

EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration

Crafting a Road Map to Better Cooperation with Migrants' Countries of Origin

MAY 2021

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Executive Summary

The return and reintegration of irregular migrants and asylum seekers whose claims are denied have long been a top priority for European policymakers. With estimates that only about one-third of those ordered to return actually leave EU territory, some policymakers see this low return rate as a threat to EU efforts to curb irregular migration and a signal that EU migration and asylum systems are not credible. Some are also concerned about how returns are conducted, with forced returns shown to lead to serious psychological harm for some returnees and uncertain prospects for sustainable reintegration. The new EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration, released in April 2021, draws on these considerations and outlines a series of principles to increase the number of voluntary returns, make the return process more dignified, and provide better support to migrants once they return.

This strategy is a step forward in the creation of a common EU system for returns, one of the key ambitions of the European Commission's New Pact on Migration and Asylum, which was released in September 2020. Thus, the strategy lays out measures to improve voluntary return mechanisms, from outreach activities to increase migrants' awareness of the return and reintegration assistance available, to better counselling on their legal options. It also aims

to strengthen coordination and exchanges between EU Member States so that they do not duplicate efforts and are able to learn from each other's experiences with assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programs. But to achieve the objectives showcased in the strategy, European policymakers also need to look outwards and invest in an often-neglected dimension of AVRR—cooperation with migrants' countries of origin. At the operational level, such cooperation can improve AVRR programming through more tailored outreach and counselling to potential AVRR beneficiaries, streamlined return travel, better support for returnees and the communities in which they settle, and more robust monitoring and evaluation. Cooperation can also improve linkages between reintegration assistance and international development projects and national and local policies, potentially creating a more fertile environment for returnees' reintegration. At the strategic level, a lack of engagement with countries of origin can be a missed opportunity to build stronger migration partnerships.

To achieve the objectives showcased in the strategy, European policymakers also need to look outwards and invest in an often-neglected dimension of AVRR—cooperation with migrants' countries of origin.

Among European policymakers and, to some extent, countries-of-origin stakeholders, there is a general consensus that more engagement with their counterparts in the returns process is needed. But despite this agreement in theory, the objectives and priorities of origin and destination countries often do not fully match, and they sometimes contradict each other. As the European Commission and EU Member States contemplate how best to take action on the guiding principles laid out in the new strategy, a first step should be to better understand the agenda of their partners on this topic, what drives it, and the challenges and structural limitations that shape what can be achieved. For instance, many European policymakers primarily aim to increase the number of returns, whereas origin-country governments are more concerned about the importance of remittances for many low- and middle-income countries and about assisting their nationals stranded abroad—issues that have taken on added weight during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, authorities in countries of destination and origin may find common ground in supporting the reintegration of returnees, both on an individual level and to mitigate the potential pressures large numbers of returns may place on local job markets and public service infrastructure.

Exchanges at the bilateral and multilateral levels should help to identify areas where countries of origin may be willing to intensify their cooperation with the European Union—for instance, in raising awareness about AVRR programs and providing counselling for migrants about their legal options. EU Member States and countries of origin have different ideas on what the ultimate goal of disseminating information about AVRR should be—increasing the uptake for voluntary returns versus assisting vulnerable nationals—but they share a desire to better inform migrants about the options available to them.

A next step in the road map to improved coordination would be for the European Commission, EU Member States, and origin countries to marry support for the reintegration of individual migrants with more structural efforts to create favorable conditions in regions of origin. This may involve, for instance, development programs to improve public service delivery, create a dynamic business environment, entrench the rule of law, or increase climate resilience. These efforts need to be tailored to the specific context, in terms of what investments to prioritize and which stakeholders should be involved on the ground. European policymakers may opt, for instance, to work with civil society in countries where the central government’s ability to effectively deliver public services is limited. In turn, policymakers in a number of countries of origin have expressed their reluctance to coordinate with actors directly engaged in forced returns.

The European Commission’s voluntary return and reintegration strategy has the potential to kickstart a new chapter for EU-funded AVRR programs, one that addresses this critical gap in cooperation with origin-country stakeholders and brings AVRR to the next level. To do so, the European Commission, EU Member States, origin-country actors, and service partners should focus on making progress in five areas:

- 1 identifying concrete areas for joint action through dialogue between countries of origin and destination, including bilateral and multilateral, formal and informal exchange;
- 2 strengthening AVRR program operations by establishing or consolidating information exchange channels between origin- and destination-country stakeholders;
- 3 improving support for migrants who choose to return through targeted and coordinated efforts, for example by helping them prepare reintegration plans outlining what

AVRR assistance and public services will be available to them;

- 4 strengthening origin countries' engagement on voluntary return and reintegration, including by supporting their efforts to formalize their policy frameworks on these issues and to coordinate between the different AVRR programs active in the country; and
- 5 making reintegration support more impactful for returnees and their communities, as well as more sustainable, by improving links between AVRR programs, development plans, and other international projects.

The pandemic has created a new sense of urgency around AVRR programming. It has intensified existing challenges associated with reintegrating migrants into the labor markets and social fabric of origin communities, many of which have been hit hard by the public-health and economic crisis. Heightened cooperation between the European Union and countries of origin will not happen overnight. Both parties need to engage in sustained dialogue and recognize that there are some areas where each will remain bound by its own internal constraints. However, regular engagement, pragmatic cooperation, and strategic investment in capacity-building will pave the way toward stronger and more tailored partnerships on voluntary returns and reintegration.

1 Introduction

The return and reintegration of irregular migrants and asylum seekers whose claims are denied have long been at the center of the European migration policy agenda.¹ Many European policymakers are concerned that only about one-third of the people ordered to return eventually leave the European Union, and consider this low return rate a weakness that hampers efforts to curb irregular migration.² In-

creasing returns is therefore a top priority in EU circles—including voluntary returns, a term that refers to the assisted or spontaneous return of migrants to a third country based on their own decision. Such returns account for less than one-third of all returns from the European Union, though research suggests they are both more humane and less costly than forced returns.³ Return policies and operations are also considered by many European officials as the linchpin of well-functioning migration and asylum systems.⁴ The European Commission's New Pact on Migration and Asylum, released in September 2020, echoes this position and presents investing in return (including voluntary return) as a key focus.

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A half a year after launching the pact, the Commission published its first common European Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration in April 2021.⁵ With voluntary return having been identified as an area in which the Commission aims to make rapid progress, the strategy's primary goals are to move toward a common EU system for voluntary returns, to address discrepancies between the assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programs of EU Member States, and ultimately to increase the number of voluntary returns. To do so, the European Commission outlines a series of measures ranging from coordination efforts between Member States' AVRR schemes, support to improve counselling to help migrants understand their legal options and encourage them to consider voluntary return, and measures to make support for returnees as they settle in their countries of origin more relevant, impactful, and sustainable.⁶ The strategy also points to the need to cultivate a sense of ownership among migrants' countries of origin and transit⁷ over

AVRR—often considered one of the main weaknesses of these programs.

Despite the fact that AVRR initiatives have existed for more than 40 years, the role of country-of-origin partners has historically been limited, causing frustration for both destination and origin countries. Better cooperation is indeed not merely a “nice to have” piece of such programs; it is a critical element to helping ensure that initiatives run smoothly for individual returnees and that they benefit broader receiving communities. At the strategic level, a lack of engagement between the European Commission, EU Member States, and governments in countries of origin constitutes a missed opportunity to strengthen partnerships on migration and other policy areas of shared interest. But while the principle of closer cooperation between origin and destination countries enjoys broad support on paper—among EU Member States, the European Commission, and at least some countries of origin⁸—there are multiple barriers preventing a smooth transition from paper to practice.

This policy brief explores notable ways in which origin- and destination-country priorities diverge, opportunities for cooperation, and possible next steps for building on the principles laid out in the EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration. As a starting point, European policymakers and their origin-country counterparts need to acknowledge the differences in how they approach voluntary return and reintegration, and then carve out areas where their interests align. Doing so, including via dialogue at the bilateral and regional levels, will help policymakers craft a joint road map on AVRR, with concrete actions such as sharing information on returnees and reintegration activities, increasing operational cooperation to facilitate travel, and strengthening public service delivery in regions of origin.

2 Diverging Policy Priorities on Voluntary Return and Reintegration

Countries of destination and origin approach voluntary return and reintegration from very different angles. While policymakers in many countries of destination view the credibility of their broader migration and asylum systems as dependent on the effectiveness of their return policy, countries of origin may be highly dependent on remittances and, thus, not inclined to support any form of return (beyond efforts by some to attract members of their diasporas). Many origin-country governments are also aware that cooperation with the European Union and destination countries elsewhere on return may trigger public backlash domestically.⁹ Finally, countries of origin may be concerned that the return of migrants will create difficulties in regions of origin, by increasing pressure on the job market and public service delivery. These divergences are significant and have stalled many efforts by European policymakers to improve cooperation on return with partner countries. However, voluntary returns and support for returnees’ reintegration may be an area where there are tangible opportunities to build cooperation around converging goals.

Indeed, there is emerging consensus between EU actors, EU Member States, and some countries of origin that better coordination is needed for reintegration activities to address the needs of returnees and generate long-term gains. Doing so, however, first requires unpacking how AVRR programs work and what countries’ interests are in them, including when they align and when they collide. Destination countries (including EU Member States) initiate and fund most AVRR programs, which usually target

asylum seekers whose claims are rejected, irregular migrants, and vulnerable groups of migrants in a European or third country.¹⁰ These initiatives provide support to migrants who agree to return to their origin countries in doing so and settling in communities there (see Box 1). Destination-country governments usually fund service partners such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to deliver reintegration activities, often without strong coordination with either governments or civil society in countries of origin, raising concerns about the programs' sustainability and the ability of returnees to quickly access public services and achieve social reintegration.¹¹

A. *Destination Countries' Agenda*

For destination countries, support for voluntary return and reintegration is largely rooted in the link made between enforcing return decisions and building a well-functioning migration and asylum system—one that welcomes those who are entitled to stay but ensures that those who have received a return decision leave the European Union. For some policymakers, voluntary return is also a way to assist vulnerable and stranded migrants, and reintegration efforts a way to help alleviate the pressure on receiving communities in countries of origin. The first voluntary return programs were launched in the 1970s, to assist migrant guest workers in going home (due

BOX 1 Main Components of AVRR Programs

Assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programs benefit migrants who decide to return to their origin countries by providing assistance for travel and reintegration in their community of origin. The selection criteria for these projects vary, but beneficiaries typically include stranded migrants, irregular migrants, asylum seekers whose claims have been denied or who are unlikely to gain refugee status, victims of trafficking, and other vulnerable groups such as people with health issues and unaccompanied migrant children.

AVRR candidates are usually provided with counselling about their legal options and the eligibility criteria and benefits of the program. Migrants who decide to return receive predeparture orientation and travel assistance. Once in their country of origin, they can access a reintegration package (financial and/or in-kind support), usually with the aim of helping them become self-reliant. Most AVRR programs focus on economic reintegration, often considered the centerpiece of the process, with activities such as start-up grants, job placements, and vocational training. Investments in the social and psychosocial dimensions of the reintegration process tend to be more limited, but a number of programs offer access to a counsellor, help connect returnees with public services (e.g., documentation, health care, education, housing), and include outreach to communities of origin to change negative perceptions of return and sensitize them to the challenges many returnees face. Finally, some AVRR interventions have a broader focus and aim to build the resilience of communities of origin, so as to mitigate the pressures of welcoming returnees (e.g., by supporting private sector development or by strengthening public services in localities of return).

Sources: Samuel Hall and University of Sussex, *Mentoring Returnees: Study on Reintegration Outcomes through a Comparative Lens* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2020); European Commission, European Council on Refugees and Exiles, International Centre for Migration Policy Development, and Matrix Insight Ltd., *Comparative Study on Best Practices to Interlink Pre-Departure Reintegration Measures Carried out in Member States with Short- and Long-Term Reintegration Measures in the Countries of Return* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2012).

to the interruption of these programs and rising unemployment after the oil crisis) and, increasingly, to encourage asylum seekers whose claims were rejected to return to their origin countries.¹² In 1977, France was the first European country to launch a voluntary return program with a financial package to incentivize migrants who no longer had a job to move back to their origin countries.¹³

Today, many European countries consider AVRR the most effective and dignified approach to the return of asylum seekers whose cases are denied and other migrants without legal status. Voluntary return allows migrants to prepare for their return, in terms of making plans for their reintegration, deciding on where to settle, and notifying relatives and acquaintances. It is also sometimes the only option available to governments that do not have return and readmission agreements with migrants' origin countries.¹⁴ Forced returns also come with a greater human toll and can strain relations with partner countries. Detention and other punitive measures are often used during the forced return process, and they can lead to severe psychological stress among returnees.¹⁵ Finally, voluntary returns appear to be cheaper overall.¹⁶ For example, a 2018 study by the European Parliamentary Research Service calculated that the fiscal cost of forced return was about six times greater than that of voluntary return.¹⁷

This combination of factors has convinced more EU Member States to launch their own AVRR programs, especially once the European Union created a Return Fund in 2008 to support these activities.¹⁸ In 2004, before the fund's creation, there were 20 AVRR programs operating out of 18 EU countries; by 2015, there were 87 programs being run by 23 countries. But the demand for AVRR among potential returnees has remained limited.¹⁹ The low uptake has led several EU countries to upgrade their reintegration activities, motivated in part by the assumption that more enticing support packages would convince more migrants to apply for AVRR.²⁰ For example, in

2005, the United Kingdom increased the benefits provided to voluntary returnees, while also stepping up public outreach around the scheme.²¹ Several studies on AVRR programs in the United Kingdom and Norway have shown, however, that financial incentives are rarely the deciding factor in migrants' choice to return—even though monetary support could ultimately improve their situation once they do.²²

Still, European countries now see reintegration support as a key corollary of assistance to voluntary return, driven by the specific agendas of different ministries and how each of them defines successful and sustainable reintegration.²³ From a home affairs perspective, for example, better reintegration mechanisms should ensure that people are more willing to consider the option to return and, once returned, are less likely to migrate again because they are satisfied with their situation.²⁴ Some also argue that good cooperation with origin countries on AVRR could ultimately produce better outcomes when negotiating return and readmission agreements.²⁵ Development actors are inclined to go beyond individual support schemes and leverage reintegration assistance to further development goals in regions of return. As such, they often seek to link reintegration packages with local development strategies and interventions by collaborating closely with countries of origin, ultimately turning the process into an opportunity for returnees and communities of origin (regardless of returnees' decision to leave again in the future). Finally, foreign policy actors are typically more interested in leveraging AVRR projects to garner goodwill and improve broader cooperation with countries of origin. Despite efforts to implement a whole-of-government approach, these interests may not align, and they can even contradict each other in some cases, but they have all contributed to European countries' decision to invest in voluntary return and strengthen reintegration support. They are also reflected in the new EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration.²⁶ In the process of expanding the

scope of reintegration activities, the European Commission and EU Member States have come to realize that better coordination is needed among themselves and with their origin-country counterparts, even though the agendas of those partners similarly vary.

B. *Motivations for Origin Countries' Engagement*

Countries of origin have traditionally engaged on return from a very different perspective. Their citizens often depend on the remittances of migrants abroad, meaning that cooperating with destination countries on return risks putting policymakers at odds with their constituency,²⁷ and some have concerns about their ability to deliver adequate services to vulnerable returnees and the communities where they settle. On voluntary return specifically, ori-

gin-countries' top priority is generally responding to requests for emergency support from their nationals stranded abroad. Irregular migration routes are perilous,²⁸ and many migrants face problems along the way that prompt them to call for assistance to return home. In 2017, the release of a video showing the inhumane treatment of migrants in Libya triggered strong reactions on the part of African heads of state.²⁹ They ultimately created a joint task force with the European Union and the United Nations to assist with the evacuation, return, and reintegration of their nationals stranded or imprisoned in Libya.³⁰ Three years later, the COVID-19 pandemic has produced new populations of stranded and vulnerable migrants in need of assistance, elevating the importance of AVRR on both the policy agenda and public opinion in countries of origin.³¹ Many origin-country governments have had to deploy exceptional mea-

BOX 2 European Support for South-South Returns

In parallel to returns from EU Member States to third countries, European donors have supported AVRR projects outside Europe. These efforts usually take a route-based approach, facilitating returns from countries where migrants are often in transit on their way to Europe. Since 2016, the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) has funded the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration, which covers 26 African countries and provides assistance to migrants who voluntarily return to other countries throughout the continent. The European Union also supports AVRR projects in countries such as Turkey, Morocco, and Tunisia. In Morocco, the project Strengthening Selected Moroccan Municipalities in the Management of Migration (RECOSA), commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), co-funded by the European Union, and implemented by the Germany Agency for International Development (GIZ), seeks to enhance migration cooperation between Morocco, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Senegal, among other activities. Under the EUTF's Programme Gouvernance Stratégie Migration Tunisienne (Governance Strategy Tunisian Migration Program, or ProGreS), the French Office for Immigration and Integration launched a pilot initiative in January 2020 with the Tunisian authorities to help return migrants from Tunisia to sub-Saharan Africa. European policymakers have noted, however, that the sense of ownership over these projects among partner countries' national authorities tends to be limited as their priority is generally supporting the reintegration of their own nationals. Still, the new European strategy refers to EU support for AVRR programs from and between transit and origin countries as a main pillar of its voluntary return and reintegration policy.

Sources: IOM, "About the EU-IOM Joint Initiative," accessed April 2, 2021; IOM, "IOM and the European Union Helping Thousands of Vulnerable Migrants to Get Home from Turkey" (press release, April 16, 2019); author interview with EU Member State official, February 2, 2021; European Commission, "Programme Gouvernance Stratégie Migration Tunisienne, Progrès Migration – Phase II," updated October 23, 2020; European Commission, "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration" (COM [2021] 120 final, April 27, 2021); GIZ, "Migration Management and Integration," accessed May 9, 2021; author correspondence with a representative of Expertise France on the ProGreS pilot, May 5, 2021.

asures to help their nationals return, while navigating extremely challenging circumstances.³²

Outside these crisis situations, origin-country stakeholders' interest in voluntary return varies. However, a number of governments have adopted or updated their migration policies to outline the need to make reintegration assistance more relevant and impactful, and also to fight prejudice against returnees and collect better data on these populations. For instance, Ghana's 2016 National Migration Policy notes the duplication of support efforts in the area of return and reintegration, and calls for better assistance to help returnees to find a job, the protection of their rights, and efforts to counter misperceptions against returnees.³³ In Ethiopia, the government lacks a reintegration policy but expressed interest in improving reintegration activities and working with the European Union under an Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) project to do so.³⁴

A number of governments have adopted or updated their migration policies to outline the need to make reintegration assistance more relevant and impactful.

With the pandemic, public-health considerations also became a priority for origin-country governments seeking to ensure the safety of returnees and their communities. In 2020, the large number of uncoordinated returns quickly raised concerns about migrants spreading the virus in regions of origin, especially those who had been in administrative detention or traveled in conditions that did not allow for social distancing.³⁵ Origin-country authorities have had to closely monitor the extent to which public-health guidelines are followed during each part of the return process, including the reception conditions for migrants once they arrive. They have had to quickly step up their infrastructure and de-

ploy a range of measures to register, quarantine, and test returnees, often with the support of IOM and other international partners.³⁶ While these responses were specific to the challenges of the pandemic, this experience has shown the importance of institutionalizing reception and health-screening mechanisms moving forward so countries are better prepared for the next crisis.

For many countries of origin, the pandemic has also driven home the need for reintegration support for all returnees, regardless of which country they are coming back from and what their migration status is. This is not a new concern as various governments have long expressed their commitment to assist all returning nationals, especially migrants who are deported and often do not qualify for a reintegration package under AVRR. For example, after Saudi Arabia's deportation campaign that saw the forced return of more than 160,000 Ethiopian workers in 2013, Addis Ababa worked with international partners and civil society to support their reintegration. The authorities allocated funding to manage the process and support local actors, while also setting up regional task forces to deliver direct aid to returnees.³⁷ This issue of who receives assistance is particularly critical as in many origin countries, the vast majority of returning migrants do not come from Europe, but from countries that do not run AVRR programs. For example, only a very small proportion of the people returning, voluntarily or forcibly, to Bangladesh come from Europe, yet many are in need of support. Civil-society actors such as the Bangladesh-based development organization BRAC have called for the inclusion of all returnees in reintegration schemes.³⁸

Finally, most origin countries would like to ensure that AVRR projects do not operate in a vacuum.³⁹ Reintegration packages usually consist of business development support and other livelihoods activities for returnees (see Box 1), but most do not connect with other ongoing development programs. Many

national and local governments in origin countries want to better connect AVRR with national and local development plans to leverage reintegration activities and the injection of international aid for broader communities. This type of coordination can help to manage potential tensions between returnees and members of the communities where they settle, who may not always welcome the support provided strictly to returnees.⁴⁰ With this in mind, the German program Returning to New Opportunities seeks to link reintegration assistance with local development policies in countries such as Kosovo, Iraq, Morocco, Nigeria, and Serbia.⁴¹

3 Initial Measures to Enhance Cooperation with Origin Countries

The new EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration acknowledges that the involvement of origin-country governments, civil society, and other stakeholders is needed to make reintegration sustainable and presents enhancing the involvement of partner countries in AVRR as a key objective.⁴² But this cannot be achieved overnight. Because countries of origin and destination look at voluntary return and reintegration through different lenses, solid partnerships will need to recognize these areas of divergence, identify areas of consensus, and take action on shared goals. The first step should be to better appreciate each other's priorities and what drives them. This can take the form of formal dialogues or more informal meetings to help build trust and map out common interests and activities where progress can be made.

A low-hanging fruit could then be to start establishing information-sharing channels to improve predeparture counselling and the assistance provided to returnees upon arrival in their origin country. Such exercises are in the interest of both destination and

origin countries, as both sides wish to ensure migrants have realistic expectations about the process and to set the stage for smooth reintegration. Similar aims could also call for further coordination on making sure migrants have the needed travel documents and other logistical issues, thus facilitating the return journey of AVRR beneficiaries.

A. *Mapping out Convergent Interests through Official and Informal Engagement*

Return constitutes one of the most delicate topics between countries of origin and destination, and there are few regular channels for policymakers to exchange their perspectives, discuss their agendas, and figure out what objectives they may have in common. Still, more regular conversations are now happening in global and regional forums. At the global level, the negotiations for the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration marked a turning point. These talks featured strongly differing opinions and interests, but ultimately the drafting of the compact's Objective 21 showed it was possible to acknowledge the perspectives of origin and destination countries.⁴³ In this objective, states agreed to cooperate to facilitate the return of migrants who do not have legal permission to remain in a country, while also committing to make returns safer and more dignified and to provide better support for reintegration.⁴⁴

At the regional level, political platforms such as the Khartoum, Rabat, and Prague Processes have paved the way for more regular discussions on returns.⁴⁵ The European Dialogues on Return and Reintegration organized in 2018 and 2019 by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ); the German Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building, and Community (BMI); and IOM offered a similar opportunity.⁴⁶ The EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration in

Africa also holds regular events that bring together origin- and destination-country participants.⁴⁷ In March 2021, for example, IOM organized a three-day seminar on the return and reintegration of children and their families, with participants from African and European governments and civil-society organizations and from other UN agencies.⁴⁸ These consultations between countries of origin, transit, and destination remain sensitive, and their formal nature does not always allow for fully open conversations, but they have acted as a venue for the socialization of ideas and sharing of information between partners.⁴⁹

These various informal and formal, multilateral and bilateral dialogue formats are complementary, and all are needed to build relationships among policymakers, civil society, and other stakeholders.

In parallel, bilateral engagement between the European Union, or EU Member States, with countries of origin has helped to develop more tailored partnerships. In a number of countries, and particularly those in Africa following the creation of the EUTF, EU delegations have become more active in migration policy discussions, sought to better grasp the priorities of their partners, and worked to develop relationships with key stakeholders in government and civil society. For example, the EU-funded projects Lemma⁵⁰ and ProGreS have led to more regular exchanges between European and Tunisian policymakers on return and reintegration, and ultimately paved the way for a closer cooperation on this topic.⁵¹ Finally, closed-door roundtables organized by think tanks and research institutes have allowed for more informal dialogue.⁵² These meetings, however, remain uncommon as they rely on the existence of robust professional networks that are well connected to and trusted by actors in both origin and destination countries, something that is relatively rare.

These various informal and formal, multilateral and bilateral dialogue formats are complementary, and all are needed to build relationships among policymakers, civil society, and other stakeholders working on this topic. These ties, in turn, can lead to concrete ideas and ultimately operational cooperation in areas of common interest—as envisioned in the new EU strategy.⁵³

B. Enhancing AVRR Program Design Based on Better Information-Sharing

One area where quick gains can be achieved is the sharing of information between origin and destination countries. Both have an interest in providing accurate information to AVRR candidates about the conditions to which they would be returning—a critical component of ensuring they make informed decisions about return and supporting the success of reintegration activities. Establishing more regular and reliable information channels would also better inform origin countries about the profiles and needs of returnees, and it could feed into monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and learning mechanisms.

Improving the quality of the information shared with AVRR candidates during counselling and pre-departure orientation is a top concern for origin and destination countries alike. Both have an interest in avoiding situations in which migrants return with unrealistic expectations about the conditions that await them, grow disillusioned, and fail to meet their reintegration aspirations.⁵⁴ Counselling and pre-departure orientation are usually conducted by the authorities or a service provider in the destination country.⁵⁵ The main objective is to help migrants consider whether to return, mentally prepare for their move, and plan for their reintegration. It is therefore critical for counsellors to have access to the broadest, most accurate, and most up-to-date information about the situation in origin countries

and challenges previous returnees have experienced. Counsellors typically rely on data gathered by their own institution, but government and non-government actors in origin countries can contribute by providing information or being involved in counselling themselves.

The engagement of origin-country actors can, however, come with some difficulties. Indeed, the authorities in origin countries may not always be well positioned to produce a neutral analysis about the situation within their borders. They may be reluctant, for example, to acknowledge limitations in public service delivery, security issues, and other sensitive governance problems. The information they share can be highly valuable, but counsellors will still need to triangulate it with other sources to present a nuanced overview to AVRR candidates. Furthermore, counsellors have noted that, in some cases, mentioning their collaboration with origin-country authorities can undermine beneficiaries' confidence in the AVRR scheme.⁵⁶ This is common in the context of fragile or nondemocratic states, where migrants tend to distrust the information and commitments made by their own government. Destination countries may also choose to tap other stakeholders—diasporas and networks of returnees, for instance—whose information may be more trusted by migrants considering return.⁵⁷ In any case, policymakers will need to address practical challenges to establishing operational communication channels and ensuring that information is regularly exchanged about changes in the situation within origin countries.⁵⁸

Recognizing the value of exchanging information with origin-country actors, some destination countries have taken steps to identify relevant actors and to verify and aggregate data sources. France and Belgium, for example, have produced video clips showcasing the experience of returnees, the difficulties they often face on arrival, and their situation after some time.⁵⁹ In Germany, reintegration scouts

are in contact with stakeholders in origin countries and use the information they gather to counsel AVRR candidates.⁶⁰ In the context of the pandemic, investing in data-sharing with origin-country actors is even more important as information about the epidemiological situation and availability of health-care resources is valuable to AVRR candidates. The crisis has, however, also made counselling more challenging as reliable and up-to-date data on the COVID-19 situation may not be available in all origin countries, and the full effects of lockdowns and other public-health measures on local economies are still unfolding.

On the other side of the equation, destination countries and their service partners could share more information with origin countries about voluntary returnees and AVRR programs. Origin-country governments are usually aware of some AVRR initiatives, but they often lack details about the characteristics of returnees, AVRR activities, and how the implementation of those activities goes. This is particularly the case for countries that receive returnees from various destination countries, each of which may have its own AVRR project (or several, if different support is provided to different categories of migrants), implemented by the same or different service partners and with varied program characteristics (e.g., length, focus, and level of formal evaluation). In Senegal, the Reception, Orientation, and Follow-Up Offices for Senegalese Abroad (Bureaux d'Accueil, d'Orientation et de Suivi des Sénégalais de l'Extérieur) are responsible for collecting data on returnees, but this information is not always aggregated, triangulated with other sources, and used to inform policymaking and service delivery.⁶¹ And with some destination countries opting to only work with civil-society organizations in certain origin countries, nongovernment actors may sometimes be better informed of the coming and going of returnees than their governmental counterparts. Even their own knowledge, however, is often limited due to the fragmentation of AVRR activities nationwide,

rudimentary monitoring mechanisms, and the short-term nature of most reintegration packages. Access to this information is critical to their ability to identify gaps in assistance and improve returnees' access to public services, including through tailored referral systems.⁶² Such information-sharing mechanisms would demand solid guidelines to ensure their compliance with the European Union's data protection standards and those of partner countries.

Ultimately, a freer and more regular flow of information can feed into more ambitious M&E and learning systems. For destination countries, building such systems requires having reliable partners on the ground in origin countries to maintain contact with returnees and analyze the effects of reintegration assistance in the long term. And for origin countries, it is important to record the limitations of AVRR projects and where additional public support is needed. But M&E raises some thorny questions in terms of ownership of the data and analysis, which entity should lead the M&E process, and who should have access to the conclusions of the M&E studies. Destination countries have to report on the use of public funds, and they have often preferred to do so through internal means or by hiring a third party to conduct an independent evaluation, without necessarily consulting government stakeholders in countries of origin.⁶³ Still, some progress has been made toward more robust M&E on AVRR, including with IOM's conceptualization of a common framework for all of its AVRR projects (MEASURE) and regular data collection under its Reintegration Sustainability Survey.⁶⁴ Another key initiative is the new Reintegration Assistance Tool (RIAT) launched by the European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN) in 2020—an online platform that standardizes and facilitates data exchange on the reintegration process of returnees.⁶⁵ The new EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration emphasizes the need for more solid M&E practices within the bloc; however, efforts to involve origin countries in the analysis of the monitoring findings and to share the conclusions and

recommendations with all relevant stakeholders will be needed if these systems are to improve AVRR programs in ways that benefits returnees and the communities in which they settle, and to support destination- and origin-country policy aims more broadly.

C. Strengthening Outreach and Travel Arrangements via Operational Coordination

Other areas ripe for cooperation are expanding awareness-raising efforts about AVRR options among migrants in destination countries and facilitating travel for people who have decided to return. As with information-sharing, these operational dimensions of AVRR programs are areas where the interests of origin and destination countries align.

In terms of outreach, destination-country governments usually seek to expand the pool of AVRR candidates through campaigns to inform irregular migrants, asylum seekers who are unlikely to receive protection, and those whose asylum claims have been rejected about their options for assisted return and the reintegration assistance available. European countries have recently invested in new approaches to do so, as reflected by the ReachOut pilot initiative operated by the ERRIN.⁶⁶ As part of ReachOut, the Belgian Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers and the French Office for Immigration and Integration have partnered with social services, local authorities, and civil-society organizations to share information about AVRR and counsel migrants who do not live in reception facilities.⁶⁷ But the success of these activities largely depends on the institutions disseminating the messages, and many migrants do not trust information spread by destination-country authorities. In Norway, for instance, a 2016 report found that migrants did not believe communications that came from the Norwegian Immigration

Service and inaccurate rumors about AVRR were common.⁶⁸

Origin-country governments and civil-society organizations do not share the aim of increasing the uptake of voluntary return, but they do share destination countries' goal of wanting migrants in need of assistance to know about the existence of a safe return option. They also broadly share a desire to support migrants in making informed decisions about return. Thus, consular networks and diaspora organizations can complement the work done by destination countries, especially as migrants are more likely to trust them to share accurate information about their legal options.⁶⁹ For example, the social attachés in Tunisia's consulates regularly disseminate information about AVRR to their nationals, including those in administrative detention.⁷⁰ The German government, IOM, and other service partners have also organized targeted engagement with diaspora groups to raise their awareness about AVRR activities and eligibility criteria, so that these groups can pass the information on to migrants in their communities.⁷¹ These efforts have proved particularly important since the beginning of the pandemic, as a result of which many migrants have lost jobs, gotten stranded, and may be uncertain of where to seek assistance with returning to their origin countries.⁷²

Origin-country governments and civil-society organizations do not share the aim of increasing the uptake of voluntary return, but they do share destination countries' goal of wanting migrants in need of assistance to know about the existence of a safe return option.

Another area where operational cooperation could be expanded, despite the differences between or-

igin- and destination-country objectives for AVRR more broadly, is the facilitation of travel for migrants who have chosen to return. AVRR beneficiaries often lack travel documents, and destination countries and service partners could work even more closely with consular authorities to ensure the necessary documents are issued to AVRR beneficiaries in a timely fashion.

4 Sustainable Cooperation through Longer-Term Structural Reforms

As noted in the new EU strategy,⁷³ connecting reintegration assistance to longer-term priorities in countries of origin is another critical step toward making programs more impactful and sustainable. This requires, on the one hand, the formalization of origin-country policy frameworks on voluntary return and reintegration so that governments can engage in AVRR activities in a systematic and meaningful way. On the other hand, destination and origin countries need to explore how to connect support for individual migrants' reintegration (i.e., the priority for destination countries, and particularly the ministries responsible for counselling returnees and contracting service partners) with creating favorable conditions in regions of origin more broadly (i.e., a priority for development agencies in both origin and destination countries).

These efforts need to be tailored to each specific context, and both sides should reflect on the optics of working together on these issues as well as on how to identify the right stakeholders on the ground to partner with for project implementation. Destination countries may opt, for instance, to work with civil-society organizations.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, some origin countries have expressed their preference for not engaging with actors that are also involved in forced returns. As part of these efforts, policymakers should

reflect on how to communicate to the public about this cooperation, so that it does not undermine returnees' trust in AVRR programs.

A. *Improving the Governance of Voluntary Return and Reintegration in Origin Countries*

To achieve a meaningful partnership on AVRR with destination countries, countries of origin need their own policy frameworks and sufficient resources to roll them out. Voluntary return and reintegration have long been a blind spot in origin countries' migration and development policies. However, as these countries create or update their migration policies, they are increasingly referring to this dimension and reflecting on the challenges and opportunities of voluntary return, including as relates to the profile of returnees and their situation prior to their return.⁷⁵ The 2018 draft National Migration Policy of Senegal, for instance, refers to voluntary return and reintegration among its top 11 objectives.⁷⁶ The text outlines four main objectives and associated actions: the need for better data to design and provide better services; adequate support for returnees, including psychosocial counseling; support for their economic reintegration; and enhancing transfers of knowledge and expertise. Such frameworks can be a starting point for origin countries to adopt new measures to facilitate reintegration (such as those to facilitate the recognition of skills migrants acquired abroad⁷⁷).

These are critical first steps and need to be complemented by broader efforts to strengthen governance structures. Reintegration is a multidimensional process that requires a whole-of-government approach,⁷⁸ but ministries sometimes lack a clearly delineated mandate on reintegration (as in Burkina Faso⁷⁹) or an interagency coordination mechanism (as in Ghana⁸⁰). To maintain oversight over and steer the various AVRR initiatives active in a country, it

can be helpful to pick one actor to coordinate the others—either a directorate-general in a relevant ministry (as in Kosovo) or an independent agency linked to the office of the prime minister (as in Ethiopia⁸¹). The decision of who should take on this role needs to be informed by broader institutional considerations and should be followed by investments in the chosen actor's capacity and in building relations between it and counterparts in key destination countries.

Reintegration is a multidimensional process that requires a whole-of-government approach, but ministries sometimes lack a clearly delineated mandate.

In countries going through decentralization, local authorities are usually in a good position to capture the needs of returnees and their communities and refer them to adequate public services. However, their offices are often not well resourced and/or have limited coordination with central governments.⁸² The Reception, Orientation, and Follow-Up Offices for Senegalese Abroad, for instance, lack capacity; they need better systems to record data as well as resources to conduct monitoring visits, and their mandate can overlap with the responsibilities of other local bodies.⁸³ Their recent incorporation into the country's Regional Development Agencies (Agence Régionale de Développement) and capacity-building projects funded by European donors are expected to help consolidate their role, including in terms of documenting the reintegration process of returnees more closely.⁸⁴ Finally, in many origin countries, NGOs have become more active on reintegration,⁸⁵ but this has not always been accompanied by an increase in capacity. For example, in The Gambia, the number of civil-society organizations working on reintegration issues has reportedly increased in recent years, but they often lack experience and

would benefit from further training and technical assistance.⁸⁶

The European Commission and EU Member States have sought to address some of these gaps. For instance, the European Union supports capacity-building projects under the EUTF and the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund.⁸⁷ These initiatives are at different stages of implementation and have faced a range of operational, technical, and political challenges. For instance, delays in the adoption of Senegal's draft National Migration Policy and the lack of clear ownership over migration governance have hampered efforts to address institutional shortcomings.⁸⁸ In Tunisia, the long-standing engagement of the French Office for Immigration and Integration and its partner, Expertise France, on voluntary return

and reintegration has fostered a working relationship with Tunisian actors. But the AVRR component under the EUTF's ProGreS does not involve all of the EU Member States that have a vested interest in voluntary returns to and reintegration in the country, and several EU countries continue to operate parallel AVRR programs. As this illustrates, governance issues also exist on the European side, and addressing them is similarly important (see Box 3).

As the European Commission rolls out its new strategy, it will be essential to carefully examine the takeaways of past initiatives in order to inform future project design. This is particularly true of deciding the conditions under which European actors are well positioned to deliver technical assistance to origin-country governments and how best to

BOX 3

Improving Coordination between EU Member States and EU Institutions

In parallel to efforts in origin countries, EU institutions and Member States need to work toward better coordination within the bloc. As noted by several origin-country officials (and service partners), it can be challenging to oversee many different AVRR programs, with various benefits and M&E requirements. This fragmentation can also impede the conceptualization of a unified approach to reintegration on their end. Efforts to align European destination countries' AVRR programming have been made through the work of the European Return and Reintegration Network and the Return Expert Group of the European Migration Network, but the European Commission's Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration advocates for further convergence and synergies among EU Member States.

There are two areas where immediate improvements could be made in how EU Member States engage with origin countries to ensure this is done in a productive and coherent manner:

- 1 EU Member States could ensure that the information they gather about conditions in countries of origin and the situation of previous returnees benefit all EU actors and that efforts to triangulate and consolidate data on these topics are streamlined across the European Union.
- 2 The European Commission and EU Member States should seek to better coordinate their programs in origin countries. Specifically, they need to capitalize on the work of European actors that are considered credible by their origin-country counterparts and that have built solid relationships with these partners. EU delegations and European migration liaison officers have already started working on this in a number of countries, including by organizing coordination meetings on migration. These mechanisms could be further consolidated and replicated, where relevant.

Source: Participant discussions during the Migration Policy Institute roundtable "EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration: Perspectives of Origin Countries?," January 14, 2021.

encourage local stakeholders to take greater ownership over voluntary return and reintegration.⁸⁹ The European Union could fund a series of process and impact evaluations and organize closed-door consultations with service partners, EU delegations, and other relevant stakeholders (e.g., European diplomats posted in key countries of origin) to map out lessons learned and explore how to replicate good practices in other contexts. Some of the ongoing dialogues described in Section 3.A. could also host discussions with origin-country partners.

B. Aligning Reintegration Assistance and Development Planning

Despite the divergent views of origin and destination countries on the ultimate objectives of the return and reintegration process, as well as different perspectives among policymakers and ministries from within the same country, all agree on the need to coordinate to make these activities more impactful and sustainable. One way to do this is to bring AVRR and development interventions into greater alignment—as outlined by the European Commission in its new strategy.⁹⁰ However, policymakers involved in AVRR in destination countries tend to be more concerned about supporting the reintegration of individual returnees,⁹¹ whereas origin countries value individual assistance but are also concerned about linking AVRR activities with broader development policies and international development programs (often funded by the same destination countries). There is no definitive model for reconciling these approaches, and different formats can be explored to accommodate the priorities of the partners involved.

Many destination countries consider delivering on their commitment to provide individual support to returnees their top priority, both for the success and the credibility of their AVRR program. Practitioners sometimes worry that additional coordination ef-

forts with origin-country governments could delay planned activities, and ultimately feed negative rumors about the quality of their assistance.⁹² At the same time, this focus on the individual can overlook the fact that reintegration needs a conducive environment to be successful, one in which returnees have access to economic opportunities, public services, and overall security and stability. As such, short-term objectives (i.e., delivering an individual reintegration package) need to be married with medium- and long-term objectives for return and reintegration (i.e., helping to create conditions in which returnees feel economically, socially, and psychosocially well integrated and actively participate in local communities).

This focus on the individual can overlook the fact that reintegration needs a conducive environment to be successful, one in which returnees have access to economic opportunities, public services, and overall security and stability.

IOM and other service partners contracted by EU Member States as part of AVRR programs may be best placed to swiftly deliver individual reintegration support, but destination countries still need to work with governments, civil society, and the private sector in origin countries to move toward more welcoming conditions for returnees. Service partners are in a strategic position to assess what activities and program formats are the most suitable in a particular context and would be worth piloting. This can involve, for example, conducting joint assessments in regions of return, during which origin- and destination-country stakeholders can together map the needs of returnees and their communities and brainstorm AVRR project designs.⁹³

IOM and other partners have also implemented a series of community-based projects⁹⁴ to comple-

ment the individual support packages delivered to returnees. These initiatives offer livelihoods opportunities to returnees and members of receiving communities and seek to enhance social cohesion (e.g., by funding infrastructure that benefits all residents of a region). The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development's initiative Returning to New Opportunities, for example, links up individual assistance to returnees with broader development interventions. As part of this project, the Germany Agency for International Development (GIZ) operates centers for jobs, migration, and reintegration, together with national partner institutions, in 13 countries of origin. These centers are open to all workers and provide training courses, vocational skills development, and psychosocial support services, but they also deliver specific supports to returnees.⁹⁵ Such projects are, however, often challenging to design and roll out as their target beneficiaries are a more diverse group, being made up of both returnees and community members.⁹⁶

For their part, origin-country governments generally wish to welcome returnees and ensure they have access to public services, but not necessarily to grant them extra support.⁹⁷ Still, it is important to acknowledge the specific challenges returning migrants often face in terms of accessing livelihoods, recreating social bonds, and, for some, overcoming psychosocial issues.⁹⁸ Therefore, public institutions need to calibrate to recognize both these unique needs and what types of interventions will resonate with and avoid creating tensions with the communities in which returnees live. The work of the GIZ and the Moroccan National Employment Agency (Agence nationale de promotion de l'emploi et des compétences, or ANAPEC) as part of the Returning to New Opportunities initiative illustrates this dynamic. ANAPEC was initially reluctant to support activities designed only for returnees, but GIZ gradually generated an interest among ANAPEC staff in addressing the difficulties returnees face by offering

tailor-made support in addition to the program's broader support for all jobseekers.

As many origin countries are also recipients of development aid, referral systems between AVRR projects for individual returnees and longer-term development interventions could contribute to their ongoing reintegration. While this is one of the recommendations of the new EU strategy,⁹⁹ development actors and other practitioners warn that such referral mechanisms require a lot of staff time and effort, and that they have had mixed results.¹⁰⁰ Hence, it may be important for the European Commission to temper its high expectations as to what referral systems can achieve. Rather, efforts could focus on what is urgently needed: a careful assessment of what has worked and what the factors of success are, as well as a cost-benefit analysis of the value of individual referrals against more targeted efforts to promote structural changes in regions to which large numbers of migrants return and of integrating migration-related assistance into development projects more broadly. In sum, the extent to which reintegration assistance and development programming are coordinated, and how that may be done, will vary depending on the context.

5 Next Steps: Building on the EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration

Strengthening the engagement of origin-country actors in AVRR programs is an aspiration often voiced by the European Union and its Member States. While a worthy ambition, this discourse often overlooks intermediary steps needed to achieve this aim. A meaningful partnership between migrants' origin and destination countries requires regular dialogue, information exchange, and sustained co-

operation. Helping to build the capacity of origin countries to participate in each of these areas is key (e.g., developing a national policy framework on return and reintegration), as are the development of tools to facilitate exchange (e.g., platforms for secure information-sharing) and links between the reintegration process and more structural reforms (e.g., connecting start-up grants with broader reforms of the business environment).

To build on the European Commission's Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration, the following actions could guide implementation:

- ▶ **Map out joint interests through dialogue between countries of origin and destination.** Given how sensitive the topic of (voluntary) return and reintegration is, it is critical that the European Commission, EU Member States, and origin countries continue to discuss their needs, policies, and programs at bilateral and regional levels. Formal dialogues such as the Rabat, Khartoum, and Prague Processes are useful arenas, as are international summits such as the meeting to be held between the African Union and the European Union in 2021. In parallel, other, less formal modes of exchange could be explored, as such private consultations may allow stakeholders to take off their institutional hats and discuss in a more candid way what is missing in AVRR programs. Altogether, this will help create a better understanding of partners' respective agendas and pave the way to identifying common ground.
- ▶ **Strengthen AVRR operations by establishing regular channels for information exchange.** Activities for AVRR candidates such as counselling and predeparture orientation, as well as supports provided after return, would benefit from more and better data-sharing between countries of origin and destination. This information exchange could also help strengthen monitoring and evaluation efforts and learning systems, which remain rudimentary for many AVRR projects.
- ▶ **Improve programming through concrete, joint actions where interests converge.** Further cooperation and coordination on activities such as outreach to vulnerable migrants who may benefit from AVRR programs could help raise awareness about the programs' availability and eligibility criteria. In parallel, joint efforts to secure travel documents for AVRR participants in a timely manner and facilitate a swift return process would also be valuable.
- ▶ **Bolster origin countries' engagement on voluntary return and reintegration through technical assistance and budget support.** An increasing number of countries of origin have added references to return and reintegration into revised or newly created migration policies, but more efforts are needed to implement these policies. Capacity-building activities can help improve the governance of voluntary return and reintegration, and they should target civil society and the private sector as well as government actors to mobilize their respective strengths. Finally, regional and continental bodies such as the African Union could become more active in this field and better coordinate countries of origin when it comes to their engagement with EU countries.
- ▶ **Make AVRR programs more impactful and sustainable by improving their links with development plans and other international projects.** Many AVRR programs operate in a vacuum, which limits their impact and sustainability. In the short

term, the European Commission and other relevant stakeholders could review what partnerships and referrals have successfully linked returnees to ongoing supports; what coordination mechanisms between AVRR initiatives, development strategies, and international programs have proved the most promising; and how future projects could encourage these practices.

As the European Union and its Member States argue for enhanced cooperation with countries of origin

on voluntary return and reintegration, more direct and regular engagement with government actors, civil society, and the private sector in these countries will help to unpack this principle. It will lead to the identification of areas where countries of destination and origin can work together in the short term, and how the European Union can best support its partners in the medium to long term. Such dialogues should not avoid the tough questions but, on the contrary, seek to better understand where sensitivities lie and how to achieve deeper partnerships over time.

As the European Union and its Member States argue for enhanced cooperation with countries of origin on voluntary return and reintegration, more direct and regular engagement with government actors, civil society, and the private sector in these countries will help to unpack this principle.

Endnotes

- 1 See previous action plans on return issued by the European Commission: European Commission, “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and to the Council: EU Action Plan on Return” (COM [2015] 453 final, September 9, 2015); European Commission, “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on a More Effective Return Policy in the European Union – A Renewed Action Plan” (COM [2017] 200 final, March 2, 2017).
- 2 European Commission, “Migration Management: New EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration” (news release, April 27, 2021). Note, however, that the way this return rate is calculated has been challenged in the past. See Sergo Mananashvili, “EU’s Return Policy: Mission Accomplished in 2016? Reading between the Lines of the Latest EUROSTAT Return Statistics” (policy brief, International Centre for Migration Policy Development, May 22, 2017).
- 3 The European Agenda on Migration, for instance, states that the low number of returns constitutes “one of the incentives for irregular migrants” and that smuggling networks take advantage of this system. See European Commission, “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A European Agenda on Migration” (COM [2015] 240 final, May 13, 2015). Also see European Commission, “Migration Management: New EU Strategy.”
- 4 See, for instance, remarks by Henrik Ankerstjerne, Deputy Permanent Secretary at the Danish Ministry of Immigration and Integration at the European Migration Network (EMN) conference in Vienna in 2018. In this presentation, Ankerstjerne argued that “everything started with return.” EMN, “Annual Conference 2018: 4-5 October Vienna, Austria; Managing Migration – From Reacting to Sharing; Conference Report,” accessed May 9, 2021.
- 5 European Commission, “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration” (COM [2021] 120 final, April 27, 2021).
- 6 The strategy outlines a series of measures under seven pillars, which include: “1. a more effective and operational framework; 2. effective coordination between all stakeholders; 3. supporting voluntary return and reintegration of migrants from and between third countries; 4. effective return counselling and referral; 5. ensuring quality of support; 6. fostering sustainability of reintegration support and ownership of partner countries; and 7. funding for voluntary return and reintegration.” See European Commission, “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration.”
- 7 European Commission, “New Pact on Migration and Asylum: Questions and Answers,” updated September 23, 2020.
- 8 In January 2021, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) and MPI Europe organized two closed-door virtual roundtables gathering policymakers from the European Commission, the EU External Action Service, EU Member States, origin countries, and international organizations and experts. These meetings aimed to inform the drafting of the EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration, and they took place under the aegis of MPI’s research project with the German Development Cooperation Agency (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH, or GIZ) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). See MPI, “Critical Migration Governance Issues in a Changed World,” accessed May 10, 2021. Participant discussions during the MPI roundtable “EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration: Switching Perspectives?,” January 12, 2021; participant discussions during the MPI roundtable “EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration: Perspectives of Origin Countries?,” January 14, 2021.
- 9 For instance, in 2016, rumors that the Malian government was negotiating a readmission agreement with the European Union triggered mass protests in Bamako. See Kassim Traoré, “Le Mali dément catégoriquement tout accord de réadmission avec l’UE,” *Voice of America*, December 19, 2016.
- 10 For information about assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programs outside Europe, see for instance: International Organization for Migration (IOM), “About the EU-IOM Joint Initiative,” accessed April 2, 2021.
- 11 Ine Lietaert, Eric Broekaert, and Ilse Derluyn, “From Social Instrument to Migration Management Tool: Assisted Voluntary Return Programmes – The Case of Belgium,” *Social Policy & Administration* 51 (2017): 962–980; EMN, “Overview: Incentives to Return to a Third-Country and Support Provided to Migrants for Their Reintegration” (bulletin, EMN, Brussels, February 2015).
- 12 This return component was already integrated into the labor recruitment procedures of governments in the 1950s and 1960s. See Lietaert, Broekaert, and Derluyn, “From Social Instrument to Migration Management Tool.” On AVRR projects increasingly targeting asylum seekers whose claims have been denied, see Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), “Promoting Voluntary Return,” in *Sustainable Reintegration of Returning Migrants: A Better Homecoming* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020); Claudia Olivier-Mensah et al., “Developing Lifeworld Oriented Perspectives for Return Migration: Needs, Vulnerabilities and Support of Refugees in Germany” (working paper, October 2020).
- 13 The measure also targeted migrants who had been working for five years in France, including in the last six months; people with a disability and having worked at least five years in France (and whose disability had been caused by a work accident); and the families of these foreign workers. However, the program could only benefit nationals from 23 countries (including, for instance, Algeria, Cameroon, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, Morocco, Niger, Senegal, Togo, Tunisia, and Turkey). See André Lebon, “L’aide au retour des travailleurs étrangers,” *Economie et Statistique* 113 (1979): 37–46.
- 14 In the absence of such an agreement, some countries of origin do not issue travel documents to their nationals or refuse to authorize flights carrying returnees to land. See OECD, “Promoting Voluntary Return.”

- 15 Martha von Werthern et al, “The Impact of Immigration Detention on Mental Health: A Systematic Review,” *BMC Psychiatry* 18 (2018): 382; Sarah Turnbull, “Living the Spectre of Forced Return: Negotiating Deportability in British Immigration Detention,” *Migration Studies* 7, no. 4 (2019): 513–532; Katie Kuschminder, “Taking Stock of Assisted Voluntary Return from Europe: Decision Making, Reintegration and Sustainable Return – Time for a Paradigm Shift” (working paper, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, Firenze, Italy, 2017).
- 16 In comparison, forced returns often entail expenses related to administrative detention and the reliance on security forces to enforce the return decision. These costs can increase if the migrant’s origin country does not cooperate and the individual remains in detention for a longer period. See OECD, “Promoting Voluntary Return”; Richard Black, Michael Collyer, and Will Somerville, *Pay-to-Go Schemes and Other Noncoercive Return Programs: Is Scale Possible?* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2011).
- 17 Wouter van Ballegooij and Cecilia Navarra, *The Cost of Non-Europe in Asylum Policy* (Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service, 2018). Another report, published by the French Parliament, assessed that the average cost of a forced return is around 14,000 euros (U.S. \$16,500), compared to 2,500 to 4,000 euros for a voluntary return (U.S. \$3,000 to 4,700). The report acknowledges, however, that experts and administrative services have produced various estimates of the costs of forced returns. See French National Assembly, *Annexe N° 28: Immigration, Asile et Intégration* (Paris: French National Assembly, 2019).
- 18 This fund supported activities for the period 2008 to 2013. See EMN, “Overview: Incentives to Return”; “Decision No 575/2007/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 May 2007 Establishing the European Return Fund for the Period 2008 to 2013 as Part of the General Programme ‘Solidarity and Management of Migration Flows,’” *Official Journal of the European Union* 2007 L144/45, June 6, 2007.
- 19 In 2019, out of the 138,860 returns reported by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), 67,656 were voluntary but not all of these returnees received assistance. In fact, only around 5,000 migrants received AVRR assistance. See Frontex, *Risk Analysis for 2020* (Luxembourg: Frontex, 2020).
- 20 Another strategy to convince more migrants to apply for AVRR has been to adjust the eligibility criteria for reintegration support to increase or accelerate voluntary return (e.g., not making it strictly based on needs, as some countries initially did). For instance, Switzerland developed a model in which migrants receive more money the earlier they register for voluntary departure. Denmark also established an “uncooperative track” for migrants who refuse to consider voluntary return, making them ineligible for return assistance. See OECD, “Promoting Voluntary Return.” See also the analysis of the history of the Belgian program in Lietaert, Broekaert, and Derluyn, “From Social Instrument to Migration Management Tool.”
- 21 Darren Thiel and Kirsty Gillan, “Factors Affecting Participation in Assisted Voluntary Return Programmes and Successful Reintegration: A Review of the Evidence” (research report 29, UK Home Office, Research, Development, and Statistics Directorate, London, January 2010); Transparency Research, Olga Evans, and Laura Powlton, “The Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) 2005: A Process and Impact Assessment” (research report 38, UK Home Office, Research, Development, and Statistics Directorate, London, June 2010).
- 22 Thiel and Gillan, “Factors Affecting Participation”; Transparency Research, Evans, and Powlton, “The VARRP 2005”; Jan-Paul Brekke, *Why Go Back? Assisted Return from Norway* (Oslo: Institute for Social Research, 2015). However, these efforts may reach this objective in some contexts and under some circumstances. For instance, an analysis based on the French program between 2011 and 2018 found that a 30-percent increase in reintegration assistance led to a 30-percent increase in the number in voluntary returns. See French National Assembly, “Annexe N° 28: Immigration, Asile et Intégration.”
- 23 OECD, “Promoting Voluntary Return.”
- 24 This assumption is not, however, supported by solid evidence; at most, previous research has documented the link between the lack of reintegration and the wish to remigrate. See Khalid Koser and Katie Kuschminder, *Comparative Research on the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration of Migrants* (Washington, DC: IOM, 2015). Similarly, a 2013 study conducted in Nigeria found that between half and two-thirds of returnees *thought* about leaving again if their return was not followed by reintegration. See Jenny Pennington and Brhmie Balam, *Homecoming: Return and Reintegration of Irregular Migrants from Nigeria* (London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 2013). Another study, published by the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), found that many of the Ethiopian migrants who were deported from Saudi Arabia in 2013 were considering leaving again for lack of reintegration prospects at home. The MMC does not have data on the proportion of returnees who effectively left to the Gulf after their return, but anecdotal evidence suggests that some did remigrate. See TSIONAWIT Gebre Yohannes, “Two Years On: The Revolving Door Expulsion and Re-Migration of Ethiopians through Yemen,” MMC, September 17, 2015.
- 25 EMN, “Overview: Incentives to Return.”
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- 33 Government of Ghana, Ministry of the Interior, *National Migration Policy for Ghana* (Accra: Government of Ghana, 2016).
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- 36 Le Coz and Newland, *Rewiring Migrant Returns and Reintegration*. This period has also demanded that governments consider how to integrate returnees and their communities into national recovery plans. In Kosovo, for instance, GIZ worked with the authorities and the German Information Centre for Migration, Vocational Training, and Career to assist individuals applying for unemployment benefits and advise returnees who had previously received support from the center. As of September 2020, around 79,000 people who had lost their jobs due to the crisis applied for benefits through the center. The center, in coordination with the Kosovo Employment Agency, also advised more than 1,200 start-ups that had previously received support from the project Returning to New Opportunities. Information provided in author correspondence with GIZ staff working on the Returning to New Opportunities project, May 7, 2021.
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- 66 ERRIN, “ReachOut – Sharing the Project Outcomes,” accessed May 9, 2021.
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- 87 European Commission, “Renforcement de la gestion et de la gouvernance des migrations et le retour et la réintégration durable”; European Commission, “Favoriser la mise en œuvre de la stratégie nationale migratoire de la Tunisie,” updated December 16, 2016; European Commission, “Sustainable Reintegration Support to Ethiopian Returnees from Europe and Support to Vulnerable Displaced Populations Affected by COVID19,” updated February 26, 2018.
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- 92 Participant discussions during the MPI roundtable “EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration: Switching Perspectives?,” January 12, 2021. Some also see their limited engagement with origin countries as a way to protect their program from interference by other European policymakers (usually from the area of home affairs) who wish to negotiate readmission agreements.
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- 97 OECD, “Promoting Voluntary Return.”
- 98 Previous research notes, for instance, that the topic of addiction among returnees may not have received sufficient attention in the past. See Olivier-Mensah et al., “Developing Lifeworld Oriented Perspectives for Return Migration.”
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Acknowledgments

This publication results from a partnership between the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). It is part of the series “Critical Migration Governance Issues in a Changed World.” For more on this series on the global compacts and international cooperation on migration and refugee issues, see: www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/international-program/critical-migration-governance-issues-changed-world.

The author is grateful to GIZ and BMZ for their support for this brief and the series of which it is part, as well as to the officials and experts who shared their insights with her for the purpose of this research. In particular, the author would like to thank Lena Dreyer, Martin Hiebsch, Tina Mahler, and Benjamin Thomas of GIZ; Moira Feil and Johannes Behrens of BMZ; and Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan of MPI and Hanne Beirens of MPI Europe for their thorough and thoughtful comments. She also thanks Hannah Tyler and Rahul Balasundaram for their research assistance, and Lauren Shaw for her skillful editing.

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Design: Sara Staedicke, MPI
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Suggested citation: Le Coz, Camille. 2021. *EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration: Crafting a Road Map to Better Cooperation with Migrants' Countries of Origin*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.



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