

Text written following the publication of the guide ‘My Guide to Return’, published by Frontex and intended for children deported alongside their parents

21 July 2026

Open letter to the Director of Frontex

Cynicism becomes harder to resist as we watch what feels like a collective moral failure unfold before our eyes. The latest European legislation on asylum and migration marks a troubling turning point. It calls into question principles at the heart of our rule of law that many of us had come to take for granted. History teaches us that such safeguards are never permanent. Today, it is clear that they are being steadily eroded.

First, the legal barrier has been breached through the weakening of protections for the most vulnerable: foreigners. Yet, foreigners have often served as the testing ground for the erosion of rights, a way to gauge what the public is willing to accept. When the right to asylum is weakened, or when migration law is stripped of its safeguards, it is not only foreigners who lose protection. Our own rights are undermined as well. We should never forget that.

Second, there is the barrier of language itself. Political rhetoric distorts reality and yet it is given the same weight as analyses derived from decades of rigorous scientific research. We have seen this with human rights. We have seen it with climate change. Facts are challenged not with evidence, but with narratives based on fear and political interests.

Amid this erosion of meaning, one principle still remains beyond dispute across society: the need to protect children and uphold their rights. Recent events have shown that much remains to be done, sparking a powerful wave of public mobilisation. And yet it was in this very context that Frontex published ‘My Guide to Return’, a booklet intended to explain deportation to children!

In this guide, deportation is depicted as a relocation, almost as an adventure. The illustrations are bright, colourful and cheerful. Perhaps No doubt we have AI deserves credit for such positive imagery.

Let us read through the guide together:

‘As you go on this journey, you’ll meet various adults. Their job is to help you and your family.’

“Help”, really?

Help: transitive verb. To support (someone) by offering assistance. → assist, aid, rescue, relieve, support. (Source: Oxford English dictionary)

Several years ago, we took in a little boy of about five and his mother. Her asylum application had been rejected. Day after day, the little boy drew the same picture on every sheet of paper

made available to him: a house with a broken roof and shattered windows, a vase lying on the ground with flowers scattered around it, and large dark clouds overhead. He never spoke of the country he had left at such a young age. They had fled a war. His mother told us that his father had witnessed the murder of his own parents, their throats slit before his eyes, and had never recovered from the trauma. In their culture, the dead were not spoken of. So the child kept silent and drew.

We can picture this guide being handed to this child in a detention centre or before boarding the return flight. Such a disconnect between bureaucratic language and human reality is simply heartbreaking.

But let us continue. This is only the beginning.

This is followed by a substantial section on children's rights:

'Just like adults, children and teenagers have rights. Your rights give you the tools you need to survive and thrive, to protect yourself from violence and discrimination...'

Children do indeed have rights, which are enshrined in an international convention. But what are those rights worth when those responsible for upholding them fail to do so?

Another child recently came to us. Born in France to undocumented parents, he has never known any other home. His mother visited our offices last week. She explained that she had fled a forced marriage and an abusive husband, and that her family would never forgive her for doing so. The birth of her son, out of wedlock, became a further source of threats. The child was regarded as a curse and blamed for the death of his aunt.

This child has rights. Will those rights protect him -and keep him alive once he arrives in his mother's country of origin? Who will protect him from violence? Who will ensure his survival?

Beneath the paragraph reminding the child that they have rights is an image of a father, his son and a police officer. This is followed by a list of the rights set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, accompanied by cheerful rainbow-coloured illustrations.

The contrast speaks for itself.

The guide then walks the child through the various stages of the return process, using the simplistic language of a mediocre children's book. At the end of each section, a box entitled "resources" encourages the child to share their feelings with a trusted adult, assuring them that speaking about their feelings may help them feel better.

Once again, the dissonance is difficult to ignore.

After the notification, the process of registration is explained to the children: having their photograph taken, having their fingerprints taken 'if you are older'. It should be noted here that fingerprints may now be taken from children as young as six years old.

Notification, registration, potential detention.

France has been condemned eleven times for detaining children in detention centres, a practice deemed inhuman and degrading, and therefore contrary to Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

But the guide manages to present this stage almost as if it were a summer camp: 'Before you and your family return to your country of origin, you may have to stay in a building with other families who are waiting to travel...' Deportation thus becomes just another journey. The accompanying illustration shows children playing with a ball, while others are on the swings with their parents sitting on a bench nearby.

What detention centre resembles a nursery?

Cynicism and cruelty, dressed up as kindness.

Next comes the moment of departure, and the booklet turns into a holiday workbook. The journey to the aeroplane will be made with escorts, and the child can try to guess the colour of their waistcoat, which will brighten up their uniform.

We could give our children the rest of this booklet before their first flight: the large suitcase in the hold and the hand luggage, the toys or books they can keep with them. A proper holiday!

At last, the future.

With a new home (or perhaps not, but the guide does not say), a new school (or perhaps not, but the guide doesn't say) and a new teacher, who *might* be nice. So what is this 'might' doing in such an idyllic setting?

And finally, this extraordinary claim: 'New things are always exciting. Don't be afraid to discover new things. (...) You'll be able to make new, friendly friends and discover new sweets!'

The cynicism is breathtaking.

On the back cover, Frontex invites anyone with comments to send them to the email address provided.

After reading this guide, we wavered for a brief moment between disgust, resignation and anger. At this historic moment, as we witness an impoverishment of public debate and the erosion of the moral and legal safeguards upon which Europe was built, we cannot resign ourselves to this.

We are sending you this letter so that it may never be said that citizens across Europe remained silent in the face of such cynicism and abject behaviour

Yours faithfully,

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