47 organisations call on the EU to protect people's rights, not outsource them

We, 47 human rights, humanitarian, civil society and trade union organisations from 16 countries, firmly reject plans to set up so-called "return hubs" outside the EU.

16 November 2026 - Today Austria, Denmark, Germany, Greece and The Netherlands formally presented their plans to establish a "return hub" in Rwanda .

The announcement today outlines a new phase of harmful externalization policies, which we (46 signatories from 16 countries) firmly oppose. Enabled by the new EU Return Regulation, these plans allow people without a right to stay in the EU to be sent to countries with which they have no connection at all. These policies shift people, and responsibility for their safety and rights, out of public sight and beyond scrutiny. No choice of partner country, legal guarantees or institutional oversight can eliminate the fundamental risks associated with such ''return hubs''.

Some Member States are rebranding these "hubs" as 'welcome centres' or 'opportunities' for people on the move. This is a euphemism that masks forced removal, as part of a policy based on a fundamental disregard of migrants' agency, and on the idea that the returning country has discretion over their lives and future. People will be removed to these deportation centres against their will, often after years of living and working in Europe, to a country they may have never lived in, without family, networks or meaningful prospects.

It signals that Member States accept the risk of serious human rights violations against one of the most marginalized groups in society, in return for a deterrence goal that evidence clearly suggests they will not reach. Such cruel measures drive people into further insecurity, and risk making migration routes more dangerous. When Israel deported people to Rwanda and Uganda, they were promised status and safety. But research indicates that many were driven onto dangerous onward journeys and into the hands of human trafficking networks. Rebranding such arrangements does not change their reality: they are forced transfers pushing people outside of the EU blurring the lines of responsibility and jurisdiction, into countries that often have shown disregard for their rights.

Rwanda: no protection, no independent oversight

The recently adopted Return Regulation only allows agreements with countries that respect international human rights standards and the prohibition of refoulement. Rwanda fails this test. Austria's own asylum authority, in its country information on Rwanda, reports torture in detention, arbitrary arrests and impunity within the security services. In 2023, the UK Supreme Court found a real risk of refoulement, noting that people sent to Rwanda under the earlier Israeli deal were regularly moved on covertly to Uganda. In Rwanda, courts are not independent of the government, security forces arrested and detained persons arbitrarily and without due process, complaints of ill-treatment are routinely disregarded and the country has not demonstrated an ability to ensure fair procedures and adequate protection for people forcibly transferred from another country.

Above all, it remains unclear how oversight could work. The Return Regulation requires an independent monitoring mechanism of the agreement or arrangement itself only where onward removals are foreseen, but this is not enough. Monitoring is only effective if violations can be stopped and the Return Regulation does not clarify what happens when violations fall outside of the scope of the agreement or arrangement. Even within the EU, monitoring mechanisms have failed to stop border violence. Where the EU has neither jurisdiction nor enforcement powers, a monitoring mechanism on paper changes nothing.

By relying on third countries to take on its protection obligations, the EU makes itself dependent on non-EU states, enabling third countries to leverage migration in line with their own political agenda. At the same time, such agreements, negotiated amid deep power asymmetries, shift responsibility onto countries that already host more refugees with far fewer resources. They reduce African agency and erode the promise of an equal EU–Africa partnership. By placing its own return agenda above the priorities African countries have recently set out, the EU undermines its credibility as a trusted partner.

Frontex: lack of accountability for rights violations

The Commission's newly proposed Frontex Regulation would allow the agency to support returns in third countries, including a possible role in implementing “return hubs”, subject to an EU agreement. Frontex currently still operates with a de facto lack of accountability: unclear responsibilities between the agency and Member States have long prevented effective judicial accountability. Instead of addressing these failures, the new proposal removes the current obligation to assign at least one Fundamental Rights Monitor to each operation. Frontex would become more powerful, but not more accountable.

The risks associated with “return hubs” are not implementation failures but are the very purpose of the model. We as civil society call on Austria, Denmark, Germany, Greece and the Netherlands to abandon plans to establish the so-called "return hub" in Rwanda and to not transfer people to countries with which they have no meaningful connection. Instead, EU Member States should uphold their international obligations and provide durable solutions with sufficient resources to give people a real chance to become full members of society. These are the values the EU is based on, and we encourage the EU to live up to them.

Signatories:

1. INTERSOS HELLAS, Greece
2. WeMove Europe, EU
3. Greek Council for Refugees (GCR), Greece
4. Jesuit Refugee Service Serbia, Serbia
5. 11.11.11, Belgium
6. JRS Switzerland, Switzerland
7. European Network Against Racism (ENAR), Belgium
8. CNCD-11.11.11, Belgium
9. Fondation pour la promotion des droits, Algeria
10. Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Europe, EU
11. Jesuiten-Flüchtlingsdienst Deutschland, Germany
12. Jesuit Refugee Service, Kosovo
13. Netherlands Refugee Foundation (Stichting Vluchteling), The Netherlands
14. ASKV, The Netherlands
15. Jesuit Refugee Service Poland, Poland
16. Irídia - Centre per la Defensa dels Drets Humans, Spain

17. Klikaktiv, Serbia
18. FEANTSA - European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless, EU
19. Here to Support, The Netherlands
20. Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, Belgium
21. JRS France, France
22. Brot für die Welt, Germany
23. Validity Foundation - Mental Disability Advocacy Centre, Hungary
24. HIAS Europe, Belgium
25. medico international, Germany
26. Dutch Council for Refugees, The Netherlands
27. PRO ASYL, Germany
28. EuroMed Rights, Belgium/Regional
29. Statewatch, United Kingdom
30. Terre des Hommes, Germany
31. Sea-Watch, Germany
32. SOLIDAR, Belgium
33. Equinox Initiative for Racial Justice, EU
34. Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM), EU
35. ECCHR - European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, Germany
36. EPSU European Public Service Unions, EU
37. Red ACOGE, SPAIN
38. asylkoordination austria, Austria
39. Novact, Spain
40. Quaker Council for European Affairs, Belgium
41. ILGA-Europe, Belgium
42. IRC - International Rescue Committee, Belgium
43. JRS Romania, Romania
44. Churches ´Commission for Migrants in Europe CCME(CCME), Belgium, EEU
45. CIRÉ, Belgium
46. SOS Balkanroute, Austria & Bosnia-Herzegowina
47. Human Rights Watch, EU