

Frontex's role in deportations

Abolish Frontex Research Group – June 2026

While EU border guard agency Frontex was primarily established to control the EU's securitised borders, it has also played an increasing role in deportations of people on the move. Starting with coordinating flights to jointly remove people from several EU member states to their countries of origin, its role has expanded to include involvement in pre-departure assistance and initiating deportations itself. With the reform of the Common European Asylum System and the upcoming review of the Frontex mandate, a severe turning point will take place. Frontex is consolidating its position as a central actor in deportation governance, transforming deportations into a routine, bureaucratically sanitized mechanism of the EU border regime that systematically violates peoples' fundamental rights and dignity.

General overview

Frontex initial regulation already included assisting member states with returns, through facilitating 'joint return operations' (JROs), coordinated flights in which people on the move from multiple member states are deported. In June 2006 the agency organised its first JRO, deporting people on the move to Armenia and Georgia. In the following years the number of Frontex assisted deportation flights increased, mostly to a set of countries Frontex has cooperation agreements with, such as Nigeria, Cameroon and Pakistan.

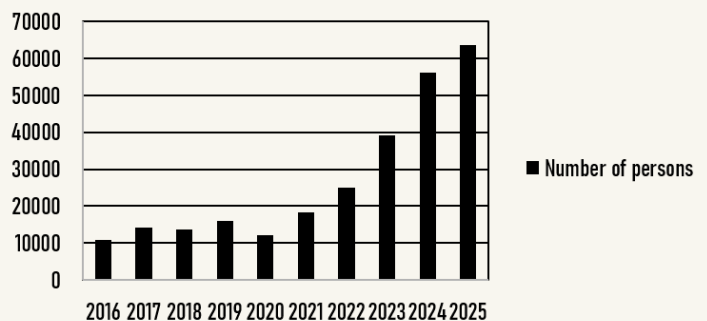
Types of Frontex assisted deportations

Air	Joint return operations	People from several member states removed in one flight	Either by chartered flight or by scheduled (commercial) flights
	National return operations	People from one member state removed in one flight	
	Collecting return operations	People picked up from the departure airport by the authorities of their country of destination	
Land, sea	Frontex may organise deportations by other means of transport		

Since 2014 Frontex has also been organising 'collecting return operations', where the aeroplane, escorts and medical staff at the flight are from the country of destination. The agency provides training for such escorts, including 'coercive measures and restraint'. In general, Frontex plays an important role in contacts with non-EU-countries, for readmission and other reasons. This has led to many deportations to conflict regions and human rights-violating regimes, where people have been arrested, detained, tortured and murdered upon return. Next to this, there have been numerous reports of violence and rights violations in the detention and deportation process, including during deportation flights.

Meanwhile, the agency also increasingly involved itself in the pre-departure phase, assisting member states with tasks as the 'collection of information necessary for issuing return decisions' and identifying of individuals subject to a removal order. Since the so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015 Frontex has seen an extensive expansion of its mandate, including calls for it to play a central role as the EU's 'deportation hub'. The agency can now for example initiate and organise joint return operations by itself. The annual number of persons it has helped deport has grown to over 60,000 in 2025; this includes so-called 'voluntary returns'.

Frontex assisted returns



Contracts

Every few years Frontex concludes large framework contracts with providers of chartered or scheduled deportation flights, currently:

- 1) Chartered flights - Air Partner (Germany), AS Aircontact (Norway) and Chapman Freeborn Airmarketing (Germany) – maximum value €46.2 million each
- 2) Scheduled flights - eTravel (Poland) – maximum value €200 million

Growing responsibility

With the year 2026, Frontex's already strong role in coordinating and organising deportations is set to be further strengthened and expanded. More precisely, discussions are underway to radically expand the agency's mandate. As more effective deportations are desired by EU member states, the upcoming changes are seen as an opportunity to put these aims into action. Therefore, Frontex is expected to hold a key role in the EU's future deportation system which includes its expansion of powers towards a more independent operational role in deportations, including operations beyond EU territory. In this regard, Frontex is expected to move well beyond its primarily coordinating and administrative tasks and become much more operationally involved in deportations. Existing proposals and discussions among policymakers suggest that Frontex may play a stronger role in implementing deportation decisions across the European Union. These proposals point to a broader EU deportation system in which Frontex is embedded through technical, logistical, and organisational support. Accordingly, Frontex is likely to become much more involved in cross-border deportation cooperation between Member States.

To support this expansion, policymakers responsible for deportation are expected to be more involved in Frontex's strategic decision-making, alongside an increase in deportation experts within the Standing Corps. Better strategic oversight and management of deportations by the Frontex management board is envisaged, as well as improved coordination and communication on deportations between the agency, the European Commission and the new EU Return Coordinator, as well as between the agency and member states.

Overall, the agency's role is not projected to be completely overhauled but made more efficient to make deportations faster and easier. This leads to the institutionalisation and normalisation of the undignified procedure of deportations at EU level.

Border externalisation through third country operations and return hubs

Moreover, the foreseen expansion of the agency's role further strengthens the EU's externalisation of borders. Member states support Frontex's involvement in third-country operations to facilitate deportations. In this regard, a major likely change is the creation of a new legal basis for Frontex to support deportations from non-EU countries to other non-EU countries.

In more detail, Frontex is supposed to facilitate operations in non-EU countries with more flexible and informal arrangements. Assistance of the agency could range from providing training to concrete deportation operations. Accordingly, existing rules may be loosened to allow deployment of Frontex deportation teams in non-EU countries. Essentially important, as considered by Member States, is Frontex's assistance in Return Hub activities, including the transfer of people on the move. Further future activities may also include pre-departure checks at third-country airports or crossing points.

All this is supported by the foreseen increase of independence of the agency, which will automatically affect Frontex deportation operations outside EU territory and will likely increase and make Frontex operations outside the EU easier. Consequently, Frontex's future role shall expand well beyond classic assisted deportation involvement in flights toward a key role in an externalised deportation architecture.

Sources:

<https://prd.frontex.europa.eu/document/return-operations-undertaken-by-european-border-and-coast-guard-agency-from-2006-to-2012>; <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/return-and-reintegration/return-operations/returns/>; https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3629129; <https://www.returnmigration.eu/gapsblog/the-european-border-and-coast-guard-agency-a-main-actor-of-the-return-policy>; Numbers taken from Frontex annual reports; <https://ted.europa.eu/en/notice/-/detail/739830-2023>; <https://ted.europa.eu/en/notice/-/detail/612917-2025>; <https://www.statewatch.org/analyses/2026/frontex-mandate-review-2026-violent-border-practices-to-be-expanded-further/>; https://www.statewatch.org/media/5345/6316_26-the-future-of-frontex-comprehensive-strategy.pdf; [https://www.europar.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2026/785662/EPRS_BRI\(2026\)785662_EN.pdf](https://www.europar.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2026/785662/EPRS_BRI(2026)785662_EN.pdf); https://www.europar.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI%202026%29785662; [https://www.europar.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2026/785662/EPRS_BRI\(2026\)785662_EN.pdf](https://www.europar.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2026/785662/EPRS_BRI(2026)785662_EN.pdf); <https://www.statewatch.org/media/5379/jwk-6546-2026-returns-compromise-08-may-2026.pdf>