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DISCUSSION PAPER ON
THE EU STRATEGY ON VOLUNTARY RETURN AND REINTEGRATION

The EU has been promoting voluntary return as it is a more dignified, easier and more cost-effective option to return illegally staying third country nationals. Also, this option is preferred by third countries and therefore is less problematic when it comes to readmission. Voluntary return can be even more useful in situations where enforcing a return decision is not possible because of a third country not accepting forced returns or in the case of certain categories of migrants who are difficult to return.

Reintegration is an increasingly important component of an efficient return policy as it can make illegally staying third country nationals more likely to accept voluntary returns because it provides an alternative to illegal stay and uncertain prospects in the host country and therefore allows for a more predictable return process. Reintegration is also crucial for enhancing the sustainability of returns and thus preventing irregular re-migration. In a broader sense, it can also build the capacities of receiving communities and governments' ownership of the sustainable reintegration of their own nationals as part of wider agenda for development and the management of migration.

In the past few years the Romanian, Finnish and Croatian Presidencies have been prioritizing the discussion on reintegration, exploring its different aspects, and the German Presidency organised workshops focusing on voluntary return and reintegration. The discussion on reintegration held at the joint meeting of the Strategic Committee on Immigration, Frontiers and Asylum (SCIFA) and the High-Level Working Group (HLWG) in February 2019 under the Romanian Presidency, among others, started a longer-term debate on reintegration at a more political level and brought a common understanding of the objectives of reintegration in the context of the return policy such as encouraging voluntary returns, striking the right balance between providing individual support and creating pull factors, increasing capacity and ownership of third countries and so addressing root causes of irregular migration. The Integration, Migration and Expulsion Working Party (IMEX Expulsion) meeting in June 2019 elaborated on the core elements of the effective reintegration such as return counselling, referral mechanism and single marketplace for the service-providers of reintegration and case-workers (RIAT), quality framework for reintegration service-providers and monitoring the effectiveness of reintegration.

The Finnish Presidency has taken the discussion on reintegration further. In the IMEX meeting in July 2019, the future mandate of Frontex was examined in relation to post-arrival and post-return related activities, including reintegration. In the informal SCIFA meeting in July 2019, the Member States broadly supported the Presidency's objective of finding ways to enhance cooperation in the area of reintegration. At the IMEX meeting in November 2019, the delegations further discussed the ways to enhance effective reintegration and focused on return counselling, the monitoring of reintegration programmes and the link between reintegration and development policy. A later discussion at the joint SCIFA-HLWG meeting in November 2019 aimed at exchanging views on and raising awareness of the challenges of reintegration coordination in third countries, as well as finding ways to improve this coordination.

Building on the discussions on various aspects of reintegration held during the Romanian and Finnish Presidencies, the Croatian Presidency in March 2020 further explored the potential of vocational training in the voluntary return and reintegration process, as a tool that could help increase return effectiveness, and the possibilities of providing it through building partnerships with third countries.

The German Presidency organised two workshops on voluntary returns in Covid-19 context. The first workshop held in July 2020 focused on return counselling and adjustments of voluntary return programmes due to Covid-19. This discussion was continued at the second workshop in October 2020, which additionally explored adjustments of reintegration programmes due to Covid-19.

On 27 April 2021 the Commission adopted the EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration, accompanied by the background document (Commission staff working document) on EU framework on return counselling and the reintegration assistance tool (RIAT). The strategy aims to develop a more uniform and coordinated approach among Member States to unlock the full potential of voluntary return and reintegration. It follows and promotes the overall objectives of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, and 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.

Upon identifying different challenges as regards voluntary return and reintegration, including fragmentation of approaches, insufficient data collection, lack of a coherent framework for return counselling and a mechanism to refer returnees to return and reintegration programmes, insufficient coordination among stakeholders, lack of sustainability, including due to a lack of ownership and capacity of origin countries, insufficient funding, and last but not least, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Strategy proposes measures under seven pillars. These include:

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.

As a concrete deliverable of the new strategy, the Commission puts forward the EU framework on return counselling and the reintegration assistance tool (RIAT). These two tools are intended to support the implementation of the Strategy, are based to a large extent on information collected in the context of the European Migration Network (Return Expert Group) and, as regards return counselling, provide guidance mainly to national authorities responsible for setting up, managing and developing the relevant structures in the Member States.

In the Strategy the Commission also announced that by mid-2022 it will develop a quality framework for reintegration service providers, identifying common standards, which could be supported by EU funding. These standards will cover organisational and project management requirements and conditions for material support and will also lay down key performance indicators, including on timeliness, compliance with the standards and level of service.

At the forthcoming IMEX meeting on 12 May 2021, delegations are invited to share their views on the following questions:

- 1. What is needed for Member States to best benefit from the tools (such as RIAT, Return and Reintegration Inventory and the EU framework on return counselling) at EU level?**
- 2. In addition to using common IT tools for referring assisted voluntary return and reintegration cases, how can the current varying approach be better aligned in terms of content and quality of support provided?**
- 3. What role should Member States have in ensuring ownership of third countries in the readmission and reintegration of their nationals?**