

Assisted voluntary return and reintegration: strategy of EU Member States and European coordination

EMN French Presidency Conference, 21 June 2022

INTRODUCTION

On behalf of the General Directorate for Foreign Nationals in France (DGEF) within the Ministry of the Interior, EMN France organises the EMN French Presidency Conference in Paris on 21 June 2022. This conference is dedicated to assisted voluntary return and reintegration schemes in the EU, focusing on national approaches and European coordination.

With the support of the Sub-Directorate for Combatting Irregular Migration (SDLII) within the DGEF and the French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII), the conference will host high-level speakers from the European Commission, European agencies including Frontex, as well as representatives of EU and non-EU countries, the civil society, international organisations and NGOs.

The conference will last the whole day starting with keynote speeches and followed by four panels in order to have fruitful exchanges and debates on key topics, best practices and challenges faced by the EU Member States, non-EU countries and their partners.

BACKGROUND

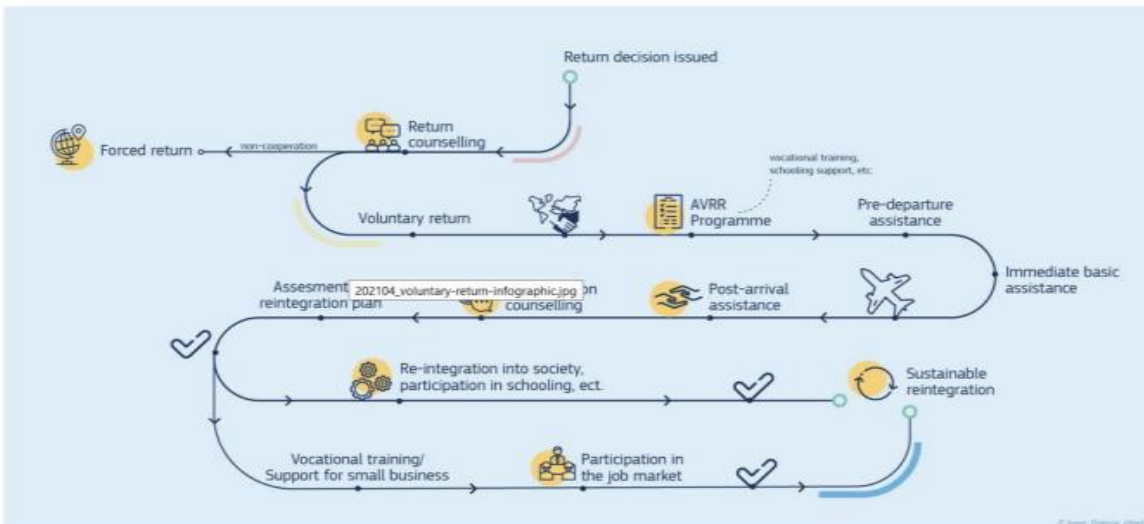
The EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration published by the European Commission on 27 April 2021 promotes the importance of voluntary returns and aims at increasing their share and number, while increasing the quality of the support provided to returnees.

This strategy is based on seven pillars¹:

- Strengthening the legal and operational framework;
- Facilitating effective coordination between all stakeholders;
- Supporting voluntary return and reintegration of migrants located in non-EU countries;
- Improving return counselling and referral practices through dedicated tools and guidance;
- Promoting common quality support;
- Fostering the sustainability and the ownership of reintegration in partner countries;
- Using financial resources in a better coordinated manner.

The strategy promotes voluntary return and reintegration as an integral part of a common EU system for returns, a key objective under the New Pact on Migration and Asylum.² It sets out practical measures to strengthen the legal and operational framework for voluntary returns from the EU and transit countries, improve the quality of return and reintegration programmes, establish better links with development initiatives and strengthen cooperation with partner countries.

Furthermore, this strategy intends to develop a more coordinated approach among EU Member States, and to boost the effectiveness and sustainability of the common EU system for returns for the mutual benefit of the returnees, the EU and countries of origin.



¹ European Commission, New EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/news/new-eu-strategy-voluntary-return-and-reintegration-2021-04-22_en

² European Commission, New Pact on Migration and Asylum, https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/promoting-our-european-way-life/new-pact-migration-and-asylum_en

Ylva Johansson, Commissioner for Home Affairs, , said: **“Only about a third of people with no right to stay in the EU return to their country of origin and of those who do, fewer than 30% do so voluntarily.** Voluntary returns are always the better option: they put the individual at the core, they are more effective and less costly. Our first ever strategy on voluntary return and reintegration will help returnees from both the EU and third countries to seize opportunities in their home country, contribute to the development of the community and build trust in our migration system to make it more effective.”³

THE EU’S POLITICAL AND FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK (PANEL 1)

A humane and effective return policy, following the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU and based on the principle of giving preference to voluntary return, is essential to a comprehensive and sustainable migration policy. The EU seeks to harmonise and support national efforts to manage returns based on the Return Directive in line with the aforementioned EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration.

The strategy promotes voluntary returns and facilitates reintegration of irregular migrants in their country of origin, and provides financial support, including under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). Effective cooperation with non-EU countries, on the basis of readmission agreements, is also necessary to ensure the success of the common EU system for returns. A positive state of cooperation with third countries in order to assure an effective return and reintegration is also necessary. The communication on enhancing cooperation on return and readmission as part of a fair, effective and comprehensive EU migration policy is an important follow-up to the New Pact on Migration and Asylum.⁴ It describes how the European Commission intends to build upon the annual process initiated by the first assessment of third countries’ level of readmission cooperation to tackle challenges in EU return policy and in relation to third countries.

The Return Coordinator and the High Level Network for Return will provide technical support to Member States in bringing together different strands and actors of the EU return policy including in the field of voluntary return and reintegration, where the Return Coordinator will promote a more coherent approach to reintegration assistance in relation to specific partner countries. The work of the Coordinator and the High Level Network will form an integral part of the governance framework set by the proposal for a Regulation on

³https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/ip_21_1931/IP_21_1931_EN.pdf

⁴ European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, Enhancing cooperation on return and readmission as part of a fair, effective and comprehensive EU migration policy, 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021DC0056>

Asylum and Migration Management in order to promote the consistency between national actions and the strategy.

In the new financial cycle 2021-2027, the EU will strengthen its financial support for Member States' actions promoting the increase in voluntary returns from the EU and will provide funding for assisted voluntary return schemes as well as for reintegration programmes in partner countries. Relevant instruments for internal and external actions (AMIF, Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) and Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)) will contribute to finance return and reintegration policies.

TOWARDS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF NATIONAL SCHEMES FOR ASSISTED VOLUNTARY RETURN AND REINTEGRATION (PANEL 2)

1. EU actions

- The role of Frontex as the operational arm of the common EU system for returns is key to improve the overall effectiveness of the system and to support – with new tools – the practical use of a consolidated EU framework on voluntary return and reintegration. The agency should support an increasing number of voluntary return operations and reinforce its capacity to provide operational assistance to Member States in all phases of the voluntary return and reintegration process, including on pre-return counselling, post-arrival support and monitoring the effectiveness of reintegration assistance.

With the extension of the EU mandate in the field of post-arrival/post-return assistance, Frontex is taking over parts of the previous ERRIN project. These services will offer assistance to returnees after voluntary and non-voluntary return. The Joint Reintegration Services (JRS) Pilot Project has been launched on 1 May 2021, before expanding its scope and offering assistance to Member States along the full spectrum of return-related activities as of 1 July 2022.

Frontex may also deploy return teams either on its own initiative with the consent of the EU Member State concerned or at the request of that EU Member State, providing additional technical and operational assistance in the area of return. The return teams will carry out their tasks in accordance with the EU Member States' national legislation, under their command and control structures and in compliance with operational plans agreed between the agency and the host EU Member States. Two profiles are foreseen to be deployed in the framework of return teams: Forced Return Escort and Support Officer (FRESO) and Return Specialist (RS).

In order to guarantee the quality of return and reintegration assistance services offered by the EU, a clear evaluation framework as well as monitoring activities are

necessary. For this purpose, Frontex is currently developing a Quality Monitoring Framework (QMF) where Member States have been involved in its development, based on the work of ERRIN. Therefore, the result of Frontex should be awaited and referred to.

The European Commission has developed in the context of the European Migration Network (EMN) an EU framework on return counselling that provides guidance to Member State organisations in setting up, managing and developing counselling structures in Member States.⁵ Within this context, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), Frontex and ERRIN are developing a **common curriculum for return counsellors**. Professionalisation of return counsellors is a key point to improve the quality and sustainability of return counselling

- Frontex' extended mandate does not cover all areas in which Member States currently explore and implement joint actions which increase effectiveness of return and reintegration. Based on this, a Return and Reintegration Facility (RRF) will be developed by ICMPD. The RRF will support the development and implementation of innovative approaches and will offer a platform for experimentation, innovation and operational support of return and reintegration policies and practices. The RRF will ensure that the activities that are currently implemented by ERRIN and that are outside the mandate of Frontex or not yet covered by Frontex can be continued and further developed.

2. National schemes

Providing early, tailor-made and effective return counselling taking into account individual circumstances, the needs of children and vulnerable groups, as well as support after return, improves the chances of successful and sustainable reintegration into the home communities.

Through the presentation of national schemes in several EU Member States, the conference will give the opportunity to discuss best practices and challenges and how to reach a better understanding of national schemes in order to improve the quality of assisted voluntary return programmes.

⁵ European Migration Network, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/networks/european-migration-network-emn_en

NATIONAL CHALLENGES AND PRACTICES TO PROMOTE VOLUNTARY RETURN AND REINTEGRATION (PANELS 3 AND 4)

1. Voluntary return

- EU Member States make use of various incentives to promote voluntary departure, including the opportunities to benefit from assisted voluntary return and reintegration in the country of return, typically provided in the framework of specifically designed assistance programmes (AVRR programmes). The offered incentives can be of financial nature, but may also include other measures. However, these incentives do not always seem to be known to the target groups and they appear to play a rather minor role in the complex combination of factors that influence the decision to depart voluntarily. In contrast, the concerned persons' intrinsic motivation for voluntary departure is of great importance. The motives for voluntary departure are manifold and cannot or can only to a limited extent be influenced by the host country.
- The EMN launched the inform on return incentives and motives for decision-making on voluntary return from EU Member States, Norway, Switzerland, Georgia and Moldova to examine national experiences regarding motives and incentives for voluntary departure and seeks to discuss the opportunities and challenges with regard to incentives. It should also answer the questions still pending on the motivations of persons eligible for voluntary return: prospect of being forcibly removed, feeling of failure in the event of return, opportunities for reintegration in the country of origin.
- Innovative initiatives will be highlighted through two presentations dedicated to a return counselling project that has been deployed by the Belgian Federal Agency Fedasil in 2019 and to digressive return assistance offered by Switzerland.
- A presentation from Serbia will give a new approach of voluntary return from the EU external borders.
- Presentation by SEEFAR.

2. Towards a sustainable reintegration

- Main findings of the study EVALUA.
- In the field of reintegration, innovative practices have been developed by several EU operators in order to guarantee sustainable returns. For instance, south-south reintegration projects have been developed aiming at strengthening regional governance of migration between third countries. This kind of reintegration facilitates mobility between third countries and aims to support productive investments from the diaspora and the creation of a regional migration governance system. Capacity building for third countries such as training, peer-to-peer learning

and exchange of best practices are also valuable tools that have been used in the context of several EU-funded initiatives.

- Presentation of several national innovative practices in EU and non-EU countries will highlight national good practices in favour of a sustainable reintegration. Political, social and economic contexts are key points to analyse the impact of such programmes on successful reintegration.

CONCLUSIONS

The European Commission, together with EU Member States, Frontex, EU delegations and partner countries, alongside the wide range of stakeholders and international organisations involved, has been working on the implementation of the Strategy. The implementation of this strategy is monitored by the European Commission, notably in the context of the EMN.

Over one year after the adoption of the first EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration and based on discussions and debates organised through these four panels, this annual EMN conference organised in the framework of the French Presidency of the Council of the EU aims to raise following strategic questions:

- What are the practical measures implemented to strengthen the legal and operational framework for voluntary returns from the EU and transit countries?
- How to improve the quality of return and reintegration programmes and establish better links with development initiatives?
- How to strengthen cooperation with partner countries?