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## Frontex's Role in Return Operations – Perspectives from Sweden

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It is fundamental to a regulated migration system that those who do not have the legal right to remain in a country actually return to their home countries. The issue of return has grown in importance in Swedish as well as in European policy, especially following the refugee crisis in 2015. The increased importance of return in policy has led to the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, also known as Frontex, being given an expanded mandate and growing resources to support the EU Member States throughout the return process – from planning and coordinating return operations to supporting reintegration in the returnee's home country. In practice, Frontex currently serves as the EU's enforcement arm in the area of returns. But many powers also remain with the Member States, which means that national priorities and strategies play a crucial role in this area. This Policy Brief is based on the AMIF-funded report *Frontex's Role in Return Operations – Perspectives from Sweden* (2025:11), which maps how Swedish government agencies use Frontex support in returns, and provides insights into how the cooperation between Swedish parties and Frontex is working.

## Increased focus on returns in Sweden

In recent years, Sweden has highlighted return as a priority area in its migration policy. The Swedish Government has adopted a whole-of-government approach, where all relevant government agencies and ministries are required to work together to increase the number of enforcements. Previous evaluations have emphasised that effective government agency cooperation is crucial to increasing the rate of enforcement. In 2022, the Swedish Agency for Public Management noted that, in addition to their cooperation with each other, the relevant Swedish government agencies also needed to improve their cooperation with Frontex in return operations coordinated by Frontex.

Swedish government agencies have increased their use of Frontex's resources markedly over time. In 2018, only 128 returns were carried out with the assistance of Frontex, while over 11 000 return journeys were financed by Frontex during the period 2020–2025, the majority of which were normal (voluntary) returns. Thus, over time there has been a sharp increase in the way Sweden uses Frontex, and Sweden is today one of the biggest users among the Member States of the resources offered by Frontex to enforce refusal-of-entry and expulsion orders.

There is a lack of knowledge in this area about how the cooperation between Sweden and Frontex actually works and functions in practice – and how Swedish actors actually use European resources in the area of return. An effective return requires close and well-coordinated cooperation between national government agencies, particularly in operations that utilise the EU's tools.

## Aim and questions

Against this background, the study aimed to deepen our understanding of the interaction between Swedish government agencies and Frontex in return. What forms of support are used? What is it that motivates staff at the government agencies to use the support offered, and how do they think that the cooperation is working? And what consequences does this have on the objectives of an effective, humane and sustainable return policy?

## Method and materials

The study was primarily based on around 40 semi-structured interviews with key individuals who were working with return and Frontex matters at different levels. The interviewees included officeholders from the Swedish Police Authority, the Swedish Prison and Probation Service/NTE<sup>1</sup>, the Swedish Migration Agency, the Ministry of Justice, and officials from the European Commission and Frontex. Snowball selection was used to find the interviewees: initially, several interviewees were identified via established contacts, who then recommended additional respondents.

In addition to the interviews, we collected and reviewed relevant reports, annual reports, governing documents and some statistics from both Swedish government agencies and Frontex. This material provided context and enabled the triangulation of information. For example, the interviewees' testimonies were checked against documentation and previous research to strengthen their reliability.

Through a participant observation of a Frontex-funded return operation to Uzbekistan in September 2025, we gained a first-hand understanding of how enforcement works in practice – from preparatory planning and release to security checks, the flight, and hand-over in the destination country. This participant observation gave us insights into how the return process is actually carried out in practice. These were compared with the interviewees' descriptions, and this deepened the analysis. During the operation, eight officials were also identified and interviewed to capture additional perspectives from the operational side of things.

Previous studies of Frontex have largely been based on analyses of documentation and the regulatory framework that governs it. The qualitative approach in our study involving semi-structured interviews provided new insights and perspectives, but also had some limitations. It was difficult to get extensive access to Frontex staff. The Agency's only participation was through a small number of interviews, one of which was through written answers only. The focus of our study lies instead on how Swedish government agency representatives have experienced the cooperation with Frontex.

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<sup>1</sup> In September 2025, the National Transport Unit (NTE) underwent a reorganisation within the Prison and Probation Service and is now the Transport Department. However, the material for this study was collected before this reorganisation; hence the Prison and Probation Service/NTE is referenced consistently in the report and this Policy Brief.

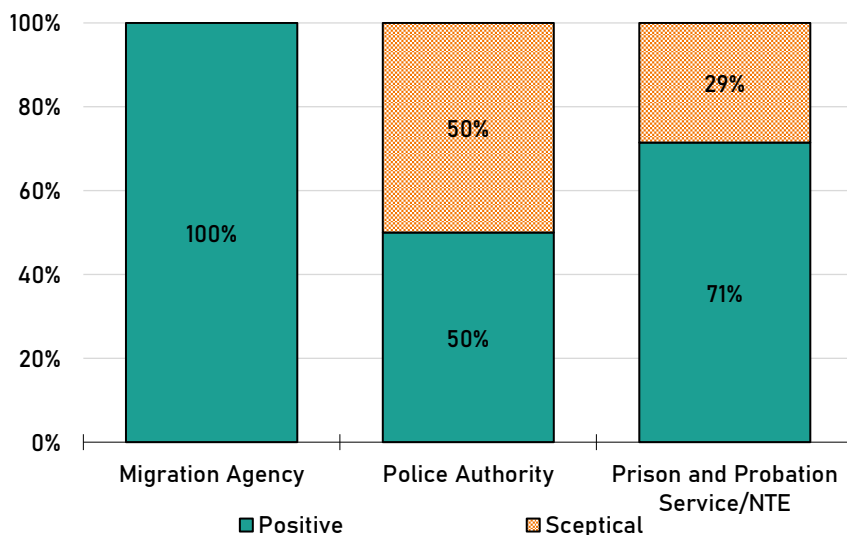
## Important conclusions and outcomes

The study identifies a number of important aspects of how the cooperation between Swedish actors and Frontex functions and is perceived, as well as which dimensions of the cooperation are considered valuable or problematic. The interaction between Swedish government agencies and Frontex is complex and takes place in a politically sensitive area, but some common patterns emerge.

### Varying use of and attitudes towards Frontex

In general, Swedish government agency actors are positively disposed to the support offered by Frontex and their cooperation with it, but there are nevertheless significant differences between the agencies' views, as Figure 1 illustrates. The Swedish Migration Agency has a positive view of the cooperation, which it describes as both constructive and results oriented. Frontex is perceived as a responsive and flexible partner, and the Migration Agency feels that they play an active role in developing joint initiatives. For example, the Migration Agency has been involved in developing the Frontex booking system, FAR, which has also led to the tool being well integrated and well used by the Migration Agency's staff.

**Figure 1. Attitude to how the cooperation with Frontex is functioning**



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 cooperation with Frontex functioning”, which was asked in all the interviews.

Source: Own visualisation from 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.

The Prison and Probation Service/NTE also has a predominantly positive attitude towards Frontex. Frontex’s procedures and common core curricula have been integrated into the Service’s activities, and this is described as a quality-enhancing aspect of the cooperation. But the Service also criticises the booking procedures in FAR, which some respondents experience as bureaucratic, complicated and time-consuming. Economic reasons are the main underlying factor when the respondents choose to use Frontex support. This is in line with the Swedish national strategy (2024), which justifies the increased use of Frontex support as a way of being able to finance return operations with EU funds.

The Police Authority is the most critical of the cooperation with Frontex among the government agencies consulted. The respondents raise several strategic and operational objections, questioning, among other things, the cooperation’s

effectiveness and benefit in relation to carrying out the Authority's own mission. Despite this, Frontex is appreciated when it comes to training matters, sharing experiences, and operational cooperation during enforcements.

The differences in attitude of the government agencies can be partly explained by the different forms of cooperation that each agency has with Frontex. The Migration Agency works primarily with voluntary returns, while the Prison and Probation Service/NTE acts as an operational provider of transports ordered by the Police Authority. The Police Authority is responsible for enforcements that involve coercive measures and is the national point of contact (NFPOC) with Frontex. The Authority thus has the most interfaces and points of contact with Frontex.

### National interests versus European cooperation

Through Schengen, Sweden is part of the EU's integrated border management, which entails both obligations and opportunities. A clear tension in Sweden's relationship with Frontex concerns the balance between national priorities and common interests at the European level. The interviews show that Swedish government agencies often view Frontex through a national lens, where the focus is on Sweden's concrete operational needs rather than on European level coordination and harmonisation.

When it comes to economic incentives and the supply of skills, the motivation to use Frontex is high among the Swedish government agency actors. The Swedish government agencies see the use of FAR and cooperation on training as beneficial to them, and in these cases the support offered by Frontex is well in line with operational needs. Friction arises, however, when the support is not perceived to be based on needs. An example of this is Sweden's contributions to and use of Frontex's standing corps. In the latter case, operational staff criticise what they see as an ineffective use of human resources. Nevertheless, staff seconded to Frontex's standing corps felt that their experience was positive and that Frontex expressed appreciation for their efforts.

Through its vulnerability assessments, Frontex can issue binding recommendations to Member States. One example of such is the recommendation to Sweden to enable hosting of the standing corps. Among the Swedish respondents, this has been experienced as an imposed initiative that is not grounded in actual operational needs. Hosting the standing corps also raises

concerns about the erosion of national knowledge and skills, which in the long run could jeopardise the government agencies' capacity to carry out their mission. The tension between the EU's objectives – which aim to increase resource effectiveness at the European level – and national strategies and self-determination is obvious. This is also reflected in Sweden's position for the Justice and Home Affairs Council (JHA) meeting (Ministry of Justice, Division for EU Affairs, 2025).

The government agencies express a variety of apprehensions about hosting the Frontex standing corps. Working language and secrecy rules are seen as challenges for the Migration Agency, while the Prison and Probation Service and the Police Authority question the need for and benefit of hosting them. From the EU's perspective, the standing corps is crucial to interoperability and emergency preparedness, but this view is not entirely shared by the Swedish actors.

The cooperation with Frontex is marked by a tug-of-war between national priorities and European ambitions. At the strategic level, there are formal decision-making procedures, but the Swedish actors feel that Frontex is often able to set the agenda unilaterally. To have an influence, the Swedish actors use informal strategies and building alliances with other Member States in the Frontex Management Board, but the question of accord between Sweden's needs and Frontex's mandate is decisive in how the cooperation is experienced at the operational level.

### Communication via formal and informal channels

The cooperation between Swedish government agencies and Frontex is largely based on communication and sharing of information. In formal terms, all communication with Frontex should go through the Police Authority's shared mailbox (the NFPOC). Despite this, Frontex sometimes contacts Swedish government agencies directly, bypassing the formal structure. There may be a variety of entirely legitimate reasons for using informal communication channels, but doing so risks resulting in the lack of a clear overview, duplication of work, and important matters falling between the cracks. When communication is tied to individuals, this also entails a vulnerability in the event of staff changes. On the other hand, informal communication that is tied to individuals may facilitate the cooperation and make it more effective.

According to the Frontex Regulation (European Parliament and the Council, 2019), all communication is through the national point of contact in each Member State. Several respondents point out that Frontex's own staff should be aware of – and respect – this structure in order to avoid ineffectiveness and confusion.

### The discrepancy between policy and practice

Policy objectives and the operational reality are not always in accord – a well-known phenomenon in implementation research. The study shows that there is a gap between policy decisions, strategies and priorities on the one hand, and the conditions on the ground for Swedish government agencies on the other.

For example, changes in EU Regulations and the pace of implementation are out of step. The 2016 Frontex Regulation had not yet been fully implemented before the adoption of the revised 2019 Regulation. Nor, in turn, has that later Regulation been fully implemented prior to the entry into force of the new EU Asylum and Migration Pact in 2026. This high tempo of reform generates uncertainty as well as additional work for Swedish government agencies, which must simultaneously manage changes in national legislation along with new working methods and procedures.

The discrepancy between policy and practice is particularly apparent when it comes to the matter of the Frontex standing corps. At European level, there is a clear policy objective to increase the standing corps. The President of the European Commission has proposed a tripling of the corps to 30,000 people (European Commission, 18 July 2024). At the same time, Frontex has been finding it difficult to reach its original target of 10,000. Several of the respondents argue that such an expansion risks affecting national government agencies' staffing and their capacity to carry out their mission. Their view is that an expansion of this kind is not grounded in operational needs and thus demonstrates the gap between political vision and practical realities.

In the coordination, there is some friction between the EU's policy ambitions and objectives, Frontex's operational activities, and the missions and needs of the national government agencies. Given that friction, bigger strategic objectives can be difficult to put into practice, both for Frontex and for national government agencies. Differences in legal mandates, political priorities, resource allocation and in which government agencies are responsible for what may be explanatory factors. Overall, the study shows that there is a



need for enhanced coordination between the policy level and operational reality in order for the cooperation with Frontex to function as effectively as possible.

### Effective, humane and sustainable as objectives

The words *effective*, *humane* and *sustainable* recur again and again in policy documents in the area of return. Although these concepts are rarely clearly defined, they still constitute an important background for how different actors in the area think and act. Of these catchwords, *effective* appears to be the objective that stands out the most in our interviews. The respondents describe effectiveness from several different angles, but measuring effectiveness only in terms of the number of enforcements or in monetary terms is far too narrow a framework for the complex work involved in a return. What is experienced as effective is context-dependent, and is influenced by multiple factors such as geographical proximity, access to scheduled flight connections, diplomatic relations, bilateral agreements, and the number of third-country nationals who can return.

Effectiveness must always be understood in relation to the legal framework and international commitments that regulate the return process, and be part of a humane or dignified return process. Here it can also be noted that *voluntary* returns are the preferred method according to Frontex as well as the Swedish government agencies. In cases where a return is forced, the operational staff follow Frontex guidelines and stress the importance of maintaining a dignified and compassionate connection with the returnee, with mutual respect being the goal. When this approach works well, it helps the enforcement to be dignified and humane. Several respondents emphasise that effectiveness must not be achieved at the expense of humanity and legal certainty.

Respect for human and fundamental rights is essential for an activity like this to be legitimately pursued, and thus also to be an integral part of a sustainable process. A humane and sustainable approach does not stand in opposition to the objective of effectiveness – on the contrary, it can enhance it. During the participant observation of the return operation and subsequent conversations, it emerged that certain destinations are more often associated with turmoil or conflict, raising questions as to whether it would be possible to further adapt the support measures prior to enforcement to increase acceptance among returnees to these destinations. In this context,

sustainability should also be understood as the return having a lasting effect, i.e. that the person does not return illegally to Sweden or the EU, and that they are successfully reintegrated into their country of origin.

In this area, Frontex is still facing challenges. It has recently assumed responsibility for the EU's reintegration programme, and it is too early to evaluate the outcome. All round the study suggests that effectiveness is most often measured in quantitative terms (number of enforcements, cost per return), while humanity and sustainability are more qualitative goals that require follow-up over time. Balancing between these objectives is a significant challenge: how do you increase the tempo and number of returns without compromising trust in the system and the dignity of the returnees?

## Proposals and policy recommendations

The analysis identifies several areas where policy changes or measures could strengthen the cooperation between Sweden and Frontex and increase effectiveness in returns without compromising on humanity and sustainability. The following are concrete recommendations aimed primarily at Swedish decision-makers and government agencies:

- Frontex is one of the European agencies that has grown fastest 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 target of 10,000 people by 2027 has involved some recruitment challenges. Besides difficulties in attracting staff with sufficient knowledge and skills, this part of the standing corps is unevenly distributed, geographically and in terms of gender balance. In view of this uneven distribution and the recruitment challenges, it is proposed that the Commission and Frontex should prioritise efforts to make serving in the standing corps more attractive.
- Does a future expansion, a tripling to a corps of 30,000, lie in Sweden's or Europe's interests? A joint European corps of this size could certainly enable interoperability and create the conditions for a more coherent and resolute response to crises. Staffing capacity in the Member States is crucial to the possibility of implementing such an expansion. The study shows that Swedish actors currently prioritise national capacity over a European target of this size, because a substantial increase risks negatively affecting domestic capacity and control.

- Given the substantial expansion that has already occurred, there is good reason to continue to make haste slowly and focus on Frontex's existing core mission in border control, return and the protection of fundamental rights. The Swedish position paper (Ministry of Justice, Division for EU affairs, 2025) was prepared using a process that is in line with the approach recommended here. That position paper reflects the assessment of both decision-makers and operational staff that continuing the (proposed) expansion of Frontex would not assist with the operational needs of Swedish government agencies. Particular weight should be given to the proposed evaluation and analysis of costs, operational needs and the effects of a possible expansion on the quality of border management.
- Furthermore, Swedish government agency staff seconded to serve in the standing corps may have acquired their new knowledge and insights which could be better utilised than is currently the case. To do this, knowledge and skills shared through secondments should be documented and evaluated to increase the operational benefit and to promote the dissemination of good examples and best practice among the border management agencies.
- The question of effectiveness needs to be examined in more detail as it is rarely defined or explained in policy and governing documents. To better understand the actual effects of the cooperation, it is proposed that annual follow-ups and evaluations of Sweden's cooperation with Frontex be carried out. These should include utilisation rates, outcomes, lessons learned, and the dissemination of successful working methods within and between government agencies.
- In the interaction between Swedish government agencies and Frontex, tensions arise on several levels – between national and supranational, and from the management and Management Board down to the operational work. This dynamic is inherent in many EU contexts. This tension is particularly apparent within the Police Authority, which both coordinates Frontex matters and has a core mission responsibility for external border management. Even within the government agencies, there are tensions between management and operational activities, where goals and priorities imposed from above are sometimes difficult to put into practice.

- Although these tensions are difficult to eliminate entirely, Sweden could strengthen the national coordination between the relevant government agencies in order to achieve a clearer and more coherent line, particularly in Sweden's work in the Frontex Management Board. One possible way is to establish a common structure within which the NFPOC, operational activities (e.g. through giving the Operational Centre an expanded function), and carefully selected individuals from each government agency discuss strategic matters and priorities more regularly.
- Finally, this study shows that more practice-based research and knowledge is needed in this field. The cooperation 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 Policy Brief has highlighted some, but far from all, aspects of this cooperation, and to provide effective, humane and sustainable returns in the long term, there is more to discover.

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The authors are fully responsible for the report's contents including its  
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