



Study on the way towards a comprehensive, integrated and digitalised EU migration management system

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1 Background and context

1.1 Introduction

The EU's return system is built on the principles of effectiveness and respect for fundamental rights, with the Return Directive³ providing common standards for returning non-EU nationals staying irregularly in the European Union (EU). In recent years, the Commission has taken steps to strengthen and harmonise this system, including the adoption of the EU Strategy on Return and Reintegration⁴, the SIS Return Regulation⁵, and the appointment of a Return Coordinator to enhance cooperation among Member States.

Most recently, the Commission has published a proposal for a new Return Regulation⁶ aimed at simplifying and accelerating return procedures across the EU. This is part of a broader shift outlined in the 2024–2029 Political Guidelines⁷ and the Commission Work Programme 2025⁸, which call for a more coherent and digitalised approach to migration management.

This study contributes to this effort through two related objectives:

- **Objective 1:** Exploring steps towards a comprehensive, integrated, and digital EU migration management system; and
- **Objective 2:** Advancing the digitalisation of case management systems for return, readmission, and reintegration.

The study has analysed the current landscape of digital systems used across Member States in relation to RRR processes, identified key problems and objectives, and developed a set of policy options — including a preferred option — to support further digitalisation in these areas.

The findings from Objective 2 are intended to support the Commission's Impact Assessment that will accompany an upcoming legislative initiative on the digitalisation of case management systems for return, readmission, and reintegration. The Impact Assessment study is being conducted in

³ European Commission (2008). Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2008 on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals. Available at: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/dir/2008/115/oj>

⁴ European Commission (2021). COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL The EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration. Available online at : <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021DC0120>

⁵ European Commission (2018). Regulation (EU) 2018/1860 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 November 2018 on the use of the Schengen Information System for the return of illegally staying third-country nationals. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2018/1860/oj/eng>

⁶ European Commission (2025). Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the Union. Available online at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52025PC0101>

⁷ Ursula von der Leyen (2024). Europe's Choice. Political Guidelines for the next European Commission. 2024-2029 (pp. 16-17). Available at: https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en?filename=Political%20Guidelines%202024-2029_EN.pdf.

⁸ European Commission (2025). Commission Work Programme 2025: Moving forward together: A bolder, simpler, faster Union (p. 7). Available online: https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/f80922dd-932d-4c4a-a18c-d800837fbb23_en?filename=COM_2025_45_1_EN.pdf

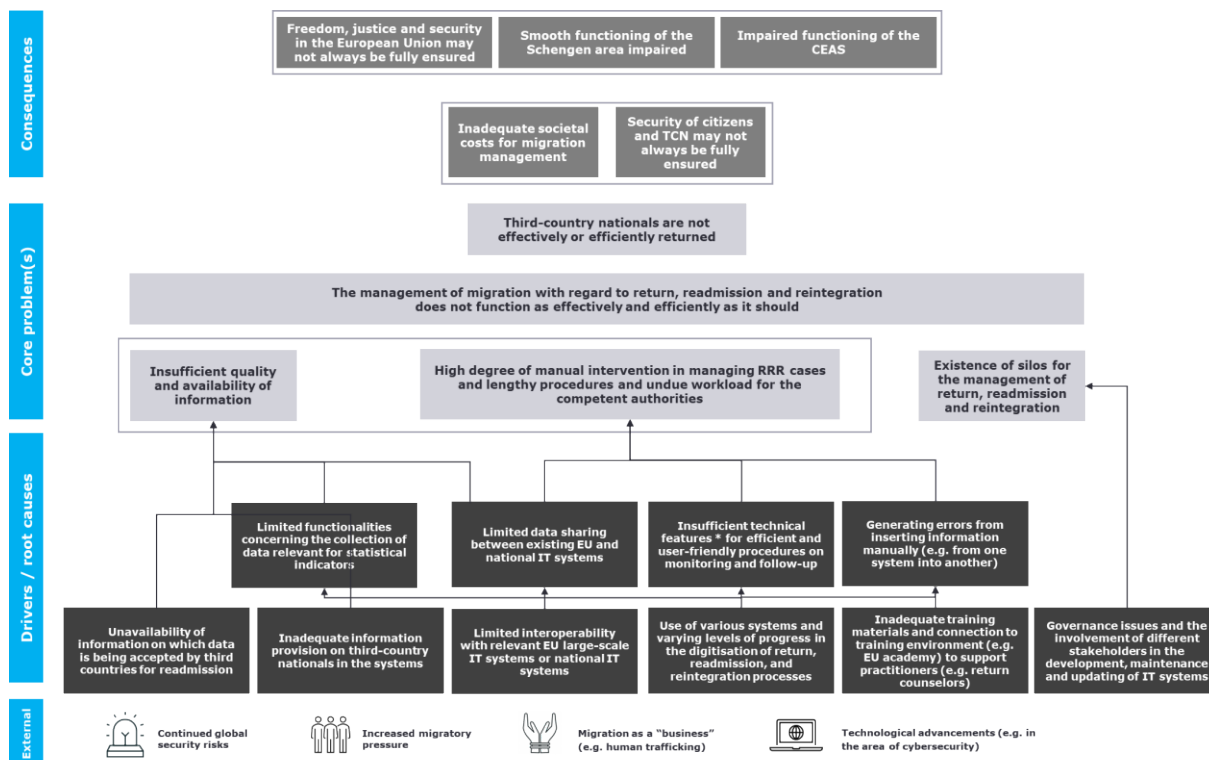
accordance with the Better Regulation Guidelines and Toolbox, and addresses the following questions:

- What is the problem and why is it a problem?
- Why should the EU act?
- What should be achieved?
- What are the various options to achieve the objectives?
- What are the impacts of the policy options?
- How do the options compare?
- What is the preferred policy option?
- How will actual impacts be monitored and evaluated?

1.2 What is the problem and why is it a problem?

The study identified a range of core problems and related drivers (causes) that hinder effective digitalisation of migration management, which are visualised in the problem tree below. The tree is read from bottom to top by first identifying drivers and root causes, which lead to the core problems (presented on the second layer, above the drivers). The central problem is positioned in the middle of the tree. The consequences of the core problems may be found at the top of the tree, reflecting the logical progression from underlying issues to broader impacts. The consequences reflect Treaty objectives.

Figure 1 - Problem tree



Source: Authors' elaboration.

At the heart of the problem assessment lies the ineffective and inefficient digital management of return processes for third-country nationals (TCNs) without a right to stay in the EU. This inefficiency is primarily driven by a fragmented landscape of national case management systems, which vary significantly in their availability, functionality, and integration across the Member States. Such fragmentation leads to poor quality and availability of information, resulting in lengthy procedures and increased workloads for authorities.

Key drivers of these core problems include inadequate information provision on TCNs, which hampers the ability of national authorities to make informed decisions. Additionally, limited interoperability between EU and national systems restricts the flow of accurate and reliable information, further complicating RRR processes. Governance challenges, including insufficient resources and competing institutional mandates, hinder the maintenance and upgrading of these systems, exacerbating the existing inefficiencies.

The consequences of these problems are far-reaching. Digital inefficiencies contribute to a low return rate of irregular TCNs, which undermines the credibility of both EU and national systems, eroding public trust in the rule of law. TCNs face inconsistent procedures and legal uncertainties, which can lead to prolonged processing times and increased risks of absconding. Moreover, the overall effectiveness of the Schengen area and the Common European Asylum System (CEAS)⁹ is compromised, limiting the EU's ability to enforce common migration policies effectively.

1.3 Why should the EU act?

The study highlights the necessity for EU action, grounded in the legal framework provided by Articles 79(1) and 79(2)(c) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU). These Articles empower the EU to develop a common immigration policy aimed at ensuring efficient migration management and combating illegal immigration, including the return of TCNs.

The challenges affecting the EU's common system for returns significantly hinder the implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum¹⁰ and smooth functioning of the Schengen area. The underlying problems cannot be resolved through isolated national initiatives, as they fail to ensure interoperability and consistent data exchange throughout all Member States, leading to inefficiencies and increased costs in cooperation and coordination. Therefore, EU-level intervention is essential to centrally coordinate efforts, ensure operational efficiency, and achieve effective outcomes that align with EU objectives.

⁹ European Commission (n.d.). Common European Asylum System (CEAS). Available online at: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/common-european-asylum-system-ceas_en

¹⁰ European Commission (2024). Pact on Migration and Asylum. Available at: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en.

1.4 What should be achieved?

The objectives of any potential future EU initiative are summarised in the objectives tree below. The objectives have been derived from the problem assessment.

Figure 2 - Objectives tree



Source: Authors' elaboration.

The general and specific objectives identified in the figure above are consistent with EU policies related to the digital management of RRR processes, particularly the Pact on Migration and Asylum¹¹ and the proposed Common European System for Returns¹² as well as the with the CEAS.¹³ Additionally, they are consistent with multiple legal instruments and funding priorities (e.g under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF)¹⁴, Internal Security Fund (ISF)¹⁵, Border Management and Visa Instrument (BMVI)¹⁶ or Horizon Europe¹⁷), ensuring a comprehensive approach to migration management across the EU.

1.5 What are the various options to achieve the objectives?

In addition to the baseline scenario (i.e. no action would be taken other than what is currently already planned or ongoing; see Figure 3 in the Annex), the study identified three policy options to address the existing problems and fulfil the policy objectives. Each option is designed to achieve the specific objectives that align with the overarching goals of the Pact on

¹¹ European Commission (2024). Pact on Migration and Asylum. Available at: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en.

¹² European Commission (2025). Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the Union. Available online at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52025PC0101>.

¹³ European Commission (2016). Towards a Reform of the Common European Asylum System and Enhancing Legal Avenues to Europe. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52016DC0197>.

¹⁴ European Commission (2025). Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (2021-2027). Available online at: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/funding/asylum-migration-and-integration-funds/asylum-migration-and-integration-fund-2021-2027_en

¹⁵ European Commission (2025). Internal Security Fund (2021-2027). Available online at: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/funding/internal-security-funds/internal-security-fund-2021-2027_en

¹⁶ European Commission (2025). Border Management and Visa Instrument (2021-27). Available online at: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/funding/borders-and-visa-funds/integrated-border-management-fund-border-management-and-visa-instrument-2021-27_en

¹⁷ European Commission (n.d.). Horizon Europe. Available online at: https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe_en

Migration and Asylum. Visualisations of each policy option may be found in the Annex for further clarification.

Policy option 1 (“Raising the floor”): Introduction of a **hybrid model** for the digital case management of RRR processes **without a new central EU database**.

The case management system **for return** is developed at **national level**, (based on the Frontex RECAMAS Model or, for the willing Member States, based on a reference implementation of the RECAMAS Model (i.e. an off-the-shelf IT tool) that Member States will be able to customise to their specific needs. The case management system **for readmission and reintegration** is developed at **EU level** (based on RCMS and RIAT) and integrated in the national case management systems.

This option will improve data sharing via the establishment of a secure communication channel (‘the Communication Portal’) to boost the effectiveness of RRR processes and share the data that cannot be shared via existing or upcoming EU Information Systems (e.g. SIS, Eurodac).

By leveraging existing infrastructures, this option seeks to create a more integrated system for better communication and coordination among Member States, allowing for rapid implementation while ensuring a minimum standard of digitisation and interoperability with EU Information Systems. This includes linking RECAMAS to the Schengen Information System (SIS) and RIAT to Eurodac for logging reintegration support. A detailed visualisation of policy option 1 can be found in Figure 4 in the Annex.

Policy option 2 (“Raising the ceiling”): Introduction of a **hybrid model** for the digital case management of RRR processes **with an EU central database**.

Just as in policy option 1, the case management system **for return** is developed at **national level**, while the case management system **for readmission and reintegration** is developed at **EU level** and integrated in the national case management systems.

An **EU central database dedicated to return, readmission and reintegration is created** to facilitate the sharing of the relevant data between Member States. The connection between the EU central database and national case management systems is made through a uniform interface. A detailed visualisation of policy option 2 can be found in Figure 5 in the Annex.

Policy option 3 (“Europeanisation”): Introduction of a **fully centralised system** for the digital case management of RRR processes **with an EU central database**, mandating the use of a **single EU case management system** for return, readmission and reintegration. This option aims at eliminating fragmentation in case management across the

EU. The system would require all Member States to operate under a unified framework, ensuring that data is consistently managed and shared across borders. A detailed visualisation of policy option 3 can be found in Figure 6 in the Annex.

1.6 What are the impacts of the policy options?

For informed decision-making, it is essential to understand the potential impacts of each policy option. Below an overview of the main advantages and disadvantages of each policy option is provided. This serves as a basis for comparing the options and their impacts in various dimensions, as described in more detail in Table 4.

Policy option 1 - Hybrid without central database

The table below provides an overview of the main advantages and disadvantages of policy option 1.

Table 1 - Main advantages and disadvantages of policy option 1

Main advantages	Main disadvantages
Rapid deployment: Due to building on existing systems, the case management system will be operational comparatively fast	Short-term focus: The emphasis on rapid implementation may re-sult in insufficient attention to long-term strategic considerations, potentially leading to future challenges such as integration issues or the need for costly adjustments
Increased harmonisation: national RECAMAS will be harmonised based on the Frontex RECAMAS Model and RCMS and RIAT will be EU systems integrated into national RECAMAS.	Dependency on existing systems: The effectiveness of PO1 is contingent upon the completeness of information stored in existing EU Information Systems (e.g. SIS), which may not improve adequately.
Flexibility: The option provides substantial flexibility for Member States on return case management, enabling them to utilise existing infrastructures tailored to their needs.	Limited scope of information exchange: Information exchange through the Communication Portal will be limited to case-by-case needs.
Established infrastructure: Leveraging existing national return systems, the existing RCMS and RIAT and EU Information Systems facilitates quicker implementation and reduces the need for extensive training, ensuring a smoother transition.	
Reduced technical complexity: The absence of a central database simplifies the technical architecture and allows for an easier integration into existing national infrastructures.	

Main advantages	Main disadvantages
Streamlined communication: The introduction of a secure communication channel (the Communication Portal) is expected to reduce cumbersome and fragmented information exchanges between authorities.	
Improved coordination: Enhanced direct coordination among authorities is anticipated, diminishing the tendency to work in silos and improving overall efficiency in managing RRR.	
Timely responses: The option is expected to enable quicker responses and decisions in urgent RRR cases, thereby improving the overall effectiveness.	

Source: Author's elaboration.

Policy option 2 - Hybrid with central database

The table below provides an overview of the main advantages and disadvantages of policy option 2.

Table 2 - Main advantages and disadvantages of policy option 2

Main advantages	Main disadvantages
Central database access: The EU central database allows for direct access to case data across the Member States, improving data availability and quality for informed decision-making	High implementation costs: Estimated costs for implementation are significant placing a financial burden on Member States and the EU budget
Support for less digitised Member States: Offers advanced technical solutions to less digitised Member States, promoting uniformity and coherence in digital migration management	Delayed benefits: The central database is expected to take several years to become operational, meaning existing problems will persist during this period, delaying the realisation of benefits
Utilisation of existing systems: Builds on existing national systems for return case management, allowing for a smoother transition and minimising the need for complete system overhauls	Limited added value: Much of the data can already be shared via existing EU IT systems, raising questions about the immediate value of the new central database

Source: Author's elaboration.

Policy option 3 - Centralised system

The table below provides an overview of the main advantages and disadvantages of policy option 3.

Table 3 - Main advantages and disadvantages of policy option 3

Main advantages	Main disadvantages
Streamlined processes: A centralised approach could simplify operations, reduce coordination needs, and enhance efficiency by automating processes	Complex implementation: Migrating data to a central system is expected to be complex, potentially delaying the system's launch and diverting resources
Unified system: Establishes a centralised EU case management system, enhancing data sharing and reducing fragmentation among Member States	High sunk costs: Member States will incur significant costs maintaining existing systems until the new system becomes operational, leading to financial strain
Long-term efficiency gains: Although initial implementation may be slow, the long-term benefits could lead to reduced operational costs and improved migration management	Limited immediate impact: The expected benefits may only materialise in the long term, with initial inefficiencies and operational costs persisting during the transition

Source: Author's elaboration.

2 Annex

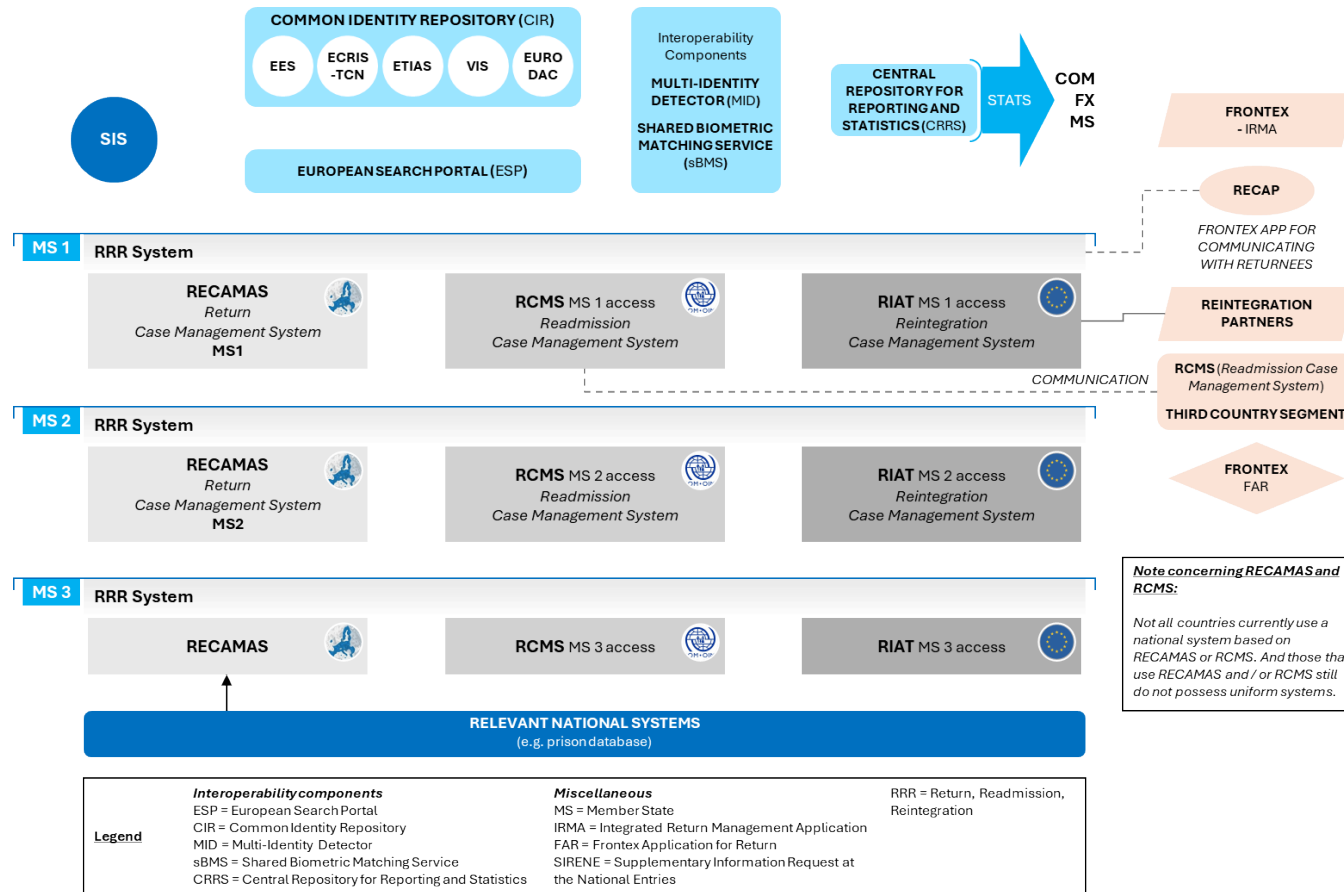
This Annex provides the visualisations of the three different policy options analysed in this study.

2.1 Policy option 0 – Baseline scenario

Figure 3 – Infographic for the expected baseline scenario¹⁹

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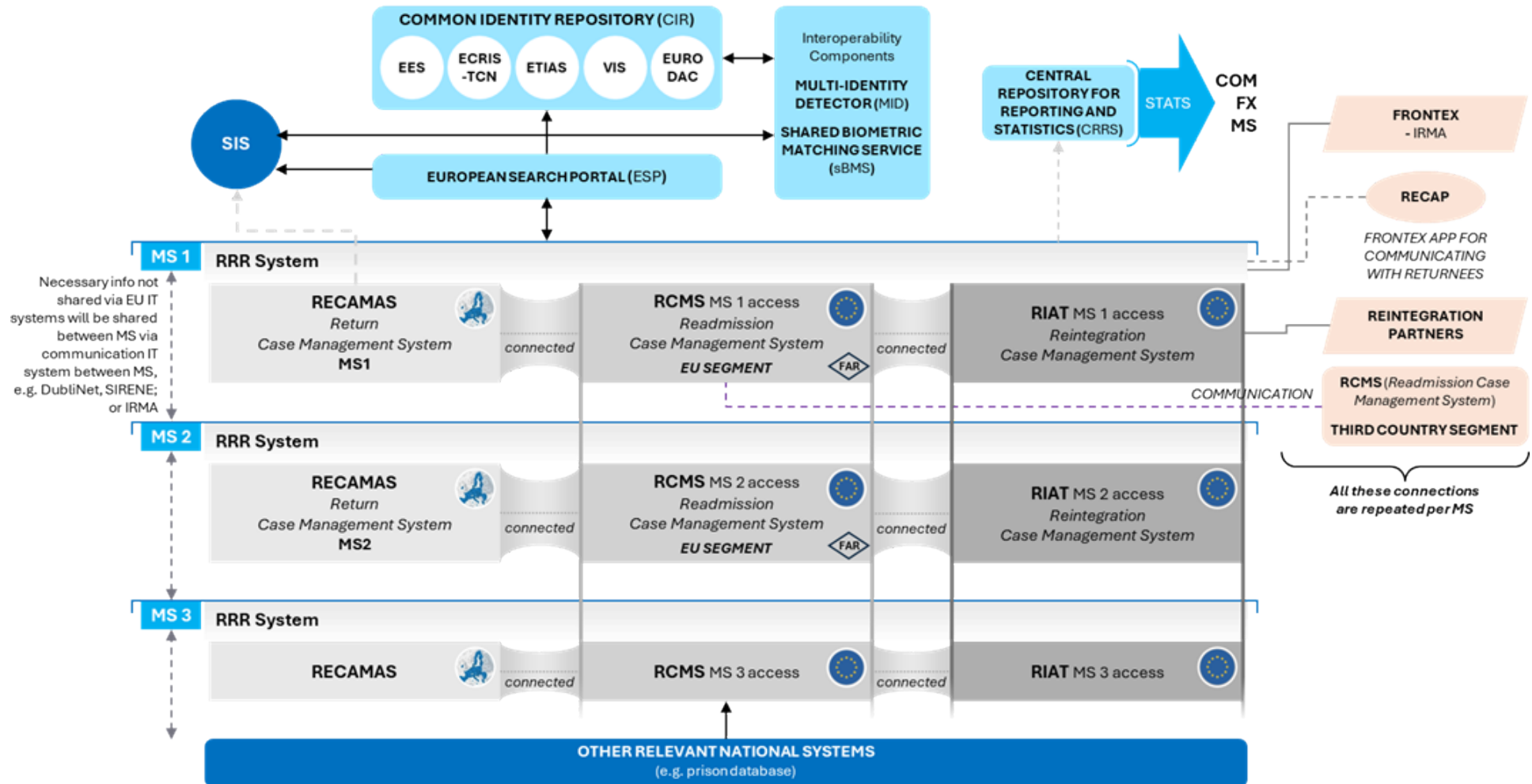


Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Commission draft.

¹⁹ Please note that the figure depicts the baseline scenario expected in the near future given that certain IT systems, including RE-CAP, EES, and ETIAS, are not operational as of today.

2.2 Policy option 1 – Hybrid option without central database

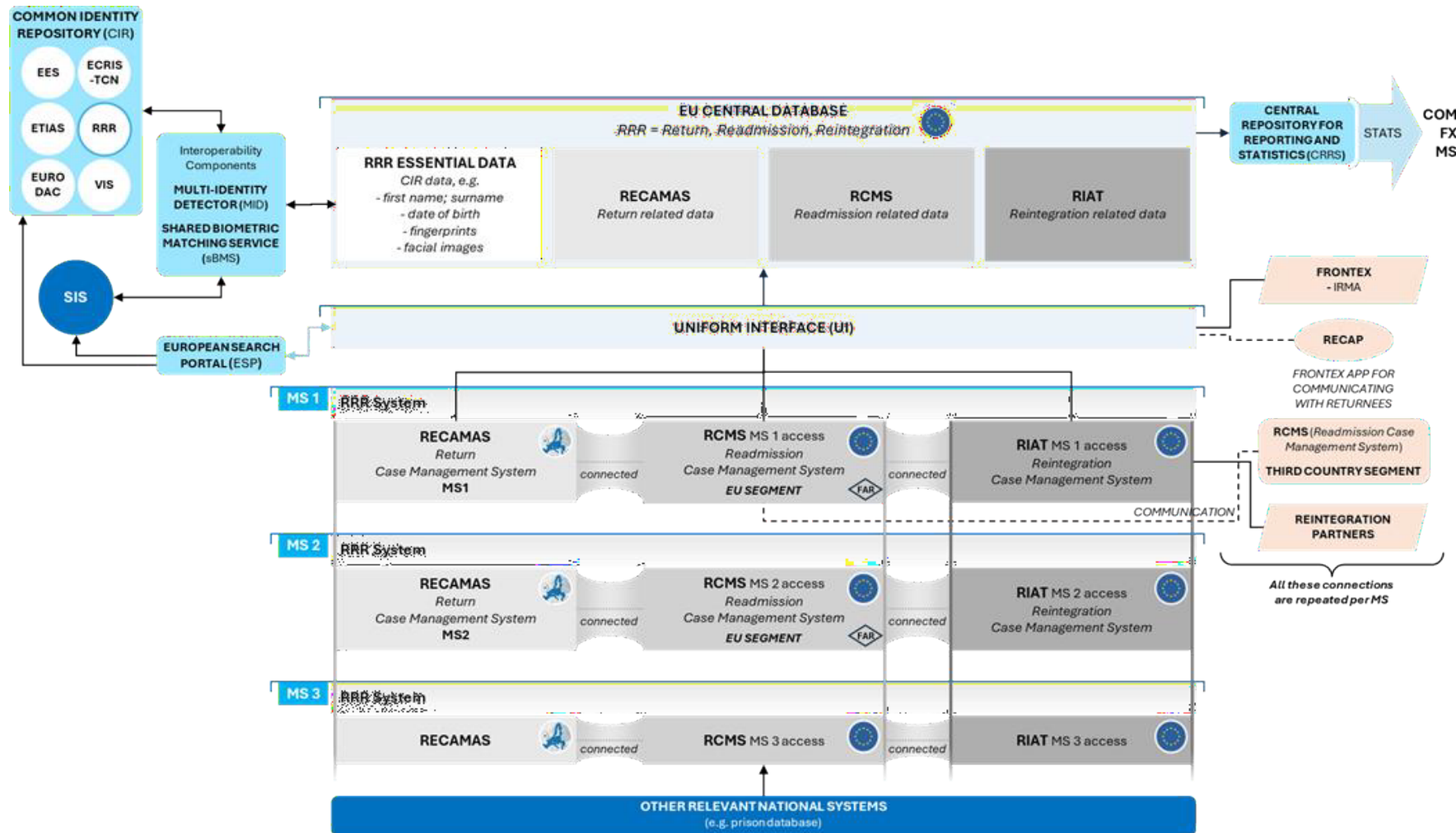
Figure 4 – Infographic for PO1: “Hybrid option without central database”



Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Commission draft.

2.3 Policy option 2 – Hybrid option with central database

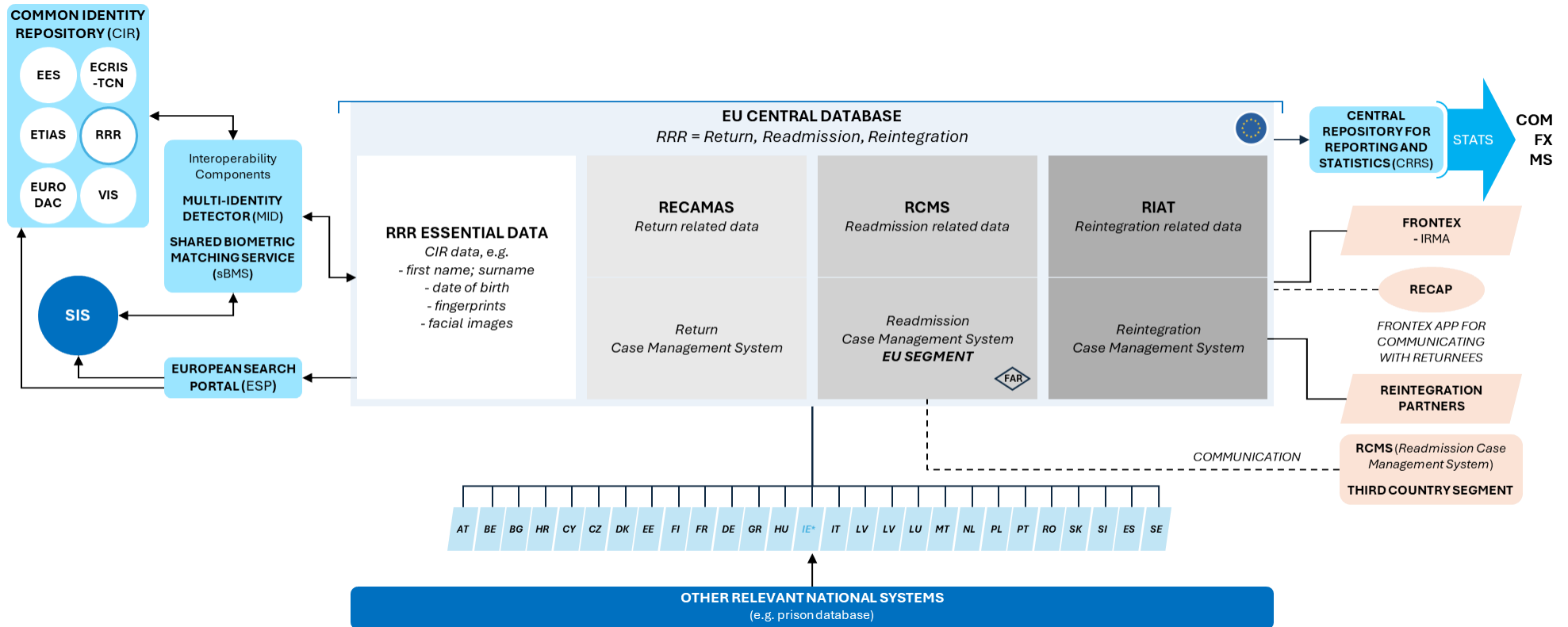
Figure 5 – Infographic for PO2: “Hybrid option with central database”



Source: Authors' elaboration based on European Commission draft.

2.4 Policy option 3 – Centralised system

Figure 6 – Infographic for PO3: “Centralised system”



Source: Author's elaboration based on European Commission draft.²⁰

²⁰ It should be noted that compared to the original provided by the Commission, the arrow to the ESP has been changed so that Member States query the ESP via the central database.

