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NOTE

From: Presidency
To: Delegations

Subject: Implementation of the Schengen Council cycle priorities: incentivising voluntary returns

Effective return policy remains a key element of a well-functioning Schengen area and a central pillar of credible and sustainable migration management. Ensuring that third-country nationals with no legal right to stay effectively leave the territory contributes to maintaining public trust, safeguarding free movement, and preventing secondary movements within the Schengen area.

Recent EU efforts to strengthen the return policy, include the Council general approach on the Return Regulation proposal, the European Asylum and Migration Management Strategy and the EU visa policy strategy adopted by the Commission on 29 January 2026, and the upcoming proposal on the digitalisation of the return, the readmission and reintegration process, the establishment of the trade leverage through the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) Regulation and the proposal to establish a development leverage through the Global Europe instrument .

Voluntary return is a key part of an effective return policy providing a more dignified, sustainable, and cost-effective alternative to forced return while contributing to increased engagement of third countries.

As indicated in the October 2025 Schengen Barometer¹, between January and July 2025, 240 825 third-country nationals were ordered to leave the Schengen area. Of those, 56 795 third-country nationals were returned effectively. More than half were voluntary returns (54%) and were supported by Frontex.

Understanding how to best support and encourage voluntary return is crucial to increase the number of returns of illegally staying third country nationals and to maintain a balanced and effective migration policy, as set out in the EU Strategy on voluntary return and reintegration adopted by the Commission in 2021. With this in mind, the Cyprus Presidency decided to focus on voluntary returns as part of the implementation of the Schengen Council cycle priorities 2025-2026. During the informal meeting of JHA Counsellors (Schengen) on 21 January 2026, Cyprus presented concrete operational practices in the field of voluntary return, followed by a very fruitful exchange of views among delegations.

Challenges with voluntary return

Despite significant procedural and operational efforts, including in the area of voluntary return, the overall return rate across the EU remains low, at around 24%². While Member States have improved internal coordination, persistent complexity and fragmentation at legal, policy and operational levels, including in the use of large-IT systems, continue to undermine the effectiveness of returns.

In several Member States, responsibilities for voluntary and forced return are divided among various authorities. Insufficient communication and information-sharing hinder continuity of procedures, resulting in delays in the return process. This fragmentation also reduces predictability for the prospective returnees, weakening incentives for timely cooperation. A clearer and more consistent follow-up leading to effective enforcement of return decisions could be an incentive for third-country nationals to cooperate at early stages and return voluntarily.

Furthermore, there is a risk of “return and reintegration shopping”, where individuals move between Member States to seek more favourable incentives for return, thus contributing to secondary movements. A significant number of Member States consider the risk of absconding, which is associated with the period of voluntary departure, as one of the main challenges.

¹ 13141/1/25 REV 1

² The European Annual Asylum and Migration Report (2025), COM (2025) 795 final, p.17.

1. Strengthening incentives for voluntary return

Introducing the possibility of voluntary return early in migration and asylum procedures could allow individuals to make informed decisions before their situation becomes protracted. The effectiveness of voluntary return is enhanced **by clear, consistent and transparent information, targeted counselling accompanied by a coherent referral mechanism, and possible reintegration support.** This enables third-country nationals to take ownership of their trajectory, understand the available support measures, the benefits of timely cooperation as well as the consequences of non-cooperation.

Approaches that prioritise early engagement, including, where appropriate, degressive support, can incentivise potential returnees to consider at an early-stage voluntary return options, thereby reducing pressure on Member States return systems, including the use of reception capacity and alternatives to detention.

Currently the issuance of a return decision is necessary for Member States to be able to benefit from Frontex return and reintegration support. During recent meetings held under the Cyprus Presidency, some Member States called for dissociating the issuance of a return decision from the provision of reintegration support, in order to speed up the return process.

2. Strategic use of reintegration support

Sustainable reintegration encompasses addressing the needs and vulnerabilities of returnees while strengthening the capacity of receiving communities and local stakeholders. It also supports partner countries in taking greater ownership of reintegration processes, thus creating the conditions for more effective cooperation on the return and readmission of their own nationals. An ambitious reintegration policy should therefore be embedded in comprehensive and mutually beneficial partnerships with partner countries, in line with broader development and migration management objectives.

The EU could also make better and more **strategic use of support and incentives** in order to increase voluntary returns including a more targeted use of readmission instruments, financing tools, and, where appropriate, visa and development policy.

The **effective and systematic use of Frontex support**, including for voluntary return and reintegration activities, through the EU Reintegration Programme (EURP) complemented, where appropriate, by assistance from other service providers like IOM, through national Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration Programmes can help maximise operational capacity, and ensure coherence with EU standards. This support can be targeted more strategically towards the priority third countries, also in the context of the upcoming return border procedure to be implemented as of June 2026.

Adequate and sustainable EU financial support is also required to underpin these efforts, covering reintegration measures in countries of origin as well as measures in transit countries in order to enhance the sustainability and credibility of return outcomes.

3. Addressing fragmentation through credible and coherent return systems

A coherent “**whole-of-government approach**”, underpinned by strong inter-agency cooperation, including close coordination between asylum, migration, return and law enforcement authorities, as well as effective cooperation between Member States, with the Commission and EU agencies, could ensure continuity of procedures, enhance predictability and reduce the risk of absconding.

As practice showed, voluntary return is most effective when integrated into a broader framework that also includes robust and effective measures to enforce return decisions, as a genuine alternative.

Effective implementation of adopted measures, in particular, the recommendations following Schengen evaluations, including making use of the best practices, while preparing for the implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum, in particular the return border procedure, will ensure greater consistency, predictability, and responsibility sharing in increasing effective returns. The adoption, entry into force and effective implementation of the new Return Regulation as well as the timely implementation of the EURODAC Recast Regulation, and the Screening Regulation are expected to strengthen the legal and operational framework for returns and reduce opportunities for absconding.

Enhanced digitalisation and interoperability of return case-management systems are crucial for improving traceability, information sharing, and enforcement across the Schengen area. This includes the effective use of existing tools like the Schengen Information System (SIS) and the Entry/Exit System (EES) paying particular attention to accurate registration of exits for third country nationals leaving the territory. The upcoming legislative proposal on the digitalisation of the return, readmission and reintegration process, announced by the Commission for the third quarter of this year, will contribute to further streamlining Member States' return systems.

Finally, sufficient third country cooperation on readmission is crucial for having effective returns. Therefore, the EU should make use of all available tools including readmission instruments, financing tools, visa, trade and development policy, to improve third country cooperation on readmission and to ensure that returns are accepted.

Coordinated and consistent implementation of voluntary return policies across the Schengen area can play an important role in **addressing secondary movements**, particularly when return procedures and incentives are applied in a tailored, yet comparable manner across Member States.

The purpose of the discussion at the Working Party for Schengen Matters on 19 February 2026 is to exchange views on the above voluntary return-related challenges and actions and to agree on the questions to be submitted to the ministers.

During the **Schengen Council meeting on 5 March 2026**, ministers could be invited to reflect on the following questions:

- Which measures can we put in place to incentivise early-stage voluntary return? How effective can the degressive support model be?
- How can we ensure a more strategic use of return and reintegration support, also in the context of upcoming implementation of the border return procedure?
- What steps can be taken at national level to improve the coherence and coordination among stakeholders so as to enhance the effectiveness of voluntary returns?