

The EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration

Discussions on how to increase the number of returns (including voluntary ones), while conducting them in a humane way, and achieving sustainable reintegration are high on the agenda of both Turkey and the European Union (EU). In April 2021, the European Commission took a step toward with the creation of a common EU return system, releasing its first Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration. This Strategy aims to increase the number of voluntary returns, but also to improve EU Member States' coordination on their respective Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes and make reintegration in origin countries more sustainable. To achieve these objectives, the EU needs to secure cooperation with countries of origin and transit, such as Turkey. Voluntary return and reintegration may be one area where there are tangible opportunities for Turkey and EU/EU Member States to build on some converging goals.

1. The EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration in Summary

The New Pact on Migration and Asylum (proposed in September 2020) aims to structure the EU's capacity to offer protection to people in need, to integrate those living and working in the EU, and to provide effective and humane processes to return people who are not entitled to stay. The system for returns is an essential component of a comprehensive and integrated migration management system for the EU. Voluntary and forced returns are both key elements of an effective return policy.

The Pact reiterates effective cooperation with partner countries on return, readmission and reintegration as outlined in the Commission's recent Communication on "Enhancing cooperation on return and readmission as part of a fair, effective and comprehensive EU migration policy".

On 27 April 2021, the European Commission adopted the **EU Strategy on voluntary return and reintegration**. This Strategy promotes voluntary return and reintegration as an integral part of a common EU system for returns, underlining the importance of voluntary returns and aims at increasing the share and number of voluntary returns from Europe and from transit countries, while improving the quality of the support provided to returnees and reinforcing the coherence and governance of the EU action. Over the years, the Commission has supported voluntary return and reintegration through various national schemes and EU-funded projects. However, this is the first time that the Commission presents a strategy on voluntary return and reintegration, which sets out new approaches to the design, promotion and implementation of voluntary return and reintegration.

The new Strategy builds on initiatives launched in previous years and on the experience gained in implementing national and joint voluntary return and reintegration programmes, including through the European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN) and its predecessor, the

European Reintegration Network, which has supported voluntary return and reintegration of nearly 25.000 migrants since its establishment in mid-2018.

The European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) is preparing to take on a bigger role to support voluntary returns and reintegration. Around 18% of the Frontex's return operations organised in 2020 were voluntary returns, and this share is increasing. In mid-2022, Frontex will take over the activities of ERRIN in this regard.

The 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. Within this context, the **International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)**, Frontex and ERRIN are developing a common curriculum for return counsellors.

The new EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration sets out a wide range of measures under seven pillars, grouping together the internal, external and operational aspects of voluntary return and reintegration:

1. A more effective legal 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.

2. The Way Forward

The Commission will work with the European Parliament and the Council to advance and conclude negotiations on the various elements of the New Pact, in particular the Regulation on Asylum and Migration Management, the recast Return Directive, the Asylum Procedures Regulation and the Eurodac Regulation proposals, to further reinforce the return legal framework and support the implementation of the new Strategy.

Member States will be encouraged to make full use of the operational assistance that Frontex can offer in relation to voluntary return and initial reintegration. Frontex will aim to increase the number of return operations – including voluntary returns – it carries out. Frontex appointed, as a matter of priority, the Deputy Executive Director to lead the dedicated Return structure of the Agency.

The Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) - Global Europe and the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) III will contribute to implementing the new Strategy, including by assisting migrants and their families in countries of **transit or destination** outside the EU to voluntarily return and reintegrate back home. Out of the total budget of EUR 79.5 billion, indicatively 10% of the financial envelope of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument - Global Europe will be dedicated particularly to actions supporting management and governance of migration, forced displacement as well as addressing the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement when they directly target specific challenges related to migration and forced displacement.

In addition, NDICI - Global Europe and IPA III will support the national authorities and actors of the countries of origin to increase their ownership of return and reintegration activities taking place in their territory, including by strengthening their capacity to refer the returnees towards effective reintegration schemes and by helping them to develop an adequate legal and policy framework, as well as the relevant information tools and coordination structures.

These two funding instruments will also **support relevant third countries of transit or destination** to strengthen their capacity to provide protection and assistance for voluntary return from their territory, taking the needs of the migrants into account, including vulnerability, fundamental rights considerations and the need to provide international protection.

3. Possible Implications for EU-Turkey Cooperation on Voluntary Return and Reintegration

The EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration recognizes the value of voluntary return and aims to increase the number and share of voluntary returns from Europe and from **transit countries**. Given the forced migration trends on the Eastern Mediterranean route, particularly following the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis, Turkey is one of the prime transit and destination countries on the immediate borders of the EU that receives hundreds of thousands of irregular migrants every year, the majority aiming to cross to the EU. Cooperation between the EU and Turkey on voluntary return and reintegration, as well as on asylum for those who are eligible for international protection, is essential for effectively addressing irregular migration. Such cooperation can be built upon EU support to Turkey's efforts in the area of voluntary return and reintegration, especially the newly established National Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration Programme (NAVRR) in Turkey, which is a priority policy for Turkey's overall migration management.

The new EU Strategy foresees support for Frontex in the areas of voluntary return and reintegration, to increase returns, including voluntary returns. The objective is to implement a

central and coherent approach at the EU level on voluntary return and reintegration. The document also expresses the current challenges, most issues being connected to insufficient coordination and a decentralized approach among the EU Member States. In addition it also created a risk of duplication and challenge to sustainability of the return and reintegration due to lack of a centralized approach among EU Member States and lack of a broader coordination with non-EU countries of destination and transit. In the case of relations with Turkey, individual EU Member States have their respective priorities for cooperation with Turkey in the field of migration. A number of EU Member States are preparing to provide support as of this year for the inception of Turkey's NAVRR programme. This support, along with the policy developments at the EU level brought about by the new EU Strategy on Returns and Reintegration, could culminate in the following year(s) for **EU support to NAVRR in Turkey** through IPA III.

The new EU Strategy also emphasizes the provision of **support to, coordination with and the importance of development programmes in the countries of origin** for sustainability of returns and reintegration. The same vision is shared by Turkey. The efforts of Turkey and the EU in strengthening dialogue and cooperation with countries of origin would bring mutual benefits to ease the pressure of irregular migration on and facilitate returns from Turkey and the EU alike. The EU's focus on further provision of support to countries of origin would also benefit Turkey's newly established return and reintegration programme, contributing to an already improved mechanism in receiving and reintegration of its citizens by countries of origin which will result in sustainable return and reintegration programmes. Hence, Turkey and EU Member States need to align their work in return and reintegration, and in strengthening cooperation with countries of origin.

At the same time, given the bleak outlook in the main countries of origin (in relation to security, economy and political instability), exacerbated by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, forced migration from these countries to Turkey and further towards Europe can be expected to pick up once circumstances begin a return to normality. Stronger cooperation between Turkey and the EU on irregular migration, return and reintegration is also crucial for **addressing possible post-Covid risks and future flows of migration**.

Finally, Turkey and the EU/EU Members States could also enhance **cooperation on technical issues** in relation to return and reintegration. Having recently taken major steps to establish its NAVRR programme, Turkey would benefit from the EU Member States' accumulated experience in voluntary return and reintegration, especially in areas of return counselling, Reintegration Assistance Tool (RIAT) and Return and Reintegration Assistance Inventory (RRAI).