ICMPD Working Paper 10

Rethinking Post-Arrival Assistance: The Road Towards a European Return System

Martijn Pluim

Martin Hofmann

June 2016

About ICMPD

The International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), established in 1993 by Austria and Switzerland, is an international organisation headquartered in Vienna working in migration-related fields. The organisation was created as a support mechanism to facilitate consultations on migration and to provide expertise and services in the emerging landscape of multilateral cooperation on migration and asylum issues. Today, ICMPD provides its 15 Member States and numerous partners with in-depth knowledge and expertise in the area of migration. Although ICMPD has a European basis, it carries out its activities throughout the world, including in Europe, Africa, Central Asia, the Middle East and Latin America.

Over the years, ICMPD has been a key European player in the migration field, working with partners in creating innovative concepts and mechanisms like integrated border management, the interactive map on migration and transnational referral mechanisms for trafficked persons, as well as carrying out in-depth research on important topics. It has also been a leader in promoting migrants´ contributions to their home communities and their receiving societies. One of ICMPD´s most important contributions to the migration field is its advancement of multilateral migration dialogues.

ICMPD´s working philosophy is based upon conviction that the complexities of migration challenges can only be met by working in partnership with governments, research institutes, intergovernmental institutions, international organisations and civil society. The principles of partnership on an equal footing, a forward-looking perspective and a balancing of interests are the foundation of ICMPD.

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Abstract

Effective migration management requires the implementation of sustainable return and readmission policies that place emphasis on improving post-arrival support and reintegration assistance. Instead of focusing narrowly on increasing return rates, EU member states should strive to adopt a coordinated approach towards countries of origin with the aim of delivering meaningful opportunities for returnees. Developing a joint European system for post-arrival support represents a clear way forward for enhancing the effectiveness of return mechanisms, decreasing the burden on individual member states and offering lasting reintegration solutions to the benefit of countries of origin and returnees alike.

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Introduction

The current migration situation in Europe is widely described as the most challenging since the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc. Although these challenges are not entirely new, they are unprecedented in their magnitude and complexity. They also suggest that the existing European policies and instruments to govern migration are neither fully functional nor fully sufficient, particularly when it comes to return policies.

A credible and functioning policy regulating the return of foreign nationals who do not - or no longer - fulfil the legal conditions for entry to, presence in or residence on the territory of a state is a crucial element of migration management. A state has to be in a position to decide whether or not a foreign national is legally entitled to remain on its territory. By extension, a state has to be in a position to actually enforce the removal of unlawfully present persons who do not leave of their own accord. The absence of a functioning return mechanism deprives migration management of the possibility to assume one of its main functions – the control over the entry and residence of foreign nationals.

Return, readmission and reintegration have always been some of the most challenging aspects of migration governance, but these issues are exacerbated by the current migratory situation. While a large share of the arrivals from 2015 and 2016 will qualify for international protection, it is also safe to assume that, given the large influx of arrivals overall, there will be a very significant number of individuals who will not qualify for protection and who – in theory – are to be returned to their home countries. This large number of prospective returnees makes the task of administrating return, readmission and reintegration all the more difficult for sending and receiving countries as well as returnees. The fact that bigger numbers will create bigger challenges becomes all the more apparent when looking at some of the main reasons that hamper the functioning of return policies and programmes:

- difficulties in ascertaining the identity and/or nationality of returnees

- concerns over returns aggravating the political, economic and social situation in countries of origin

- lack of functioning labour markets and job opportunities for returnees

- overburdened communities and regions

- economic dependency of origin countries on remittances

- lacking population registers that would allow for identification

- inadequate administrative capacities to respond to return requests

- political reluctance on the part of countries of origin and transit towards return and readmission

- low priority for return issues in domestic policies among countries of origin

Against this background, comprehensive return policies need to take into account the underlying root causes of migration as well as the understandable reluctance of countries of origin to readmit their own

nationals. A cooperative approach on return calls for the acknowledgment of the fact that the reasons for an individual's decision to embark on a migration journey oftentimes directly reflect the problems countries of origin face as a whole.

Credible and sustainable solutions should therefore be grounded in a comprehensive concept of "migration diplomacy". This requires significant investment in political relations and dialogue with countries of origin, the delivery of structural aid to source countries and returnees as well as smart return policies. As part of the recently established Partnership Network with third countries, the European Commission has reaffirmed its commitment to enhanced cooperation based on long term and systematic engagement with countries of origin and transit under the European Agenda on Migration.[1]

While the EU's pledge to improve cooperation with third countries is a welcome development, the migration policies of EU Member States must move away from short-sighted, quick-impact "return headcount strategies", which strive to have the largest number of returns in the shortest possible time span. These policies often rapidly grind to a halt when countries of origin stop their cooperation, resulting in "revolving door policies" that leave returnees and countries of origin without any constructive options for successful reintegration. Smart return policies should aim to avoid these mistakes and invest in viable reintegration options. They should offer credible support for successful reintegration, be based on a real dialogue with countries of origin, and invest in political commitments and the development of regions and communities where returnees come from. To adequately address all these components will be difficult for individual EU Member States in terms of financial and human resources and will require extensive know-how on the specificities of different home countries of returnees. This will only work through cooperation and a coordinated policy towards countries of origin. Given their limited administrative capacities, these countries often struggle to deal with requests from up to 28 different member state authorities simultaneously. All of this speaks to the need for enhanced modes of cooperation between EU member states that should, based on a voluntary commitment, align their approaches and pool their resources in the interest of moving towards a system of "European post-arrival support" which would be open to all types of returnees. Such a system should lead to a sharing of reintegration burdens between the returning and receiving countries, and provide credible offers for returnees to start a new life in their former homes.

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[1] "Establishing a new Partnership Framework with third countries under the European Agenda on Migration" http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160607/communication_external_aspects_eam_towards_new_migration_ompact_en.pdf

1. Return from the EU – statistical indicators

It is a widely held view that EU policies on return do not function as well as they should. In June 2015, referring to the European Agenda on Migration and EU Action Plan against migrant smuggling, Commissioner Avramopoulous stated that the EU's system for returning irregular migrants or rejected asylum seekers is not sufficiently fast and effective. According to the Commissioner, relatively low return rates undermine the credibility of the EU's efforts to reduce irregular migration, which in turn decreases public support for protecting persons in need. Thus, he called for exploring all options related to increasing "rates of return" and improving the effectiveness of European return systems. The significance of return for credible and functioning migration policies should not be questioned. All empirical evidence suggests that states face severe difficulties in achieving their migration policy goals when they are not in a position to ensure or – if needed – enforce the return of persons under the obligation to leave. What deserves second thought and more detailed discussion, however, is the question whether statistical indicators alone should decide whether a return policy can be deemed a success or if other aspects have to be taken into consideration in order to make return policies successful in the long run.

Today, the Eurostat database provides a rich source of statistical data on returns reported by EU Member States. At the same time, the available data is not sufficient on its own to serve as unequivocal statistical evidence for the real situation on the ground. The data does nevertheless draw an accurate picture of return trends in the EU context when looked at as a quantitative indicator for certain broader developments.

1.1 Return rates

Return rates are calculated by dividing the number of leave orders for third-country nationals (in total and/or for certain nationalities) by the number TCN returns in the same year. Returns include recorded forced and voluntary returns, i.e. returns under an Assisted Voluntary Return Programme. Return rates are naturally biased as they do not count voluntary returns which have not been recorded by the authorities and do not necessarily correspond to orders to leave of the same year of the returns. The difference in the number of persons ordered to leave and those returned following an order to leave indicates the number of persons who left/returned voluntarily, stayed in the country without authorisation or could not be returned due to various reasons. Taking into account these inherent limitations, return rates provide a rough quantitative indicator for assessing the functioning of return policies and programmes broken down by nationality.

For 2015, the overall return rate was 42.2 per cent (app. 533,000 leaver orders and app. 225,000 returns). This value is in line with the trend from previous years. Between 2008 and 2014 the annual return rate had fluctuated between 39.5 and 42.7 per cent.

EU return rate 2008 - 2015
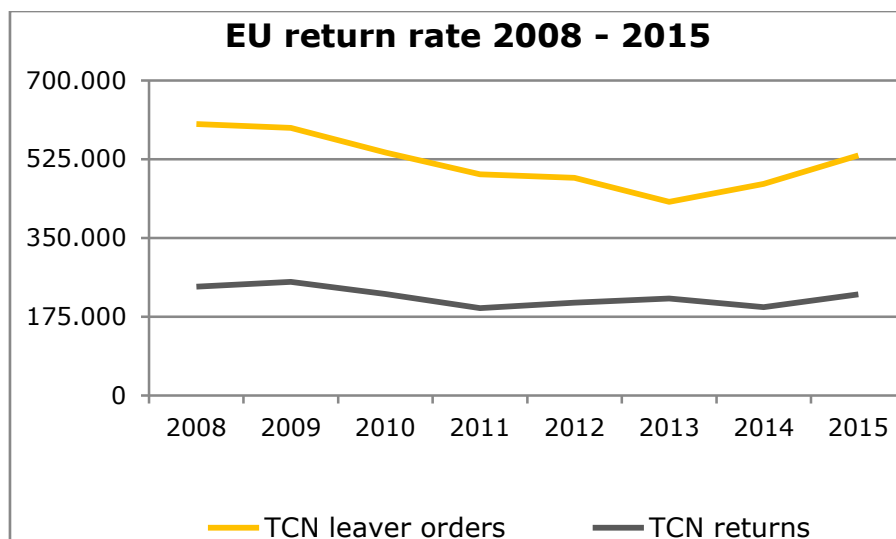
Whether average return rates of app. 40.0 to 43.0 per cent should be considered as "high" or "low" is a matter of interpretation. Looking at these numbers, which imply that every year more than half of the persons under the obligation to leave cannot be returned, it is possible to conclude that these return rates are too low. At the same time, one could also argue that they are remarkably high when taking into account that they do not cover unrecorded voluntary returns, which are clearly underreported, and that returns to countries and regions affected by conflict and bleak economic conditions are extremely difficult.

The overall return rate, however, provides only a partial picture of the extent and direction of returns from the EU. The most important countries of origin – when using leave orders as an indicator – are a very heterogeneous group with regard to their geographic location, political, economic and cultural proximity, and density of relations with the EU and its Member States. The graph below shows the respective return rates for 28 important countries of origin for 2014.[2] They were selected on the basis of the number of asylum applications submitted by their citizens, the number of illegally present and the number of leave orders imposed. Moreover, they are intended to exemplify the situation with regard to different world regions as well as varying degrees of political and geographical proximity to the EU.

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[2] 2014 was chosen for reasons of data completeness and quality. Moreover, 2014 represented the last year were trends developed along the patterns of previous years. Thus, the data allows for better comparability with previous years.
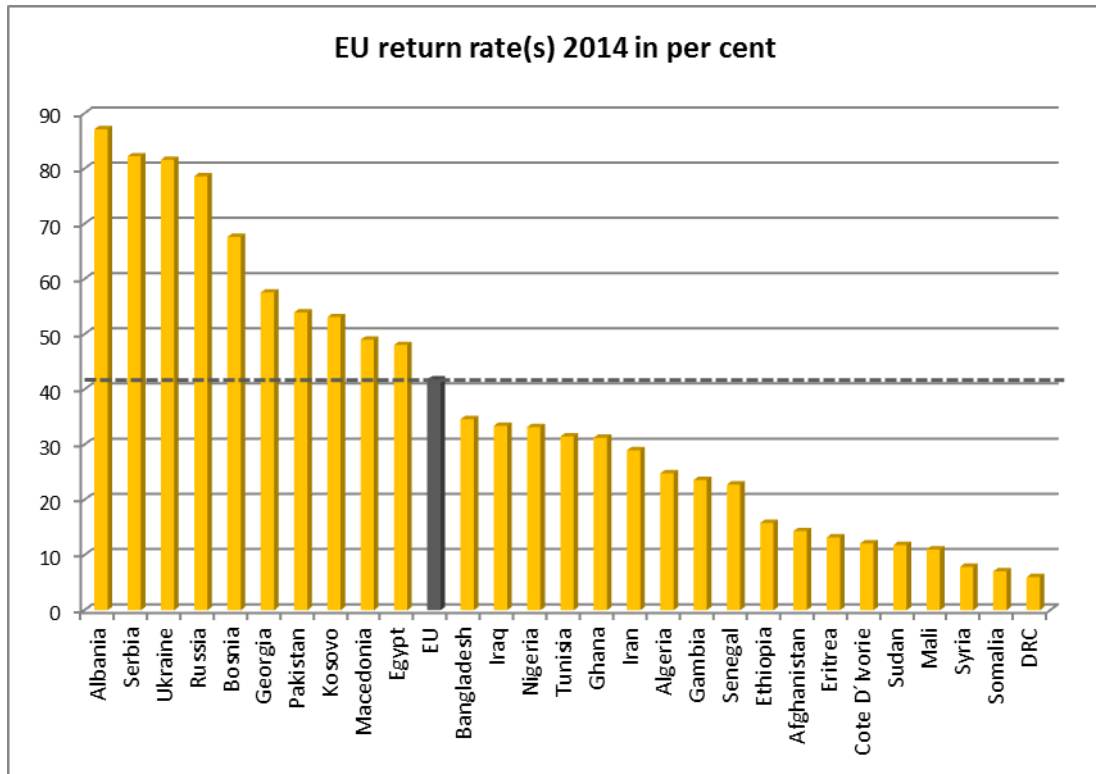
Thus, it becomes obvious that there is wide divergence in actual return rates between the selected countries, impacting the overall EU-wide average. If one were to subtract neighbouring countries such as Serbia (97.0 per cent return rate in 2014), Albania (87.6 per cent), Ukraine (81.5 per cent) and Bosnia (80.6 per cent) from the list, the EU-wide return rate for 2015 would drop from 42.2 to 32.0 per cent. At the same time, some countries that are presumed to be difficult when it comes to return fair better than the EU-wide average. Pakistan and Egypt, for example, are above the EU average return rate while Bangladesh, Iraq and Nigeria are slightly below.
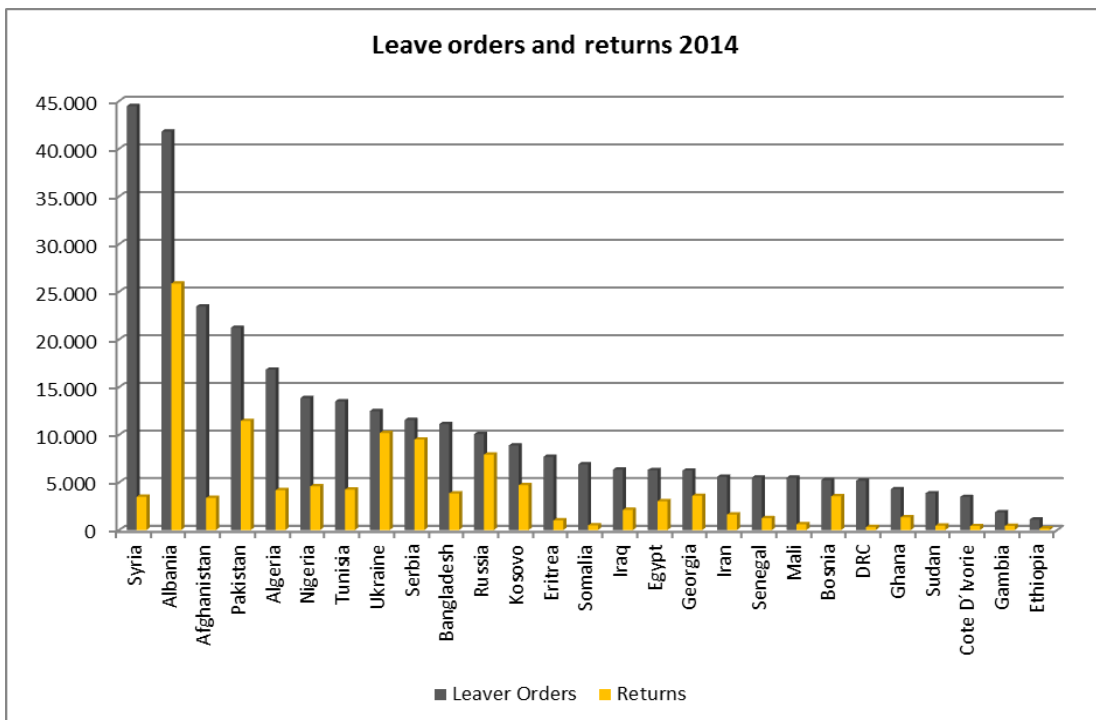
A comparison between leave orders and actual returns reveals two groups of countries of origin where return rates are particularly low. The first group is comprised of states located in major global conflict zones; namely Syria (2014 return rate of 7.9 per cent), Afghanistan (14.3 per cent) and Somalia (7.0 per cent). The second group includes mainly African countries of origin with rather small asylum caseloads. Here the return rates range between 10.0 and 20.0 per cent.

1.2 Characteristics of illegally present third country nationals (TCNs)

The Eurostat database provides some limited information on the personal characteristics of those illegally present TCNs in the EU. The majority of them are male (81.2 per cent in 2015). The absolute number of female illegally present TCNs has nevertheless risen by 39.1 per cent since 2008 from a total of app. 101,000 to around 170,000. Assuming that a large share of these women will receive a leave order in the future, return policies and programmes will have to take into account more gender-specific aspects in the future in order to be successful. A similar trend can be observed for minors. The total number of illegally present TCNs in the age group 0 – 17 almost tripled between 2008 and 2015 from a total of app. 47,000 to about 137,000. Thus, their share among the total number of illegally present TCNs rose from 7.7 to 15.1 per cent. Again, special approaches need to be put into place to provide functioning return and reintegration for this particularly vulnerable group.

1.3 What figures can tell us

The first lesson learned from analysing return rates on an EU-wide and quantitative basis is that they are a rather questionable indicator for the functioning and success of return policies. Geographic proximity and political interest in close cooperation with the EU on the part of third countries seem to increase return rates significantly. When looking at past developments, it can be concluded that large numbers of illegally present TCNs in the EU from countries like Albania, Serbia, Ukraine, Bosnia or Georgia will continue to improve overall return rates in quantitative terms in the future. This trend, however, will most likely be counterbalanced by the presence of large numbers of TCNs illegally present or under a leave order who originate from countries where return is extremely difficult if not impossible.

Despite its inherently limited explanatory power, a quantitative analysis of return rates divided by countries of origin reveals a number of notable observations. Firstly, return rates for some countries of origin that are considered to be rather challenging, such as Pakistan, Egypt, Bangladesh, Iraq and Nigeria, actually hover around the EU-wide average, even if the indicative figures for 2015 point towards a worsening of the situation. These countries are arguably more economically and politically stable and have been priority countries for comprehensive policies on return *and* reintegration in the past. Secondly, return rates are particularly low to countries currently in a state of war or armed conflict, such as Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan or Somalia. For obvious reasons, only a small number of nationals from these countries return or can be returned because a safe return operation cannot be guaranteed for them or their escorts irrespective of there being a valid leave order. Thirdly, return rates are also very low with regard to a number of African countries of origin which have only small numbers of their citizens illegally present in the EU. The capacities of return authorities there are limited and it can be assumed that political investment and resource allocation tend to prioritise countries of origin of TCNs with larger caseloads. This approach is understandable from the point of view of efficiency, but it also has the potential to backfire. Having return rates below 10 per cent for certain groups of TCNs under a leave order sends a dangerous message. Low return rates almost "guarantee" that a vast majority of migrants from a specific country of origin will not be returned regardless of their status. This may create an

incentive for irregular migration from these countries to the EU and might increase related flows in the future. <u>Finally</u>, it can be assumed that the composition of TCNs under the obligation to leave will shift towards larger shares of persons originating from regions and countries of origin where return is particularly challenging. This will be a logical result of the large inflows of nationals from these countries during the last years. It is almost inevitable that the overall EU return rate will decrease even if return policies become more effective because of factors related to countries of origin that are largely out of the control of EU member states and their return authorities. As a result, playing the numbers game by emphasising headcounts and using short-term return rates as a metric for the relative success or failure of return policies is a misguided approach.

2. Can we escape "the numbers game"?

There should not be any illusions; the particularly challenging nature of the current migration situation puts additional pressures on policy makers and migration authorities to increase the overall number of returns. The higher number of potential returnees in turn intensifies the political demand for higher numbers of actual returns. But how realistic is it for the EU and the governments of member states to live up to these expectations? One thing is clear: in view of the increasing numbers of arrivals and the persisting difficulties in returning to main countries of origin, the more traditional approaches towards return policies will no longer be sufficient.

Increasing the number and rate of return and readmission, one of the primary goals enumerated in the European Agenda on Migration, cannot be the be-all and end-all of EU migration policy. The reality is that any return policy which measures its success on the basis of annual "head counts" of returned TCNs will be faced with shrinking shares of "returnables" among the overall population of TCNs under the obligation to leave. This basic fact makes apparent the need for reformulating the criteria for success and failure in the area of return policy. It also calls for a much better understanding of the failed return policies for each country of origin.

A first step in breaking this potentially vicious circle of shrinking return rates and growing political expectations for them to increase is to take a closer look at some of the gaps and deficits in return policies that hamper their successful implementation. Such a review has to address the current lack of clearly defined objectives and realistic expectations towards return policies. In theory, these policies should return all illegally present TCNs, within the confines of existing international human rights/protection conventions, irrespective of where they come from or have transited through and regardless of the actual situation in the home country. Moreover, they should be sustainable, which implies reintegration support for returnees while at the same time being careful to avoid creating any incentives.

At present, return policies cannot fully fulfil any of these unrealistic expectations. More often than not, they have an isolated nature as "stand-alone" policies separate from foreign, trade or development policies and broader inter-governmental relations. Consequently, they do not have much to offer to countries of origin apart from a number of problems resulting from the return of larger contingents of people under difficult circumstances, moderate levels of reintegration assistance for individuals, and vague promises that good conduct on return might lead to closer relations with the EU

Under pressure to deliver positive "head counts", return policies tend to revert to strong-arm tactics. Carrot and stick approaches are also regularly employed whereby countries of origin are promised earmarked financial support in exchange for cooperation on return and readmission and threatened with

cuts to trade and development assistance (ODA) in case of non-cooperation. The notion of using positive and negative incentives related to development and foreign aid to influence the adherence of third countries to migration management commitments is central to the EU's new Partnership Framework. Such policies are, however, often ineffective due to their relatively low financial incentives and vulnerability towards blackmail. Overriding national political and strategic interests on both sides usually ensure that any economic sanctions remain toothless. In the worst case, these approaches negatively affect wider state relations without having a positive impact on returns as well as potentially exposing the most vulnerable populations in countries of origin to greater risks.

At the technical level, return policies are comprised of a series of procedures that require a high level of coordination and are vulnerable to bureaucratic hurdles. All major stages in the return chain, such as the establishment of identity, issuance of documents, approval of the actual return operation, approval of entry and commitment to stay in the home country require the consent and support of either the country of origin, the returnee or both. If there is an impasse at any of these stages, the whole chain collapses. This gives countries of origin disproportionally strong leverage in the process and makes it relatively easy to sabotage return policies for political gains. Returning countries might not approve of this, but their mantra-like calls upon countries of origin to readmit their nationals in line with international law will bear little fruit in changing the situation.

One of the main ensuing conclusions is that return policies need clearly defined *and* realistic objectives. Is it just about numbers? Is it about long-term goals? Do different expectations apply for different regions and countries of origin? Is it about creating more favourable environments for return? Is it about quick wins or long-term gains? These questions and many more have to be adequately addressed in order to create a framework for measuring the quality and impact of return policies. Without clearly formulated objectives it will never be known whether or not desired goals have been successfully attained.

Another conclusion derived from the analysis above is the need for taking an honest and critical look at the current scope and direction of return policies. It is not only the countries of origin which are to blame for the unsatisfying state of return, but also some of the existing European policies and practices which do not offer enough for ensuring more consent and cooperation.

3. Three options for improvement

There are a number of potential avenues leading to increased and more durable return as well as enhanced support and acceptance for return and readmission among third countries. Interlocking readmission and mobility rights, as often requested,[3] is not a realistic option at the moment. In view of the current migration situation, it is not to be expected that significant openings of EU labour markets will take place in connection with readmission agreements. This leaves three more promising options for improvement:

- moving away from third country clauses

- stepping up financial incentives and investments for countries of origin

- improving post-arrival and reintegration support for the benefit of both returnees and countries of origin

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[3] Sergio Carrera et al, EU-Morocco Cooperation on Readmission, Borders and Protection: A model to follow? CEPS Paper in Liberty and Security in Europe, No. 87 / January 2016, p. 15

The third country national clause in EU readmission agreements represents a major obstacle for formal and informal cooperation with non-EU countries. Third countries, Morocco being a recent example, raise serious concerns about the implications of these clauses for their situation, especially when they are important transit countries along major migration routes.[4] Taking into account that according to Eurostat figures a considerable share of all returns in 2015 involved persons returned to a third country[5], it is not likely that the EU and its Member States will give up on the clause easily, even if this comes at the price of cumbersome or even failed negotiations of new readmission agreements. It might nevertheless make sense to reopen this discussion. Doing away with third country clauses lowers the risk for third countries and the potential political price they have to pay for accepting a readmission agreement. This might significantly enhance the number of states around the globe willing to readmit their own nationals on a formal basis and thus outweigh the limited advantages of a few countries who also accept third country nationals. Consequently, two possible options remain – enhanced investment, financial support and development cooperation on the one side and improved post-arrival support and reintegration assistance on the other.

4. The art of the possible

A number of the cardinal sins of return policies are related to their vulnerability to different kinds of external pressures. There is the political pressure to maintain the legitimacy of the system in front of electorates, the institutional pressure on return authorities to report high overall return rates or increasing returns to difficult countries of origin, and the diplomatic pressure on third countries to readmit their own nationals or foreigners who have transited through their territories.

Giving in to these pressures might also imply that the otherwise reasonable policies of linking trade, investment and development cooperation in the field of migration are thrown into reverse. "Quid pro quo" policies that threaten interstate relations with serious negative consequences in cases of misconduct related to migration are regularly perceived as blackmailing attempts, especially if they offer few positive incentives. Exchanging numbers of returned migrants for concrete financial support turns people into commodities and return policies into marketplaces where both sides try to cut a deal and increase their returns when the next trade comes along. In the long term, return and readmission policies will only work when they have the continued support from countries of origin and are based on resilient relations on a general inter-state level. Mutual respect is a particularly crucial factor. Return and readmission can only form part of a broader functioning dialogue and inter-governmental cooperation strategy. Investments, trade policies and development cooperation should be seen as means to achieving good and resilient relations and not as a means to achieving short-term wins in the numbers game. All parties involved can and should be open about their goals, which also includes improved cooperation on return, but should see the latter as a result of good relations rather than as a one-sided priority imposed on others. Letting investments work over time will most probably result in maintaining or even increasing return rates.

The second avenue open to improvement is equally important and consists of offering more credible solutions to returnees on reintegration. This will not only enhance their readiness to participate in voluntary return, but also make returns more sustainable. Keeping in mind that difficult economic conditions as well as the lack of opportunities induce many to leave their countries of origin, Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes should aim at taking this into account by providing targeted reintegration assistance.

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[4] Mark Klaassen, The compatibility of third country nationals clauses in readmission agreements with the principle of non-refoulment, Master Dissertation, Leiden University, February 2010, p. 10

[5] Third country nationals returned following an order to leave - annual data (rounded) [migr_eirtn]

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 with targeted investment and structural aid. To a considerable degree, return policies – in conjunction with other policies – will have to create the necessary conditions to allow for reintegration. Economic cooperation, trade and investment are the backbone to creating and improving such conditions, which in turn will be the precondition for a better functioning return and reintegration system.

Individual reintegration assistance also deserves some rethinking. The current distinctions between forced, assisted voluntary and voluntary returns seeks to incentivise participation in voluntary return programs while migrants are still in the country of destination by providing post-arrival assistance only to those who consent to a voluntary return. This approach is quite comprehensible from the returning country's perspective, but does not take into consideration the needs of the receiving country. Once a migrant has been returned to the country of origin, they face a common set of challenges regardless of how they were returned. From the individual's as well as the state's perspective, the main issues are what kind of objective opportunities exist and what kind of support is available. If individual reintegration assistance wants to gain more acceptance among return migrants and authorities in countries of origin, it has to widen its scope to include forced returnees as well. While this might take away some of the incentive for returnees to participate in voluntary as opposed to forced returns, the support offered is hardly a strong enticement to return home compared with the broader challenges faced by returnees and local authorities in countries of origin. Moreover, experience shows that the biggest potential for the unintended use of voluntary return support is limited to countries of origin in the EU's immediate neighbourhood and to migrants who make the expected benefits part of their migration strategy even before they leave their home country. For long-distance migrants from Africa and Asia who have to span continents, crossing deserts and treacherous waters in order to reach Europe, even the more generous reintegration packages will not create enough of an incentive to embark on the long and hazardous journey just to collect return benefits at a later stage.

Besides widening their scope and expanding their target group, post-arrival support and reintegration assistance also need improvements in terms of quality. To be sure, a large variety of excellent programmes have already been developed and implemented, tailored to the needs and priorities of returnees and countries of origin alike. Many of them have yielded great results and have found their way into all sorts of European handbooks on good practices. The problem is that in most cases these programmes were limited in scope and duration. Many of them were either not prolonged or, if prolonged, their know-how and lessons learned were not shared with others. All too often the gathered know-how is lost and the sustainability of the programmes remains permanently in question as funding cycles stretch over short time periods in the face of long-term challenges. The number of beneficiaries of these programmes is also normally rather small. As a result, priority countries in particular see the evolvement of a fragmented landscape comprised of a myriad of programmes and projects with different scopes, target groups and backing organisations. All the while, less prioritised countries might see no programmes at all, which signals to these states that their citizens who do not have the right to stay in the EU might not be returned.

5. Towards a European post-arrival support and reintegration system

There is a lot room for improvement and there are good arguments for thinking about making the right kinds of investments for the future. On the basis of the observed challenges and in view of the existing

opportunities, a future European post-arrival and reintegration support system could be developed along three main lines:

- The establishment of enlarged return and reintegration programmes and post-arrival support jointly managed between EU Member States with the aim of moving towards a genuine and holistic European return and reintegration policy;

- The establishment of joint reintegration support centres in the many countries of origin where irregular migrants originate from and which can be jointly used even if the caseload for individual Member States would be too little to develop their own infrastructure;

- The establishment of a European Return Agency whose task, very much in line with the mandate of Frontex and the EASO, would be to support the return and reintegration policies and programmes of Members States, and to coordinate all related activities between them.

Such a European system would have a number of advantages from the perspective of individual EU Member States. It would allow for the pooling of resources and the joint use of structures built in the respective countries of origin. For those countries of origin where the European caseload is comparatively low, such pooling and joint use would significantly enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of return and reintegration. Such a system would also lead to a better coordination of all measures related to return and reintegration and allow EU Member States to speak with one voice towards any given country of origin and avoid the current cacophony of messages whereby each of the 28 EU Member States promotes its own policies and programmes. Joint approaches would also facilitate monitoring, evaluating and learning from positive and negative experiences of individual programmes. Currently it takes years of external evaluations and research to identify and communicate good practices and lessons learned. The learning curve with regard to return issues in general and specific countries of origin in particular could be dramatically steeper and faster than it is now.

There are also, of course, potential disadvantages. The involvement of a bigger number of states also entails increased coordination efforts. There is the risk that a bureaucracy evolves that reduces the leeway and responsiveness of individual Member States. It is possible to argue that cooperation in the EU as such is always fraught with challenges, but that overall the advantages of finding joint solutions outweigh the disadvantages of the complex and cumbersome process of reaching those aims. A potential stumbling block may also be the reluctance of individual Member states to give away their respective comparative advantages in cooperation with certain countries of origin combined with the fear of other member states "free riding" on the achievements made by others. In reality, however, the EU is increasingly perceived as "one" by third countries, which leads to frequent misunderstandings about where the competence of the Union ends and that of Member States begins. In other words, a dysfunctional or insensitive policy of one EU Member State towards a certain country of origin can jeopardise return and readmission programmes for the whole EU. Joint approaches that emphasise the exchange of expertise and best practices while keeping uncoordinated attempts by individual member states in check would reduce the risk of stalemates caused by faults committed by individuals acting unilaterally.

6. Conclusion

This paper aimed at providing food for thought for a possible reorientation and reformulation of the current EU policies on return, post-arrival assistance and reintegration support. Thus, it wanted to challenge the wide-spread notion that return "is not working". Taking into account the inherent difficulties and looking at the available statistical indicators, the track record is not as poor as often assumed. But the paper also wanted to challenge the notion that the gaps and deficits in return policies can be solely blamed on countries of origin or individual migrants and their reluctance towards readmission and return. The issue of return represents a number of very serious challenges for both countries of destination and origin as well as migrants themselves. It is in the interest of all sides involved to address those difficulties in a more realistic, pragmatic and future-oriented manner. Improving post-arrival assistance and reintegration support is one way of doing that. In this respect, there are good arguments for EU Member States to develop holistic and coordinated joint approaches. This will improve the quality of reintegration offers, allow for the establishment of links with other policy areas like trade, development and economic cooperation, and make policies and programmes more sustainable and predictable.