

**Project**

**“FACILITATING ACCESS TO HUMAN RIGHTS AND ESSENTIAL SERVICES FOR  
INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS AND RETURNEES AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL”**

# Voluntary return: an overview of policies and practices

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## Contents

Introduction .....	3
Overview of standards and policies on voluntary return .....	4
Council of Europe .....	4
European Union .....	5
Case law .....	9
Case law of the European Court of Human Rights related to the Rights of Returnees ....	9
Case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union on the EU Return Policy .....	10
Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programmes (AVRR) .....	11
EU Reintegration Programme (EURP) .....	11
Eligibility for EU Reintegration Programme (EURP) .....	12
Other AVRR programmes .....	12
Eligibility for other AVRR programmes .....	13
Non-EU AVRR programmes .....	14
Stages of voluntary return and reintegration procedures .....	15
Pre-return .....	15
Return .....	18
Post-return/ reintegration .....	18
Stakeholders of the return procedure .....	20
Monitoring and evaluation of voluntary return programmes .....	22

# Introduction

This paper gives an overview of Council of Europe standards and relevant case law of the European Court of Human Rights along with EU legislation and guidelines on returns with a focus on voluntary return and assisted voluntary return and reintegration programmes.

It covers the stages of voluntary return and reintegration procedures, including the relevant aspects at each stage. Country-specific examples pertinent to each stage are included, in particular, concerning using of financial incentives for returning of third country nationals.

The role and functions of key stakeholders in the implementation of voluntary return and reintegration procedures are outlined.

Country specific examples, summaries of policies and standards are highlighted in blue.

Links to practical tools in the field are in yellow.

# Overview of standards and policies on voluntary return

## Council of Europe

The right to return refers to the entitlement of every individual to enter or return to their own country or territory. In situations involving mass influx or forced displacement due to conflict, return becomes possible once the conflict has ended or when individuals voluntarily choose to return, having been fully informed of the prevailing conditions.

Such returns must be conducted in a dignified manner and in accordance with international human rights law and relevant policies.

[The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe](#) has emphasised the importance of the right to return voluntarily and with dignity to their homes or places of habitual residence, or to resettle in another part of the country, in accordance with the European Convention on Human Rights.

[The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe \(PACE\)](#) has invited the governments to continue to support the process of voluntary return, local integration and integration elsewhere in the home countries of displaced persons.

The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, in its **Twenty Guidelines on Forced Return**, has encouraged host states to adopt measures that promote voluntary return, which should be prioritized over forced return. While member states retain the sovereign right to control the entry and residence of non-nationals within their territory, exercising this right may, in some cases, necessitate the forced return of individuals residing illegally and such operations, carry the risk of violating fundamental rights and freedoms. The Guidelines serve as a practical tool for Council of Europe member states in the development and implementation of national laws and regulations on returns, ensuring respect for the human rights of returnees.

### [The Council of Europe's Twenty Guidelines on Forced Return](#)

The Twenty Guidelines on Forced Return, adopted in 2005 by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, encourage host states to take measures to promote voluntary returns, which should be preferred over forced returns, as they pose significantly fewer risks to human rights.

The Guidelines establish measures and conditions to be respected during the different stages of the return process. These include:

- When issuing return decisions (also known as removal orders), states must do so in accordance with the law, ensuring dignity and safety, and taking into account the real risk of returnees being killed, executed, or subjected to torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment in their home countries.
- A prohibition on collective expulsion and the requirement to provide special protection for the rights of children and families.
- The right to remedies against removal orders and detention decisions.
- Co-operation between states in the readmission process.
- Host states should seek the cooperation of returnees at all stages of the return process, particularly in cases of forced return.

## European Union

At the European Union level several policies and strategies have been adopted to manage the return of third-country nationals from the territory of an EU Member State and to support their reintegration. The main policies and strategies include:

- The standards and procedures in EU Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals, referred to as the Return Directive
- The EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration
- The Pact on Migration and Asylum (the Pact)
- The ongoing proposal for regulation establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the Union
- Returns in the Temporary Protection Directive including the situation of Ukrainian nationals in the context of return procedures.

[The standards and procedures in EU Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals, referred to as the Return Directive, were adopted in 2008.](#) This remains the applicable legal framework that sets out common standards and procedures for the return of non-EU nationals who are staying irregularly within the EU. Transposed into national law by EU Member States, the Directive prohibits collective expulsions and affirms that no one may be removed, expelled, or extradited to a country where they face a serious risk of being subjected to the death penalty, torture, or other inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Member States must take due account of the best interests of the child, family life, the state of health of the third-country national concerned, and must respect the principle of non-refoulement. Furthermore, return procedures must be carried out without discrimination, in an objective, fair, and transparent manner, and based on individual case assessments.

It is important to highlight that the Council of Europe's Twenty Guidelines on Forced Return, **are cited in the Directive as a key source** for interpreting and applying the Directive [in a manner that is compliant with fundamental rights](#). This applies to all third – country nationals, i.e., any person who is not a citizen of the European Union who do not longer meet the conditions for entry, stay, or residence in European Union Member States, who may be issued a return decision.

According to the Return Directive, “voluntary departure” or “voluntary return” refers to the obligation to leave within the time limit set in the return decision, which may only be enforced once that period has expired. **Voluntary departure is the preferred option.** When EU Member States resort to coercive measures to remove a third-country national who resists return, such measures must be proportionate and must not exceed the use of reasonable force. The removal decision must be implemented in accordance with national legislation, issued in writing with full respect for fundamental rights. It must include the reasons for the decision and provide information about the available legal remedies to appeal before a competent, impartial, and independent judicial or administrative authority. As well as issuing a return decision, according to the Return Directive, EU Member States also have the option at any moment decide to grant an autonomous residence permit or other authorisation offering a right to stay for compassionate, humanitarian or other reasons to a third-country national staying illegally on their territory. In that event no return decision shall be issued. Where a return decision has already been issued, it shall be withdrawn or suspended for the duration of validity of the residence permit or other authorisation offering a right to stay.

[The EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration](#), 2021 promotes voluntary return and reintegration as an integral component of a common EU return system.

It emphasises that the true success of a return policy must be assessed by considering the situation of the individuals concerned, ensuring that their return is carried out in a dignified manner and with attention to their reintegration prospects upon returning to their country of origin.

**Reintegration should be designed with the active involvement** of national and local authorities, host communities, and civil society, in order to provide tangible opportunities for returnees.

**Sustainable reintegration should also support broader development strategies in partner countries**, helping to generate development benefits and address some of the root causes of irregular migration.

The Strategy highlights the key challenges for coherent implementation of the return and reintegration policy:

- Establishing a more effective legal and operational framework.
- Enhancing coordination among all stakeholders.
- Supporting voluntary return and reintegration of migrants from and between third countries.
- Providing effective return counselling and referral services.
- Ensuring the quality of support provided to returnees.
- Fostering the sustainability of reintegration efforts and promoting ownership by partner countries.
- Securing adequate funding for voluntary return and reintegration programs.

Additionally, [the Pact on Migration and Asylum \(the Pact\)](#) adopted in 2024 significantly emphasised on returns, including establishing a return border procedure. A key element of the Pact is that Member States facing sudden migratory pressure will not be left to manage alone; they will be able to request support from the EU and other EU Member States to facilitate migrant relocations, transfers, financial contributions, or the deployment of support staff. The Pact aims to increase the efficiency of procedures and improve border management. [It also introduces several safeguards to protect the fundamental rights of migrants](#), including standardized asylum procedures, screening processes, vulnerability assessments, and independent monitoring mechanisms.

[The obligations of EU Member States concerning the rights of returnees include:](#)

- Encouraging voluntary departure.
- Establishing a minimum set of basic rights for irregularly staying migrants pending their removal, including access to basic health care and education for children.
- Ensuring that coercive return measures are not excessive or disproportionate.
- Respecting the principle of non-refoulement.
- Guaranteeing effective protection of human rights, including individual safeguards and the prohibition of collective expulsion.
- Prohibiting discrimination based on sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or other opinions, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age, or sexual orientation.
- Ensuring a fair and transparent procedure for issuing return decisions.
- Providing return assistance, counselling, and access to legal aid.
- Establishing effective remedies to appeal return decisions.
- Engaging in bilateral agreements and cooperation with third countries to facilitate the return process.

## Ongoing legislative procedure to introduce a Return Regulation

EU Member States considered that a more efficient return policy was needed because [several problems were identified](#) by the European Commission concerning the legal framework on returns and the implementation of the Return Directive 2008, including:

- It allows for a wide margin of discretion, resulting in divergent practices and varying interpretations of EU rules and administrative procedures among Member States.
- The system is overly complex and fragmented, leading to inefficiencies in cooperation between authorities involved in the return process – both within individual Member States and across borders.
- Many returnees do not fully cooperate with authorities, and the legislation does not impose a clear obligation for them to do so.
- Absconding – where a returnee relocates to another Member State to evade enforcement of a return decision – remains a significant challenge.
- There is insufficient efficiency and cooperation in readmission procedures by countries of origin, hindering the effectiveness of returns.

Consequently, to further facilitate voluntary and enforced return, impose obligations on third-country nationals to cooperate with return procedures, and increase the efficiency of the return process, the European Commission launched [a proposal for “Regulation establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the Union”](#), commonly referred to as the “Return Regulation” in early 2025. If adopted, it will replace the 2008 Return Directive.

The objectives of the proposed Return Regulation include:

- Ensure cooperation from third-country nationals with the authorities through a combination of obligations, incentives, and consequences for non-cooperation.
- Facilitate both voluntary and forced returns while fully respecting fundamental rights.
- Equip Member States with common rules to identify and expedite the return of third-country nationals who pose a security risk.
- Integrate readmission procedures into the return process for the first time.
- Safeguard the fundamental rights of returnees through clear procedural guarantees, including the right to appeal and the prohibition of refoulement, with special attention given to vulnerable persons.
- Prevent return decisions from being circumvented or delayed by third-country nationals who have been issued a return decision moving between Member States, by introducing a new coordination mechanism.
- Strengthen the right to information for returnees, which includes an obligation on Member States to provide return counselling.
- Enhance financial assistance for returnees.
- Clarify and reinforce the rules on forced returns for both national authorities and third-country nationals.

Several civil society organisations including [European Council on Refugees and Exiles \(ECRE\)](#) and the [Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants \(PICUM\)](#) have criticised the proposed Return Regulation and its potential effects on human rights, particularly concerning restrictions on the right to suspensive effect of the return decision during appeal procedures and the possibility to return illegally staying foreign nationals to a broad range of other third countries, not just the country of origin or habitual stay, opening the way for “[return hubs](#)” outside the EU. In the proposed Regulation voluntary departure (renamed “voluntary return” despite it being mandatory) is no longer specified as the preferred option and several exclusions are introduced. It also takes away

the minimum time period of seven working days to leave “voluntarily” meaning that in theory, potential returnees could be given one or two days to leave under their own steam before enforced return kicks in.

## Returns in the Temporary Protection Directive

[In 2001, the Directive on minimum standards for giving temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons and on measures promoting a balance of efforts between Member States in receiving such persons and bearing the consequences thereof](#) (**The Temporary Protection Directive**) established the obligations of Member States toward individuals benefiting from temporary protection. These obligations include the provision of residence permits, accommodation, access to employment or self-employment, educational opportunities for adults, vocational training and practical workplace experience, protection for unaccompanied minors, and access to education for children throughout the duration of the protection.

The Temporary Protection Directive requires Member States to take measures to enable the voluntary return of persons under temporary protection – or whose protection has ended – with full respect for human dignity and with access to accurate information about the situation in their country of origin. It also allows individuals to exercise their right to return even before their temporary protection ends and permits enforced return, when necessary, provided that it is carried out with due respect for fundamental rights.

### Perspectives of Return involving Ukrainian nationals

A return decision may be issued to a Ukrainian citizen or third-country national who fled Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine in the EU **once their legal stay on the territory has ended**.

In the case of Ukrainians and other foreign citizens who left Ukraine and are currently hosted by EU Member States as **beneficiaries of temporary protection**, return decisions can be issued by the host states once the conflict has ended and the temporary protection granted by the EU has expired, currently extended until 4 March 2027.

Ukrainians who have been granted **international protection**, such as [as refugee status](#) or [subsidiary protection](#), cannot be subject to a return decision while this protection remains in place. However, return decisions may be issued by states in cases of the cessation or the exclusion of the refugee status or the subsidiary protection. Ukrainians and others who have fled Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine may also have **a residence permit for other purposes such as study, family or work**. In some EU Member States, it is necessary to renounce temporary protection to receive a different residence permit, in others it can be held in parallel. In at least one Member State in 2023 (Belgium), temporary protection could be replaced by the new residence permit and re-activated if the new permit came to an end before the expiration of temporary protection.

### European Migration Network:

Application of the Temporary Protection Directive: [challenges and good practices](#) in 2023, November 2024.



## Case law

Several aspects and rights related to return process have been analysed and assessed **by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR)**.

The Court does not always use the term “voluntary return” explicitly, it has developed relevant jurisprudence under Articles 3, 8 and 13 of the European Convention on Human Rights. In the following decisions, the Court addressed fundamental rights such as the right to non-refoulement, the primacy of fundamental rights policies and standards over bilateral agreements, **the prohibition of collective expulsions, the assessment and provision of information on risks and the situation in the country of origin, respect for an effective remedy, and the protection of property and housing in the context of reintegration.**

### Case law of the European Court of Human Rights related to the Rights of Returnees

- The Court has determined that the **expulsion of migrants** by a Contracting State may engage that State’s responsibility under the Convention, where substantial grounds exist to believe that the person in question, if expelled, would face a real risk of treatment contrary to Article 3 of the Convention in the receiving country. [Chahal v. the United Kingdom](#), no. 22414/93, judgment, 15 November 1996, para. 74.
- Contracting States have the right to control the entry, residence, and expulsion of aliens and to enter into agreements with third countries for the readmission process. However, Contracting States cannot evade their responsibilities and obligations under the of the European Convention on Human Rights and its Protocols by relying on the content or terms of such agreements, **when returnees face risks of ill-treatment or the death penalty in the third country** that has signed the agreement – and may also be at risk of being repatriated to their country of origin. It has also reminded states to take into consideration respect for family and private life when the returnee has established family life in the host country. [Al-Saadoon and Mufdhi v. the United Kingdom](#), no. 61498/08, § 128, 2010
- [Hirsi Jamaa and others v. Italy](#), no. 27765/09, Grand Chamber, judgement, 23 February 2012, paras 113, 114, 129, decision; [Amrollah v. Denmark](#), no. 56811/00, 11 July 2002.
- The Court has reaffirmed **the prohibition of collective expulsion** of aliens, emphasised the importance of distinguishing between non-admission and expulsion, and highlighted the need for effective access to legal entry procedures that allow individuals to claim protection. [N.D. and N.T. v. Spain](#), nos. 8675/15 and 8697/15, Judgment, 13 February 2020.
- Competent national authorities **have an obligation to assess all information** brought to their attention before making a removal decision to a country of origin, including the current situation of the person that may pose a risk in the event of return. [F.G. v. Sweden](#), no. 43611/11, judgment, 23 March 2016, paras.156-158.
- **Regarding the right to legal remedies**, the European Court of Human Rights found a violation of Articles 3 and 13 of the European Convention on Human Rights.  
The case concerned the deportation of the applicant to his country of origin, which was carried out despite a national court order suspending the removal. The Court determined that Belgium had failed to properly assess the risks the applicant faced in his country of origin and had violated his right to an effective remedy by proceeding with the deportation in defiance of the court order. [M.A. v. Belgium](#), no. 19656/18, judgment, 27 October 2020.
- **The rights of returnees during reintegration** in their countries have also been addressed in the Court’s jurisprudence, primarily protecting the right to access, enjoy, and repossess property, as well as highlighting issues related to lack of access to property or temporary housing, the loss of houses, land or income.

#### **Access to property or temporary housing**

[Soltanov and Others v. Azerbaijan](#), nos. 41177/08, 41224/08, 41226/08, 41245/08, 41393/08, 41408/08, 41424/08, 41688/08, 41690/08 and 43635/08), 13 January 2011

#### **Loss of houses, land or income**

[Akdivar and Others v. Turkey](#), no. 21893/93 (just satisfaction), 1 April 1998

## Case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union on the EU Return Policy

**The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU)** has also ruled on the application of the Return Directive and has safeguarded the fundamental rights of returnees in the context of return decisions made by EU Member States.

In the following decisions, the Court addressed key aspects of the return policy, including its main objectives and purposes, the best interests of the child, compliance with the maximum period of detention, and the primacy of the Directive's application to cases of illegal stay over conflicting national criminal law.

- The Court has emphasized that **the main objective of the Return Directive** is to establish an effective removal policy. It has reiterated that the implementation of the Directive must respect fundamental rights and legal principles, particularly those enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. With regard to asylum seekers, Member States are required to grant applicants the right to challenge the execution of a return decision before at least one judicial body. All effects of the return decision must be suspended during the period allowed for lodging an appeal and, if an appeal is submitted, until a decision is rendered by the competent judicial authority. It is also essential that the period for voluntary departure does not begin to run while the person concerned is authorized to remain in the Member State, and that the individual is not placed in pre-removal detention during this time. Finally, the person concerned retains the status of applicant for international protection until a final decision has been adopted regarding that application.

[Sadikou Gnandi v État belge, C-181/16, jugement, 19 June 2018](#)

- **The Court has also safeguarded the best interests of the child.** In the case referred to, a return decision was issued against a person who is the father of a minor legally residing in the EU. In the absence of a residence permit for the father, the child would have been compelled to leave the EU with him. The Court emphasized that the Return Directive is applicable in such situations, including Article 5(a), which requires consideration of the best interests of the child. This provision, the Court noted, “constitutes a general rule binding on Member States as soon as they implement that directive.” This safeguard, in conjunction with Article 24 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and Article 3(1) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, must be applied in cases involving children.

[C-430/11](#), 6 December 2012

[M. A. v Belgium](#), Judgment of the Court (Tenth Chamber) of 11 March 2021

- The Court has clarified **that the maximum duration of detention** under the Return Directive is 18 months and emphasized that detention must be used only as a measure of last resort.

[C-357/09 PPU-Kadzoev](#), 30 November 2009.

- The Court has recalled that the Directive **does not prevent a Member State from classifying illegal stay as a criminal offence** and establishing penalties to deter and sanction such violations. However, a Member State may not apply criminal law provisions that would undermine the application of the common standards and procedures established by Directive 2008, thereby depriving it of its effectiveness. These standards and procedures would be undermined if, after determining that a third-country national is staying illegally, the Member State were to initiate criminal proceedings – potentially leading to imprisonment – before adopting or implementing a return decision.

[C-430/11](#), 6 December 2012

## Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programmes (AVRR)

[Assisted voluntary return and reintegration \(AVRR\) programmes](#) are any measure to support (e.g. administrative, financial, logistical, counselling) the return and reintegration of a returnee in their country of origin or another third country by the State or by a third party (e.g. an international organisation or non-governmental organisation) which enable the returnee to lead an independent life in the country of return.

Since [the EU Regulation on the European Border and Coast Guard in 2019](#) came into force, Frontex has a mandate to provide technical and operational assistance to EU Member States in all phases of the return process, including in post-arrival and post-return phases (i.e. reintegration services).

## EU Reintegration Programme (EURP)

Frontex' EURP was introduced and promoted due to EU Member States having very diverse reintegration assistance programmes and capacity.

It aims to be [a European-wide reintegration assistance programme with equal standards and equal treatment](#) for third-country nationals eligible for support. It aims to harmonise offers for returnees and ensure that all EU Member States can provide reintegration assistance with equal standards.

The EURP provides individual reintegration assistance to returnees in their countries of origin that can be provided to both voluntary and non-voluntary returnees (depending on EU Member State legislation and priorities). It includes both short-term support upon return, as well as long-term support such as housing and employment advice.

The EU Reintegration Programme is currently active in 38 countries of origin/return.

Frontex support for assisted returns is coordinated using Reintegration Assistance Tool (RIAT).

### [Reintegration Assistance Tool \(RIAT\)](#)

RIAT is a digital platform that streamlines the management and delivery of reintegration assistance to returnees. It is owned and funded by the European Commission with support from the Return and Reintegration Facility (part of the International Centre for Migration Policy Development or ICMPD).

RIAT is a closed system with access for authorized persons only. It has a central dashboard where different stakeholders can store and exchange information to coordinate returns.

EU Member States, other host countries, EU institutions like Frontex, and reintegration service providers can use RIAT. For example, return counsellors use it to obtain information on services available in the country of return. If an individual is eligible for EURP support, EU Member States submit the application on RIAT. As of 2024 all EU Member States had signed up to RIAT and so could take part in the EU Reintegration Programme or EURP.

It is also increasingly possible to extra data from the dashboard on the number of cases and case monitoring.

### **Frontex:**

[Reintegration assistance for migrants, User-friendly brochure](#)

## Eligibility for EU Reintegration Programme (EURP)

In the EURP an EU Member State is responsible for determining whether a person is eligible or not for reintegration assistance, according to their national legislation.

Generally, individuals are eligible for EURP support if they:

- Have not yet received a final negative decision on their request for stay, legal residence or/ and international protection (asylum), and decide to return. This is voluntary return.
- Have received a final negative decision, and/ or a return decision, which sets a deadline within which they have to leave the territory of the Member State and they decide to return to their country of origin. This is voluntary departure.
- The national authorities of the European country where a person is residing will inform him/her about the possibility of receiving reintegration assistance and the deadline within which one have to leave the country.

Depending on national legislation, individuals may also be eligible in cases of forced return where they:

- Have received a return decision, but have not chosen to depart within the set deadline (voluntary departure). In this case the return decision becomes enforceable, and the individual can be returned by force.

Generally, **individuals are not eligible for EURP assistance**, if they:

- Have the right to stay, legal residence, international protection or **temporary protection** on the territory of an EU Member State.

## Other AVRR programmes

EU Reintegration Programme (EURP) does not cover all countries of return and offers a standard amount of assistance.

Some EU Member States have their own independent AVRR programmes run by themselves or with another implementation partner to:

- compliment EURP programmes and provide additional support;
- to target specific groups or countries that are not covered by EURP.
- Some EU Member States have ongoing AVRR programmes funded by Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) or other funds, together with providers such as International Organisation for Migration (IOM), as is the case in [Estonia](#), [Lithuania](#), and [Italy](#).

### **International Organisation for Migration (IOM):**

[Practical guidance on the design, implementation and monitoring of reintegration assistance: handbook](#)

## Eligibility for other AVRR programmes

EU Member States and other host countries may have other criteria for eligibility. These can include specific groups, such as people who have been granted protection; certain nationalities; vulnerable groups, medical cases.

[Germany, for example, has additional AVRR programmes](#) run by several Federal States, including Bavaria that had a “Special Iraq Programme” that offered additional support to Iraqi nationals from Bavaria upon their return to Iraq for a limited period until 30.06.2025.

Cyprus recently opened an [assisted voluntary return programme for Syrian nationals](#), allowing the father of the family to stay in Cyprus and work for up to three years, whilst the family return, with additional financial assistance for the spouse (EUR 2,000 up from EUR 1,500) and each child (EUR 1,000 up from EUR 750).

### [Eligibility for Italy’s AVRR programme](#)

Italy’s programme is run by IOM and funded by Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). Categories of people admitted to the programme may vary slightly depending on the year and the implementing partner organisation.

#### **People generally admitted to the programme include:**

- People who have not yet received a decision on their asylum claim. If they decide to participate in the AVRR programme at this stage, they have to withdraw any pending asylum application.
- People who have been granted protection in Italy;
- People who have never applied for asylum in Italy;
- People whose asylum claim has been denied and who received a time limit to depart Italy voluntarily;
- People who no longer meet the requirements for a residence permit;
- Unaccompanied children may be eligible. The Italian authorities have to perform a thorough family investigation in a child's country of origin and ensure the return is voluntary and in the child's best interests.

#### **People who are not eligible, include:**

- People who received an expulsion order as a consequence of a crime, extradition or an arrest warrant.

#### **Frontex:**

A number of useful toolboxes [to assist vulnerable groups in return](#).

Materials include age-appropriate information for children as well as guidance for return counsellors, parents, and migration officers.

## Non-EU AVRR programmes

Non-EU countries are not entitled to take part in EU Reintegration Programme (EURP) and often have their own assisted voluntary return and reintegration programmes.

For example, [Serbia works with IOM Serbia for their AVRR programme](#) for all migrants residing in Serbia irrespective of their legal status when they do not have means to support their own return: (ex) asylum seekers, stranded migrants, migrants in irregular situation, rejected asylum seekers, vulnerable migrants.

The UK has the [“Get help to return home if you’re a migrant in the UK”](#) government programme of support for voluntary return to 143 countries that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) [has defined as developing](#).

# Stages of voluntary return and reintegration procedures

The main stages of voluntary return and reintegration procedures are pre-return, the return itself and the post-return or reintegration phase.

## Pre-return

Countries offer various types of assistance pre-return, including, administrative and logistical support; financial support and incentives; return counselling; information provision. Medical assessments may also be needed to help those with medical conditions to understand their needs for travelling and post return support.

### Administrative and logistical support

This can include help to fill in applications, to obtain travel documents, if necessary; assistance with travel arrangements to the final destination; covering travel expenses; assistance during departure at the airport.

### Financial support and incentives

EU Reintegration Programme (EURP)

Typically, financial support for returnees from EURP involves:

- Short-term support:
- Voluntary return: EUR 615 per person
- Long-term support:
- Post Return Package (up to 12 months after departure) – generally only a benefit in kind.
- Voluntary return (main applicant): EUR 2,000
- Each additional family member: EUR 1,000

### [Return from Austria: Austrian programme on return to Iraq](#)

#### Post-arrival or short-term support

The post-arrival package worth €615 is used for immediate support after the arrival in Iraq and includes the following immediate services:

- Welcome by a reintegration partner directly at the airport and handover of a post-arrival package: pre-paid SIM card, personal hygiene products (toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, shampoo, etc.), 1 water bottle, 1 warm meal (also available as a voucher), age-appropriate toy for children
- Airport pick-up
- Support in onward journey (organisation and covering the costs)
- Temporary accommodation for up to 3 days after arrival
- Direct medical assistance

If a person does not require any or only some of the immediate services, they receive the proportional amount of €615 in cash from the local partner organisation.

#### Long-term reintegration support

In addition, there is a post-return package of EUR 2,000. The person receives EUR 200 of this amount in cash and EUR 1,800 in the form of benefits in kind based on the reintegration plan which is created with the assistance of the local partner organisation during the first six months after return.

The in-kind post-return package may include:

- Support in establishing a small enterprise (company)
- Educational activities and training
- Support in entering the job market
- Support in enrolment of accompanying children at school

- Legal and administrative consultancy services
- Family reunification
- Medical assistance
- Psychosocial support
- Support related to house and household (furnishings)

## Support for vulnerable groups

Some countries have special programmes of support for specific vulnerable groups

<a href="#">Finland</a>	Victims of human trafficking: EUR 3,000. If a person needs additional assistance: one may be eligible for an additional amount of EUR 1,000. This includes age, disability, illness, family situation or other similar reason.
<a href="#">UK</a>	Victims of modern slavery, people sleeping rough, and young people aged under 21 who have left care are three of the groups eligible to apply for financial support of up to GBP 3,000 in the UK as part of its assisted return programme.

Some countries have degressive models of financial assistance. This means that they pay more the sooner the individual decides to take up voluntary return.

<a href="#">Finland</a>	If a person returns to a country whose citizens are required to have a visa to enter Finland, the amount of assistance will be: EUR 5,300 if one applies for assisted voluntary return within 30 days of being served with first negative asylum decision or of cancelling first asylum application; EUR 2,000 if one applies for assisted voluntary return for over 30 days after being served with first negative asylum decision or of cancelling first asylum application; EUR 2,000 if one has applied for asylum more than once. The person can only receive the higher amount once.
<a href="#">France</a>	Reintegration support for certain countries is doubled in the first month after an order to leave is received - from EUR 600 to EUR 1,200. From two to four months after the order to leave, the individual receives EUR 600. If the person leaves after four months, this is reduced to EUR 400.

## Non-EU countries

Norway	The Norwegian government has different programmes of assistance. Assistance is possible for both Ukrainian citizens and non-Ukrainian citizens with residence who wish to return to Ukraine. Norway cannot help with travel arrangements or support upon arrival but will pay NOK 17,500 (around EUR 1,500) per person and per accompanying child to help return.
UK	People seeking assisted voluntary return support in the UK can apply for up to GBP 3,000 that is provided on a payment card upon arrival in country.

## Return counselling

[Return counselling](#) is individual return advice to potential returnees, including – depending on the circumstances of the case – information on the obligation to leave the country and the consequences



if not leaving, different return support schemes, information on the situation in the country of return and the potential prospects for the returnees for a new start in their country of return with the aim to encourage (assisted) voluntary return.

Return counselling is often provided by different service providers in-country, depending on the location of the migrant, their situation and the way the service is organised. Return counselling services may be provided by an implementing partner such as IOM or a civil society organisation at return centres, in reception centres and places of detention.

#### [ICAM \(Individual Case Management\), Belgium](#)

The Belgian government implements ICAM system for irregular migrants. It is used as an alternative to detention for individuals in irregular stay, particularly those in the Dublin procedure (the process of determining the EU Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the EU Member States by a third-country national or stateless person).

It involves personalised support and guidance from an ICAM coach to help individuals find a long-term solution, either through legal stay in Belgium or return to their country of origin. It gives individuals and families time to come to terms with their status and explore all their options before making a decision on return. Special attention to be paid to vulnerable individuals, including children, families with minors, and those with disabilities or illnesses

#### **Frontex, 2025:**

[Quick view manual on return counselling](#)

#### **International Organisation for Migration, 2022:**

[Return counselling toolkit](#)

#### **Danish Refugee Council, 2019:**

[Return counselling: supporting informed decision-making through impartial, independent and non-directive counselling](#). A policy brief on best practices for return counselling based on experiences

## Return

For the phase of the return itself, assistance has usually been given to purchase tickets and make travel arrangements and at the airport. This can include assistance with travel arrangements to the final destination; covering travel expenses; assistance during departure at the airport.

A medical “fit-to-fly” test can also be undertaken shortly before departure to assess whether the person is fit to travel. Additional support may be given in the form of specific medical support for vulnerable groups. Medication may be provided for the journey, the journey and shortly after return or for longer periods.

## Post-return/ reintegration

Most assisted voluntary return and reintegration programmes provide short and longer-term cash and in-kind assistance as a **“reintegration package”**.

Frontex offers a “reintegration package” as part of its support for migrants returning to their home countries under the EU Reintegration Programme (EURP).

This package includes various forms of assistance, such as accommodation, medical aid, job counselling, and education, for up to 12 months post-return.

The EURP is fully financed by Frontex and implemented by partner organisations.

The EURP Reintegration Package provides the following:

- An Individual Reintegration Plan through Reintegration counselling helps develop a personalised plan outlining the support, referral, and counselling needed.
- The support can last up to 12 months, with the specific details determined by the EU Member State.
- Frontex monitors the implementation of reintegration programmes to ensure they meet EU standards and address returnees' needs.
- Financial support can include cash assistance, travel expenses, and support for setting up a new business.
- Accommodation: temporary housing or assistance finding accommodation may be provided.
- Medical Assistance: access to healthcare services, including mental health support, is often included.
- Education and Training: Vocational training, language courses, or other educational opportunities may be offered.
- Job Counselling: Support in finding employment or developing a business plan.

Frontex provides additional support to vulnerable groups, including children, families, and individuals with health issues.

Although there is a push to harmonise reintegration assistance among EU Member States, the specific content, amount, and duration of the reintegration package are determined by the Member State involved in the return process.

### **Inclusion of Ukrainians and others who fled the Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine in voluntary return programmes**

Although (former) beneficiaries of international protection are not generally eligible for AVRR programmes, some Member States are beginning to make exceptions:

In 2023, the Czech Republic established a legal basis for a programme of assisted voluntary return for citizens of Ukraine, whilst in 2024 it implemented [a pilot Assisted Return Programme, facilitating 21 returns](#) and addressing complex cases requiring additional assistance.

In Germany, non-Ukrainian third-country nationals who fled the war in Ukraine are not eligible for EURP support to go back to Ukraine but those who previously resided in Ukraine, left Ukraine due to the war and are now in Germany, can apply for support for their voluntary return from Germany to their country of origin through the [REAG/GARP programme](#) (Reintegration and Emigration Programme for Asylum-Seekers in Germany/Government Assisted Repatriation Programme).

In the Netherlands [assistance for Ukrainians wishing to go back to Ukraine was introduced](#). Also [a programme for non-Ukrainians](#) who no longer had the right to temporary protection in the country was implemented for a period of time in 2024.

# Stakeholders of the return procedure

Overview of key actors involved in different stages of the return procedure.

Stakeholders	Stage of the procedure	Functions	More information
Civil society in host country/ EU	1.Pre-return	1.Return counselling; “watchdog” role or monitoring; legal advice	<a href="#">Dignified return.</a> Danish Refugee Council return counselling programme  <a href="#">Caritas International</a> Return counselling in the EU, and co-ordination with local partners in third countries to prepare for return
Civil society in third country/ country of return	1. Pre-return 3. Post-return	1. Communication with return counsellors in host country or EU Member State officials; 3. Meeting of returnees at the airport; trainings; support returnee with individual reintegration plan and assistance.	<a href="#">ERSO network</a> (European Reintegration Support Organisations)  Civil society organisations – <a href="#">reintegration partners of Frontex in countries of return.</a>
European Commission	1. Pre-return 2. Return 3. Post-return	Facilitation of experience exchange; elaboration of legal and regulatory framework; Provision of funding both for EU level initiatives and also for national return programmes, including under Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF).	European Commission: <a href="#">An effective, firm and fair EU return and readmission policy</a>  EU funding programmes on migration: <a href="#">Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF).</a>
Frontex	1. Pre-return 2. Return 3. Post-return	Assisting EU Member States in developing and implementing voluntary return measures. Support EU Member States with joint return operations and post-return reintegration packages.	Frontex: <a href="#">Reintegration assistance</a>  Frontex: <a href="#">Return operations</a>
International Organisation for Migration (IOM)	1. Pre-return 2. Return 3.Post-return	Pre-return: provision of information about the country of origin, medical assistance (e.g., medical examinations and documentation), and arrangement of transportation and travel documentation. Return: departure assistance (including travel and reinstallation allowances), transport coordination (movement coordination, transit assistance, escort assistance, unaccompanied baggage handling, and necessary documentation), and medical support (such as pre-embarkation medical checks and medical escorts).	International Organisation for Migration: <a href="#">Assisted voluntary return and reintegration at a glance, 2015</a>

		Post-return: reception, inland transportation, health-related support, disbursement of return or reinstallation grants, reintegration assistance (in collaboration with local entities), and post-return monitoring and follow-up.	
National government in host country/ EU	1. Pre-return 2. Return	Concludes readmission agreements; Issues a return decision; elaboration and implementation of national legislation; organisation of the return operation with the support of Frontex and governments in third countries; provision of funding.	An example: <a href="#">Austrian programme on return to Syria</a> and the programme <a href="#">Federal agency assisted return leaflet</a>
National government in third country/ country of return	3. Post-return	Identifying individuals before return and issue a travel document where relevant; provision of longer-term support for returnees who have returned to the country of return	An example of a long-term programme: <a href="#">Welcome to Serbia, Information for returnees with foreign citizenship</a>
Return and Reintegration Facility (RRF) funded by the European Commission and implemented by International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)	1. Pre-return 2. Return	Support for the European Commission and Frontex in administering the Reintegration Assistance Tool (RIAT) database; operational and financial support to EU Member States to facilitate the development of solutions in the area of return and reintegration through capacity building activities.	<a href="#">Return and reintegration facility</a>
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)	1. Pre-return 2. Return 3. Post-return	Ensuring international protection and human rights safeguards at all stages: establishing the voluntary character of return; cooperating with governments to assist refugees who express the wish to return; arranging for guarantees to be provided by the country of origin; advising refugees of such guarantees and of information regarding conditions prevailing in the country of origin; monitoring the situation of returnees in their country of origin; receiving returnees in their country of origin and assisting in their reintegration.  Advocate for the inclusion of protection provisions in bilateral and multilateral readmission agreements	UNHCR: <a href="#">Voluntary repatriation: international protection: Handbook, 1996</a> UNHCR: <a href="#">Return arrangements for non-refugees and alternative migration options, The 10-Point Plan in Action, 2020</a>

# Monitoring and evaluation of voluntary return programmes

Monitoring and evaluation of assisted voluntary return and reintegration programmes is a complex subject being often **a part of wider discussions on evaluation of technical assistance programmes and impact evaluation** initiated by governments, humanitarian, and development organisations.

Human rights considerations of AVRR programmes **have often been the subject of criticism**, particularly [concerning the situation and safety of the individuals](#) who may be returning to a situation of vulnerability or an unstable environment or the sustainability of that return.

**Difficulties of building a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework** stem from stakeholders having different objectives, and from programmes operating under different funding streams and timelines, with various levels of and formats for coordination, and different data-sharing practices and monitoring requirements.

Monitoring can take place at the pre-return, return and/or post-return phase. In a 2024 European Migration Network informed that [nine EU Member States reported on monitoring activities](#) of the effectiveness of their assisted return programmes.

Monitoring is improving with ongoing contact by local partner organisations and returnees for up to 12 months upon return, e.g. as part of the EURP, as well as the development of digital tools such as Reintegration Assistance Tool (RIAT) that enable EU Member States to know who is receiving what assistance, for how long, and their situation regarding employment.

Communication and work with local partner organisations in third countries allows for an evaluation of the type of support provided and its results.

**Formal readmission agreements** with third countries and informal agreements on return, often **include monitoring clauses**.

## [Assisted Voluntary Return: Lessons of Bosnia and Herzegovina from the 1990s](#)

Effective measures and policies to facilitate and support voluntary return and reintegration should:

- Provide accurate, up-to-date information about conditions in the country and region of origin is important.
- Implement explanatory visits (look and see visits) that help individuals to assess the situation in their country of origin before deciding to return but still be able to go back to the host states after visits.
- Provide financial reintegration packages but also consider innovative solutions such as “repatriation accounts”, deducted from salaries when displaced persons were working in the host state/s and transferable upon return.
- Provide financial and material support for rebuilding homes, schools, farms, and public infrastructure.
- Engage returnees in the reconstruction process that accelerates their reintegration and economic recovery.
- Offer vocational trainings and educational opportunities in host states to prepare returnees for labour market demands in their country of origin and can contribute effectively to rebuilding efforts.
- Promote dialogue between returnees and those who remained in the country of origin that fosters social cohesion.

[A monitoring and evaluation framework of AVRR programmes should consider the following components:](#)

**Assess the outcomes of reintegration support, but also monitors the process** that leads to them (the quality of the services delivered by partner organisations and assessment of the adequacy of the assistance compared to returnee needs).

**General features of the service provider** (the local embeddedness of service providers and their knowledge of local dynamics, the human resources available per returnee, and/or the organisations' operational capacity to reach returnees).

**Service delivery** (what type of assistance and how it is delivered; its relevance to local dynamics).

**All dimensions of reintegration** (reintegration is a multidimensional process, involving psychological and social elements, economic stability etc).

**Impact at the individual and community levels** (the impact on communities as well as individual returnees).

**Insights of a wide range of stakeholders** (consider information from different sources: service providers, authorities in countries of origin, returnees themselves).

**Review and regular update** (be adaptable based on emerging research, evidence, feedback from stakeholders, previous results achieved).

#### [IOM monitoring of AVRR programme in Finland](#)

As an implementing partner for many AVRR programmes, IOM has developed its own monitoring among beneficiaries who receive reintegration support as a way to ensure accountability towards beneficiaries and donors and improve voluntary return and sustainable reintegration programming based on evidence.

In 2020, IOM Finland conducted a beneficiary monitoring survey to examine reintegration sustainability among beneficiaries of the reintegration cash support project, focusing on migrants who had returned from Sweden to Afghanistan and Iraq. The results showed there was a significant difference in reintegration outcomes. Those having returned with families showed lower levels of reintegration sustainability in general as did those who returned to another community than their country of origin. The results of the survey also indicated that the cash support itself was not enough to allow for sustainable reintegration. IOM recommended an integrated approach to reintegration that considers communal factors and overall structures in the country of origin for reintegration assistance schemes.

#### **European Migration Network (EMN):**

[Guidelines for Monitoring and Evaluation of AVR® Programmes, 2016](#)

#### **The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD):**

[Sustainable reintegration of migrants](#), 2020

#### **International Organisation for Migration:**

Reintegration [handbook](#)

#### **Mixed Migration Centre:**

[Mixed returns: return migration and reintegration dynamics](#), 2024