



Council of the  
European Union

**Brussels, 16 April 2024  
(OR. en)**

**8752/24**

**LIMITE**

**JAI 612  
MIGR 166  
RELEX 534  
COMIX 177**

**NOTE**

---

From: Presidency

---

To: Integration, Migration and Expulsion (IMEX Expulsion) working party

---

Subject: Presidency discussion paper on return and reintegration

---

Delegations will find in annex a discussion paper on the above-mentioned topic for the Integration, Migration and Expulsion (IMEX Expulsion) working party meeting on 23 April 2024.

## **PRESIDENCY DISCUSSION PAPER ON RETURN AND REINTEGRATION**

In its communication on a New Pact on Migration and Asylum, the Commission announced that it would adopt a Strategy on voluntary return and reintegration as a tool for an effective and common EU system for returns. The Strategy was indeed published in April 2021. The Pact and the Strategy highlight the need to move forward on a structured and sustainable approach on return and reintegration.

Three years after the publication of the Strategy, the Belgian Presidency organised a conference on 19 and 20 March 2024 on return and reintegration, together with Frontex, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) and the Migration Policy Institute (MPI). It provided an opportunity to take stock of the current state of play and to explore next steps for return and reintegration policies and practices, as well as the ongoing dynamic of EU-level programming and both its interaction and influence on national programming.

The Presidency has decided to pursue the debate at the Integration, Migration and Expulsion (IMEX Expulsion) meeting on 23 April 2024 and the joint EMWP-CODEV meeting on 17 May 2024 in order to provide strategic guidelines on the consolidation work to be carried out in the coming years in terms of the European return system and of reintegration policy.

Out of the various important topics that were addressed at the conference, we will focus this discussion on three large issues that emerged as the issues to be further looked at so as to consolidate the EU return system:

- More coordination, collaboration and harmonisation
- Deepening the holistic approach
- Making the added value of sustainable reintegration more tangible.

## More coordination, collaboration and harmonisation

- *Reflecting on governance structure for operational activities:* The Strategy mainly focuses on the legislative framework and less on the operational aspects dealt with by Frontex and the EU Return coordinator. However, a lot has changed since the adoption of the Strategy. Voluntary return and reintegration policies are gaining prominence within the return systems. Discussions at the conference emphasised the need for a nuanced approach that balances growing harmonisation of return and reintegration with the needs and priorities of individual Member States. In this regard, the speakers underscored the need to assess whether the current EU governance structures and budgets were still adequate. This assessment should include the role and mandate of Frontex to ensure that return-related issues are well-represented and discussed in the Frontex Management Board. Different discussions recently took place on this topic, including at the SCIFA meeting on 20 February 2024 and the IMEX Expulsion meeting on 12 March 2024.
- *Pursuing the efforts on the harmonisation and the complementarities:* The creation of the Joint Reintegration Services (JRS, now EU Reintegration programme, EU-RP) is an important achievement in this regard. The EU-RP brought three elements: a common framework and reduced discrepancies among the EU Member States, the operational ownership by national authorities, linkages with other EU bodies and EU activities. Discussions also underscored the importance of integrating the EU-RP with national programmes designed to address specific priorities and needs. It was also emphasised that the Return and Reintegration Facility (RRF) addresses tasks not yet undertaken by Frontex, such as developing complementary return counselling and reintegration services tailored to specific contexts and groups, including vulnerable returnees.
- *Ensuring predictable funding:* The Strategy points out the issue of the insufficient funding for reintegration activities. The EU-RP provides new funding in that regard even if the needs for funding continue to increase. Consequently, the main outcome of this discussion focused rather on the need for predictable EU funding for voluntary return and reintegration initiatives to support sustainable programmes. This predictability ensures stability and continuity in supporting Member States efforts to return and reintegrate illegally staying third country nationals. This issue was also raised in the evaluation of the EBCG Regulation discussed at the IMEX Expulsion meeting on 12 March 2024.

- *Ensuring inclusive process*: Similarly like in the Strategy, the importance of multi-stakeholder approaches involving national and local authorities, EU Agencies, international organisations and civil society organisations (CSOs) in countries of origin, transit and destination in order to design and implement successful return and reintegration initiatives has been clearly underlined during the discussions. Clear progress has been recorded in this area but there is still room for improvement. The need to involve the national and local authorities in the countries of origin when designing and implementing successful and sustainable reintegration initiatives will be discussed during the joint EMWP-CODEV meeting on 17 May.

#### Deepening the holistic approach

- *Integrating and empowering the return counsellors at all stages*: As clearly indicated in the Strategy, the role of return counselling is considered as crucial in providing comprehensive and accurate information throughout all stages of the return process (also during the reception phase) and in facilitating sustainable reintegration. The need for a comprehensive and coherent (digital) return case management system was noted by participants. During the conference an idea was raised about the possibility for return counsellors to interact via RIAT. The dedicated panel emphasized the necessity to further involve the return counsellors in different stages in relation with CSOs and countries of origin. The discussion also addressed the leading role of Frontex in providing a shared understanding of return counselling through trainings on effective return counselling to Member States and the creation of a training curriculum in this regard.
- *Reinforcing the multidimensional support systems*: There is a consensus in the reintegration community to base the approach on three main elements: economic, social and psychosocial. Collaboration, adaptability, and tailored support for vulnerable groups were highlighted as key themes in the discussion at the conference and are particularly essential with the increasing complexity of returnee's profiles. In this regard, a specific attention on mental health issues was also raised.

## Making the added value of sustainable reintegration more tangible

- *Developing an Evaluation and Monitoring Framework:* During the discussions at the conference, the dedicated panel highlighted the complexity in setting up this kind of framework given that it implies the need to also involve civil society (ideally at the design stage) and also the EURLOs. It also requires to work with Key Priority Indicators related to the objective of sustainable reintegration, on which a consensus has not yet been reached. Taking into account this complexity, experts advocated for enhancing evaluation methods to assess both outcomes and processes of return and reintegration programmes, to accommodate the diverse perspectives and needs of different stakeholders, including returnees, countries of origin, and EU Member States. Frontex is currently working on an Evaluation Monitoring Framework (EMF) aiming to provide evidence-based evaluation and monitoring of the quality of the EU-RP performance. The EMF runs quality assessment of both the EU-RP outcomes as well as the EU-RP management process. To achieve this goal, the Agency is setting up a comprehensive system composed of 3 main elements: evaluation, monitoring and reporting. The EMF is expected to be released soon.
- *Improving the use of data:* At the time the Strategy was published, significant data were missing. Since then, some progress has been achieved (like the creation of the RIAT platform) but it remains important to ensure more data-driven policy and to make the existing databases interoperable for informed decision-making and research. The discussions stressed the importance of promoting data-driven policy, on both internal and external elements of the return and reintegration process, by enhancing the comparability of data and digital case management systems, ensuring the interoperability of different systems and collaboration between different actors, as well as assuring a day-to-day availability of these data for the EU Member States. Continuous efforts to collect data in a solid manner, interpret, and utilise it, were considered as crucial for informing policy decisions and maximising the impact of existing policies and programmes.

**At the forthcoming Integration, Migration and Expulsion (IMEX Expulsion) working party meeting on 23 April 2024 the Presidency would like to invite delegations to reflect and share their views on the following questions:**

1. *How do you assess the implementation of the reintegration part of the EU Strategy on voluntary return and reintegration? What are the challenges and opportunities for further implementation?*
2. *What additional steps could be considered for further harmonisation of reintegration assistance and approach to reintegration assistance across Member States?*
3. *How can we ensure that we make progress on the areas highlighted above in the near future? What are the roles and responsibilities of the different actors and what do we expect from each other?*

---