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NOTE

From: General Secretariat of the Council
To: Delegations
Subject: FRONTEX's Reports on Return operations - 1st half 2021

Delegations will find attached reports on Return operations issued by FRONTEX¹.

¹ Reports have been distributed with the consent of FRONTEX.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	2
1. Operational activities in the field of return	3
1.1. Returns under COVID-19 restrictions	3
1.2. Returns by charter flights	4
1.3. Returns by scheduled flights	6
1.4. Returns by sea and land	8
1.5. Monitoring of returns	8
1.6. Deployment of Forced Return Escort and Support Officers from the Standing Corps	8
1.7. Other return-related activities	9
2. Evaluation of return-related activities	10
2.1. Main challenges	10
2.1.1. Challenges related to COVID-19 restrictions	10
2.1.2. Ensuring the cost-effectiveness of returns by charter flights	10
2.1.3. High share of national return operations vs. joint operations	10
2.1.4. Information exchange with Member States	11
2.1.5. Participation of forced return monitors in return operations	11
2.1.6. Suspension of readmission operations from Greece to Turkey	11
2.2. Main achievements	12
2.2.1. Voluntary returns and voluntary departures	12
2.2.2. Deployment of Standing Corps – FRESO profile	12
2.2.3. Other achievements	12
3. Conclusions and outlook	13

INTRODUCTION

In accordance with Article 50(7) of the new European Border and Coast Guard Regulation¹, the purpose of this document is to provide a comprehensive, comparative analysis of the results of returns organised or coordinated by Frontex between 1 January and 30 June 2021 (hereinafter: the 1st half of 2021), with a view to enhancing the quality, coherence, and effectiveness of future return activities.

The report does not present a general overview of all returns in the EU, as it does not cover returns carried out by Member States at the national level without the support of the Agency.

Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, organises and coordinates Member States' returns by air and by land. Returns by air are carried out by charter and scheduled flights. Returns by charter flights are carried out by airplanes chartered by either Member States or Frontex, while returns by scheduled flights are carried out on regular, commercial flights. Additionally, Frontex supports Greece in the implementation of readmission operations within the EU-Turkey Statement. Readmission operations take place only from the Greek hotspots to Turkey, either by sea or by air.

In accordance with the new mandate of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency in the field of return, as of 2020 the Agency has been providing technical support to the Member States also in the implementation of voluntary returns.

The Agency does not enter the merits of return decisions issued by the Member States. The national competent authorities are also solely responsible for decisions on voluntary returns and voluntary departures at national level.

The Agency's role is to provide technical assistance and/or operational coordination, which may consist of the following:

- Providing assistance at pre-return stage to remove obstacles related to the implementation of returns;
- Providing logistical support by ticketing/chartering aircraft and deploying Return Teams of the European Border and Coast Guard Standing Corps;
- Optimising resources at the European level, by matching needs and requests of different Member States with the aim of organising joint return operations with the participation of two or more Member States; this solution provides an alternative

to national initiatives and fosters cooperation;

- Providing an Operational Plan that sets the rules and details regulating the operation in line with: Frontex Regulation, EU standards defined by the Guide for Joint Operations by Air, the Code of Conduct for return operations and return interventions coordinated or organised by Frontex and other relevant provisions at the EU level, safeguarding among others the fundamental rights of persons returned, the principle of non-refoulement, the proportionate use of means of constraints during the entire return operation;
- Supporting the monitoring of fundamental rights with the pool of forced-return monitors²;
- Organising, promoting and coordinating activities encouraging and enabling the exchange of information and the identification and pooling of best practices in return matters between Member States;
- Fostering communication and a joint approach on return across the EU;
- Financing or co-financing all types of returns.



¹ 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.

² In November 2020 Frontex adopted the Management Board Decision no. 40/2020 of 26 November 2020 on the revised profile and determining the number of forced-return monitors to be made available to the pool of forced-return monitors.

1. OPERATIONAL ACTIVITIES IN THE FIELD OF RETURN

Between January and June 2021, 8239 non-EU nationals were returned with the support of Frontex. 60% were returned by charter flights and 40% by

scheduled flights. 5 non-EU nationals were returned by land (bus). No readmission operations from Greece to Turkey were carried out.

No Serious Incident Reports as well as complaints were submitted during the reporting period.

1.1. RETURNS UNDER COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS

The chart to the right shows the number of non-EU nationals returned with Frontex support during the last 5 half-years.

The total number of non-EU nationals returned with the support of the Agency was higher than in the 2nd half of 2020 (+6%) and almost doubled in comparison with the 1st half of 2020 (+98%).

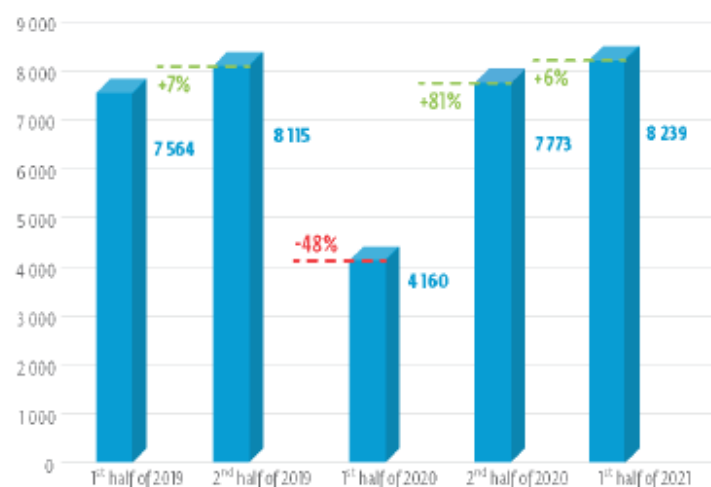
In comparison to the pre-pandemic situation, current numbers of returned non-EU nationals are also higher than the ones from the 1st half of 2019 (+9%).

The chart below shows the number of non-EU nationals returned between January 2020 and June 2021 per month, by both charter and scheduled flights (different background colours indicate the 3 different half-years).

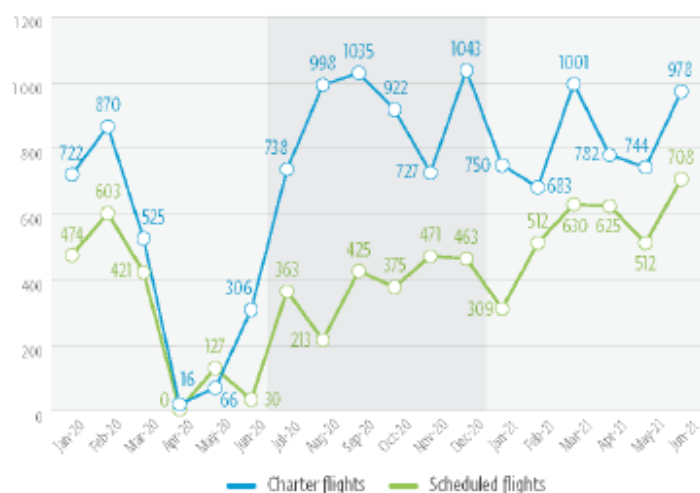
While in April and May of 2020, due to the COVID-19 outbreak, all return-related activities were drastically reduced to almost none, since July a gradual recovery has been observed. The situation appears stable, and in June 2021 the highest ever number of Frontex supported returns was registered. The monthly average number of non-EU nationals returned with Frontex support is currently 1373.

As indicated in previous reports, Frontex has continued to ensure flexibility when confronted with the health and safety restrictions imposed by Member States, non-EU countries and airlines, by providing the Member States with tailored support.

Non-EU nationals returned with Frontex support



Number of non-EU nationals returned per month since January 2020

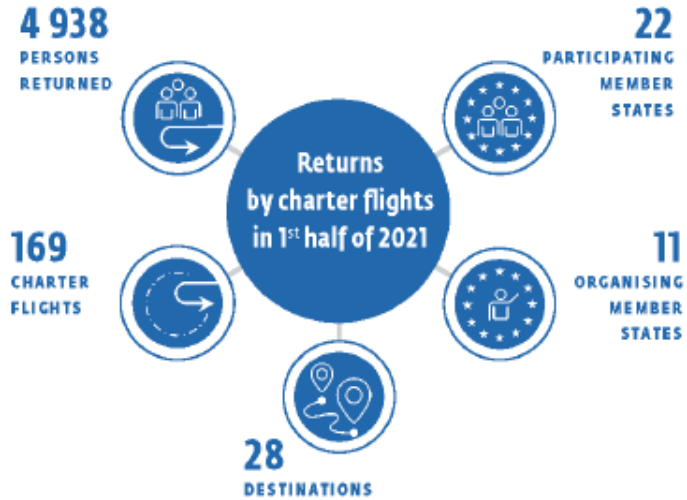




1.2. RETURNS BY CHARTER FLIGHTS

Frontex supports the following types of charter flight for returns:

- Joint return operations (JRO) where non-EU nationals from two or more Member States are returned on the same aircraft;
- National return operations (NRO) where non-EU nationals from a single Member State are returned; also possible when technical support is provided by other Member States' resources (e.g. monitors, forced-return escorts or aircraft provided by another Member State);
- Collecting return operations (CRO) where aircraft and escorts are provided by the countries of return;
- Voluntary returns and voluntary departures (VR and VD) where non-EU nationals depart or return on a voluntary basis.



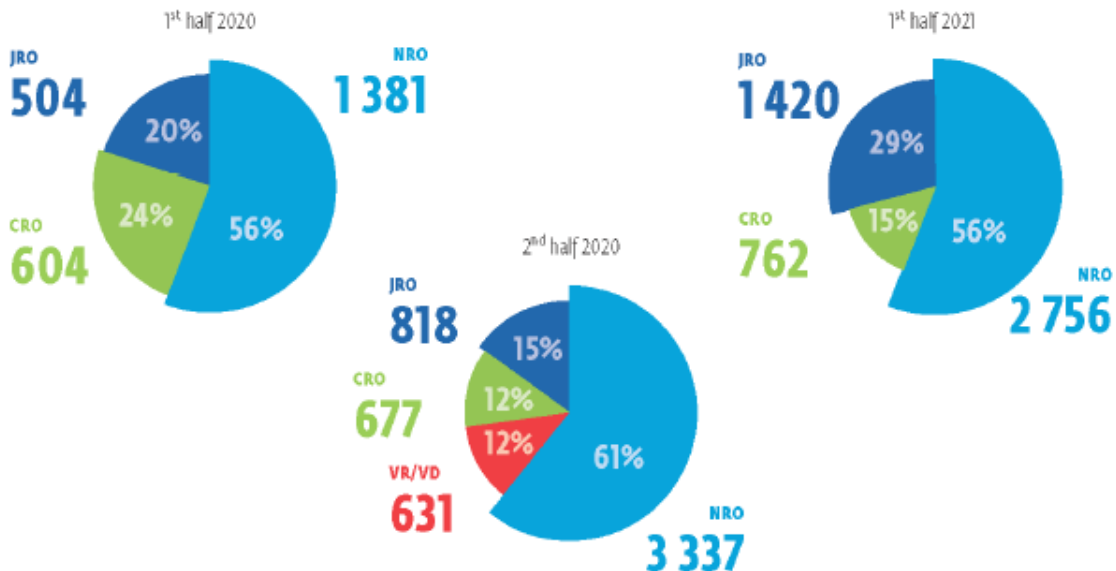
Frontex also provides technical and logistical support to Member States. In the reporting period Frontex chartered aircraft to implement 10 return operations: 6 of them were joint and 4 were national return operations. Additionally, 2 more aircrafts were chartered for connecting flights.

The charts below present an overview of persons returned by charter flights in the last three half-years.

- In the 1st half of 2021 no voluntary returns were carried out by charter flights (due to no requests received from Member States) despite such flights taking place successfully in 2020.
- Collecting return operations were facing COVID-19 restrictions and a slow-down since the first half of 2020. However, the numbers of collecting return operations steadily grow each half-year, which signals

the existing good co-operation with the relevant non-EU countries.

- The number of non-EU nationals jointly returned by Member States (JRO) increased by almost 75% in comparison to the previous half year.



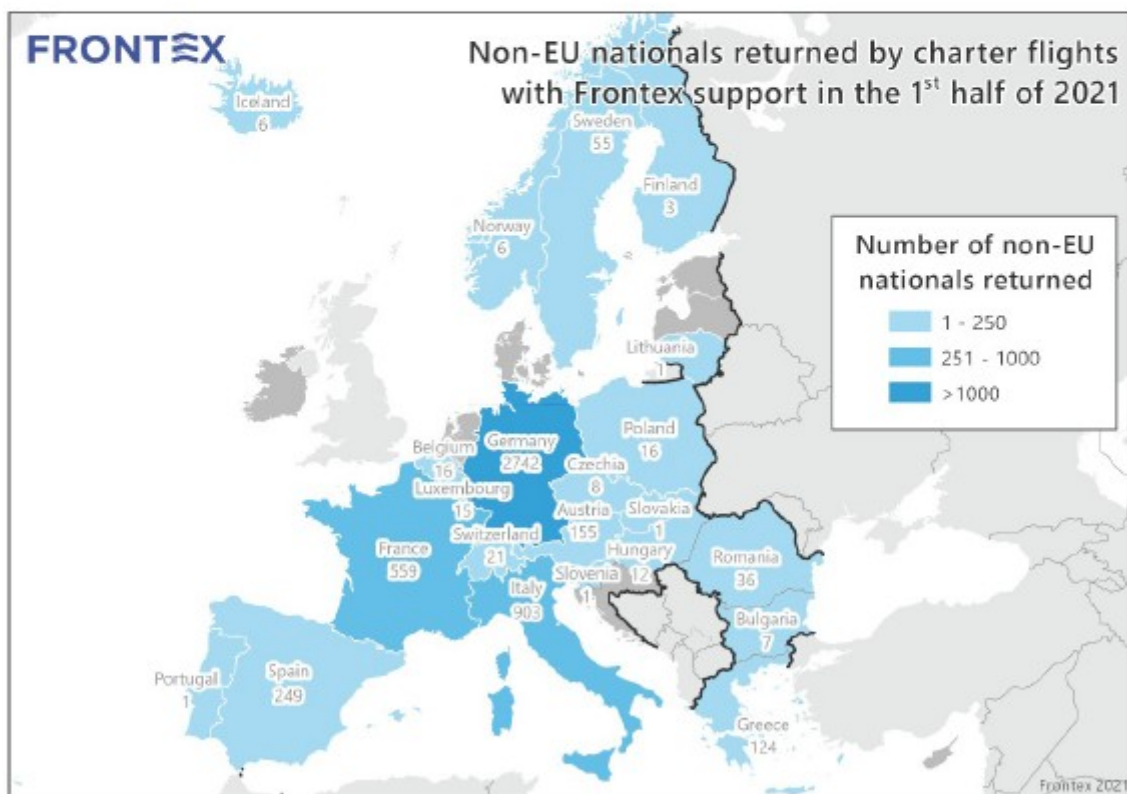
Organising and participating Member States

The map below shows the number of persons returned by charter flights by Member State. 4553 non-EU nationals were returned by organising Member States, while Member States participating in joint return operations returned 385 non-EU nationals on 49 flights.

Most returnees were from Germany (almost 56%), Italy (18%) and France (11%). These three Member States returned over 85% of all non-EU nationals by charters in the last half-year.

Austria, Germany and Greece were the most active participating Member States in joint operations.

In total, 11 Member States organised returns by charter flights, same as in the 2nd half of 2020. The number of participating Member States increased from 18 to 22. This trend is of particular value in the times of pandemic, when acting jointly can increase effectiveness of common efforts to return non-EU nationals to certain destinations.





1.3. RETURNS BY SCHEDULED FLIGHTS

Frontex supports the following types of returns by scheduled flights:

- Return operations of escorted returnees (DEPA) - forced-returns;
- Return operations of unescorted returnees (DEPU) – forced-returns of low risk profiles;
- Voluntary departures (VD) – non-EU nationals with an obligation to leave within the time-limit fixed for that purpose in the return decision, as described in Art. 7 of the Return Directive;
- Voluntary returns (VR) – non-EU nationals who do not have the right to stay, legal residence, international protection or temporary international protection in the territory of Member State, and who return on a voluntary basis to their country of origin³.

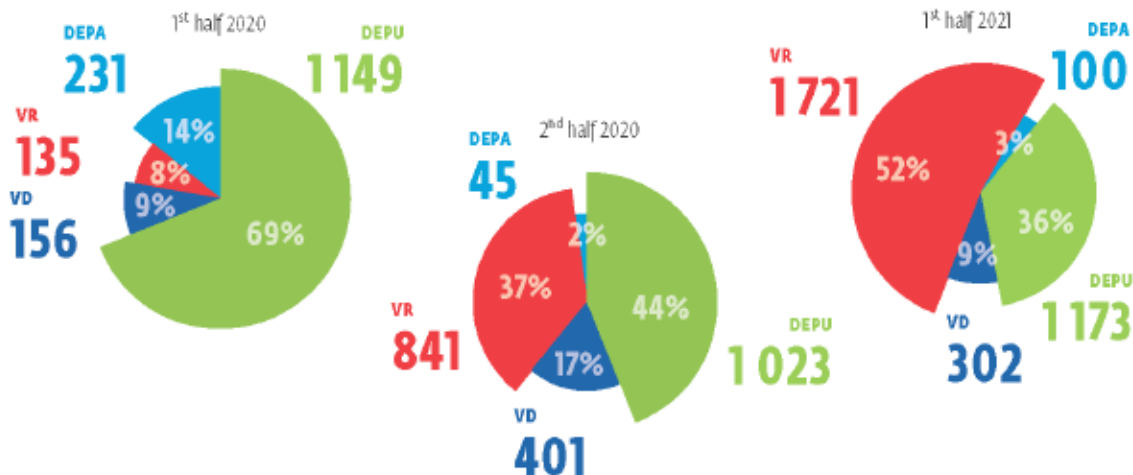
The charts below present an overview of persons returned by scheduled flights in the last three half-years.

- In comparison to the previous half-year:
- Returns by scheduled flights experienced an unprecedented growth. The number of non-EU nationals returned increased to 3296 from 2310 in the previous half-year (+43%).
 - This increase was mostly due to the rise of voluntary departures and voluntary returns which constituted 61% of the total number of non-EU nationals returned by scheduled flights.



- Austria, Croatia and Italy started using voluntary returns and departures with the assistance of the Agency on a regular basis, in addition to the group of 15 Member States which already do so.
- The general decrease in the number of forced returns was largely linked to COVID-19 situation: some embassies did not issue travel documents and some third countries of return imposed mandatory COVID-19 test-

ing before departure which was often refused by the returnees, and which interrupted the return process. As a result, forced returns decreased from 46% of the total in 2nd half of 2020 to 39% of the total in the 1st half of 2021. Only towards the end of the semester, also thanks to the reopening of transit hubs and increased availability of flight routes, the number of escorted returnees (DEPA) increased slightly.



³ Frontex does not provide assistance for voluntary returns of non-EU nationals enjoying the right to stay, legal residence and/or international protection or temporary protection in the territory of Member States.

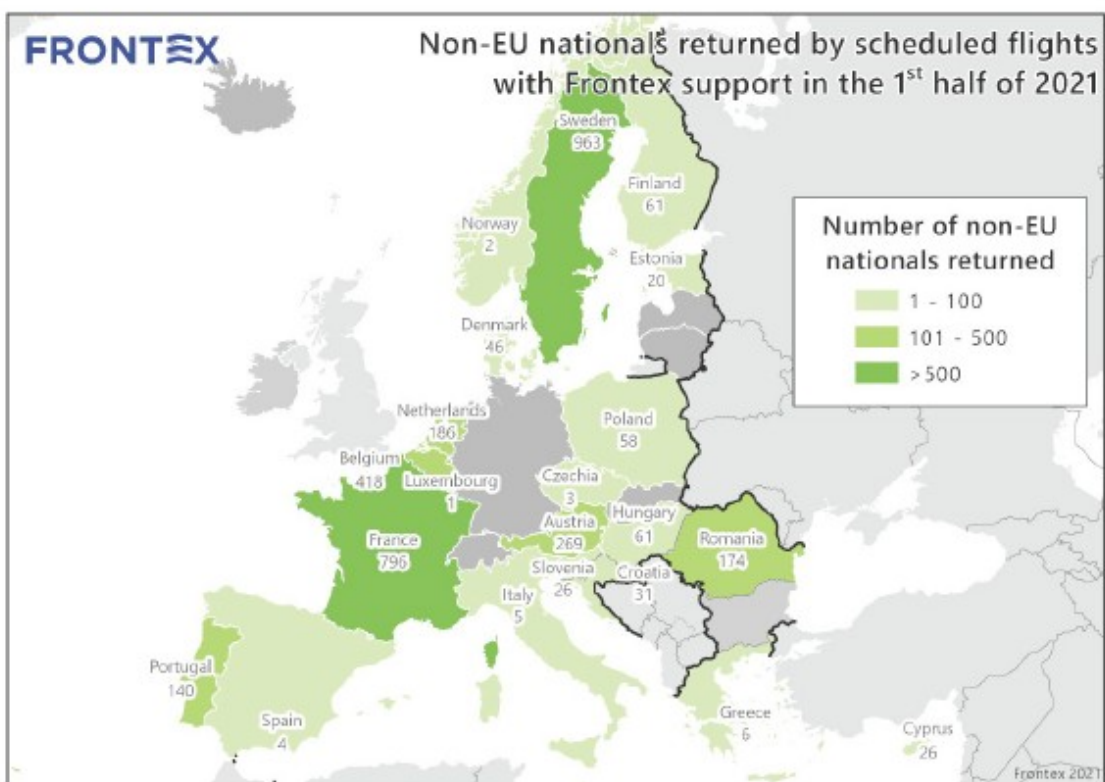
Organising Member States

The map below shows the number of non-EU nationals returned by scheduled flights by 21 Member States. Five Member States (Sweden, France, Belgium, Austria and the Netherlands) returned almost 80% of all non-EU nationals returned by scheduled flights.

Due to the new cooperation established by Frontex with the national institutions, such as the Bundesagentur für Betriebs- und Unterstützungsleistungen (BBU), the Office Français de l'immigration et de l'intégration (OFII) and the Swedish Migration Agency (SMA), the number of voluntary departures and voluntary returns from Austria, France and Sweden have significantly

increased in comparison with the previous half-year.

The figures on voluntary cases are expected to continue to grow in the future, based on the need for assistance expressed by the Member States and the increasing number of national authorities cooperating with Frontex.





1.4. RETURNS BY SEA AND LAND

The Turkish authorities suspended the readmissions from Greece to Turkey within the EU-Turkey Statement⁴ in March 2020, thus no operations by sea took place in the reporting period.

The Agency successfully supported a return operation by land from Austria with 5 non-EU nationals. The Agency assumed the operational coordination of the activities while Austria chartered the bus. 1 national monitor from Austria was on board of the bus.

The Agency is actively exploring possibilities to more systematically support Member States also in return operations by land and sea, expanding the support beyond readmissions from Greece to Turkey.

1.5. MONITORING OF RETURNS

According to Article 8(6) of Directive 2008/115/EC: 'Member States shall provide for an effective forced-return monitoring system'. Frontex remains ready to support Member States by deploying forced-return monitors as members of the pool upon request of the Member State. The Agency keeps encouraging Member States to deploy forced-return monitors in all return operations or to request the Agency for further support by deploying forced-return monitors

from the pool, including fundamental right monitors.

In the 1st half of 2021, 109 monitors participated in return operations by charter flights coordinated by the Agency, of which 51 (47%) were deployed from the Frontex pool upon Member States' request.

At least one monitor was present on board of 47% of all Frontex-coordinat-

ed return operations by charter flights: 100% of collecting return operations, 73% of joint return operations, and 23% of national return operations.

In comparison with the previous half-year, the share of return operations with at least one monitor on board decreased by 7%, mainly due to COVID-19 related restrictions which in many circumstances impeded the monitors physical presence during flights.

1.6. DEPLOYMENT OF FORCED RETURN ESCORT AND SUPPORT OFFICERS FROM THE STANDING CORPS

In the 1st half of 2021 the Agency strengthened its operational support in the field also by supporting the Member States in the implementation of return operations departing and/or transiting in main EU airports.

Based on the new EBCG Regulation, Frontex can deploy Standing Corps return teams in return operations either on its own initiative and with the consent of the Member State concerned, or at the request of that Member State, providing additional technical and operational assistance in the field. The return teams may consist of different profiles of return experts who carry out their tasks in accordance with the Member States' national legislation, under their command and control structures and in compliance with operational plans agreed between Frontex and the host Member States. Two profiles are deployed in the framework of return teams: Forced Return Escort and Support Officer (FRESCO) and Return Specialist (RS). While the RS provide support to pre and post-return activities as well as the management of relevant return IT systems, the FRESCOs directly support the implementation of return operations as follows:

1. Pilot deployments of FRESCO at Member States airports introduced in 2021 to extend the operational support to the implementation of returns by both charter and scheduled flights departing or transiting in main EU airports (not only limited to returns supported by the Agency). The team of FRESCOs are integrated in the local teams, working in close cooperation with and under the command of the host Member States' authorities.

Main tasks of the FRESCO at airports: increasing the Member States' capacity in providing ground support mainly to returns in transit (i.e. returns organised or implemented by another Member State). If requested by the host Member States, they can also act as escorts in return operations coordinated by Frontex.

Two deployments took place in the reporting period:

- Italy, Rome Fiumicino, since 27 January: 11 FRESCO, including 1 Coordinator;
- Germany, Frankfurt, since 3 May: 13 FRESCO, including 1 Coordinator;

The concept will be gradually expanded also to other EU airports later in 2021:

- Amsterdam Schiphol airport (The Netherlands) – 7 FRESCO planned to be deployed from 13 September;
- Vienna airport (Austria) – 5 FRESCO planned to be deployed in November.

Main operational results:

Italy, Rome Fiumicino

The return team in Rome Fiumicino supported the return of 408 non-EU nationals while providing support to 22 charter flights and 105 scheduled flights.

This included also 2 FRESCO escorting to the third country of return a non-EU national who was transiting unescorted at Fiumicino airport by scheduled flights. The presence of FRESCO at the airport allowed for this flexible solution which was requested by the Italian authorities based on the local risk assessment.

Germany, Frankfurt

The return team in Frankfurt supported the return of 306 non-EU nationals while providing support to 6 charter flights and 114 scheduled flights.

This included also 12 FRESCO supporting Germany as a backup team on board a joint return operation. This participation

⁴ The activity will be further evaluated in the Frontex Evaluation Report 2021 of the Joint Operation (JO) Poseidon.

of a return team at a Member State's airport in a joint return operation was the first of its kind.

2. Ad-hoc deployment of FRESO to support return operations: FRESO can fulfil escorting functions in return operations coordinated by Frontex on an ad hoc basis and upon request communicated by the Member State. The activity guarantees the continuity of support provided by Frontex under the framework of the former forced-return escort pool, which had operated until the end of 2020 and was replaced by the Standing Corps in 2021.

Up to 20 FRESO were made available throughout the half-year in the Return component of the Frontex Operational Coordination Centre (FOCC) in Frontex headquarters, ready to be re-deployed on an ad hoc basis to return operations upon Member States' request.

Within the reporting period 14 FRESO supported the implementation of 2 joint return operations by carrying out escorting functions:

- Norway requested 2 FRESO to participate in a joint return operation organised by Germany;

- Norway requested 4 FRESO to participate in a joint return operation organised by Poland;
- Poland requested 8 FRESO to participate in a joint return operation organised by Poland.

3. Readmission operations: FRESO may carry out escorting tasks also in readmission operations from Greece to Turkey, ensuring continuity of the support previously provided by the former pool of forced-return escorts. Since the readmission operations were suspended, no deployments took place in the reporting period.

1.7. OTHER RETURN-RELATED ACTIVITIES

- Development of FAR, the Frontex Application for Return. FAR is a dedicated online platform for sharing operational information among Member States and Frontex for planning and implementing returns by charter and scheduled flights, as well as readmission operations. FAR is a web-based application, embedded in the Integrated Return Management Application (IRMA) managed by the Agency.

Within the reporting period, the application has been further developed. The new data protection notice, new versions of the implementation plans, as well as the new complaint forms became available in the system. Through FAR Frontex also promoted the 24/7 stand-by support provided by the Agency to Member States.

5 new versions of FAR, both charter and scheduled flights modules, were released in the reporting period. The main new features focused

on improving the user experience and fixing identified bugs, as well as introducing new features enhancing the overall performance of the platform, also for training purposes.

Frontex is currently in the process of developing the business and technical requirements for additional new features that will allow Member States to manage other operational steps within the system, such as the authorisation to transit in other Member States and the notification form to be sent to the airlines prior to the operations via scheduled flights.

The charter flights module of FAR is currently subject to an in-depth analysis aimed at significantly simplifying the platform and making it more user-friendly. The definition of the business requirements is currently in the final stages; the development is due to commence in Q4 2021.

- The Agency is developing 'Health and Safety Guidelines in return operations during pandemics or outbreaks' which will be adopted soon. The document is based on the lessons learnt during the COVID-19 pandemic. It includes open source information tools to prepare returns, measures adopted by Member States and Frontex that help overcome limitations created by the pandemic, as well as practical advice that support Member States and their escort leaders in making decisions in a dynamic operational environment. The document was drafted with the contribution of Member States' experts.

2. EVALUATION OF RETURN-RELATED ACTIVITIES

2.1. MAIN CHALLENGES

2.1.1 Challenges related to COVID-19 restrictions

The organisation of returns under COVID-19 circumstances continued to be challenging and time-consuming. In order to minimise the risks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, Frontex continued to support additional health and safety measures:

- possibility to perform COVID-19 tests for all participants in returns;
- scanning of all passengers with thermal devices for COVID-19 symptoms (fever) before boarding;
- disinfecting of aircraft;
- maintaining social distancing on board;
- obligation to wear masks and providing hand sanitiser throughout the operation.

Limitations imposed by the authorities of the countries of return were changing constantly. They included quarantine for non-EU nationals on arrival in some destinations, or requirements for COVID-19 vaccination certificates and/or testing for all passengers prior to departure and/or on arrival. These measures were the main limitations in the effective implementation of forced returns due to the lack of returnees' willingness to cooperate (refusing to undergo testing or get vaccinated) in order to hamper the return process. As already said, it brought down the number of forced returns from 46% of the total in 2nd half of 2020 to 39% of the total in the 1st half of 2021.

The above-mentioned restrictions and the risk of postponements and cancellations of flights resulted in a high number of national return operations by charter flights: it was less challenging for Member States to organise such flights in comparison to joint return operations when safety measures in different Member States continued to change frequently. Also, Member States did not always allow the participation of other

Member States in their national return operations due to the limited number of persons on board a flight.

Some collecting return operations were also replaced with joint or national charters, mainly when no forced-return monitors were available to be deployed⁵.

2.1.2. Ensuring the cost-effectiveness of returns by charter flights

Member States regularly faced challenges to ensure the full occupancy of seats available on board of charter flights, mainly due to last minute reductions in the number of returnees because of asylum requests, absconding, administrative or judicial decisions, for medical reasons or for having failed to get the returnees tested or vaccinated as required by the destination countries.

It was even more challenging due to the need to ensure social distancing on board as a safety measure for COVID-19.

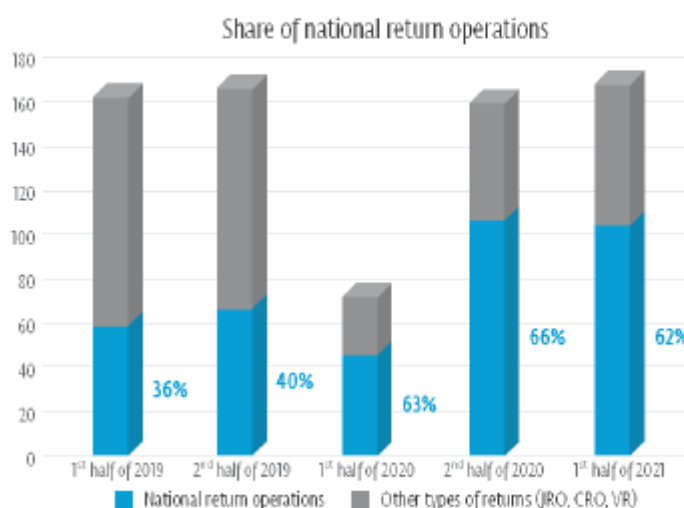
Frontex continued to encourage Member States to find operational solutions to prevent absconding of returnees as well as to open return flights to the participation of other Member States, when feasible, considering that in joint return opera-

tions participating Member States may be able to fill in places that become available shortly before a return takes place.

2.1.3. High share of national return operations vs. joint operations

Frontex encourages Member States to organise joint return operations as they generally result in a higher number of returnees and a lower number of flights. However, in the 1st half of 2021 the possibility for the Member States to join efforts continued to be limited mainly due to some COVID-19-related travel restrictions among different Member States, and the difficulties in accommodating a higher number of escorts and returnees on board while respecting the safety measures in place.

Notwithstanding the difficulties, Member States managed to organise more joint return operations (25 in the 2nd half of 2020 and 40 in the 1st half of 2021) and less national return operations (106 in the 2nd half of 2020 and 104 in the 1st half of 2021). Frontex will put efforts to strengthen this trend and to increase Member States' participation in joint return operations which are generally more efficient and cost effective



5 The physical presence of forced-return monitors is legally required in the collecting return operations (Article 50(3) of the Regulation (EU) 2019/896 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).

2.1.4. Information exchange with Member States

A regularly updated overview of Member States' return related needs and future plans is crucial to enable the Agency to better coordinate the operations. This is to allow Frontex to take account of the possible limitations in applying readmission agreements and arrangements with the countries of return when it comes to the frequency and the number of flights and in the number of returnees, as well as to ensure cost effectiveness and a more efficient management of human resources and technical equipment.

In some cases the lack of a timely and complete communication by Member States to Frontex limited the possibility for the Agency to provide its assistance, for instance due to contractual deadlines foreseen by the framework contract to charter an aircraft, or to provide Member States with more details about the situation in the country of return (for example security, health related, etc.), especially in the areas where EURLCs are deployed.

2.1.5. Participation of forced return monitors in return operations

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the participation of forced-return monitors

has been lower than in previous years. This was mainly due to COVID-19 restrictions limiting the possibility for the monitors to travel within EU Member States and to non-EU countries (e.g. quarantine periods on entry and/or upon return, type and required validity of the COVID testing, etc.) which also lead to the decision of some national monitoring institutions not to deploy monitors to physically monitor return operations.

As the presence of at least one forced-return monitor on board of collecting return operations is legally required, the lack of monitors directly affected the regular implementation of this type of return operation.

The 21 working-days' notice set by the Regulation to get resources from the pool continued to be an additional limitation on effective deployment of monitors, especially under the above mentioned COVID-19 circumstances which resulted in cancellations, postponements and change of dates of operations.

Member States are therefore constantly encouraged to provide national monitors in their operations, and whenever needed to continue to make full use of the Frontex pool of forced-return monitors while facilitating their deployment, for instance

ensuring possible exceptions of existing sanitary entry measures for those categories, in order to always ensure at least one monitor physically present in return operations coordinated by the Agency.

To address the issue of a shortage of monitors provided by Member States, Frontex fundamental rights monitors took part in some operations as members of the pool of forced-return monitors. However, this solution would not be sufficient to replace a more systematic involvement of the Member States' national monitoring institutions in the operations supported by the Agency.

2.1.6. Suspension of readmission operations from Greece to Turkey

The Turkish authorities suspended readmissions from Greece to Turkey within the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2020 as a response to the global outbreak of COVID-19.

The planned deployment of FRESO to Greece to support throughout 2021 the possible restore of the readmission activities (as mentioned under point 1.6) was progressively cancelled per relevant operational periods of the 1st half of 2021.

2.2. MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS

2.2.1. Voluntary returns and voluntary departures

Upon Member States' request, the Agency provided technical assistance to voluntary returns, which constituted over 61% of all Frontex supported returns by scheduled flights.

After the successful implementation of some charter flights for returns in voluntary manner in 2020, in the reporting period the Agency did not receive any request from Member States to get technical assistance to such charters. Most probably it was because of the increased availability of routes by scheduled flights which offered an easier and safer way of carrying out returns of individuals and smaller groups while taking into account the COVID-19 circumstances and limitations.

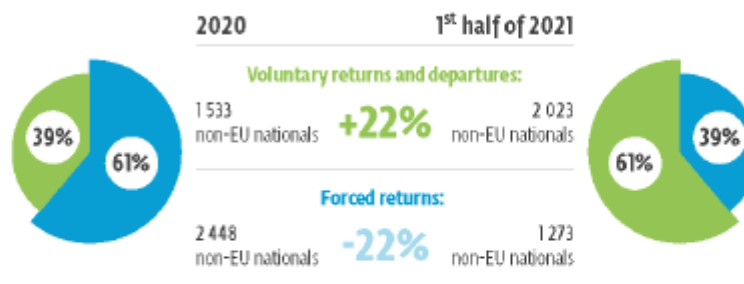
The chart above depicts the evolution of Frontex support to voluntary returns and voluntary departures by scheduled flights since the beginning of 2020.

In the reported period, Frontex supported the return of 2 unaccompanied minors and 173 families with 555 non-EU nationals. All returns were carried out in a voluntary manner and were in full agreement and in coordination with Frontex Fundamental Rights Office.

The Agency constantly promotes its assistance to voluntary returns, and proactively tries to reach out to relevant Member States' institutions responsible for the implementation of such type of returns.

2.2.2. Deployment of Standing Corps – FRESO profile

The deployment of FRESOs to support the implementation of return operations increased in the 1st half of 2021: apart from the long-term deployments of FRESOs at Fiumicino and Frankfurt airports, where they regularly provide ground support at departure and transit, some Member States requested ad-hoc deployment of FRESOs in return operations by charter flight.



A similar type of support was already made available by the Agency as escorts from the Frontex pool of forced-return escorts, based on the former Regulation, but as mentioned in previous reports the Member States have always been quite reluctant to request this service.

What made the FRESO concept successful was not only some shortage of Member States' own resources during COVID-19, but also the fact that now the Member States are more aware of the background and training of the FRESO. This increased the overall level of trust in the skills of FRESOs and the services they provide. The ad hoc re-deployment of some FRESOs in Fiumicino and Frankfurt in Frontex coordinated operations shows this tendency.

The Agency will continue to promote the concept and offer the deployment of FRESOs in different return activities, based on Member States' needs, with a focus on either increasing the number of key airports of deployment, and being able to deploy FRESOs in return operations based on short term requests.

2.2.3. Other achievements

The 1st half of 2021 brought other positive developments in the area of return:

- Cooperation with European Return Liaison Officers (EURLO) was further enhanced. This was helpful especially in organising returns under COVID-19 circumstances and facilitated contacts with non-EU countries authorities.

- Implementation Plans were revised to better adapt to the needs of Member States and to respond to specific situations related to COVID-19.
- Since the COVID-19 outbreak, Frontex has been closely monitoring COVID-19-related developments in the countries of return and the activities of air carriers. In order to support Member States in organising and carrying out returns, updates were regularly published in the Frontex Integrated Return Management Application (IRMA).
- In cooperation with Member States Frontex also recently mapped the non-EU countries requiring a mandatory COVID-19 vaccination of returnees as a precondition to accept returns. The Agency is constantly in touch with the Member States to find viable solutions for cases of returnees who refuse to be vaccinated (e.g. proposing to the countries of return to hand over vaccines to the local authorities and to continue to adopt alternatives measure at departure and/or on arrival such as testing, etc.).
- Member States were encouraged to exchange best practices, share information and plans aimed at better coordination of returns and identifying long term solutions. When possible, the Agency maintained contacts with non-EU countries in order to ensure continuous cooperation, and actively exchanged information with relevant stakeholders (e.g. via ministries, consulates, airports, airlines, European Return Liaison Officers based in non-EU countries).

3. CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

Although the impact of COVID-19 was still visible, in the 1st half of 2021 Frontex supported the largest number of returns ever in a semester: 8235 non-EU nationals were returned to their countries of origin, twice as many as those returned in the corresponding period of 2020 and 9% more than in the 1st half of 2019, before the COVID-19 outbreak.

These results were achieved mainly thanks to the growing share of voluntary returns supported by the Agency, which compensated for the still existing gap with the number of forced returns coordinated by Frontex in previous years. Some COVID-19 safety requirements, such as mandatory testing and more recently also vaccinations, had a substantial impact on the operational implementation of forced returns, mainly due to the lack of returnees' willingness to cooperate.

Returns by charter and scheduled flights proved once again to be complementary. Charter flights were exclusively used to implement forced returns, while the 61% of returns via scheduled flights were voluntary cases, the remainder being mainly low risk profile forced returns.

The number of voluntary returns is expected to grow even more in next months and years when considering the Member States' needs and the increasing number of relevant national institutions that expressed interest in cooperating with Frontex.

When the remaining COVID-19 restrictions will be further relaxed and limitations will cease to exist, the forced returns are expected to resume fully and the Agency will play an even stronger role in assisting with an unprec-

edented number of returns, also taking into account possible backlogs in Member States.

For the time being the Agency will focus on continuing to provide comprehensive support to Member States, to allow the maximum extent of flexibility in this ever-changing environment: new operational solutions, supporting tools and financial support will be aimed at facilitating the organisation and implementation of all types of returns and to gain an even higher level of operational activities on EU level.

Also, the upcoming adoption of *'Health and safety guidelines in return operations during pandemics or outbreaks'* goes in this direction as it aims to enhance the safety and effectiveness of all return-related activities in COVID-19 times, in line with international best practices.

Frontex continues to encourage Member States to open their return flights to the participation of other Member States when allowed by the agreements with the countries of return. The joint return operations are generally more cost effective when considering the number of flights to certain destinations vs. the number of returnees per flight; more participating Member States may be able to fill in places that become available shortly before the operations due to absconding of returnees, last minute asylum requests, lack of sanitary requirements to enter the country of destination, etc.

As long as the COVID-19 restrictions are in place, a certain share of national return operations by charter is still expected. Travel restrictions, which may limit participating Member States' con-

necting flights to reach the airports of departure of the charters and the difficulties in accommodating a higher number of escorts and returnees on board flights due to social distancing requirements, are seen as limiting for now a more extensive use of joint operations.

The Agency will continue to engage with relevant Member States to increase the number of key EU airports where to deploy FRESOs, as well as the number of their deployments in return operations, including the support to readmissions from Greece to Turkey. A more systematic deployment of FRESOs would not necessarily lead to an increase in the number of returns but it would contribute to the overall effectiveness of returns on EU level, for instance by facilitating returns which require a transit authorisation by another Member States.

The requests for technical support are on the rise. More and more Member States are requesting the Agency to charter aircraft. The Agency is also developing for the near future its own capacity to organise Frontex-led return operations, which will further relieve the Member States from some organisational burden.

Member States are expected to timely inform the Agency about their needs, including for the deployments of Standing Corps return teams and to get technical support and equipment. This will enable the Agency to play an even more central role in the effective coordination of returns, by creating synergies, opportunities for cooperation and ensuring overall effectiveness, while reinforcing the EU dimension in line with the external policy on return.