



New EU Strategy on voluntary return and reintegration: Questions and Answers

Brussels, 27 April 2021

What is the Commission presenting today?

The Commission is adopting the first [EU Strategy on voluntary return and reintegration](#) to promote voluntary return and reintegration as an integral part of a common EU system for returns and improve the overall effectiveness of EU migration policy, key objectives under the [New Pact on Migration and Asylum](#). The Strategy identifies challenges that need to be addressed and proposes practical measures, based on 7 pillars, to strengthen the legal and operational framework for voluntary returns from Europe and from transit countries, improve the quality of return and reintegration programmes, establish better links with development initiatives and strengthen cooperation with partner countries. The Strategy also builds on initiatives launched in previous years and on the experience gained in implementing national and joint voluntary return and reintegration programmes as well as EU-funded initiatives in partner countries.

What is the EU doing to increase return and improve reintegration?

Return, readmission and sustainable reintegration are essential elements of the comprehensive and balanced approach set out in the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. Under the Pact, the Commission proposed a common EU return system based on the proposed amendments to the Return Directive, a new border procedure with swift returns and the concept of return sponsorship to allow for closer European cooperation particularly in situation of pressure on national systems. The Commission will also appoint a Return Coordinator, supported by a new High Level Network for Return of Member States' representatives. The EU is also working to create mutually beneficial partnerships with non-EU countries using all the necessary policy instruments available, including on matters of return and readmission and the full implementation of the new [Visa Code](#).

The new Strategy builds on previous initiatives and on the experience gained in implementing national and joint voluntary return and reintegration programmes as well as EU-funded initiatives in partner countries. The EU-funded European Return and Reintegration Network facilitates cooperation between migration authorities, supporting the return and reintegration of nearly 25,000 people to their home countries since mid-2018. The Commission has developed an EU framework on return counselling to provide guidance to Member State organisations in setting up, managing and developing counselling structures in EU Member States and is currently developing a common curriculum for return counsellors, focusing on the skills and competences that counsellors need. On the basis of its reinforced mandate, Frontex is supporting Member States in voluntary returns with around 18% of return operations in 2020 being voluntary returns, and the aim is to increase this share.

What is voluntary return?

Voluntary return is the assisted or independent return of a person who does not have the right to stay in the EU to their country of origin or transit, based on their own free will. To encourage and facilitate voluntary returns, Member States may offer to assist the returnee, for example by covering the travel expenses and providing help, in cash or in kind, for a short period upon arrival. The EU also supports voluntary returns from partner countries, for example in the framework of the EU-International Organization for Migration (IOM) Joint Initiative in Africa and to returnees from Afghanistan and Bangladesh.

What is sustainable reintegration?

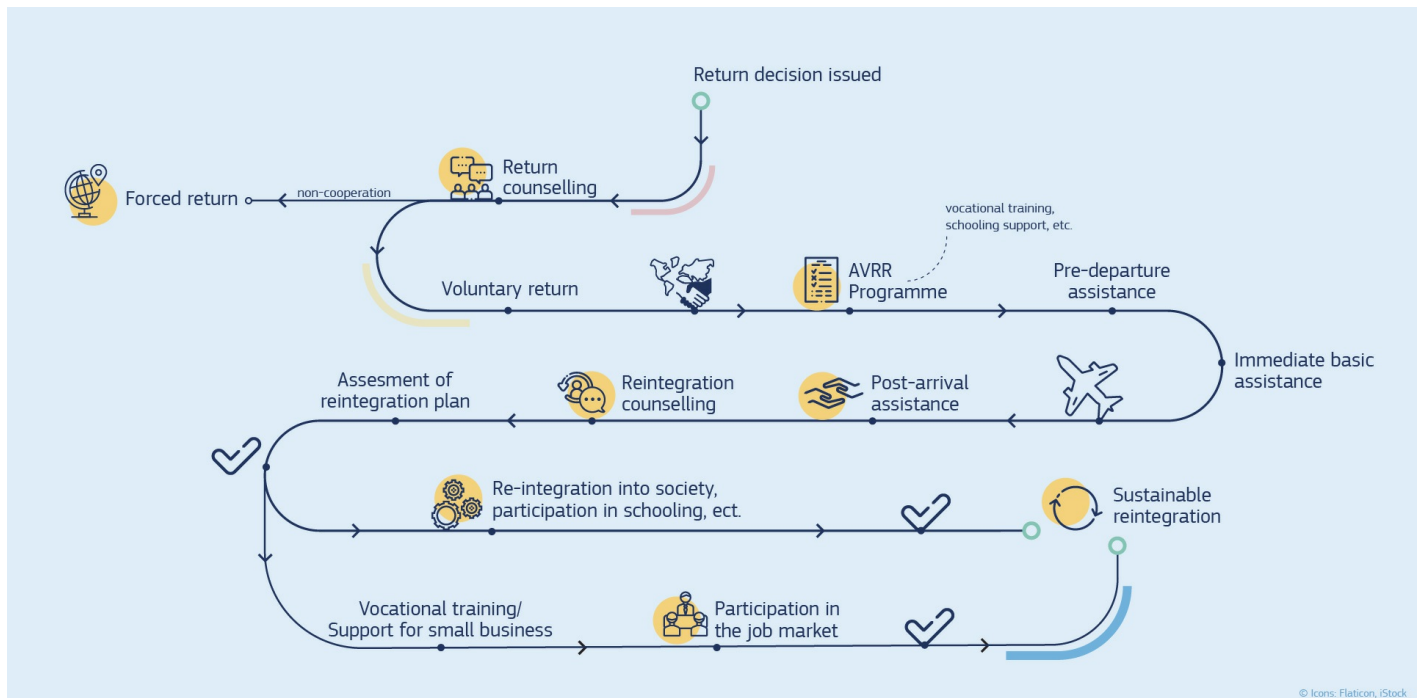
Reintegration is sustainable if it takes into account the social, psychosocial and economic aspects of the person's return to the origin community. Sustainable reintegration aims at supporting not only individuals, but also the structures and services that make reintegration possible, such as job search, education and training, entrepreneurship support, or administrative structures. This in turn benefits the whole community, and could help address the reasons that would have led the migrants to leave in the first place.

Why are voluntary returns more effective?

Voluntary returns can be less costly [see Q+A below] and more effective than forced returns. Voluntary returns take into account individual needs, expectations and prospects of the returnee once back in the country of return. Reintegration support helps returnees to reach economic independence and reintegrate successfully in the community. As part of a comprehensive partnership on migration, today's Strategy also helps to increase the participation and the ownership of the process of the countries of return.

How does voluntary return work in practice?

People with no right to stay in the EU are generally given a period for voluntary departure during which they should return voluntarily in compliance with a return decision. This period normally varies between 7 and 30 days. During this period, the authorities may not enforce the decision unless they identify a risk of absconding or security risks. Returnees are assisted throughout the process by professional return counsellors who discuss different options and their consequences and explore possible support for return and reintegration with people who decide to return.



How much does voluntary return cost?

Voluntary return is generally considered to be more cost effective than forced return. The cost of voluntary return depends on each individual situation. Costs include travel costs, the in-cash and in-kind assistance provided to the returnee and, where relevant, the reintegration package. Forced returns, by contrast, also involve additional costs such as pre-removal detention, forced return escorts, and other special arrangements before, during and after the return has taken place. The European Parliamentary Research Service has estimated that a forced return costs €3,414, compared with €560 per voluntary return. The average indicative cost of returns from transit countries is estimated at around €2,500 per person.

Why is the rate of return from the EU so low?

The low return rate from the EU is a result of several factors including fragmented and inefficient procedures within the EU as well as low levels of cooperation of countries outside the EU on identification and readmission of returnees. This question was explored in detail in the [Staff Working Document](#) accompanying the proposals for the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (particularly section 3).

The Commission proposal on the [recast Return Directive](#), the amended proposal for an [Asylum Procedures Regulation](#) and the proposal for an [Asylum and Migration Management Regulation](#) aim to improve the procedures inside the EU, including through bridging the gaps between asylum and return. The Strategy on voluntary returns and reintegration aims to address the shortcomings on the voluntary return side, which can contribute to increasing the return rates through more effective coordination and stronger engagement with partner countries on return, readmission and reintegration as part of the EU's broader mutually beneficial partnerships on migration with non-EU countries.

How does this Strategy link up with other proposals under the Pact?

The Strategy supports the successful implementation of key objectives of the New Pact, i.e. the border procedure and return sponsorship, and is part of the comprehensive migration partnerships with partner countries. More coordinated action on voluntary returns and reintegration will facilitate the implementation of the new return border procedure as well as the fulfilment of the new solidarity measure in the form of return sponsorship. It also puts forward an approach that fosters coherent action, forges closer links with development initiatives and national strategies in non-EU countries and fosters their capacity and ownership over the return, readmission and reintegration of their citizens.

What tools does the Commission have at its disposal to help foster the capacity of countries of origin in the return, readmission and reintegration of their citizens?

Capacity building for third countries such as training, peer-to-peer learning and exchange of best practices are valuable tools that have been used in the context of several EU-funded initiatives and multilateral dialogues with partner countries of origin. Under its reinforced mandate, Frontex is able to provide capacity-building support to partner countries. EU funding also supports countries outside the EU in the development of national strategies and standard operating procedures for return, readmission and reintegration. Finally, pilot projects with a limited scope can be used to test the actual capacity and support the setting up of reintegration services in third countries, with the aim of gradually increasing the ownership of the third country of the reintegration process.

What safeguards are there to ensure that the principle of non-refoulement is respected?

The principle of non-refoulement, as enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights, must be respected by all Member States when applying EU law, including the [Return Directive](#).

More specifically, the Return Directive provides protection against refoulement at all stages of the return procedure, for instance by requiring an assessment of the principle during the procedure and by including non-refoulement as a mandatory ground for postponement of removal. Article 5 explicitly states that when implementing the Directive, Member States shall take due account of the principle of non-refoulement.

With which countries does the EU have readmission agreements and arrangements?

The list is available [here](#).

What will the Return Coordinator do?

The Return Coordinator and the High Level Network for Return, comprising representatives from Member States, will provide technical support to Member States to bring more coherence between different policies that affect the effectiveness of return policies, building on positive experiences of Member States in managing returns. In the field of voluntary return and reintegration, the Return Coordinator will also focus on reintegration assistance in specific partner countries, particularly making sure that different stakeholders work together to use available support to the full extent. The work of both the Coordinator and of the High Level Network will form an integral part of the governance framework set by the proposal for a [Regulation on Asylum and Migration Management](#).

What are the tools that support the implementation of the Strategy?

Dedicated EU tools include:

- The **EU framework on return counselling**, published with the Strategy and developed with the European Migration Network, offers guidance on the best practices to set up and run national structures to provide return counselling. In addition, together with Frontex, the Commission will develop a **common curriculum for return counsellors** with teaching components on all aspects of the return policy and practice. Frontex will support Member States by deploying return experts trained in return counselling as part of the standing corps.
- The web-based **Reintegration Assistance Tool (RIAT)**, already available for Member States and reintegration service providers, enables return counsellors to refer individual cases to service providers in partner countries and exchange relevant information on return and reintegration (i.e. reintegration needs and plans). The Commission, with the support of Frontex, will also promote the **interoperability** of tools like RIAT and Return and Reintegration Assistance inventory with national return case management systems, and ensure appropriate governance structures for them.
- To address the lack of common quality standards, **a quality framework for reintegration** service providers will help increase and harmonise the quality and content of assistance and facilitate comparability and monitoring.

- 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.

For More Information

[Press release](#): Migration management: New EU Strategy on voluntary return and reintegration

[Communication](#): The EU Strategy on voluntary returns and reintegration

[Commission Staff Working Document](#): The EU framework on return counselling and the Reintegration Assistance Tool

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