

## “Creating Transnational Conditions for Return and Reintegration”

**Avenir Suisse fifth Annual Think Tank Summit: “Migration Policies towards Refugees and Asylum Seekers and Their Impact on the Labour Market, Social Systems and on National Security”**

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*Check speech against delivery*

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Madam Chair, Dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to speak to you at the occasion of today’s Think Tank Summit. I think we all would have preferred to meet in person for this occasion, unfortunately this is not possible at the moment. But we all hope that the situation will change for the better soon. Thankfully we have learned to use our digital tools to meet and to work together, even when there is some distance between us.

- Let me start my intervention with a simple and basic fact: A credible and functioning policy on return of foreign nationals who do not fulfil the legal conditions for residence on the territory of a state is a crucial element of any migration policy. States have to be in a position to decide whether a foreign national is entitled to remain on their territory or not. In the latter case, they have to be in a position to effect the return, if the person concerned does not leave in a voluntary way.
- Why is return so fundamental for a migration management system? The absence of a functioning return policy implies that such a system cannot assume one of its main functions – the control of entry and residence of foreign nationals. It leads to a situation, where it is up to the migrants’ decision whether they stay on the territory of a host country or not, irrespective of their legal entitlement to do so. And as we know, such a situation is not accepted by the public and it is not accepted by the voters.
- Consequently, there is high political pressure on governments to deliver on return. And in the public eye, they are not always very successful in that respect. We just have to look at one indicator that always comes up in the debate, namely the overall return rate of the EU Member States. The most recent data are from 2019. In this year the EU return rate stood at 33 %. This basically implies that during this year, two thirds of those who were under the obligation to leave, did not return.
- Now we can have a theoretical discussion whether the return rate is really a good indicator for the quality of our migration policies. But we can hardly deny that the public

and the voters feel that this figure is too low and that governments should become better at returning people.

- At this point we have to ask ourselves, why is it that so many individuals do not accept a return decision? And why is it that so many countries of origin find it difficult to readmit their own nationals?
- When pointing out the necessity of functioning return, one also must point out the challenging nature of related policies. All European States agree that return must be carried out in a humane and dignified manner. However, from the concerned individuals' point of view, the situation might look quite different.
- Often, return is seen as a threat to their personal safety. When there are no security concerns, returnees still have to worry about an uncertain economic future in their home countries and the harsh financial consequences of a failed migration project.
- For their home countries, return adds to existing challenges on labour and housing markets and deprives them of the benefits of migrant remittances. But return is also seen as an expression of an unfair world order, where the rich countries of the Global North impose their interests on the poorer countries of the Global South.
- All these issues we have to address when we want to create better “transnational conditions for return and reintegration”, as the title of this session calls for.
- We have to follow a “migration partnership approach” and we have to make our return policies more intelligent. It has to be mentioned here that Switzerland is the first country that has developed “migration partnerships” and follows this concept since many years. Migration partnerships are closely linked to the issue of return. The acknowledgement of the need to embed return into a broader set of mutually benefitting relations was the main reason why they emerged in the first place.
- Migration partnerships and intelligent return policies have to achieve two things: They have to provide returnees with credible offers for functioning reintegration and they have to ensure that the return of their nationals does not turn into an additional burden for the countries of origin.
- Successful reintegration depends on having the right environment for returnees in terms of employment and business opportunities. This highlights the need of linking return policies to targeted investment, economic cooperation and structural aid. This approach is the best way to create the necessary conditions for reintegration.

- Meanwhile, there are some Good Practices that we can build upon. To give you just two examples. At ICMPD we have implemented a project called SUPREM with Nigeria. The aim was to train Nigerian return migrants while they were still in Austria and to place them with companies in Nigeria once they had returned. This helped the returning migrants but it also carried a strong development component and made it easier to cooperate at the political level.
- Mutual respect between the partners is a crucial factor. Return is a sensitive issue for everyone involved. It has to be made part of broader dialogue and inter-governmental cooperation. Investment, trade policies and development cooperation should be seen as means to achieving good and resilient relations between governments and states. It is these relations that open up the policy space for cooperation on return.
- All parties should be open about their goals and priorities, but should also listen and learn about the goals and challenges of the other side.
- Last but not least, we also have to think about creating more opportunities for legal and labour migration. All empirical evidence leads to the conclusion that the best way to reduce irregular migration is a combination of strict migration control AND openings for labour migration. Policies that try to do only one thing – control or opening – run the risk of failing. Opportunities for labour migration provide a credible offer for migrants to follow the rules and still be able to achieve their individual goals. And they provide an important incentive for governments in countries of origin to cooperate on all other migration-related issues.
- To sum up, I think States should follow four main priorities on return: 1) They should create the economic conditions that allow return migrants to rebuild their lives at home, 2) they should invest in economic cooperation and good and resilient relations with countries of origin, 3) they must show respect for the needs and challenges of these countries and 4) and they should not forget about creating pathways for legal and labour migration. If they do so, they will significantly improve the transnational conditions for return and reintegration, as this conference calls for.

Thank you.