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# Policy Brief

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## Nordic cooperation within return and readmission

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Nordic cooperation on return and readmission is a rapidly evolving field, fuelled by increasing political ambitions to enhance collaboration. This policy brief draws on the AMIF-funded Delmi report Nordic cooperation within return and readmission (2025:2), offering insights into the formal and informal networks that underpin this cooperation. It examines how these networks function, identifies opportunities and challenges, and evaluates to what extent Nordic cooperation can foster return and readmission processes that are effective, sustainable, and humane through the lens of those involved in policy creation and implementation in the Nordic countries. Key findings include the predominance of operational networks over political ones and the pivotal role of 'like-mindedness' in enabling this cooperation. While the study highlights that Nordic cooperation on return and readmission has great potential and is often appreciated by those involved in it, challenges persist. These include a tendency to be protective of national interests and achievements, disparities in resource allocation between countries, and transparency issues linked to the –often informal – nature of Nordic cooperation.

## A unified Nordic political front on return and readmission?

Recent years have seen a growing political focus on enhancing Nordic cooperation on return and readmission policies. A notable development occurred during the two-day Ministerial meeting of the Nordic Joint Advisory Group on Refugee Policy (NSHF) in Copenhagen, Denmark, on 31 October 2023. Following the meeting, the Ministers of the five Nordic countries – Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Iceland – issued a joint press release outlining three joint initiatives “...with a strong commitment to strengthen and expand Nordic cooperation in the area of return” (Ministry of Justice, et al., 2023). This press release suggests a political shift towards a more unified Nordic front on return and readmission.

However, the increasing emphasis on these issues by Nordic politicians publicly, individually as well as collectively, contrasts with the limited amount of previous research on Nordic cooperation on migration management in general, and on return and readmission in particular. What we do know, however, is that it is not uncommon to find a gap between aspiration and reality in institutionalized cooperation between the Nordic countries when it comes to politically charged issues like migration control and asylum policy (Etzold, 2017). By examining formal and informal networks, this policy brief lays the groundwork for understanding if and how recent developments are attempting to bridge this gap in order to promote more cohesive regional cooperation in the area of return and readmission.

### Aim of the study

In the report, we examine **how, and to what extent, Nordic countries, i.e. Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Iceland, cooperate with one another when it comes to implementing and coordinating the return and readmission of migrants who have received a return decision.** We do this through exploring: a) what formal and informal intra-Nordic networks currently exist at a political and operational level when it comes to this cooperation; b) what roles these networks play and how they function; c) what opportunities and obstacles exist for improving this cooperation; and d) to what extent, through the eyes of those working within these networks, Nordic cooperation can promote effective, sustainable and humane return processes.

## Background: Historical foundations and contemporary shifts in Nordic migration cooperation

Nordic cooperation has deep historical roots and is characterized by cultural affinity and institutionalized collaborative frameworks that have evolved into a unique regional identity. By formalizing Nordic cooperation through organizations such as the Norden Associations in 1919 and later the Nordic Council (1952), and the Nordic Council of Ministers (1971), the Nordic countries have sought to enhance their international influence by presenting “a stronger, more unified voice” (Bergum Kinsten & Orava, 2012, pp. 8,9). Through initiatives such as the 1952 Nordic Passport Union, followed by a joint labour market in 1954 and harmonization of laws such as the Nordic Convention on Social Security in 1955, the Nordic region has also been at the forefront when it comes to free movement, and transnational residence and labour rights, decades before other European countries (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Ford, 2022).

The Nordic region’s migration policies, however, have not always aligned. Until 2016, Sweden maintained one of Europe’s most generous asylum policies, contrasting sharply with the more restrictive approaches of Denmark in particular (Etzold, 2017). This divergence began to converge after the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015, which resulted in significant political pressure on all Nordic countries to recalibrate their policies. While all countries in the region adopted more restrictive measures, the change was particularly pronounced in Sweden, which shifted from being one of Europe’s most generous asylum policy regimes to a stricter approach emphasizing the return and readmission of individuals without legal residence. The resulting ‘return turn’ marked a regional focus on enhanced migration control, aligning with broader European trends emphasizing deterrence, i.e. policies designed to discourage or prevent migrants and refugees from arriving in or accessing the asylum systems of destination countries, over humanitarian commitments and protection (Gammeltoft-Hansen T. , 2017).

Despite increasing policy convergence, the Nordic countries continue to face challenges in coordinating their responses during periods of heightened migration pressure. Fragmented reactions during the 2015 refugee crisis and, more recently, the displacement caused by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, underscore the limitations of the existing frameworks. These events highlight that, while institutionalized cooperation facilitates Nordic collaboration across various policy areas, significant gaps remain in

achieving a unified and coordinated Nordic approach to migration management. This historical and contextual understanding of Nordic cooperation provides a foundation for exploring the current landscape of return and readmission efforts, examining both the opportunities and challenges of enhanced collaboration as reflected in the initiatives presented in the press release following the 2023 NSHF Ministerial meeting in Copenhagen.

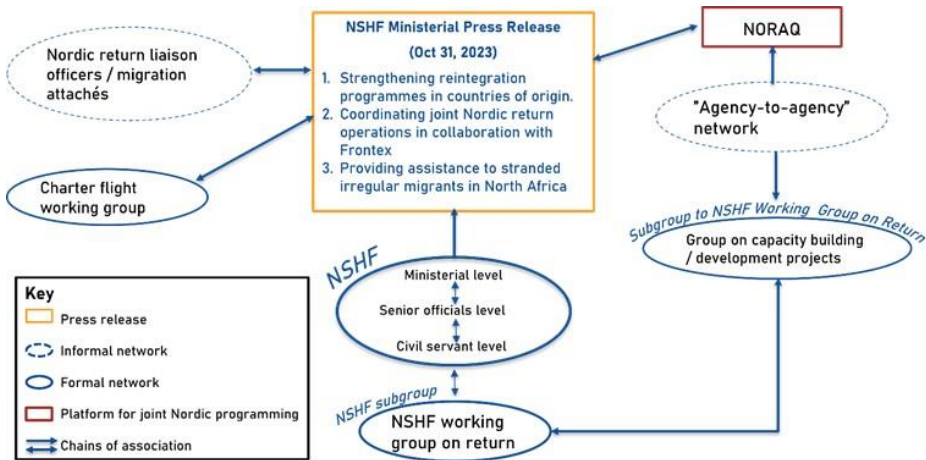
## Methods and data

The report uses an **Actor Network Theory (ANT)** approach as both the main theoretical framework and a methodological tool for tracing and examining networks. By using ANT as a methodological tool, we are able to identify actants. An **actant** is someone or something that plays an important role in the network by “making something happen” (Bellanova & Duez, 2012). By tracing the actions from one actant to additional actants, we are also introduced to additional networks. Through these **chains of associations**, we begin to understand the effects or consequences that these connections have on the network as a whole. Thus, in identifying what formal and informal intra-Nordic networks exist when it comes to cooperating on return and readmission, what roles they perform and how they function, an ANT approach helps us to map out the field. The analysis within the report mainly draws on accounts from extensive semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders: 35 individuals in the five Nordic countries. These individuals were identified as having (or were assumed to have) experience of participating in intra-Nordic regional and/or bilateral collaborative activities regarding return and readmission processes, at a political or operational level.

## Main findings

By means of an ANT-inspired mapping of formal and informal intra-Nordic networks working with return and readmission (visually represented in Figure 1 below), we were introduced to a variety of advantages and disadvantages regarding the roles that these networks play and how they function at a political and/or operational level.

Figur 1. Key formal and informal networks in Nordic return cooperation



It should be noted, however, that while Figure 1 depicts the most central networks identified during the time of writing the report, highlighting their roles and connections in Nordic cooperation on return and readmission, it does not provide a comprehensive picture of all Nordic cooperation efforts in this area. Furthermore, although the chains of association between networks are illustrated, the reality is far more fluid and complex, as actants within these networks often move both across and within networks. However, by mapping these networks, the Figure –though simplified – underscores how operational-level activities feed into broader policy directives. These networks include:

- the NSHF working group on return (a formal operational network consisting primarily of civil servants; it provides information to the more political levels of the NSHF).
- the charter flight working group (a formal operational network consisting of government agencies working logistically with enforcing returns in relation to the idea of Joint Nordic Return Operations).
- the agency-to-agency network (an ad hoc, semi-formal, information-sharing operational network consisting of relevant government agencies; this network later transformed into a formal operational network functioning as a subgroup to the NSHF working group on return and consisting of civil servants and relevant government

agencies working on specific capacity-building/development projects in third countries).

- informal networks of Nordic return liaison officers/migration attachés (which are difficult to map due to their informality).

The findings reveal that Nordic cooperation on return and readmission is predominantly operational, driven by a 'bottom-up' approach that emphasizes collaboration at the civil-servant level. Thus, the overwhelming presence of operational networks in comparison to political networks when it comes to intra-Nordic networks working on return and readmission very much aligns with previous research on Nordic cooperation. Joint Nordic capacity-building projects through operational networks are expected to continue and increase in number in the future, as Nordic cooperation has shown particular promise in third-country capacity-building projects such as the Nordic Support on Return and Reintegration in Iraq (NORAQ) initiative. This initiative, as the report highlights, demonstrates the potential for joint efforts to address post-deportation challenges while avoiding resource overlaps.

The findings also revealed that a general sense of Nordic 'like-mindedness' was a key factor in facilitating cooperation among the Nordic countries. This like-mindedness was described in terms of the Nordics "working in a similar way" to one another due to, for example, shared cultural heritage values, a common history of cooperation, as well as similar administrative and legal structures. However, it was also often described in quite abstract terms by actants, such as the Nordics "sharing a bond". Thus, the idea of a Nordic identity based on a distinct linguistic and cultural affinity, also known as **Nordicity** (Jalava, 2013), was often found to be the glue holding many of the intra-Nordic networks together, as it made actants more inclined to share information with their Nordic neighbours. However, both previous research and our findings suggest that pragmatism, rather than deep normative consensus, is the primary driver of Nordic cooperation. Interviewed actants emphasized for example the notion that, while the Nordic countries are relatively small individually, they are 'stronger together', whether in relation to the European Union (EU) or third-country authorities, particularly on issues of return and readmission.

Moreover, while Nordicity appeared to play a significant role in identifying and holding networks together, Nordic cooperation also hinges on specific

national interests. These sometimes conflicting national priorities, combined with the absence of a shared and explicitly stated normative framework, leave this cooperation vulnerable to divergence if national policies shift. Thus, significant challenges persist as a result of this tension. The findings of this report underscore that the ability of each Nordic actor to 'bring something to the table' – whether through expertise, resources or operational capacity – is crucial in determining the level and nature of engagement within these networks. For instance, the exclusion of actors such as Iceland in certain contexts highlights how national interests and resource considerations can sometimes outweigh the collective Nordic vision. Thus, in cases such as Iceland, Nordic cooperation rests on a kind of 'give-and-take' cooperation that is more inclined to benefit the national interests of the Nordic country that can give more. The findings also revealed that while informal and semi-formal approaches foster flexibility and openness within and between networks, they also raise concerns about transparency, as discussions are often held within tiny, tight-knit groups that are not required to record and make public the minutes of their meetings.

It should also be noted that despite their normative nature, **effective**, **sustainable** and **humane** are three terms that, despite not being formally defined, dominate EU strategy documents regarding return and readmissions, such as the EU New Pact on Migration and Asylum, as well as the EU Return Directive. While Nordic migration and integration policies are closely aligned with the broader framework of the European Union, discussions with actants revealed little explicit reference to these concepts. This raises questions about their perceived importance. Their absence could reflect a reluctance to use language seen as vague or politicized, or an assumption that these principles are so integral to a Nordic return and readmission process that the 'obvious' did not have to be stated. Their absence could also be due to a lack of prioritization within Nordic processes.

## Policy recommendations

Based on the findings of the report, we provide the following policy recommendations if intra-Nordic cooperation on return and readmission policies and practices continues to be prioritized in the future:

- A **common goal** should be formulated at the **political level** that highlights the aim and benefits of a unified Nordic approach. This goal should be grounded in an explicitly stated shared **normative**

**framework** that defines the principles, values and standards guiding the cooperation. Such a framework would promote alignment, trust, and mutual accountability, ensuring long-term cooperation regardless of national shifts in political power. Additionally, it would provide clarity on the rationale for Nordic cooperation and its efficient use of resources. Moreover, the rationale behind Nordic cooperation on return and readmission and shared goals, should also be included in individual Nordic countries' return strategies.

- Key terms such as **effective, sustainable** and **humane** should be explicitly **defined** and **operationalized** to ensure they are **meaningful** and **actionable** rather than remaining vague political buzzwords if they are to be included in a common goal or within national return strategies. What an effective, sustainable and humane return and readmission process would entail at an operational level would also need to be unpacked and defined within operational networks. Establishing a shared understanding of these terms, with clear and operational definitions, would not only guide implementation but also provide a robust foundation for evaluating the success of cooperative efforts.
- We further highlight the need for **greater inclusivity within networks**. Expanding participation to include relevant NGOs and ensuring that government-agency level actors are meaningfully integrated into civil-servant led networks would strengthen cooperation. Network meetings should be inclusive by the working language being first and foremost English.
- Operational efficiency could also be improved through **standardized practices** such as maintaining a shared registry of Nordic return liaison officers and facilitating better access to embassies in neighbouring Nordic countries.
- **Transparency**, while maintaining operational flexibility, must be enhanced to align with **public accountability** and enable civil society to engage constructively with return and readmission policies. We recommend that networks on return and readmission review when and where relevant civil society organisations can be included in network meetings, thereby contributing to a more transparent process. Relevant Nordic NGOs should also be invited to fulfil the



role of an independent observation committee for Joint Nordic Return Operations.

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