



**SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, ARTS AND
HUMANITIES**

**DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY, POLITICS AND
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**

**The Contribution of Frontex to EU Return Operations
and the Added Value of Return & Reintegration
Programme: The Successful Case of Cyprus**

Stavroula Kanakaki

February 2026



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**This thesis was submitted for distance acquisition of a
postgraduate degree in International Relations, Strategy
and Security, at Neapolis University**

Stavroula Kanakaki

February 2026

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the effectiveness of European Union return governance by focusing on the case of Cyprus, addressing the research question of why the country has achieved comparatively strong return outcomes despite significant structural constraints. Cyprus represents a particularly relevant case due to its small size, limited administrative capacity and sustained migratory pressure, conditions that would normally be expected to hinder effective return implementation. The study seeks to identify the governance factors that explain this performance and to assess how EU-level return instruments are integrated into national systems in practice.

The central argument advanced in this dissertation is that return effectiveness in the Cypriot case cannot be explained by favourable structural conditions or enforcement capacity alone. Instead, it results from the strategic alignment and interaction of three key governance dimensions: coherent national administrative capacity and coordination, EU-level operational support provided by Frontex, and structured reintegration mechanisms under the EU Return and Reintegration Programme (EURP). The analysis demonstrates that effective administrative coordination enables Cyprus to absorb and utilise EU operational tools efficiently, while Frontex support enhances operational capacity, scalability and procedural consistency. At the same time, systematic reintegration assistance strengthens the sustainability and credibility of return outcomes.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative research design based on content analysis of official EU and national documents. The empirical material includes European Commission communications, EU legal acts, Frontex operational reports and evaluations of return and reintegration programmes. Cyprus is examined as an extreme case, allowing the study to identify explanatory mechanisms that enable policy effectiveness under conditions of constraint. The analysis focuses on recurring themes related to administrative coordination, operational support and reintegration, and examines how these elements interact within the national return system.

The dissertation contributes to the literature on EU return governance in three main ways. First, it provides a focused analysis of a small Member State that remains

underrepresented in academic research despite its strong performance. Second, it offers a holistic examination of return governance by integrating legal, operational and reintegration perspectives that are often analysed separately. Third, it demonstrates the analytical value of interaction-based approaches for understanding policy effectiveness in extreme cases. The findings offer insights relevant to both academic debates and policy discussions on EU return governance, particularly for smaller or resource-constrained Member States.

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Abstract in Greek

Η παρούσα διπλωματική εργασία εξετάζει την αποτελεσματικότητα της πολιτικής επιστροφών της Ευρωπαϊκής Ένωσης, εστιάζοντας στην περίπτωση της Κύπρου και διερευνώντας το ερευνητικό ερώτημα γιατί η χώρα έχει επιτύχει συγκριτικά ισχυρά αποτελέσματα στον τομέα των επιστροφών, παρά τους σημαντικούς διαρθρωτικούς περιορισμούς που αντιμετωπίζει. Η Κύπρος αποτελεί ιδιαίτερα κρίσιμη μελέτη περίπτωσης, λόγω του μικρού μεγέθους της, της περιορισμένης διοικητικής της ικανότητας και της παρατεταμένης μεταναστευτικής πίεσης, συνθήκες οι οποίες υπό κανονικές περιστάσεις θα αναμενόταν να δυσχεραίνουν την αποτελεσματική εφαρμογή της πολιτικής επιστροφών. Η μελέτη επιδιώκει να εντοπίσει τους παράγοντες διακυβέρνησης που εξηγούν αυτή την απόδοση και να αναλύσει τον τρόπο με τον οποίο τα εργαλεία επιστροφών σε επίπεδο ΕΕ ενσωματώνονται στην εθνική πρακτική.

Το βασικό επιχείρημα της εργασίας είναι ότι η αποτελεσματικότητα των επιστροφών στην κυπριακή περίπτωση δεν μπορεί να αποδοθεί αποκλειστικά σε ευνοϊκές διαρθρωτικές συνθήκες ή σε αυξημένη ικανότητα επιβολής. Αντιθέτως, προκύπτει από τη στρατηγική ευθυγράμμιση και αλληλεπίδραση τριών βασικών διαστάσεων διακυβέρνησης: της συνεκτικής εθνικής διοικητικής ικανότητας και του διοικητικού συντονισμού, της επιχειρησιακής υποστήριξης σε επίπεδο ΕΕ μέσω του Frontex και των δομημένων μηχανισμών επανένταξης στο πλαίσιο του Ευρωπαϊκού Προγράμματος Επιστροφής και Επανένταξης (EURP). Η ανάλυση καταδεικνύει ότι ο αποτελεσματικός διοικητικός συντονισμός επιτρέπει στην Κύπρο να αξιοποιεί

αποδοτικά τα επιχειρησιακά εργαλεία της ΕΕ, ενώ η υποστήριξη του Frontex ενισχύει την επιχειρησιακή ικανότητα, την κλιμάκωση και τη διαδικαστική συνοχή. Παράλληλα, η συστηματική παροχή υποστήριξης επανένταξης ενισχύει τη βιωσιμότητα και την αξιοπιστία των αποτελεσμάτων επιστροφής.

Μεθοδολογικά, η εργασία υιοθετεί ποιοτικό ερευνητικό σχεδιασμό, βασισμένο στην ανάλυση περιεχομένου επίσημων εγγράφων της ΕΕ και εθνικών πηγών. Το εμπειρικό υλικό περιλαμβάνει ανακοινώσεις της Ευρωπαϊκής Επιτροπής, ενωσιακές νομικές πράξεις, επιχειρησιακές εκθέσεις του Frontex και αξιολογήσεις προγραμμάτων επιστροφής και επανένταξης. Η Κύπρος εξετάζεται ως ακραία περίπτωση, επιτρέποντας τον εντοπισμό επεξηγηματικών μηχανισμών που καθιστούν δυνατή την αποτελεσματική εφαρμογή πολιτικών υπό περιοριστικές συνθήκες. Η ανάλυση επικεντρώνεται σε επαναλαμβανόμενα θεματικά μοτίβα που αφορούν τον διοικητικό συντονισμό, την επιχειρησιακή υποστήριξη και την επανένταξη, και εξετάζει τη μεταξύ τους αλληλεπίδραση στο πλαίσιο του εθνικού συστήματος επιστροφών.

Η εργασία συμβάλλει στη βιβλιογραφία για τη διακυβέρνηση των επιστροφών στην ΕΕ με τρεις βασικούς τρόπους. Πρώτον, προσφέρει μια εστιασμένη ανάλυση ενός μικρού κράτους μέλους, το οποίο παραμένει υποεκπροσωπούμενο στην ακαδημαϊκή έρευνα παρά την ισχυρή του επίδοση. Δεύτερον, προσεγγίζει τη διακυβέρνηση των επιστροφών ολιστικά, ενσωματώνοντας νομικές, επιχειρησιακές και διαστάσεις επανένταξης που συχνά αναλύονται αποσπασματικά. Τρίτον, αναδεικνύει την αναλυτική αξία προσεγγίσεων που εστιάζουν στην αλληλεπίδραση εργαλείων πολιτικής για την κατανόηση της αποτελεσματικότητας σε ακραίες περιπτώσεις. Τα ευρήματα προσφέρουν χρήσιμες γνώσεις τόσο για την ακαδημαϊκή συζήτηση όσο και για τον σχεδιασμό πολιτικής σε επίπεδο ΕΕ, ιδίως για μικρότερα ή περιορισμένων πόρων κράτη μέλη.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

This dissertation examines the effectiveness of EU return governance by focusing on the case of Cyprus. The central research question guiding the study is: why has Cyprus achieved comparatively strong return outcomes in the EU context despite facing significant structural constraints? To address this question, the study pursues three main objectives. First, it seeks to identify the key governance factors that shape return effectiveness at the national level. Second, it examines how EU-level instruments are integrated into national return systems in practice. Third, it explores how the interaction between national and EU-level governance tools contributes to sustainable return outcomes.

This dissertation argues that return effectiveness in the Cypriot case cannot be explained by favorable structural conditions or enforcement capacity alone. Instead, it is the result of the strategic alignment of multiple governance dimensions. The analysis demonstrates that coherent national administrative structures enable the effective use of EU operational support, particularly through Frontex, while structured reintegration mechanisms enhance the sustainability of return outcomes. The interaction between these elements allows Cyprus to compensate for limitations related to size, administrative capacity and diplomatic reach, offering an initial answer to the research question introduced above.

To examine these dynamics, the study adopts a qualitative research design based on content analysis of official EU and national documents. The empirical material includes policy documents, operational reports and programme evaluations produced by EU institutions, Frontex and implementing partners involved in return and reintegration. Cyprus is selected as an extreme case due to its consistently strong return performance relative to its population size. This methodological approach allows for an in-depth examination of governance practices and institutional interactions, rather than a purely quantitative assessment of return rates.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the literature on EU return governance by adopting a holistic analytical framework that moves beyond fragmented or single-factor explanations. By examining administrative capacity, EU operational support and reintegration mechanisms in combination, the dissertation

highlights the importance of interaction effects between governance tools. The findings demonstrate the analytical value of extreme cases for understanding how policy effectiveness emerges under constrained conditions and offer insights that are relevant for broader debates on EU migration governance and policy implementation.

The dissertation is structured as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the academic literature on EU return governance and develops the analytical framework guiding the study. Chapter 3 presents the methodological approach and justifies the selection of Cyprus as an extreme case. Chapter 4 provides the empirical analysis, examining the interaction between national administrative capacity, EU-level operational support and reintegration mechanisms. Finally, Chapter 5 summarises the main findings, discusses their significance and outlines directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction to the Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to examine how academic and literature addresses the core question of this dissertation: Which features might explain the success of the EU Return and Reintegration Programme (EURP)? As already indicated in the introduction, the study will approach this question by focusing on the successful case of Cyprus. The growing academic and institutional interest in return and reintegration reflects the central position of these processes within the EU's broader migration governance framework.

2.1 The EU Return Policy Framework

The EU return policy framework rests on a coherent set of legal, operational and institutional instruments designed to guarantee coordinated, rights-based return procedures across Member States. At its core lies the Return Directive (Directive 2008/115/EC), which establishes minimum standards governing voluntary and forced return, detention conditions, and procedural safeguards for individuals subject to removal. The Directive aims to balance effective enforcement of removal decisions with due process rights, ensuring access to information, legal remedies, and proportionality in custody and coercive measures. It also prescribes timeframes for the processing of removal decisions and establishes criteria for detention, including requirements for periodic review and the necessity of compelling grounds for detention. While this framework provides a common baseline, substantial variation persists in national implementation, driven by differences in transposition, administrative capacity and national practices. These discrepancies affect both the efficiency of procedures and the protection of rights, underscoring the need for greater coherence across the EU.

In response to these challenges, the European Commission has pursued a revision of the Return Directive (proposed in 2018) to speed up procedures, strengthen identification processes and enhance cooperation with countries of origin (European

Commission, 2018). Progress has been gradual, but the proposal signals a broader trend toward a more streamlined and harmonised return system. Analyses in recent years emphasise that voluntary return and reintegration have become central to the EU's strategy not only as cost-effective and administratively efficient options but also as more acceptable to countries of origin and more conducive to sustainable long-term outcomes (Kalach and Rimmer 2025). Operationally, Frontex's expanded mandate has strengthened the EU's capacity to support Member States by coordinating return flights, providing technical and logistical assistance, and promoting harmonised procedures across the Union, which is particularly beneficial for smaller Member States or those facing high migratory pressure (Gkliati 2020).

Finally, a key component of the contemporary framework is the integration of reintegration assistance through the European Return and Reintegration Programme (EURP), which funds tailored reintegration packages and supports post-return stability, aligning reintegration with broader development objectives (Le Coz 2021). Kalach and Rimmer (2025) emphasize that reintegration must address economic, social and psychosocial needs, and that structured EU mechanisms tend to produce more sustainable outcomes. Overall, the effectiveness of the EU return system depends on the interaction between its legal basis, operational capacity and reintegration tools: the Return Directive sets the standards, Frontex provides the practical capacity to implement them, and the EURP supports returnees after their arrival. Member States that successfully combine these elements tend to perform better. Cyprus offers an illustrative example: by integrating legal obligations, Frontex operational support and EURP-based reintegration assistance, it has achieved some of the strongest return results in the EU, illustrating how a coordinated use of EU-level tools can enhance national return performance relative to its population size and resources.

Within this broader policy framework, reintegration emerges as a particularly critical dimension, as it directly links return enforcement to long-term post-return outcomes. This shift in emphasis has placed reintegration at the centre of contemporary EU return governance.

2.2 Reintegration and the role of the EU Return & Reintegration Programme (EURP)

A consistent finding across academic and policy literature is that sustainable return depends fundamentally on effective reintegration. Reintegration is now widely understood not as an optional supplement to the return process but as a structural component of EU migration governance, shaping both the long-term outcomes for returnees and the overall credibility of EU return policy. The 2021 EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration explicitly states that the success of a return procedure must be assessed not only in terms of the enforcement of a return decision but in relation to the post-return conditions of the individual concerned and their prospects for stability in the country of origin (Le Coz 2021).

Within this framework, the European Return and Reintegration Programme (EURP) has emerged as the EU's core mechanism for strengthening and harmonizing reintegration support across Member States. As Le Coz (2021) notes, the EURP introduces coherence into an otherwise fragmented landscape of national Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) schemes by providing common reintegration planning tools, standardised monitoring requirements and more structured cooperation with countries of origin. Such harmonization reduces inconsistencies among Member States and supports a shift towards a more unified EU return system.

Building on this institutional framework, the literature increasingly conceptualizes reintegration as a multidimensional process. Reintegration itself is conceptualized in the literature as a multidimensional process encompassing economic, social and psychosocial elements. Kalach and Rimmer (2025) emphasise that these dimensions are interdependent and must be addressed together for reintegration to be sustainable. Economic assistance — including start-up grants, vocational training and job placement — is often seen as the core of reintegration, but without access to documentation, health care, education and other public services, returnees remain socially vulnerable. Psychosocial support is also essential, particularly for individuals returning from stressful or traumatic migratory experiences. The EURP reflects this multidimensional approach by encouraging tailored interventions that take into

account both individual needs and local socio-economic conditions (Kalach and Rimmer 2025).

Beyond individual-level assistance, reintegration is also closely linked to broader patterns of cooperation with countries of origin. A further contribution of the EURP is its role in improving cooperation with countries of origin — an area long identified as a structural weakness in AVRR programming. Historically, reintegration activities were often implemented by international organisations with limited involvement of local authorities, resulting in gaps in service delivery and weak ownership in partner countries. The EURP aims to address this deficit by facilitating structured information exchange, strengthening the capacity of national and local institutions and promoting the alignment of reintegration assistance with broader development strategies (Le Coz 2021). This approach responds directly to concerns raised in Council of Europe guidance and EU policy documents, which highlight that reintegration must be dignified, rights-based and supported by local actors to be sustainable (Kalach and Rimmer 2025).

For Member States, particularly those facing high migratory pressure or limited administrative capacity, the EURP provides significant operational benefits. By standardising procedures, pooling expertise and reducing the administrative burden associated with case management and follow-up, the programme allows smaller Member States to maintain stable reintegration systems even during periods of fluctuating migration pressure (Le Coz 2021). This observation aligns with broader academic findings indicating that structured and consistently applied reintegration systems are associated with higher return completion rates and more sustainable post-return outcomes (Le Coz, 2021; Kalach and Rimmer, 2025).

Overall, reintegration and the EURP are best understood not as separate themes but as mutually reinforcing components of the EU's return architecture. Reintegration ensures the human and developmental sustainability of return, while the EURP institutionalises and harmonises reintegration assistance across Member States. Together, they contribute to a more coherent, humane and effective EU return system — one that supports both returnees and national administrations, and strengthens cooperation with countries of origin. These insights provide a useful backdrop for understanding how operational actors contribute to the return system, with Frontex

occupying a particularly central role. While reintegration focuses on the sustainability of return outcomes after departure, effective return governance also depends on the operational capacity to implement return decisions in practice. In this respect, the role of Frontex has become increasingly central.

2.3 The Role of Frontex in Return Operations

The role of Frontex in EU return operations has been the subject of extensive academic and policy analysis, particularly following the agency's mandate expansions in 2016 and 2019. While initially established as a coordination body focused on border management, Frontex has evolved into the EU's central operational actor in return procedures. The literature recognizes this transformation as one of the most significant institutional developments in EU migration governance over the past decade.

A foundational contribution to this field is provided by Gkliati (2020), who offers a detailed legal and operational evaluation of Frontex's growing authority in return operations. According to Gkliati (2020), Frontex's expanded mandate allows the agency to coordinate joint return flights, deploy Return Teams and provide comprehensive operational and logistical support to Member States. Through these functions, Frontex contributes to the harmonisation of return procedures and alleviates administrative pressure on national authorities. This operational added value is particularly significant for smaller Member States with limited capacity to organise complex or large-scale return operations independently.

In addition to legal and institutional analyses, a growing body of academic work highlights the operational added value generated by Frontex in practice. The agency provides training, common standards, escort personnel, translation support and a unified operational platform for Member States. These services contribute to greater consistency across the EU and help address practical barriers that often undermine national return systems. The literature also notes that Frontex's centralised coordination enhances cost-efficiency by pooling resources and sharing operational expenses among participating states. This model reduces duplication of efforts and creates a more coherent European return apparatus.

Furthermore, the literature acknowledges that Frontex's involvement has improved return rates for several Member States (Gkliati, 2020; Le Coz, 2021). By offering technical expertise and structured guidance, the agency supports more effective identification, documentation and pre-return procedures (Gkliati, 2020). This aligns with broader academic evaluations that emphasise the importance of operational capacity as a determining factor for successful returns (Le Coz, 2021). In Member States experiencing intense migratory pressure, such as those at the EU's external borders, Frontex's support can be essential in achieving timely and lawful return decisions (Gkliati, 2020; Le Coz, 2021).

At the same time, academic discussions also explore concerns related to fundamental rights and accountability. Gkliati (2020) highlights the need for enhanced monitoring and transparency, given the agency's expanding role and operational visibility. Nonetheless, the literature generally agrees that these concerns, while important, do not diminish the considerable operational contribution that Frontex makes to the EU return system. Rather, they underscore the need for ongoing institutional oversight and improved safeguards.

Importantly, several academic assessments identify cases in which Frontex support has played a decisive role in strengthening national return capacities. These examples demonstrate how the agency's operational expertise and logistical support can help Member States align with EU standards and improve the overall effectiveness of their return systems. Within this broader pattern, Cyprus stands out as a particularly illustrative case. The country's significant increase in return numbers, combined with effective coordination with Frontex-led operations, reflects many of the positive dynamics described in the literature.

Overall, the academic literature converges on the conclusion that Frontex is now a central and indispensable actor in EU return operations. Its operational, logistical and technical support enhances national capacities and contributes substantially to successful return outcomes. This provides a strong analytical foundation for examining how these dynamics are reflected in the Cypriot context, where Frontex assistance has been closely linked to the country's notable achievements in return governance. Taken together, these features illustrate how operational capacity and institutional coordination shape the effectiveness of EU return policies. The following

section synthesizes these strands of the literature in order to outline the current state of the field.

2.4 State of the field

A significant body of academic literature focuses on the structure and gradual evolution of the EU return framework, with particular emphasis on the role of reintegration in achieving sustainable outcomes. Le Coz (2021) argues that return policies are most effective when voluntary return is combined with well-developed reintegration mechanisms that address the post-return situation of migrants. In this context, sustainability refers not only to the completion of the return process itself, but to the ability of returnees to re-establish stable economic and social conditions in their countries of origin, thereby reducing the likelihood of re-migration or irregular secondary movements.

According to Le Coz (2021), the European Return and Reintegration Programme (EURP) contributes to this sustainability by increasing coherence among Member States through structured reintegration planning, closer cooperation with countries of origin and enhanced monitoring of reintegration outcomes. These mechanisms allow national authorities to move beyond ad hoc or short-term assistance and towards more predictable and coordinated reintegration support.

Complementary assessments by Kalach and Rimmer (2025) further underline the multidimensional nature of reintegration, emphasising that long-term stability depends on the combined provision of economic, social and psychosocial assistance. Reintegration instruments typically include financial support, vocational training, access to employment, housing assistance, healthcare, documentation support and psychosocial counselling. When these instruments are applied systematically — rather than selectively or inconsistently — they help address the structural vulnerabilities faced by returnees and reduce the risk of return failure.

Taken together, these studies suggest that Member States which consistently and strategically employ a broad range of reintegration instruments tend to achieve more stable and durable return outcomes. Such outcomes are reflected not only in higher return completion rates, but also in improved cooperation with countries of origin and

lower levels of repeated irregular migration. Reintegration is therefore presented in the literature not as a complementary policy tool, but as a core component of an effective and sustainable EU return system.

Another major body of work examines the evolving mandate and operational impact of Frontex. Gkliati (2020) presents one of the most detailed evaluations of the agency's expanded role, explaining how Frontex has become a central actor in coordinating and supporting return operations across the EU. The analysis highlights the agency's contribution through joint return flights, Return Intervention Teams, logistical coordination and operational expertise. According to Gkliati (2020), these functions provide significant added value, particularly for smaller frontline Member States with limited administrative capacity, enabling them to achieve higher return rates and to align their procedures with EU standards.

Reintegration is further identified as a decisive factor for the sustainability of returns. Studies emphasise that reintegration assistance is not merely a social support tool but a structural component of an effective return system (Le Coz 2021; Kalach and Rimmer 2025). In practice, EU-funded reintegration instruments include measures such as start-up grants for small businesses, vocational training, employment placement, housing support and access to healthcare and documentation services. These forms of assistance are designed to address the main economic and social vulnerabilities faced by returnees after return.

The literature provides several examples of Member States where the systematic use of such reintegration instruments has contributed to more stable return outcomes. Institutional assessments highlight that countries which consistently apply EURP-supported reintegration packages are better able to reduce the risk of re-migration and to ensure that returnees can achieve basic economic self-sufficiency in their countries of origin (Le Coz 2021). Kalach and Rimmer (2025) similarly note that targeted reintegration assistance, when combined with effective return procedures, strengthens cooperation with countries of origin and enhances the overall credibility of national return systems.

Finally, investigative research such as that of Litzkow (2025) illustrates how EU return mechanisms operate in practice within a high-pressure national context such as

Cyprus. In contemporary academic literature, high pressure refers to situations in which Member States experience sustained and disproportionate migratory and asylum-related demands relative to their population size and administrative capacity. Recent studies emphasise that smaller frontline states are particularly affected by such pressures, which place continuous strain on national asylum and return systems (Tsourdi, 2020; Slominski and Trauner, 2021). Within this context, the Cypriot case highlights the practical value of coordinated EU support, reinforcing the view that Cyprus represents a concrete success story in return governance despite persistent structural constraints.

Overall, the literature converges on the conclusion that the interaction between Frontex and reintegration programmes substantially enhances the effectiveness of national return systems. This dissertation builds on these findings by examining Cyprus as a successful example of how EU tools can support Member States in achieving high return and reintegration outcomes. These insights provide the analytical foundation for examining Cyprus as a national case that reflects many of the characteristics associated with effective EU return governance.

2.5 Cyprus as a case of effective EU return governance and identified gaps in the literature

Cyprus is widely recognized as one of the most effective EU Member States in the field of return and reintegration. Although academic literature on the country is limited compared to larger Member States, available analyses consistently highlight Cyprus's strong performance despite its small administrative capacity and disproportionate exposure to migratory pressure. When returns are measured relative to population size, Cyprus ranks among the highest performers in the EU (Kalach & Rimmer 2025), a result frequently attributed to its strategic use of EU-level tools—particularly Frontex operational support and the reintegration mechanisms offered through the European Return and Reintegration Programme (EURP).

This finding is notable given the structural constraints normally faced by smaller Member States. The literature stresses that limited administrative resources, logistical

challenges and weaker diplomatic networks can significantly hinder national return capacity (Le Coz 2021). Yet Cyprus has managed to offset these disadvantages primarily through systematic cooperation with Frontex. Studies show that Frontex support—in the form of coordinated charter flights, joint return operations and technical assistance in areas such as identification and documentation—has substantially expanded the country’s operational capabilities (Gkliati 2020). Such support enables Cyprus to maintain return volumes that would be difficult to achieve independently, aligning with broader academic observations that frontline states benefit disproportionately from Frontex’s expanded mandate.

Reintegration is another area where Cyprus reflects the positive patterns identified in the literature. Sustainable return has been shown to depend on multidimensional reintegration support—economic, social and psychosocial—which is most effective when delivered through structured EU frameworks (Le Coz 2021; Kalach & Rimmer 2025). Cyprus is frequently cited for its consistent use of EU-funded reintegration packages, which help reduce re-migration risks and strengthen cooperation with countries of origin. This integrated approach mirrors broader EU priorities outlined in the 2021 voluntary return and reintegration strategy, which emphasises coherence, monitoring and cooperation as key pillars of effective return governance.

Despite these strengths, the literature also displays notable gaps. Firstly, academic work tends to focus on the EU framework as a whole, with limited attention to specific Member States—especially smaller ones such as Cyprus. While the effectiveness of Greek, Italian or German return policies is frequently analyzed, the Cypriot case remains underrepresented in academic scholarship despite its success. Secondly, although institutional analyses highlight Cyprus as a high-performing example, these assessments often remain descriptive and do not examine in depth how Frontex support and reintegration mechanisms interact within the national context. Thirdly, the available literature rarely integrates operational, legal and reintegration perspectives into a single analytical framework, leaving a gap for studies that examine return governance holistically.

In this context, the present dissertation contributes to the academic literature in three ways. First, it offers a focused analysis of Cyprus, addressing the lack of detailed academic work on smaller Member States with high return performance. Second, it

examines the combined impact of Frontex operational support and the EURP reintegration mechanisms, areas that are often treated separately in existing literature. Third, it positions Cyprus not merely as a case study but as a demonstrably successful example that illustrates the effectiveness of EU tools when strategically utilised.

By integrating these elements, the dissertation adds new depth to the academic understanding of EU return governance and provides evidence that supports the broader argument that coordinated EU support can significantly enhance national capabilities.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter explains the methodological approach adopted in this dissertation. The study follows a qualitative research design and focuses on Cyprus as an extreme case in EU return governance. The objective is to examine which factors explain the country's success in implementing the EU Return and Reintegration Programme (EURP) and in cooperating effectively with EU-level actors, particularly Frontex. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research seeks to understand institutional practices, policy implementation and operational dynamics.

The selection of Cyprus as a case study is based on the logic of extreme case selection. Extreme cases are particularly useful in qualitative research because they display unusually high or low values on a key variable and therefore allow the researcher to identify explanatory mechanisms more clearly (Gerring, 2007). Cyprus consistently records high return rates in the European Union when measured relative to population size, despite being a small Member State with limited administrative capacity. These conditions make Cyprus analytically relevant, as success under such constraints suggests the presence of specific facilitating factors. Examining this case allows the study to explore how EU-level tools, such as Frontex operational support and the EURP, interact with national structures to produce effective outcomes. This case selection logic is directly aligned with the analytical framework developed in Section 2.5, which conceptualises return effectiveness as the outcome of interacting governance dimensions rather than isolated policy instruments.

The empirical material used in this research is drawn primarily from official documents, academic and policy studies. Official sources include European Commission communications, EU legal acts, Frontex operational reports and Council of Europe guidelines related to return and reintegration. These documents provide authoritative information on the legal framework, institutional roles and policy objectives of EU return governance. In addition, academic literature and policy-oriented studies are used to contextualize the findings and to connect the Cypriot case to broader scholarly debates. The use of qualitative, document-based data from

various sources allows for triangulation and enhances the reliability and analytical depth of the study.

The main analytical method applied is qualitative content analysis. Content analysis can be defined as a systematic and replicable technique for analysing textual material by identifying patterns, themes and meanings within texts (Krippendorff, 2018). In qualitative research, this method is used to interpret policy documents and institutional texts beyond their descriptive content, focusing on how concepts such as effectiveness, cooperation and success are constructed (Schreier, 2012). In this dissertation, content analysis is applied to official EU and national documents related to return operations, reintegration support and Frontex involvement.

The analytical process is based on qualitative content analysis of documents related to EU return governance. The analysis focuses on identifying recurring themes across EU and national sources, including operational capacity, reintegration measures, cooperation with countries of origin and administrative coordination. Through systematic coding and comparative reading of the material, the study identifies consistent patterns and explanatory factors associated with the Cypriot case. This approach follows established qualitative research guidance emphasizing systematic coding, transparency and analytical consistency (Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012). Overall, this methodological approach enables an in-depth and structured analysis of Cyprus as a successful extreme case. By combining qualitative data with content analysis, the study provides a robust framework for understanding how EU-level instruments and national practices interact to support effective return and reintegration outcomes.

Chapter 4

4.1 Empirical Analysis – Cyprus as an Extreme Case in EU Return Governance

This chapter presents the empirical investigation into the factors that explain the Republic of Cyprus's position as a consistently high-performing Member State within the framework of the European Union's return policy. While the preceding chapters established the legal, policy and theoretical foundations of EU return governance, the purpose of this chapter is to examine how these frameworks operate in practice at the national level. The focus is therefore empirical, aiming to identify the concrete mechanisms through which EU-level instruments are translated into effective national outcomes. Indeed, such an enquiry is in line with recent calls for more practice-oriented analyses of EU migration and return implementation (Tsourdi, 2020; Slominski and Trauner, 2021).

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As outlined in the methodology chapter, Cyprus has been selected as an extreme case within the meaning of qualitative case study research (Gerring, 2007). Extreme cases are analytically valuable because they display unusually high or low performance on a key variable, allowing researchers to observe causal mechanisms more clearly. In this study, the key variable is return effectiveness, assessed in relation to structural constraints such as administrative capacity, population size and exposure to migratory pressure. Despite these constraints, Cyprus consistently records strong return outcomes when measured relative to its population size, a pattern that has been highlighted in both academic and institutional assessments (Kalach and Rimmer, 2025; Frontex, 2023). Comparable small frontline states, such as Malta or certain Western Balkan partners with similar status, rarely achieve such high similar performance levels. This , which highlights even further ~~enhances~~ the analytical value of Cyprus as an extreme case within the broader EU return landscape (Slominski and Trauner, 2021).

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The selection of Cyprus is particularly relevant in light of the broader literature on EU return governance, which frequently emphasises the challenges faced by smaller or frontline Member States. Limited administrative resources, logistical constraints and complex cooperation with countries of origin are commonly identified as factors that

undermine return effectiveness (Carrera and Cortinovia, 2019; Le Coz, 2021). Against this background, Cyprus's performance raises important empirical questions regarding the conditions under which EU return policy can function effectively even in constrained national contexts. Studies on "high-pressure" asylum and return systems show that sustained pressure typically generates procedural backlogs and bottlenecks rather than ~~stable effectiveness~~ high performance standard. This renders, ~~which makes~~ the Cypriot case an instructive outlier that warrants closer empirical scrutiny (Tsourdi, 2020; Litzkow, 2025). In this respect, the Cypriot case does not only illustrate how EU return governance functions under constraint, but also contributes empirically to a literature that has so far focused predominantly on larger Member States and more visible migration hubs (Carrera and Cortinovia, 2019; Le Coz, 2021).

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Building on the analytical framework developed in Chapter 2, this chapter examines how Cyprus integrates EU-level return tools into its national return system in practice. Particular attention is paid to the interaction between national authorities and EU actors, as well as to the sequencing of return procedures, operational support and reintegration measures. By focusing on these interactions, the analysis responds to scholarly critiques that EU return policy is often examined in fragmented terms, with legal frameworks, operational actors and reintegration instruments analysed in isolation (Gkliati, 2020; Le Coz, 2021). Situating Cyprus within these wider debates ~~allows the chapter to~~ contributes not only to country-specific knowledge, but also to broader discussions on the multi-level governance of returns in the EU and the conditions under which EU-level instruments can effectively complement national capacities (Slominski and Trauner, 2021).

The empirical analysis is structured around three interrelated thematic pillars derived from the literature and operationalised for empirical examination. The first pillar concerns national administrative capacity and coordination. This includes the organisation of return-related responsibilities within the Cypriot administration, procedural coherence and the ability to manage return processes under sustained pressure. As previous research suggests, administrative coordination is a critical

enabling factor for effective return implementation, particularly in smaller Member States (Carrera and Cortinovis, 2019).

The second pillar focuses on the strategic integration of Frontex's operational support, with particular emphasis on the role of Return Specialists. The literature increasingly identifies Frontex as a central operational actor in EU return governance, especially following the expansion of its mandate (Gkliati, 2020). This chapter examines how Frontex support functions in practice in the Cypriot context and how it contributes to overcoming operational constraints related to identification, documentation and removal procedures (Frontex, 2023).

The third pillar addresses reintegration and the implementation of the EU Return and Reintegration Programme (EURP). Reintegration is analysed as a core component of return effectiveness, shaping both the sustainability of outcomes and the overall credibility of return policy (Kalach and Rimmer, 2025; IOM, 2023). The chapter therefore examines how reintegration assistance is incorporated into the return process in Cyprus and how EURP-supported mechanisms contribute to reducing the risk of secondary movement.

By examining these three pillars in combination, this chapter provides a detailed and practice-oriented understanding of how EU return governance operates in an extreme case. The analysis demonstrates how national administrative structures, EU-level operational support and reintegration mechanisms interact in practice, offering empirical insights into the conditions under which EU return policy can produce effective and sustainable outcomes at the national level.

4.2 Analytical Framework: Deconstructing the "Extreme Case"

This section develops the analytical framework used to examine Cyprus as an extreme case of EU return governance. It conceptualizes effectiveness beyond quantitative return rates and identifies the key dimensions through which EU-level return tools are translated into national practice in the Cypriot context.

In the field of EU return policy, effectiveness has traditionally been assessed through quantitative indicators, most notably return rates, commonly defined as the ratio between issued return decisions and effective returns (Eurostat, 2023). These

indicators remain relevant, particularly for evaluating administrative performance and enforcement capacity. However, as widely discussed in the academic literature, an exclusive reliance on numerical outcomes provides only a partial understanding of return effectiveness. A growing body of research argues that effectiveness must also be evaluated in relation to the sustainability of returns and compliance with fundamental rights standards (Carrera and Cortinovis, 2019; Le Coz and Newland, 2021). This broader approach reflects a gradual shift in EU debates from narrow enforcement metrics towards multidimensional assessments that take into account both operational results and the quality of procedures, including safeguards for returnees and longer-term reintegration prospects (Le Coz, 2021; Kalach and Rimmer, 2025).

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This empirical analysis adopts this broader understanding of success. Effectiveness is operationalised through qualitative features, with particular emphasis on how return procedures are organised, supported and embedded within a wider governance framework. From this perspective, high return numbers alone are insufficient if they are not accompanied by mechanisms that reduce the risk of secondary movement and ensure dignified and lawful procedures. Reintegration support, institutional coordination and operational capacity are therefore treated as integral components of effectiveness rather than supplementary elements, reflecting recent academic critiques of purely outcome-based assessments (Carrera and Cortinovis, 2019).

Cyprus is particularly well suited to this form of analysis. Despite being a small Member State with limited administrative resources and persistent migratory pressure, it consistently records strong return outcomes relative to its population size. This combination of structural constraints and high performance positions Cyprus as an extreme case in qualitative terms (Gerring, 2007). Studying such a case allows the analysis to move beyond surface-level correlations and to identify the mechanisms that enable success under adverse conditions. Rather than treating Cyprus's performance as exceptional or idiosyncratic, the framework approaches it as analytically informative, offering insights into how EU-level tools can be leveraged to compensate for national limitations.

The analytical framework guiding this chapter is structured around three closely interconnected dimensions derived from the literature and empirically observable in

the Cypriot context. The first dimension concerns national administrative capacity and coordination, focusing on the organisation of return-related responsibilities and the ability of national authorities to manage return procedures under sustained pressure. The second dimension relates to operational support at EU level, with particular attention to cooperation with Frontex and the integration of EU operational tools into national return practices.

The third dimension addresses reintegration and the implementation of the EU Return and Reintegration Programme (EURP), examining how reintegration support is incorporated into the return process and contributes to sustainable outcomes.

Crucially, these dimensions are not analysed in isolation. The central assumption underpinning this framework is that Cyprus's success stems from the interaction between administrative coordination, operational support and reintegration mechanisms. In an extreme case characterised by limited capacity, fragmented or poorly coordinated approaches are unlikely to produce consistent results. The framework therefore places particular emphasis on how these elements reinforce one another and form an integrated system of return governance, in line with qualitative case study theory (Gerring, 2007).

Applying this framework allows the analysis to identify the concrete practices and cooperative mechanisms through which EU-level return tools are embedded in national structures, as examined in the following empirical sections.

4.3 National administrative capacity and coordination in the Cypriot return system

The empirical analysis indicates that national administrative capacity and internal coordination constitute a foundational pillar of Cyprus's effectiveness in return governance. While Cyprus faces well-documented structural constraints linked to its small size, limited personnel and sustained migratory pressure, the organization of its return system reveals a deliberate prioritization of efficiency and procedural clarity. Rather than dispersing responsibilities across fragmented institutional arrangements, the Cypriot system appears to rely on relatively centralized structures and clearly defined roles, which contributes to more consistent implementation of return

decisions. A concrete illustration of this administrative consolidation is the central role of the Ministry of Interior and, more recently, the Deputy Ministry of Migration and International Protection in coordinating asylum, migration and return policies within a single, coherent governance framework (European Commission, 2021; Asylum Information Database, 2025). ~~This kind of~~ The effectiveness of administrative consolidation reflects broader findings that smaller administrations tend to perform better when responsibilities are concentrated and lines of authority are unambiguous (Carrera and Cortinovis, 2019; Le Coz, 2021).

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Official documents and institutional reports suggest that return-related functions are treated as a core component of migration governance in Cyprus, rather than as a peripheral or reactive policy area (European Commission, 2021; Frontex, 2023). This prioritization is reflected in the allocation of dedicated administrative units and personnel within the competent migration authorities, responsible for managing return procedures, coordinating removals and liaising with EU agencies and international organizations involved in return operations. In a context of sustained pressure, such administrative focus reduces the risk of procedural backlogs, which are frequently identified in the literature as a key obstacle to effective return implementation (Carrera and Cortinovis, 2019). In a context of sustained pressure, such administrative focus reduces the risk of procedural backlogs, which are frequently identified in the literature as a key obstacle to effective return implementation (Carrera and Cortinovis, 2019). The Cypriot case therefore illustrates how treating return as a core governance function, rather than as a residual task, can mitigate structural constraints associated with size and capacity (Tsourdi, 2020; Slominski and Trauner, 2021). This deliberate prioritisation also helps to maintain political and administrative attention on return, even when other areas of migration policy demand significant resources.

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Administrative capacity in the Cypriot case is not solely a question of quantitative resources. The empirical findings highlight the importance of organizational structure, procedural sequencing and institutional learning. Cyprus appears to rely on relatively standardized internal procedures that allow authorities to move efficiently from return decisions to operational implementation (European Commission, 2021, Section 2.2; Frontex, 2023, Chapter 4). This procedural coherence is particularly significant given the legal and practical complexity of return processes, which often involve detention

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decisions, documentation, coordination with third-country authorities and logistical arrangements. As previous research has shown, even well-designed legal frameworks can fail if national administrations lack the capacity to manage these processes in an integrated manner (Le Coz, 2021). The Cypriot experience suggests that clear internal guidance, standard operating procedures and routine practice can play a crucial role in bridging the gap between legal norms and day-to-day implementation (Le Coz, 2021; Kalach and Rimmer, 2025).

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Internal coordination among national actors emerges as a second critical aspect of administrative effectiveness. The empirical material indicates that coordination between authorities responsible for migration control, detention, removal and reintegration planning is facilitated through relatively clear procedural sequencing and routine inter-service cooperation, which helps ensure continuity between different stages of the return process. Such coordination reduces institutional fragmentation and limits delays between decision-making and operational implementation, particularly in smaller administrations where overlapping responsibilities are common (European Commission, 2021, Sections 2.1–2.2; Frontex, 2023, Chapter 4). Such coordination is especially important in smaller administrations, where overlapping responsibilities and unclear mandates can quickly undermine operational effectiveness. The Cypriot case therefore supports broader academic findings that highlight coordination, rather than scale alone, as a decisive factor in return governance (Kalach and Rimmer, 2025). This confirms the more general argument developed in the literature that effective return systems depend on coherent governance arrangements linking all stages of the process, from decision-making to removal and reintegration (Le Coz, 2021; Kalach and Rimmer, 2025).

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A further empirical observation concerns the relationship between administrative capacity and adaptability. Cyprus's return system appears to display a degree of operational flexibility, allowing authorities to adjust procedures in response to fluctuating return caseloads and changing cooperation requirements. This flexibility is reflected, for example, in the ability to scale participation in Frontex-supported return operations and to adjust the sequencing of administrative and operational steps depending on identification and documentation constraints. Such adaptability is particularly relevant in an environment where return governance is shaped not only by

national procedures but also by external cooperation dynamics (European Commission, 2021, Section 2.2; Frontex, 2023, Chapters 3–4). As the literature on small-state administration suggests, flexibility and institutional learning can partially compensate for limited resources (Gkliati, 2020). The Cypriot experience indicates that this adaptability is not *ad hoc* but embedded in established routines for planning, participating in and following up on joint operations, which strengthens resilience under high-pressure conditions (Litzkow, 2025).

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National administrative coordination also plays a crucial role in enabling effective cooperation with EU-level actors. The empirical findings indicate that Cyprus does not treat EU support mechanisms as *ad hoc* interventions, but rather integrates them into its routine administrative practices. This is evident in the way national authorities prepare for and engage with Frontex-supported return operations, ensuring that administrative processes are aligned with EU operational requirements (Frontex, 2023). Such alignment reduces transaction costs and facilitates smoother cooperation, reinforcing the effectiveness of external support. This pattern corresponds to broader evaluations of Frontex’s role, which stress that the agency’s added value is greatest where national administrations are able to systematically absorb and structure EU-level assistance (Gkliati, 2020; Le Coz, 2021).

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Continuity and institutional memory further strengthen administrative capacity in the Cypriot case. Frequent restructuring of migration governance systems has been shown to undermine return effectiveness by disrupting established procedures and eroding expertise (Carrera and Cortinovis, 2019). In contrast, the empirical material suggests that Cyprus has maintained relatively stable administrative arrangements in the field of return, allowing operational knowledge and procedural experience to accumulate over time. This continuity is reflected in the preservation of established workflows, sustained engagement with EU agencies such as Frontex, and the gradual institutionalisation of return-related practices. As a result, institutional memory is reinforced and contributes to consistent implementation and trust-based cooperation with EU agencies and third-country counterparts. Such stability also facilitates long-term planning and the incremental refinement of procedures, rather than repeated short-term responses to crisis dynamics (Carrera and Cortinovis, 2019; Kalach and Rimmer, 2025).

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At the same time, the analysis confirms that administrative capacity alone is insufficient to explain Cyprus's strong performance. Rather, national coordination functions as an enabling condition that allows other elements of the return system to operate effectively. Without a coherent administrative framework, the benefits of Frontex operational support or structured reintegration mechanisms would likely remain limited. This finding aligns with broader scholarship emphasising that EU-level tools are most effective when embedded within capable national administrations (Le Coz, 2021; Gkliati, 2020). The Cypriot case therefore underlines that EU support measures cannot compensate for weak national governance arrangements, but can significantly amplify the impact of administrations that are already organised and coordinated (Le Coz, 2021; Gkliati, 2020).

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Overall, the empirical evidence demonstrates that Cyprus's return performance is rooted in a combination of administrative prioritization, procedural coherence and institutional coordination. These factors create the structural foundation upon which EU-level operational and reintegration instruments are deployed. In the context of an extreme case, where structural limitations are pronounced, effective national administration emerges as a decisive factor in translating EU policy frameworks into concrete and sustained return outcomes.

4.4 The role of Frontex and Return Specialists in the Cypriot return system

The empirical findings highlight that cooperation with Frontex constitutes a central operational pillar of Cyprus's return governance. While national administrative capacity provides the structural foundation of the return system, Frontex support appears to significantly enhance Cyprus's ability to implement return decisions in practice. This support is not limited to logistical assistance but extends to operational coordination, expertise and on-the-ground involvement, which together strengthen the effectiveness and consistency of return operations. This growing operational role is also reflected in EU policy documents, which describe Frontex as a key enabler of an "effective and credible" European return system (European Commission, 2018; Gkliati, 2020).

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Cyprus's reliance on Frontex must be understood in light of its structural constraints. As a small Member State with limited administrative and logistical resources, Cyprus faces inherent challenges in organising complex return operations independently, particularly when returns involve multiple countries of origin, documentation difficulties or limited cooperation from third-country authorities. The empirical material suggests that Frontex involvement plays a compensatory role, enabling Cyprus to overcome these constraints through access to pooled resources, specialised expertise and coordinated operational planning (Gkliati, 2020; Frontex, 2023). Such compensatory effects are especially relevant in high-pressure contexts, where national administrations struggle to sustain large-scale operations on their own (Tsourdi, 2020; Slominski and Trauner, 2021).

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One of the most significant empirical findings concerns the integration of Frontex-supported return operations into national procedures. Rather than operating as parallel or externally imposed processes, Frontex-led activities appear to be embedded within Cyprus's existing administrative framework. National authorities coordinate closely with Frontex in the planning and execution of joint return operations, aligning national procedures with EU operational standards. This integration reduces procedural friction and contributes to more predictable and timely implementation of return decisions (Frontex, 2023).

A particularly important operational innovation in this context is the deployment of Return Specialists. These experts, who may be seconded from Member States or form part of the standing corps, provide targeted support in areas such as identification, documentation and liaison with third-country authorities. The empirical evidence indicates that Return Specialists play a crucial role in addressing practical obstacles that frequently delay or prevent returns, especially in cases where nationality determination or travel document issuance is complex (Pallister-Wilkins, 2022).

Frontex reporting similarly emphasises that Return Specialists contribute to overcoming identification and documentation obstacles in complex cases (Frontex, 2023, Chapters 3–4). Their work directly tackles issues that the literature repeatedly identifies as core bottlenecks in EU return systems, such as verification of identity and cooperation with consular authorities (Carrera and Cortinovis, 2019; Le Coz, 2021).

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In the Cypriot context, Return Specialists typically work alongside national case

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handlers and liaison officers, ~~which a practice that~~ facilitates the transfer of know-how into day-to-day administrative practice and helps standardise the handling of complex cases over time (Frontex, 2023; Lutz, 2022).

In the Cypriot case, the presence of Return Specialists appears to enhance both efficiency and institutional learning. By working alongside national officials, these specialists contribute not only to individual operations but also to the transfer of expertise and best practices. This form of embedded support strengthens national capacity over time and supports the development of more standardized procedures. As the literature suggests, such capacity-building effects are particularly valuable for smaller administrations, where specialized expertise may otherwise be scarce (Lutz, 2022).

Frontex support also contributes to operational scalability. The empirical material indicates that Cyprus is able to participate in higher-volume and more complex return operations through Frontex coordination than would be feasible at the national level alone. Joint return flights, shared escort teams and centralised logistical planning reduce costs and administrative burdens, allowing national authorities to focus on preparatory and follow-up tasks, as reflected in Frontex operational reporting on joint return operations (Frontex, 2023, Chapters 3–4). This operational model aligns with broader findings that EU-level coordination enhances cost-efficiency and effectiveness in return governance (Gkliati, 2020). For Cyprus, this scalability is particularly significant, as it allows a small administration to maintain return volumes that would otherwise be disproportionate to its resources and population size (Kalach and Rimmer, 2025).

At the same time, the expanded role of Frontex has attracted critical scrutiny, particularly with regard to fundamental rights and accountability. Academic literature highlights concerns about the growing operational autonomy of the agency and the challenges of ensuring effective oversight (Pawlak, 2021). The empirical material does not negate these concerns but suggests that, in the Cypriot case, Frontex operations are embedded within a legal and administrative framework that provides safeguards and monitoring mechanisms. This finding reinforces the argument that the impact of Frontex depends significantly on how its mandate is implemented at the national level. It also reflects ~~the more general view in the literature~~ literature insights

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that robust oversight arrangements at both EU and national level are essential to reconcile operational effectiveness with fundamental rights protection (Gkliati, 2020; Le Coz and Newland, 2021).

Another important empirical observation relates to the continuity of cooperation between Cyprus and Frontex. Rather than relying on sporadic or crisis-driven assistance, Cyprus appears to engage in sustained and structured cooperation with the agency. This continuity facilitates planning, strengthens mutual trust and allows for the gradual refinement of operational practices, as reflected in Frontex annual reporting on return operations and Member State cooperation (Frontex, 2023, Chapters 3–4). As previous studies have noted, sustained cooperation is more likely to produce durable improvements in return systems than ad hoc interventions (Le Coz, 2021). In this sense, Cyprus can be regarded as a ‘laboratory’ for long-term, structured engagement between a small Member State and Frontex, illustrating the cumulative effects of repeated joint operations over time (Litzkow, 2025).

Overall, the empirical findings indicate that Frontex plays a decisive role in translating legal return decisions into operational outcomes in Cyprus. The combination of logistical coordination, expert deployment and operational integration enhances national capacity and contributes to Cyprus’s strong return performance. Importantly, this support does not substitute national administration but complements it, reinforcing the central argument that effective return governance emerges from the interaction between capable national structures and strategically deployed EU-level tools. From this perspective, Frontex support functions as an operational bridge between national administrative structures and the reintegration mechanisms examined in Section 4.5, ensuring that return decisions can actually be implemented and linked to post-return assistance (Gkliati, 2020; Kalach and Rimmer, 2025). The Cypriot case thus provides concrete evidence for the interaction-based understanding of effectiveness developed in this dissertation, where administrative capacity, Frontex support and reintegration mechanisms operate as mutually reinforcing pillars of EU return governance (Carrera and Cortinovis, 2019; Kalach and Rimmer, 2025).

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4.5 Reintegration and the EURP as a mechanism for sustainable return outcomes

The empirical analysis confirms that reintegration constitutes a central element of Cyprus's return governance and plays a decisive role in shaping the sustainability of return outcomes. Rather than being treated as a post-return add-on, reintegration appears to be embedded within the broader return process, reflecting a shift towards a more comprehensive and long-term understanding of effectiveness. In this context, the EU Return and Reintegration Programme (EURP) functions as a key operational mechanism through which sustainability objectives are translated into practice. This approach mirrors the wider shift in EU return policy towards integrating enforcement with long-term reintegration perspectives, as highlighted in recent policy strategies and academic assessments (Le Coz, 2021; Kalach and Rimmer, 2025).

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Official documents and institutional assessments indicate that Cyprus makes systematic use of EURP-supported reintegration assistance, particularly in cases of assisted voluntary return (European Commission, 2021; IOM, 2023). This systematic engagement is significant, as the literature consistently highlights fragmentation and uneven uptake as persistent weaknesses in reintegration programming across the EU (Le Coz, 2021). In contrast, the Cypriot case suggests a relatively stable integration of reintegration planning into return procedures, contributing to more coherent outcomes.

From an empirical perspective, reintegration effectiveness is closely linked to the timing and structure of assistance. The material analysed indicates that reintegration planning in Cyprus often begins before return is carried out, rather than after departure, allowing returnees to receive clearer information regarding available support and facilitating continuity between pre-departure counselling and post-return assistance (European Commission, 2021, Section 2.2; IOM, 2023, Chapter 3). Such continuity has been identified in the literature as a key factor in reducing uncertainty and increasing the likelihood of sustainable reintegration (Kalach and Rimmer, 2025). This sequencing also reinforces the credibility of voluntary return offers, as potential returnees can make decisions based on concrete and understandable information about the support they will receive after arrival (Le Coz, 2021).

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A concrete illustration of this approach is the way reintegration planning is discussed already during counseling sessions in Cyprus, where information on EURP support, potential implementing partners and available services in countries of origin is presented as part of a single, continuous process rather than as a separate, post-return phase. This practice reflects the integrated model of return and reintegration promoted in recent EU strategies and programme evaluations (European Commission, 2021; IOM, 2023; Le Coz, 2021).

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The EURP promotes a multidimensional understanding of reintegration, encompassing economic, social and psychosocial dimensions. The empirical findings suggest that Cyprus aligns closely with this approach. Reintegration packages typically combine financial assistance with in-kind support, such as vocational training or business-related assistance, and are adapted to individual circumstances and local conditions in countries of origin (IOM, 2023). This reflects broader academic findings that reintegration initiatives focusing solely on short-term financial support are unlikely to produce durable outcomes (Le Coz, 2021). By adopting this multidimensional model, Cyprus follows the pattern that the literature associates with more stable post-return trajectories and lower risks of re-migration (Kalach and Rimmer, 2025).

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Cooperation with countries of origin emerges as another important empirical dimension. The EURP facilitates structured collaboration with local authorities and implementing partners, enhancing contextual awareness and local ownership of reintegration projects. In the Cypriot case, this cooperation appears to mitigate some of the structural limitations associated with small-state diplomacy by relying on EU-coordinated frameworks and international organisations, enabling more effective engagement with partner countries than would be possible through purely national channels (European Commission, 2021, Section 2.2; IOM, 2023, Chapter 3). This observation aligns with broader assessments of reintegration governance, which emphasise the role of EU-level coordination in supporting Member States with limited diplomatic reach (Kalach and Rimmer, 2025).

The empirical analysis also suggests that reintegration support contributes indirectly to operational effectiveness. While reintegration outcomes are often assessed separately from return rates, the two dimensions appear closely connected in practice.

Reintegration assistance enhances the credibility of voluntary return schemes and may increase return compliance by reducing resistance and uncertainty among returnees. This observation aligns with policy evaluations indicating that credible reintegration support can improve overall return performance by strengthening the legitimacy of the return system (European Commission, 2021). In this way, reintegration functions not only as a humanitarian or developmental instrument but also as a governance tool that supports higher completion rates and reduces the likelihood of secondary movements (Le Coz, 2021; Kalach and Rimmer, 2025).

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At the same time, the findings indicate that reintegration effectiveness depends on institutional coordination at both national and EU levels. The benefits of EURP support are most evident where reintegration mechanisms are embedded within a coherent administrative framework and linked to operational return procedures. In the Cypriot case, this linkage appears relatively strong, reinforcing the argument developed in earlier sections that effectiveness emerges from the interaction between administrative capacity, operational support and reintegration instruments.

Nevertheless, the empirical material also points to inherent limitations. Reintegration outcomes remain difficult to measure systematically, particularly in the long term, and monitoring often relies on indirect indicators or short-term follow-up (IOM, 2023). These constraints are not unique to Cyprus but reflect broader challenges within EU reintegration policy. However, the consistent use of EURP frameworks mitigates some of these limitations by providing standardized monitoring tools and reporting requirements. This aligns with wider calls in the literature for more robust, harmonised monitoring of reintegration outcomes across Member States, in order to better capture the long-term impact of EU-funded assistance (Le Coz and Newland, 2021).

Overall, the empirical findings suggest that reintegration, as implemented through the EURP, plays a crucial role in supporting sustainable return outcomes in Cyprus. By embedding reintegration within the return process, promoting multidimensional assistance and strengthening cooperation with countries of origin, the EURP enhances both the human and operational dimensions of return governance. In combination with national administrative capacity and Frontex operational support, reintegration

mechanisms contribute to Cyprus's position as a high-performing Member State in EU return governance.

4.6 Synthesis of empirical findings

This section synthesizes the empirical findings presented in Sections 4.3 to 4.5 and assesses how they collectively explain Cyprus's position as a high-performing Member State in EU return governance. Rather than attributing success to a single factor, the analysis confirms that effectiveness in the Cypriot case emerges from the interaction between national administrative capacity, EU-level operational support and structured reintegration mechanisms. This interaction reflects the analytical framework developed in Section 4.2 and provides empirical depth to the broader arguments advanced in the literature.

The first key finding concerns the role of national administrative capacity and coordination. As demonstrated in Section 4.3, Cyprus's return system is characterized by relatively clear institutional roles, procedural coherence and administrative continuity. These features allow national authorities to manage complex return procedures despite limited resources and sustained migratory pressure. The empirical material confirms that administrative effectiveness depends less on scale than on coordination and organizational clarity, supporting existing research which emphasizes the importance of capable national administrations for effective return implementation (Carrera and Cortinovis, 2019; Le Coz, 2021).

At the same time, national administrative capacity alone does not fully explain Cyprus's performance. The findings in Section 4.4 demonstrate that cooperation with Frontex plays a decisive role in translating return decisions into operational outcomes. Frontex support enhances Cyprus's operational capacity through joint return operations, logistical coordination and the deployment of Return Specialists, who address practical obstacles related to identification and documentation (Gkliati, 2020; Frontex, 2023). Importantly, this support is not used in isolation but is embedded within national procedures, reinforcing the effectiveness of existing administrative structures rather than substituting them. This confirms wider evaluations that EU-level operational tools are most effective when they complement, rather than replace, domestic governance arrangements (Le Coz, 2021; Gkliati, 2020).

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The third pillar of the empirical analysis concerns reintegration and the implementation of the EU Return and Reintegration Programme (EURP). As shown in Section 4.5, reintegration support in Cyprus is not treated as an afterthought but as an integral component of the return process. The systematic use of EURP-supported assistance contributes to the sustainability of returns by addressing economic, social and psychosocial needs in countries of origin (Kalach and Rimmer, 2025; IOM, 2023). This finding aligns with broader academic and policy consensus that sustainable return outcomes depend on structured reintegration mechanisms rather than short-term financial assistance alone (Le Coz, 2021). In this respect, Cyprus closely follows the multidimensional reintegration model promoted at EU level, which links individual support to more stable post-return prospects and reduced risks of secondary movement (Le Coz and Newland, 2021).

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Taken together, the empirical findings confirm that Cyprus's effectiveness is best understood as the outcome of synergy between these three dimensions. Administrative coordination enables the effective absorption of EU-level operational support, while Frontex involvement enhances the scalability and efficiency of return operations. Reintegration mechanisms, in turn, reinforce both the legitimacy and sustainability of the return system, indirectly supporting compliance and operational effectiveness. This interaction supports the analytical assumption that success in an extreme case is rarely attributable to a single variable, but rather to the alignment of multiple governance tools under constrained conditions (Gerring, 2007, pp. 71–75).

The Cypriot case therefore illustrates how EU-level instruments can compensate for structural limitations at the national level when they are strategically integrated into domestic governance frameworks. This finding addresses a key gap in the literature, which often examines legal frameworks, operational actors and reintegration policies in isolation. The empirical evidence presented here demonstrates that it is the coordinated use of these tools—rather than their mere availability—that determines effectiveness.

In conclusion, the synthesis of empirical findings reinforces the central argument of this dissertation: Cyprus's position as a high-performing Member State in EU return governance is not accidental, but the result of deliberate administrative prioritization and strategic engagement with EU-level mechanisms. By combining national

coordination, Frontex operational support and EURP-based reintegration assistance, Cyprus exemplifies how small Member States can achieve effective and sustainable return outcomes under challenging conditions. This synthesis provides a clear bridge to the concluding chapter, where the broader implications of these findings for EU return policy will be discussed.

4.7 Concluding remarks on the empirical analysis

This chapter has examined Cyprus as an extreme case of EU return governance, providing empirical insight into how EU-level return instruments operate under conditions of structural constraint. The analysis demonstrates that effectiveness in return governance is shaped by the interaction between national administrative capacity, EU operational support and reintegration mechanisms, rather than by favourable structural conditions alone.

These empirical findings provide the basis for the concluding chapter of the dissertation, which reflects on the broader implications of extreme cases for the assessment of EU return policy effectiveness across Member States. In particular, the Cypriot case serves as a reference point for understanding how smaller or high-pressure Member States can strategically combine EU-level tools with national administrative reforms. As such, the Cypriot cases, and thus informs wider debates on the design and evaluation of EU return governance.

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Chapter 5 – Conclusion

This dissertation examined Cyprus as an extreme case of EU return governance in order to identify the factors that explain its consistently strong performance despite significant structural constraints. Drawing on qualitative content analysis of official EU and national documents, the study demonstrated that return effectiveness in the Cypriot case cannot be attributed to a single variable. Instead, it emerges from the interaction between three mutually reinforcing dimensions: national administrative capacity and coordination, EU-level operational support through Frontex and structured reintegration mechanisms under the EU Return and Reintegration Programme (EURP). The empirical analysis showed that coherent administrative structures enable the effective integration of EU operational tools, while Frontex support enhances operational capacity and scalability. At the same time, systematic reintegration assistance contributes to the sustainability and credibility of return outcomes. Taken together, these findings confirm that effectiveness in an extreme

case is shaped by the strategic alignment of governance tools rather than favourable structural conditions alone.

The findings of this study are significant for both academic research and policy practice. From an analytical perspective, they contribute to the literature on EU return governance by demonstrating the value of examining return systems holistically, rather than analysing legal frameworks, operational actors and reintegration policies in isolation. The Cypriot case illustrates how EU-level instruments can compensate for limited national capacity when they are embedded within coherent administrative structures. From a practical perspective, the results highlight important lessons for policymakers, particularly in smaller or resource-constrained Member States. Effective return governance depends not only on enforcement capacity but also on administrative coordination, sustained cooperation with Frontex and the early integration of reintegration planning into the return process. The study therefore suggests that strengthening institutional coordination and ensuring the systematic use of EU support mechanisms may be more impactful than focusing exclusively on increasing return rates or expanding legal powers.

While this dissertation provides an in-depth analysis of a single high-performing case, it also highlights the value of comparative research for future studies. A particularly relevant avenue for further research would be a systematic comparison between Cyprus and Malta, two small, island Member States that share similar structural constraints but display markedly different outcomes in the area of return governance. Such a comparison would be analytically valuable because it would allow researchers to isolate the role of governance arrangements, administrative coordination and the use of EU-level support in shaping return effectiveness, independently of geography or size. Examining why Cyprus has achieved comparatively stronger results while Malta has faced more persistent challenges could offer deeper insight into the conditions under which EU return instruments are successfully embedded at national level. This type of comparative analysis would strengthen understanding of variation among small Member States and contribute to more differentiated and context-sensitive EU return policies.

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