



Frontex Evaluation Report

on the results of returns
implemented in the 1st
half of 2024



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Signature

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Introduction

The European Border and Coast Guard Agency (“Frontex”) assists the Member States¹ in implementing voluntary-based² or forced returns of people who have exhausted all legal avenues to legitimise their stay in the Schengen area. The competent national authorities are solely responsible for issuing return decisions, which are administrative or judicial decisions or acts, stating or declaring the stay of a third-country national (“non-EU national”) to be illegal and imposing or stating an obligation to return.³ The Agency does not enter into the merits of return decisions, as per Article 48(1) of the European Border and Coast Guard Regulation⁴ (“the Regulation”).

Returns are implemented mainly by air, either on scheduled⁵ or charter flights. The Agency supports the organisation, implementation, and financing of returns organised by Member States, and organises returns on its own initiative. In all cases, Frontex is responsible for the coordination of returns at operational level and can provide technical and operational support also through the deployment of specific profiles of the European Border and Coast Guard standing corps officers (“standing corps”).

Member States request the Agency’s support to returns via the Frontex-Assisted Returns (“FAR”) modules of the Integrated Return Management Application (“IRMA”).⁶ Each request is assessed by the Agency against the criteria indicated in the Management Board Decision 24/2023:⁷ security aspects, respect for fundamental rights, cost-effectiveness, operational conditions and flexibility, time-effectiveness, coherence with the external

EU policy on return, and environmental sustainability. The assessment of these criteria may lead to approval or rejection of the return need, or to proposing alternative technical or operational solutions, if available, for instance offering to use scheduled flights instead of a charter flight, providing alternative dates and/or routes for the return, etc.

As per Article 50(7) of the Regulation, the executive director shall evaluate the results of the return operations to enhance the quality, coherence, and effectiveness of future return activities. This report evaluates the results of returns organised or coordinated by Frontex **between 1 January and 30 June 2024** (hereinafter: the first half of 2024). Even though providing assistance in relation to voluntary returns⁸ does not constitute return operations in the meaning of Article 50 of the Regulation, **such returns are also covered by this report for the sake of completeness and coherence. This document does not cover returns carried out by Member States at the national level, without the support of the Agency.**

While the Agency does not prioritise returns from any particular Member States, the results shown in the report are based on the different volumes of Member States’ return needs.

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

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

² In this report, ‘voluntary-based return’ applies to those returns where the non-EU national willingly accepts the obligation to return either with or without having received the return decision. It therefore encompasses both voluntary return and voluntary departure.

³ Article 3 (4) of the Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2008 on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals (OJ L 348, 24.12.2008, p. 98).

⁴ Regulation (EU) 2019/1896 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 November 2019 on the European Border and Coast Guard and repealing Regulations (EU) No 1052/2013 and (EU) 2016/1624.

⁵ Regular commercial flights.

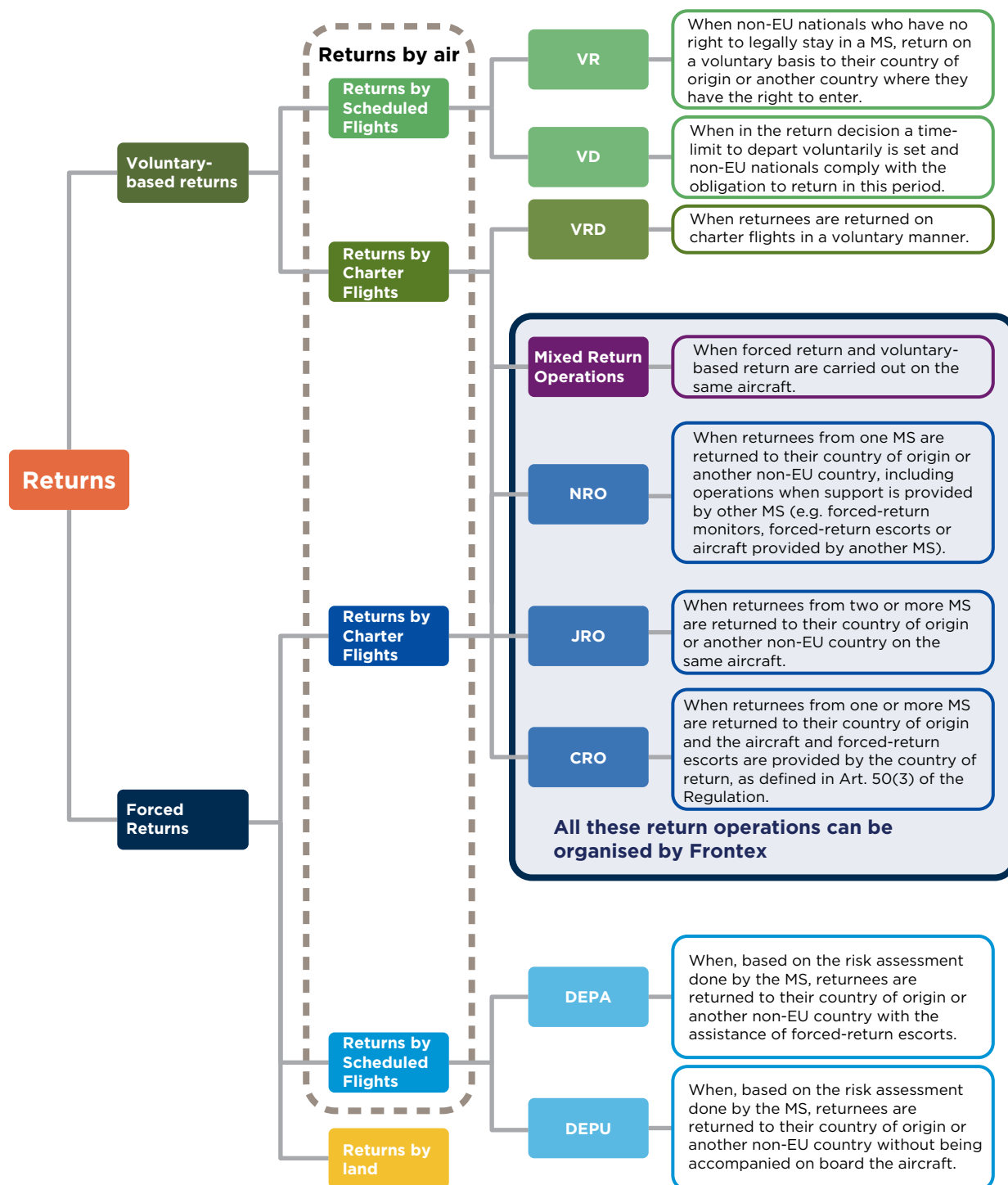
⁶ As set out in the Management Board Decision 24/2023 of 21 July 2023 adopting the modus operandi of the rolling operational plan for Return.

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

⁸ As set out in Article 48(1)(a)(iii) of the Regulation (EU) 2019/1896.

Mapping of the different return categories

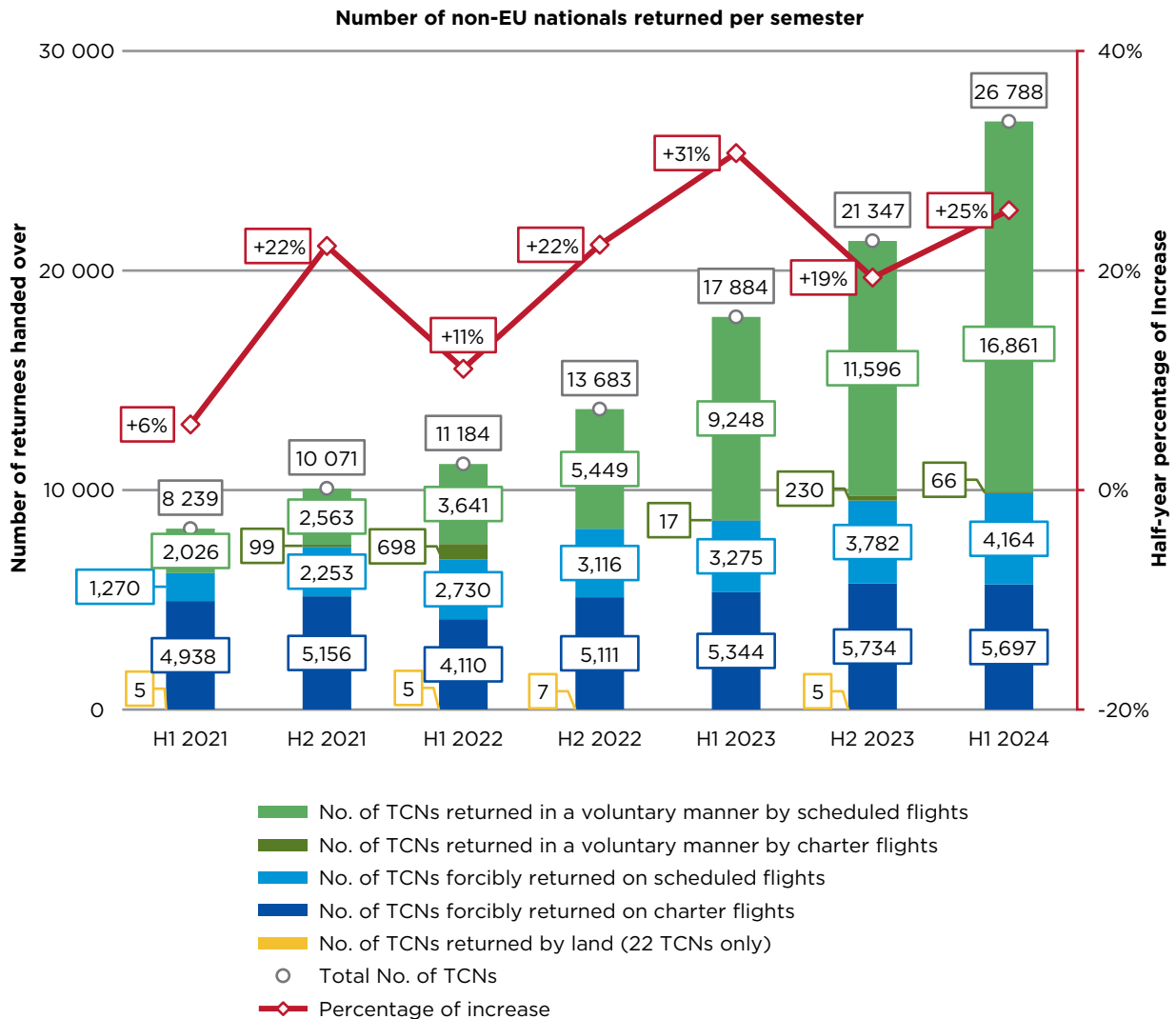
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1. Overview of returns

In the first half of 2024, Member States returned 26,788⁹ non-EU nationals with the assistance of Frontex. All returns were implemented by air: 78% on scheduled flights and 22% on charter flights. The number of returns

implemented with Frontex's support is constantly on the rise. **An average of 4,465 non-EU nationals were returned per month in the first half of 2024**, compared to the 3,558 and 2,980 in the previous two semesters.



In detail, the number of non-EU nationals returned per Member State, as shown in the map below, varies according to the diverse migratory situations they face. **Germany, Cyprus, and France returned the highest number of people, 16,751 non-EU nationals in total (63% of the total number of all Frontex-supported returns in the first half of 2024).**

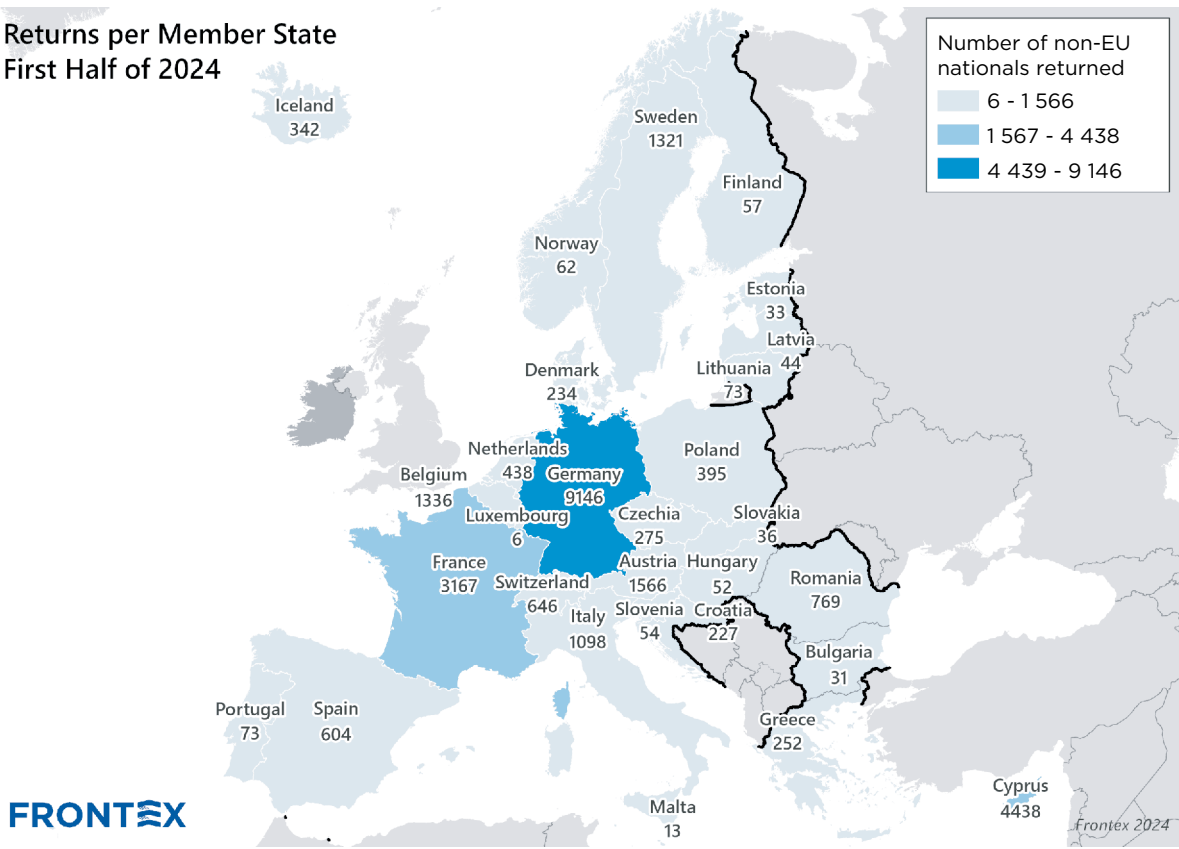
Most Member States have increased the number of non-EU nationals returned in comparison with the

second half of 2023. The biggest growth comes from Germany, Belgium, and Switzerland as the number of persons returned from these Member States increased by 63%, 64%, and 1142% compared to last semester. Other Member States in the top 10 have either increased their numbers at a level comparable with the semestrial growth average of 25%, or at steadier pace at around 6%. In the top 10, only Sweden and Italy experienced a decrease in number of non-EU national returned with the support of Frontex.

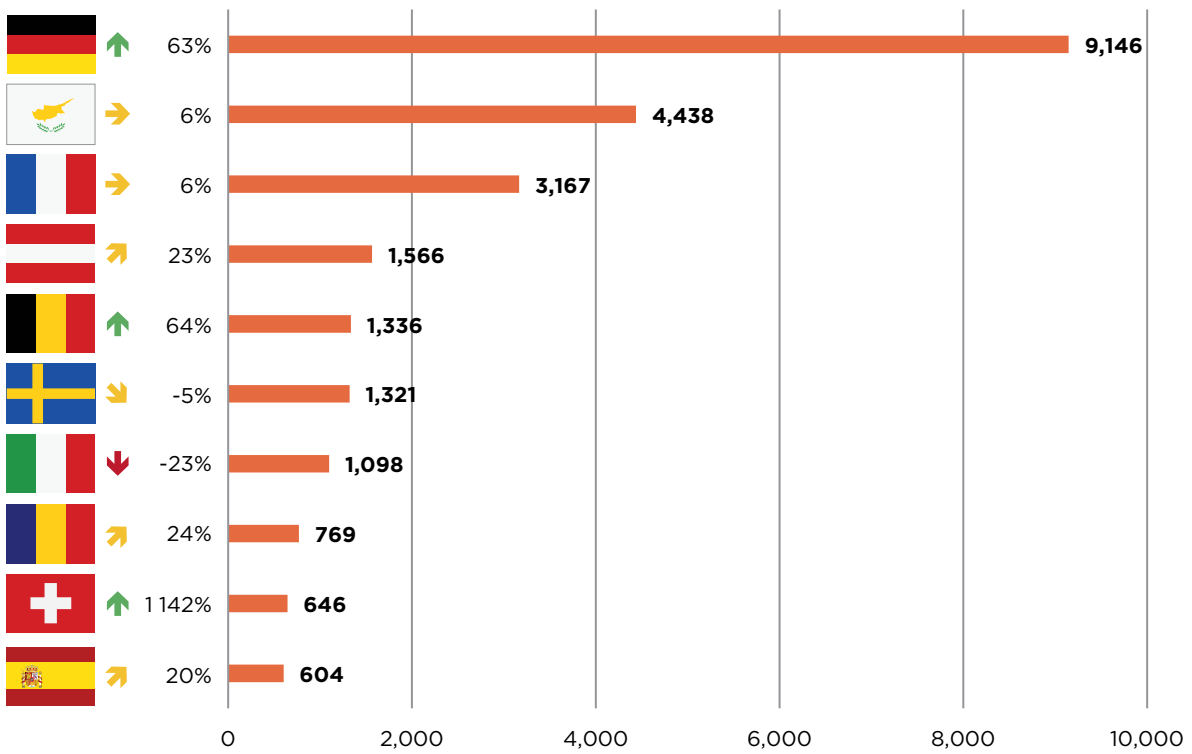
⁹ Data may be subject to minor changes due to late validations of data in FAR by Member States.

Overview of returns

Returns per Member State
First Half of 2024



Top 10 MS per number of non-EU nationals returned with
Frontex support in H1 2024



Top 10 MS in H1 2024 (with percentage of increase compared to H2 2023)

1.1 Support of return teams

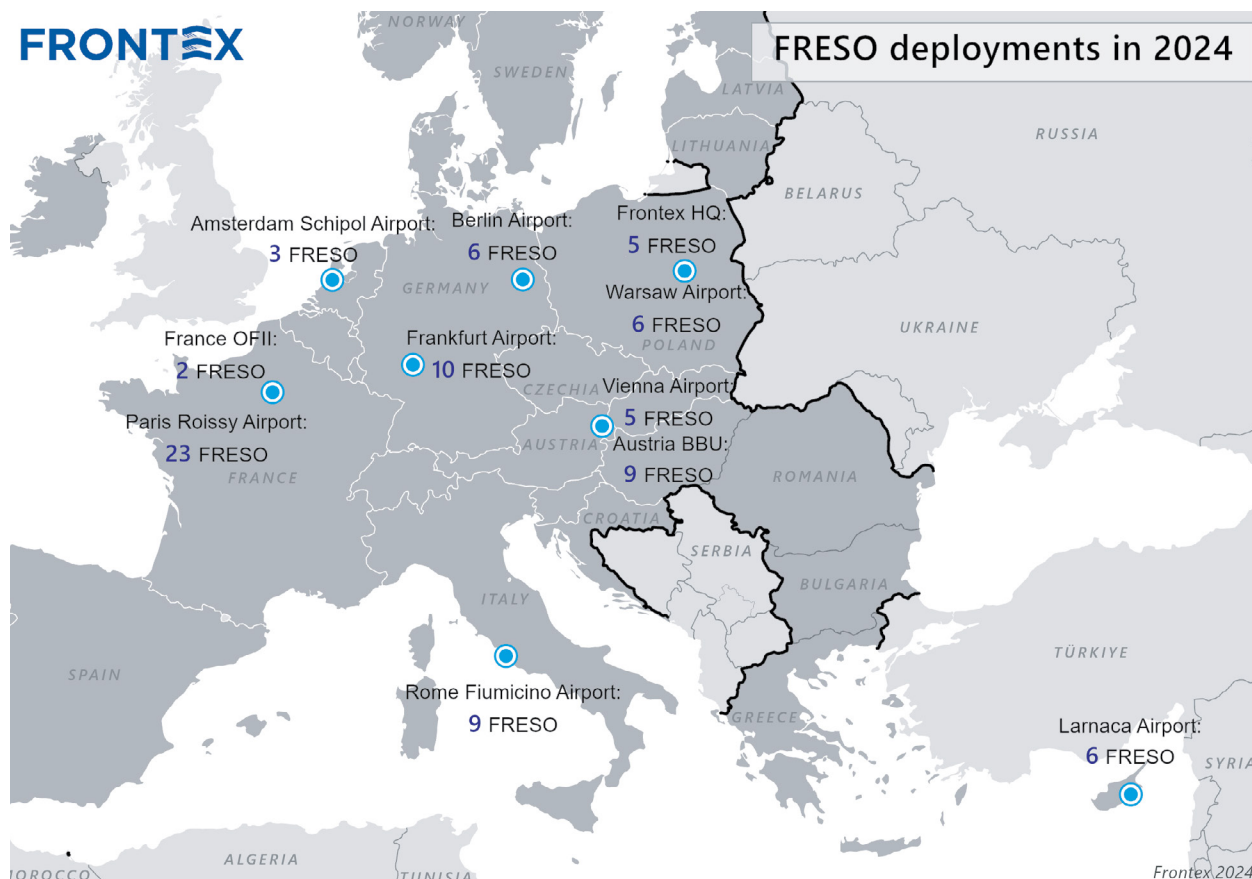
In addition to the operational, technical, and financial assistance provided by Frontex to return flights, the Agency supports Member States' returns by deploying standing corps officers under two return profiles: Frontex Return Escort and Support Officers ("FRESO") and Return Specialists ("RS").¹⁰ These officers engage in various specialised tasks in the field as requested by the Member States. These deployments increase the Member States' capacities to implement effective returns, both directly, by supporting with additional members of escort teams or return and reintegration counselling, as well as indirectly by technical support in the implementation of digital systems for returns or improving consular relations with third countries of return.

Officers with the FRESO profile are deployed mainly to Member States' airports to reinforce the local authorities' capacities in the implementation of forced and voluntary returns. FRESO provide support on the ground to returns by charter and scheduled flights departing or transiting in the airport from other Member States. When requested,

FRESO may also escort returnees, thus contributing to the safe and secure implementation of return operations. Depending on the agreements with Member States, in certain locations FRESO may also support voluntary-based returns by transferring non-EU nationals to be returned to the airport of departure and assisting them during pre-departure and boarding procedures.

In the first semester of 2024, a total of 83 FRESO were deployed to 10 locations in 7 Member States. **These FRESO teams contributed to the return procedure of 11,016 persons** by supporting returns implemented by the Member States' authorities both with and without the support of Frontex. **Out of the total, FRESO have contributed to the voluntary return of 5,849 persons.**

FRESO also supported the transit of 527 returnees departing from other Member States on the way to their countries of destination, which accounts for a 107% increase compared to the number of supported transits in the first half of 2023. On top of that, FRESO



¹⁰ The standing corps profiles are defined in the Management Board decision 5/2023 of 25 January 2023 adopting the profiles to be made available to the European Border and Coast Guard standing corps for 2024.

contributed to the safe and secure return of 5,167 non-EU nationals in total.

Two new FRESO return teams were deployed in the first half of 2024. 2 FRESO started their deployment in January at the French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII) to support voluntary-based returns, while in May a team of 6 FRESO was deployed to Warsaw Chopin Airport. Other return teams were reinforced during the semester, including a short-term deployment to Frankfurt of 3 FRESO who participated in a pilot activity to support returnees transiting through Frankfurt Airport during their return. **Based on a request for extraordinary support, in June 13 additional FRESO temporarily joined the return team at Paris Charles De Gaulle Airport to cover for the national officers who were reassigned to support the Olympic Games.**

On top of the support provided by FRESO teams in the Member States, 5 FRESO posted in Frontex HQ participated as escorts or members of the back-up team in 4 return operations coordinated by Frontex.

When standing corps under RS profile are deployed, they can provide support in three different areas:

- Third country cooperation in the field of return focuses on consular engagement to identify and obtain travel documents for returnees. RS provided support to Member States in engaging with third country consular authorities in 479 cases.
- Return and reintegration counselling, which consists of informing non-EU nationals about the return process while promoting voluntary returns and offering possibilities for reintegration. Counselling takes place during all stages of the return process. In the first half of 2024, RS conducted 7178 return and reintegration counselling sessions, which resulted in 3866 declarations to return voluntarily.
- In addition, RS also provided support in the use of different IT systems such as FAR (2819 cases), the Reintegration Assistance Tool ("RIAT") (1020 cases), or the Readmission Case Management System ("RCMS") (162 cases).

2. Voluntary and forced returns

It is important to distinguish between voluntary-based returns and forced returns, as they are implemented in very different manner.

Voluntary-based returns are promoted and preferred in the EU legal and policy framework, as they are considered more humane and sustainable. They also require much less resources to be implemented. Migrants deciding to comply with the obligation to return typically do so due to a combination of legal and financial incentives, including support offered in the form of assistance after their return (e.g., financial support, medical assistance, long-term help with setting up of business), as well as personal circumstances (e.g., situation in their country of return).

In contrast, forced returns are the last resort for migrants who, regardless of the applicable incentives, refuse to comply with their obligation to leave the territory of the EU. Some non-EU nationals may also be refused the possibility to return voluntarily based on Member States'

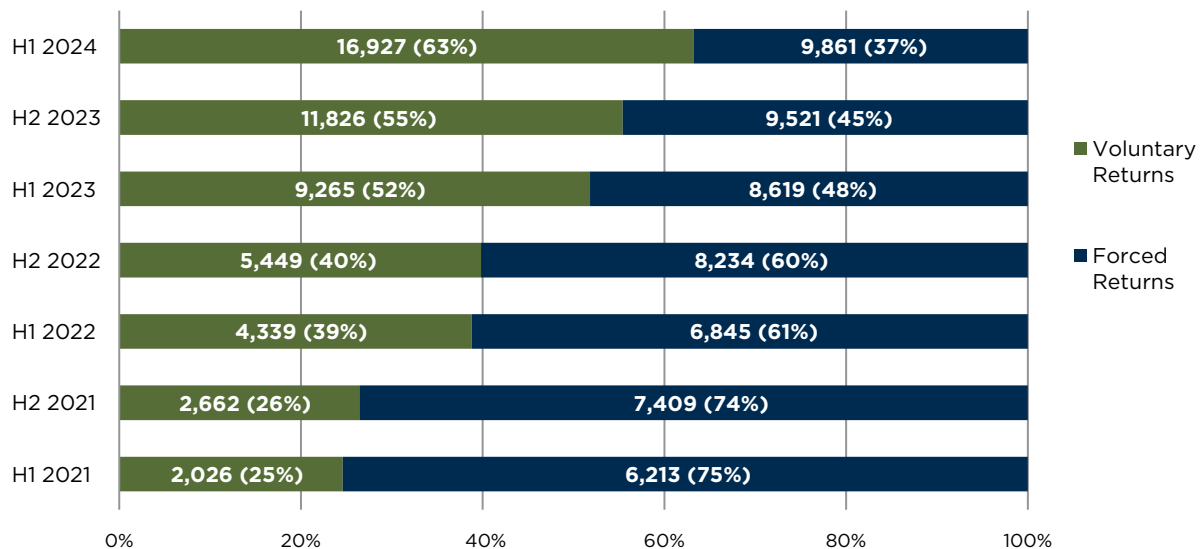
national legislations and policies, such as in cases of persons who pose security risk or have criminal records.

Both types of returns are correlated and represent two sides of the same return system. An effective voluntary return programme, also supported by post-arrival or reintegration assistance, reduces the number of forced returns. On the other hand, the potential possibility of a forced return, applied as a last resort measure, serves as a deterrent from evading the return (i.e., absconding), and may encourage migrants to choose a more dignified (and often beneficial) way of returning.

In the first half of 2024, the number of non-EU nationals who returned voluntarily with Frontex support increased by 43% compared to the second half of 2023. On the other hand, the same comparison shows that the number of forced returns increased by only 4%. The more significant growth in number of voluntary-based returns is a result of Frontex's efforts to promote its extended mandate,¹¹ as well as of its effective cooperation with Member States' authorities responsible for voluntary

¹¹ The Agency's mandate in returns was extended in the Regulation 2019/1896 to include voluntary returns, as well as post-arrival and post-return (reintegration) support.

Voluntary-based vs. forced returns ratio in number of non-EU nationals returned each semester



returns. Various legal and policy documents at EU level¹² also prioritise voluntary returns over forced returns, causing a bigger demand from Member States for Frontex support.

Over the last three years, the share of forced and voluntary returns has significantly shifted: **while in the first half of**

2021 voluntary returns constituted 25%, in the first half of 2024 they amounted to 63% of the total (an even more prominent increase in absolute numbers taking into consideration also the increase in the total number of implemented returns).

2.1 Voluntary-based returns

Frontex has significantly increased its support for voluntary-based returns over the last years, aligning with the political and strategic guidance provided by the EU institutions and responding to the demand expressed by the Member States. The Agency has not only supported the implementation of an increasing number of voluntary-based returns but has also made structural investments in activities which contributed to the rising numbers of migrants choosing to return voluntarily. These activities are offered at all stages of the return process, including assistance to the non-EU nationals after their return. As an example, Frontex introduced a comprehensive service of return counselling and referral of migrants through the specialised RS profile of the standing corps, which is then complemented by an array of post-arrival and post-return activities offered by the Agency's EU Reintegration Programme.

In the first semester of 2024, 23 Member States benefitted from Frontex assistance in the voluntary

returns of 16,927 non-EU nationals. 68% of the non-EU nationals returned from three Member States: Germany (26%), Cyprus (25%), and France (17%).

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

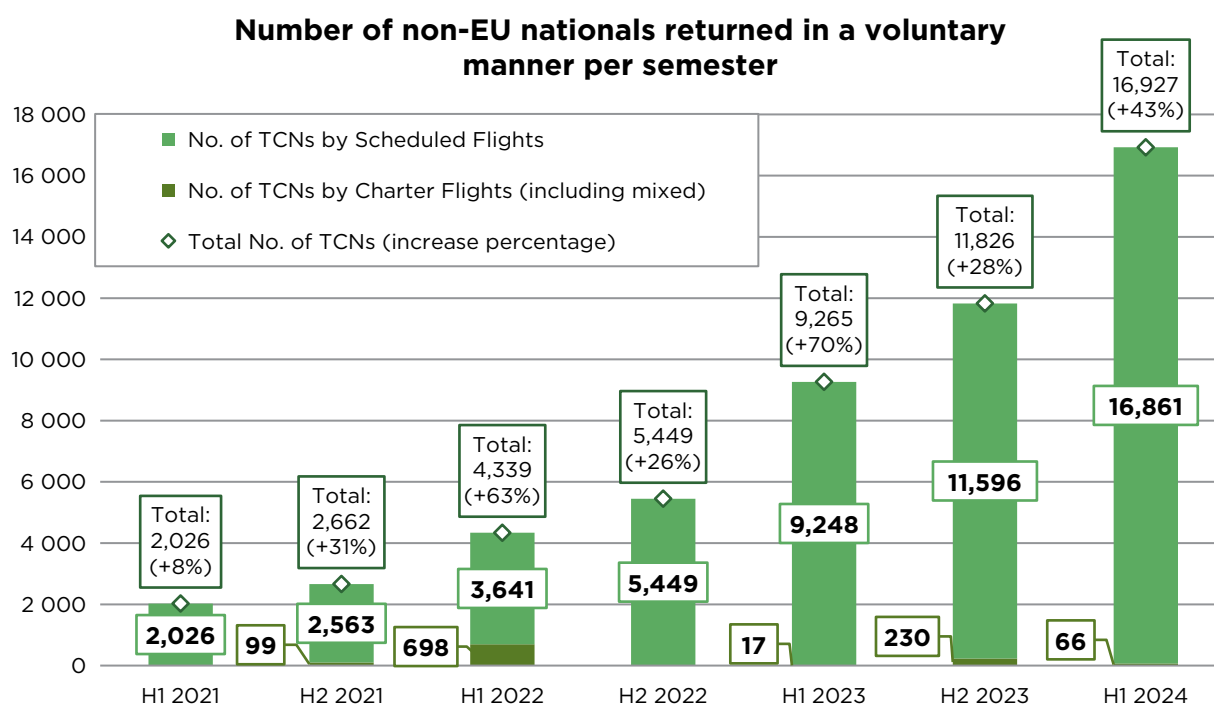
When Member States do not have available direct flight connections to a country of return, the migrants have to transit to another country on their way to the final destination. As said, such transits take place outside of

¹² Including, inter alia, the 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum, the 2021 EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration, the 2020 New Pact on Migration and Asylum, as well as the Return Directive itself.

the Schengen area. However, if the travel time would be disproportionately prolonged or such a flight schedule would not be cost efficient, Member States may be in the need of using flight connections within the Schengen area. In principle, Frontex does not support such type of voluntary-based returns due to the risk that, because of the lack of border checks in transit, the returnees decide to abscond, avoiding their return and entering another Member State irregularly. Nevertheless, there could be exceptions in case there are agreements between the Member States organising the return and those of transit. For instance, the cooperation between Icelandic and Spanish authorities was essential for the successful implementation of the voluntary return of 247 Venezuelan nationals from Iceland via Spain, which was facilitated by Frontex. More voluntary-based returns

to other destination countries were implemented with Frontex support in the first half of 2024 using similar arrangements between different Member States.

When there is a higher number of migrants to be returned to the same country, Member States may consider using charter flights also for voluntary-based returns. In order to arrange such flights, Member States need a larger number of non-EU nationals of the same nationality ready to return at the same time. The organisation of a charter flight consumes more time and resources and requires an agreement with the country of return. Due to these reasons, voluntary returns by charter flights are not frequently implemented. In the reporting period, there was no voluntary-based return by charter flight supported by the Agency.



2.2 Forced returns

Forced returns are often the only way to return an individual from the Member States' territory. This may be caused by a non-cooperative behaviour of the person to be returned, their high-risk assessment, or even by a risk to public security posed by the individual. These circumstances often do not allow for a voluntary return. Still, forced returns represent the smaller portion of the overall returns carried out by Member States.

In the first semester of 2024, forced returns did not increase as much as voluntary-based returns. Still, **the**

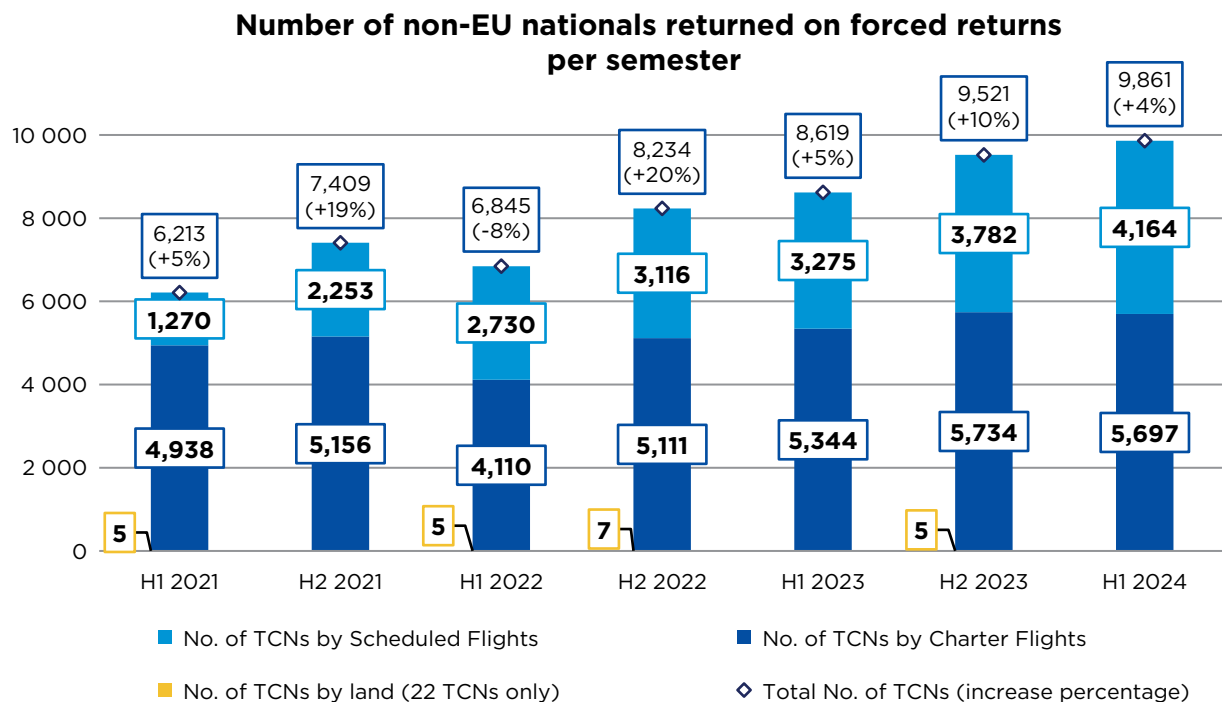
numbers of forced returns have steadily increased over the last years, with a growth of 4% between this semester and the previous one. If this trend continues, the number of non-EU nationals returned forcibly may reach 20,000 by the end of 2024, which would be the highest number of forced returns supported by the Agency in one year.

Forced returns on scheduled flights have grown by 10% in the first semester of 2024, forced returns by charter flights is more stable (-1%). A big increase in the number of non-EU

nationals returned on forced returns by scheduled flights by Germany, Belgium, and Spain sustained this growth. As a result, **the share of scheduled flights used to implement forced returns has slightly increased from 40% in the second half of 2023 to 42% in the first half of 2024.**

The enhanced use of Frontex support to carry out forced returns by scheduled flights is thanks to the strengthened cooperation between Frontex and partner airlines, which puts at the disposal of the Member States operational conditions which are normally not accessible to all of them. It is projected that by the end of 2025, scheduled flights will become the most used means of transportation to carry out forced returns facilitated by the Agency.

On the other side, charter flights remain a standard method for implementing forced returns. These flights have a number of advantages in the context of forced returns. For instance, disruptive passengers who cannot be returned on scheduled flights can be returned in a safe and secure way, whilst upholding EU standards during the flights and respecting the returnees' fundamental rights. In case it is needed, medical staff and specialised personnel accompanying sick returnees or vulnerable groups may also be involved in the flight. On charter flights it is also possible to manage flight routes, include stopovers in the Schengen area, and plan flights with multiple destinations.



3. Complementarity between charter and scheduled flights

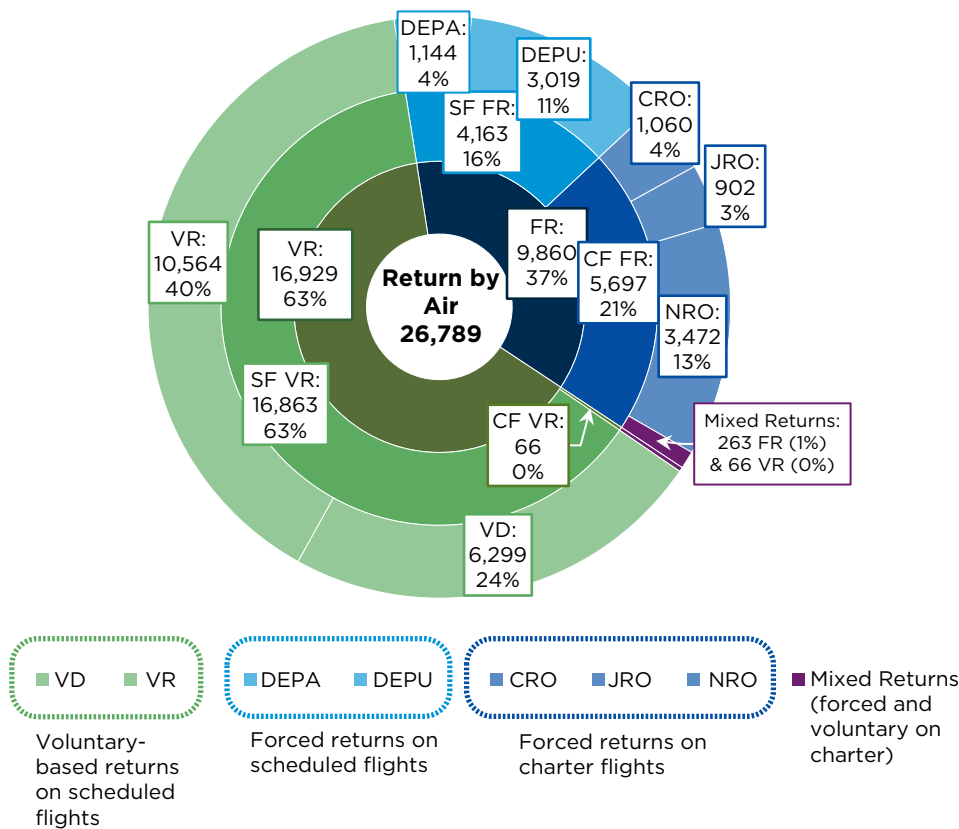
Frontex supports different means of transportation to assist Member States in the implementation of returns. This variety of options offers activities tailored to Member States’ needs and reflects the possibilities of organising returns of migrants in various situations and to different countries of return.

This diversity of methods and operational frameworks is highlighted by the full breakdown (below) of Frontex support to Member States. Complementarity between these categories allows Frontex not only to strive for a better efficiency of returns, but also to develop a comprehensive strategy in line with the Member States’ requirements and the EU policy framework.

Frontex supported 29 Member States in the return of 21,025 non-EU nationals on scheduled flights, representing 78% of total returns in the period. The leading Member States for returns by scheduled flights were Germany (27%), Cyprus (21%), and France (14%).

Charter flight numbers remained stable compared to previous semester. **21 Member States took part in Frontex coordinated charter flights, either as an organising or as a participating Member State,¹³ and returned 5,763 non-EU nationals in total.** The Member States with most returnees on these flights were Germany (60%), Italy (17%), and Spain (7%).

Number of non-EU nationals returned by air per category (H1 2024)



¹³ Several Member States can participate in the same return operation on charter flights depending on their needs. Each of these operations have one organising Member State responsible for organising the operation unless Frontex organises the operation itself. Other Member States taking part in the same charter flight operation are considered participating Member States.

Scheduled flights are currently the most common means of transportation for Frontex-supported returns. Here are some examples of why Member States' prefer this method for implementing returns:

- there is an extensive list of destinations which can be reached easily on scheduled flights;
- if lack of detention capacity or the limited period of detention puts a time pressure on Member States to implement a return, scheduled flights offer a useful solution which can be arranged in a short time and with flexible conditions (such as cost-free changes in schedule or cancellations);
- the geopolitical situation in certain countries of return may favour the use of scheduled flights, because they draw less public and media attention than charter flights;
- some third countries may not even be reached other than on scheduled flights, as they refuse charter flights for return purposes;
- finally, commercial flights are mostly used for the return of low-risk individuals who often return voluntarily or do not require the assistance of forced-return escorts.

On the other hand, charter flights offer an appropriate solution when there are many returnees to the same destination, and are often used during forced returns of high-risk persons. The routing of a charter flight can be accommodated to the needs of participating Member States and complex routes with stopovers both within and outside of Member States may be planned. Each type of a return by charter flight has its own advantages:

- national return operations (NRO) take advantage of political bilateral agreements between certain Member States and specific countries of return;

- joint return operations (JRO) foster cooperation among Member States at the EU level and are, in principle, more cost-efficient than NRO;
- collecting return operations (CRO) rely on cooperation with European neighbourhood countries and are implemented with the participation of the authorities of the returnees' destination countries.

In the past year, Member States benefitted from the use of mixed returns, on which both voluntary and forced returns are implemented on the same flight. This type of charter flight has now been included in the Agency's portfolio as a regular service.

Member States are well aware of the differences and advantages of the two methods of implementing returns and use them in line with their demands and the assessment of needs done by Frontex. This assessment may lead to a return's approval or rejection, or to a proposal of an alternative technical or operational solution, if available. For instance, Frontex may offer to arrange a return by a scheduled flight instead of a charter flight, provide alternative dates and/or routes for the return, propose to organise a JRO instead of a NRO, etc.

The complementarity of both means of transportation can be also seen in a micro scale. For example, a returnee may be transferred by a scheduled flight to the main charter or, conversely, a returnee may first travel on a charter flight and then reach the country of return with a scheduled flight, if such an arrangement is deemed most efficient. For these returns in particular, a good cooperation between all parties engaged, including the countries of return, is essential.

4. Efficiency

4.1 Scheduled flights

The total costs of tickets issued for returns by scheduled flights organised by Member States are borne exclusively by Frontex. Thanks to the arrangements made by the Agency, Member States do not have to pay for any cancellation fees, no-show fees, or unused and non-refundable tickets. This solution does not only have a **positive economic impact for the Member States, but it also decreases operational burden**, as national officers do

not have to constantly monitor the planned return aiming to cancel tickets in due advance of the missed departure.

Returns by scheduled flights offer to the Member States the required flexibility to adapt to unforeseen situations.

The policy of the Agency is to agree with air carriers on financial solutions to minimise and, in the majority of cases, avoid any cost for cancelled tickets, as well as to allow for the change of dates or passenger details.

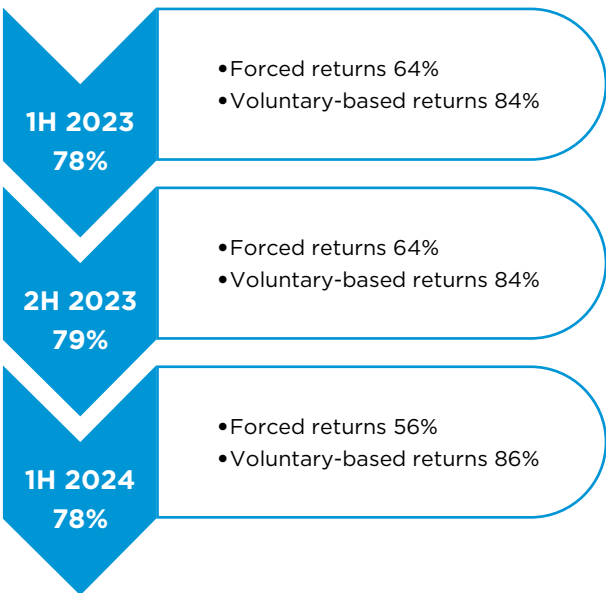
4.1.1 Use of tickets

Overall, 78% of booked scheduled flight tickets were used in the first half of 2024, which is similar to figures from the previous two semesters (78% in the first half of 2023 and 79% in the second half of 2023). The chart below shows the ratio between tickets booked and effectively used for each type of return in the last three semesters.

In principle, fewer tickets are cancelled in voluntary-based returns as compared to forced returns (86% vs. 56%). This is mainly because migrants returning voluntarily are cooperative, low-risk, and fly as regular passengers, which decreases the likelihood for cancellations.

On the other hand, the lower rate of tickets used for forced returns is connected to structural factors increasing the risk of (last minute) cancellations. Non-EU nationals subject to forced return procedures may more often abscond the return or resist the return procedures. They may also appeal against or seek review of their return decisions or lodge last-minute asylum requests. In parallel, there are additional administrative requirements applicable for forced returns, such as the airline authorisation before tickets are issued and final acceptance of the returnee on board of a flight by the captain. In case these are not obtained, the return may need to be cancelled.

On top of this, the slight decrease in percentage of used tickets for forced returns could be also explained by



larger increase in tickets booked compared to tickets used between the two semesters. While the increase of the number of non-EU nationals returned was at 10% when comparing the last two semesters, the number of booked tickets rose by 24%. This quantitative increase in needs might mechanically increase the number of cancellations for forced returns.

4.1.2 Ticket cancellation

The flexibility of the Frontex scheduled flights system is used by Member States to its full extent. Flights are being modified, cancelled, and rebooked for different reasons.

The system is cost-effective, not only because such returns are in principle less expensive than returns by charter flights, but also since most of ticket cancellations

do not bear costs to the Agency due to its agreements with airlines. To illustrate the volume of savings generated because of these arrangements, an analysis was carried out on the ticket cancellation rate. In the first semester of 2024, 5,893 booked tickets were cancelled. The main reasons for ticket cancellation for both forced and voluntary-based returns were the following:

Main cancellation reasons for returns on scheduled flights:

Reasons for cancellation	Forced Returns	Voluntary Returns	Grand Total
Need to change schedule	17.57%	43.86%	29.49%
Returnee absconded	20.93%	15.42%	18.43%
Returnee refused to depart	12.64%	10.07%	11.47%
Flight cancelled	12.64%	9.47%	11.20%
Grand Total	3 221	2 672	5 893

The reasons for cancellation which do not depend on the returnees' behaviour ("need to change schedule" and "flight cancelled"), amounting to 41% of ticket cancellations in total, do not always result in a failure to return of non-EU nationals, who can still travel on

another flight under the coordination and support of Frontex. Nevertheless, tackling more effectively the risks of returnees' absconding and refusal to depart could further improve the effectiveness of returns.

4.2 Charter flights

In the first half of 2024, the number of persons returned on charter flights with the support of the Agency declined by 3% compared to the previous semester.

While the number of flights organised during this period decreased by 7%, **the average number of non-EU**

nationals per flight increased from 39 to 41 returnees per flight. This result highlights Frontex's and Member States' joint efforts to improve the efficiency of charter flight operations.

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

A comparison of JROs and NROs offers valuable insights into the advantages of these distinct types of charter operations. While JROs promote joint EU efforts and foster cooperation between Member States in return, NROs allow specific Member States to return large number of returnees to destinations where JROs may not be accepted by the local authorities. An NRO may also be organised when there is a need to return non-EU nationals to a certain destination and no other Member States expressed interest in joining the operation. **In the first half of 2024, 37 operations were initially offered as JROs, but changed to an NRO due to such lack of interest or feasibility for more Member States to join them. This has contributed to the decrease of share of**

JROs in the total, which went down from 20% to 16% while NROs increased to 60%.

Frontex offers concrete operational solutions to facilitate Member States' participation in JROs: arranging the transfer of non-EU nationals to the main point of departure (either by a connecting charter or any other means), or facilitating arrangements at Member States' airports to organise the boarding of returnees from other Member States. Frontex encourages Member States to participate in the already planned flights instead of organising additional ones on a national level, fostering cooperation on EU level as well as reducing the environmental impact of the flights.

4.2.2 Mixed charter flights

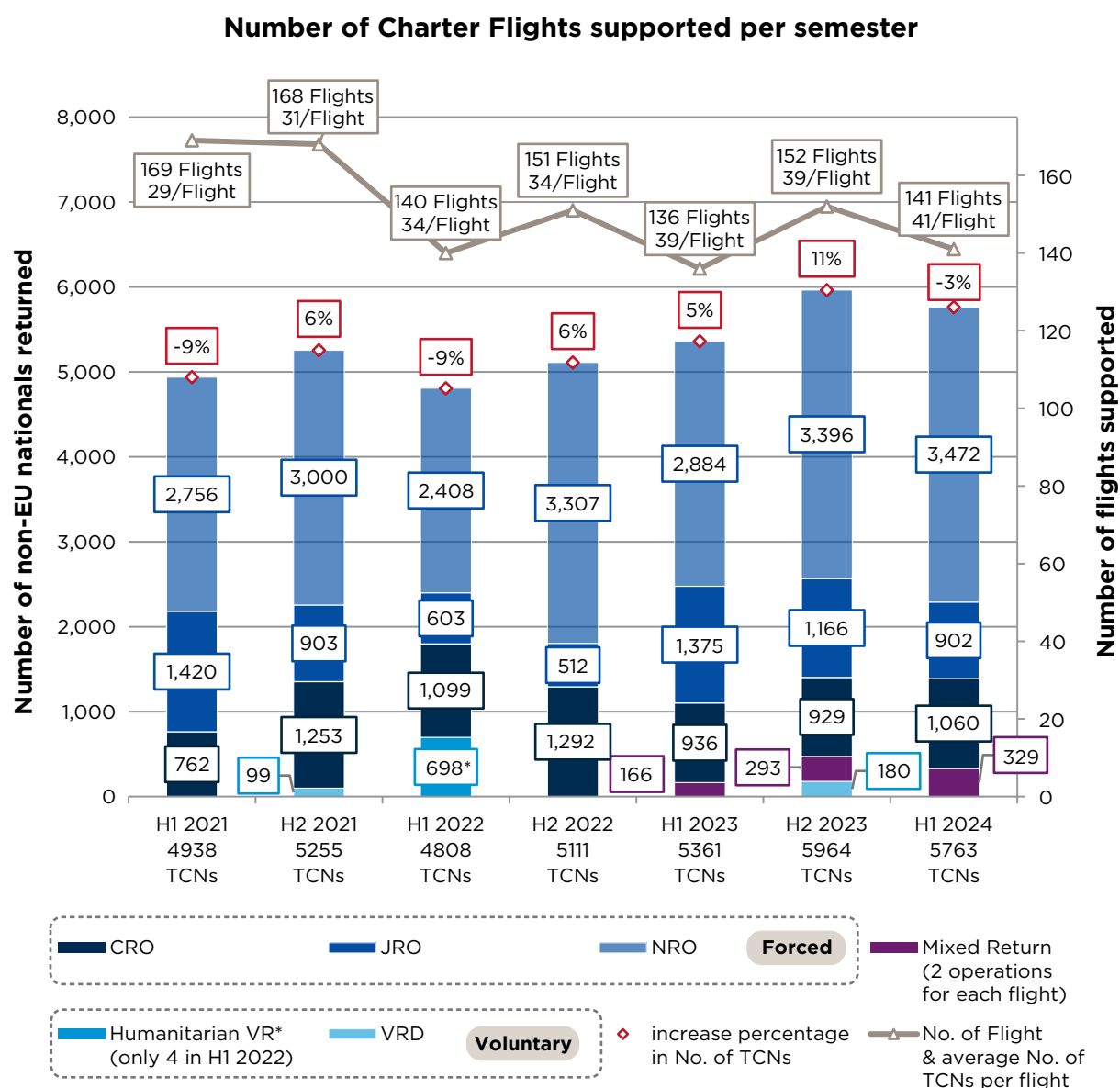
Frontex may support Member States in the implementation of mixed charter flights. This type of flight, implemented for the first time in 2024, following a pilot phase in 2023, combines forced and voluntary returns on the same aircraft. 3 mixed flights were implemented, on board of which 263 non-EU nationals have been returned forcibly and 66 persons returned in a voluntary manner. A number of dedicated requirements related to the respect of fundamental rights and security need to be fulfilled for

such a return to take place. In particular, a thorough risk assessment and operational safeguards are agreed in advance of the flight with the Agency's Fundamental Rights Officer ("FRO"), that also regularly monitors such flights.

This type of return ensures higher occupancy of the aircraft guaranteeing its cost-efficiency and lower environmental footprint. The average number of non-EU nationals returned on these mixed flights was 110.

Should they have a need, Member States are encouraged to propose such flights. Though so far mixed flights have been used to return non-EU nationals to Latin America

and the Western Balkans, other destinations may be considered.



4.2.3 Collecting return operations (CROs)

CROs are a distinct type of charter flights, for which the means of transport and return escorts are provided by a third country of return.¹⁴ Overall, CROs are considered cost-effective, have a low impact on Member States' resources, and increase the responsibility and ownership of non-EU countries in the return process.

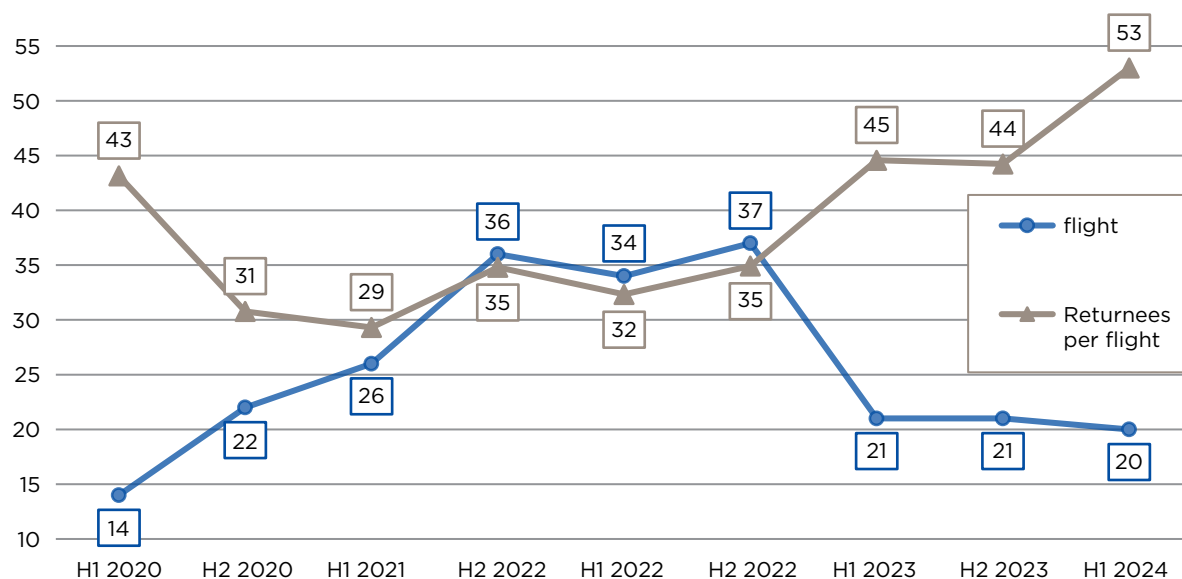
Frontex invests in a closer cooperation with destination countries under the CRO concept to promote EU standards on return flights, enhance the capacities of partner countries, and improve their own return systems through dedicated training.

¹⁴ Article 50(3) of Regulation 2019/1896

The number of CROs has stabilised at 20 flights per semester with the highest average of 53 non-EU nationals on board per flight this semester. Frontex successfully supported for the first time a CRO to Moldova and

involved Armenia in dedicated training sessions, thanks to which a growth in the CRO numbers may be expected in the future.

Collecting return operations supported by Frontex



4.2.4 Occupancy of charter flights

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

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

Considering the above, on an aircraft with 190 seats an average of 50/60 seats could be assigned to returnees, which accounts for around 25-30% of the total.

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

While ensuring full occupancy of an aircraft is not always possible, there are ways to maximise efficiency of the flights. For example, Member States are encouraged to plan an operation well in advance, allowing other Member States to join the flight and add more returnees on board.

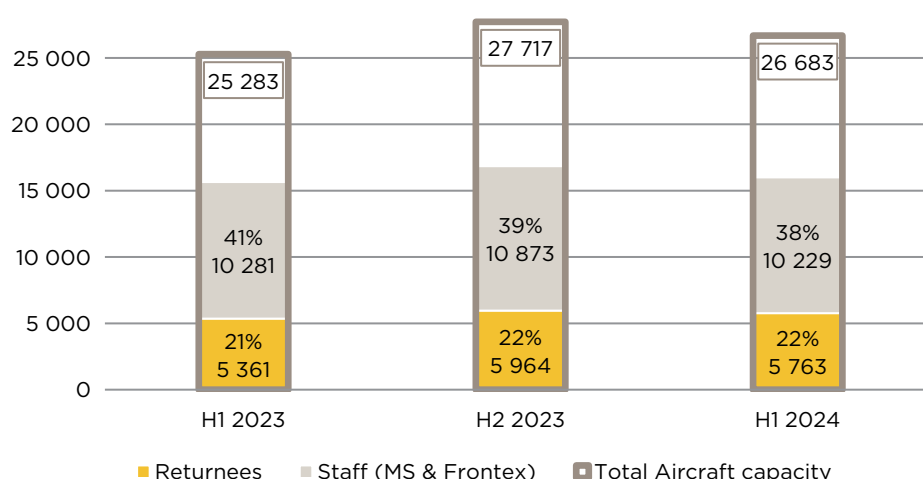
While selecting the right size of an aircraft is key to ensuring the flight's efficiency, there are a number of criteria to consider. The organisers need to take into account distance of the route, possibilities for technical stopovers during the flight, and availability of aircraft (which may be limited during high travel seasons). For any return operation, the Member States need to also decide on the number of forced-return escorts to ensure safety and security on board. This number depends on the risk assessment performed by the Member States as well as the length and complexity of the operation. Moreover, some destination countries impose a cap on the number of returnees allowed per charter flight, which may be significantly lower than the capacity of the aircraft. All these factors influence the aircraft's needed capacity and costs of an operation, while the share of seats by returnees may seem relatively small.

Still, some returns contribute towards achieving objectives despite low usage of the capacity of seats on board.

While some flights may have high political relevance in the context of relations with destination countries, other may provide tangible operational results to Member States which need such type of support. For instance, flights with low number of passengers on board could still prove valuable to foster cooperation with third countries new to the cooperation on returns. In other instances, high-risk individuals (e.g., criminals), whose return on scheduled flights is not possible for safety reasons, could be eventually returned on charter flights.

Taking into consideration all of the above circumstances, Member States should, nevertheless, aim to increase the efficiency of flights. In particular, they should be mindful of the number of returnees when selecting the aircraft, reduce the number of escorts when there is a drop in the number of returnees, and use tools to maximise the occupancy of the available seats, such as by creating “reserve list” of returnees to mitigate the risk of last-minute decrease in the number of passengers.

Charter flight occupancy rate per semester



4.2.5 Cancellations and efficiency challenges

The reasons for cancellations of charter flights are more difficult to collect and assess than for scheduled flights, as charters are more complex to organise and implement. Some cancellations happen due to factors out of Frontex’s or Member States’ control, such as destination country’s refusal to issue a landing permit. In other cases, cancellations may have a positive outcome, when an alternative, more efficient way to implement the return is identified. On the other hand, some charter flights are implemented despite low number of returnees on board due to the flight’s political importance, or due to high costs of cancellations. The Agency carefully considers and assesses each request received from Member States, taking in due account the flights’ efficiency.

In the first half of 2024, 82% of the seats for returnees on charter flights requested by Member States in FAR were effectively used. The reasons for reductions in the number of returnees included absconding, asylum requests, appeals against the return decision, or medical reasons. In such cases, Member States were not always

able to replace returnees timely, especially on flights in which no other Member States participated. Cancellations and difficulties in ensuring full seat occupancy happened more frequently on flights to those non-EU countries with a lower rate of successful identification of their nationals.

39 return needs for charter flights were cancelled. Frontex rejected the request of Member States to organise charter flights in 7 cases (18%), out of which 6 for optimisation purposes and 1 for fundamental rights related reasons. Three operations were cancelled, and their participants were requested to join other flights to the same or nearby destinations. Two operations were cancelled due to low number of returnees in the passengers’ list, and one NRO was cancelled and transformed into a JRO instead.

Member States requested 23 cancellations (59%). Most of these cancellations happened due to administrative or organisational reasons in the Member States or external circumstances which prevented national authorities from implementing the return operation.

Finally, 9 return operations were cancelled due to a lack of landing permit (23%), which well reflects the difficulty to organise charter flights to some destination countries.

Additional diplomatic efforts and cooperation with these countries would be necessary to decrease the number of such cancellations.

Cancellation reason in 1 st half of 2024	JRO	NRO	VRD	Grand Total
Frontex cancellations	5	2		7 (18%)
Optimisation reasons	5	1		6
Fundamental rights reasons		1		1
Member States cancellations	2	21		23 (59%)
Administrative reasons		16		16
As per organising Member State request	1	5		6
Organisational reasons	1			1
Non-EU country related cancellations	4	3	2	9 (23%)
No landing permit issued	3	3	2	8
Disagreement on the date	1			1
Grand Total	11	26	2	39

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

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

4.2.6 Chartering of aircraft

Chartering of aircraft is a form of technical support provided by the Agency to Member States on the basis of a framework contract. In principle, an aircraft is chartered only when an adequate number of non-EU nationals on board is confirmed by the Member States. Once the procurement procedure is initiated, Member States should immediately communicate any possible reduction in the

number of returnees, allowing the Agency to reassess the cost-efficiency of the operation.

In the reporting period, the Agency chartered 11 aircraft for return operations (both JRO and NRO) based on Member States' requests. The Frontex framework contract for chartering aircraft was prioritised for use by Member States without a national contractual capacity or with limitations in procurement.

5. Green Deal

While returns by air is in general a field which carries a heavy impact on the environment, **the Agency is looking for ways to reduce such impact as much as possible, in line with the core principles of the European Green Deal.** Several measures were already implemented to reduce the amount of CO² emitted by returns. Frontex coordinates returns so that, whenever possible, they are carried out by means of scheduled flights, with preference for direct connections, shorter routes, and air carriers actively implementing a green approach through the use of modern aircraft, sustainable aviation fuel (SAF), or initiatives aimed at reducing and/or offsetting CO² emissions.

In 2024, in an agreement with Frontex, a group of airlines committed to spend 1% of the revenue received from Frontex for the purpose of return. As a result, Frontex purchased 19,826 kg of SAF, reducing the emission by 59,264 kg of CO². That is the equivalent of driving 243,930 kilometres in an average petrol passenger car.

Frontex also received a CO² emission mitigation certificate, which is issued by an independent auditor. The Return Division is furthermore actively working on new solutions to further reduce the carbon footprint associated with return activities.

6. Safeguards

6.1 Monitoring of returns and related developments

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

At least one forced-return monitor was present on board of 73% of all Frontex coordinated return operations by charter flights in the first half of 2024 (including mixed charter flights of forced and voluntary-based returns). 62% of the monitors were provided from the Frontex pool.

FRO also provides fundamental rights monitors in some return operations. Similar to the monitors from national institutions, fundamental rights monitors can also be nominated to the Frontex pool of forced-return monitors. In this case they receive the dedicated training for forced-return monitoring, and, upon a Member State's request, can be called to monitor a return operation.¹⁵ Additionally,

fundamental rights monitors can be deployed to any operational activity of the Agency, including Frontex-supported return operations, to monitor compliance with fundamental rights.¹⁶

In the reporting period, 31 fundamental rights monitors were present on 27 flights, including joint, collecting, and national return operations as well as on three mixed forced and voluntary-based flights. The participation of monitors from FRO was partially provided in return operations when no national monitor was present on board, and no request for monitors from the pool was received from the participating Member States.

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

Moreover, in line with the requirements set in the Fundamental Rights Action Plan, the Agency requested

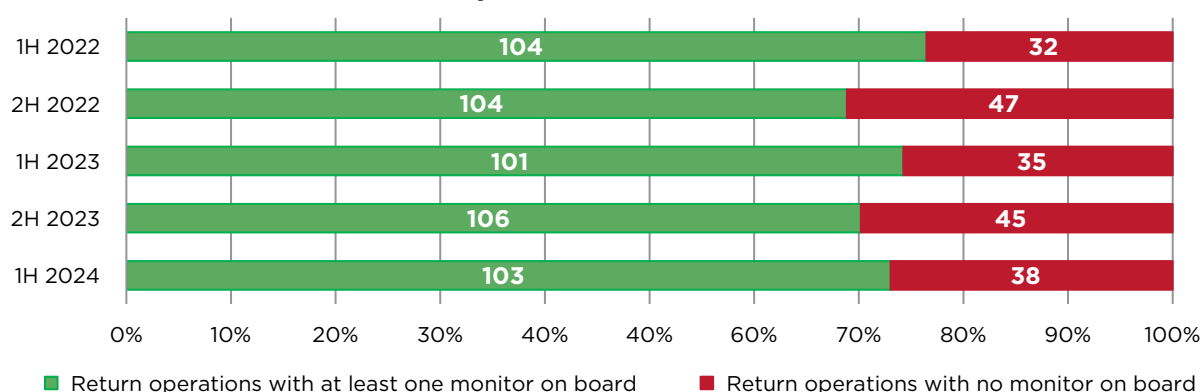
¹⁵ As set out in Article 51 of the Regulation (EU) 2019/1896.

¹⁶ As set out in Article 110 of the Regulation (EU) 2019/1896.

Member States to collect in advance the written consent of staff who participate in return operations supported by Frontex, stating they have read and acknowledged

the Frontex Code of Conduct for Return Operations and Return Interventions.¹⁷

Return operations with at least one monitor on board vs with no monitors on board Comparison between semesters



6.2 Fundamental Rights Officer's recommendations from the second half of 2023

Each Frontex Evaluation Report on Returns includes Observations by the FRO, which are compiled based on the reports of monitors who have participated in return activities. Member States and the Agency is called to implement recommendations from the FRO observations. Here is an update on the progress made in connection to the last FRO recommendations:

Recommendations:

1. Consideration to be given to the participation of a child psychologist/social worker in the pre-departure phase whenever it is recognised that many children will participate in an operation.

State of play:

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

practitioners in different stages of the return process where families with children are involved.

Frontex launched a dedicated project called "Toolbox for Children in Return" to support Member States' staff involved where children are present. The aim is to inform and prepare children about the different procedures in return, to lower the possible stress caused by return. Books for children in different age groups, for parents and guardians, and for migration officers have been developed in close collaboration with experts in child psychology and children's rights, as well as the FRO. The manuals and guidebooks, available in multiple languages, were distributed to the Member States, while electronic version will be made available as well. The Toolbox ensures that the adequate preparation of children for return starts already in the pre-return phase, well in advance before the flight.

2. The Fundamental Rights Office, together with Member States monitoring institutions and pool monitors, should aim to increase the number of monitored Frontex supported national return operations.

¹⁷ Code of Conduct for Return Operations and Return Interventions coordinated or organised by Frontex.

State of play:

The Agency uses all available channels to invite Member States to designate monitors and by this to increase their presence in operations, including NROs. While some Member States ensure the presence of a monitor on every NRO, other Member States do not provide a national monitor, and do not request monitors from the pool either. In such circumstances, occasionally FRO appoints fundamental rights monitors to NROs based on Art. 110 of the Regulation to ensure consistent monitoring.

The participation of fundamental rights monitors significantly increased, from 3 national return operations covered in the second half of 2023 to 11 in the first half of 2024.

3. Member States to always ensure adequate seating and full coordination between national bodies regarding individual circumstances of persons subjected to return procedures (i.e., concerning their family status, travel documentation, health condition, etc.).

State of play:

Provisions on taking into account individual conditions of returnees and paying specific attention to the treatment of vulnerable persons are included in the Frontex operational plan for returns and the Code of Conduct¹⁸ which are binding for all the participants – Frontex as well as Member States' staff.

4. The Fundamental Rights Office, in cooperation with the Frontex Training Unit and Member States, to coordinate trainings for pool monitors and specific trainings for escorts relating to returnees with violent behaviour.

State of play:

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

Frontex invites specialised trainers as well as monitors to participate in return-related trainings. The Agency will continue its close cooperation with FRO to do its part in safeguarding the rights of the returnees.

5. Member States to provide returnees with relevant information, counselling and medical assistance well in advance to ensure a safe and dignified return. This allows for sufficient and proper preparation of returnees in view of their return.

State of play:

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

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

6. Member States to provide clear information and instructions about EU Reintegration Programme or any other type of reintegration packages given to returnees before their departure to avoid any misunderstandings. If cash allowance is to be given to the returnees and a signature is required, it should be clearly communicated to them during the pre-return phase.

State of play:

The EURP is a key deliverable of the EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration. It is active in 35 non-EU countries and currently being used by 34 authorities in 29 Member States. Since its inception there is a constant increase of caseload due to continued efforts by Frontex to help Member States' onboarding to the EURP. Simultaneously, the EURP further expanded its communication materials to reach irregular migrants. One of the examples is the brochure on reintegration assistance for returnees that is available for Member States in 16 different languages. In addition, the Agency has implemented 6 training iterations for return and reintegration counselling for both standing corps (1) and

¹⁸ Code of Conduct for Return Operations and Return Interventions coordinated or organised by Frontex.

Member States' staff (5). This curriculum aims to enhance knowledge and skills in counselling activities and is part of the larger objective to increase the awareness of irregular migrants on reintegration possibilities, as well as to increase the number of voluntary returns.

7. Member States to always ensure sufficient female escorts, and preferably a female doctor or nurse for return operations involving female returnees.

State of play:

The Agency advises Member States to consider the individual circumstances of returnees when assigning escort officers to return operations, including the gender of the returnees. It is therefore recommended to assign female escort officers when women are returned. Furthermore, additional recommendations are also described in the 'Guide for JROs by air coordinated by Frontex', which is currently being reviewed by the Agency.

7. Conclusions and outlook

Different types of returns and high-quality services were delivered in the semester to meet Member States' growing needs. Successful returns increased by 25% in comparison to the previous semester, and by the end of the year a total of around 50 thousand non-EU nationals may be returned with the support of the Agency.

The cooperation established with a growing number of Member States' institutions is based on a principle of shared responsibility in organising and implementing returns, which has strengthened the Agency's coordinating role, in line with the EU policy. Frontex aims at further reinforcing its role of key partner in the common efforts to increase the overall effectiveness and efficiency of returns from the EU.

While the Agency has proved to be ready and capable to provide continuous operational support to Member States, questions have recently arisen on its structural capacity to get available and regularly adjust its budget to the continuously growing Member States' needs. Returns cannot be easily planned as they depend on many variables, such as the finalisation of asylum procedures, the successful rate of identification of returnees, absconding, secondary movements, etc. Also, some decisions of the Member States to expand the use of the Agency's services are often meant to address shortcomings or sudden increased needs, thus are generally not communicated to the Agency years or months in advance. As already highlighted in the previous report, without a stable growth of financial resources made available to the Agency, it is difficult to predict if in the future the Agency will still be able to fully support all the needs of the Member States in the field of return, and whether the systematic increase of Frontex returns will continue.

When looking closer at the results achieved in the semester, it is visible that the extensive use of scheduled flights for voluntary-based returns was the driving force behind the high number of returns. While respecting fundamental rights and well-being of the returnees to the highest extent, this type of return also ensures a fast and more efficient return process, making returns more sustainable as a whole. If the rising trend continues, in 2025 the Agency may support up to 75% of voluntary-based returns on the total of Frontex assisted returns.

Both charter and scheduled flights continued to be used to implement forced returns of a wide range of returnees' profiles, from the ones more cooperative who left unescorted, to the highest risk cases who could not travel with other passengers on regular flights. At the same time, charter flights remained a viable solution to return larger groups of non-EU nationals to certain destinations and contributed to the achievement of EU migration policy objectives through the cooperation with relevant third countries. Further growth for forced returns by scheduled flights is expected, while charters will remain stable, with the Agency's constant focus on increasing their effectiveness.

Frontex will continue to deploy standing corps with the profiles of RS and FRESO in Member States, where needed, since the deployment of return teams proved to have positive effects on the effectiveness of the return systems of the host Member States.

Last but not least, safeguarding fundamental rights of each individual returned is a top priority for the Agency. Frontex will continue to work with Member States and the FRO to make sure that the well-designed processes safeguarding fundamental rights are applied

Conclusions and outlook

in every return, also by constantly providing monitors from the pool, upon Member States' request, and by cooperating with the Member States and FRO to ensure the participation of monitors in a higher number of

NROs. This will complement the promotion of voluntary returns and information sharing on reintegration support to make EU returns more and more effective, humane, and sustainable.

FRONT**X**



**EUROPEAN BORDER AND
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