be overly focused on fundamental rights matters and too bureaucratic, with no understanding of the operational challenges of external border management" (European Anti-Fraud Office, 2022, p. 4).

Although the Frontex Executive Director can be brought to account before the national legislatures of the Member States, this only provides limited liability according to Kalkman (2021) and Horii (2018). Responsibilities within Frontex are characterised by a complex hierarchy that includes the Executive Director, but in formal terms the Executive Director reports to the Agency's Management Board, thus effectively being under the control of the Member States. According to De Bruycker (2016), this dual position means limited influence on the governance of the Agency.

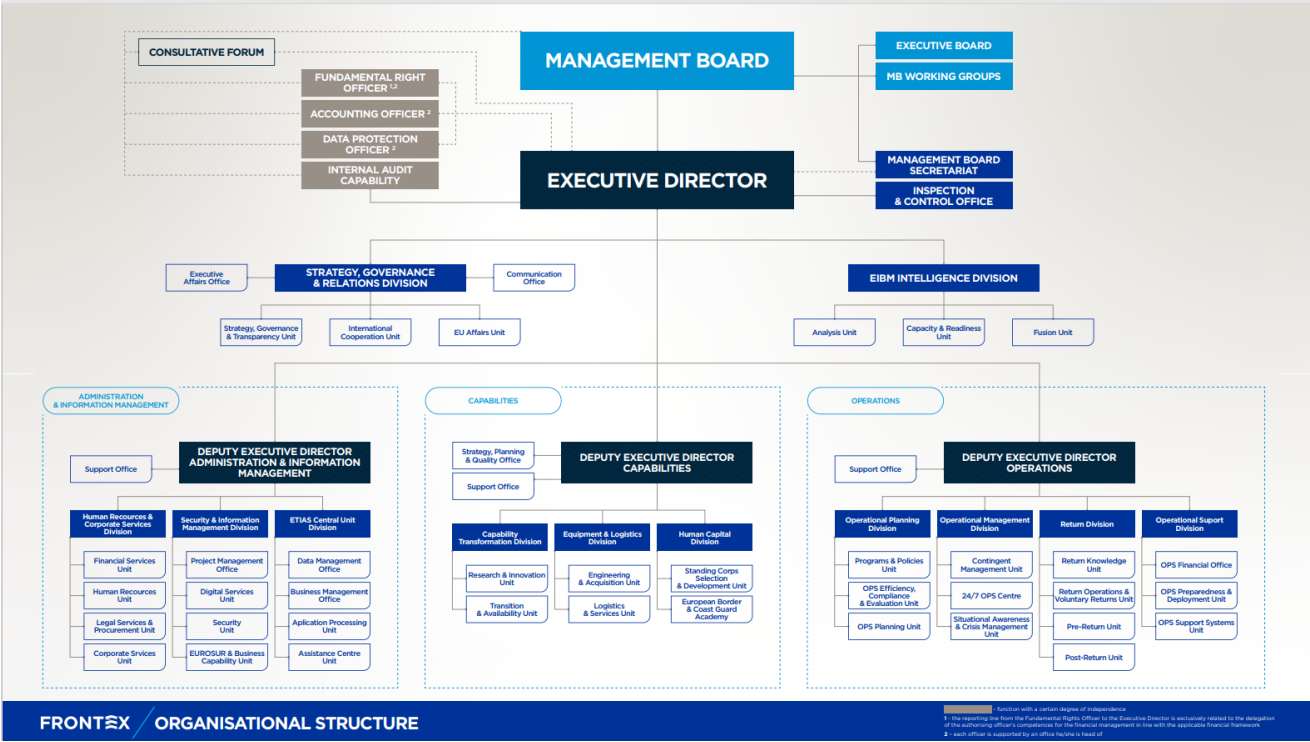
Departments

Frontex's day-to-day activities are organised in 12 departments covering different thematic areas: operational planning, intelligence, strategy support, internal audit, data protection and more (see Figure 1. Frontex organisation chart).

³⁷ At the time of writing, the Deputy Executive Directors are Uku Särekanno (administration and information management), Lars Gerdes (operational planning and returns), and Aija Kalnaja (capabilities). See Figure 1. Frontex organisation chart showing the division of responsibilities between them.

³⁸ See a summary of several of the investigations and targeted criticism that led to the declaration of no confidence in Frontex's former Executive Director Fabrice Leggeri (Aversa & Gkliati, 2021).

Figure 1. Frontex organisation chart

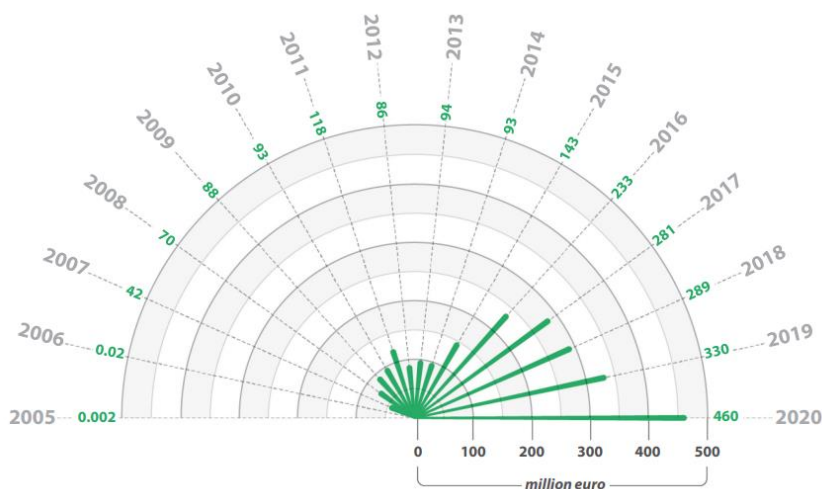


Source: (Frontex, 2025a).

Size and budget

Since its establishment in 2005, Frontex has grown considerably in size, mandate and staff to become the EU's largest and fastest growing agency in several respects. The European Court of Auditors writes that the Agency has had exponential budgetary growth since its inception, especially after the 2019 Frontex Regulation established and planned for the standing corps (European Court of Auditors, 2021; European Parliament and Council, 2019). Other sources have data of the same order of magnitude, but not exactly the same data, and they point out that the Frontex budget doubled between 2020 and 2025 and has broken through the EUR 1 billion ceiling. When staffing of the standing corps has been completed in full in 2027, it is estimated to cost approximately EUR 900 million, of which the lion's share comes from the EU's general budget (European Court of Auditors, 2021). We will return to Frontex's substantial growth and the consequences that may have, especially in Sections 5.6 and 6.4.

Figure 2. Frontex budget growth 2005–2020



Source: (European Court of Auditors, 2021, p. 11).

Note: The European Court of Auditors' compilation is based on Frontex's annual reports.

Since 2016, the budget line for return activities has increased significantly.³⁹ However, it is difficult to accurately calculate the share that goes to return activities, as parts of other budget lines – such as capacity building, the standing corps and rights activities – also in part support the Member States' return work. Estimates by the European Court of Auditors indicate that 28 percent of operational costs in 2019 went to returns (European Court of Auditors, 2021). In 2024, the budget line for return activities accounted for around 10 percent of the total budget.⁴⁰

The massive criticism of the Agency at the beginning of the 2020s, which concerned a lack of transparency and suspicion of irregularities, led to the European Parliament not granting Frontex discharge for the 2020 financial accounts (Frontex, 2022c; Haglund, 2022; Gigli, 2024). Both Pandit (2012) and Kalkman (2021) argue that the European Parliament's control mechanisms need to be strengthened in order to exact political accountability. Gigli (2024) underlines that the Parliament's option to refuse discharge is a potential means that it has. It is a way that the European Parliament can exercise political oversight and, indirectly, influence the activities of Frontex.

The governance of Frontex

Frontex gets its mandate, mission and funding from various EU institutions, which govern and supervise the Agency in various ways.

European Commission and Directorate-General

The European Commission has the overall responsibility to monitor and follow up on the implementation and enforcement of the EU Treaty and EU legislation, which also means that the Commission oversees the work of EU agencies, including Frontex (Frontex, 2025b). The Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME)⁴¹ is responsible for Frontex and DG HOME also has two representatives on the Management Board. The Commission may also request expert opinions from Frontex, for example on the design of new draft legislation. The Commission is also tasked with contracting an independent external evaluation to assess the Agency's work and goals achieved every four years (Frontex, EU Institutions, 2025b).

³⁹ The budget line for return activities has changed its name over the years. Until 2016, the budget line was called *return operations*, when it changed its name to *return support*; in 2020 it was called *European Center for Return*, and in 2024 this budget line is listed as *return activities*.

⁴⁰ Frontex's total budget for 2024 was EUR 922,074,136, with the budget line *return activities* being EUR 93,786,264 (Frontex, 2024a).

⁴¹ The Directorates-General and their tasks can be equated with the ministries in the Government Offices of Sweden.

The Council of the European Union and the European Parliament
The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union are the institutions that together adopt EU legislation which in turn governs Frontex. Furthermore, Frontex is accountable to the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union and must report its activities to them (European Parliament and Council, 2019, ss. Article 6, p. 116). The Agency is required to produce risk assessments and vulnerability assessments, identify financial and operational needs, and produce annual activity and operations evaluations, which are presented to the Council. The European Parliament is responsible for monitoring and control of Frontex in order to assure transparency and accountability (European Parliament and Council, 2019, p. Article 12). Both the Parliament and the Council also regularly call on Frontex to make presentations, and participate in hearings or consultations on various issues.

Furthermore, the Parliament has scrutiny powers and has therefore established the permanent **Frontex Scrutiny Working Group (FSWG)**.⁴² The task of the FSWG is to scrutinise all aspects of the Agency's activities, including respect for fundamental rights, transparency and accountability to the Parliament. Through the FSWG, the MEPs have gained deeper insight into Frontex's actions and more options to monitor (Gkliati, Decoding Frontex's fragmented accountability mosaic and introducing systemic accountability - System Reset, 2021; Del Monte & Luyten, 2023). The FSWG's first report was launched in 2021 and was part of the documentation that led to the European Parliament's loss of confidence in former Executive Director Fabrice Leggeri (Del Monte & Luyten, 2023). The investigations of the FSWG have led to the adoption by the European Parliament of resolutions with recommendations concerning the operational activities of Frontex in Greece and Mauritania among other places (Gkliati, Decoding Frontex's fragmented accountability mosaic and introducing systemic accountability - System Reset, 2021). In summary, Gkliati points out (2021) that the Parliament has become more involved since Frontex was set up, although its influence is still limited because most operational decisions are not made at a legislative level.

Gkliati (2021) points out that it is the Commission that is tasked with carrying out assessments of the Agency's compliance with fundamental rights and informing the Parliament.⁴³ However, the Commission and the Council have no

⁴² The European Parliament exercised its supervisory powers under Article 7 of the Frontex Regulation (European Parliament and Council, 2019) and Articles 13 and 14 of the Treaty on European Union (Europeiska Unionen, 2012) and established the FSWG in January 2021. See also (Del Monte & Luyten, 2023; Gkliati, 2021, p. 200).

⁴³ See European Parliament and Council, 2019, p. reason 88. (European Parliament and Council, 2019, s. skäl 88).

obligation to obtain the approval of the Parliament when it comes to human rights questions, and this has been criticised by a number of actors.⁴⁴

4.3. Frontex's mission

Frontex has been given more powers and resources, in particular following the migration crisis of 2015–2016.⁴⁵ The successive broadening of the Agency's mandate and mission is manifest in particular in the **2016 and 2019 Regulations**, which are key points of reference in this study. In September 2016, Regulation 2016/1624 was adopted, expanding the mandate and powers of Frontex. After strong pressure from the Council of the European Union, the draft regulation was adopted at record speed (Ferraro & De Capitani, 2016). The decision was made in light of the (then) ongoing migration crisis, combined with eu-LISA having produced estimates indicating that around 300 million third-country nationals would cross the Schengen area's external border in 2025 – a very substantial increase from the 190 million third-country nationals who did so in 2014 (Ferraro & De Capitani, 2016).

The Regulation gave the Agency greater powers to coordinate operations at the external borders and an increased mandate to combat cross-border crime (European Parliament and Council, 2016). The Agency was given greater powers in relation to return activities with particular regard to the Return Directive and this was formulated in terms of coordinating and organising returns (European Parliament and Council, 2016, p. (33)).

Frontex's mandate was further expanded in 2019, when the Agency once again received a new Regulation, which shifted the Agency's mission from a coordinating one to the Agency's having a more directly operational role (European Parliament and Council, 2019). The mandate was broadened to include cooperation with third countries, and the Agency's role in the area of returns expanded in that it began to provide technical and operational support

⁴⁴ Criticism has been levelled by, among others, LIBE, the Frontex Consultative Forum, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), who wants the FRO and the Consultative Forum to report directly to the European Parliament regarding violations of fundamental rights and how these are addressed within Frontex (Gkliati, Decoding Frontex's fragmented accountability mosaic and introducing systemic accountability – System Reset, 2021, p. 201).

⁴⁵ Léonard and Kaunert (2022) show that the migration crisis led to an intensification of Frontex's security practices, which increasingly include the gathering of intelligence and cooperation with other security organisations such as Europol and NATO. See also Niemann and Zaun (2023).

to the Member States.⁴⁶ This included the Agency being given responsibility for pursuing and further developing:

[...] an integrated return management platform for processing information, including personal data transmitted by the Member States' return management systems, that is necessary for the Agency to provide technical and operational assistance.

(European Parliament and Council, 2019, p. Article 49)

The 2019 Frontex Regulation brought another significant change to the Agency's mandate with the establishment of a standing corps. In the past, Frontex relied on border guards from the Member States, but with the new Regulation, the goal was for the Agency to manage up to 10,000 operationally active individuals by 2027.⁴⁷

Under the 2019 Frontex Regulation, Member States sent out a request for operational or technical assistance from Frontex. This constitutes a form of consent from the receiving Member State. However, the Agency also has written into the Regulation that it can deploy 'emergency interventions' without a request nor the consent of the Member States, given certain circumstances (Andreevo, 2016). Decisions on emergency interventions are made by the Council of the European Union.⁴⁸

With the expansion of its mandate in 2019, Niemann and Speyer (2018) claimed that Frontex had developed its own institutionalised agency and a mandate of its own, capable of maintaining the EU's borders, even against the will of the Member States. Despite claims that these coercive measures would pave the way for Frontex to become a supranational agency, David Fernandez-Rojo argues (2021) that the border management system will remain decentralised

⁴⁶ Although support for returns had been established from the outset in Frontex's founding Regulation (European Parliament and Council, 2004) as one of the Agency's main tasks, the matter of returns had remained a low priority for many years. Regulation 2016/1624 called on Frontex to "coordinate" and "provide technical and operational assistance to Member States experiencing particular challenges with regard to their return systems" (European Parliament and Council, 2016, ss. section 4, Article 27). See also the 2019 Regulation. (European Parliament and Council, 2019, ss. section 8, Article 48).

⁴⁷ The standing corps consists of border guards, coast guards, return specialists, document experts, vulnerability assessors, etc.

⁴⁸ This happens if a Member State fails to implement recommendations from the Frontex Executive Director and subsequent decisions of the Agency's Management Board within a reasonable time limit; or if there is such a sharp increase in irregular border crossings at the external borders of a Member State that control of the external borders is rendered ineffective to such an extent that it risks jeopardising the functioning of the Schengen area.

with a strong national influence.⁴⁹ Perkowski (2019) claims that Frontex's mandate should be seen as a balance between the objective of creating a common European border management and the Member States' reluctance to relinquish part of their national sovereignty.

A key part of Frontex's mission is to carry out regular risk assessments. In these, the Agency identifies and describes the risks and challenges affecting border security and migration management. A number of researchers have argued that Frontex's risk assessments have become a tool for the Agency that it can use to influence its tasks and mandate.⁵⁰

As is well known, its mission includes not only tasks at the external borders but also in returns. The following is a summary of the Agency's returns task under Article 10 of the Frontex Regulation 2019/1896:⁵¹

- Monitor the operational needs of Member States in the context of returns.
- Assist with the coordination and organisation of returns.
- Establish a reserve of forced-return monitors.
- Deploy returns units during return interventions.
- Support the development of technical standards for equipment in the area of border control and returns and support the development of common minimum standards for external border surveillance.
- Cooperate with the European Agency for Asylum (EUAA) to facilitate measures in the case of third-country nationals who are returnees.
- Develop and manage information systems that enable the exchange of information on emerging risks in the management of the external borders, illegal immigration and returns.

But there are additional points that are not listed here that more or less (in)directly come into play when it comes to Frontex's returns task. These include Frontex's tasks related to technical capacity and capacity building.

Capacity building

An important task of Frontex is to coordinate the Member States' interaction and collaboration within border procedures. It therefore coordinates training for national staff working in the area. It is worth noting that Frontex is required

⁴⁹ See (European Parliament and Council, 2016; European Parliament and Council, 2019).

⁵⁰ See for example (Bigo, 2014; Andersson, 2014; Monar, 2016; Horii S., 2016; Paul, 2017; Silberstein, 2020).

⁵¹ (European Parliament and Council, 2019; Frontex, Samlat programdokument 2024-2026, 2024b).

to produce course materials and common core curricula that Member States are then obliged to implement at the national level.⁵² Horii (2012) examines the effects of Frontex training courses for border guards within the EU and shows that the question of training is an under-researched topic that may also have wider policy significance.⁵³ Through joint training using related course materials, border guards have developed a shared vision and created a professional community at the European level, and Horii (2012) argues that Frontex training has had an integrating effect on EU external border management through socialisation and professionalisation, leading to a convergence in how policies are implemented. In addition, Horii highlights (2012) the popularity and high rate of participation in Frontex training courses, because Member States see participation as consistent with their own interests.

According to Lemberg-Pedersen and Halpen (2021, p. 68), Frontex has a harmonising role in terms of evening out the knowledge and skills levels of Member States' escort leaders. For example, German escorts undergo a three-week escort training course, while in several other Member States the training is considerably shorter – sometimes only three days. Through its interventions, Frontex helps to improve the level of knowledge and skills and harmonise the training standard in return operations across several of the Member States.

Social responsibility

Much of the academic literature focuses on (questioning) legitimacy, (a lack of) transparency, and (a lack of) accountability. Researchers who focus on the legitimacy of Frontex argue that the Agency's operations and actions are under-regulated. Although the Member States are ultimately accountable for the legality of returns, Coppens notes (2012) that the Agency's influence in how return operations are carried out is increasing.⁵⁴ Several researchers have also highlighted the fact that the responsibility shifts during Frontex operations,

⁵² Article 62 of the 2019 Frontex Regulation (European Parliament and Council, 2019) requires Frontex to develop and implement training courses for border guards. The aim is to ensure that staff have the necessary knowledge and skills and that they comply with common European standards for border control; this is also implemented through Article 16 of Regulation 2016/2016 (Europeiska Unionen, 2016), which requires that the Member States shall integrate this at national level.

⁵³ Horii (2012, pp. 159-160) gives here an example of the fact that Member States' relationships can be adversely affected if some country is seen as unable to uphold its part of the Schengen agreement (e.g. maintaining an external border). Ultimately, it is the border police who carry out this task and if they do not have the right conditions or training, the result will be affected.

⁵⁴ Coppens (2012) primarily investigated maritime operations.

which means that it can be difficult for individuals to demand accountability in relation to the Agency if they are injured (Andersson, 2014; Kalkman, 2021; Carrera, den Hertog, & Parkin, 2013; Raimondo, 2023).

When Frontex was established, reference to the Agency's human rights obligations was largely lacking in its governing documents. This led to massive criticism from both civil society organisations and academia. Frontex initially tried to dismiss the criticism by claiming that the Agency has a supporting or coordinating role where the individual Member States bear the responsibility for protecting the fundamental rights of migrants (Loschi & Slominski, 2022; Raimondo, 2023, pp. 59-61). But since the early 2010s, the Agency has gradually become more open to criticism, resulting in new commitments, such as a code of conduct, a fundamental rights strategy, the consultative forum and a Fundamental Rights Officer (FRO) (Marin, 2011, ss. 479-485; Raimondo, 2023). According to the research, these softer tools and monitoring mechanisms have improved the Agency's work with these matters in several ways.⁵⁵ Despite this, there is still criticism from both academia and civil society that Frontex still does not take a clear responsibility for potential rights violations (Marinai, 2016; Loschi & Slominski, 2022; Raimondo, 2023).

Consultative Forum

In 2012, Frontex set up a Consultative Forum on fundamental rights.⁵⁶ It was established as a long-term strategy to promote and protect fundamental rights. The Consultative Forum provides advice and recommendations on internal and strategic matters and prepares publicly accessible annual reports to improve transparency and accountability.⁵⁷ Frontex must provide the Consultative Forum with access to information that concerns respect for fundamental rights, facilitate oversight of its operations, and follow-up of the recommendations made by the Forum.

⁵⁵ It is important to note that these tools are not legally binding. (Marin, 2011; Loschi & Slominski, 2022; Raimondo, 2023; Giannetto, 2019).

⁵⁶ In January 2024, the Consultative Forum consisted of the following 13 organisations: Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME); Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe (CCBE); European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA); European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA); International Organization for Migration (IOM); Jesuit Refugee Service Europe (JRS); Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN Human Rights); Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe - Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE-ODIHR); Save the Children (SC); The Council of Europe (CoE); The Global Campus for Human Rights; The Rule of Law Institute Foundation; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (Frontex, 2024f).

⁵⁷ See for example (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2011; Frontex, General Report, 2013, p. 43; Frontex, General Report, 2013, p. 43).

Civil society organisations that have a seat in the Consultative Forum at times have a difficult balance to strike or a choice to make between getting access to the Agency and openly criticising its activities (Giannetto, 2019). Loschi and Slominski (2022) argue that the Consultative Forum has not significantly influenced the Agency's accountability, but the regular involvement of actors in an institutionalised dialogue with Frontex has the potential to strengthen the collective learning process for protecting fundamental rights. Giannetto (2019) shows that the Consultative Forum's influence has led to a substantial increase in engagement with and the operationalisation of fundamental rights, including in the area of returns, within the Agency.

Fundamental Rights Officer

Regulation 1168/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council tasked Frontex with appointing an independent Fundamental Rights Officer (FRO) (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2011). The FRO monitors operational activities and works with the Consultative Forum to provide independent advice on fundamental rights matters. The role of the FRO is to monitor and assess compliance with the rules, provide advice and support to promote fundamental rights, document and report on Frontex activities to the Management Board and Consultative Forum, train and support Frontex staff, and help to align Frontex's operational documents with international standards.⁵⁸

It is worth noting that a large part of the criticism levelled by OLAF in its inquiry was that Frontex had actively thwarted the efforts of its own FRO to the point that the FRO was unable to perform their tasks or fulfil their role satisfactorily (European Anti-Fraud Office, 2022). The Agency argues that steps have been taken and that its old ways of doing things now belong to the past.⁵⁹ Raimondo (2023, p. 63) notes, however, that although the FRO was already assigned an assistant FRO and a team of Fundamental Rights Monitors (FRM) in the 2019 Frontex Regulation, this section suffers from chronic understaffing.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ (Frontex, General Report, 2012; Frontex, General Report, 2013).

⁵⁹ Among other things, an FRO is now automatically assigned to officials in charge of cases, and has access to the necessary information and reports to the Consultative Forum and the Management Board. The Board is then tasked with informing the Consultative Forum about what follow-up measures they have taken based on the FRO's recommendations (Frontex, 2022b). See also (Raimondo, 2023, p. 61).

⁶⁰ However, Jonas Grimheden, FRO at Frontex, underlines that there is currently [2025] no "chronic understaffing" and that the FRO function is well able to fulfil its monitoring role.

Today, the FRO has a staff of approximately 75 who monitor border protection and returns.⁶¹ In addition, the FRO coordinates a pool of national forced-return monitors.⁶²

The complaints mechanism

In 2012, the European Ombudsman concluded that Frontex was not in a position to deal with human rights violations. The Ombudsman considered that the Agency lacked some awareness of suspected violations of fundamental rights, and recommended the introduction of a complaints mechanism (European Ombudsman, 2013). Initially, Frontex rejected this recommendation, but has since, gradually and after subsequent inquiries by the Ombudsman, introduced such a mechanism.⁶³

These functions have improved Frontex's attitude, compliance and capacity to respect fundamental rights. However, as Raimondo (2023, p. 63) points out, there is great potential for improvement. The complaints mechanism is managed internally and there is no possibility to appeal. The 2019 Frontex Regulation requires the Agency to develop an "independent and effective" complaints mechanism.⁶⁴ Raimondo (2023) is among those who call into question the Agency's willingness to accomplish this.

While Frontex has developed mechanisms to strengthen respect for fundamental rights, it has also expanded its operational support to Member States in the area of returns.

Frontex's support in returns

Today, Frontex is playing an increasing role in implementing the EU's integrated border management strategy. The 2023 Schengen evaluation noted that the coordinating role of Frontex has increased significantly, with the share of returns coordinated by Frontex rising from 17 to 31 percent between 2020 and 2022. The number of voluntary returns involving Frontex also increased by

⁶¹ Jonas Grimheden. FRO, Frontex.

⁶² See, for example, Table 3 *Swedish Migration Agency's monitoring of enforcement for Sweden's contribution to the monitor pool*.

⁶³ In 2016, Frontex introduced a first version of the human rights complaints mechanism which proved ineffective because it lacked definitions of what could be considered appropriate follow-up measures according to Raimondo (2023, p. 63). In its subsequent inquiry, one finding of the Ombudsman was a low number of complaints, which suggests that the mechanism was not sufficiently accessible, and that it was very difficult to identify potential perpetrators based on the information received (European Ombudsman, 2022). See also (European Parliament and Council, 2019; European Commission, 2023) (European Parliament and Council, 2019; Europeiska Kommissionen, 2023).

⁶⁴ (European Parliament and Council, 2019; Europeiska Kommissionen, 2023).

109 percent between 2021 and 2022, and subsequent Schengen evaluations also show how the Agency's role is growing.⁶⁵ The Agency's work comprises many tasks: risk assessments, training of border staff, and carrying out joint operations. The Agency offers support in several phases of the return process in the following main areas:⁶⁶

- **Operational support** – includes coordinating or organising return operations such as JROs. It also includes support in preparatory phases such as the identification of individuals, assistance in consular contacts with third countries, acquiring travel documents, and support in *pre-departure counselling*.
- **Financing and logistics** – Frontex offers financial and logistics support such as charter flights. It also assists in voluntary returns by providing assistance and financing when scheduled flights are used for returns.
- **Reintegration support** – This includes *post-arrival assistance* or financial reintegration support.
- **Training and capacity building** – Frontex provides training and capacity-building measures for national government agencies to strengthen their capacity to deal with different parts of the return process.
- **Collaboration and networking** – The Agency works to strengthen collaboration between Member States and third countries including through various working groups (e.g. Country Working Groups), or through the deployment of EURL0.

Carrera, den Hertog and Parkin (2013, p. 347) noted that Frontex has an experimental approach to its mission and that its mandate has been constantly evolving. The Agency has occasionally undertaken activities in areas that originally did not formally fall within their legal mandate or mission. These activities are often in line with its basic regulation but go beyond both original expectations and areas of responsibilities.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ In 2016, Frontex introduced an initial version of the complaints mechanism for fundamental rights, which turned out to be ineffective since it lacked definitions of what could be considered appropriate follow-up measures, according to Raimondo (2023, p. 63). In its subsequent investigation, the Ombudsman noted, among other things, a low number of complaints, which suggests that the mechanism was not sufficiently accessible, and that it was very difficult to identify potential perpetrators based on the available information (European Ombudsman, 2022). See also European Parliament and Council (2019) and European Commission (2023).

⁶⁶ The following list is a summary and does not include all the different activities or areas in which Frontex works with returns.

⁶⁷ See the section on JROs for a more in-depth look.

Frontex Application for Return

Frontex Application for Return (FAR) is a Frontex-owned digital case management system for both voluntary and forced-return operations that aims to facilitate the coordination of return operations between Member States. The system is used to book and advertise places in return operations – for national return operations as well as to provide opportunities for other Member States to register their interest in participating in a JRO. Applications for financial support from Frontex for return operations are also made in FAR, as are reservations for voluntary returns via scheduled flights.

Standing corps

The 2019 Frontex Regulation introduced the *standing corps*, which consists of operational staff, defined as “[...] border guards, return escorts, return specialists, and other relevant staff”,⁶⁸ who are divided into four categories:⁶⁹

- Category 1: Statutory staff
- Category 2: Operational staff for long-term secondments
- Category 3: Operational staff for short-term deployments
- Category 4: Reserve for rapid reaction

Category 1 consists of staff directly employed by Frontex. According to the annual planning for 2025, Category 1 amounts to 1,438 positions, of which 92 are in the sub-category *Forced Return Escort and Support Officer* (FRESO) (Frontex, 2024d). In returns, FRESO constitutes a specialisation to support Member States in return operations, especially in the case of forced returns, by:

- escorting individuals returning to their countries of origin, on chartered as well as scheduled flights
- supporting national authorities at departure and transit airports
- working under the host country's officers in command and in accordance with operational plans approved by Frontex and the Member State
- cooperating with fundamental rights monitors during return operations.

⁶⁸ According to European Union, 2016, p. Articles 13 and 14, Gkliati (2021). (European Commission, 2024b, s. article 58).

⁶⁹ See Annex 1 to the Regulation for a more detailed specification of the staff categories, recruitment goals, etc.

In addition, there are plans for having 42 *Return Specialists* in Category 1 in 2025. The Return Specialists focus primarily on advice, coordination and ensuring legal certainty in the *pre-departure* phase: (Frontex, 2024e) Their tasks include:

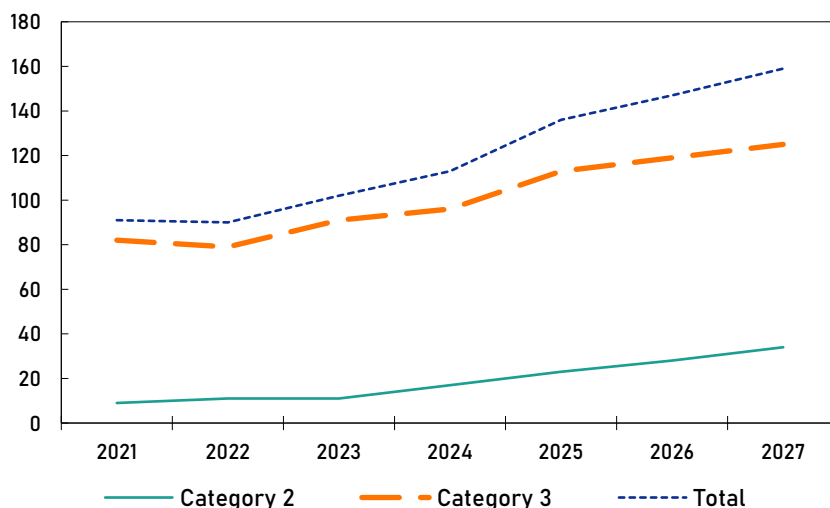
- cooperation with third countries; through identifying individuals, procuring travel documents and consular contacts
- advice on return and reintegration; providing information about voluntary and forced return, presenting reintegration programmes, and helping individuals to understand their options;
- systems support; working with digital case management systems, booking tickets, handling logistics and coordinating with national government agencies.

The standing corps is the first uniformed position at EU level, with the aim of providing the Union with its own operational border and coast guard capacity. The intention is that this corps can be mobilised quickly to assist Member States in need of assistance (Frontex, 2020).

Categories 2, 3 and 4 consist of staff seconded from the Member States, as set out in Annexes 2 and 3 of the 2019 Frontex Regulation.⁷⁰ In 2024, Sweden contributed 139 people in categories 2 and 3, of which 100 came from policing activities. This corresponds to 0.47 percent of Sweden's national policing resources, which is on par with Germany. Denmark and Iceland, on the other hand, have higher shares, with 0.67 percent and 0.93 percent, respectively. Of the 24 countries for which data are available, Sweden lies in the middle of the range: 12 countries have a higher share, 10 a lower share, and two countries – Germany and Romania – have the same level as Sweden. (European Commission, 2024a).

⁷⁰ (European Parliament and Council, 2019, s. Annex 2 and 3) See also Annex 1 of the report for an extract from the objectives for the standing corps' staffing.

Figure 3. Annual numbers to be provided by Sweden to the standing corps (categories 2 and 3) in accordance with Article 56



Note: Own compilation.

Source: (European Parliament and Council, 2019, p. Appendix 2 and 3).

EURLO

One of the specialist groups that work with returns is the European Union Return Liaison Officers (EURLO), whose task is to strengthen cooperation with third-country government agencies on returns (Vera Larrucea & Luthman, 2024). EURLO are deployed to selected third countries to represent the interests of the European Union in the area of returns. For several years, Sweden has had two EURLOs financed by Frontex and deployed to Kenya⁷¹ and Ethiopia. These countries have been selected due to returns to Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia having long been considered particularly challenging (Migrationsverket, 2025a).

The EURLO's work includes contacts with local government agencies, establishing identity, collecting the necessary authorisations and approvals, and the coordination of practical matters such as reintegration interventions. Frontex provides funding and overall coordination, while Member States are responsible for staffing the positions. Besides supporting Member States with staff via the standing corps and the EURLO deployments, Frontex also coordinates and finances return operations.

⁷¹ This deployment also covers Somalia.

Joint Return Operations

Joint Return Operations (JROs) are based on the principles of sharing existing capacity and exploiting established relationships with third countries with the aim of strengthening the Member States' preparedness for organising joint flights (Frontex, General Report, 2015, p. 53). Typically, one Member State acts as the organiser while Frontex assists in coordination and can provide screening experts, interpreters and guidance from the FRO. Frontex may also target a request for support to other Member States experiencing difficulties.⁷²

Member States are encouraged to include forced-return monitors in all JROs coordinated by Frontex. The monitor's task is to gather information and ensure that the interventions are carried out in compliance with fundamental rights. They must pay particular attention to the treatment of vulnerable individuals, and to the use of force and coercive measures (Frontex, General Report, 2015, p. 57). According to Lemberg-Pedersen and Halpen (2021), the number of monitored JROs has increased sharply, and these are now in a clear majority compared to those that are not monitored.⁷³

Carrera, den Hertog and Parkin (2013, p. 347) argue that Frontex's involvement in JROs initially lay beyond its formal mandate. According to these researchers, the coordination of JROs was not explicitly included in Frontex's mission. The European Commission has pointed out a discrepancy between Frontex's formal mandate and actual activities. Although the legal basis originally described Frontex as "providing assistance" to the Member States, in practice the Agency actually took on a coordinating role. This shift has occurred in line with the wishes of both the Member States and the Commission, which have called for more effective and centralised coordination of returns (Carrera, den Hertog, & Parkin, 2013, p. 347; Europeiska kommissionen, 2010, p. 16).

Carrera, den Hertog and Parkin (2013) describe this as an example of the **experimental approach** that Frontex applies in the development of its operations and, by extension, its mission. The Agency has thus progressively expanded its role through its practices rather than through formal changes in its mandate.

⁷² A clear example of Frontex's role in supporting return operations is the situation in 2015, when pressure increased sharply in the frontline states as the number of irregular migrants rose. At the time, Frontex identified a lack of available funding and the lack of a framework for charter flights, which were having a direct impact on the ability of frontline states to enforce returns. In response, Frontex sent a request for assistance to the other Member States. Denmark responded by chartering aircraft on several occasions to assist Greece and Italy as part of a JRO (Frontex, 2015).

⁷³ According to Lemberg-Pedersen and Halpen (2021, pp. 36–37), unmonitored Frontex-funded JROs were phased out in 2018.

National Return Operations

National Return Operations (NROs) refer to operations carried out by one Member State without the participation of others. In these cases, Frontex can provide funding for all or part of the operation, as well as staffing through its return pool. The Agency can also provide organisational support and contacts with third country authorities.⁷⁴ Notably, the Agency provides assistance to Member States' NROs even when the Member State has not included monitoring activities (Lemberg-Pedersen & Halpen, 2021). According to Lemberg-Pedersen and Halpen(2021, p. 67), there is a clear asymmetry in the proportion of (un)monitored operations between JROs and NROs.⁷⁵

Collecting Return Operations

Collecting Return Operations (CROs) were introduced in 2012 and consist of return flights chartered by third countries. The escorts come from the organising third country, but are trained by Frontex to maintain "professional standards [...] and procedures [which] are harmonised with EU standards" (Frontex, General Report, 2013, p. 18). Georgia and Albania were the first countries to implement a CRO. This type of return operation is not feasible in Sweden due to Swedish legislation, but Sweden participates in CROs departing from other Member States.

Scheduled Flight returns

In 2018, Frontex launched a Scheduled Flight returns pilot project. In this project, 17 Member States returned almost 1 500 third-country nationals. The project was assessed as cost-effective and thus successful, which led to this type of return being made permanent the following year. In 2019, this activity expanded significantly, and Frontex established separate agreements with several airlines to further strengthen Member States' capacity to carry out effective returns(Frontex, General Report, 2019, p. 19).

In the case of voluntary returns, scheduled flights are often a suitable alternative, as returnees travel under the same terms and conditions as other passengers. For forced returns, airlines conduct an individual assessment and give final approval of which individuals – and how many – may return on their scheduled

⁷⁴ It is worth noting that NROs are also implemented without Frontex's involvement.

⁷⁵ Furthermore, Lemberg-Pedersen and Halpen (2021, pp. 66-69) criticise the quality of the Frontex Pool of Monitors.

flights.⁷⁶ All in all, this means that a need for return operations with chartered aircraft remains.

4.4. Swedish return

In the academic research, there are only a few studies that deal with Swedish or Nordic collaboration with Frontex. Waerp (2025) studies Swedish and Danish Border and Coast Guard staff who have been seconded to Frontex operations at an external border. The informants viewed their participation in Frontex operations positively, as they see themselves as having higher moral standards and stronger work ethics than their colleagues in other parts of Europe.⁷⁷ The informants saw their participation as beneficial for all involved, especially for the migrants, which Waerp (2025) sees as an expression of a kind of Nordic “exceptionalism”.⁷⁸

In their study, Lemberg-Pedersen and Halpen (2021, p. 38) show that Danish border Swedish Police find it easier to work without any involvement from Frontex. Their attitude is that the Agency imposes requirements that are not in line with nor in harmony with bilateral agreements and agreements that Denmark has with third countries. However, it emerges in the study that the border Swedish Police had a somewhat ambivalent attitude once they realise that Frontex offers funding and a variety of services that the Danish authorities could have benefited from. However, Lemberg-Pedersen and Halpen (2021, pp. 31-32; 38; 68) argue that these requirements may be one reason why some countries are less likely to collaborate with Frontex or organise joint return operations.

Work in Sweden on the issue of returns has grown and developed over time. When Malm Lindberg (2020) studied the Swedish government agencies' handling of the issue, in summary he found that there were multiple challenges, in particular conflicts of objectives and that the matter of returns (then) was clearly underprioritised.⁷⁹ How Sweden has handled return and reintegration

⁷⁶ The starting point is always safety on board and in some cases this is also tied to the type of aircraft (the size of the aircraft in terms of the number of seats on board) (International Civil Aviation Organization, 1964; International Civil Aviation Organization, 1944; International Air Transport Association, 2020) (International Civil Aviation Organization, 1964; International Civil Aviation Organization, 1944; International Air Transport Association, 2020).

⁷⁷ In particular compared to colleagues from Central, Eastern and Southern Europe.

⁷⁸ See also Hammarstedt & Luthman, 2025.

⁷⁹ Malm Lindberg (2020) interviewed mainly officials at the Swedish Migration Agency, the Swedish Police Authority and the Swedish Ministry of Justice, which were the two government agencies and ministry responsible for the issue wealth returns in 2020.

was studied by Vera Larrucea, Malm Lindberg and Asplund (2021). Their findings pointed to the need for better communication and cooperation with returnees as well as between government agencies, but also with the receiving countries, in order to create the conditions for sustainable returns and successful reintegration. Furthermore, Vera Larrucea and Luthman (2024) have studied the diplomatic relations between Swedish government agencies and foreign diplomatic missions on the issue of returns. Hammarstedt and Luthman (2025) have studied Nordic collaboration on returns and note that this occurs primarily at the operational level through flexible and decentralised government agency networks and that the lack of transparency and accountability pose challenges. The latter is a recurring criticism when it comes to collaboration under the umbrella of Frontex.⁸⁰

In Sweden, the work of enforcing a refusal-of-entry or expulsion order, i.e. getting third-country nationals without a legal right to stay in the country to return to their country of origin, is divided between the Swedish Migration Agency, the Swedish Police Authority and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service.⁸¹ Voluntary return is the preferred means of return, which is handled by the Swedish Migration Agency. Those who do not return voluntarily become cases with the Swedish Police Authority and thus subject to refusal of entry or expulsion with escort.

Swedish Migration Agency

The Swedish Migration Agency is tasked with managing migration to Sweden. This includes examining applications from people who, for various reasons, want to settle in the country, come to visit, are seeking protection from persecution, or wish to obtain Swedish citizenship (Migrationsverket, 2025b). The Swedish Migration Agency also has an instruction to deepen European and international cooperation (Migrationsverket, 2020). Return is a priority area in the 2025 appropriations directions, but has been the object of greater attention, at least since around 2020.

If the Swedish Migration Agency makes a refusal-of-entry or expulsion decision, the individual concerned is called to a conversation where a case officer informs them about the alternatives available. The Swedish Migration

⁸⁰ See previous sections on the establishment, organisation and governance of Frontex and its mission.

⁸¹ The Swedish Security Service is the enforcement authority for cases processed in accordance with the Act concerning Special Controls of Certain Aliens (2022:700) (SFS, 2022:700) and for what are termed security cases under the Aliens Act (SFS, 2005:716). These are not addressed in this report.

Agency offers a number of assistance and support functions to individuals who have received a decision that requires them to leave the country, including:⁸²

- Pre-departure advice
- Help with passports, travel documents and travel booking
- Support for re-establishment and reintegration

Swedish Migration Agency and coercive measures

The Swedish Migration Agency is also tasked with monitoring the enforcement of forced returns, i.e. returns implemented by the Swedish Police Authority and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service.⁸³ In 2024, the Swedish Migration Agency had eight monitors working part-time with this task, and in 2024, 19 of the monitoring assignments were in connection with a JRO (Migrationsverket, 2025d).

The monitors are present for the enforcement and report to the enforcing government agencies, and to the Frontex FRO and the Consultative Forum. Among other things, they monitor compliance with human rights, respect for the returnees' right to freedom from bodily harm, and compliance with the Frontex *Code of Conduct*. Overall, Swedish government agencies' compliance is assessed as good, although there were some remarks during 2024.⁸⁴

The Swedish Migration Agency's monitors also carry out assignments as part of the Frontex Pool of Monitors.⁸⁵

⁸² *Pre-departure counselling* is provided at the Swedish Migration Agency, which is a conversation aimed at preparing individuals for return. On this point, Frontex and the Swedish Migration Agency cooperate closely, with training courses and sharing support materials. (Migrationsverket, 2025c).

⁸³ According to Government Decision 11:1 2023-12-20, the Swedish Migration Agency may use SEK 7 million for costs incurred in monitoring forced returns, but according to the annual report for 2024, Frontex provides an increasing proportion of the funding for monitored operations. (Migrationsverket, Årsredovisning 2024, 2025d).

⁸⁴ Deficiencies concerning the rights of the child in an enforcement inquiry concerning a heavily pregnant woman, and on two occasions when bodily searches of persons of the opposite sex were conducted. (Migrationsverket, Årsredovisning 2024, 2025d). See also (Fundamental Rights Officer, 2024a; Fundamental Rights Officer, 2024b; Fundamental Rights Officer, 2023a; Fundamental Rights Officer, 2023b) See also (Fundamental Rights Officer, 2024a; Fundamental Rights Officer, 2024b; Fundamental Rights Officer, 2023a; Fundamental Rights Officer, 2023b).

⁸⁵ Frontex Pool of Monitors.

Table 3. Swedish Migration Agency's monitoring of enforcement

Type of enforcement assignment	2022	2023	2024
National assignment	26	31	35
Frontex Pool of Monitors assignment	9	9	12
Total	35	40	47

Source: Swedish Migration Agency Annual Report 2024.

The Swedish Migration Agency is also responsible for detention operations, which are used when the government agencies assess that there is a risk that the individual will abscond or otherwise obstruct the enforcement of a refusal of entry or expulsion order.

Swedish Police Authority

In cases where the Swedish Migration Agency cannot enforce a refusal-of-entry or expulsion order such as when the individual does not cooperate or flees, the case is handed over to the Swedish Police Authority, which is also responsible for enforcing expulsion decisions made by a court.⁸⁶ In 2024, the Swedish Migration Agency handed over 4,460 enforcement cases to the Swedish Police Authority.⁸⁷ A large majority of these – about 85 percent – were handed over because the person concerned had absconded (Migrationsverket, 2025a). The Swedish Police are tasked with locating both individuals who have been absconded and individuals who are staying irregularly in the country for the purpose of being able to enforce the decision. A key tool in this work are internal controls of aliens, which can be carried out in connection with workplace inspections, for example.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ It is worth noting that the Police Authority can also hand back cases to the Swedish Migration Agency under certain specific circumstances. Chapter 12, Section 14 of the Aliens Act states that:

The Swedish Police Authority may turn over a case pursuant to the first paragraph, or hand over a case in accordance with Section 14, third paragraph, to the Swedish Migration Agency if the Agency consents to this. The main rule is that a case must be dealt with by the authority that has the best conditions for enforcing the decision.

For example, in 2021, the Swedish Migration Agency carried out a pilot project with chartered aircraft for voluntary returns with the support of Frontex. On this occasion, the Police Authority was asked if they had enforcement cases who were willing to return voluntarily, in which case they could be handed back to the Swedish Migration Agency to make more efficient use of the chartered aircraft (Polismyndigheten, 2022, p. 80).

⁸⁷ This figure excludes Dublin Regulation cases. Iraq, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Colombia and Ethiopia were the most common receiving countries.

⁸⁸ According to the Swedish Police Authority's annual report of 2024, the number of individuals encountered who do not have a permit to stay has increased. According to

Table 4. Swedish Police Authority's internal controls of aliens 2021–2023

Swedish Police region	2021	2022	2023	Changes 2022–2023 (number)	Changes 2022–2023 (%)
Bergslagen	978	803	1,081	278	34.6%
Mid Sweden	848	785	1,047	262	33.4%
Northern Sweden	288	415	769	354	85.3%
Stockholm	1,574	1,136	2,514	1,378	121.3%
Southern Sweden	2,038	3,712	9,240	5,528	148.9%
Western Sweden	1,824	2,115	4,560	2,445	115.6%
Eastern Sweden	1,681	1,702	1,903	201	11.8%
Total	9,231	10,668	21,114	10,446	97.9%

Source: (Polismyndigheten, 2024b, p. 44).

Since 2018, the Swedish Police Authority has had a mandate to carry out inspections at workplaces in 'high-risk industries' themselves for the purpose of checking that employers do not have employees who do not have the right to stay or work in Sweden. Where this is suspected, the Swedish Police can conduct internal controls of aliens in connection with these inspections (Polismyndigheten, 2025b).

The Swedish Police Authority also works with enforcing refusal-of-entry and expulsion orders and, through its Embassy Liaison Team, it can cooperate with foreign embassies and consulates in Sweden. This work includes:

- **identity verification** of persons who do not have valid travel or identity documents;
- **issuing travel documents**, where the Embassy Liaison Team work to ensure that the foreign diplomatic missions provide the necessary travel documents;
- **coordination of returns** with foreign diplomatic missions with the goal of enforcing the returns in a safe and humane way.

the Police, this is partly due to the fact that the number of controls has increased, and that skills-enhancing efforts have had a positive impact on police officers being able to identify more individuals who are staying illegally in Sweden (Polismyndigheten, 2025a).

The Swedish Police Authority also acts as Sweden's national point of contact for Frontex, the EU's border authority.⁸⁹

Swedish Prison and Probation Service

The Prison and Probation Service has an important operational role in work with returns. The Service is responsible for booking travel and means of transport and for coordinating the enforcement.⁹⁰ The Service's responsibilities also include primary responsibility for staffing escort leader and escort roles. Its 2025 appropriation directions state that the Swedish Prison and Probation Service shall cooperate with the Swedish Police Authority and the Swedish Migration Agency at an operational and strategic level to create better conditions for more and more effective returns (Justitiedepartementet, 2024b).

Table 5. Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE external transfers of migration clients

	2022	2023	2024
Migration clients	5,923	5,544	6,103

Note: A single client may have been transferred on more than one occasion.
Source: (Kriminalvården, 2025, p. 68).

Collaboration agreements

In order to strengthen collaboration and the effectiveness of returns and enforcements, a wide range of agreements have been concluded and joint government agency networks established since 2019.⁹¹ The main purpose is to improve the sharing of information and thereby improve effectiveness, which has been noted as lacking by, among others, (Malm Lindberg, 2020), (Riksrevisionen, 2020) and (Statskontoret, 2022).

The most important agreement for the purposes of this study is the collaboration agreement on international transfers between the Swedish Police Authority and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service, which was concluded in October 2022 (Kriminalvården & Polismyndigheten, 2022). The agreement aims to ensure that international transfers are carried out in a legally certain, humane and dignified manner, and that the government agencies act promptly in each individual case. The Swedish Police Authority is responsible for

⁸⁹ See European Parliament and Council, 2019, s. Articles 13 and 21. (European Parliament and Council, 2019, p. Article 13 and 21).

⁹⁰ Under Section 29a of the Police Act (1984:387). (Polislagen, 2024).

⁹¹ (Polismyndigheten, 2024a, pp. 19–20) (Footnote 90) (Polismyndigheten, 2024a, pp. 19–20) gives a picture of the agreements in this area.

assessing whether a handover to the Swedish Prison and Probation Service for international transfer is appropriate. For a handover to be possible, the Swedish Police must ensure that the necessary documentation is available or can be procured. The Swedish Police Authority is also responsible for ensuring that the individual has been detained before the international transfer is implemented, after which the case is handed over to the Swedish Prison and Probation Service.

The Prison and Probation Service is responsible for the planning, booking, resourcing and implementing international transfers taking account of:

- the current security situation
- Whether tickets can be procured through established channels
- that available airlines operating the route are not on the EU's Air Safety List ('blacklisted' airlines)
- whether a landing permit can be obtained in the case of charter flights
- whether the destination country accepts the chosen form of outward journey
- that the transport complies with the requirements in acts, ordinances and international commitments.

Joint work of the government agencies

The Swedish Government's focus on returns has resulted in a strategy that brings together several different policy areas in a *whole of government approach*. The aim is to manage migration and return in a coordinated, effective and sustainable way (Regeringen, 2024b).

The Government has already tasked the Swedish Police Authority, the Swedish Migration Agency and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service with making the return process more efficient and increasing the number of enforced refusal-of-entry and expulsion decisions. This includes developing measurable goals for different categories of cases and jointly reporting the results.⁹² As early as 2021, Sweden adopted its strategy for European integrated border management which:

⁹² (Regeringen, 2022).

[...] implements the EU work in this area nationally and aims to create a structure to maintain and develop Swedish border management, steer operations towards common national objectives, and ensure that Sweden contributes to the implementation of the EU's overall objectives for European integrated border management”.

(Polismyndigheten, 2024a)⁹³

The Swedish Migration Agency's appropriations directions for 2025 also state that the agency is to “deepen its collaboration with the Swedish Police Authority and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service at both the operational and strategic levels. The collaboration is intended to create better conditions for increasing returns and reducing the proportion of individuals who abscond” (Justitiedepartementet, 2024a).

In order to make returns more efficient, the government agencies have established a joint Operational Centre (OPC)⁹⁴ where the entire chain of return activities is linked together (Migrationsverket, 2024a). The OPC works with the annual planning of charter flights, the establishment of new travel routes to ‘difficult’ countries, and the sharing of risk and security assessments. Co-planning has led to the Swedish Migration Agency being able to hand over cases to the Swedish Police Authority in connection with the interventions enabling detention centres to be used more efficiently (Migrationsverket, 2024a). The overall purpose of the OPC is to shorten the processing times at each of the government agencies, increase the number of returns, and increase the occupancy rate when charter flights are used (Kriminalvården, 2025).

4.5. Summarising analysis

It is clear that return operations and enforcements have evolved from being a marginal, support activity to an integral and increasingly important part of Frontex's mission, especially since 2015. The Return Directive (European Parliament and Council, 2008) is closely linked to Frontex's mandate, and the Agency serves as a tool for coordinating how Member States implement sustainable, legally secure and effective returns. Today, Frontex's mandate spans multiple core areas: border control, returns and enforcements, risk

⁹³ The 2021–2023 strategy was replaced by the current strategy covering 2024–2027.

⁹⁴ The OPC originated in the joint government agency project “Operation Delta”. The Police Authority, the Prison and Probation Service and the Swedish Migration Agency worked together in the project to increase the number of enforcements by coordinating, targeting and streamlining their work with enforcements internally and externally (Polismyndigheten, 2024b).

assessment and intelligence, technical and operational assistance, and cooperation with third countries. Over time, Frontex has evolved from having more of a coordinating role to becoming a more operational body with a mandate to actively assist throughout the return chain. This includes deploying Frontex staff to Member States to assist with, for example, establishment of identity, preparation of travel documents, contact with third-country embassies, and physically escorting migrants on return transfers.

In relation to its mission, Frontex is legitimised by the needs on the ground – that is, the Member States' needs for coordination and support to implement returns effectively. In relation to the purpose of this study – to investigate how Swedish government agencies are using Frontex's resources in the area of returns, and how these actors perceive the support and their collaboration provided by Frontex – it can be concluded that even Swedish actors have acquired expanded powers. But they also have a clear mission to improve the collaboration between them to increase the number of returns, which has become an increasingly high priority for governments, irrespective of political colour. Frontex is then the key actor at the EU level with which domestic government agencies need to interact and cooperate. It is worth mentioning that Sweden is currently one of the EU countries that uses Frontex support for the return of third-country nationals to a very large extent – which has not always been the case.

The Swedish Agency for Public Management (2022) identified certain shortcomings in how the government agencies work, in particular when it comes to the allocation of responsibilities between the Swedish Police Authority and the Prison and Probation Service. The problems are then that who is responsible for what becomes unclear with the risk of duplication of work, or that tasks fall between the cracks, ultimately leading to resources being used inefficiently. In turn, Nordic research in this area points out that the Agency is sometimes perceived to be imposing such heavy demands that the domestic government agencies are reluctant to cooperate or utilise Frontex's resources (Lemberg-Pedersen & Halpen, 2021, p. 38). A relevant question is whether this also applies to Sweden. That is why we have turned to informants in relevant government agencies to find out how the support offered by, and collaboration and interaction with, Frontex is working in a range of questions and dimensions concerning return work.

5. Perspectives on Frontex's activities

This chapter outlines the areas in which ongoing collaboration or interaction between Swedish government agencies and Frontex have been identified. Member States have increasingly entrusted the Agency with an increasingly integral role in the implementation of the EU's Common Migration Policy, including on return issues. A number of central themes have been identified in Sweden's collaboration with Frontex. These include the use of Frontex support in return operations, collaboration in enforcements and planning efforts, staffing of the standing corps, communication channels between the Swedish government agencies and Frontex, training initiatives and capacity building, the scope of Frontex and, finally, Sweden's strategic engagement within the Management Board primarily. In addition, experiences from the participant observation are also reflected in these themes.

We use the previously discussed conceptual pairs of **formal** and **informal** collaboration as well as **use** and **non-use** to categorise the interaction and provide analytical tools to understand how the collaboration is actually working in practice.

5.1 Collaboration and support in return operations

This section investigates the operational collaboration facilitated primarily through the Frontex Application for Return (FAR). Member States use FAR to book return operations with support from Frontex. The support can be purely financial, but can also include lending staff or other operational resources, for example.⁹⁵ This section also explores the respondents' motivations for using Frontex tools and support systems. As noted in the Introduction, Sweden's use of FAR and Frontex support has increased considerably over time. When the Swedish National Audit Office (2020) evaluated returns, it found that the use of Frontex services was very low at that time. One key explanation was a lack of clarity about the division of responsibilities between the Swedish Police Authority and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service.

⁹⁵ For Sweden, it is mainly financial support that is relevant.

In *Sveriges strategi för europeisk integrerad gränsförvaltning 2024–2027* (Sweden's strategy for European integrated border management 2024–2027), objective two calls for increasing the effectiveness of the EU's return policy (Polismyndigheten, 2024a). It is worth noting that the strategy does not define what is meant by effectiveness or how an increase in effectiveness should be measured. One suggested means of achieving this objective is through increased cooperation between the Swedish border management agencies.⁹⁶ The recently adopted EU Asylum and Migration Pact is a further reason why such collaboration has become even more essential, including in the area of return.⁹⁷ Another development is that Swedish border management agencies are required to develop forms of collaboration with Frontex and take advantage of the support that the Agency offers "[...] based on national needs" (Polismyndigheten, 2024a, p. 20). This marks a shift from the previous strategy period 2021–2023⁹⁸, which emphasised: "Frontex's travel booking service (FAR) [...] to be used as widely as possible" without reference to specific national needs (Polismyndigheten, 2021, p. 40).

The strategy identifies Frontex as a key player to cooperate with, and instructs national agencies to continue strengthening that relationship. However, a shift in tone is evident between the previous and later periods. The clearer steering in the 2021–2023 strategy can be contrasted with the 2024–2027 strategy with its looser wording based on the national needs identified. The strategy from 2021–2023 stated that the government agencies were to use FAR as much as possible and Figure 4 illustrates how the Swedish Migration Agency has gradually increased its use of FAR over time, thereby operationalised the strategy.⁹⁹ Meanwhile, Figure 5 shows that the share of number of returns booked by the Prison and Probation Service via FAR peaks in 2022 and 2023 and then drops sharply to around 30 percent in 2024. This drop is interesting particularly given that the Swedish Agency for Public Management's study (2022) stated that the Prison and Probation Service had started to use FAR more and more, and that Sweden was the leading user of Frontex's booking system within the EU.

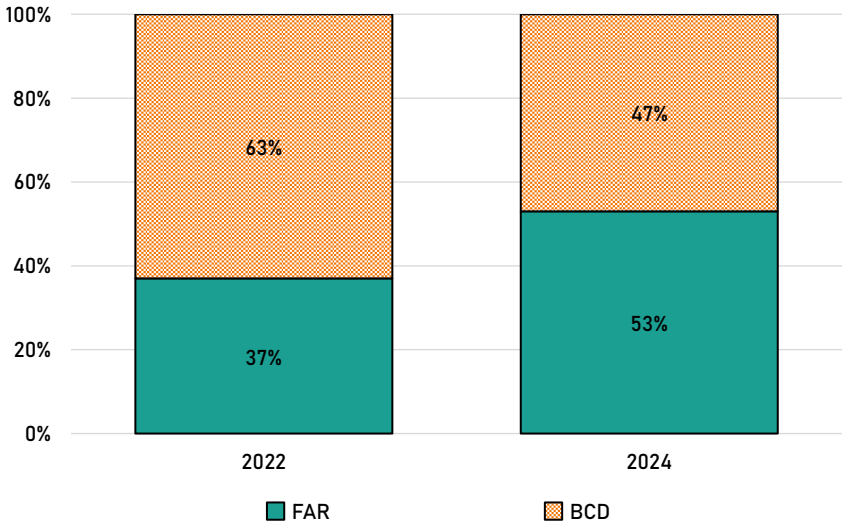
⁹⁶ Primarily the Swedish Migration Agency, the Swedish Police Authority and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE.

⁹⁷ See, for example (Polismyndigheten, 2025c).

⁹⁸ See European Parliament and Council, 2019, p. Articles 13 and 21. (Polismyndigheten, 2021).

⁹⁹ According to the Swedish Migration Agency's annual report for 2023, the use of FAR has increased over time. In 2023, Frontex paid for 1,583 returns compared to 1,015 returns in 2021. The Agency also states that they are making greater use of Frontex when it comes to booking returns to destinations with high airfares (Migrationsverket, 2024b, p. 86). It should also be noted that staff at the operational level have been more enthusiastic about increasing the use of FAR according to respondent #14 from the Swedish Migration Agency.

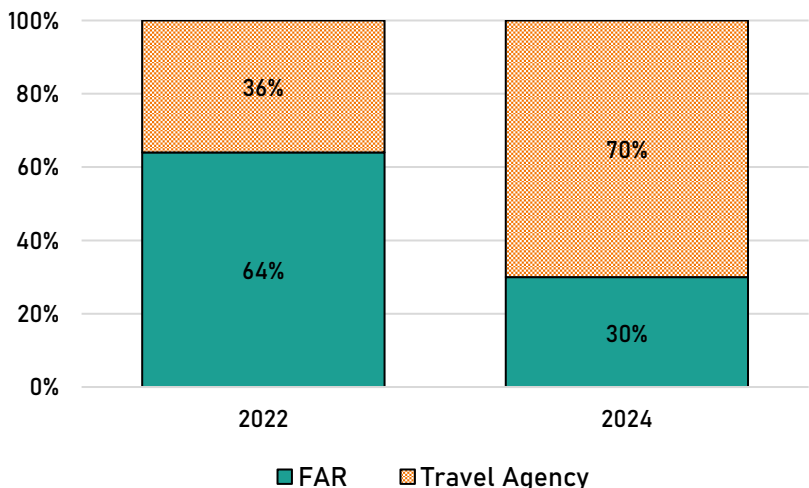
Figure 4. Share of the Swedish Migration Agency's bookings in FAR and BCD¹⁰⁰ in 2022 and 2024



Note: The Swedish Migration Agency registered 8,300 departing persons with removal orders its 2024 annual report.
Source: (Migrationsverket, Årsredovisning 2024, 2025d).

¹⁰⁰ BCD Travel is a global travel management company that provides travel booking services for government agencies and organisations.

Figure 5. Share of Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE bookings in FAR/in-house travel bookings for 2022 and 2024 (return via scheduled flights)



Note: In 2022, 64% of returns were booked using scheduled flights via FAR and 36% of returns were booked via the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE's in-house travel booking service. In 2024, 30% of returns were booked using scheduled flights via FAR and 70% handled internally. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE registered a total of 1,688 travel orders in 2022 (of which 611 were booked in-house and 1,077 were booked via FAR); in 2024, 1,471 travel orders were registered (of which 1,034 were booked in-house and 437 were booked via FAR).

Source: The figure is based on data provided by the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE.

In general, respondents described collaboration with Frontex in positive terms. The Agency's financial support was particularly valued, with many seeking to maximise its use. Bookings via FAR enable financing for NRO, JRO and for tickets on scheduled flights.

That we get funding. It's a way for us to make use of the EU funding that's available. If we can deal with it through Frontex, that's a clear benefit.

Joacim Trybom
 Head of Transport Department
 Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE

This line of reasoning is echoed across all the relevant Swedish government agencies.¹⁰¹ A number of the interviews indicated that there are instructions to make full use of Frontex funding. However, when asked where these instructions can be found, many respondents express uncertainty.¹⁰² We have not found them at the government agency level. Instead, as highlighted in this section, there are references to the extensive use of Frontex support for returns as part of Sweden's strategies for European border management. It is therefore likely that these strategy documents are the source of the guidance perceived by government agency staff. It is important to clarify that funding from Frontex *does not* determine whether a return is implemented. Nevertheless, the availability of external funding is viewed as a strong incentive for increased **use** of Frontex as it helps to ease pressure on government agency budgets. In addition to the financial rationale, there is also an argument about effectiveness where one of the core objectives with Frontex – namely that multiple Member States can jointly use a flight's capacity for enforcements – is stated as a reason for using the Agency.

Frontex confirms that Sweden is now among its most active users. Since 2020, Sweden has been one of the leading recipients of Frontex financial support for the return of third-country nationals. Between 2020 and 2025, Frontex has funded 10,307 returns via scheduled flights, and 1,071 returns via charter flights.¹⁰³ These figures also underscore that voluntary returns constitute the bulk of the support, even though forced returns tend to receive more public and political attention.¹⁰⁴

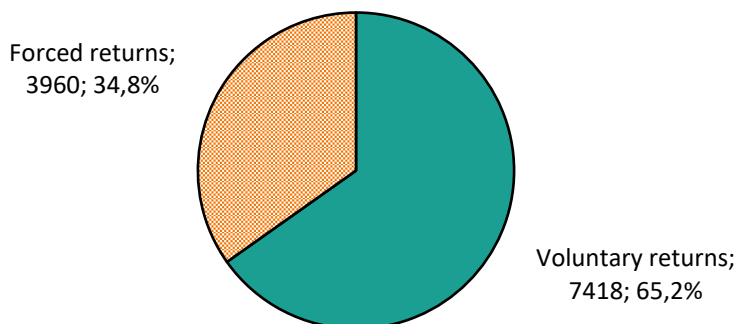
¹⁰¹ Cecilia Andelius, Expert, Frontex and European border Management, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE; Eva Åhs, Charter Flight Planning, Swedish Police Authority; #1 Swedish Police Authority; #8 Group Manager, Embassy Liaison Team, Swedish Police Authority; #24 Swedish Police Authority; Lisbeth Åhman, Case Officer, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE; Thomas Schünemann, Project Manager Co-Location (OPC), Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE; Kristina Hellgren, Expert, Swedish Migration Agency; Petra Lindh, Unit Manager, Swedish Migration Agency.

¹⁰² One respondent refers to the instructions available at the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE (#27 Inspector, NOA, Swedish Police Authority).

¹⁰³ The figures are valid from 2020 to 13 February 2025. During the period, a total of 11,378 returns from Sweden were financed by Frontex, of which 7,418 were voluntary returns and 3,960 were forced returns. #25 Frontex.

¹⁰⁴ Forced returns are handled by the Police Authority and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE, while voluntary returns are handled by the Swedish Migration Agency.

Figure 6. Frontex financing of returns from Sweden 2020–2025



Note: These figures are a compilation produced by Frontex following a request from the authors. The figures were provided in Frontex’s text-based interview response.

Source: #25 Frontex.

Swedish Migration Agency

The high number of individuals whose returns are financed by the Swedish Migration Agency with the support of Frontex is notable in itself. According to a respondent from the Swedish Ministry of Justice, the Swedish Migration Agency’s attitude has changed. In the past, returns were not considered a core task and there was some scepticism within the agency towards Frontex as a partner in enforcement work.¹⁰⁵ However, returns have since gained higher priority. Following the adoption of the 2019 Frontex Regulation – which expanded the Agency’s mandate in the area of voluntary returns—the Swedish Migration Agency intensified its collaboration with Frontex.¹⁰⁶ The same respondent also provides a more nuanced picture of the previous scepticism towards Frontex:

¹⁰⁵ #2 Swedish Ministry of Justice. See also Malm Lindberg (2020).

¹⁰⁶ Kristina Hellgren, Expert, Swedish Migration Agency.

In the beginning, most migration agencies were quite cautious in their attitudes towards Frontex. [The Agency] still had a brand that was more 'forced returns', a border management authority, a bit harsh. When they were going to have their mandate expanded to include voluntary returns, many migration agencies in the European Union had a somewhat cautious attitude, I would say, even to the point of being quite sceptical. And I think that [Frontex] has proved that they have nevertheless been able to handle return matters well, beyond expectations.

Kristina Hellgren
Expert, Swedish Migration Agency

The respondent from the Swedish Migration Agency confirms the initial scepticism and shift in attitude towards Frontex previously noted by the respondent at the Swedish Ministry of Justice. This shift seems to have occurred relatively quickly after the Swedish Migration Agency established contact with Frontex. It is already apparent in the Swedish Migration Agency's 2021 annual report that the use of FAR and collaboration with Frontex had increased compared to 2020 (Migrationsverket, 2022, p. 16). It is important to emphasise that it was not merely a shift in attitude within the Swedish Migration Agency. Frontex's expanded mandate and enhanced capacity to provide support led to changes in its organisation and its image. In addition, the Swedish Migration Agency was included in Sweden's national strategy for integrated European border management 2021–2023, which explicitly stated that the Swedish Migration Agency was to utilize Frontex's support 'to the greatest extent possible' (Polismyndigheten, 2021). The Swedish Migration Agency's experiences in the *pre-* and *post-departure phases* may also have contributed to their change in attitude. Frontex's take-over of the reintegration programme [formerly managed by the European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN)] and responsibility for procurement and contracts resulted in a substantial rationalisation of the processes.¹⁰⁷ Overall, this illustrates how evolving conditions at *both* the European *and* national levels have contributed to greater – and more effective – collaboration.

As previously noted, travel bookings are made using the Frontex-owned FAR system. The Swedish Migration Agency describes the collaboration and its use of the system in positive terms.¹⁰⁸ One respondent highlighted the system's skills-enhancing value for the Swedish Migration Agency's own staff, while

¹⁰⁷ #16 Swedish Migration Agency; Kristina Hellgren, Expert, Swedish Migration Agency.

¹⁰⁸ Kristina Hellgren, Expert, Swedish Migration Agency; #14 Swedish Migration Agency; Petra Lindh, Head of Unit, Swedish Migration Agency.

there are also staffing advantages.¹⁰⁹ Since the Swedish Migration Agency is not staffed on weekends, Frontex staff can provide support in emergency situations.¹¹⁰ Additional benefits of using FAR include assistance with transit rules and improved access to airline tickets.¹¹¹ Despite these benefits, respondents feel that the operational support Frontex provides rarely improves quality. Instead, they emphasised that the primary benefit is the financial support Frontex provides.¹¹²

Many of our needs are often about, *is there a technical resource we can access here? Can I book something for free via FAR?* In that case, we are extremely interested. But when it concerns the qualitative aspect, maybe we are too self-righteous or it's that we feel that we have such a high level that we don't need to bring in all that expertise because we have experience. [...] We already have that expertise. At that stage, an assessment must be made: *Is what Frontex is offering us as good or better?* Or are we happy with what we have? Usually it is the latter, we are happy with what we have.

#14

Swedish Migration Agency

The perception that Frontex contributes little to operational quality is not limited to the interviews conducted for this report. Waerp (2025) describes a similar pattern in her study of Swedish and Danish border staff, which she interprets as an expression of a kind of Nordic exceptionalism.

Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE

For the Prison and Probation Service, the (2022) collaboration agreement with the Swedish Police Authority (see Section 4.4) was a defining moment. The agreement granted the Service greater autonomy in its interactions with Frontex, a new way of working – enabling a new, more institutionalised working model and strengthening its independent operational capacity.¹¹³ Respondents from the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE also report improvements in operational quality since Frontex common core curricula and the Frontex *code of conduct* were implemented in the Service. In addition,

¹⁰⁹ #14 Swedish Migration Agency.

¹¹⁰ This may include re-bookings and the like.

¹¹¹ Petra Lindh, Head of Unit, Swedish Migration Agency; #30 Senior Case Officer, International Planning, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE.

¹¹² Petra Lindh, Head of Unit, Swedish Migration Agency; #14 Swedish Migration Agency.

¹¹³ Ivan Tomovic, Expert, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE; #11 Swedish Police Authority.

collaboration with the Agency has created opportunities for more long-term, strategic work.

At the same time, [the implementation of Frontex common core curricula at national level] has helped us to raise our standards when it comes to how we relate to returnees, testing and learning methods in simulated environments, human rights, [and] work with vulnerable groups [...]

Ivan Tomovic

Expert

Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE

While the implementation of Frontex common core curricula and its *code of conduct* has been seen as a positive contribution to operational practices, several respondents criticised the FAR system as limited and overly complex. In addition, the staff seem to have received insufficient training in how to use the system and when problems arise there is no obvious point of contact.¹¹⁴ Against this background, in some cases it is seen as easier and faster to handle return bookings through internal systems.

According to Ivan Tomovic, Expert at Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE, another reason for this preference, is that the procured service is based on a business model where the supplier is incentivised to do its utmost to make things easier for the customer. The aim is to create a situation where the customer is able to spend money, which in practice means a more customer-oriented and service-oriented approach. In contrast, the FAR system is primarily a platform for distributing support to government agencies. It includes control and follow-up mechanisms to verify the need for support under the current regulatory framework, which in turn is linked to the Agency's own reporting obligation. For users, this translates into a higher administrative burden compared to entering into a business relationship, making FAR appear more cumbersome and less flexible.¹¹⁵

Respondents at the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE generally express a preference for conducting return operations independently rather than through Frontex. This view is reflected in comments such as "fewer people to be involved", "faster and more efficient", which illustrate that planning time increases and flexibility decreases with the current way of organising Frontex

¹¹⁴ Thomas Schünemann, Project Manager Co-Location (OPC), Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE; Lisbeth Åhman, Case Officer, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE.

¹¹⁵ Ivan Tomovic, Expert, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE.

return operations.¹¹⁶ As with respondents at the Swedish Migration Agency, the financial support is seen as the primary benefit and motivation for using the FAR system.

After all, using Frontex systems does not improve effectiveness; we must do the same work in purely operational terms. Same processing time and so on. But we get budget support, we get the whole operation paid for. That is the incentive of course.

Thomas Schünemann
Project Manager, Co-Location (OPC)
Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE

This pattern of economic motivation coupled with organisational scepticism is also reflected in previous research. Lemberg-Pedersen and Halpen's (2021) study of Frontex and the Danish border Swedish Police revealed the same ambivalence: The Danish border Swedish Police expressed a cautious attitude towards Frontex, while at the same time acknowledged the value of securing funding from the Agency.

The Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE is responsible for carrying out forced-return operations on behalf of the Swedish Police Authority. When planning Frontex-funded return operations, respondents state that they aim to reach specific quotas or thresholds to qualify for funding from the Agency.¹¹⁷ However, there is considerable uncertainty about *what* applies and *which* quotas and thresholds must be reached in order to secure funding. One respondent states that the quota for funding is usually either 15 or 30 returnees.¹¹⁸ Several respondents from the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE noted that this lack of clarity poses challenges in operational planning and creates uncertainty about whether an operation will be eligible for reimbursement.

When questions about funding and quotas are raised with the Agency, they refer to Article 106(4)(i) of the 2019 Frontex Regulation¹¹⁹ which gives the Agency a mandate "to evaluate, approve and coordinate requests made by

¹¹⁶ Thomas Schünemann, Project Manager, Co-Location (OPC), Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE; Lisbeth Åhman, Case Officer, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE.

¹¹⁷ #19 Swedish National Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE.

¹¹⁸ Joacim Trybom, Head of Transport Department, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE.

¹¹⁹ See European Parliament and Council, 2019, p. Articles 13 and 21. (European Parliament and Council, 2019, p. Article 106:4i).

Member States for return operations and return interventions in accordance with Articles 50 [return operations] and 53 [return interventions]¹²⁰.

Frontex has also acknowledged ongoing efforts to revise its funding model. At the High Level Round Table on Returns (HLRTR) in 2024, the Agency proposed an adjustment of the financial contribution to returns aimed at improving resource utilisation for chartered return flights. According to the proposal, Frontex's contribution would be reduced stepwise (75%, 50%, 25%) based on the assessed cost-effectiveness of the operation. The model would apply to the Member State organising an NRO or JRO, and to the Member States participating in a JRO. In consultation with Member States at the expert level, Frontex plans to develop clear rules and criteria for the various steps in this new funding model.

Frontex acknowledges that full capacity on charter flights cannot always be guaranteed. However, there are measures that Member States can take to maximise occupancy rates and improve cost-effectiveness. These include early planning, and a willingness to convert an NRO to a JRO, "[...] as well as to make a larger number of returnees available to allow replacements".¹²¹ In Sweden, the work of national agencies through the OPC represents a step towards consolidating return efforts and achieving higher occupancy rates, thereby improving cost-effectiveness (see the next section on the Swedish Police Authority and OPC). However, some restrictions on improving cost effectiveness are noted within the government agency. Two respondents point out that enforcements cannot be delayed solely to secure external funding. For instance, returnees cannot be detained longer than necessary just to await EU funding; in such cases, the return must proceed using Sweden's own resources.¹²²

An interesting observation from a respondent in the Prison and Probation Service identifies several process improvements introduced to explicitly increase operational effectiveness. One key change is the early planning of charter flights, which significantly reduces costs. However, this requires the Service to be involved early on. Currently, this planning is conducted in joint sittings enabling the resolution of practical issues and earlier scheduling of charter flights.

Another improvement involves concentrating return efforts on one destination country at a time. The example mentioned was Uzbekistan, where all the government agencies concentrated their efforts to be able to enforce returns

¹²⁰ Written interview with Frontex.

¹²¹ #25 Frontex, written response.

¹²² #19 Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE; Thomas Schünemann, Project Manager Co-Location (OPC), Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE.

to one and the same country on a slightly larger scale. This approach helped reduce the cost per individual and created a margin of flexibility in case some bookings were cancelled.¹²³ We will revisit this in the section on the Return operation (5.2).

Swedish Police Authority

The Swedish Police Authority also describes the operational collaboration with Frontex as positive.¹²⁴ Regarding collaboration in the FAR system, Frontex staff are described as helpful. One respondent emphasises that Sweden uses Frontex funding for return operations to a greater extent than other countries.¹²⁵ Another respondent describes the collaboration as well-functioning but also mentions that good collaboration requires both sides to take responsibility:

I feel that the collaboration works very well, but I also feel that, as a Member State, you need to communicate clearly with Frontex, explaining what the challenges and conditions are. My experience of the collaboration with Frontex is that if we just explain the situation in good time, our circumstances, what we need support with, we can get that support. So, I feel that it is functioning well.

#11

Swedish Police Authority

Respondents from the Swedish Police Authority also mention the quotas for funding as an important factor.¹²⁶ One respondent says that the staff work actively with reserve lists of returnees, from Sweden as well as from the Member States participating in a JRO. This ensures that Sweden, or participating countries in the case of a JRO, reach the quotas stated when they registered the operation in FAR. The same respondent also states that the Swedish Police plan targeted operations prior to return operations, such as workplace inspections in industries where they know that third-country nationals without a residence permit often work.¹²⁷

¹²³ Joacim Trybom, Head of Transport Department, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE.

¹²⁴ #8 Group Manager, Embassy Liaison Team, Swedish Police Authority; #11 Swedish Police Authority; Eva Åhs, Charter Flight Planning, Swedish Police Authority; #24 Swedish Police Authority.

¹²⁵ #8 Group Manager, Embassy Liaison Team, Swedish Police Authority.

¹²⁶ For example, it is worth mentioning that the interagency cooperation leads to the possibility of transferring cases between agencies in order to achieve higher occupancy rates in return operations. For example, the Police Authority and the Swedish Migration Agency did this in 2021 when the Police Authority transferred enforcements to the Swedish Migration Agency, which organised a Frontex-funded charter flight of voluntary returnees. See (Polismyndigheten, 2022).

¹²⁷ Eva Åhs, Charter Flight Planning, Swedish Police Authority.

On the Swedish side, the agencies cooperate within the OPC, something which several respondents see as progress since the occupancy rate has increased, which in turn is an indicator of more effective returns.¹²⁸ In more general terms, the fact that collaboration between agencies with regard to returns seems to work better may also have to do with the fact that there were previously somewhat different cultures within the agencies. The Swedish Migration Agency did not view returns as a core task, which in turn may have contributed to their remaining more cautious in terms of Frontex.¹²⁹

Returning to the fixed quotas, a respondent from the Swedish Police Authority claims that there are no fixed quotas, but that it is a matter of relating to the objective of cost-effectiveness.¹³⁰ This is confirmed by another respondent, who did not experience a strict limit on the timeframe for return operation funding being granted by Frontex. Instead, an assessment is made by Frontex whereby operations with a lower number of returnees can also be granted funding provided they are deemed cost-effective.¹³¹ When we ask the respondent about their experiences, they describe that:

[Frontex] are very clear, I feel, when you sit in meetings with them, or when communicating by phone or email. As long as we argue *why* we have a need, they can also evaluate whether they can support us in the types of interventions where we need support. So absolutely, there is talk of figures around 25–30 [individuals] as a minimum. This is what I've heard since I started working in this area [a number of years] ago. But my perception is that [the quotas] don't need to be particularly fixed or strict.

But in a sense, this is informal knowledge that you have acquired?

Yes, I would say that. Yes, I think so.

#11,
Swedish Police Authority

¹²⁸ Refer to the background section on Swedish return operations and Joint work of government agencies and Government Decision 11:5. 2022/06–22 *Uppdrag till Migrationsverket, Polismyndigheten och Kriminalvården att effektivisera återvändandeverksamheten* [Task assigned to the Swedish Migration Agency, Swedish Police Authority and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service to streamline return operations] (Regeringen, 2022).

¹²⁹ See (Malm Lindberg, 2020).

¹³⁰ #24, Swedish Police Authority.

¹³¹ #11, Swedish Police Authority.

There is a lack of clarity, both between and within government agencies, on how to relate to the perceived funding quotas. While some respondents refer to specific thresholds, Frontex's reply shows that there are no fixed limits. Instead, funding decisions seem to be based on an overall assessment of the cost-effectiveness of the operation. However, the assessment may also be influenced by the third country to which the return is being made, and how the Member State justifies the cost in question – as is also confirmed in the quote above. According to one of the Agency's respondents, there is flexibility on the part of Frontex if it concerns a country where enforcement has been impossible, in such a case Frontex can still provide funding – even if the number of people is extremely small – in order to set an example.¹³²

One respondent describes a clear change in the collaboration with Frontex over time. Collaboration with Frontex has gradually become more bureaucratic and administratively demanding, with higher demands imposed on the Member States. By extension, it is felt that “more [work by Swedish government agencies] is needed to achieve an adaptable solution to return operations”¹³³.

Another respondent shares the same view, but also points to another aspect: the lack of operational experience and thus lack of knowledge of some Frontex staff. For example, Frontex proposed an ill-advised administrative procedure requiring a medical officer to confirm that each individual was fit to fly – even those with no medical conditions. According to the respondent, the proposal was unrealistic because the returnees are detained at different units across the country, while the examination needed to be carried out by the medical officer accompanying them on the journey. But that change was never made, it just “disappeared”.¹³⁴

The importance of the Agency having a flexible and responsive approach is emphasised by several respondents at the Swedish Police Authority.¹³⁵ One respondent gives a clear example of when Frontex was to take responsibility for an important part of the enforcement, namely the actual air transport. This did not work and, following a dialogue, a more appropriate national approach was adopted, with NTE handling the bookings.

¹³² #24, Swedish Police Authority.

¹³³ #27 Inspector, National Operations Department, Swedish Police Authority.

¹³⁴ #24, Swedish Police Authority.

¹³⁵ #18 Group Manager, Swedish Police Authority; Eva Åhs, Charter Flight Planning, Swedish Police Authority.

The problem in that instance is that Frontex *only* procures the flight. When we arrived [at the hangar] there were no stairs to the plane, Frontex had not booked buses and there was no catering organised, and so on. Frontex carries out *just* one step, which means suddenly our procedures are overturned and everyone is unsure who is doing what.

Eva Åhs
Charter Flight Planning
Swedish Police Authority

Sweden wanted to have the option of doing the procurement independently in order to achieve a coherent solution where all components of the operation – medical staff, interpreters, escorts and others – could be booked and procured at the same time. According to the same respondent, the Agency showed both flexibility and responsiveness to the issue and accommodated Sweden's requests. However, there are other examples where Frontex is experienced as too rigid and lacking in insight into national processes, which can irritate the Swedish actors.

Respondents describe situations in which Frontex made changes to procedures or rules that were perceived as neither grounded in operational activities nor particularly well thought out. In addition, respondents state that there seems to be a lack of clear follow-up by Frontex after such changes are introduced. The organisation seems to have had a greater capacity for learning in the past, which may have been due to the fact that there was a greater element of experience sharing back then: what went well and what went less well, with countries sharing lessons learned in the context of operations. Those meetings seem to have slid more into presentations rather than exchanges of experience.¹³⁶ The lack of follow-up, and thus of learning opportunities, is also mentioned in relation to the Agency's desire to expand, which we will return to in Sections 5.4 and 5.7.

Having said that, there are also clear improvements in streamlining in the collaboration with Frontex and in the fact that all countries can use FAR:

I see advantages in having a [booking] system that all European countries can use and that travel can be pooled. If we hadn't had Frontex and that system, we would probably have had to ring around to each other to sort out joint activities, so it's an advantage to have somewhere to coordinate joint flights.

#24
Swedish Police Authority

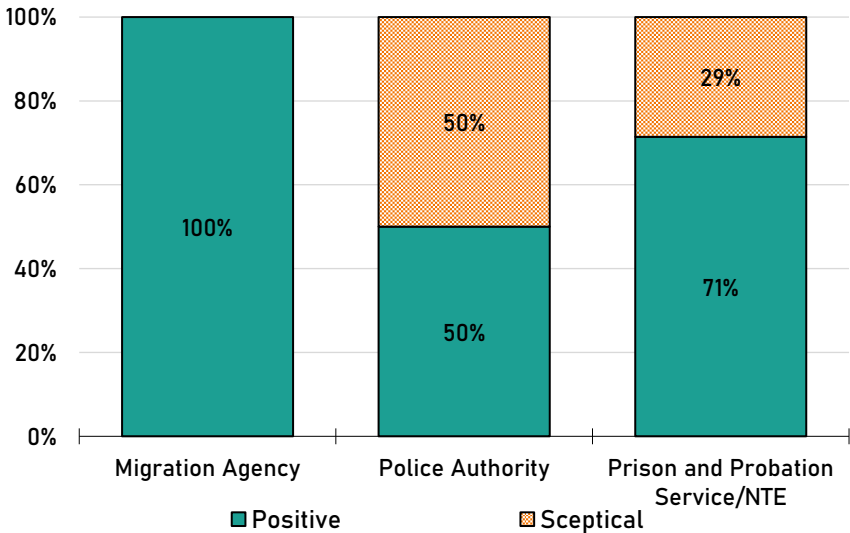
¹³⁶ #24, Swedish Police Authority.

The quote illustrates how the Frontex booking system provides a kind of infrastructure that enables and facilitates coordination and collaboration and helps ensure a more effective implementation of joint return operations.

Concluding remarks

This section has examined the operational collaboration between Swedish government agencies and Frontex and how the government agencies have utilised Frontex support.¹³⁷ In general, respondents describe the collaboration with Frontex as successful: The Agency is perceived as helpful, responsive in its communication and there is a positive attitude towards **using** Frontex support.

Figure 7. Attitude towards the use of Frontex



Note: Dummy variable (0/1) showing whether respondents are sceptical or positive about using and cooperating with Frontex in their work. The variable is based on the answer to the question “How is the collaboration with Frontex functioning” posed in each interview. For a more detailed summary of how respondents view different elements of the collaboration, see Figures A1 and A2 in Annex 2.

Source: Own visualisation on the basis of coded interviews with a total of 25 respondents from the government agencies. One respondent did not state their experience of using and cooperating with Frontex.

¹³⁷ The described cooperation is mainly linked to return operations, but in a broader sense there are more areas of cooperation between Frontex and these Swedish actors that are not covered in this section (e.g. *pre-departure counselling* and reintegration).

As noted earlier, Frontex has been criticised by various organisations for many years for failing to assure the fundamental rights of returnees and for a lack of transparency. Although Swedish border management agencies are tasked with cooperating with Frontex, there is reason to believe that the negative reputation of the Agency may, at least in the past, have influenced both attitudes and willingness to cooperate. However, Frontex has undergone an internal change process since the resignation of the then CEO, Fabrice Leggeri, in April 2022, following revelations of serious shortcomings specifically with regard to respect for fundamental rights (European Anti-Fraud Office, 2022). There are indications that the Agency has been working harder to safeguard these rights in recent years, although some researchers have questioned how effective this work has been (Gkliati, 2021). This is a sign that this dimension, which relates to the objective of humane returns, is being given greater attention at the Agency.

Swedish government agencies have varying histories of cooperating with Frontex. The Swedish Migration Agency and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE began cooperating with the Agency when Frontex's mission changed or when the government agency was given new tasks.¹³⁸ Several respondents, mainly at the Swedish Migration Agency, point out that there was initially some scepticism about the Agency, which in turn may have had to do with the fact that it was associated with involuntary return. However, as Frontex has proven to be a good partner, a government agencies' perceptions of it have become more positive. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE describes how the collaboration has contributed to raising standards internally when it comes to matters of how returnees are treated and work with fundamental rights. In this case, there is also reason to point out how the 2022 collaboration agreement gave the Service its own role, which was different from before.

The agencies' positive perception of Frontex – in the case of the Swedish Migration Agency, where their fears were not realised or in the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE, where they feel that collaboration with Frontex has contributed to improvements internally – may have been significant in promoting the use of Frontex support. At the same time, it should be mentioned that several of the agencies received intimations that they should prioritise return issues in the first years of the 2020s, including making more use of Frontex (Statskontoret, 2022).

¹³⁸ Cooperation between the Swedish Migration Agency and Frontex began when Frontex was given responsibility for working with voluntary returns following the introduction of the 2019 Frontex Regulation.

However, some respondents point out that Frontex is a bureaucratic organisation where some initiatives – such as the suggestion to change the procedures for medical certificates – are perceived as difficult to implement and not well enough anchored. In a number of cases, these initiatives just evaporate without any feedback (Carrera, den Hertog, & Parkin, 2013). Another example is when Frontex had to organise the logistics of a chartered plane for a return operation. According to the respondent, this led to important elements of logistics planning falling through the cracks. After this, all logistics planning returned to Sweden which, in itself, can be interpreted as an expression of Frontex's ability to be flexible and adaptable.¹³⁹

The respondents in these cases describe two different forms of **non-use**. In the case of the medical certificates, the lack of clarity surrounding them seems to have created a space to refrain from implementing the suggestion. In the case of air logistics, the Swedish agencies opted for **non-use** of Frontex resources. They thus opted not to use a solution because it was not deemed to fulfil their needs, a decision that was also accepted by the Agency.

Frontex's flexibility in these cases is worth noting, as it connects to the experimental approach described by Carrera, den Hertog and Parkin (2013). Having a broad mandate to support and contribute to the work of Member States can pave the way for grey zones in which the Agency can test new and expanded support functions. In this case, it can be concluded that the positive effect did not materialise. Although the outcome was described as negative by Swedish respondents, it can still be seen as a step towards best practice, provided that Frontex is able to combine its experimental approach with clearer anchoring and dialogue with the Member States and responsiveness to national needs.

When it comes to the financing of return operations, there are differences of opinion. One group describes a quota system that is unclear, creates stress and is difficult to navigate, where they perceive that a certain number of returnees are required to be granted funding. Another group emphasises instead that the question of funding is more flexible, being an assessment where Frontex makes trade-offs on a case-by-case basis and Swedish agencies can justify their needs. The Agency states that there is no fixed quota to be reached in order to obtain funding. It is also clear that both Frontex and the Member State in question – in this case Sweden – must relate to an objective of cost-effectiveness, but it is also clear that this objective can be bypassed if there are sufficiently strong reasons for organising an enforcement using Frontex funds.

¹³⁹ The respondent described how key parts of the logistics preparatory work had been not happened as neither the Swedish agencies nor Frontex had taken responsibility for booking aircraft stairs or catering.

This can therefore be interpreted as informal knowledge about how Frontex makes its assessments that some respondents have obtained, but which has not reached everyone. Two separate **informal** paths seem to have developed: On the one hand, there is the **informal** perception that the quotas do not mean hard and fast limits, but that there is an interaction between Sweden and Frontex to ensure funding; and on the other hand, an **informal** perception that there are hard and fast limits around the quotas that must be kept to in return operations.

The latter perception is interesting from a more institutional perspective. In practice, the notion of fixed quotas – even if it does not correspond to how things actually work – can have real and problematic consequences for how these activities are organised. It can serve as an example of how informal practices become institutionalised over time (Sahin-Mencutek & Triandafyllidou, 2025). Such perceptions can then characterise and influence planning, health staff are allocated, and decisions on the scale of the operation.

Several respondents at the three Swedish government agencies highlighted the financial aspects, i.e. that Frontex provides funding, as a major benefit. An important motive for **use** is to recoup the funds that Sweden has contributed through Sweden's national contribution to the EU. This can be interpreted to mean that Swedish actors at the operational level consider national needs in the first instance, meaning that the collaboration is primarily valued on the basis of the financial compensation that can be obtained. Although financial compensation is perceived as positive, it does not necessarily add operational value. The fact that return operations are funded by Frontex does not automatically make them more operationally effective, qualitative or frequent, as several respondents at different agencies also note. What is clear is that effectiveness, in terms of more enforcements, also depends to a large extent on how Swedish actors solve other logistical challenges such as finding and ensuring that a sufficient number of returnees can be made available for departure with the correct travel documents and the go-ahead to be received by their country of origin, which is an aspect that has been highlighted by the Swedish Agency for Public Management (2022).

Although respondents generally emphasise the economic aspects as the most important in their collaboration with Frontex, there is also an operational added value. It is apparent that the **use** of Frontex is considered to contribute to the operational objectives of the agencies. This includes staffing during inconvenient working hours, assistance with transit rules and ticket booking on scheduled flights, all of which are factors that make returns easier for the agencies and can contribute to their work with returns being more effective.

However, it is noteworthy that only one respondent identifies the opportunities for coordination as a benefit of the collaboration with Frontex. From a government agency perspective, the possibility for Member States to coordinate and organise a JRO for example using FAR is important in order to be able to implement return operations with higher occupancy rates and thus access to economies of scale. Instead, there are quite a number of statements about “duplication of work”, “lack of flexibility”, “falling between the cracks”, etc. In other words, that the collaboration between Sweden and Frontex requires extra coordination and entails greater complexity. Besides the three Swedish agencies needing to coordinate themselves for an enforcement, which also requires the participation of the recipient countries, needing to coordinate an operation with an actor such as Frontex is an operational challenge. In terms of efficiency, there are both pluses and minuses to report.

In summary, Frontex offers Member States resources and a network for collaboration and coordination of return operations at a level that far exceeds what bilateral cooperation between countries could provide. However, it is not without challenges, and a lot of effort is put into asking questions and solving problems to be able to utilise what Frontex has to offer.

5.2 A Frontex-funded return operation

This section is largely based on the observations made during the participation observation in a Frontex-funded return operation from Sweden to Uzbekistan in September 2025.¹⁴⁰ The section is descriptive and aims to provide a picture of how the day-to-day work in the act of returning a person takes place. We have also tried to compare and contrast the statements of previous respondents and relevant policy documents with what we were able to observe.

Planning phase

Return operations carried out in collaboration with Frontex require a certain amount of planning, during which the Swedish government agencies compile their preliminary needs and present an *annual wheel timeline* to Frontex. In this annual wheel timeline, the agencies make estimates and assessments of which interventions they want support or funding for in the coming year, which includes the planning of destinations where they expect to implement return operations. However, one respondent from the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE emphasises that this annual wheel is mostly an aid, as it is difficult to have such long time horizons in the area of return.

¹⁴⁰ One of the authors of the report participated in a major return operation by chartered aircraft. The operation meant that only staff and returnees were on board, as opposed to returns by scheduled flights.

The annual wheels are preliminary planning. It is difficult to know in weeks 48, 20, 25 whether you will have 40 returnees that you can enforce. So it's a rough estimation. Germany and other large states find it much easier to draw up their annual plans and stick to them, as they have over a quarter of a million [return] decisions. It's not as easy as that in Sweden. The annual wheel – presented to Frontex – is established in October. But there are always changes so the annual wheel is not always the outcome. Our work is nevertheless relatively incident-driven. [...] So the annual wheel is a tool [...] you have to see it as preliminary planning.

#19

Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE

As this quote illustrates, it can be difficult to predict whether there will be enough detained individuals or individuals with orders that are otherwise enforceable at the time of a planned return operation. At the same time, situations may arise where suddenly a large number of individuals are in detention, and their orders are enforceable to a third country where no operation is planned in the annual wheel. This creates an acute situation where a rapid response is required, as individuals with enforceable refusal-of-entry or expulsion orders should not be detained any longer than necessary.¹⁴¹ To make planning more effective and to provide better estimates and planning in the annual wheel, the agencies have joint co-planning within the Operational Centre (OPC).¹⁴² This is an example of how the goal of humane processes and a limited time in detention needs to be reconciled with effectiveness in terms of having enough people to refuse entry, which in turn has led to increased interagency cooperation.

And then the OPC was set up [...] through which the Swedish Police Authority, the Prison and Probation Service and the Swedish Migration Agency work very closely together and see how we can balance things between us, where we can travel to. We then create an annual wheel together stating that *these charters should depart*. Then [the Swedish Police Authority] must take steps in workplaces to find these individuals. Because not all the people destined for return are in detention, they are out there

¹⁴¹ According to Chapter 10, Section 1 and Chapter 12, Section 7 of the Aliens Act (SFS, 2005:716) an alien may be held in detention only if it is necessary and the purpose is to enforce a refusal-of-entry or expulsion order. Detention should end as soon as there are no longer grounds for the measure and enforcement should take place as soon as practically possible, in accordance with the principles of the EU Return Directive. (European Parliament and Council, 2008).

¹⁴² This initiative began as Operation Delta and has since evolved into what is known as the OPC (see Section 4.4).

somewhere. The OPC led to more structure and concerted efforts to fill [chartered aircraft]. Because there was a period when we did not fill the chartered flights because the Swedish Police Authority did not have so many returnees ordered with us. But then this special intervention was made [OPC] that began [autumn 2023].

Lisbeth Åhman,
Case Officer,
Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE

One of Frontex's requirements is that return operations should be cost-effective, and the joint government agency work in the OPC helps to increase the occupancy rate and thus the cost-effectiveness of these charter flights. The OPC also carries out some evaluations to identify shortcomings and opportunities for improvement after a charter flight has been completed.¹⁴³ Every week, the group reviews possible needs to explore whether it is possible to participate in a JRO or if it is possible to implement the return by means of a scheduled flight. According to informant Lisbeth Åhman, Case Officer at the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE, it is primarily the charter flights not included in the annual wheel that are funded by Sweden.

Once a return operation has been established, much of the logistics planning rests with the planning activities of the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE. At this stage, staffing and aircraft bookings are made through *brokers*. A few days before departure, lists and information about the individuals to be returned are then given to the escort leader.

¹⁴³ #19, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE.

Table 6. Staffing during observations of return operation

Staff	Tasks
Escort leader	The escort leader is responsible for leading and coordinating the work throughout the return operation, ensuring that the operation is conducted in a legally certain manner and according to plan, managing communication with other operational functions and making decisions in emergency situations. They have the overall responsibility for managing the individuals, the logistics and security, and serve as a point of contact with the back-up team leader and operations management.
Assistant escort leader	The assistant escort leader participates in the final planning, has an overview of the entire operation and assists the escort leader in operational decision-making, coordination and communication.
Back-up team leader	The back-up team leader is responsible for leading the back-up team's work and allocating tasks within the team throughout the operation, with a particular focus on support when there are elements of risk and in interventions involving vulnerable individuals. They participate in the final planning, select a small back-up team, and coordinate closely with the escort leader to ensure that they are updated on the progress and development of the operation, including at a detailed level.
Back-up team	The back-up team has a flexible and versatile function that provides back-up for the entire operation and the escorts, but does not have direct responsibility for individual returnees. They assist with bodily searches, toilet visits and at junctures where there is an element of risk. They are informed about vulnerable individuals among the returnees, their medical backgrounds and about returnees with a special risk assessment.

Staff	Tasks
Monitor	The national monitoring mechanism during the return operation was represented by a monitor from the Swedish Migration Agency, whose task is to ensure that the enforcement is carried out in accordance with Swedish and international regulations. The monitor follows the entire operation and checks whether returnees are treated with dignity, in accordance with the applicable guidelines, regulations and the Frontex <i>Code of Conduct</i> . Extra attention is paid to the treatment of particularly vulnerable groups, access to toilet visits, interpretation services, complaints mechanisms and the use of coercive measures. In Sweden, the Swedish Migration Agency has the formal task of monitoring a forced return.
Medical officer	Two medical professionals are responsible for assessing the state of health of the returnees and monitoring this during the return operation.
Escorts	The escorts are responsible for maintaining security and order during the return operation, ensuring that returnees are treated with dignity in accordance with the applicable regulations, guidelines and the Frontex <i>Code of Conduct</i> , and reporting any incidents concerning fundamental rights. At the point of release, each escort is assigned a returnee, either individually or as part of a small team, and is then responsible for ensuring that the returnee's needs are met – for example, access to toilet visits, smoking breaks, and information on complaints mechanisms. The escort also carries the individual's valuables with them, and accompanies the individual from the detention centre to their handover in their home country. The matching of escorts and returnees takes into account specific needs, such as female returnees being assigned at least one female escort, and minors or families with children being assigned escorts with expertise in the area of children's rights.

Staff	Tasks
Fundamental Rights Monitor	<p>The Fundamental Rights Monitor (FRM) is part of the FRO staff, which constitutes an independent mechanism within the Frontex organisation, and is tasked with monitoring and reporting on respect for fundamental rights in the Agency's operational activities. During the return operation, the FRM observes and verifies that returnees are treated with dignity in accordance with the applicable regulations, guidelines and the Frontex <i>Code of Conduct</i>. Particular attention is paid to the treatment of vulnerable groups, access to toilet visits, interpretation services, complaints mechanisms and the use of coercive measures.</p> <p>The FRO reports back to the Consultative Forum and publishes annual reports on how Frontex's activities relate to fundamental rights. These reports include assessments of whether the individuals concerned are treated with dignity, and they also identify good examples and possible areas for improvement.¹⁴⁴</p>
Frontex Official	<p>The Frontex Official has a comprehensive observing role during the return operation, with the task of ensuring that staff, facilities and procedures comply with Frontex guidelines and the <i>Code of Conduct</i>. This role includes monitoring the implementation of the operation from a quality and rights perspective, but a description of this function's tasks appears to be somewhat unclear to us as external observers.</p>

Note: All staff in a Frontex-funded return operation are responsible for ensuring that the fundamental rights of returnees are respected. All participants have read and agreed to the Frontex *Code of Conduct* and are obliged to report incidents and breaches (Frontex, 2024c; Frontex, 2018a). It is worth noting that the Frontex FRO, Frontex Official and the monitor are not necessarily involved in all return operations.

Source: Own observations and #32 Observation; #33 Observation; #34 Observation; #35 Observation; #36 Observation; #37 Observation; #38 Observation; #39 Observation; Jonas Grimheden, FRO Frontex.

In the case of larger charter flights, the return operation is led by an escort leader who, together with an assistant escort leader and a back-up team leader, initiates the detailed planning of the operation. Planning includes noting and taking into account the individual needs of returnees, including risk assessments based on factors such as a history of violence, willingness to cooperate, age, gender and medical background. Particularly vulnerable groups must be

¹⁴⁴ See more under Section 4.3 Frontex's mission, the part on *Social responsibility and Fundamental Rights Officer*.

observed with extra care throughout the operation according to Frontex guidelines and the working methods of the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE. Children and families with children should be kept separate from others as far as possible. The escort leader is also responsible for the seating of the returnees on the aircraft and for keeping the captain and airline informed of passenger lists and relevant risk assessments.

In the final preparatory phase of a return operation, passenger lists can still be adjusted, meaning that returnees can be both added and removed. During the observation carried out for this report, the final deadline for changes was 15 hours before release for departure, and 21 hours before the scheduled departure.

[Even in the event of minor changes] all lists have to be amended in the FAR system, and lists given to the escort leader must be changed, staff lists and returnee lists, and we need to have the right information for the airline, etc. and [the escort leader] must have the right PAX lists [passenger lists]. So everything has to be redone for every change that takes place. It's very intense, all this paperwork. [... For these changes] the escort leader and the planner work in parallel and make the changes in all systems. But it's [the escort leader] who ultimately has to check that everything is correct. This means of course everything from going through all the returnees and checking that all the information about [the returnees] is correct. There have been problems with the ordering official having entered the wrong sex or the wrong personal identity number. There's a lot that you have to check [... which] takes a lot of time, it has to be correctly entered in the order.

#44

Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE

The short time frame adds to the flexibility and allows more returnees to be included in the operation, which is a positive thing from the point of view of occupancy rates and effectiveness. At the same time, it imposes a significant workload on escort leaders, who need to handle rapid changes and extensive supplementary work with very short lead times.

Pre-departure

The return operation observed as part of this study started with the release at the offices of the Probation and Prison Service/NTE at 03.00. The escort leaders and the back-up team leader had been in place since 01.00 to carry out the final preparations and conduct a briefing with the back-up team. The

release meant that all staff involved – escorts, medical staff¹⁴⁵ and observers – received a joint briefing on the times for the different steps and relevant information about the operation. In this specific operation, 24 individuals were to be returned to Uzbekistan with the help of 62 staff.¹⁴⁶ The escorts were then given a folder and a bag with all the necessary information about the returnee. They then prepared for the assignment, either individually (in the case of a single escort) or together in a group (when several escorts are responsible for the same individual).

At 04.00, buses left for the Swedish Migration Agency's detention centre in Märsta. At the release, the escort leader called out numbers pre-assigned to the escorts, who then entered the detention centre to collect the individual they were to escort. The escorts introduced themselves and provided information on bodily searches, packing, handling of valuables and the rules that apply during the operation. All luggage was labelled with the returnees' names and seat on the aircraft. Several of the returnees stated that they could not speak Swedish or English and we were then able to observe how an individual from the back-up team translated into Russian. The role of the interpreter is crucial to ensure that information is transmitted correctly, that the communication functions, and that the individual is treated in a respectful and humane manner. Nevertheless, interpretation support is only a recommendation from Frontex and not a binding requirement for the organising country.¹⁴⁷ Staff from the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE able to speak other languages may decide for themselves whether they are willing to assist with translation.¹⁴⁸

I know [several languages] and at times I feel like I can take the task on [interpreting]. I can make things easier for the returnee and for my colleagues so that it goes quickly and smoothly. [...] Yes, so everyone understands each other and a good atmosphere can be created in a way. [...]. But [as now] I was part of the back-up team and had no returnee [of my own] with me. This means I can provide support everywhere. In actual fact, I wasn't meant to be an

¹⁴⁵ Medical staff participate and make assessments of needs and medical interventions already in the planning stage of assignments. They are then actively involved in the whole operation. It is also a Frontex requirement that medical staff are present during return operations.

¹⁴⁶ A total of 62 people participated in the operation, including two escort leaders (first and second), two medical staff, one monitor (from the Swedish Migration Agency), one team leader for the back-up team, eleven back-up team individuals, 43 escorts, as well as one FRO and one Seconded National Expert from Frontex.

¹⁴⁷ See for example point 5.4 (Frontex, 2016) and Article 14 (Frontex, 2018a).

¹⁴⁸ #33 Observation.

interpreter there, but I don't mind, sometimes you end up in certain situations and I'm flexible. I can put myself forward, it doesn't matter. It could be languages. It could be something else. You want to make things go smoothly for everyone. That's the main thing.

#38

Observation

The lack of interpreters is noted by #39 Observation as a change in recent years and an area where they believe there are differences from other Member States with which #39 Observation is familiar. #34 Observation also explains that the absence of an interpreter seems to be systematic and recounts occasions when this created problems and left a "bad taste in your mouth". Being able to communicate and create a sound basis for a peaceful operation where the returnees cooperate with the escorts, as #37 Observation also notes.

[The system of staff interpreting] is quite vulnerable too, because say the [person who knows the language] staff gets held up or falls ill or something, you have no back-up there. [...] An interpreter's job is to be independent and impartial, so we don't really fulfil that bit either [when the escort staff have to interpret].

#39 Observation

As noted in the quote, it is a vulnerable system even though staff often manage to remedy the situations that arise by interpreting and translating themselves during return operations. The lack of interpreters has previously been highlighted as a shortcoming by the FRO (Fundamental Rights Officer, 2024a, p. 14)), which also leads to this being an area that has to be monitored particularly closely by both national monitors and the FRO.

The back-up team continued to assist the escorts during the release process by assisting with bodily searches, for example. The returnees and their escorts were then placed on waiting buses by the back-up team. During the observed operation, there was a very calm atmosphere, but #37 Observation reflected on the different roles of escorts and back-up teams. For the escorts, communication was very important, and that some form of mutual respect was created.

Sometimes [the clients] become irritated and offended when confusion arose due to language difficulties, and we are unable to communicate about our procedures, it's at this point that situations can arise. It's nice to have more colleagues there in

such cases. If I had to be the one needing to wrestle with the person and use coercive measures, then sit next to him for ten hours – well, that's not so great. He would have a bit of a grudge against me, I feel. So it's nice to have others come in and take that part so you can come in as the "good cop". I mean with the verbal instructions. [...] just because it can be up to 20 hours the escorts have to sit with this client.

#37

Observation

Treating returnees with respect and humanity is crucial – not only to ensure a humane return, but also to prevent conflicts before they arise.¹⁴⁹ Observation #37 emphasises that difficult situations can often be avoided through clear communication and a dignified approach to the person. They point out that they prefer to avoid coercive measures if it is not strictly necessary, not least because the escort and the returnee may then have to spend many hours together during the flight. An angry atmosphere makes the working day very demanding and long.

In the next step, returnees and staff arrived at a hangar in the Arlanda Airport area. A FRO and a Frontex Official joined them there, and the returnees were escorted together with their escorts one by one from the buses, through security control and then through passport control. The back-up team also assisted throughout these steps. The FRO and Frontex Official monitored the progress and spoke with the escort leader and the monitor from the Swedish Migration Agency. The escort leader placed themselves in the passport control and assisted with identity documents while the other escort leader was able to move more freely and keep an eye on things generally.

In the spacious waiting area, tables and chairs were provided, and the escorts and returnees could sit together and eat breakfast from prepared paper bags that were waiting on the tables. The back-up team circulated around and waited in case anyone needed extra assistance. Adjacent to the waiting area was a family room with sofas and toys where children and families with children could be kept separate if necessary. The waiting area also had separate toilets, information about the complaints mechanism, prayer rooms,¹⁵⁰ a resting room¹⁵¹ and a smoking area. When the returnees needed to use any of

¹⁴⁹ #36, Observation.

¹⁵⁰ This information was found on one of the far walls.

¹⁵¹ The resting room also doubled up as a telephone room when some of the returnees needed to make calls to lawyers or relatives.

these facilities, the escort(s)¹⁵² and sometimes someone from the back-up team accompanied them.

While in the waiting area, the escort leader held a briefing together with other escort leaders, the back-up team leader, the monitor, one of the medical officers¹⁵³, the FRO and the Frontex Official. During the briefing, a review of how the operation had gone (up to that point) was held, at which everyone had the chance to note or comment on observations or incidents, along with a short briefing on the remaining part of the operation. Aside from the Frontex Official, who complained about the lack of WiFi on the plane, everyone was satisfied with the morning and the operation thus far.¹⁵⁴

Boarding and the journey

Just before 09.00, it was announced that it was time for boarding, so the returnees and their escorts lined up to leave the hangar and board the waiting buses that drove them out to the aircraft. On this occasion, several members of the back-up team placed themselves between the bus door and the aircraft staircase, and the escorts also got extra back-up at the top of the stairs,¹⁵⁵ which was described as one of the elements of risk during the operation. We noted that the supervisor and the FRO were close by during the entire course of events. The returnees were then escorted to their seats. All returnees were placed in the window seat; the middle seat was left empty and an escort sat closest to the aisle. All hand luggage brought by the returnees and staff had been placed in advance on the aircraft by their seats.

The escort leader and the Frontex Official sat at the front of the plane, with some of the back-up team seated in the following rows. The FRO and the monitor had been seated in positions that offered a good overview of the plane. During the flight, the back-up team rotated in the aisle and the escorts had to raise their hand if they needed a break or if their returnees needed to go to the toilet. When visiting the toilet, two members of the back-up team came and escorted the returnee there and back. These procedures complied with the Frontex guidelines and are described as having been developed over a long period of time, taking note of what constitutes lowest risk and *best*

¹⁵² The escorts accompanied them to the toilets but waited outside.

¹⁵³ The second medical officer was requested but was busy with one of the returnees' medical needs.

¹⁵⁴ Access to the Internet enables incidents to be logged during the journey. However, we cannot find any recommendations for this to be available on board in the Guide for Joint Return Operations by Air coordinated by Frontex (Frontex, 2016).

¹⁵⁵ The aircraft staircase was covered, meaning it had a roof and walls, which is also in line with Frontex guidelines (see point 6.1.6 of the Guide for Joint Return Operations by Air coordinated by Frontex (Frontex, 2016)).

practice.¹⁵⁶ During the flight, generous amounts of food, snacks and drinks were also served, which is deemed to help keep the atmosphere calm.¹⁵⁷

The escort leader, who is seated right at the front of the plane, is kept continuously informed by the back-up team leader and other key people on the progress of the journey. This regular communication enables the escort leader to make operational decisions, such as reassignment of escorts, when necessary. During the operation in question, a situation arose where an escort who was part of a team with two other escorts, was reassigned to another returnee who had only one escort assigned at the time. The reassignment was not due to the returnee causing a disruption, but was based on an operational judgement by the escort leader. As the original team was working very well and the returnee was calm and cooperative, it was deemed possible to reallocate the resources. The aim was to provide some relief to the lone escort while maintaining a safe and even distribution of work during the journey. During the second meal, a situation arose where the Frontex Official remarked that the returnees were given a knife and fork, which is not in line with the Agency's guidelines. Cutlery is considered a risk and according to point 6.1.8 in the guidelines for a JRO, only plastic spoons are suitable (Frontex, 2016).¹⁵⁸ This meant that everyone on the plane had to eat their meal using a teaspoon. In this situation, the Frontex Official was in point of fact correct – it did not follow the guidelines, but at the same time, this turned into a decision that the escort leader was forced to make.

#32 Observation notes that it is important for all staff at all stages, including in the planning, to be aware of the guidelines, rules and the practical aspects of the operation in order to satisfy all guidelines. In this instance, a slightly less strict approach to the treatment of returnees was demonstrated by the Swedish staff.

¹⁵⁶ See point 6.3.5 of the Guide for Joint Return Operations by Air coordinated by Frontex (Frontex, 2016).

¹⁵⁷ The food was served by flight attendants and the procedure was no different from that during regular scheduled flights. However, as noted in point 6.1.8 of the Guide for Joint Return Operations by Air coordinated by Frontex (Frontex, 2016) both the quantity and quality of food should be duly considered.

¹⁵⁸ "If cutlery is provided during the flight to the country of return, it should be plastic and not include a knife or fork." See point 6.1.8 of the Guide for Joint Return Operations by Air coordinated by Frontex (Frontex, 2016).

It is more offensive to have to eat your food with a small plastic spoon than to eat properly with a knife and fork. If I am looking after an assignment myself, I rely on the escorts to make sure that the cutlery is collected after the food has been eaten. Frontex does not do that [...] we only see Frontex regulations.

#32

Observation

The situation that arose led to direct complaints from escorts to the escort leader which, according to #33 Observation, led to the *chain of command* being broken, noting that although there is a hierarchical structure to Swedish return operations, the hierarchy tends to be slightly less evident compared to other Member States.¹⁵⁹

Arrival and handover

The landing procedures vary depending on the country of arrival. On this occasion, the returnees were allowed to leave the aircraft on their own without an escort. Before leaving the plane, they were given their valuables back for which the escort had been responsible since the release from the detention centre, along with complaints forms that they can fill in and submit digitally. The transfer to the Uzbek authorities took place in the arrivals hall, before passport control, and proceeded very quickly. There was an EURLO on site who had prepared for receiving both returnees and staff. The task of an EURLO is to work on third-country government agencies, establish communication channels and procedures for identity documents, and speed up landing permits and other important elements of the return process. To make things easier, they are also present at the airport upon arrival. Several staff members emphasised that the arrival is much easier and smoother when there is an EURLO in the country of arrival.

Sweden, like other smaller Member States, routinely utilises the EURLO in Uzbekistan for returns to the region.¹⁶⁰ This could be because larger Member States have either negotiated bilateral agreements or established procedures and communication channels on their own.

¹⁵⁹ This was also noted by #34 Observation, who stated that Sweden stands out both in comparison with other Member States and in terms of how Frontex's guidelines dictate that communication should take place.

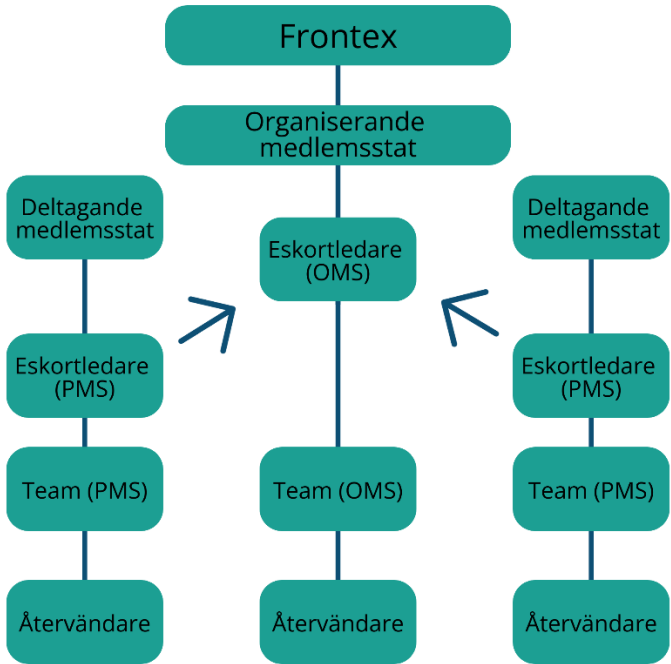
¹⁶⁰ According to the PowerPoint presentation given by the Uzbek EURLO.

Collaboration under the Frontex umbrella

According to our observations, the return operation followed both Frontex guidelines and the *Code of Conduct* and is thus consistent with what respondent #19 Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE and Ivan Tomovic, Expert at the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE state regarding the common core curricula, guidelines and procedures having been implemented at national level.

Uncertainty about mandates and division of responsibilities can affect the capacity to assure the consistent and humane treatment of returnees. There is a risk of a fragmented structure arising where it becomes difficult to intervene if shortcomings are observed. Furthermore, this may lead to variation in how returnees are treated, depending on the country responsible for them, which risks undermining equal treatment. Even when Swedish staff participate in another country's JRO, the staff state that they experience a lack of clarity concerning their mandate and responsibility.

Figure 8. Frontex Chain of Command during a JRO



Source: Own visualisation in line with description.

Several of the staff who served during the observation would like clarification of the details concerning both responsibilities and mandates during return operations. In addition to the mandate during the rest period¹⁶¹, several respondents would like to know how the responsibility should be distributed during a JRO, perceiving it as unclear. This is despite the fact that the Frontex Chain of Command states that escorts from the participating Member States report to their escort leader, who in turn reports to the escort leader of the organising Member State.¹⁶²

It's difficult when you have other Member States involved; we are very careful and confident about what applies during assignments. [...] It can be difficult to manage when there are many different Member States on an assignment because they then have their escort leader who controls them. I cannot go in and control the staff of another country. Instead I have to go to the escort leader and convey that *I can see that this and that is happening among your staff*. It's difficult, as I said, because we do not really know what our mandate is.

#44

Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE

In a JRO organised by another Member State, ambiguities sometimes arise regarding responsibilities and mandates. I have official responsibilities in my role as a children's representative, which include preparing the child or family by describing and painting a picture of how the actual return will happen. In Sweden, we have certain procedures and governing documents when it comes to how to deal with children as a [vulnerable] group. When we join a JRO and are on the ground in the organising Member State, their governing documents, arrangements and procedures apply instead. Much of what happens in the organising country is out of my control. Here I feel that I'm largely wing-clipped as an official – do I have any say in these circumstances? There are sometimes quite strange situations where we [Swedish government officials] pack cuddly toys and chocolates and act as 'human shields' in situations where families are not separated from other returnees and where the situations can become

¹⁶¹ In this case, #32 Observation and #33 Observation, among others, noted that there is some ambiguities from the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE regarding the status of staff during breaks and how they should relate to the Code of Conduct and Frontex guidelines during this time, which also creates an unclear mandate for the escort leader.

¹⁶² See Figure 7.

unsettled and the staff [from the organising Member State] can be armed. In Sweden, we separate the families and have special rooms with toys and a quieter environment. I feel very uncomfortable when I think about these situations – and I have asked my managers and others in my organisation where my responsibilities as a Swedish official cease, but I have not received a clear answer.

#45

Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE

The quote raises important questions about the division of responsibilities, mandates and ethical boundaries. In situations where Swedish government agencies apply a softer, more humane and child-friendly approach, other Member States may have a stricter focus on security or practices that Swedish escorts are neither used to nor see as appropriate – especially when minors are involved. In practice, this difference can create difficult dilemmas for Swedish officials, who in their professional role try to maintain a child rights perspective even in contexts where they lack direct influence.

Much of the academic literature on Frontex highlights this very set of problems. Researchers point to (a lack of) transparency and (the lack of clear) accountability. According to Coppens, (2012) Frontex is increasing its influence on how operations are conducted, despite the fact that the Member States are formally responsible. This creates a grey zone where responsibility for operational decisions is shifted. For Swedish officials acting within the framework of another Member State's governance – but with Swedish official responsibilities – this means that the humane perspective risks being marginalised. When children's representatives feel that they are hampered ("wing-clipped") in their professional role, it is not just a matter of personal frustration – it is an indicator of a system where the humane perspective is not sufficiently integrated into cross-border practice.

Effective enforcement

In subsequent conversations with #37 Observation and #38 Observation, it emerged that operations to Uzbekistan tend to be largely without drama and function well. The returnees seem to accept enforcement to a large extent. One reason may be that their stay in Europe has been related to work and often the expulsion happens after they have 'changed' Member State within the EU without a permit, or that they are *overstayers* who have remained after their residence permits have expired. #38 Observation and #33 Observation also note that returnees to other destinations tend to put up more resistance

and in that case may require quite different interventions from escorts and the back-up team.

One staff member reflects on the effectiveness of these types of return operations, i.e. the staff costs that larger return charter flight operations entail.¹⁶³

A [working] week involving 60 escorts costing X amount of money. If we had done this unescorted, or done this on a scheduled flight, we would have travelled two by two with [the returnees] the whole time. [...] these 60 [escorts] would have got many more people out in the same period of time. So I'm not so sure this is particularly effective or that much cheaper either. That said, you can't take all returnees on scheduled flights. But that has nothing to do with this journey you accompanied us on, because in that case, all the [returnees] were relatively orderly and wanted to go home. Even if they don't want to go home, they don't resist anyway. There are some who put up a lot more resistance. You can't have them in furnished aircraft, you have to travel some other way [...] When you initially say that we are doing this to avoid the costs and that it will be cheaper, it doesn't always work out that way. However, you don't see the costs because you palm them off elsewhere, and so you think you have a "clean slate" here at home.

#36

Observation

The question of effectiveness in this case may be somewhat hypothetical, but it is still important to think about. Based on our observations and subsequent conversations, it appears that some destinations are seen as very unproblematic to return to, as in the case of Uzbekistan. Although the returnees are being forced to travel back, there is a degree of voluntariness, or at least no overt resistance. Could these individuals be returned unescorted, or escorted to boarding in line with how #43 Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE describes their assignment during their secondment abroad?¹⁶⁴ The issue of risk assessment may also come into play, as it is not certain that all

¹⁶³ When Frontex finances a return operation of this kind, it means that the Agency pays for the costs of chartering aircraft, hotels, scheduled flights (in some instances), medical staff and, in some cases, monitors. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE is responsible for staff costs (Joacim Trybom, Head of Transport Department, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE).

¹⁶⁴ The respondent describes how they served as an escort in voluntary returns where they assisted with checking in and accompanying returnees through security and passport control as well as accompanying them to the gate and waiting for boarding (#43 Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE).

individuals (even if the whole operation proceeds without incident) would be authorised to travel on scheduled (unescorted or escorted) flights, or that such a large number of individuals to the same third country would be able to return by scheduled flights over such a limited period of time. There are multiple aspects to consider when enabling and planning for larger groups to return over the same period of time. One respondent reflects on the planning for forced returns noting, among other things, that there are several factors that need to mesh when these individuals are returned using scheduled flights.

In the case of operations or enforcements involving forced returns, the level of difficulty is gradually increased. This is because the airline must authorise the person on board. And if the transit is through the Schengen area, there must also be an authorisation for the transit itself. So there are a lot of factors, multiple factors that come into play that affect whether the operation can be authorised or whether you have to start over from scratch. If, for example, let's say Lufthansa says no to a deportation to Albania, which is a very common enforcement. The Member State then has to start over and potentially apply to the same company on another day if it is informed that *we have too many [deportations] on board so we are not allowed to travel that day*. Or another case could be: if we imagine that the person was supposed to travel from Arlanda via Frankfurt to Tirana and then the authorities in Germany say that the person is not allowed to transit in Germany because there is an *arrest warrant* for them. So if the person were to be transited, [they] would be arrested. In that case you also have to inform the Member State that in this case we have to... you have to rebook, you have to change the itinerary, but not go via Germany. This is because that transit route will never be approved at all.

#30, Senior Case Officer, International Planning,
Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE

The question of *efficiency* or what is *cost-efficient* is difficult to assess and penetrate. As the Senior Case Officer, International Planning, notes, there are other factors that affect planning, and it is also of utmost importance that enforcement is not delayed in accordance with the Return Directive and the Aliens Act. In a more "closed" process such as an NRO or a JRO, there are simply fewer factors that can affect whether enforcement takes place or is delayed, which in itself can be described as more effective. It then becomes

more a question of increasing the occupancy rate to improve cost-effectiveness. According to several respondents, collaboration under the OPC seems to contribute precisely to this type of improvement in effectiveness.

5.3 Standing corps

This section begins with an introduction to the standing corps; its purpose, composition and staffing. It then moves on to the views that Swedish government agencies have on hosting parts of the standing corps and the possibility of seconding their own staff. The standing corps is expected to play an important role in Frontex's operational work to support Member States in border surveillance and enforcements of returns as well as in the implementation of EU directives, in particular the new Asylum and Migration Pact.

One of the biggest tasks of EU border management is to build up and staff Frontex's standing corps. By 2027, the objective is for the standing corps to comprise 10,000 individuals, with 3,000 in Category 1, i.e. employees of Frontex, while the other 7,000 are to be seconded from the Member States (Frontex, u.d.(b)). But the plans don't stop there. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has proposed an expansion that would swell the standing corps to 30,000 (Europeiska Kommissionen, 2024). At present there are indications that recruitment is difficult and respondent #15 Commission Official DG HOME notes that this is one of the points that are often discussed at Management Board meetings.

If we look at the current situation, Frontex is a little more than halfway to reaching 10,000. [...] we are simply trying to help Frontex achieve this target and solve any problems. [...] Frontex sometimes has difficulty recruiting its own staff in Category 1. Because they don't get enough applicants or qualified applicants. It's not easy for us to solve those problems from the Commission's side, but we do try to monitor this and do what we can to assist to be *on track* there. Then for the future 30,000, DG HOME will have the main responsibility for drafting the proposal.

#15 Commission Official
DG HOME

The respondent from the European Commission confirms that there are some difficulties in staffing Category 1 (direct employees of Frontex). Nor has the proposal to expand the standing corps' staff pool been received with open arms from individuals at Frontex.

And *what* we would prefer to do if the vision [were to become a reality], Frontex has of course been promised, or threatened with, a tripling of the number of standing corps by Ursula von der Leyen in July [2024] in the European Parliament. [...] a tripling would mean 30,000 [...] what are we going to do with all those staff, I have, so to speak, been ready and willing to help, and said that we can of course take some of them on and turn them into monitors [...]

Jonas Grimheden, FRO
Frontex

The problems with staffing the standing corps (Category 1) may also be due to the benefits and salaries offered. This is also indicated by #9 Coordinator at the Swedish Police Authority, who reflects on how Category 1 is staffed and gives clear indications that the pay terms and benefits are not on a par with what is provided in some Member States – including Sweden:

If you look at the standing corps today, we have a geographical imbalance. If you look at Category 1, then it basically consists of just 2–3 countries. There is Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, a few other countries. There is basically zero Swedish participation [in Category 1]. Why isn't it popular in some countries to apply [to work] for Frontex? I think it's about the pay levels, the work environment, that is, the way you move around. I think that Frontex may not always have a good reputation. It can also be difficult to get leave from one's job to do this. [...] Furthermore] the gender balance is also very skewed. There are basically 80% men in Category 1.

#9 Coordinator
Swedish Police Authority

The Swedish respondents, who are generally in favour of the collaboration with Frontex, express more mixed views when it comes to the standing corps. Above all, the size of the future standing corps raises some concern, as respondents point to risks for Sweden's national capacity.¹⁶⁵ Previous experience of seconding staff also varies, and many remain very doubtful about both the need for and the usefulness of hosting staff from the standing corps.

¹⁶⁵ #12 Head of Border Police Unit, NOA, Swedish Police Authority; Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority.

Secondment of staff

The standing corps is largely staffed by Member States that second staff to the corps. These are staff in Categories 2 and 3, who are deployed for short or long periods, and are to be sourced with the help of the Member States. Even here however, the Agency has had difficulty recruiting staff.

Is Frontex *on track* to get to 10,000 with the annual targets in the current Regulation? [...] Member States sometimes find it difficult to second as many staff as they should for Categories 2 and 3. [Staffing] is a challenge for the Member States.

#15 Commission Official
DG HOME

Views diverge at Swedish government agencies regarding the secondment of staff. The Swedish Police Authority has had the most negative experiences, while the Swedish Migration Agency says that their civilian employees can sometimes encounter certain obstacles in environments where there is more policing involved. This negative attitude is far from unique to Sweden. A survey form from the European Court of Auditors sent to Member States in 2019 showed that 81 percent of respondents felt that the Frontex Regulation from the same year – including the standing corps – would affect national staffing and have both budgetary and operational implications (European Court of Auditors, 2021). The Swedish position at the Justice and Home Affairs Council (JHA) meeting in October 2025 also gives a clear picture that seconding staff to the standing corps must not risk weakening the nation's capacity to guard its own borders (Justitiedepartementet, EU-enheten, 2025, p. paragraph 10 b) and, by extension, the capacity of national government agencies to carry out their missions.

Swedish Migration Agency

A respondent at the Swedish Migration Agency describes some difficulties being encountered when staff were seconded to Frontex, but that the work in general is going well.¹⁶⁶ At first, for example, the workload was perceived as uneven – but these problems have decreased with time. When asked why experiences differ between government agencies, the respondent reflects on the fact that the Swedish Police Authority's seconded staff work in a different structure within Frontex:

¹⁶⁶ In 2024, the Swedish Migration Agency contributed five experts to the standing corps; they were deployed in Cyprus and Greece (Migrationsverket, Årsredovisning 2024, 2025d). In 2023, five experts were contributed who assisted in returns and identification matters in Greece, Italy and Cyprus (Migrationsverket, 2024b).

I think it's due to the fact that our missions are different and that we work in different cultures. [The respondent talks about an operation where the Swedish Migration Agency's seconded staff participated in a policing structure]. There we noticed that they work within an existing policing structure. It was strange for [our staff] to become part of those groups.

#26

Respondent at government agency

Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE

When a respondent who works at the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE is asked about the Service's experiences of seconding staff and their attitudes to this, they provided the following reflection:

[The secondment] is so limited. It's a great opportunity for our employees and they can get some new input. Often it's [staff] who have been instructors with us who get seconded and go and work as instructors. They get a bit more experience. But as an organisation, there are no great benefits for us.

Joacim Trybom

Head of Transport Department

Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE

According to the same respondent, the Prison and Probation Service has had a seconded staff member for a long period at the Frontex headquarters in Warsaw. This contact has been valuable and has given them a deeper understanding of Frontex as an organisation.¹⁶⁷ Another respondent from the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE, also commenting on the staff member seconded to Warsaw, also points out that while this seconded national expert certainly did not work specifically to advantage Sweden, they have nevertheless been extremely valuable. Despite these positive experiences, the Service currently sees no need to send a new seconded national expert when the current expert's term of office expires as the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE assessed that they "[...] had had [the expert] there for three years and we have got what we wanted out of it".¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ Joacim Trybom, Head of Transport Department, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE.

¹⁶⁸ Cecilia Andelius, Expert, Frontex and European Border Management, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE.

During our subsequent conversations with staff involved in the Frontex-funded return operation, several stressed that they saw the possibility of secondment as a good professional opportunity for both their career and personal development.¹⁶⁹ A number of staff members had also served in other Member States under the Frontex umbrella.¹⁷⁰ A respondent from the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE summed up their time as a member of the standing corps, category 3, as the best time in their professional life, but added that although the work was very rewarding, the exchange was more heavily weighted towards the hosting Member State.¹⁷¹ The respondent felt that experiences such as patience, treatment and communication were characteristics of the staff that were worth taking with them from the Swedish context to the hosting Member State. The experience and exchange thus seem to be part of Sweden contributing to best practice in the area. The respondent felt that the softer and more humane way of working in Sweden was a strength that also facilitated the achievement of the objective of humane returns. All of this was something they felt they could contribute to the other organisation. A question that remains, however, is how Swedish government agencies, or more specifically the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE in this case, can better utilise experiences or best practice that can be captured after staff have served in other Member States.

Swedish Police Authority

The 2021 Annual Report of the Swedish Police Authority (2022, p. 130) states that the secondment of staff to Frontex interventions is an important part of the Authority's work to "fight irregular migration". The Swedish Police Authority is also responsible for the coordination and secondment of staff to the standing corps.¹⁷² However, in our interviews with several respondents at the Swedish Police Authority, they noted that their seconded staff often lack meaningful tasks.¹⁷³ One respondent describes the experience of staff seconded to two different Member States:

¹⁶⁹ #33 Observation; #34 Observation; #37 Observation; #38 Observation.

¹⁷⁰ Some had served before the introduction of the standing corps.

¹⁷¹ #43 Swedish National Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE.

¹⁷² The Police Authority provided staff to the standing corps who were guarding the land borders in Eastern Europe and in the maritime environment in Italy during 2023 (Polismyndigheten, 2024b).

¹⁷³ Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority; #18 Group Manager, Swedish Police Authority.

We sent staff to locations such as [place name] in [EU country] for border surveillance in relation to [third country]. The person was going crazy there because [they] were not given anything to do. We have had a person who speaks [the language of the country] who has been in [the Member State] where [the Member State] did not let [them] do anything for four months however much [they] tried.

Lasse Hammarsjö
Head of Operations Unit
Swedish Police Authority

In general, the Swedish Police Authority's responses are marked by a clear scepticism about the secondment of staff to the standing corps. According to the respondents, a recurring problem is the difficulty of finding meaningful tasks and that the Authority loses knowledge and skills that are difficult to replace. One respondent summed up the problem thus:

[If secondment to the standing corps were to become too burdensome for the Authority,] we would end up without staff, we can never replace [too great employee losses]. Now we have lost a staff member for four months.

#18 Group Manager
Swedish Police Authority

It is worth noting that the Agency's response is that it evaluates all secondments within the standing corps.¹⁷⁴ To a direct question about how Frontex views the criticism voiced by Swedish respondents concerning the lack of task, Frontex replied:

So far, FRESO seconded by Sweden did not report lack of meaningful tasks after their deployment. Moreover the Swedish Category 2 officer previously requested his secondment to be prolonged. Also the above mentioned five Swedish Return Specialist deployments did not report lack of meaningful tasks. On the contrary, they have expressed great satisfaction with the tasks and workload during the deployments to Greece and Cyprus.

#25
Frontex

¹⁷⁴ #25 Frontex.

The quotes from the Swedish Police Authority may also indicate that from the government agencies' perspective, they see themselves as having the greater need for their own staff, which leads to **non-use**. Which can also be confirmed by the quote from #15 Commission Official, DG HOME, who stated that: "[...] Member States sometimes find it difficult to second as many staff as they are required to for Categories 2 and 3. [Staffing] is a challenge for the Member States". The majority of respondents from the Swedish Police Authority also express some scepticism about how the corps is used within the framework of Frontex's mission. There is a perception that the standing corps is not being used effectively, but is instead either under-utilised, used incorrectly or serves as a means for "some countries in southern Europe" to finance their activities through systematic staff exchanges.¹⁷⁵ There are also perceptions that Frontex is "bad at deploying staff to places where they are really needed and when they have seconded staff in these places they are really bad at managing the feedback".¹⁷⁶ Another respondent at the Swedish Police Authority expresses uncertainty about why Frontex insists on deploying staff to certain countries:

What does the risk assessment say, and *who* makes the decision based on what the risk assessment says about where we should deploy the standing corps, and for *how long*? I don't perceive that this is the way things are done today. We have deployed staff to Iceland and I wonder, *where is the crisis in Iceland?* The connection between secondment and anticipated operational effect needs to be clarified.

#12 Head of Border Swedish Police Unit, NOA,
Swedish Police Authority

Although several respondents at the Swedish Police Authority express doubts concerning the effectiveness, some positive aspects are also highlighted. Above all, the opportunity to offer staff the opportunity to serve abroad is seen as valuable, as well as the structure of different categories of secondment.¹⁷⁷ Despite this, they still feel that the standing corps does not add much value to the Authority as a whole. From the Agency's side, they highlight that Sweden makes a valuable contribution and that staff seconded from Sweden are highly skilled and competent and contribute to *best practice* within this collaboration:

¹⁷⁵ Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority; #12 Head of Border Police Unit, NOA, Swedish Police Authority.

¹⁷⁶ Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority.

¹⁷⁷ #12 Head of Border Police Unit, NOA, Swedish Police Authority; Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority.

Beyond the operational support, the deployment of FRESO teams also proves to be of additional added value in each deployment location. The versatile professional background of the team members allows a seamless way of sharing best practices with the local team, and at the same time providing practical assistance [...] For instance, during one return operation a returnee appeared agitated and unwilling to be returned, so the local authorities asked for the support of the Swedish FRESO. By using his language skills and cultural awareness, the FRESO managed to establish a dialogue with the returnee, who eventually started cooperating with the authorities and agreed to be returned.

#25

Frontex

Admission of the standing corps

According to the current regulations, Swedish government agencies may request deployment of the standing corps, but to date this has not happened as a government agency project is in progress that is preparing tasks and practicalities for this kind of deployment. In 2026, the Swedish Police Authority will host two people from the standing corps. According to the Frontex Regulation from 2019, there is no requirement that the Member States must host members of the standing corps, which has opened the way for a certain amount of **non-use**. However, it emerges that Frontex, through its vulnerability assessments, has required Sweden to facilitate the reception of members of the standing corps. Which in purely practical terms has meant changes in the rules and their implementation at the government agency level.¹⁷⁸

The requirement for Sweden is that we should be able to host standing corps members. There is no specific requirement concerning how many we have to accept. The only requirement on us is how many we have to second to Frontex. However, Frontex *wants* us to be able to host standing corps members, and they often point out that Sweden has not yet hosted any staff from the standing corps.

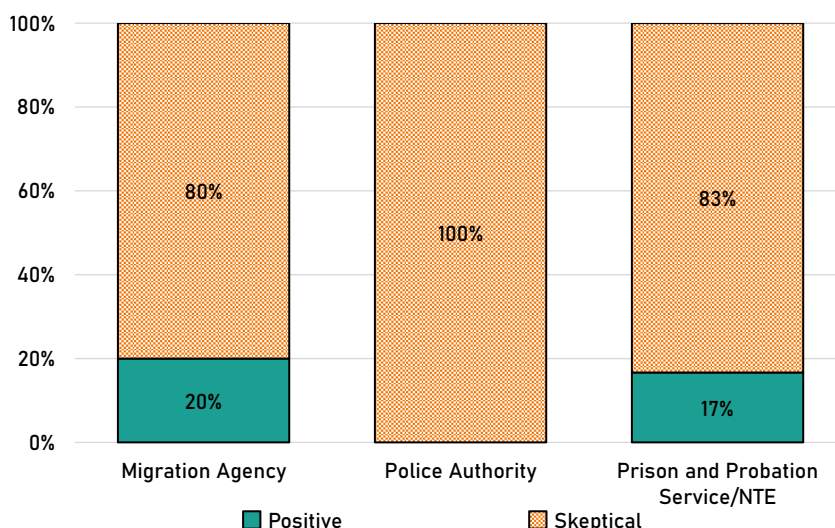
#9 Coordinator

Swedish Police Authority

¹⁷⁸ Article 32 of the 2019 Frontex Regulation requires the Agency to carry out vulnerability assessments, which can then form the basis for **binding recommendations** to Member States on measures that need to be taken. If a Member State does not comply with these recommendations, Frontex may propose that the European Commission take further action under Article 42, which may lead the Commission to propose that the Council decide on the temporary reintroduction of border controls under Article 29 of the Schengen borders code (European Parliament and Council, 2019).

The respondents have differing attitudes to hosting the standing corps. Somewhat simplified, the Swedish Migration Agency has a more open attitude, while the respondents at the Swedish Police Authority were more doubtful. Some respondents from the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE and the Swedish Police Authority expressed the opinion that they could cover their own staffing needs and perform their own tasks. But the standing corps might possibly be able to benefit some other unit or government agency.¹⁷⁹

Figure 9. Attitudes to using the standing corps in Sweden



Note: Dummy variable (0/1) showing whether respondents are sceptical or positive about the standing corps in Sweden. The variable is based on the answer to the question “What is your view of the use/benefit of the standing corps in your work” which was asked in the majority of the interviews. For a more detailed summary of how respondents view concerning the government agencies’ reception of the standing corps, see Figure A3 in Annex 2. Source: Own visualisation from coded interviews with a total of 25 respondents from the government agencies. Seven respondents did not state any view about the standing corps being deployed in Sweden. The analysis was therefore made with the remaining 18 respondents.

Overall, a discrepancy can be discerned between how the Swedish government agencies perceive hosting the standing corps, and how the Commission seeks to justify a broad reception at the EU level. There are also indications that the Agency, as the executive arm of EU policy, is trying to justify an increased **use**.

¹⁷⁹ #19 Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE; Joacim Trybom, Head of the Transport Department, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE; Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority.

At the same time, the Swedish position is restrictively inclined, with regard to the budget position as well as being against a broad use of the standing corps in general.

The activities of Frontex and any changes to the Agency's mandate should be based on the actual operational needs of the Member States. This also applies to the size of Frontex's standing corps. A proposed expansion of Frontex's standing corps, regardless of its size, must therefore be preceded by a thorough analysis of costs, operational needs at the EU's external borders and the impact of an expanded standing corps on the capacity and quality of European border controls. Besides quantitative needs, the analysis must also include qualitative needs.

(Justitiedepartementet, EU-enheten, 2025, p. 12)

The Swedish position reflects to some extent the Swedish respondents' statements where areas of use, additional work, the quality of the work performed by staff not being grounded in the Swedish context, and the need for an introduction/organised reception often lie at the centre of their concerns.

Swedish Migration Agency

Several respondents at the Swedish Migration Agency suggested that the standing corps could be used as administrative support rather than in the field. Bookings in the FAR system were seen as a task that could utilise the standing corps. According to one respondent, there were examples from other Member States where this was practised.¹⁸⁰ The digitalised FAR system also allows certain staff to work remotely, which one of the respondents notes is an opening for having staff from the standing corps stationed anywhere in Europe. But this also raises questions about what it really means to *host* the standing corps.¹⁸¹

However, it emerges that the final decisions on how the Swedish Migration Agency could host and utilise the standing corps have not yet been made. One respondent states that while no concrete discussions about how the standing corps could be utilised have begun, that both opportunities and potential are seen.¹⁸² This is confirmed by another respondent at the Swedish Migration Agency, who adds that they have identified operational challenges to hosting

¹⁸⁰ Kristina Hellgren, Expert, Swedish Migration Agency.

¹⁸¹ Petra Lindh, Head of Unit, Swedish Migration Agency.

¹⁸² Kristina Hellgren, Expert, Swedish Migration Agency.

the standing corps. The Swedish Migration Agency has therefore appointed a working group to review how to handle these challenges.¹⁸³

Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE

The Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE expresses a more moderate position on the usefulness of the standing corps. In interviews with the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE, one respondent summarises their view of the standing corps as follows:

[...] Then again the standing corps is far more [than return issues]. They also know about border surveillance and everything else, but that lies completely outside what we are doing. [...] For us of course, it is very, very limited to the staffing of return operations.

Joacim Trybom

Head of Transport Department

Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE

Another respondent at the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE concludes that they do not see an operational need to host the standing corps:

For a lot of people, it is wholly irrelevant. We have over a thousand employed staff in the Service. We may be increasing our staff to double that due to the expansion of places that the Service is undertaking in remand centres and correctional institutions. So for our part, we don't need the standing corps.

#19

Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE

According to the respondents, the limited added value for the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE is explained by two factors: the NTE's narrow and limited role in border management, and the Service's high staffing level. It is worth noting that both the respondents noted that the corps could potentially be in greater demand elsewhere.

The standing corps includes the FRESO staff profile, who can escort returnees in forced-return operations. However, respondents from the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE find it difficult to see a need to use the standing corps in this capacity. Instead, they claim that the Service already has good capacity and, if necessary, can borrow staff from the Swedish Police Authority.¹⁸⁴ The Service can borrow staff because the Swedish Police

¹⁸³ #17 Swedish Migration Agency.

¹⁸⁴ Reference to the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE.

Authority was previously responsible for providing escort staff prior to the collaboration agreement, which means that there are trained escort leaders within the Swedish Police Authority (Kriminalvården & Polismyndigheten, 2022). In the long run, however, this possibility will disappear as Swedish Police officers no longer undergo escort training. In the coming years, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE is expected to have more trained escort leaders in place which will thus remedy any staffing problems.¹⁸⁵

A respondent at the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE states that the Service is positive to hosting the standing corps when needed – or rather is conditionally positive. It might be relevant to request support from the standing corps in a hypothetical scenario where Sweden was experiencing an exceptional increase in return cases that threatened to overload the rest of the Service's activities.¹⁸⁶ Another respondent explains that the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE has the formal capacity to host standing corps staff, but that there is no need for this at present.¹⁸⁷ The use of the term *fiktivt antagande* (fictitious supposition) by one respondent is indicative that the question does not appear to be a priority in relation to the Service's core activities. This respondent also claims that the potential area of use for the corps would be extremely limited for the Service.¹⁸⁸

From an effectiveness perspective, Ivan Tomovic, an expert at the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE, argues that the standing corps could be used in several ways. Return operations in the transport area are very resource-intensive and drive costs. According to Tomovic, the possibility of augmenting their own staff for major return operations could mean freeing up staff for the other activities of the Service, which in turn would lead to significant improvements in effectiveness. At the same time, there is an inherent paradox: this kind of solution could reduce the need for the number of positions in the Service that exist to be able to cater for peak periods. This could create some resistance within the organisation, as it affects established structures and staffing models.

¹⁸⁵ Eva Åhs, Charter Flight Planning, Swedish Police Authority.

¹⁸⁶ Ivan Tomovic, Expert, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE.

¹⁸⁷ Cecilia Andelius, Expert, Frontex and European Border Management, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE.

¹⁸⁸ Cecilia Andelius, Expert, Frontex and European Border Management, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE argues that the use of staff from the standing corps would be extremely limited, which is confirmed in part by Joacim Trybom, Head of Transport Department, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE, who says that it would only be in staffing major return operations and if the resources of the Prison and Probation Service and Police Authority could not satisfy the staffing need.

Swedish Police Authority

Among the government agencies asked, it is the Swedish Police Authority that exhibits the greatest scepticism about hosting staff from the standing corps. Several voice fears at a strategic level, where a larger standing corps is seen as a potential competitor to Sweden's border Swedish Police operations, but they are also sceptical for operational reasons because there is uncertainty about the corps' real contribution to national efforts.

Only a few respondents see a possible need for the standing corps, and the examples of potential tasks for them are few. Like the respondents at the Swedish Migration Agency, they identify a potential need for administrative support when the Swedish Police Authority is required to introduce the Entry/Exit System (EES)¹⁸⁹ as more staff capacity may be needed for the registration of passenger data on arrival.¹⁹⁰ Expert support is also mentioned as a potential area where there could be a need. The respondent states that, like people at the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE, this could be relevant in the case of a major event.¹⁹¹

Some of the Swedish Police Authority respondents, like those from the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE, express the view that it would not be relevant for Sweden to host the standing corps because neither Sweden nor Frontex sees a need for this.¹⁹² This is in contrast to another respondent, who says:

There is some pressure from Frontex that we should request deployment of the standing corps to Sweden. That's what I experience. That we are being asked to make ourselves ready so that we can host them. That we should request deployment of the standing corps to us. So then I thought, *"okay, but based on what kind of threat then?" From what risk assessment is it saying that we need the standing corps deployed to us?"* It can't just be some kind of *capacity building*, that we should travel around to each other and learn from each other and be all energetic in that way.

#12 Head of Border Swedish Police Unit, NOA,
Swedish Police Authority

¹⁸⁹ Sweden has fully implemented the EES as of 12 October 2025. The pace of implementation varies slightly between the Member States and in some it is a stepwise process.

¹⁹⁰ #9 Coordinator, Swedish Police Authority; #12 Head of Border Police Unit, NOA, Swedish Police Authority; Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority.

¹⁹¹ #9 Coordinator, Swedish Police Authority.

¹⁹² #8 Group Manager, Embassy Liaison Team, Swedish Police Authority.

The respondent describes a certain amount of pressure coming from the Agency to enable the reception of the standing corps. Respondent #26 at the Swedish Police Authority also reports that people at the Authority have talked about pressure from the Agency but that the Authority says it is doubtful about how they would incorporate these staff.

Respondents at the Swedish Police Authority expressed several fears concerning the standing corps. Firstly, that the expansion may affect the future capacity of Sweden's border authorities. If too many Swedish Police officers are seconded to the standing corps, domestic capacity may be eroded. Secondly, that the border authorities in the Member States would become gradually dependent on seconded Frontex staff. This would upset something fundamental, namely control over one's own borders, in that part or all of external border surveillance in Sweden would be left to Frontex.¹⁹³

The Agency got enhanced powers under the 2019 Frontex Regulation. This Regulation gives the Agency the option to act even without the approval of a Member State if the functioning of the Schengen area is threatened. The Council of the European Union may then, on a recommendation from the European Commission, order the Member State to cooperate with Frontex in implementing the measures (European Parliament and Council, 2019, s. Article 42(1)). Niemann and Speyer (2018) argue that, with this change in its mandate, Frontex has developed its own institutionalised agency to maintain the EU's external borders, even against the will of the Member States. There are thus possibilities for Frontex to be a direct competitor to national border surveillance activities. Fernandez-Rojo (2021) also points out that although Frontex has the option of using coercive measures, the EU's border management system is decentralised and that the power of the Member States in this area will remain strong.

One respondent expresses concern about what could happen if too many staff are seconded to the standing corps and how this might affect expertise, staffing capacity and capabilities. Sweden's contribution to the standing corps is to gradually increase from today's 139 to 193 people in 2027 (Polismyndigheten, 2025b). Since the Swedish Police Authority accounts for 100 out of today's 139, it is likely that the increase will mainly affect the Swedish Police. According to the national strategy for 2024–2027, the responsibility for coordinating Sweden's contribution to the standing corps lies with the Swedish Police Authority which probably explains why staff from this government agency in particular articulate this concern.

¹⁹³ Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operational Unit, Swedish Police Authority; #12 Head of Border Police Unit, NOA, Swedish Police Authority.

In addition to the capacity issue, there is also some scepticism about the operational quality of the standing corps. Several respondents express concern that the standing corps does not possess the same level of professionalism nor do the standing core have an understanding of Swedish working methods.¹⁹⁴ The respondent describes different perspectives on border management work, where in Member States in northern Europe their function is to fight crime and terrorism to a large degree, while Member States in southern Europe, the 'frontline states', see border management more from a migration policy perspective.¹⁹⁵ But critical questions are also posed looking at the situation from more of a resource allocation perspective. If the standing corps – even today – is not used on the scale envisaged and the staff are under-utilised, it can be seen in light of a scarcity of funds for financing return operations.¹⁹⁶

The negative attitude of the Swedish Police Authority can be seen as an expression of the **non-use** of Frontex's resources. The majority of respondents at the Authority do not see the benefit nor improvements in effectiveness from hosting standing corps staff. Instead they would prefer limited interaction at this level to protect their own resources and tasks.

Here one can easily discern a discrepancy between the Swedish government agencies and the policy level in Europe. Respondents from the Commission are actively working to increase Member States' motivation to host members of the standing corps, and they believe that, from a purely economic point of view, there could be big gains from increased **use**.

[In] the end [the standing corps] is meant to be something good. After all, it means extra staff for the Member States that they do not have to pay for and who can be very valuable [...], the starting point must be what the Member States need and what they think they can incorporate into their national systems as something useful. And the experience from my side is that sometimes we need to push the Member States to be a little more open-minded about how they could change a bit and thus become more effective. [...] You have to have *some* flexibility to adapt old ways of working.

#15 Commission Official
DG HOME

¹⁹⁴ #2 Swedish Ministry of Justice.

¹⁹⁵ #2 Swedish Ministry of Justice.

¹⁹⁶ #27 Inspector, National Operations Department, Swedish Police Authority.

The Commission also stresses that in no way whatsoever should the standing corps compete with national staff, but should be there to assist the Member States.

Frontex staff are really not supposed to replace the local staff, but they are there to support. [...] But as a personal opinion, I believe this is a part of the solidarity that the Member States can show each other. Depending on [staff] category, certain personnel in the corps will not be permanently active, but function as an operational reserve that can be activated when needed. [...] It is about ensuring sustainability.

Ionut Mihalache
Policy Officer
DG HOME

Question marks – tasks, working language and secrecy issues

The regulations governing Sweden's reception of the standing corps have been in place since 2022¹⁹⁷ and the Swedish Ministry of Justice/Government Offices of Sweden have placed the issue of hosting the standing corps onto the government agencies' desks. The doubts expressed by several respondents concern practicalities that can prevent the deployed staff from being able to effectively perform their work. In addition to understanding Swedish legislation, two specific obstacles are identified: secrecy rules and working language.¹⁹⁸

Secrecy: Access to national databases, registers and other sensitive information is fundamental in border surveillance and return operations. The relevant government agencies are required to resolve the issue of the standing corps' access to Swedish systems prior to hosting them.¹⁹⁹ According to the European Commission's evaluation of the 2019 Frontex Regulation, effectiveness is limited by precisely these obstacles (European Commission, 2024a).

¹⁹⁷ See Förordning (2022:1058) med kompletterande bestämmelser till EU:s gräns- och kustbevakningsförordning. (Förordning (2022:1058) med kompletterande bestämmelser till EU:s gräns- och kustbevakningsförordning, 2022, p. § 9).

¹⁹⁸ Kristina Hellgren, Expert, Swedish Migration Agency.

¹⁹⁹ The staff of the standing corps undergo security vetting which is carried out by the seconding country. What remains is how Swedish government agencies should handle these security vettings. Among other things, respondents have highlighted that the Swedish Transport Agency is the agency that issues regulations governing access to Swedish airports (#9 Coordinator, Swedish Police Authority).

Working language: The standing corps staff may have difficulty using domestic systems that are primarily in Swedish, which means that they often need an interpreter or help from local staff in Sweden. This reduces the standing corps' operational autonomy and flexibility – a problem that the European Commission also points out in its evaluation (European Commission, 2024a).

Two measures are proposed by the Commission in its evaluation in relation to the issue of secrecy, one being that Frontex gives standing corps staff access to SIS (European Commission, 2024b). The second measure is for Member States to grant staff from the standing corps access to the databases by ensuring that national legislation permits this, without technical constraints. According to the 2019 Frontex Regulation, the standing corps must be able to carry out checks of a person's identity and citizenship, including searches in both EU and national databases. The application of these procedures is defined in the Regulation as follows:

Member States shall ensure that they provide such database access in an efficient and effective manner. Members of the teams shall consult only those data which are strictly necessary for performing their tasks and exercising their powers [...] That consultation shall be carried out in accordance with Union data protection law and the national data protection law of the host Member State.

(European Commission, 2024b, s. Article 82(10))

An opinion voiced by a number of respondents is that Swedish staff hold higher standards than their European counterparts. This means that Swedish government agencies often do not see any great value in utilising the standing corps. Language is one problem, but it is not the only one:

If I get any employee from [Member State] who speaks English, does not know our legislation, we need to work for months to explain how we work and our legislation. What's the benefit we get? None. None at all. Taking a co-worker like this with us [to meetings/the place they will work], but the co-worker doesn't know how our legislation works; it ends up being totally useless, unfortunately.

#18 Group Manager
Swedish Police Authority

A respondent from the Swedish Migration Agency has a similar argument:

There are challenges, especially for our systems, which are in Swedish. [...] This is also partly why we have not seen such a great need from Swedish government agencies to speed up this process. [...] We haven't really thought about how we can make better use of them instead of seeing them as extra work. For example, we would need to have designated supervisors as they may not be able to work very independently.

Kristina Hellgren
Expert, Swedish Migration Agency

Several respondents are doubtful that staff from the standing corps can contribute anything, mainly because they cannot be fully independent. In many cases, Frontex staff are only supposed to be able to 'accompany' and assist national colleagues, while Swedish staff use the actual systems. In practice, this would reduce the standing corps' operational independence. During an interview with a representative from DG HOME, our impression is that this is the intention, i.e. that staff from the standing corps can accompany national staff to assist in their tasks, but that the national staff use the computer systems and the working language is assumed to be English to facilitate communication.²⁰⁰ Frontex is currently working on developing a harmonised data system to facilitate the use of the standing corps, but no respondent had information on the timing of its implementation.²⁰¹

A second problem that the respondents highlight is the issue of secrecy, and security vetting of staff from the standing corps and their access to the IT systems.²⁰² A respondent from the Swedish Migration Agency expresses concern about the standing corps being able to produce travel documents. Frontex says that the standing corps should be able to assist with this (Frontex, 2024g). But the staff would then need access to documentation in the IT system – which is often classified. This creates uncertainty about whether and how individuals can be included in the systems without risking unauthorised access.²⁰³

²⁰⁰ Ionut Mihalache, Policy Officer, DG HOME.

²⁰¹ #9 Coordinator, Swedish Police Authority; Ionut Mihalache, Policy Officer, DG HOME.

²⁰² #8 Group Manager, Embassy Liaison Team, Swedish Police Authority; Petra Lindh, Head of Unit, Swedish Migration Agency; Kristina Hellgren, Expert, Swedish Migration Agency.

²⁰³ Petra Lindh, Head of Unit, Swedish Migration Agency.

Despite the fact that several respondents identified secrecy rules and language barriers as significant difficulties, respondents at the Swedish Police Authority expressed different views. One respondent there emphasises that language barriers can be surmounted and gives examples of how to get around problems by giving the staff access to translated templates in the Swedish systems. The issue of secrecy should not be insurmountable either. Since, according to Frontex documentation, staff are required to undergo security vetting,²⁰⁴ it should be possible to manage their access within existing systems using the right allocation of permissions. That Sweden cannot host standing corps staff is seen as more about the government agencies' internal problems – not due to secrecy and language being obstacles per se.²⁰⁵ Another respondent stresses the importance of the reception of standing corps members being well integrated into operational activities – otherwise there is a risk that the support is seen as being imposed on them. Without getting the support of local staff, and if the decision is perceived as having been made by Frontex, the situation risks being similar to the negative experiences described by the Swedish Police. Conversely, with good anchoring in the organisation, the standing corps can have relevant tasks that contribute operational benefit *and* enable knowledge exchange.²⁰⁶

Getting the support of Swedish actors is important. The majority of respondents point out that the agencies are poorly motivated to host the standing corps. It is perceived as being imposed on them, and that the value of hosting the standing corps does not seem to be well anchored in the organisations. One respondent from the Swedish Migration Agency also reflects on the work involved in hosting the standing corps, concluding that: "If you want to, you will work it out, but if you don't want to, everything will be a problem along the way."²⁰⁷

There is some ambiguity concerning what powers the standing corps should have. The 2019 Frontex Regulation states that operational staff "[...] should have all the necessary powers to carry out border control and return tasks, including the tasks requiring executive powers, set out in relevant national law or in this Regulation" (European Parliament and Council, 2019, s. ingresskäl (60)).

²⁰⁴ The security vetting of members of the Frontex Standing Corps is governed by the Frontex Regulation (EU) 2019/1896 (European Parliament and Council, 2019). This Regulation lays down rules and guidelines for the European Border and Coast Guard, including security vetting requirements to ensure that staff are suitable for their tasks and are able to process sensitive information safely and securely.

²⁰⁵ Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority.

²⁰⁶ #26 Respondent at government agency.

²⁰⁷ #26 Respondent at government agency.

But the Regulation also states that these executive powers shall be subject to the authorisation of the host Member State (European Parliament and Council, 2019, s. Article 82 (2)).

Another explanation for the scepticism voiced by the respondents could be that the statutory work needed to host the standing corps is not complete. For this reason, it may be difficult to fully justify the value of the standing corps out in the various government agencies. Probably practicalities, guidelines, working methods and tasks will be clearer once standing corps members are hosted next year (2026).

Concluding remarks

In summary, the Swedish government agencies exhibit low interest in hosting the standing corps. The resistance that exists relates to strategic matters, the risk of domestic government agencies losing control of their border surveillance, but also more operational issues – that the standing corps would not be as effective as national staff for various reasons. Most respondents see no such need, and it is logical given Sweden's geographical location, the absence of particular pressures in the area of migration and return, and that the domestic capacity is perceived as good. Therefore, **non-use** is a reasonable basic position among the respondents. Correspondingly, the need for Frontex staff appears to be more pressing in Member States at the EU's external borders, where the migration pressures are significantly higher.

Despite this, work is being done at several Swedish government agencies to ensure a rapid reception, even if this work is proceeding slowly. With some reluctance, Swedish government agencies are preparing to **use** the standing corps, suggesting that the potential benefits of the standing corps are not sufficiently clear within the government agencies. Their views are largely based on a national perspective where domestic needs must be met.

Few respondents make comments in terms of the need at EU level to develop and ensure interoperability through collaboration between the Member States. This could potentially ensure that the standing corps remains operational in the event of crises or other severe situations. This view on hosting the standing corps can be seen as an expression of what Fernandez-Rojo (2021) writes about the border management system being decentralised and that it will remain so. With regard to secondments, Sweden is meeting the targets set by Frontex, although the respondents are sceptical about whether the standing corps is being used effectively. But several respondents also mention that the secondment of staff can have positive effects such as knowledge and skills development, sharing of experiences, and as an attractive career opportunity, even if it means a loss of capacity at home. The possibility of being seconded

seems to be generally appreciated by the staff and it is described as an incentive when recruiting new staff. Thus, there may be of value in secondment that goes beyond the operational because it creates added value for the organisation.

Besides the fact that the respondents do not see it as realistic, or do not have a current need to host the standing corps, a few practical and structural obstacles are also highlighted. Many are doubtful about whether the staff from the standing corps can work independently, in particular due to secrecy rules and language barriers. If members of the standing corps lack access to Swedish computer systems and cannot work independently, there is good reason for the concern expressed by some respondents about limited effectiveness. In some cases, it is presented as a risk that the corps are more likely to drain resources and reduce operational effectiveness than vice versa.

The interviews reveal clear differences between the government agencies in their attitudes towards the standing corps, where the Swedish Migration Agency appears to be the most positive to the **use** of Frontex. The Swedish Police Authority is more critical while the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE has a more middle-ground stance. This variation can be understood as being based on the different tasks and mandates of these government agencies. The Swedish Police Authority sees greater competition between its national mission and Frontex's growing role. This approach then becomes a strategic choice where you can maintain control, independence and operational effectiveness and avoid competition from the standing corps.

In the case of the Swedish Migration Agency and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE, there is not the same competitive environment. However, none of them expresses an immediate need for Frontex support. In the case of the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE, there is already sufficient staffing capacity. In the case of the Swedish Migration Agency, there is a greater opening for hosting the corps, but some uncertainty about how that reception should be designed in practice. The greater scepticism expressed by the Swedish Police Authority may be due to the fact that it is the primary interface with Frontex. The fact that there is pressure coming from Frontex to **use** the standing corps has been noted by several respondents and targets the Swedish Police Authority, which may thereby experience a greater tension between different objectives and interests.

Another explanation for the differences may lie in the fact that the government agencies are responsible for different parts and stages of the return process. The Swedish Migration Agency is responsible for voluntary returns, while the Swedish Police Authority and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE work with forced returns. A respondent from the Swedish Migration Agency

says that the secondment of staff has generally worked well, but that challenges have arisen when their seconded staff were operating in policing environments. The **use** of Frontex through participation in the standing corps seems to create differing challenges for the government agencies: The Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE is often involved in secondments for a shorter period of time, while the Swedish Migration Agency tends to have longer secondments. The Swedish Police Authority, whose participation is mainly in policing environments, can extend over longer periods of time and appears to suffer from major challenges.

The reluctance to host the standing corps can also be understood in relation to national sovereignty. This might explain the differences between government agencies in terms of the added value that corps could contribute. As noted earlier, the development of Frontex's mandate entails striking a balance between the goal of a common European border management and the Member States' wanting to preserve their sovereignty (Perkowski N. , 2019). Border control is closely linked to control over national borders and Member States have at times been unwilling to hand over too much of that responsibility to supranational authorities or other bodies (Fernández-Rojo, 2021; Carrera, den Hertog, & Parkin, 2013, p. 343).

Among the three border management agencies in this study, the Swedish Police Authority has the strongest connection to the task of maintaining national sovereignty in the form of territorial control. The Authority's scepticism can thus go beyond the challenges of secrecy and working language mentioned in the interviews. It can in fact concern questions of who has the right to exercise violence and the legitimacy of border management functions in maintaining Sweden's territorial integrity. The future **use** of the standing corps also needs to take these aspects into account when we are attempting to understand the differences in attitude of the government agencies towards hosting the standing corps in the future. Finally, the aversion to the standing corps may also have to do with effectiveness factors. Resources are not unlimited and if more funds are spent on standing corps staff with questionable effectiveness, there is a risk that the actual Frontex-funded operations that Sweden carries out will be less well resourced.

5.4 Communication with Frontex

The issue of communication between government agencies, whether domestic or international, is absolutely fundamental to their capacity to carry out their mission. This is especially true where there are three different government agencies involved, as in the Swedish case, and these need to communicate quickly and effectively to solve tasks, as the examples from Section 5.1

illustrate. In general, there is a clear division of tasks between the Swedish government agencies (see Section 4.4) to refer to, but there are also plenty of examples of coordination challenges that in turn may have to do with poorly functioning communication between the Swedish government agencies responsible for these matters. Here, communication is also about how different technical systems for case management, for example, are integrated with and communicate with each other. However, this section primarily examines a hub in the form of Sweden's National Frontex Point of Contact (NFPOC), whose task is to coordinate all contacts between Swedish government agencies and Frontex.

Article 13 of the 2019 Frontex Regulation requires each Member State to appoint a national contact point for communication between Frontex and the Member State. In Sweden, the Swedish Police Authority is the appointed NFPOC and responsible for coordination between the various border management agencies. Within the Swedish Police Authority, this responsibility lies organisationally with the National Operations Department (NOA).²⁰⁸ In reality the NFPOC, is a shared email inbox²⁰⁹ managed by a coordinator (the NFPOC function is currently staffed by one full-time position and one supplementary 25 percent of full-time position). This is where communications are received, sorted and then disseminated to the relevant actors. This section discusses how Swedish respondents feel that the communication with Frontex is functioning – between the agencies in their communications with Frontex as well as how Frontex, for its part, communicates with the Swedish government agencies.

Respondents from all of the relevant government agencies feel that it is appropriate and that the Swedish Police Authority has the overall responsibility as the NFPOC and that this is functioning well. None of them expressed dissatisfaction or implied any kind of tug-of-war around this function. On the contrary, the Swedish Police Authority is highlighted as the most natural and obvious point of contact for the collaboration.

The interviews indicate that there are additional, informal, communication channels beyond the formal structure. Staff from other government agencies have direct contact with Frontex – without copying or notification to the shared

²⁰⁸ In addition to the Swedish Police Authority, the border management agencies are: the Swedish Prison and Probation Service, the Swedish Migration Agency, the Swedish Coast Guard, Swedish Customs, the Swedish Security Service and the Swedish Maritime Administration.

²⁰⁹ The coordinator has the main responsibility for the shared mailbox, but several people have access to it.

mailbox.²¹⁰ For example, there is direct contact concerning the coordination of training courses, where Frontex suborders the Prison and Probation Service's training and exercise facilities for conducting escort leader training.²¹¹ There are also direct communication channels in the FAR case management system that do not need to be handled or taken through the formal NFPOC.²¹²

Interviews with respondents at the Swedish Police Authority revealed that important information was not shared because Frontex, at least previously, tended to bypass the NFPOC and turn directly to other government agencies or other units within the Swedish Police Authority.²¹³ This way of doing things could in turn lead to a poor overview, resulting in the risk of additional work.²¹⁴ One respondent described how this had happened and could happen in training courses when Sweden was going to send both participants and teachers:

[At Frontex it seems] that there have been a few changes in [staff] resources and the like [...] it means that communication between me and Frontex can be affected. Generally all goes well, but sometimes different Frontex officers can contact staff directly out in the different government agencies and bypass the national function. And this means that we don't have the same complete overview of staff going out to training courses or operations and the like. This has improved, but initially it was a major challenge that some Frontex officers bypassed the national functions.

#29 NTC

Swedish Police Authority

The respondent identifies a number of problems that can arise when the information does not go through the established channels. It may be more difficult to coordinate before training instances if the necessary information about who is registered to attend is lacking. When Frontex bypasses the NFPOC, it risks complicating the process, while not giving the Swedish Police Authority the opportunity to assess whether they can spare the resource. However, the respondent also adds that it is a challenge for Frontex and a pressure on the

²¹⁰ Ivan Tomovic, Expert, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE, Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority, #1 Swedish Police Authority.

²¹¹ According to Ivan Tomovic, Expert at the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE, this happens when there are operational matters of a more practical nature, for example when logistics planning is required (accommodation, transport, facilities, catering, etc.).

²¹² Petra Lindh, Head of Unit, Swedish Migration Agency.

²¹³ # 9 Swedish Police Authority; Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority; #29 National Training Coordinator (NTC), Swedish Police Authority.

²¹⁴ #9 Coordinator, Swedish Police Authority; #29 NTC, Swedish Police Authority.

Agency's officers who are supposed to deliver the training course instances while being entirely dependent on Member States to contribute teacher resources. This in turn can be a partial explanation as to why such situations arise.

The interviews show that the Swedish Police Authority see it as a problem that the NFPOC is sometimes bypassed. At the same time, the Authority emphasises that the NFPOC does not have sufficient capacity to fully coordinate all communication between the Agency and the other Swedish government agencies. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the NFPOC function is spread across different parts and groups within the Swedish Police Authority, which can create confusion for both the Swedish government agencies and the Agency.²¹⁵ This raises the question of whether it would be a more effective use of resources to create a function that covered all communications.²¹⁶

In formal terms, there is a clear structure for communication between Swedish actors and Frontex, but in parallel there is an informal structure that is accepted by the Swedish Police Authority to some extent. This illustrates how informal practices and processes over time can become accepted in organisations (Sahin-Mencutek & Triandafyllidou, 2025). Even when other government agencies have direct contact with the Agency, the NFPOC should be notified. But this does not always happen, which means that the NFPOC may miss out on important incidents and details.²¹⁷ The NFPOC thus risks being without important information, which can undermine its role. One respondent describes being in two minds about the informal communication:

If we were to make a proper NFPOC, that is, an office responsible for border management, I think that there could be synergistic effects from everything going through it. [...] But questions always come up that say, *"so, were you at such a meeting? What did you decide there? We had no idea about that."* And at the same time sometimes it's also like, Phew! so glad that they handled that.

²¹⁵ The main shared mailbox (NFPOC) is managed by an administrator at the National Border Police Unit, Sweden's Aula (facilities booking) administrator is located at International HR, while the NTC has been linked to the national training coordination for border police training matters at the National Border Police Unit (NGPE).

²¹⁶ There are somewhat differing opinions between the respondents, but #29 NTC Swedish Police Authority points out that the current placement of the NFPOC and the link between the NTC and national training coordination is preferable since they see clear advantages with this arrangement when implementing EU requirements at national level and building national capabilities and skills within border police operations.

²¹⁷ # 9 Coordinator, Swedish Police Authority; Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority.

Because we didn't have time for it. We don't have to have the contact ourselves. Because Customs handles this better, the collaboration with Frontex. And then they come and say, *this is what we have done*. Check. Then we know what's what.

Lasse Hammarsjö
Head of Operations Unit
Swedish Police Authority

As we can see, the respondent identifies a potential for improvement with the possibility of greater synergies if the NFPOC has a more comprehensive role as the point of contact. At the same time, it is a matter of resources to deal with all correspondence where boundaries need to be made clear to all parties.²¹⁸ The Swedish Police Authority is also of the opinion that it is positive if other government agencies have their own separate contacts with Frontex, as long as the Swedish Police Authority is kept informed.²¹⁹ One respondent also describes this as an accepted way of working:

They too of course have some dialogue with Frontex. I initiate the dialogue with Frontex and then, given that I am not an expert on the various matters, I usually, after I've initiated the contact there, I let the experts from the various government agencies take over the communication.

#29 NTC
Swedish Police Authority

When you encounter opinions on feedback to the NFPOC such as: "It's very much tied to the individual, unfortunately. But it's working right now. We're glad of that"²²⁰ it captures the duality that many respondents voice. The communication is working, but it is vulnerable. When something is very much tied to the individual, the meaning is that it is based on particular individuals' experiences, networks and continuity in the organisation. The fact that the NFPOC is not limited to return and migration matters but covers more areas and government agencies than those covered in this study means that many more parties would need to be involved in a potential border management office.²²¹

Concluding remarks

The informants gave multiple examples of challenges in communicating rapidly and effectively between the government agencies, sometimes including

²¹⁸ Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority.

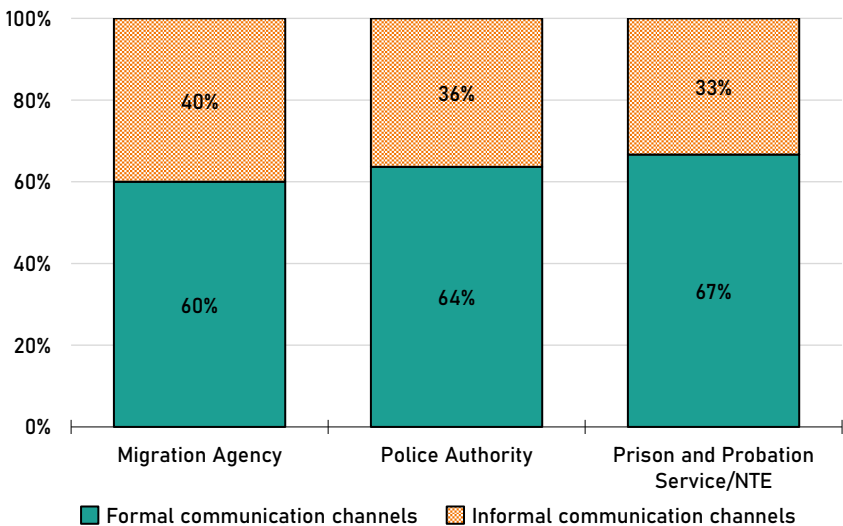
²¹⁹ Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority.

²²⁰ Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority.

²²¹ Mats Bergkvist, Head of Border Police Unit, NOA.

examples of how to overcome the problems through personal contacts. In this area, there is an important regulatory framework to rely on in the form of Article 13 of the 2019 Frontex Regulation, which is a **formal** provision stating that communication between Member States and the Agency is to take place through a national contact point and national coordination centre. However, it is clear that the communication sometimes takes place in more **informal** ways, most often initiated by Frontex and not by the Swedish government agencies.

Figure 10. Percentage of respondents who stated that they use formal and informal communication channels to Frontex



Note: Dummy variable (1/0) of whether respondents use informal or formal communication channels to Frontex. The variable is coded broadly and includes both respondents who stated that they have informal meetings with other Member States prior to formal meetings and other activities; and respondents who stated that they have their own communication channels to Frontex.

Source: Own visualisation based on coded interviews with a total of 25 respondents from the government agencies. Three of the respondents did not state how they usually communicate with Frontex.

The extent of **non-use** of the NFPOC is difficult to determine. However, respondents from all the Swedish government agencies claimed that this does occur, and as Figure 10 illustrates, a good one third of respondents have had informal contacts with the Agency. The initiative seems to be taken primarily by Frontex, which does depart from the procedures for communication and chooses **non-use** of the NFPOC in favour of **informal** communication channels, which can be seen as an **informal** practice incorporated over time into the

work (Sahin-Mencutek & Triandafyllidou, 2025). On the other hand, the Swedish Police Authority describe the informal contacts as a challenge. **Non-use** of the NFPOC is an obstacle to its overview and makes it more difficult to manage its coordination task.

As Kleine (2010) notes, the combination of formal and informal collaboration can make institutions and government agencies more dynamic and more adaptable. It is clear in interviews with the Swedish Police Authority that they do not either see a need to control or handle all communication between Swedish government agencies and Frontex. The responsible officials at the Swedish Police Authority reflect on the fact that it is more appropriate for each government agency to communicate regularly with Frontex, as the NFPOC does not have the capacity to fully handle all aspects of the communication with Frontex and the border management agencies. Thus, the degree of **informality** in the communication is necessary for the work to proceed and be effective. The problem is that when **non-use** of the NFPOC occurs, its overview is less complete, and its coordinating role eroded. This also means that the NFPOC cannot make decisions on who to delegate the communication to.

While it is true that the communication being tied to individuals can facilitate the work in certain situations, at the same time it is an aggravating circumstance when it comes to coordinating and finding synergies between different units, which in turn can impede its effectiveness. Furthermore, there is greater vulnerability when the communication is tied to individuals. When key individuals are replaced, without documented procedures there is a risk of substantial losses of information.

Given the current structure, this presents a challenge for the border management agencies in balancing **formal** structures (everything should go first via the NFPOC) and **informal** structures (that each government agency can continue the communication). This is a difficult balancing act considering how **informal** practices can become institutionalised over time by being repeated (Sahin-Mencutek & Triandafyllidou, 2025).

5.5 The value of training and capacity building

One of Frontex's tasks is to contribute to capacity building in the Member States. This section describes the types of training and capacity-building activities that the border management agencies have participated in and been involved in designing, as well as what they see as the benefit of their capacity-building cooperation with the Agency. Two important themes that came out of our

interviews are that the Swedish government agencies **use** capacity-building efforts and that these contribute to best practice in the EU.

Article 16 of the EU's Schengen Borders Code²²² requires all Member States to integrate the common core curricula for border guards developed by Frontex into their national training for border guards and return staff.²²³ The purpose of this is to ensure that these staff are properly trained and comply with common European standards. In practice, this means that:

- Frontex issues invitations to participate in various training courses for which the Member States can nominate staff.
- Frontex develops the common core curricula for staff in the area of border management and return.
- Frontex common core curricula are implemented at the national level.

Sweden's national strategy for European integrated border management 2024–2027 establishes that the government agencies must ensure that the Frontex common core curricula are implemented in the national training systems. Furthermore, it states that Swedish actors are to use the “[...] training courses provided by Frontex that are relevant to the context” (2024a, p. 29).

The Swedish Police Authority is responsible for implementing the Frontex common core curricula at national level and the Authority's training coordinator works with those responsible for training at the Swedish Migration Agency and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE to ensure compliance with the EU's regulatory framework.²²⁴

²²² (Europeiska Unionen, 2016; Europeiska Kommissionen, 2023).

²²³ Article 62 of the 2019 Frontex Regulation (European Parliament and Council, 2019) requires Frontex to develop and implement training courses for border guards. The aim is to ensure that staff have the necessary skills and comply with common European standards for border control; this is then also implemented through Article 16 of the Schengen Borders Code (Europeiska Unionen, 2016), which regulates that the Member States shall integrate this at national level.

²²⁴ This is done through *Sveriges strategi för europeisk integrerad gränsförvaltning 2024–2027* (Sweden's national strategy for European integrated border management 2024–2027) in which the Swedish Police Authority, the Swedish Coast Guard, Swedish Customs, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service, the Swedish Migration Agency, the Swedish Maritime Administration, and the Swedish Security Service have jointly developed strategies to comply with the European regulations and implement the common core curricula (Polismyndigheten, 2024a).

The Agency has two main areas for training activities (Frontex, 2025c):

- **Training for the standing corps:** Includes basic training for category 1 as well as specialised courses for all categories in the corps tailored to their operational profiles and skills needs. The goal is to ensure that staff have integrated the skills they need to work uniformly in different operations areas, while maintaining respect for fundamental rights. The training also aims to create a common professional culture and harmonisation within European Border and Coast Guard through practical exercises that develop skills in managing cultural differences, understanding conflicts, and working effectively in teams (Frontex, 2025c).
- **Capacity-building training for the European Border and Coast Guard (EBCG)** These courses are adapted to and designed for different knowledge and skills levels (practitioners, specialists) and are intended to provide the knowledge and skills needed in different areas. The purpose is to build the EU's border management and return capacity (Frontex, 2025c).

Many of Frontex's training courses also form the basis for professional certifications which are a requirement for carrying out Frontex-funded return operations. In general, the respondents from the Swedish government agencies express a positive view of the training they have attended or participated in.²²⁵ Many of them say that Frontex is working actively to make the courses accessible. However, the staffing situation has been somewhat of an obstacle. The government agencies cannot always spare staff, even if they would benefit greatly from the Frontex training courses. In balancing between building knowledge and skills long term in the organisation and satisfying operational needs here and now, the latter often wins out.²²⁶

The Agency has also developed a digital learning platform, *Frontex Virtual Aula*, to complement the in-person course instances. The learning platform provides both preparatory segments for training courses and fully digitalised self-study courses. The content on the platform is not open to the public, but according to the training catalogue that we have read, we can see that a very broad segment of the courses have digital content (Frontex, 2025c). The courses offered include basic as well as specialised courses, including training in return and fundamental rights, to try to meet current and future challenges.

²²⁵ Joacim Trybom, Head of Transport Department, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE; #30 Senior Case Officer, International Planning, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE; #16 Swedish Migration Agency; #8 Group Manager Embassy Liaison Team, Swedish Police Authority; Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority.

²²⁶ Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority.

The Swedish Police Authority, the Swedish Migration Agency and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE are also active in building knowledge and skills and the supply of skills within Frontex. Among the respondents, there is a clear perception that their own staff and activities are generally of high quality, and thus can contribute to the EU's return work as a whole – including by providing teachers and by developing common core curricula guided by Frontex. It also appears that all the Swedish government agencies seem to see it as somewhat prestigious to be able to contribute to knowledge- and skills-enhancing activities at a European level. Several respondents appear to feel professional pride that their government agency is able to contribute.

Despite the overall positive picture of the content and the knowledge- and skills-enhancing effect of the courses,²²⁷ a number of respondents identify certain challenges, such as the difficulty of translating and adapting the common core curricula. One respondent makes a comparison with the Finnish Border Guard, where one agency is responsible for all border management, and the curricula for the basic courses and various specialisations can be implemented almost without any changes. In Sweden, this responsibility is divided between different government agencies, which means that each agency needs to make a selection that suits its tasks. This can lead to a risk of non-completion or ambiguities in the implementation. In addition to the responsibilities being spread across multiple agencies, there is another challenge that requires adaptation, namely the fact that Sweden has civilian employees within its border management:

When we develop a training course, we have to look for the common denominator because you have different powers [at government agencies, civilian employees and Swedish Police officers]. A Swedish Police officer can do much more than a civilian employee [...], they do not have the same powers. This means that we can't really run a course that suits everyone. But there are even challenges in creating uniform, national training courses within the Swedish Police Authority because we need to take into account regional differences and conditions.

#29 NTC

Swedish Police Authority

Swedish Police Authority

At an overarching level, communication regarding training and training needs should go through the Swedish Police Authority's NFPOC. The Authority also has a National Training Coordinator (NTC), who is the intermediary who

²²⁷ Ivan Tomovic, Expert, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE.

communicates with Frontex and the Swedish border management agencies. The NTC compiles the training needs and communicates them to the Agency, which then has an overall picture of the needs common to all the Member States.²²⁸ Once there is a confirmed offer of a training place, the affected government agency can take over the direct contact with Frontex for the planning in detail.²²⁹ However, there are cases where Frontex staff bypass the National Training Coordinator/function, which can have implications for coordination efforts:

When important information comes in for certain training courses, I don't know where to direct it unless I know who has been registered for a specific training course. And that means of course that this information [can be lost]; sometimes the lead times and deadlines are rather short, quite simply.

#29 NTC

Swedish Police Authority

Furthermore, errors in the communication chain can create major staffing strategy problems, especially when training courses cannot be properly coordinated. For certain types of training courses, personal suitability is weighed up against the regions being able to spare staff. In that case, several units²³⁰ are involved in the nominations for given training instances.

Look at, for example, being an instructor, because [the Swedish Police Authority] send out instructors to Frontex's various training courses. And we do of course want to send out the instructors that we believe meet the criteria that exist. [...] but if Frontex gets information about a person and they contact that person [directly ...] then things have not been done correctly. Perhaps we might not want that particular person to be an instructor in a particular course instance. We might instead want to issue a general invitation to get in interested parties. [...] We want the staff with the best skills of course. These kinds of things might have been a problem in the past. But we have put a lot of pressure on Frontex and [...] we have made good progress, but I still see things like this happening sometimes.

#29 NTC

Swedish Police Authority

²²⁸ #11 Swedish Police Authority; #29 NTC, Swedish Police Authority.

²²⁹ #19 Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE; #16 Swedish Migration Agency; #29 NTC, Swedish Police Authority.

²³⁰ For example, regional management, HR and national coordinators.

One interpretation of the described fragmentation of contacts with the Agency is that it may be partly due to the Swedish government agency structure, and partly due to the fact that informal communication channels are often created around specific issues where only one government agency or unit is affected. However, these more informal contacts may have negative consequences for national coordination, information sharing and qualification-based nominations.

Course instances and opportunities are communicated by the Swedish training coordinator to the points of contact at the border management agencies. They in turn are meant to disseminate the information to the relevant units. However, some respondents at the different government agencies state that they do not have an overview of what training courses are actually offered. Many would like to see greater access, for example in the form of a training catalogue.²³¹ There are currently training catalogues which are not accessible to all staff within the government agencies, but are limited to key staff who can nominate access and suitable staff. This is also confirmed by the Swedish training coordinator who notes that information gets stopped somewhere and does not always reach all relevant staff. Here, too, the Swedish three-pronged government agency structure is identified as an important explanation for this phenomenon.²³² Proximity to the information and communication channels probably plays a role when respondents at the Swedish Police Authority say that it is easy to communicate and get a hearing for their training needs in operational work.

[Frontex] offers certain types of training at a more operational level. There we push for training that we need for our staff in various contexts and that Frontex can make available. So far, I understand that this works quite well and sometimes we might get through and they create the training [...]

#12 Head of Border Swedish Police Unit, NOA,
Swedish Police Authority

As we know, individual staff at Swedish government agencies may have different insight into what training instances are offered or how accessible these are. According to the interviews, the Swedish Police Authority appears to be an active and appreciated partner and contributes training instructors at European level. Respondents at the Swedish Police Authority argue that the Agency would like to see continued engagement in the matter:

²³¹ #14 Swedish Migration Agency.

²³² #29 NTC, Swedish Police Authority.

At the last meeting I had with Frontex, they communicated that they were very positive about our engagement and our contribution. We are considered to have a high level of knowledge and skills and professionalism. They like our instructors, precisely because their level of knowledge is very high and we are very professional when we go out on various assignments within Frontex, especially training assignments. So they really want more people from Sweden, because they think we function so well in these contexts. [...] [Frontex] is satisfied and think that we contribute a lot, but they would like [more instructors]. [...] But it is always a resource issue out there in the regions. Can I spare these people to go and train others?

#29 NTC

Swedish Police Authority

The Agency's wanting an expansion of Sweden's contribution in the form of more instructors is not only based on the high level of professionalism that Swedish staff are deemed to possess.²³³ According to one respondent, there is a chronic shortage of instructors for several of the training courses offered by Frontex.²³⁴ This situation – where Member States' government agencies would like greater access to, as well as more staff for training courses – imposes a strain on the government agencies, especially during periods when staffing is a challenge. In other words, access to Frontex training courses is affected by the Member States' being able to spare staff. This, in turn, has repercussions for the Member States' capacity to offer knowledge and skills development for their own staff.

Swedish Prison and Probation Service

Since 2023, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE has taken over responsibility for the staffing of escort leaders,²³⁵ which means that the Service is responsible for assuring the supply of qualified staff who serve during the return operations. Within the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE, Frontex's guidelines and training material are seen as guidance when it comes to quality and working methods. One respondent emphasises that when Sweden hosts escort leader courses it is a clear indicator of quality, as is Frontex's certification of escort leaders:

²³³ #25 Frontex.

²³⁴ #29 NTC, Swedish Police Authority.

²³⁵ This is according to the cooperation agreement between the Swedish Police Authority and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service.

Firstly, it's a mark of quality. That it is Frontex that certifies escort leaders and it is their thresholds and phrasing that apply and should in fact guide all types of activities. [...] It's a big plus for Sweden to be able to host. [...] It's a feather in our cap you might say.

#19

Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE

The respondent testifies to the quality of the escort training. This is one of the roles where, for monitors too, having Frontex training is a requirement. It's also a condition that these roles are included in the staffing of Frontex-funded return operations.²³⁶

Furthermore, that the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE is described as having taken an active role in the escort leader courses, and has and will host several of the training instances during 2025. This engagement is based partly on the perceived quality of the Swedish escort leaders and the effectiveness of Swedish returns,²³⁷ and partly on the fact that there is a lack of suitable training facilities in the EU.

[...] There are certain requirements for how the facilities should be designed. They need access to mock-up facilities ^[238] where you have a full-size fuselage and security controls and some other things. [...] Many states have offered to host Frontex courses, but when it comes to communication channels, suitable training facilities and so on, nobody beats us. In 2025, four training instances are planned and Sweden and NTE will host three of these training instances. I think it speaks volumes about the esteem we are held in as hosts.

#19

Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE

Organising instances of a training course is described by the respondents as proof of their own knowledge and skills and the value they add to Frontex. Although the Swedish actors feel that the training courses they organise are

²³⁶ This concerns forced-return operations.

²³⁷ #19, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE.

²³⁸ Mock-up facilities are training environments that can simulate real-life situations and environments. They are used for training purposes to give participants the opportunity to practice the practical steps involved, try out procedures, and develop their cooperation in a controlled and realistic context. The facility is designed to mimic, for example, transport environments, detention facilities or meeting situations, and can be adapted to different scenarios to strengthen preparedness and improve quality in operational work.

of high quality, several of them emphasise the added value in being the host, such as training materials and places in the courses. The organising Member State gets a number of training places earmarked for its own staff, which is important for the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE so it can more easily satisfy its knowledge and skills needs.²³⁹

Horii (2012) has pointed out that Member States' interest in participating in Frontex training courses aligns with their own interests. In the case of the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE, we also see that the **use** of Frontex and their training courses, in the form of organising the training, both increases access to training places for their own organisation and contributes to the supply of skills in the Service.

Currently, staffing does not seem to be a major problem for the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE, especially since the Service can still borrow staff from the Swedish Police Authority when necessary. But this option will disappear over time. In light of this, the possibility of organising training instances can be seen as particularly important also strategically so that the Service can assure its knowledge and skills needs in the long term (Kriminalvården, 2025, p. 72):

[...] It's a big plus for Sweden to be able to host. Plus, everything new that comes in the training materials means that we can then implement it in our local courses for our transport leaders [...] We are lucky that there are still trained escort leaders working at the Swedish Police Authority. So if we don't have an escort leader available, we can ask for support from the Swedish Police Authority. We will be hosting three training instances in 2025 and should then have a further six newly trained escort leaders. This should lead to a sustainable staffing level for Sweden.

#19

Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE

The training material offered by the Agency is greatly appreciated. Several respondents in decision-making roles at the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE have drawn attention to the fact that the standard within the Service has been raised in pace with staff having completed courses where Frontex common core curricula have been incorporated into the national training programmes. In the area of training, we see a high level of **use**; the courses are popular and appreciated, as Horii (2012) has also shown. As previous research has also pointed out, Frontex training courses increase the

²³⁹ #19 Kriminalvården/NTE, see also Kriminalvården/NTE, 2025, p. 72)

staff's professionalisation and enhance their knowledge and skills (Horii S., 2012; Lemberg-Pedersen & Halpen, 2021). Harmonisation in the way border management is conducted within the EU is also fostered, which in turn leads to greater convergence in the implementation of the EU common policies.

At the same time, [the implementation of Frontex common core curricula at the national level] has helped us to raise our standards when it comes to how we treat returnees, trying out and learning methods in simulated environments, human rights, working with vulnerable groups [...] because these are things that Frontex focuses on in particular and we have implemented and apply their code of conduct without change so our staff must adhere to the same rules that Frontex has set up.

Ivan Tomovic
Expert

Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE

The management team within the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE sees clear benefits, improvements and indicators of quality when it comes to training and its implementation at the national level. However, some of the operational staff have a different opinion. Among other things, it was noted that the Service has not taken on board all of the Agency's recommendations regarding staffing.²⁴⁰ In addition, the implementation of the chain of command or the clarification of mandates is something that #43 Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE sees as an area in need of improvement with the Service. According to this respondent, it is such a major problem that it poses a risk of losing skills in the Service's workforce.

The assignments at the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE's international section have previously been considered very attractive and according to several of the observations during the return operation, the Service has imposed requirements regarding experience and personal qualities to work in the section.

When I started in 2019, there was quite a lot of competition. I think you needed to have worked 3 or 5 years to even apply for International. There was an English test and interview before proceeding. It was probably in connection with COVID and a merger of all transport that bundled together international and

²⁴⁰ According to #34 Observation, a ground team is lacking which, according to their statement, served as a complement to the back-up team during a return operation. The respondent argues that the lack of a ground team results in the amount of responsibility placed on the back-up team being too great.

domestic. And at that time things weren't exactly running smoothly, to say the least. [After that, assignments in international transport have varied in popularity] so you didn't really need any experience at all. You could get into the transport section and start going on international assignments straight after a basic course. The usual training that includes conflict management, verbal conflict management and team support. But now we have gone back a bit since 18 months ago and they added English tests, some law and mock-ups again.

#37

Observation

The staff on the Observation pointed out that the popularity of applying to the international section and the demands placed on the recruited staff have varied over time. Furthermore, #46 Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE, who also serves as an instructor, hints that the Service has improved the content of the basic courses for escorts.

[Mock-up training] is a couple of days of law tests, English tests and then a final conflict management exercise with our basic techniques, which involves carrying out the entire procedure from pick-up to boarding the plane. Taking control of clients in the plane seat who get up or start getting aggressive and violent. Those who are permanent at International have that training and they have to complete the exercise every year to continue going out on international assignments.

#46

Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE

The various statements from the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE suggest a certain discrepancy between the management level and the operational staff, especially in how the common core curricula and guidelines are implemented in the operational parts of the Service. The risk of losing skills in operational activities due to the mandate one is given being unclear raises questions about whether these activities are sustainable in the long term or can maintain their effectiveness. If there is a lack of clarity in the allocation of mandates, the chain of command, or the employer's terms and condition are considered too poor, this risks contributing to high staff turnover. In the long run, this can lead to a significant loss of skills, which can affect the quality of the work and being able to maintain continuity in these activities.

Swedish Migration Agency

It is clear that Swedish government agencies play an active role in capacity building and training within the framework of Frontex. Sweden stands out as an engaged partner and contributes instructors and the development of operational systems, the production of common core curricula and as an organiser for training instances. In 2024, the Swedish Migration Agency contributed five trainers in pre-departure counselling (Migrationsverket, 2025d).

When it comes to pre-departure counselling, the respondents from the Swedish Migration Agency are satisfied with both the content and the quality of the training.²⁴¹ This can probably be explained by the fact that the Swedish Migration Agency has been very much involved in its design, which in turn indicates that they any needs and requests they had have been responded to.²⁴²

[... Frontex] has launched a solid training programme in pre-departure counselling lasting 5 days. [...] This is a good training programme. We have also contributed five teachers from the Swedish Migration Agency who travel around Europe [...] and teach the programme. We have also had an influence on how [the curriculum] was developed and produced so we have had some influence on its content, which has been good.

Kristina Hellgren

Expert, Swedish Migration Agency

The ongoing work to develop and improve training activities is also highlighted when it comes to reintegration programmes.²⁴³ One respondent points out that the working groups appointed for this work are heard regarding improvements and training initiatives.²⁴⁴ The respondent says that the training course offering is steered by the needs of the Member States, and that the Agency shows great flexibility and adaptability in meeting the perceived needs.

²⁴¹ #16 Swedish Migration Agency.

²⁴² During 2023, the Swedish Migration Agency participated in the Capacity Development and Training for Return Counsellors (CADRE) project, which is a programme under the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD). Fourteen staff completed the training. In addition, the Swedish Migration Agency has been involved in the development of training programmes and has provided five teachers within the Frontex pre-departure counselling training programme (Migrationsverket, 2024b, p. 86).

²⁴³ EU reintegration programme.

²⁴⁴ #16 Swedish Migration Agency.

[...] right now it is just my unit, the officials there who use RIAT [the Reintegration Assistance Tool]. But now I know that there are discussions going on, that [...] return centres too, and possibly that the Swedish Police Authority, will handle their own applications. In this instance Frontex has shown a great deal of flexibility and willingness to assist in coming here and training new officials in the system as we expand it. It is steered based on the Member States' needs.

#16

Swedish Migration Agency

FAR

All the Swedish government agencies in this study work, to varying degrees, in the joint booking system FAR (see Section 4.3). In general, there are differing opinions about FAR and the system's usefulness, with some patterns being found in which government agencies think what.

Swedish Migration Agency

The Swedish Migration Agency sees FAR as a great success. Frontex is perceived as flexible and responsive in terms of user-friendliness and the development of the system. One explanation for this is that the Swedish Migration Agency, in collaboration with Frontex, participated in developing FAR and acted as a testing partner for the beta version. Through this collaboration, the Swedish Migration Agency has expressed a wish for certain function improvements that Frontex has often taken into account. Frontex also points out that the Swedish Migration Agency's contribution has been important in the design of FAR:

In 2020, the Swedish Migration Agency was selected as one of the few entities to test the new FAR scheduled flights software before its release EU-wide. The level of contribution offered by Sweden to Return Division of Frontex on a continuous basis has been extremely important and has led to improvement of the software and the whole scheduled flights mechanism.

#25

Frontex

[In] the lead-up to the development of FAR, from the Swedish side we pushed to ensure that it is a case management system that works for an effective [return] process. There, Sweden has been very significant. So we often get questions like – *What do you do in Sweden? What are your needs? What do you want it to look like?* So we've been pretty prominent there. [...] Based on us having felt that we benefited greatly from this development and that it's become easy for us to book returns. Which means an effective management.

Petra Lindh
Head of Unit
Swedish Migration Agency

The Swedish Police Authority and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE

Those who work with FAR at the Swedish Police Authority experience the system as an improvement compared to earlier when staff had to submit a variety of forms to Frontex. When FAR was introduced, training was offered to the relevant staff at the Swedish Police Authority and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE. The training covered both the system's functions and how to use different mechanisms. A number of the respondents describe FAR as user-friendly and feel that through training and regular use they have gained a good grasp of the tool:

I completed the training in FAR roughly two years ago. My colleagues have completed this training too previously. They have not felt the need to go back and do the training again. They work daily in this system.

#11
Swedish Police Authority

Several within the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE and the Swedish Police Authority point out that they often don't get notifications when new functions are added or other changes are made in the system. Many describe it as "you have to work it out for yourself" and "try clicking on different things" – a bit of "learning by doing".²⁴⁵ In the case of urgent questions, respondents at the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE say that they can contact the responsible officer at Frontex directly.²⁴⁶ Many

²⁴⁵ Lisbeth Åhman, Case Officer, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE; Eva Åhs, Charter Flight Planning, Swedish Police Authority.

²⁴⁶ Cecilia Andelius, Expert, Frontex and European Border Management, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE.

people who work in FAR point out that they have not received any training in the system, and one person from the Swedish Police Authority says:

[...] again, it wouldn't hurt if there was somewhere where you could go in and read or watch a short instruction or a video or something [...] I've never received any training at all [in FAR]. So then you have to sit there and click your way around and work it out yourself. For me it's quite appalling that they give me access without having first passed a training course in their system. Do you understand what I mean by that? That's because my colleague who has also had to teach himself has to teach me who also isn't really familiar with the system. For me, that's a bit of a flaw.

Eva Åhs

Charter Flight Planning
Swedish Police Authority

According to several respondents who were interviewed, training in FAR is carried out in person, on site.²⁴⁷ It has not been possible for us to locate the course that contains training in FAR in the training catalogue (Frontex, 2025c); respondent #29 NTC Swedish Police Authority could not either see that this was accessible as a digital learning opportunity in Frontex Virtual Aula. The FAR system has built-in functions with pop-ups to notify users about important events. The users must then actively click them closed to proceed. Two possible improvements could be to notify users of structural changes in the system through pop-ups and to make online quick reference guides available or brief update lessons through an open-access version of the Frontex Virtual Aula platform.²⁴⁸

Sharing knowledge

In addition to regular training sessions, the sharing of knowledge between Member States is an important part of developing the work done in the area of return. According to the Schengen Borders Code, Frontex has a mandate to develop the common core curricula that Member States must transpose nationally (Europeiska Unionen, 2016). As Horii (2015) writes, there are also more **informal** approaches that Frontex uses to facilitate the sharing of knowledge.

²⁴⁷ Either by a training leader coming to the relevant government agency or by staff travelling to, for example, Warsaw.

²⁴⁸ At present, Frontex Virtual Aula is only available to staff who are actively conducting or are going to conduct the courses (in the near future). An open-access version of the platform could potentially make online material available to all staff working with border management and returns, which could also include quick reference guides to other parts of the activities.

Knowledge sharing takes place through workshops,²⁴⁹ Member State consultations²⁵⁰ and various working groups²⁵¹ that focus on different parts of returns. Country Working Groups bring the Member States together where they discuss progress in their cooperation with third countries. A number of respondents from the Swedish Police Authority say that they appreciate these meetings. They provide space for reflection, sharing experiences and networking.²⁵² The contacts and experiences that other Member States have with third countries can help to improve returns to various regions. However, the different working groups can also help to improve understanding between countries with very different conditions and thereby broaden perspectives in their day-to-day work.²⁵³

Because of course, we come from completely different [backgrounds], we have completely different histories, we have completely different traditions, we have completely different public administration cultures. But just the fact that we actually meet relatively often in [...] different working groups, it means we gain a much greater understanding of each other's systems and values. That means that we approach each other, rather a lot. I think this is a soft value that should not be underestimated.

#2

Swedish Ministry of Justice

In addition to strategic learning in working groups, the value of operational exchanges between Member States is also highlighted. A respondent from the Swedish Police Authority describes how staff members' service in other countries can contribute to knowledge transfer, best practice and the development of common working methods.²⁵⁴

²⁴⁹ For example, the Swedish Migration Agency and Frontex held a joint Workshop on Return Counselling in 2023 (Migrationsverket, 2024b).

²⁵⁰ This is described by the Swedish Migration Agency as an activity in which "[Frontex] gathers in the needs and priorities of the Member States which may thereby influence the direction of Frontex activities" (Migrationsverket, Årsrapport 2022, 2023).

²⁵¹ For example, the High Level Round Table on Return, pre-departure working group, working groups in integrated border management, capacity building, EUROSUR, risk analysis, vulnerability analysis, RIAT Working Group etc. #9 Coordinator, Swedish Police Authority.

²⁵² #18 Group Manager, Swedish Police Authority; #4 Swedish Police Authority.

²⁵³ Ivan Tomovic, Expert, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE.

²⁵⁴ Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority.

The different occupational backgrounds of the [seconded staff] enables the exchange of best practice with the local team, while they also provide practical support – for example, by averting a conflict through communication with a returnee in a language they both understand, or by ensuring that appropriate measures are taken for vulnerable groups during operations.

#25
Frontex

This type of exchange of experience within the framework of the Frontex Return Mobility Programme is highlighted as a concrete way of strengthening operational skills and promoting a more coordinated application of return measures between Member States.²⁵⁵

Concluding remarks

Sweden's national strategy for integrated European border management allows national government agencies to assess the need to participate in Frontex training operations themselves. The wording that training should be used when '[...] relevant to the context' (Polismyndigheten, 2024a, p. 29) opens the way for **non-use**, while Member States are in fact bound to implement the Agency's common core curricula at a national level according to the 2019 Frontex Regulation (European Parliament and Council, 2019).

As previously noted, there are some challenges in translating the common core curricula to fit the division of responsibilities between the Swedish government agencies. The different tasks of these government agencies means that the content needs to be adapted, which can generate a certain amount of ambiguity around implementation and use. In combination with the wording in the strategy, which leaves room for interpretation, these requirements for adaptation could leave an opening for **non-use** by Swedish government agencies. However, this scenario has not materialised. The interviews indicate that there is a high degree of **use** of Frontex training courses, in terms of participation as well as hosting courses. Respondents describe Frontex as an appreciated and valued partner when it comes to

²⁵⁵ The aim is to share good examples, build capacity and create a network between return practitioners. Sweden sent two practitioners to conduct study visits to other Member States, namely Latvia and the Netherlands. Similarly, Sweden has received study visits from two return practitioners from Estonia and Germany (#25 Frontex). The Programme covers a broad range of topics focusing on reintegration assistance and support, but also has components that focus on staff exchanges. The actual purpose is for this form of exchange to contribute to knowledge sharing, capacity building, and enhanced cooperation between EU Member States and Schengen countries. #11 Swedish Police Authority.

training, capacity building and knowledge sharing. The **use** of training courses is seen as facilitating their own work, increasing the knowledge and skills of the relevant government agencies, and contributing to achieving the organisation's own goals.

Besides their **use** of Frontex training, Swedish government agencies also participate in the development of the common core curricula and training materials. One example is how the Swedish Migration Agency has contributed to developing pre-departure counselling, and another is the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE's hosting of escort leader training. There are a number of drivers behind the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE's engagement in escort leader training that can be seen as a **use** of Frontex. The respondent from the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE emphasises the pride there is within the Service when it is entrusted to lead so many courses. The same respondent has previously highlighted how the organisation was inspired by the structure of Frontex when its international transport operations were set up after the collaboration agreement. The **use** seems to be driven by the fact that it provides positive proof of the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE's knowledge and skills. This can be seen as an example of the harmonisation that is occurring through joint training courses (Horii S., 2012).

The Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE has used a great deal of Frontex's materials and procedures in its return activities. This has then led to the Service being permitted to act as organiser and provide instructors for Frontex training instances. The **use** of Frontex training resources and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE's role as organiser also adds value, as training places can be assured for the Service's own staff, which assures staffing in the Service for the future.

A respondent from the Swedish Police Authority describes how Frontex appreciates the Swedish instructors and requests more of them from Sweden.²⁵⁶ At the same time, there is a balance that needs to be struck between what Frontex wants and the resources that the Swedish Police regions need for their core mission. However, it can be concluded in general that sending out instructors for training courses organised by Frontex does not appear to burden the Swedish Police Authority to any great extent. In comparison with the scepticism and concerns expressed by the respondents regarding the possible impact of the standing corps on the Authority's staffing capacity, it can be noted that the Authority sees **use** in this context as a broader strategic opportunity for staff. One explanation is that fewer people are affected and

²⁵⁶ #29 NTC, Swedish Police Authority.

that the time required is less than in the case of secondments to Frontex's standing corps. The impact on operations is thus less. It is also voluntary to contribute more in this area. Because there are no quotas to fill, Sweden can steer the number of trainers sent out to a greater extent. Another explanation for the **use** of training and capacity building is that there is a clearer concrete benefit for the Swedish government agencies. Through Sweden's use of Frontex training courses, Swedish staff can access material that can be passed on to colleagues, which can contribute to the strategic goal of implementing a European regulatory framework.

In terms of training, capacity building and knowledge sharing, it is clear that there are informal aspects to these processes. A respondent from the Swedish Police Authority describes how Frontex sometimes bypasses the established communication procedures and instead contacts units or individuals directly. This may have a detrimental effect on the coordination of training courses, and lead to the Swedish Police Authority at the central level not having an overview of who is participating in future courses. Bypassing the formal communication channels also means that the internal nomination process at the Swedish Police Authority is bypassed, with the result that personal suitability and other factors that are assessed internally are not taken into account.

These **informal** interfaces create challenges for the Swedish Police Authority's internal planning. Similarly, the respondents appear not to have structures through which changes in the FAR system are communicated. A possible improvement or change might be to provide an overview of changes through the already existing pop-ups in FAR, or to enable an open-access version of Frontex Virtual Aula with short how-to films or quick reference guides for anyone who works with FAR.

Knowledge is shared between Member States in several formats such as training instances, workshops and in working groups. Although knowledge sharing is not always the purpose, respondents describe the exchange as worthwhile and very often would like to see more sharing of knowledge and experience. Participation in these formats provides new insights and a deeper understanding of other countries, which in turn can assist the collaboration. These encounters facilitate the sharing of knowledge between Member State representatives and can provide opportunities to share best practice, which can improve each organisation's work.

5.6 Frontex's role and potential future expansion

A recurring theme in many of the interviews is the question of the role, scope and focus of Frontex. In this section, we summarise how Swedish actors view the role and development of Frontex, as well as the opportunities and concerns raised in relation to the Agency.

The Swedish respondents note that Frontex's mandate and scope have expanded significantly. This has led to closer cooperation between the Swedish government agencies and Frontex, with more tasks being carried out in the collaboration. The respondents emphasise positive elements, such as the fact that several of the European regulations and guidelines pave the way for a more coherent management of migration within the EU.

However, concerns are also raised about the Agency's expansion. These concerns also question what Frontex's actual mission is or should be, and what future consequences this may have for the Swedish government agencies and their missions. One consequence of this growth, highlighted by some respondents, is that clarity is declining. Those working at Swedish government agencies who dealt with Frontex previously knew who was working in the corresponding positions, and testify that: "It was never difficult to pick up the phone and call".²⁵⁷ The expansion means that contacts need to be formalised, which in turn can have consequences for communication. As previously discussed in Section 4.3, the 2019 Frontex Regulation has given the Agency an expanded mandate – including the possibility to take emergency interventions without the consent of the Member States.²⁵⁸ Moreover, with the introduction of the standing corps, staff resources have been mobilised from the Member States.

The question of Frontex's role and focus is tied to its longer-term strategy. There are indications of further expansion, for example by increasing the size of the standing corps and broadening its mission.²⁵⁹ The Agency formulates its strategy based on the needs expressed by Member States in the area of border management. However, some respondents note that Sweden's national interest can sometimes appear narrower than Frontex's overall objective.

²⁵⁷ #24, Swedish Police Authority.

²⁵⁸ These emergency interventions may be triggered where external border control is rendered ineffective to such an extent that it risks jeopardising the functioning of the Schengen area, either because a Member State does not take the necessary measures in line with a vulnerability assessment or because a Member State is facing specific and disproportionate challenges. Decisions on emergency interventions are made by the Council of the European Union.

²⁵⁹ #9 Coordinator, Swedish Police Authority; #12 Head of National Border Police Unit, NOA, Swedish Police Authority; Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority, #1 Swedish Policy Authority.

To those of us who don't have an external border with strong [migration] pressure, [it] is clear that by extension we also have an interest in having functioning external border control, even if it's not our own [border] since we have a Schengen area. But we also have a very strong interest in ensuring that those who have come to Sweden through secondary movements and who then have no right to be here actually return.

#2

Swedish Ministry of Justice

Some respondents state that there is a divide between Member States in southern and northern Europe, partly for geographical reasons²⁶⁰ and partly due to differences in public administration culture.²⁶¹ Broadening the Agency's mandate or expanding its role therefore risks happening at the expense of Swedish interests in the Schengen area as a whole, as there is always competition for resources. This is a concern that all Member States could raise, as national priorities risk getting "lost" in the bigger picture. When asked who is *driving* the further expansion of Frontex, one respondent replied:

I would probably say that I don't know if it's Frontex. I think it's more likely to come from certain Member States.

#9 Coordinator

Swedish Police Authority

The notion that it is perhaps more a matter of political will for further expansion could be discerned in the statements of Jonas Grimheden, FRO, Frontex, concerning the expansion of the standing corps:

And *what* we would prefer to do if the vision [were to become a reality], Frontex has of course been promised, or threatened with, a tripling of the number of standing corps by Ursula von der Leyen in July [2024] in the European Parliament. [...] a tripling would mean 30,000 [...] what are we going to do with all those staff, I have, so to speak, been ready and willing to help, and said that we can of course take some of them on and turn them into monitors [...]

Jonas Grimheden, FRO
Frontex

²⁶⁰ This 'natural' geographical division of Member States' interests in this matter stems from the fact that the Member States in southern Europe are more likely to be 'front-line states' (first country of arrival for irregular migration into the Schengen area).

²⁶¹ Jonas Grimheden, FRO, Frontex; #2 Swedish Ministry of Justice; #9 Coordinator, Swedish Police Authority; #12 Head of National Border Police Unit, NOA, Swedish Police Authority; Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority, #1 Swedish Policy Authority.

Grimheden notes that an expansion may pose certain challenges, especially given the already existing difficulties in meeting recruitment targets. At the same time, he can see that such a development could also mean opportunities for the Agency to strengthen its professionalisation. For example, some of the increased workforce could contribute to staffing monitoring assignments, which in turn would promote compliance with fundamental rights.

Others within the Swedish Police Authority argue that Frontex's growing mandate logically leads to even greater expansion. A broadened mandate would soon lead to new adjacent areas being identified to take on, which may ultimately lead to Member States handing over some or all of their external border management to Frontex.²⁶² A number of researchers have argued that Frontex has the opportunity to shape and expand its mandate, tasks and sphere of influence through the risk analyses it regularly produces, for example. (Bigo, 2014; Andersson, 2014; Monar, 2016; Horii S., 2016; Paul, 2017; Silberstein, 2020) In the next section, 5.7, we return to the issue of Frontex's ability to set the agenda on its own.

A respondent from the Swedish Police Authority expresses a similar concern about the risks of expanding further and wants to focus on core operations rather than expanding the standing corps:

There is a desire within [Frontex] to become as big and indispensable as possible, which makes you forget why you are there. [...] Do I like or understand the decision to have 3, 000 people [in the standing corps]? No. So scrap it while it's still in the planning phase. Bring order to what we already have instead; then we can make changes.

Lasse Hammarsjö
Head of Operations Unit
Swedish Police Authority

Frontex's current mission and commitments require sustained focus and further efforts. According to the respondents, Frontex should prioritise the tasks it has already undertaken – and do them better and more effectively – before shifting its focus to new operational areas.²⁶³

²⁶² #12 Head of Border Police Unit, NOA, Swedish Police Authority; Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority.

²⁶³ #1 Swedish Police Authority; #8 Group Manager, Embassy Liaison Team, Swedish Police Authority; #9 Coordinator, Swedish Police Authority; Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority.

At some point, those growing pains take their toll. I think you should build on what you already have. Resolve the issues with national databases. Resolve issues that haven't been resolved yet. And focus on effective border management. Focus on returns. This is really what I think. Otherwise, it will simply become huge and the quality will suffer. [...] Focus, I think, definitely. A somewhat sharper focus.

#9 Coordinator
Swedish Police Authority

Concerns about Frontex's mandate and role can be understood in light of the European Court of Auditors' evaluation in 2021. This showed that, two years after the 2019 Regulation, Frontex was not yet ready to implement those directives or provisions. In addition, Frontex had not yet adapted to the requirements in the 2016 Regulation, in particular regarding vulnerability and risk assessments. Frontex thus found itself in a situation where the 2019 Regulation had to be implemented while the 2016 Regulation was not yet fully incorporated. (European Court of Auditors, 2021, p. 37) It is also worth recognising the continuous pressure for reform and the rapid political developments at both national and European level. The potential expansion of Frontex will not be a decision taken by the Agency on its own. Even before the upcoming implementation of the EU Asylum and Migration Pact, proposals have been put forward to complement it with a new EU system for returns (Europeiska Kommissionen, 2025a; Europeiska Kommissionen, 2025b).²⁶⁴ This was highlighted in Ursula von der Leyen's speech on the political guidelines for the period 2024–2029 (Europeiska Kommissionen, 2024). A proposal for the revision of the Frontex Regulation is currently expected in 2026 (Justitiedepartementet, EU-enheten, 2025, s. paragraph 10 b).²⁶⁵

In its 2024 evaluation, the Commission pointed out that return issues have still not been incorporated into vulnerability and risk assessments (European Commission, 2024a). All Swedish respondents, mainly from the Swedish Police Authority and the Swedish Ministry of Justice, favoured a narrower focus on the Agency's core mission, in line with Swedish "interests", which is not surprising, as those are the two actors that handle strategic aspects of

²⁶⁴ The Swedish position broadly welcomes this complement, but it also includes wordings to the effect that this reform is assumed to be insufficient to achieve the desired result. (Justitiedepartementet, EU-enheten, 2025, p. paragraph 9).

²⁶⁵ According to the annotated agenda for the Council of Europe's Justice and Home Affairs Council (JHA), point 10(b) states that the revised Frontex Regulation is expected to address "[...] Frontex's role and mandate in addressing hybrid threats, such as the instrumentalisation of migrants and threats to critical infrastructure [...]" (Justitiedepartementet, EU-enheten, 2025, p. 12).

Sweden's collaboration with Frontex. The Swedish position on the Agency's activities ahead of a JHA meeting highlights Sweden's budget-restrictive stance and that the Member States bear the ultimate responsibility for their border management, and emphasises that Frontex's capabilities should not compete with their own capabilities (Justitiedepartementet, EU-enheten, 2025, s. paragraph 10 b). The Swedish position also includes a formulation on strengthened return support, which is also requested by several respondents. However, it is worth noting that several respondents, while wanting to stop Frontex's expansion, also called for services that the Agency does not currently offer.

[Regarding the possibility of focusing more on multilateral readmission agreements] I think that Frontex and the EU should have a role to bring together, coordinate and speak with one [united] voice on behalf of the EU. It should not be the case that all parties have to go and talk to [third country]. It should be possible to have joint agreements and joint negotiations on this, ensuring that this works and that there are joint procedures for how this should be done instead of each [EU] country building on its own procedure with this or that particular [third] country. There would be huge benefits if we did this together and expanded that collaboration, with even more Frontex-organised joint charter flights, with Frontex speaking for all of us under the EU hat. There may be good reasons for why this is not the case, but based on the knowledge I have today, I think it could be something that could be developed a lot further.

#12 Head of Border Swedish Police Unit, NOA,
Swedish Police Authority

This desire to expand the arsenal in this particular area – readmission agreements – has to do with the fact that Swedish government agencies found it difficult to get in place certain agreements on their own. It may therefore be in Sweden's national interest for Frontex to have a broader mandate in this particular area. At present, Frontex does not have a mandate to sign agreements with third countries; this is the responsibility of the Commission, more specifically DG HOME:

Well, [negotiating and signing readmission agreements] is also our responsibility... it's in the hands of this department that I mentioned, C1. They are responsible for [negotiating agreements with third countries]. So that's the external dimension of the return policy. [...] There's also always that friction with the Member States where if they have a bilateral agreement that works perfectly well for their own country, [we at DG HOME] don't want to disrupt that.

#15 Commission Official
DG HOME

Frontex's current mandate includes support in the form of EURLOs – liaison officers stationed in certain third countries to facilitate Member States on return matters. Their tasks may include liaising with government agencies to obtain identification documents, landing permits and other cooperation on site.²⁶⁶ The respondent from the Commission notes that the bilateral readmission agreements between Member States and third countries work very well, and there is thus no need to intervene. Lemberg-Pedersen and Halpen (2021) showed that Danish actors did not see as much value in cooperating with Frontex when they already had their own bilateral readmission agreements with the country of enforcement. It appears that Member States view Frontex and multilateral agreements as interesting when bilateral agreements cannot be signed – and vice versa.

At the same time, other Member States' bilateral agreements may favour Sweden. One respondent explains that in the case of enforcements to the Democratic Republic of Congo, the agency can choose to join a JRO organised by Belgium, which has a functioning agreement in place.²⁶⁷ One respondent also points out that Sweden can benefit from other Member States' bilateral agreements, even outside the scope of joint return operations. By contacting Member States that have bilateral agreements in place with third countries that are perceived as difficult, one can appropriate informal information on their approach.²⁶⁸ There is also previous research suggesting that in some cases it is more favourable for third countries to negotiate return agreements bilaterally with the various Member States than to do so centrally via the Commission.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁶ #19 Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE; Eva Åhs, Charter Flight Planning, Swedish Police Authority; #8 Group Manager, Embassy Liaison Team, Swedish Police Authority.

²⁶⁷ #27 Inspector, National Operations Department, Swedish Police Authority.

²⁶⁸ #19, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE.

²⁶⁹ See, among others, Vera-Larrucea and Luthman (2024).

Concluding remarks

In this section, respondents expressed concerns about Frontex's expansion, what the Agency's future mandate might cover, and how this might affect Sweden, among other aspects. The respondents who reflect on Frontex's expanded role were mainly from the Swedish Ministry of Justice and the Swedish Police Authority – not at all surprising as these actors manage the Swedish instruction for the work of the Management Board.

According to respondent #2 Swedish Ministry of Justice, concerns about the more imminent expansion in the form of the increase in the standing corps can be explained above all by the Member States' concern that the effect on staffing will have a negative impact on national border control operations, and that a broadening of the mandate and tasks will give rise to more ambiguity and competition on who is responsible for what. This is also noted in the Swedish position for the JHA meeting, which states that Frontex's resources should complement and strengthen, but not replace, the Member States' own capabilities, and that any expansion of the standing corps must not be at the expense of the ability of the deploying Member States to control their own borders (Justitiedepartementet, EU-enheten, 2025). In the long run, a major expansion of the standing corps could mean that the differing interests of Member States would also influence what the standing corps should be used for.

If the expansion in certain areas is driven by specific Member States, it could be seen as an expression of their national priorities. For Sweden, return is a priority area. Respondent #2 Swedish Ministry of Justice emphasises that Sweden would like to see Frontex do more in the area of return, with the support not only targeted based on Swedish needs. The respondent argues that Frontex already has well-developed support in the areas of border control and management, and that therefore any expansion of its activities should be in the area of return.²⁷⁰

As noted earlier, Swedish respondents tend to see Frontex through the lens of Swedish interests rather than the common European. The **use** or **non-use** of Frontex is often steered by how well the organisation is perceived to benefit Sweden's national needs.

²⁷⁰ Furthermore, respondent #2 Swedish Ministry of Justice emphasises that Frontex's border control support to the Member States generally functions well, although they acknowledge that some of the Member States should improve their national border controls.

Regarding Frontex's expansion, several respondents from Swedish government agencies claim that the Agency should prioritise the 'core mission'. There is a perception that an expanded role for Frontex could come at the expense of Swedish interests. If this perception persists, Swedish actors may in some situations see **non-use** of Frontex as the most effective option, given that the Agency's focus may not then lie within Sweden's priority areas.

Some respondents also express concern that Frontex's expansion will be self-amplifying, i.e. through expansion it will gradually broaden its mandate. This process has also been highlighted by previous research (Bigo, 2014; Andersson, 2014; Monar, 2016; Horii S., 2016; Paul, 2017; Silberstein, 2020). However, Fernández-Rojo (2021) maintains that fears of a concentration of power in Frontex are exaggerated. The border management system is expected to continue in its more decentralised form, with a strong national influence. This can also be seen clearly in the Swedish position for the JHA meeting (Justitiedepartementet, EU-enheten, 2025). In general, Member States have been reluctant to transfer border management powers to supranational agencies (Fernández-Rojo, 2021; Carrera, den Hertog, & Parkin, 2013, p. 343).

The future 'indispensability' concern expressed by one respondent is understood as a potential future scenario in which Frontex has expanded and created structures that make it necessary for Swedish government agencies to **use** it. The concerns expressed by the Swedish border management agencies relate to the risk of losing their autonomy and how this would affect their ability to carry out their mission. Here too, there seems to be a tension between the expansion of Frontex versus the concerns of national operational staff about whether a growing mission can be achieved without hampering effectiveness or other operational needs.

A similar balancing act, also described by Perkowski (2019), concerns Frontex and its relationship to sovereignty. There is a willingness here to build a common European border management system, with a strengthened mandate and role for Frontex, while Member States are also reluctant to relinquish control – especially on matters that concern national sovereignty.

But there are also arguments in favour of broadening Frontex's mandate and entrusting it with tasks that are currently outside its remit. What is intended then is a more coherent approach to joint readmission agreements with third countries under the auspices of Frontex.²⁷¹ This is in contrast to other

²⁷¹ To clarify, this lies outside Frontex's mandate, as it is the European Commission's remit to conclude readmission agreements and such agreements are not requested with third countries where functioning bilateral agreements are in place. It is also worth pointing out that previous research has shown that third countries may be unfavourably

respondents who want Frontex to have a more limited mission. As the DG HOME official points out, Member States with functioning bilateral agreements are reluctant to interfere in things that are working. Even the Commission seems to be reluctant to get involved in these issues unless necessary.²⁷² Member States may have a positive attitude towards the **use** of an expanded Frontex mandate in cases where they do not have their own bilateral agreement or experience problems with a third country. Other Member States may be inclined towards **non-use** in cases where the State itself has a bilateral agreement or functioning cooperation.

5.7 Strategic work

Collaboration with Frontex takes place at both strategic and operational levels, from participation in the Frontex Management Board to how operational staff are to work and comply with established decisions and guidelines. In this section, we examine how Swedish respondents perceive this strategic work, what opportunities are available within its framework, and how key actors, primarily from the Swedish Police Authority, the Swedish Ministry of Justice and the European Commission, perceive Sweden's work with strategic issues.

The European Integrated Border Management Regulation (2019/1896) serves as a framework for coordinating border management within the Union and between Member States (European Parliament and Council, 2016; European Parliament and Council, 2019). To implement the Regulation, Sweden has adopted a national strategy that aims, among other things, to promote cooperation between relevant government agencies and international actors (Polismyndigheten, 2021; Polismyndigheten, 2024a). The strategy has been produced by the Swedish border management agencies,²⁷³ with the Swedish Police Authority being responsible for coordination.

The Swedish Police Authority is the coordinating agency at national level and represents Sweden on the Frontex Management Board together with an alternate from the Swedish Ministry of Justice. The Management Board meets five times a year and is the Agency's highest decision-making body. Before each meeting, Frontex sends out agendas and requests for documentation to all Member States. The Swedish Police Authority then gathers information and

disposed towards multilateral agreements, instead seeking bilateral agreements with specific countries.

²⁷² #15 Commission Official, DG HOME; see also Lemberg and Halpen.

²⁷³ The Swedish Police Authority (Coordinator), the Swedish Coast Guard, the Swedish Customs, the Swedish Migration Agency, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service, the Swedish Security Service, and the Swedish Maritime Administration.

documentation from other affected Swedish government agencies.²⁷⁴ A preliminary meeting is then held together with the Swedish Ministry of Justice at which an instruction on Sweden's position on the various issues is drawn up.

The instruction and Sweden's actions in the Management Board are an important component of Sweden's strategic work within the framework of European integrated border management. This section deals with the more general strategic level, in particular the work of the Management Board, and how Sweden's national strategy is operationalised. The latter is mainly based on Swedish Police Authority respondents.

Management Board

Swedish Ministry of Justice and Swedish Police Authority

The Swedish Police Authority and Swedish Ministry of Justice represent Sweden on the Frontex Management Board and are thus the actors who have the capacity to act on Sweden's instructions in the work of the Management Board. A representative from the Swedish Ministry of Justice emphasises that Sweden's geographical location and focus on return is what often characterises Sweden's actions in the Management Board:

We have, of course, pointed out multiple times on Sweden's part that *"we really want to focus on return because it's important for Sweden"*. [...] The Management Board is very large, so it's often difficult to get discussions going. But [they] make a lot of decisions and it's very clear [which decisions will be taken during each meeting]. A great deal concerns of course how the budget is allocated within Frontex and which activities to invest in.

#1

Swedish Police Authority

Sweden's focus on return issues is in line with the latest evaluation of the Frontex Regulation, which pointed out that the Management Board needed to improve in the area of return in particular (European Commission, 2024a).²⁷⁵ The work of the Management Board is based on decision data prepared by Frontex. Before each meeting, the Agency draws up the agenda and proposals for decision. One respondent emphasises that there is no 'competition' between Member States as it is important for everyone to have their needs

²⁷⁴ Including the Swedish Migration Agency and Prison and Probation Service.

²⁷⁵ #9 Coordinator, Swedish Police Authority See also (Justitiedepartementet, EU-enheten, 2025).

met.²⁷⁶ It is part of the Agency's mission to balance the interests and needs of Member States. At the same time, one respondent at the Swedish Police Authority expressed a concern that the Management Board's strategic work to lead Frontex thus also risks being preoccupied with the Agency itself, which sets the agenda:

The Management Board's work should focus more on strategic issues, less on operational ones and spend more time on following up on actual effect. Are the interventions having the intended effect and should they continue? In this area, the Agency needs to adjust the agenda so that the smaller issues do not consume the larger ones.

#12 Head of Border Swedish Police Unit, NOA,
Swedish Police Authority

The importance of being able to deal with a large number of issues at each Board meeting requires them to be prepared in Working Groups which look at the issue in detail and formulate a finalised proposal for the Management Board to consider. When asked directly about how the Agency sets the agenda, one respondent replied:

At [the Swedish Police Authority] this is the kind of thing that people say and think. *Yeah well, they forced it through or they got it through and we have not had time to look at it.* And maybe that's what it was like in the past and it's better now. [...] But on the other hand, I know that there can be a weak link in the chain sometimes. I've been involved on a few occasions where an issue has been discussed in the Management Board where it says *the decision data for this agenda item have been dealt with in a working group.* Then when you check back, it has not in fact been dealt with in the working group [...]

#9 Coordinator
Swedish Police Authority

A respondent from the Swedish Ministry of Justice emphasises that Frontex's direction and strategy are influenced by the individuals who sit on the Management Board and, even more so, by those who sit on the Agency's management team.

²⁷⁶ #2 Swedish Ministry of Justice.

[... The work of the Management Board] is partly dependent on what has been on the political agenda and which issues have been topical and the Board has been forced to deal with. But it is at least equally dependent on the people who have sat [on the Board]. The Board members from other countries, the Chair of the Board that we've had as well as perhaps most importantly, who the Executive Director has been [...]

#2

Swedish Ministry of Justice

An example of how the political agenda can influence this work is given by a Swedish respondent who recounts an experience from an HLRTR meeting. During the meeting, a potential expansion of methodological support was discussed in order to increase the number of enforced expulsions. Following protests from some Member States, a representative from the European Commission clearly signalled the dissatisfaction of policymakers with the low rate of enforcements. This illustrates how political priorities can frame the collaboration and influence discussions on methodology development.²⁷⁷ It is interesting that this is emphasised at an HLRTR in particular, as the HLRTR has a strategic role. A respondent²⁷⁸ notes that the work of the HLRTR aims to identify current issues, including operational ones, which in turn can be moved forward.

It has been suggested that the Management Board should have more expertise on return issues. So I interpret this to mean that they want return to be discussed more often in the Board. I do think in fact the Board discusses [return but] maybe not always at a strategic level, [rather] maybe more [in terms of] "how many have we returned", "this is the trend", statistics and so on. Return is on everyone's lips of course at the moment [...]

#9 Coordinator

Swedish Police Authority

A number of respondents from the Swedish Police Authority feel there is a lack of purely strategic discussions on important issues for the long-term work of Frontex. They call for discussions on Frontex's core mission and direction, with less time spent on presenting statistics, etc.²⁷⁹ Since the interviews were held with the respondents, a number of steps have been

²⁷⁷ Ivan Tomovic, Expert, Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE.

²⁷⁸ #9 Coordinator, Swedish Police Authority.

²⁷⁹ #12 Head of Border Police Unit, NOA, Swedish Police Authority; #9 Coordinator, Swedish Police Authority.

taken to allow for a more in-depth discussion on direction and strategy. According to #12, Head of Border Swedish Police Unit, NOA, Swedish Police Authority, this has been achieved through an extraordinary Board meeting, among other steps.

To promote Sweden's national position, the board members need to act **informally**; by building alliances and acting as a united front, they can have a greater impact:

[...] Between meetings and on the margins of a meeting, you try to seek out your allies and we have had various rounds of Nordic collaboration where we meet before the Board meetings, discuss things together and try to find support from the other countries, because often the other Nordic countries think much the same as we do.

#1

Swedish Police Authority

At the same time, it should be emphasised that the work of the Management Board is not just seen as a tug-of-war between different countries, or constellations of countries, where national interests are narrowly pursued by Swedish representatives. A respondent from the Ministry points out that Sweden's interests in the area of return cannot be divorced from how the border control of southern Member States functions.²⁸⁰

In addition to pre-board meetings, a number of respondents describe informal conversations during breaks. It appears that contacts are often made between countries that are geographically close to Sweden, especially when there is a perceived common understanding of the issues on the agenda.²⁸¹ For these countries, the issue of return high may be high on their agendas, but Sweden and several of its neighbouring countries actively working to make fundamental rights issues more prominent is also described.

Sweden has stuck its neck out quite a lot when it comes to fundamental rights, as well as the importance of people being able to apply for asylum and that we should provide a good reception. This is probably the issue where I think Sweden has been most visible over the years. Lately, however, we've been talking a lot

²⁸⁰ #2 Swedish Ministry of Justice.

²⁸¹ Respondent #2 Swedish Ministry of Justice describes a strategy that is mainly about finding alliances with 'like-minded' actors – even when national interests differ. The aim is to find points of common interest that can create synergies and facilitate compromises in negotiations.

about return because it's a priority for us. But this is also the case for our Nordic neighbours.

#1

Swedish Police Authority

It is precisely on those occasions when the Management Board needs to engage in more in-depth discussions and make joint decisions, consider or take measures that the differences in priorities and attitudes become apparent. Here, the attitude of Frontex's management can play some role, as noted by #2 Swedish Ministry of Justice. Furthermore, one respondent describes the process of drawing up a statement in the Management Board, which in this case concerns the fundamental right to apply for asylum.

Something else the Management Board does quite often is to [draw up] statements concerning that "*pushbacks are not okay*". The [discussions in the Board], especially on fundamental rights, eventually lead to the agreed [statement] being so watered down [...] that it says virtually nothing because there is no agreement. So it's definitely a challenge and that's why there's a lot of lobbying that goes on.

#1

Swedish Police Authority

The difficulty of reaching a consensus at EU level is a well-known and well-studied phenomenon that researchers such as Klaassen and Rodrigues (2021) as well as Fornalé (2012) highlight (see the section on the Return Directive). The common EU approach often leads to the creation of wordings that are open to interpretation, even in the negotiations for binding regulations, directives and regulatory frameworks. The statements that need to be jointly developed by the Management Board reflect this, but also form the basis of the criticism often voiced by civil society organisations regarding the lack of accountability, for example.

Frontex and the European Commission

Respondents from the Swedish Police Authority describe the lack of deeper strategic discussions on Frontex's role and direction. At the same time, respondents at the European level call for the Member States to initiate discussions more often. Frontex considers that the Member States are *in principle* and *to some extent* involved in the development of Frontex's rules on fundamental rights and that:

More concretely, in the area of return, the Member States are always consulted in the process to adopt the annual operational plans [...] and they have the opportunity to comment on specific provisions in the operational plans. Frontex's operational plan for returns also contains instructions on how to ensure the protection of fundamental rights during operational activities. The Member States must approve the operational plan before they can participate in Frontex operational activities.

#25
Frontex

Frontex wordings on Member State influence suggest that the picture painted by the Swedish Police Authority respondents – that they mainly approve agenda items rather than influence them – may be correct. When the Agency uses wordings like *in principle* and *to some extent*, this gives the impression that an actor other than the Member States – perhaps Frontex itself – is the driver in how operational activities are designed and what instructions are included. Member States *are consulted* and given the opportunity *to comment* on the operational plans, but these are not necessarily taken into account. The need for Member States to approve the operational plan in order to participate in the activities, combined with Frontex's important role in European-level return work, creates a situation in which Member States may feel compelled to adapt. A respondent from the Commission notes that the Member States are relying more and more on Frontex support in return operations and that this is seen as a positive development.

This is something we have always encouraged – that Member States use primarily Frontex for the operational part of return.

Ionut Mihalache
Policy Officer
DG HOME

Although the Agency has an active role in setting the agenda and formulating proposals, the Member States still have the opportunity to have their say. A respondent from the Commission recognises that Frontex largely sets the agenda and direction of its activities, but also highlights that there is scope for the Member States to be more proactive and involved:

One thing that we [at DG HOME] sometimes reflect upon is the involvement of the Member States in Frontex Management Board meetings, but also in different working groups led by Frontex. For our part, we think that the Member States could at times be a bit more active because [the work with migration issues] is

something we have to do together. There is Frontex, there is the Commission, but there are also the Member States. Sometimes we find that the Member States are perhaps a little passive at Management Board meetings and don't always speak up on what they think and which activities they feel should be prioritised in the budget. Many Member States do not say anything, which is a bit of a shame because we need to come to a joint decision where everybody is on board with what we are going to do with Frontex and with what Frontex is going to do.

#15 Commission Official
DG HOME

When we ask the same respondent if they think Frontex provides opportunities for Member States to work strategically and proactively in the Management Board, they say:

Yes, I think so. But again, I don't think the Member States are exploiting it. It's all a bit passive, with Member States waiting for the proposals that Frontex puts on the table and then reacting to them as a Member State. [The stance of the Member States is] really more observational, *is there anything in these papers that Frontex has produced that I am not happy with? But if I'm not unhappy about anything, I won't say anything.* However, it is possible to go one step further as a Member State, so they could consider: *what would I like to see? What direction do I think that Frontex should take in the future* and then say it more actively. But that is unusual, in fact. In fact you don't hear a more strategic view and more proactive strategic proposals from many Member States.

#15 Commission Official
DG HOME

The respondent notes that there is sometimes a lack of direction and coordination amongst Member States when it comes to the work in the Frontex Management Board, its various working groups, and contacts with the Commission. Statements and instructions differ between these forums, leading the respondent to wonder whether all national representatives are informed of what has been said in other contexts. At the same time, the respondent emphasises that Sweden makes a good impression in this respect – Sweden's work is seen as well-coordinated and consistent.

The respondent from DG HOME sees Sweden as one of the more active Member States in terms of work in the Management Board, with representatives who both contribute to discussions and nominate participants for relevant working groups.²⁸² This statement is contradicted somewhat by Jonas Grimheden, FRO, Frontex, who does not perceive the same enthusiasm from the Swedish representatives, while emphasising that this does not mean passivity. The respondent from Frontex emphasises that solid preparatory work and collaboration with other Member States still allows us to exert influence at various levels.

If a problem arises or you want to make a little suggestion or start a little push, it's always easier to start with Sweden, then the Nordic countries and then other [Member States]. [... Sweden] has built up a great deal of trust in the Management Board and acts on the basis of that, but Sweden does not speak up on every agenda item or even at every Board meeting, but is rather quiet, which in some cases this may be good strategically. [...] they may be preparing and doing a lot behind the scenes.

Jonas Grimheden, FRO
Frontex

This suggests that there are a number of **informal** dimensions to the strategic work linked to the Management Board. Although Swedish representatives are not the most vocal, they seem to have good possibilities to influence the strategic work if they so wish. The interviews show that these **informal** dimensions of the work are not random, but rather have grown out of and become an established part of the strategic work. Mixing **formal** and **informal** work in strategic contexts seems to be valuable.²⁸³

The perceived lack of engagement from the Member States can be partly explained by the instructions that the Management Board representatives bring with them to the meetings. As #12 Head of Border Swedish Police Unit, NOA, Swedish Police Authority emphasises, clearer guidelines on the major strategic issues could benefit from better domestic preparation. Sweden could then bring up these issues on the agenda in the larger European forums, i.e. it could involve more of a national approach to Frontex, its development and strategic work. But to make a real impact, they would need to build alliances with other like-minded parties, and this is where the phrase "talking to our Nordic mates" returns as a way to gather support.²⁸⁴

²⁸² #15 Commission Official, DG HOME.

²⁸³ See Kleine, 2010, and Sahin-Mencutek and Triandafyllidou, 2025

²⁸⁴ #1 Swedish Police Authority; #12 Head of Border Police Unit, NOA, Swedish Police Authority.

Although respondents from the Swedish Police Authority²⁸⁵ and #15 Commission Official, DG HOME, call for greater involvement in the strategic work, it is noted that the more restrained character seems to be in line with how the Management Board works in general and not a sign of weakness. It is worth noting that the respondent from DG HOME describes Sweden as active in Management Board work. Jonas Grimheden, FRO, Frontex, also claims that Sweden has an important and influential role, where Sweden acts within the framework of its instruction with a form of quiet diplomacy.

Operational activities and strategy

Sweden's national strategy for European integrated border management 2024–2027 has been approved by the Government and is inter-agency, which means that the responsibility is shared between the responsible government agencies. The Swedish Police Authority is responsible for coordinating the work and continuous monitoring, but this requires interagency cooperation – which is also a priority area. The Swedish strategy aims to meet the criteria emanating from the Commission's and Frontex's strategies (Polismyndigheten, 2024a).

The Swedish Police Authority, which serves as the coordinating government agency, has a leading role in matters relating to collaboration with Frontex at Management Board level. This leading role seems to reflect how senior managers at both the Swedish Migration Agency and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE relate to strategies and instructions for the Management Board meetings. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE receives orders from the Swedish Police Authority and then acts as an operational enforcer. The Swedish Migration Agency works independently (and as part of the collaboration) to motivate and implement voluntary returns and provides detention centres in cases of forced return.

In the interviews with these two government agencies, several examples emerged of how, in practice, they are trying to develop solutions and working methods that integrate Frontex tools with their own activities. Respondents from the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE and the Swedish Migration Agency are not either equally clear in their reasoning on how the strategic approach from Frontex or in Sweden affects their agencies' operational work.

²⁸⁵ #9 Coordinator, Swedish Police Authority; #12 Head of Border Police Unit, NOA, Swedish Police Authority.

Swedish Police Authority

At the Swedish Police Authority, there are differing views on how Sweden should relate to the Frontex strategy, how it can be operationalised in day-to-day activities, and how the requirements of day-to-day activities can or should influence the strategy and the use of Frontex.

One respondent expresses concern that excessive use of the Agency – and in particular of the standing corps – could lead to a shift in focus away from the law enforcement elements of the border Swedish Police's mission. There is a potential risk that too much focus may be placed on passenger flows instead. The respondent expresses some uncertainty about how the border Swedish Police's combined mission of law enforcement and border surveillance could work if the collaboration with Frontex were to be expanded. At the same time, the respondent also notes that large parts of the Swedish Police Authority have very little to do with Frontex.

I think that there are relatively few people in the Swedish Police who are interested and know a lot about what Frontex actually does, who think about Frontex and include it in their thinking on strategy. I would say that it's a fairly small element in the Swedish Police Authority, while the border Swedish Police play a fairly large part in it [the collaboration with Frontex].

#12 Head of Border Swedish Police Unit, NOA,
Swedish Police Authority

Since 2022, a role has been established within the Swedish Police Authority be responsible for issues related to Frontex.²⁸⁶ This role is placed organisationally in the border Swedish Police, which is reasonable given this unit's responsibilities. But it also means that questions relating to Frontex are only of any importance to a small, specific part of the Swedish Police Authority.²⁸⁷ This can have multiple consequences. Several respondents note that operational realities and policy objectives do not always go hand in hand. The Swedish Police Authority's mission does not seem to be wholly in line with the political understanding of, or expectations of, the Authority's work.²⁸⁸ The respondents therefore feel that getting closer to Frontex is something that is happening at a higher political level, disconnected from the operational level.

²⁸⁶ #9 Coordinator, Swedish Police Authority.

²⁸⁷ #12 Head of Border Police Unit, NOA, Swedish Police Authority.

²⁸⁸ Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority; #12 Head of Border Police Unit, NOA, Swedish Police Authority; #9 Coordinator, Swedish Police Authority.

We [the border management agencies] need to agree on the direction we think Frontex should pursue in order for them to provide the best possible support to us. Then we need to come to an agreement with the Swedish Ministry of Justice and the Government Offices of Sweden so that we and the ministers are speaking the same language; that we agree on the direction we want to pursue.

#12 Head of Border Swedish Police Unit, NOA,
Swedish Police Authority

The respondent highlights a possible discrepancy here between operational activities and the political level which decides on the instructions and Sweden's position, a view that is supported by Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority. It now appears that there is active work going on to develop an instruction or a Swedish position in relation to Frontex (Justitiedepartementet, EU-enheten, 2025), which is largely consistent with what emerges from the interview material. This indicates that a more coherent line is being established between the border management agencies, the Swedish Ministry of Justice and the Government Offices.

The pre-meetings and instructions developed are very largely steered by the agenda sent out by Frontex. As a result, the broader discussion called for by operational activities may be limited or absent. It is worth noting that there have been major and rapid changes both within Frontex and in the national policy, which have required some adaptation on the part of the Swedish government agencies. The requirements imposed on the Agency and its operational activities by the 2016 Frontex Regulation had not been fully implemented when the 2019 Frontex Regulation was adopted. At this stage, ahead of the new Asylum and Migration Pact, which is expected to enter into force in 2026, the 2019 Regulation is also not fully operationalised.²⁸⁹ It is also important to recognise the ongoing reform pressures and rapid political developments, at both the national and European levels. Even before the planned implementation of the EU's Asylum and Migration Pact, the European Commission has put forward proposals to complement it with a new EU system for return (Europeiska Kommissionen, 2025a; 2025b). This issue was raised in Ursula von der Leyen's speech on the political guidelines for the period 2024–2029 (Europeiska Kommissionen, 2024). Currently, a proposal to revise the Frontex Regulation is expected to be presented in 2026 (Justitiedepartementet, EU-enheten, 2025, s. paragraph 10 b). The respondents sometimes appear to find adapting to new national provisions, Frontex rules

²⁸⁹ See European Court of Auditors, 2021.

and the broader EU regulatory framework a strain or time-consuming. Frontex's operational activities and the implementation of the regulations are also behind the set schedule, which in turn may be due to other external factors.²⁹⁰ As mentioned in the section on the standing corps, respondents at the Swedish Police Authority express some scepticism about operational activities becoming – too – dependent on Frontex. Therefore, a certain degree of **non-use** may exist when it comes to operationalising certain strategies, which results in the implementation sometimes lagging behind.

One respondent describes the role of the Swedish Police Authority as “enforcer of a political will”, explaining that the Authority is managed and governed by rules and regulations decided by politicians. The Swedish Police Authority does not make strategic decisions on its own, but acts on instructions from the Government Offices. According to the respondent, the Swedish Police participate in the collaboration with Frontex mainly because they are required to do so, rather than because a concrete operational need has been identified in advance.²⁹¹

[The collaboration] functions thanks to a lot of flexible staff, I must say. There is a very good vision, after all. But somewhere in the strategic layers, things go wrong. I can't say exactly where. But somewhere, it goes wrong.

Lasse Hammarsjö
Head of Operations Unit
Swedish Police Authority

The respondent adds that the Swedish Police Authority has an ambition to be an active part of the European cooperation in Frontex, especially with regard to future developments in border management, such as within IT, monitoring and working methods. At the same time, it is noted that the current operational situation in Sweden does not justify the need for the Frontex standing corps. A discrepancy is highlighted where certain parts of the collaboration are perceived as politically motivated rather than operationally driven. Hammarsjö emphasises that the collaboration is working, but that this is largely thanks to committed staff rather than the formal structures.

²⁹⁰ Among other things, the COVID-19 pandemic is mentioned by DG HOME as a reason why the Frontex regulations have not been fully implemented on schedule (Ionut Mihalache, Policy Officer, DG HOME).

²⁹¹ Lasse Hammarsjö, Head of Operations Unit, Swedish Police Authority.

Concluding analysis

When it comes to the strategic work with Frontex, the interviews reveal traces of what Sahin-Mencutek and Triandafyllidou (2025) describe: how **informal** processes and practices are gradually incorporated into organisations and government agencies and become tied to many **informal** strategies. This can also be seen in relation to Frontex, where several respondents describe how decisions and discussions can take place in informal contexts – before the meeting or during breaks. Similarly, meetings such as the HLRT are intended to feed into the work of the Management Board, which means that these meetings also serve as arenas for strategic work.

When it comes to the **formal** work in the Management Board, i.e. its regular meetings, some respondents criticise the structure at these meetings. One objection was that no opportunity was given to discuss more strategic matters at the level they would have wanted since the meeting time was taken up with information items and matters of no great relevance. Since the interviews with the respondents were conducted, some changes have occurred in this area. The Agency has introduced an extraordinary meeting that focuses on more important and strategic matters.

However, a Commission Official expresses a different view: that the Member States are passive in the strategic work of the Management Board. Rather than being proactive, they often sit back and wait to respond to what Frontex presents. Why? Either because the Member States are not given the opportunity to use the Management Board for strategic matters, or because the Member States are passive in formal contexts. This passivity can be partly explained by the fact that the Member State delegations are steered by national instructions and priorities. One respondent says that Sweden's strategic work in the Management Board has placed great importance on return, which may indicate greater activity on matters of greater relevance.

Frontex describes Sweden and our representatives as an active partner in the collaboration through participation in discussions and through contributing participants to various working groups. The Swedish representatives are seen as having built up a considerable bank of trust that can be drawn on when needed. Given this, it may then be strategically worthwhile not to comment on every matter but to be more reserved.

A number of respondents point to the informal work that happens, mainly in connection with Management Board meetings, and which influences the formal work of the Board. This confirms the previous argument concerning how the **use of informal** strategies can, as Kleine (2010) describes, facilitate deeper

cooperation. It is thus the combination of **formal** and **informal** that in this case facilitates the strategic work within the Board.

At the same time, the Swedish Police Authority expresses some reticence about the **use** of Frontex, which clearly originates in a national perspective. This reticence mainly concerns how much the collaboration with Frontex actually benefits the Swedish Police Authority's law enforcement mission. The risk, they argue, is that an increased focus on Frontex – and in particular its standing corps – could shift the emphasis from law enforcement to border surveillance. This type of tension – between national self-interest and fostering joint capacity building – is also found in the work of the Management Board, where Swedish actors need to consider and balance these interests, one against another.

Several respondents also point to a lack of accord between the strategic and the operational. They describe a discrepancy between political priorities and day-to-day activities, at both the national and European levels. This may also contribute to the feeling that the strategic work is not contributing to operational activities as much as the respondents would like. Work is currently in progress to produce an instruction or a Swedish position in relation to Frontex (Justitiedepartementet, EU-enheten, 2025). What emerges in this position is largely in accord on multiple points with what emerges from our interview material, which indicates that a more coherent line is developing between the border management agencies, the Swedish Ministry of Justice, and the Government Offices.

6. Results and conclusions

In this report, the collaboration between Sweden and Frontex in return operations has been analysed. The aim was to investigate how Swedish government agencies collaborate with Frontex and use the support offered, and how they perceive that the support and collaboration is working. The conceptual pairs **formal/informal** and **use/non-use**, which are well-known in the literature, were utilised to understand why the actors – Swedish government agencies – act in the ways that they do. Frontex's rapidly growing role and powers in this area during the decade following the 2015 refugee crisis was one of the motives for studying the Agency and its interaction with Swedish government agencies. This chapter summarises the study's main findings and conclusions, and best practice identified.

The collaboration between Sweden and Frontex should be seen in light of the conditions on which it is based. This collaboration occurs in a politically sensitive area subject to intense media scrutiny, that also involves multiple arenas and national government agencies, and includes relationships with the returnees' countries of origin. The interaction and relationship between the relevant Swedish government agencies and Frontex is complex and multi-faceted, and the testimonies from the interviews are nuanced. Nevertheless, some common patterns emerged that are worth noting.

Frontex is an important part of the European border and migration management system. Sweden's border and migration management is closely tied to the EU and the Schengen area. Frontex is a key actor that enables coordination for these matters. While there are a number of challenges in the collaboration with Frontex, the informants' testimonies feature mostly positive experiences. Both the Swedish Migration Agency's work with FAR and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE's integration of Frontex's procedures have improved knowledge and skills in these government agencies, and stimulated an increased **use** of the Agency's resources. It is also clear that the Swedish government agencies plan to implement the current rules and comply with the commitments made by Sweden. However, it is also clear in their thinking that what Frontex can contribute to Sweden's work in the area outweighs the reverse.

Sweden's relationship and collaboration with Frontex has many dimensions. There are aspects that the respondents are satisfied with, where they see the **use** of the Agency as fruitful, and also aspects that they are less satisfied with, where they see the **use** of the Agency as less worthwhile. By far the most

important reason that the government agencies use Frontex is that the Agency can reimburse the costs of enforcements and thereby save the agencies money. It is also clear that the collaboration with Frontex certainly does facilitate returns in some respects; the agencies get help with a wide range of practicalities around bookings, transits and contacts. In other respects, however, quite a few challenges remain. There are many indications that the interaction with Frontex requires extra coordination, in relation to the Agency *and* internally within and between the Swedish government agencies.

The study illustrates that collaboration is both **formal** and **informal**. There is often a clear, formalised structure for how the interaction and collaboration is meant to be organised, but in practice there are informal processes, interfaces and ways of doing things that deviate from the formal structure. This is not unusual in itself, as we know that the rise of Frontex has been characterised by both **formal** and **informal** processes (Horii S., 2015). As previous research has shown, the combination of these processes and practices can increase flexibility as well as deepen collaboration (Kleine, 2010).

As Sahin-Mencutek and Triandafyllidou (2025) write, **informal** processes and practices can be understood as gradually growing out of and becoming fixtures in the collaboration with Frontex. This dual structure can be seen as necessary for the smooth functioning of European border management.

There are also examples of **informal** processes giving Sweden more leeway. Even though the **formal** work in Management Board meetings is sometimes seen as having limited strategic depth, a large part of the discussion apparently takes place in **informal** contexts, for example during breaks where you can come to an agreement with other Board members. Furthermore, it appears that Sweden enjoys a high level of trust in the Board, both as a nation and through our representatives, and that Sweden is active in appointing representatives to the various working groups. This may well strengthen our opportunities to influence the strategic work that Frontex does.

But the **informal** processes can also be a source of challenges in the collaboration between Sweden and Frontex. One example from the interviews concerns the communication between the parties. Although **informal** communication between employees, in Sweden and in Frontex, facilitates the collaboration, it can also create problems when established procedures are bypassed.

A concrete example is the requirement for medical certificates for all returnees, as discussed in Section 5.1. Swedish actors felt that the requirement arose without being formally anchored, and then disappeared again just as quickly –

without the respondents understanding why. According to Christiansen and Piattoni (2003), this is illustrative of the risks inherent in strong **informal** elements – the absence of clear standards and a formal division of responsibilities can lead to uncertainty and make cooperation more difficult.

However, the informal elements can be understood as part of the Agency's experimental approach to developing its activities, as noted by Carrera, den Hertog and Parkin (2013). This also assists Frontex in maintaining a certain flexibility in relation to the differing needs of the Member States.²⁹² In the case of medical certificates, it can be seen as an experimental approach to how Frontex can support the Member States' efforts to safeguard fundamental rights by setting clear requirements for medical assessments. But when initiatives, even if well-meaning, are introduced through informal pathways without clear communication, they risk causing confusion rather than improvement.

6.1 Varying use of and attitudes towards Frontex

Perceptions of Frontex's mission and how the Agency functions as a partner differ clearly between the Swedish government agencies. In the interviews, a clearly positive attitude emerges from the Swedish Migration Agency. The respondents from this government agency describe the collaboration as constructive and results-driven. The Swedish Migration Agency feels that it has an active role in both the development and implementation of joint initiatives. In addition, Frontex is in general responsive to both needs and suggestions. The interviews also highlight the FAR system that the Swedish Migration Agency has been involved in developing. One can also see that, compared to the Swedish Migration Agency's travel agency BCD, the use of and bookings via FAR have increased over time.

Respondents at the Swedish Migration Agency also stress that the courses in pre-departure counselling are very good. The Swedish Migration Agency has also been involved in the development of the common core curricula. These are not only used internally, but are also in other Member States via the Frontex digital learning platform. This is also seen as a sign of a high degree of use and a means whereby the Swedish Migration Agency communicates best practice in counselling through Frontex training programmes.

In general, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE appreciates Frontex and its collaboration with the Agency. The respondents emphasise that they have integrated the Agency's procedures into their own activities, which is

²⁹² Which can also be noted in the instructions for the JHA meeting, which state that the Agency's flexibility is important to maintain. (Justitiedepartementet, EU-enheten, 2025).

seen as having improved quality. Furthermore, the respondents talk about how they cooperate with Frontex on a range of different training matters. Both of these examples demonstrate forms of collaboration that make use of best practice. The incorporation of training programmes, common core curricula and work procedures into the Swedish Migration Agency's own activities also demonstrates a high degree of use – even if it is a result of both the Swedish national strategy and the collaboration agreement.

The respondents also point out certain aspects of the collaboration where their experiences are more mixed, in particular the effectiveness of booking via the FAR system, which is seen as adding work. Here, use is primarily motivated by the economic benefits. This, too, is in line with the Swedish national strategy.

The most pronounced criticism of the collaboration with the Agency comes from within the Swedish Police Authority, where respondents voiced various kinds of objections to different parts of the collaboration. In some instances, Frontex is perceived as a competitor rather than a support in the Border Swedish Police's mission, but some of the objections were of a more operational nature. Nevertheless, the Agency also expresses its appreciation of Frontex and the assistance it can offer in the form of training and sharing experience. Much of the operational collaboration with the Agency in enforcements is also appreciated.

The differences between the government agencies in how they view Frontex can be partly explained by the different nature of their missions. The collaboration between the Swedish Migration Agency and Frontex concerns voluntary return, an area with different requirements than those for forced return. Whereas the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE and the Swedish Police Authority cooperate with Frontex in non-voluntary/forced return operations. Here, questions that concern the use of coercion and safeguarding fundamental rights are foremost, as the return is forced and resistance from recipient countries is often greater. All in all, these factors make a forced return more complex and conflicted.

That the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE is more positive than the Swedish Police Authority can be partly explained by how they perceive their respective roles in returns. The Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE sees itself to a large extent as an enforcer for the Swedish Police Authority, rather than as an equal partner in direct collaboration with Frontex. Even though the Service is responsible for ensuring that fundamental rights are respected in accordance with the collaboration agreement, and does have interfaces with Frontex, it is more of a subcontractor to the Swedish Police

Authority. This does not mean that voluntary return is free from challenges. Many of the issues raised in forced return are also relevant here, but take different forms.

Another possible explanation may lie in the differences in the scale and intensity of their interaction and collaboration with the Agency. Collaboration with Frontex does not entail as many interfaces for the Swedish Migration Agency and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE as for the Swedish Police Authority, which is Sweden's national point of contact (NFPOC). The Swedish Police Authority also contributes the most staff to the Agency in absolute figures, which means that the collaboration with Frontex draws on by far the most human resources compared to the other agencies. This may also help to explain the more critical stance that many of the Swedish Police Authority's respondents voice.

Are there any patterns in what each of the government agencies in Sweden think about Frontex in relation to the different themes highlighted in the study? It is worth noting that the criticism from the Swedish Police Authority most often has to do with practical and operational aspects and generally boils down to having identified challenges linked to a lack of (operational) effectiveness – a theme we return to in Section 6.5. The problems are somewhat similar in the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE, and in both of these agencies, the informants point to challenges related to the regulatory framework and coordination (see Appendix 2+).

6.2 National interests versus European cooperation

A tension, not especially difficult to foresee, concerns the question of national versus common interests within the EU, and is touched on explicitly and in more depth in several of the question groups. As a member of Schengen, Sweden is a part of European integrated border management. Sweden, and especially the Swedish Police Authority, are required to contribute resources to Frontex. But Frontex is also required to make resources available to Sweden. Thus Swedish migration management cannot be viewed in isolation; it coexists with and is mutually dependent on the European level. This means that there are some elements in the area of return that are related to the EU's vision of harmonisation and common interests, primarily training efforts and the standing corps.

However, in interviews with representatives from the Swedish government agencies, it appears that the collaboration with Frontex is often seen primarily through a national lens. Although some respondents stress the importance of

an integrated European system and recognise this interdependence, most relate the role of Frontex to concrete, domestic, operational needs.

This is clearly apparent in how the respondents motivate the **use** of the different forms of support that Frontex offers. The staff see the financial aspect as an incentive using FAR. Similarly, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE respondents say that assignments to train staff go hand in hand with a national/government agency-specific interest in securing training places for Swedish staff. Therefore, Frontex's need for partners and hosts for training instances coincides with Sweden's interest in providing training places for Swedish escort leaders; in other words, mutual benefit and thus fruitful collaboration.

However, there are times when these interests do not coincide, which can be seen in the attitude towards hosting the standing corps. Here there is a dividing line between Frontex's interests and ambitions at a policy level and interest in this at the operational level. At the government agency level, work is in progress to prepare for hosting the standing corps, while respondents in operational activities often express very little interest. There is criticism of how the standing corps are used in other Member States, where perceived ineffectiveness and a lack of meaningful tasks for seconded staff are the main stumbling blocks. However we can also note that staff from the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE who have served as part of the standing corps have been satisfied with the experience. It is important to add that Frontex itself did not note that Swedish staff seconded to FRESO lacked meaningful tasks. On the contrary, the Agency's view is that Swedish FRESO have contributed to best practice.

The pressure exerted by Frontex on the Member States – including Sweden – to host staff from the standing corps was also commented. While there is no formal requirement for Member States to request this resource, through vulnerability assessments the Agency can issue binding recommendations, a type of emergency intervention, to host the standing corps. This is perceived by several respondents as one of the more problematic parts of the collaboration with the Agency and boils down to a concern that hosting the standing corps could erode knowledge and skills domestically and ultimately risk posing a threat to national sovereignty. As previous research has shown, the balance between supranational and national sovereignty is an especially sensitive issue, for the EU as a whole and for the Member States individually (Fernández-Rojo, 2021; Carrera, den Hertog, & Parkin, 2013; Perkowski N. , 2019). This can also be seen in the Swedish position taken for the European Council's JHA meeting which emphasises that the size of the corps must not encroach

on national capacity or the border control responsibilities of the Member State (Justitiedepartementet, EU-enheten, 2025).

There are also some differences in attitude towards the standing corps among the three government agencies, but these differences are primarily in how the representatives justify their scepticism. From the Swedish Migration Agency, their scepticism largely concerns security and secrecy in the systems they use, while the scepticism expressed by the other two government agencies is more multifaceted. There, the informants more often point out that there is no need for the standing corps and that more generally they do not see the benefit of it. From the perspective of the Commission and Frontex, Member States hosting the standing corps is crucial to enabling interoperability between the national border guard bodies in the long term, creating the conditions for a vigorous response in high-pressure circumstances and in critical situations (as in the case of the migration crisis in 2015). The Agency emphasises that even Member States that are not experiencing severe migration pressure have a responsibility to cooperate through secondment and hosting. Hosting the standing corps can also add value through sharing knowledge and experience, which some respondents see as a way to spread best practice. But the prospect of sharing knowledge and experience does not appear to provide a sufficient motivation for hosting the standing corps.

There is a tension between national Swedish and European interests at levels ranging from the management level and the Management Board down to actual enforcements, i.e. Frontex-funded operations. Although guidelines and provisions exist in governing documents on paper, a line is still drawn where, on these operations, Swedish staff try to make certain operational decisions that are compatible with our official responsibilities regarding, for example, the rights of the child, and a slightly less rigid application of the common Frontex rules. A bit of a tug-of-war occurs between the national and the European at a very concrete level during operations.

Another aspect of the national versus European border management dimension actually concerns the management level: who manages and controls Frontex. The **formal** framework of the Management Board, working groups, and operational plans gives the impression that the Member States are in control. But in practice, according to many respondents, it seems to be Frontex that sets the agenda at Board meetings and is able to hijack or force through certain important issues. **Informally**, nevertheless, there are some strategies for having an influence in the form of quiet diplomacy and alliance building. It should also be added that, according to one respondent, there have been changes on this point: the Agency has convened an extraordinary meeting of the

Management Board in order to better facilitate and make room for strategic and more in-depth discussion.

Although multiple factors affect how Swedish actors experience the collaboration with Frontex, one particularly important aspect stands out: the degree of convergence between Swedish interests and Frontex's mandate or offered support. When these interests coincide, for example within the working groups or in the development of common core curricula for training purposes, the collaboration is described as positive and Frontex's role is seen as constructive. In contrast, there are situations where Frontex's proposals are seen as not well adapted to Swedish needs, or it is felt that initiatives are imposed from above – such as the standing corps.

6.3 Communication via formal and informal channels

The phenomenon 'collaboration' consists largely of communication and information sharing between different actors. If information is to flow smoothly, procedures, tools and instruments are needed to control, structure and enable an effective flow of communications. In the interaction between the Swedish government agencies and Frontex, there are the number of formal and informal interfaces and channels, where the **formal** ones set out certain fundamental conditions. In general, there are some challenges when the communication channels become informal and bypass the formal channels, primarily the shared mailbox. But even this type of communication may sometimes be necessary to create the conditions for effective collaboration.

As previously stated, according to the rules all communication is to go through the Swedish Police Authority and NFPOC. The fact that the Swedish Police Authority has this responsibility is natural and appropriate, given its overlapping mission with Frontex at external borders and its enforcement task. Despite this, it is clear that Frontex sometimes contacts Swedish government agencies and officials directly, thereby circumventing the **formal** communication channels. As Figure 10 in the previous chapter illustrated, just over one third of the informants had also used informal communication channels to contact Frontex. One explanation for this may be the Swedish three-pronged government agency structure leading to a need for alternative communication channels. But it may also be because the Agency, whose role it is to coordinate, is simultaneously dependent on the Member States' contributions in various instances. This can create a tough situation for individual officials at Frontex and the need for communication to be fast and direct.

The Swedish Police Authority respondents say that the informal communication channels sometimes make its task of being the coordinating government agency more difficult. The lack of a full picture covering everything from training to return operations can create uncertainty, which carries the risk of either duplication of work or questions falling between the cracks – and in the end, effectiveness may suffer. Informal communication and communication tied to individuals also suffers from the risk that when people are replaced, important information may be lost.

In other words, **informal** contacts can make things easier for a government agency, and facilitate effectiveness in certain respects, but they can also carry risks. It is worth noting that the OPC is working actively to facilitate and improve the communication and collaboration between the Swedish government agencies as well as their communication with Frontex.

It is also important to point out that although the rules require that all communication should go through the NFPOC, currently that function consists of just over one full-time position.²⁹³ Therefore, it is especially important that all affected government agencies, units and officials notify the NFPOC when they are required to attend meetings, training courses or interact with Frontex in some other way. Particular problems arises if staff at the Agency bypass the NFPOC and address their enquiries to national actors. Since the Frontex Regulation (European Parliament and Council, 2019) clearly states that contact with Member States should be through the national point of contact, a number of respondents argue that the Agency's staff should be aware of – and respect – this structure.

6.4 The discrepancy between policy and practice

Our study has revealed a clear discrepancy between policy objectives, processes and strategies, and practices and processes at the operational level. This tension was not unexpected; it has been established previously, especially in implementation research.

This gap between policy and practice is expressed in various ways in the collaboration with Frontex. Objectives, instructions and priorities set at the policy level do not always map well to the practical conditions and needs of the Swedish government agencies' routine work. In light of the rapid and fundamental changes that have become a feature of the migration area, it is interesting to note that the Frontex Regulation from 2016 (Europeiska Unionen,

²⁹³ The NFPOC is staffed by one full-time position (100%) and one part-time position (25%).

2016) was not fully implemented before a new and more far-reaching Regulation came into force in 2019 (European Parliament and Council, 2019). At present, with the new EU Asylum and Migration Pact entering into force in 2026, several parts of the 2019 Regulation are still not implemented.²⁹⁴ These Regulation changes have led to considerable reform pressure and some uncertainty for the Swedish government agencies responsible for their implementation. There is also strong pressure for reform at the national level with new legislation, changes in ordinances, and new working methods to be implemented within different government agencies. This no doubt also affects the officeholders we met, but we have not been able to include that challenge in our study.

A clear example of the discrepancy mentioned above concerns the hosting, use and structure of the standing corps. A strong political driving force lies behind the establishment and expansion of the corps, evident in European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's statements on expanding Frontex's standing corps from the current target of 10,000 by 2027, to a tripling of that figure (30,000). At the same time, Frontex is finding it difficult to reach its original target of 10,000. If the policy objective were to be met, there would be operational risks in the form of less effective returns, but also strategic risks in the form of reduced control over border management. This illustrates the gap that can arise between ambitious political vision and its feasibility for the Agency and operational activities in the Member States. A tension can also be said to exist between focusing on the core mission or on continued expansion.

But in other respects, there may be a bias towards a more operational focus, which in turn can pose challenges. One example is the work of the Management Board, where there is a need for deeper strategic discussions about assignments and direction rather than a focus on the operational state-of-play and statistics.

All in all, it can be said that the EU policy level, operational activities within the Agency, and national policy and government agencies are not always in perfect symbiosis. The EU policy level (the European Commission, Council, and Parliament) has strategic objectives and ambitions that are sometimes difficult to implement operationally. Frontex has a complex mission to support and coordinate Member States' operations, while acting independently in some instances. National government agencies have their own priorities, resources

²⁹⁴ As a complement to the EU Asylum and Migration Pact, the European Commission has put forward a proposal for a new EU return system following the speech by Ursula von der Leyen on the political guidelines for 2024–2029 (Europeiska Kommissionen, 2024; Europeiska Kommissionen, 2025a; 2025b). This is yet another example of the pressure for reform and the rapid policy development in the area of migration at European level.

and legal frameworks, not always harmonised with EU directives or Frontex's actions. This can hamper the coordination at times and some of the underlying factors we have identified include differences in legal mandates, differences in political will, limited resources and capacity, and finally the division of responsibilities between actors and the three-pronged government agency structure.

6.5 Effective, humane and sustainable returns

As we indicated initially in the wording of the aim of this study, the area of return is guided by a number of objectives – effective, humane and sustainable – legal certainty sometimes also being counted among the main objectives. Of these, it is clear that the objective of effective returns is the one primarily reflected in our interviews. However, even if effectiveness is repeated in various instances, it has no hard or fast definitions – not in the Swedish national strategy for European integrated border management 2024–2027 mentioned earlier either. Different aspects and dimensions of effectiveness permeate the respondents' picture of the collaboration with Frontex and the benefit derived from it, and this is also reflected in many policy documents and in the rhetoric at the policy level. One of the respondents also points out that the Agency often stresses that 'everything should be cost-effective', but concludes that this is not defined in practice.²⁹⁵ What then are the trade-offs, contradictions and tensions that exist within, in particular, the objective of returns being effective? The examples are taken from the interviews, including the Observation, but should be seen more as an outline than any form of in-depth analysis.

Effectiveness has many dimensions and can also be pitted against completely different objectives in returns. Cost-effectiveness alone is sometimes pitted against more strategic considerations such as setting an example that enforcement is feasible, even to hard-to-reach countries. When assessing what can be considered cost-effective, it is important to bear in mind that there is no self-evident answer. Cost-effectiveness is contextual, and depends on multiple factors such as geographical proximity, scheduled flight connections, diplomatic relations, bilateral agreements, the number of third-country nationals who can return, etc. The cost of having people in detention should also be included in this calculation.²⁹⁶ Furthermore, it is clear that office-

²⁹⁵ #27 Inspector, National Operations Department, Swedish Police Authority.

²⁹⁶ Another potential trade-off is between cost-effectiveness and the need to ensure Sweden's security. Here there is an intricate balance that needs to be struck when the costs become very high for only a few enforcements, but where for various reasons the individuals concerned are perceived to constitute a (security) threat to Sweden; serious criminals sentenced to expulsion are one such example.

holders at government agencies also need to make trade-offs and assessments when implementing the legislation and the primary objective of the activity, namely that enforcements are implemented. The costs of a return can therefore be justified to the Agency with reference to the above factors, and flexibility should continue to exist in operational activities.

A further dimension of effectiveness concerns the distribution of costs between Swedish and European actors. Since Frontex funds come from EU funds, it is a clear cost advantage for Sweden to have as many enforcements paid for with EU funds, i.e. through Frontex, as possible. At the same time, this is essentially more of a (re)distribution of costs and not necessarily a matter of utilising existing resources more effectively in an operational sense (see Section 5.1). Economies of scale should also be balanced against how the logistical challenges might otherwise be solved. It is routine in Sweden for return operations to apply for EU funding before national funds are used, which indicates that this dimension of effectiveness is very active.

Cost-effectiveness may sometimes need to be balanced against other objectives, such as humane treatment, sustainability and legal certainty. See Sections 5.1 to 5.2 for an example of this, where economies of scale could be achieved by keeping returnees detained while waiting to maximise the occupancy rate of a flight for a return operation. However, this kind of measure is not taken, as it would be contrary to both the Return Directive and Swedish legislation, which provide that persons may not be detained for an unreasonable length of time. This is based on the commitments of Swedish government agencies and Frontex to protect the fundamental rights of individuals, which can be seen as an expression of a humane and legally certain approach to returns.

How operational staff treat returnees has an impact on the objectives of effective and humane returns, but of course also on sustainability and legal certainty. In this context, collaboration and sharing experiences at European level can sometimes provide insights and pose questions about approaches and the division of responsibilities. That their European colleagues have a different approach to fundamental rights than Swedish officials and decision-makers has been expressed in certain instances, which could be seen as Nordic exceptionalism (Waerp, 2025). But it could also be correct, i.e. that Swedish staff do hold higher standards. Without having made any exhaustive analysis of the FRO's reports, we can note that Sweden rarely comes up in cases other than as a good example or with a few 'minor remarks'.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁷ See for example Fundamental Rights Officer (2023a; 2023b; 2024a; 2024b).

Respect for human and fundamental rights is also essential for an activity like this to be pursued and legitimised, and thus become part of a sustainable process. Humane treatment also helps to make returns more effective, which we saw in the participant observation (see Section 5.2). A humane approach, in the form of frequent and appropriate communication, which includes generosity in the services and necessities provided, helps to ensure that the enforcement goes smoothly, with less need for coercive measures. A return under these circumstances always includes some measure of involuntariness.²⁹⁸ An aspect that is not highlighted in the study is the initial conversations between government agency representatives and the returnees that are crucial for the individual to be well prepared and have come to accept the enforcement.²⁹⁹ Again, it can be noted that such a process is also based on close interagency cooperation. A humane and sustainable approach is not in conflict with the objective of effective returns. During the participant observation and subsequent conversations, it was also clear that troubles occur more often in returns to some countries, raising questions as to whether it would be possible to further adapt the support measures prior to enforcement so that more returnees accept and cooperate with the decision.

Operational effectiveness can be understood as how well processes and systems function in practice – how smoothly and efficiently they translate into action. In contexts where many actors need to be coordinated, such as return operations, there is a clear risk of poor operational effectiveness. Frontex plays a pivotal role as the coordinator in operational activities, between Member States and in some cases in relation to third countries. The Agency thus functions as the bridging link in a complex interaction. But it is also important to stress that, from a national perspective, the expectation that using Frontex will improve operational effectiveness is predicated on good internal coordination between the relevant national government agencies, which the OPC initiative seems to be assisting with.

Observations related to operational effectiveness were made in a Frontex-funded return operation. The staff's working methods and planning of the enforcements revealed many different frameworks, including regulations, guidelines and procedures, at both the Swedish and European levels. All in all,

²⁹⁸ It is important to note that return, both voluntary and forced, always includes a certain measure of (in)voluntariness. A voluntary return can take place when an individual, against their will, nevertheless chooses to return when they realise that the legal process has run its course. A forced return may also include a measure of voluntariness, as the individual realises, for example, that return is the preferred option (compared to detention, for example).

²⁹⁹ See for example Aslan Akay (2024), Vera Larrucea, Malm Lindberg and Asplund (2021).

these frameworks are intended to ensure equal and humane treatment. In light of the specific national context – Uzbekistan – where return operations are generally orderly, questions of operational effectiveness were related to cost-effectiveness per returnee. This included a discussion of using scheduled flights instead of chartered solutions to improve cost-effectiveness and staffing effectiveness.. But such a solution must also be weighed against factors such as the applicable regulatory frameworks at the national and international levels, the availability of scheduled flights, and transiting rules. These factors interact when assessing what constitutes operational effectiveness in practice.

Last but not least, there is an important link between the Agency's expansion and expanded mandate, and operational effectiveness (see Section 5.6), which deserves attention. In practice the expansion, which is often highlighted at the policy level – often with the reference to Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's speech for her second term of office – involves moving national resources upwards towards the European level in order to provide for the standing corps.³⁰⁰ However, the corps is seen by many as less effective than national staff, which raises questions about resource utilisation and outcomes. This is also highlighted in the Swedish position for the JHA meeting, which states that Frontex's activities should be based on Member States' actual operational needs, and that an expansion of the standing corps must be preceded by a thorough analysis (Justitiedepartementet, EU-enheten, 2025). The respondents' testimonies also showed support for this position.

³⁰⁰ See European Commission (2024).

7. Suggestions and policy recommendations

In recent years, Frontex has been given a significantly expanded mandate, more tasks, a bigger budget and, with the recently agreed EU Asylum and Migration Pact, the Agency's importance can be expected to increase further. To cope with the challenges, policy dilemma and discrepancies inherent in this context that Chapters 5 and 6 in particular have highlighted, Swedish actors need policy recommendations to guide them. However, it should be noted that much of the collaboration between Swedish government agencies and Frontex is working well and the challenges identified are manageable. Here are some of the suggestions and policy recommendations we believe Swedish government agencies in particular and other actors need to address regarding their collaboration with and use of Frontex.

To begin with, Frontex has been one of the fastest growing European agencies in recent years, which in turn raises questions about its continued expansion in terms of both its mandate and size. Much of the future expansion is related to the standing corps. Today's objective of achieving a corps of 10,000 by 2027 is not without challenges, as currently the corps is experiencing difficulties in recruiting for Category 1. Besides difficulties in attracting recruits with suitable knowledge and skills, this category in the standing corps is unevenly distributed, geographically and in terms of gender balance. In view of this and the recruitment challenges, we suggest that the Commission and the Agency should prioritise efforts to make serving in the standing corps more attractive.

Is a future expansion in line with either Swedish or European interests? If the vision of tripling its numbers to a corps of 30,000 were to be realised, it would probably mean that Member States' contributions to Categories 2 and 3 would need to be significantly increased. A common European corps of this size would certainly enable interoperability between national border guards, which in turn could create the conditions for a more coherent and resolute response to crises. Staffing capacity in the Member States will thus determine the possibility of such an expansion. To date, Sweden has reached its staffing targets in Categories 2 and 3, but based on the overall picture presented in this study, Sweden's national capacity takes precedence, as it is feared that common resources of the (intended) scale risk not being used effectively.

Given the strong expansion that has occurred, there is good reason to continue to hurry slowly and focus on Frontex's existing core mission in border management, return and the protection of fundamental rights. The Swedish position (Justitiedepartementet, EU-enheten, 2025) has been developed through a process in line with the approach recommended in this report, reflecting that decision-makers as well as operational staff assess that a further expansion of Frontex could affect their own government agency. Particular emphasis should be placed on an already proposed evaluation and analysis of costs, operational needs and the effects of a possible expansion on the quality of border management.

Furthermore, seconded national staff may have acquired new knowledge and insights which could be better utilised than is currently the case. To enable this, knowledge and skills shared should be documented and evaluated in order to increase their operational benefit and to spread good examples and best practice among the border management agencies.

It is clear that Frontex is appreciated for its ability to provide capacity that supports the Swedish government agencies in carrying out their core missions in the area of return, in particular in enforcing refusal-of-entry and expulsion orders in a humane way. The Agency thus serves an important purpose by enabling coordination between Member States, which could contribute to more enforcements and possibly a more effective process. But the question of effectiveness needs to be highlighted and discussed because we do not actually know whether the current interaction between Swedish government agencies and Frontex *is* effective, in part because effectiveness is rarely defined or explained in relevant policy and governing documents. Some suggestions to partially remedy this situation are to carry out continuous evaluations of Sweden's collaboration with Frontex; produce annual reports on the utilisation rate and effects of the collaboration; and conduct internal evaluations in order to monitor and measure the effects, document lessons learned, and spread good examples and best practice within and between the relevant government agencies.

In the interaction between the relevant Swedish government agencies and Frontex, our study observed a tension between the national Swedish and the supranational, and everything from the management level and Management Board right down to operational activities. This dynamic of national versus supranational, sometimes manifesting as more of a tug-of-war, is inevitable and inherent in multiple EU contexts. This tension is greatest within the Swedish Police Authority which, in addition to being the coordinating government agency in matters related to Frontex, also has a core mission in securing and controlling the external borders of the Schengen area?. But it

can also be noted that there are tensions between management and operational activities at the government agency level, where operational activities struggle with objectives, instructions and priorities imposed from above that are at times difficult to translate into action.

It is scarcely feasible for us to make any suggestions that could resolve the tensions within European cooperation and at the administration level within the government agencies. On the other hand, what Sweden can do is to continue strengthening the coordination between the relevant government agencies so that the Swedish line is clear, coherent and consistent in relation to Frontex. Concerning the work of the Management Board in Frontex, Sweden's voice should be strengthened in particular. One option could be to create a common structure for the government agencies where for example the NFPOC, operational activities (through an expanded function for the OPC perhaps), and strategically selected individuals at each government agency can meet to discuss important strategic matters more regularly.

Finally, this study shows that more research and knowledge is needed in this field. The collaboration between Frontex and the relevant government agencies in the Member States is an under-researched area, in academia and in the world of policy. This Delmi report has highlighted some aspects of it, but far from all. Knowledge is still lacking about the nature of the collaboration and how it is perceived in the pre-departure phase, which is important for carrying out return operations sustainably, effectively and humanely. Since 2022, Frontex has also been responsible for reintegration programmes for returnees through the EU Reintegration Programme (EU-RP) which replaced the European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN). These programmes should be studied and evaluated, particularly given that a comparison can now be made of how the Member States and returnees experience the EU-RP compared to ERRIN.

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Appendix 1

Table A1. Objective for the standing corps capacity by year and category in accordance with Article 54

Category/ Year	Category 1, Statutory staff	Category 2, Operational staff for long-term second- ments	Category 3, Operational staff for short-term deploy- ments	Category 4: Rapid Reaction Pool	Total for the standing corps
2021	1,000	400	3,600	1,500	6,500
2022	1,000	500	3,500	1,500	6,500
2023	1,500	500	4,000	1,500	7,500
2024	1,500	750	4,250	1,500	8,000
2025	2,000	1,000	5,000	0	8,000
2026	2,500	1,250	5,250	0	9,000
2027 and thereafter	3,000	1,500	5,500	0	10,000

Source: (European Parliament and Council, 2019, s. Appendix 1).

Table A2. Breakdown of profiles and number of staff in categories 1, 2 and 3 according to the 2025 planning

Staff category	Category 1	Category 2	Category 3	Total
Border and Coast Guard Officer	808	473	2,586	3,867
Information Officer	60	43	141	244
Debriefing Officer	100	93	335	528
Advanced Level Document Officer	125	154	468	747
Cross-border Crime Detection Officer	122	107	278	507
Dog Handler	5	2	118	125
Logistics and Occupational Safety and Health Support Officer	80	45	117	242
Frontex Escort and Support Officer	92	49	232	373
Return Specialist	46	34	75	155
Crew Member	-	-	650	650
Total	1,438	1,000	5,000	7,438

Source: (Frontex, 2024d).

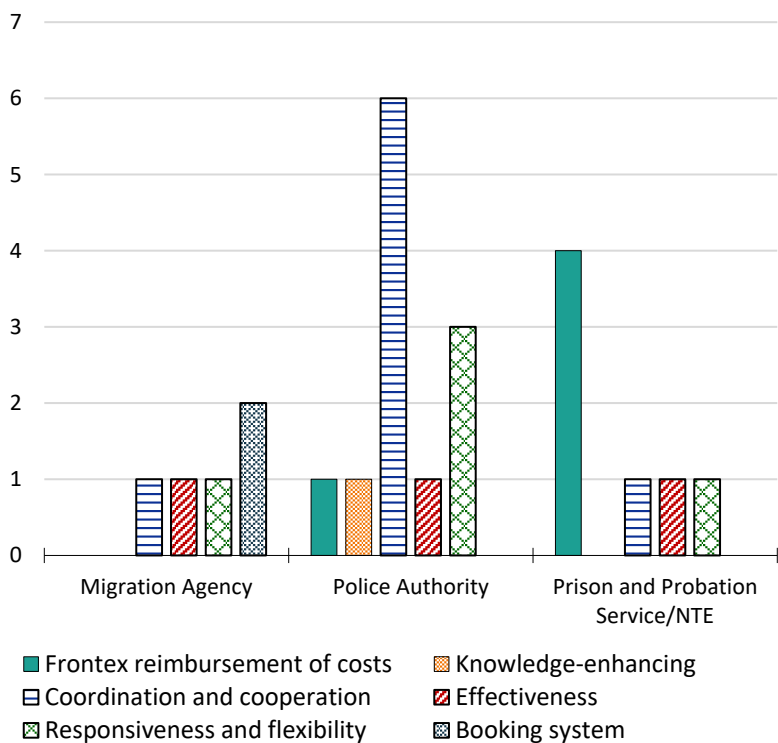
Table A3. Annual numbers to be provided by Sweden to the standing corps (Categories 2 and 3) in accordance with Article 56

Category	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027
Category 2	9	11	11	17	23	28	34
Category 3	82	79	91	96	113	119	125
Total	91	90	102	113	236	147	159

Source: (European Parliament and Council, 2019, s. Appendix 2 and 3).

Appendix 2

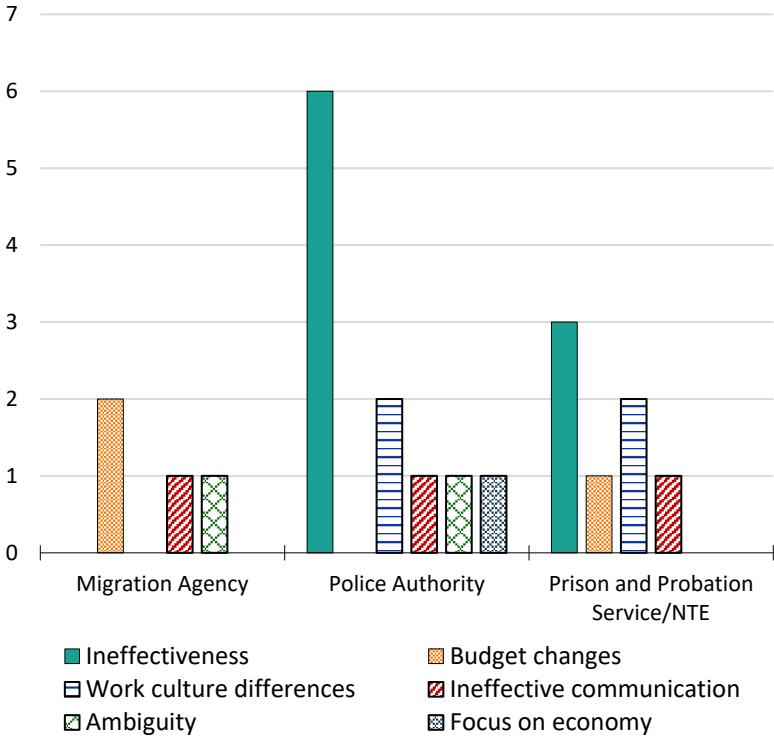
Figure A1. Positive aspects related to the cooperation and use of Frontex



Note: Categorical variables 1–6 concerning which aspects of the use of Frontex respondents say are positive.

Source: Own visualisation through coded interviews with a total of 25 respondents from the agencies.

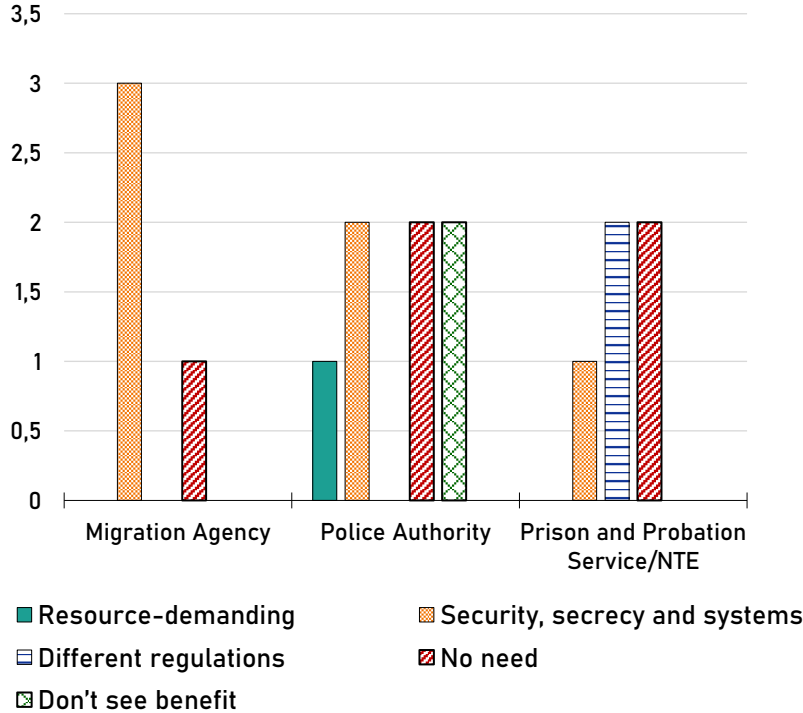
Figure A2. Challenges related to the cooperation and use of Frontex



Note: Categorical variables 1–6 concerning which aspects of the use of Frontex respondents say are less functional and hence challenging in their cooperation with Frontex.

Source: Own visualisation through coded interviews with a total of 25 respondents from the agencies. Of the 25 respondents, 3 who did not state any challenges with the cooperation with Frontex are missing.

Figure A3. Challenges for the standing corps among sceptics



Note: Categorical variables 1–5 concerning which aspects of using the standing corps in Sweden the respondents say they see as challenging.
Source: Own visualisation through coded interviews with a total of 25 respondents from the agencies. Of the 25 respondents, 2 were positive about using the standing corps and 7 had no opinion on the subject. The analysis above has therefore been made with the remaining 16 respondents who view the standing corps critically.

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Since 2023, Delmi has been running a project funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) on return as an international migration policy, with a focus on coordination within and across national borders. This report is the result of the third and final sub-project on how cooperation between Sweden and Frontex works in practice and to what extent Swedish authorities, the Police Authority, the Migration Agency and the Prison and Probation Service, use the support offered by Frontex.

The report notes, among other things, that Swedish actors are generally positive towards Frontex and that Sweden is one of the EU countries that makes extensive use of Frontex's support for return operations. The study also points to some uncertainties, particularly regarding the use of Frontex's standing force and a possible future expansion of Frontex's mandate.

The study also points to a clear tension between the national perspectives of Swedish actors and a more common objective for border and migration management at European level. There are also several areas of tension between political ambitions and the practical or operational feasibility of return work. The report concludes with a number of policy recommendations aimed at strengthening cooperation between Sweden and Frontex and increasing the effectiveness of return work without compromising the principles of humanity and long-term sustainability.

The Migration Studies Delegation is an independent committee that initiates studies and supplies research results as a basis for future migration policy decisions and to contribute to public debate.



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