

Fuchs, Lukas M.

Article — Published Version

Assisted return programmes across Europe – Mapping an increasingly obscure landscape

International Migration

Provided in Cooperation with:

John Wiley & Sons

Suggested Citation: Fuchs, Lukas M. (2025) : Assisted return programmes across Europe – Mapping an increasingly obscure landscape, International Migration, ISSN 1468-2435, Wiley, Hoboken, NJ, Vol. 63, Iss. 3,
<https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.70032>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/323858>

Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

Terms of use:

Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.

You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.

If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.



<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Assisted return programmes across Europe – Mapping an increasingly obscure landscape

Lukas M. Fuchs 

Department Migration, German Centre for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM), Berlin, Germany

Correspondence

Lukas M. Fuchs, Department Migration, German Centre for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM), Mauerstraße 76, Berlin 10117, Germany.
Email: fuchs@dezim-institut.de

Funding information

Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend

Abstract

Amidst an increasing popularity of Assisted Return (AR) programmes amongst European states, on the one hand, and criticism pertaining to their voluntary and humanitarian nature, on the other hand, this paper maps AR programmes across Europe. It contains a first comprehensive overview of 45 ongoing AR programmes across 27 countries in the European Economic Area (EEA) and outlines their commonalities and specificities along five categories: (1) clarity and reliability of available information, (2) involved actors, (3) targeting, (4) offered support and (5) accountability and empirical knowledge production. The mapping finds relevant differences in programme design according to the centralization and distribution of responsibilities between state actors, IOM and NGOs. Similarly, programmes vary according to their target groups ranging from highly specific (e.g. for victims of trafficking) to those addressing virtually all non-EU citizens. Another marked distinction concerns the labelling as either assisted return or return & reintegration programme, which may be in contrast to the amount, scope and timing of the offered support. The findings and identified knowledge gaps are discussed in relation to relevant literature to contextualize our understanding of the proliferation of AR activities and formulate recommendations for future research.

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2025 The Author(s). *International Migration* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of International Organization for Migration.

INTRODUCTION

Human mobility is one of the most intensely debated topics and migration governance one of the most controversial policy areas in Europe in the past decade (Czaika & de Haas, 2013; Niemann & Zaun, 2023). The ways in which mobile individuals have been termed and consequently governed is usually informed by the perceived motives behind their migration or the intentions of the societies who receive immigrants – ‘permanent or temporary migrants, refugees or asylees, students, second-generation migrants, short-term returnees for health reasons or for employment, those displaced by political or environmental crisis, and the forcibly repatriated because of irregular migration’ (Battistella, 2018) – just to name a few. Amongst the facets of migration and migration governance that are garnering increasing scholarly attention in recent times is return migration (Constant, 2020; King & Kuschminder, 2022).

Alongside this growing interest, also definitions and conceptualizations of return migration in migration scholarship evolved from merely demarcating the occasion ‘when people return to their country or region of origin after a significant period abroad or in another region’ (King, 1986) to understanding return rather as a temporal phase within migrants’ wider mobility processes (Constant, 2020; Gemi & Triandafyllidou, 2021) that comes in various forms: temporary return, forced return, voluntary return or assisted return (King & Kuschminder, 2022). This article focalises assisted return, a form of return with high political stakes (Biehler et al., 2021; Lietaert, 2019). Assisted Return refers to concrete political or humanitarian programmes developed by or on behalf of migrant hosting countries to support or facilitate migrants’ returns by typically offering ‘counselling and administrative, logistical and/or financial support’ to migrants returning to their countries of origin (Lietaert, 2022, p. 108). Throughout this article, we collect and map so-called assisted voluntary return (AVR) and assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) schemes throughout Europe. The term Assisted Return (AR) is used throughout the paper, in line with recent academic practice (Lietaert, 2022; Marino et al., 2023), because it is often impossible to draw an immediate conclusion as to whether return or return & reintegration are supported. Also, normative assumptions as to whether the returns are in fact voluntary are avoided.

Introduced in the late 1970s to support refugees and asylum seekers in returning to their countries of origin, recent years have seen a notable proliferation of such AR programmes across Europe but also other parts of the world (Koser & Kuschminder, 2015; Kuschminder, 2017a; Lietaert, 2019). These programmes are appealing to hosting countries who want to facilitate the exit of certain migrants because they are more cost-effective and ‘humane’ than deportations (Black et al., 2011; Leerkes et al., 2017). However, they are not devoid of controversy, supposedly serving as mechanisms deployed by receiving countries first and foremost to reduce the so-called ‘efficacy gaps’ in returning rejected asylum seekers rather than for humanitarian reasons (Kuschminder, 2017a; Leerkes et al., 2017). Some scholars investigating the predictors for taking up AR and the experiences of individuals partaking in AR call into question their voluntary nature altogether (Kalir, 2017; Salihi, 2020; Sinnige et al., 2025; Webber, 2011). Notwithstanding these critical voices, there appears to be political determination across European decision-makers to further push assisted returns as a governance tools (European Commission, 2021), necessitating research on AR programmes and their implementation. Critiques of AR and discussions on their legitimacy to date are impaired by knowledge gaps and a relative scarcity of empirical studies, owing in part to a lack of transparency of the AR programme landscape across Europe and practical challenges to studying assisted migrants’ experiences with AR.

In this light, the present mapping endeavours to achieve two primary objectives: first, to provide a comprehensive overview of the increasingly complex landscape of AR across Europe – including all member states of the European Economic Area (EEA) plus Switzerland – to counter the disbalance between the expansion of AR programmes across Europe, on the one hand, and the amount of empirical evidence, on the other hand. Second, to analyse various common patterns and practices across these AR programmes, marking potentials for future critical research and political debate on AR as well as actor accountability.

The article departs from an appraisal of AR as an increasingly important political tool in European migration governance. Next, AR is theoretically located in literature on return migration and existing literature on and reviews of AR are appraised. From these theoretical considerations, five questions are derived that structure the presentation of the 45 identified ongoing AR programmes across the EEA. Following these five questions, (1) the reliability and clarity of information publicly advertised to potential returnees, (2) the donors and implementers behind each programme, (3) their targeted groups, (4) the type and amount of offered support and (5) the quality of internal and external accountability are mapped in the results part. The discussion critically relates the findings to AR literature, finding that the observable spread of AR programmes, the in part indiscriminate targeting of migrants according to political considerations, and the often lacking concern for returnees' well-being after the return reinforce trends of AR becoming a tool of migration control rather than care. Finally, the article concludes with general takeaways from outlining the considerable disparity across EEA countries' AR programmes and formulates recommendations for future research.

AR as a political tool for Europe and beyond

The International Organization for Migration (IOM), the chief implementer of global AR activities, defines assisted voluntary return and reintegration as providing 'administrative, logistical or financial support, including reintegration assistance, to migrants unable or unwilling to remain in the host country or country of transit and who decide to return to their country of origin' (IOM, 2019a, p.12–13). In recent years, political actors across Europe have increasingly turned to AR as the means to address the often lamented 'gap between return decisions and effective returns', as articulated for example by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency Frontex (Frontex, 2022, p.7). Within a strategy document outlining the implementation of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, the *EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration*, the European Commission advocates for a 'new, more coordinated and integrated approach' to enhance the 'number and share' of voluntary returns (European Commission, 2021, p.6). The European Commission's standpoint underscores a dual objective in pushing for AR, capitalizing on arguments about, first, effectiveness and, second, morality: 'Alongside effective reintegration measures, voluntary return aims to ensure the humane, effective and sustainable return of irregular migrants' (European Commission, 2021, p.1). This standpoint – that 'pay-to-go schemes' are (a) cost-effective, (b) easier in terms of cooperation between states, (c) more humane, thus easier to sell morally and politically, (d) beneficial for overall development objectives – is often reiterated by political observers and practitioners (Black et al., 2011; IOM, 2023a, p.iii).

Globally speaking, there has been a steady rise in numbers of returns that were assisted through AR schemes over the past decades as well as an increase in AR programmes and involved actors (Kuschminder, 2017c). IOM reports having provided return assistance to at least 1.7 million returnees worldwide since the inception of the first return programme in 1979 (IOM, 2023b), 69,282 in 2022 alone (IOM, 2023a). Considering there are AR schemes other than IOM's as well, the overall numbers of AR cases is likely to be higher. AR pioneer Germany, having introduced the first return programme *Reintegration and Emigration Program for Asylum Seekers in Germany* (REAG) in 1979 to support people 'without means' in returning on their own, estimates to have assisted at least 700,000 people with returning since 1979 (BAMF, 2020).

Notwithstanding the growing political importance and increasing scope of assisted returns, reliable data or statistics on returns are scarce. Oftentimes, statistics are fragmented or conflate statistics on forced, voluntary individual returns and 'voluntary' assisted returns. On an aggregated European level, there is no reliable data on how many migrants return under AR programmes. Eurostat, for example, provides data which indicated that for 2022, around 60 percent of the 94,970 registered returns to countries outside of the EU or EFTA zone were classified as 'voluntary' without differentiating individual voluntary returns and assisted returns (Eurostat, 2023). In some cases, Germany, for example, countries are listed with a 100 percent share of forced though assisted

returns (Eurostat, 2023), which does not correspond to the data the German government published for this period (Deutscher Bundestag, 2023).

At first sight, AR-sponsored returns from other regions of the world appear higher than from the EEA. IOM missions with most AR activities are Niger (15,097) and Libya (11,200). Only Germany (7874) and Greece (3065) are in the top five of AR countries (IOM, 2023a). Taken as a whole, however, 33 per cent of all AR returns departed from the EEA (IOM, 2023a). It is also noteworthy that European countries such as the Netherlands, Germany and Norway, as well as the European Union itself, have traditionally been the biggest financers of global AR programmes, not only from Europe but also from the Middle East and North Africa (IOM, 2018). Scholars have therefore warned against an increasing diffusion of return management and other foreign policy affairs such as development cooperation (Biehler et al., 2021; Gökalp Aras, 2021) and critically examine AR's role in broader European efforts to further externalize migration control institutionally (Vandevoordt, 2017) and territorially (for a detailed discussion, see Marino, 2023; Slominski & Trauner, 2018). This suggests that AR is a central piece in Europe's proverbial migration management toolbox.

AR IN RETURN MIGRATION LITERATURE

Despite its particular place in return migration as a concrete migration governance tool, a structured understanding of AR benefits from a reading of general return literature to demarcate assisted return against other forms of return migration, especially voluntary return and forced returns. Cassarino's (2004) conceptualization of return migration centring on *returnee preparedness* famously defines that returnees exhibit varying levels of preparedness, impacted by their legal status, motivation and ability to mobilize resources. For Cassarino (2004, p.19), the most precarious group of returnees is those composed of people who have *no return preparedness* – rejected asylum seekers and irregular migrants facing expulsion or deportation. This framework is applied by Şahin-Mencütek (2023) to assess the varying reintegration prospects of assisted returnees from Germany to the Western Balkans, West Africa and the Middle East. This leads to the first question that this mapping addresses: whether returnees are provided with reliable information to derive a return decision.

Battistella's more recent categorization of return migration emphasizes the *timing* and the *voluntariness* of the return decision in particular (Battistella, 2018, p.9), yielding four general scenarios of return: (a) return of achievement (good timing and voluntary), (b) return of completion (good timing and forced), (c) return of setback (bad timing and voluntary) and (d) return of crisis (bad timing and forced). In reality, migration decisions are perhaps not that rationally derived and do not depend on the completion or incompleteness of one specific target, yet, it further emphasizes the ideal of freedom from external force in choosing to return as well as the timing of the own return. The question of voluntariness and migrant decision-making remains one of the major controversies surrounding AR. IOM, the main actor in global AR, states that for a return to be voluntary, safe and dignified, it must be built on freedom of choice, that is absence of physical or psychological pressure, and informed decision-making, which necessitates access to timely, unbiased, and reliable information to base return decision on (IOM, 2019b). Notwithstanding, IOM's own definition of AVR states that the returning migrants can be 'unable or unwilling' to stay (IOM, 2019a, p.12), which inevitably questions the degree of freedom and voluntariness. Taken together, this suggests to analyse, second, who are the migrants targeted by AR to understand whether their legal status allows for a free decision.

Studies that analyse returnees' decision-making processes and the communication of AR actors in detail find that the preconditions to migrant decision-making in the context of assisted return differ fundamentally from the decision-making in truly voluntary return scenarios (Feneberg, 2019; Marino et al., 2023; Strand et al., 2016) – some in fact locating it conceptually closer to determinants of enforced returns (Sinnige et al., 2025). In voluntary scenarios, a return decision hinges on the ability to weigh macro-level factors in the country of return (e.g. stability or security) and the country of residence (e.g. economic situation), against individual micro-level factors

in in the country of residence (e.g. legal security) (Constant, 2020; Parella & Petroff, 2019). Studies assessing the factors behind the actual decisions to take up AR, in contrast, find a dominance of micro-level factors related to life in the country of residence and hardly any consideration to the conditions in the origin country (Koser & Kuschminder, 2015; Kuschminder, 2017c). Strand et al. (2016) provide ample insights from a case study on assisted return from Norway to Afghanistan, Iraqi Kurdistan, Ethiopia and Kosovo. They find that most returnees felt very negative about their return, stressing they had accepted AR due to a lack of alternatives alone and upon return found themselves faced with the same dreadful conditions in their countries of origin that they had once tried to escape. At the time of the interview, they had already devised plans to remigrate to a neighbouring country or back to Europe. Speaking to this, existing studies importantly raise the point that political measures facilitating the migrants' return – that is AR – tend to disregard returnees' prospects in the countries of return (Flahaux, 2021). In addition to two above formulated questions of what information is communicated to potential returnees and who is targeted by AR, these considerations commend to map, third, what support is offered to returnees and whether the allocation of support may be in the interest of the returnees.

Said interest of the returnees may be supported but also jeopardized due to dynamics that the involvement of different actors – donors as well as implementors – unfolds. This owes to the intrinsic motives and agendas of the actors (Lietaert, 2022) and the role of IOM (Marino et al., 2024) and NGOs (Vandevoordt, 2017) in reinforcing the states migration agendas. Studies demonstrate how this rooted in actors' differing ways of exerting care and control in a humanitized migration management system (Marino et al., 2023). This, fourth, prompts us to map the main donors and implementors behind the AR programmes.

Finally, recent critical studies call into question whether AR, within the compounds of states' broader migration control, can exert positive effects at all (Marino et al., 2023; Webber, 2011). Comparing the national AR strategies of six European countries across the regulatory, organizational, and practical layer, Marino et al. (2023, p.355) find that 'in the absence of conducive conditions for migrants which would render their return decision truly voluntary' AR will remain a tool of migration control. While these configurations need to be assessed on a detailed case-by-case basis, this leads to the fifth question of the mapping: whether AR donors and implementors warrant a critical assessment of the effects of their programmes through internal reporting and external oversight, that is whether they foster accountability and invite critical discussion on their AR policies.

The following mapping of AR programmes across the EEA will be structured according to these five key questions formulated at the end of the five paragraphs of this section.

METHOD

This AR mapping provides the first encompassing overview of the rapidly expanding AR landscape within the EEA area (plus Switzerland). Previous overviews are either from a time when there were simply fewer programmes, fewer returns and less funding (IOM, 2002; IOM, 2009) or map (Caritas, 2020) or compare a smaller number of select country programmes (Caselli et al., 2022; Marino et al., 2023). In contrast, this comprehensive mapping was designed not to assess one or a few programmes in detail but to outline important units of analysis as well as to illuminate some structural similarities and differences in these units across AR programmes in all EEA countries.

The process of mapping involved three main steps: first, a systematic review of AR programmes across EEA member states plus Switzerland was conducted in the last quarter of 2023 and updated in January 2024. The EEA has 30 member states, including all 27 member states of the European Union alongside the three EFTA countries Iceland, Norway and Liechtenstein. Switzerland is not an official part of the EEA; however, it was included as it is part of the Schengen area.

The search included the use of conventional online search engines, migration databases, as well as referring to recent empirical studies on AR. It was conducted by two researchers in parallel until no further programmes were identified. The second step was fashioning an open access mapping table (see Appendix S1) including a

standardized set of information for each programme in columns (a) – (h): (a) country / region, (b) programme name, (c) involved actors and funders, (d) time of activity, (e) target group / beneficiaries, (f) attainable support, (g) links to the relevant websites (and additional information), (h) availability of internal reporting (e.g. statistical or monitoring data) as well as external evaluations of the programmes. The categories were inspired by the literature on assisted return and validated against other existing mapping and comparisons (Caselli et al., 2022; Marino et al., 2023).

Third, some detailed descriptive analyses on commonalities and disparities across countries as well as an assessment of the overarching programmatic preconditions for migrants' return and reintegration according to the five questions formulated at the end of the last section are provided. Throughout the analyses, reference is made to the table columns (A-H), the rows (1–69) or the cells (format: *ColumnCell*, e.g. E18) of Appendix S1. The Discussion finally relates the available information on the EEA's AR landscape to recent critical literature on return and deduces directions for future research from the results of the mapping at hand.

The study's focus is the comprehensive mapping of AR programmes across all EEA countries. Therefore, the ordered depiction of all identified programmes and broad categorisations is favoured at the expense of more detailed analysis of individual programmes and policies. Also, it exclusively relies on desk research and does not feature primary data collection or data triangulation which have generated relevant insights in other studies on AR programmes (Marino et al., 2023). Finally, it should be noted that AR programmes are dynamic and adjust to global events and situations in AR-sponsoring countries as well as countries of return. Therefore, detailed information such as targeted countries or amounts of financial assistance may change frequently. The information thus mirrors the situation in January 2024.

RESULTS

The initial search for active AR programmes in the EEA area found 45 ongoing programmes in 27 countries. Additionally, the EU-wide European Reintegration Programme (EURP) was active and expanding operations under Frontex' mandate in 2023. In the following, the EEA's AR activities are mapped in five steps according to the five key questions: (1) whether the implementors' and donors' information directed to potential returnees appear clear and reliable, (2) which actors are involved, (3) who is targeted, (4) what support is offered and (5) whether accountability is facilitated by programme implementers through internal reporting and external scrutiny.

Information for potential returnees – reliable or misleading?

Navigating the European AR landscape – practically and conceptually – is not straightforward. Practically, it can be difficult to identify what AR activities are going on when and where. Four countries – Croatia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania and Slovenia – did not state having own ongoing AR schemes in 2023. In these cases, where no new programme was announced, the last official programme is listed in the Table marked 'closed' (*Column C*). However, assisted returns still took place from these countries: Liechtenstein was included in Switzerland's AR schemes, while the Frontex-led *European Reintegration Programme (EURP)* assisted returns from Croatia, Lithuania and Slovenia. Moreover, incomplete information and lacking updates of online sources render the search for information on ongoing programmes or available support cumbersome. For Italy (Row 34), no official statement of operation was available for 2023, however, this appears to owe to a deficiency in communication as returns were in fact facilitated (Refugee.info, 2024). Similarly, Latvia's programme *Provision of Voluntary Return and Reintegration Assistance in Latvia* (Row 35) supposedly ended in 2022; however, according to IOM's implementation report, assisted returns took place in 2023 as well (H35). Websites are often ill-maintained. During the search process for this mapping the website for Poland's programme *Assistance in voluntary return from Poland* (44) was offline for several months.

Conceptually, the provided information and labelling of AR programmes are found to be partly misleading, hampering returnees' as well as researchers' access to information. Empirically and analytically, assisted return schemes are usually distinguished as (a) assisted return or (b) assisted return and reintegration programmes. Assisted return focuses on technical, practical and logistical facilitation of the return. While it may include preparing for the life after the return through, for example, counselling, these activities will take place predominantly before the return. In contrast, assisted return & reintegration programmes encompass not only return logistics but must include post-return components in the country of return (Lietaert, 2022).

IOM does not differentiate between return or return and reintegration anymore, stating that return and reintegration support are considered as necessarily complementary components in IOM's programmes (IOM, 2019a). Nevertheless, a few programmes (N=5), also counting IOM implemented activities, explicitly only offer return assistance such as travel assistance, flight costs and maybe some small pocket money (e.g. *Assistance in voluntary return from Poland*, *Return from Austria*, *Voluntary Return and Reintegration in the Country of Origin* from Slovakia). On paper, most programmes are defined as assisted return and reintegration programmes (N=29) by their implementers and are thus supposed to include both aspects, return and reintegration assistance. Finally, there are programmes that only offer reintegration support (N=10) and are usually top-ups to the assisted return programmes, such as the *RV Productivo* in Spain, *StarthilfePlus* and *Startfinder* in Germany, or *RESTART IV* and *IRMA plus III* in Austria.

A relevant illustration highlighting the common discrepancy between self-definition and the provided information is Slovakia's *Voluntary Return and Reintegration in the Country of Origin* in comparison to Norway's *Voluntary Assisted Return Programme* (VARP). The former, by name claiming to support return and reintegration, explicitly only offers pre-departure assistance (F48), the latter, labelled 'assisted return programme', also includes at least some levels of post-return assistance (F42). Both are (partly) implemented by IOM (see sections 'Varying levels of support – return or reintegration assistance?' for more detail on what support is offered under return or reintegration schemes).

These first findings indicate that there is a certain persistent jargon, evident also in the identical wording on many IOM programme websites regarding procedures and support offered under different AR schemes, that overshadows the incomplete and partly misleading information provided by AR donors and implementers.

Actors involved – centralization or decentralization?

The next categorization can be drawn along actors involved and the level of centralization of return programmes, that is how many and what kind of actors are involved in the operations (see *Column D*). [Figure 1](#) displays all countries along an axis according to how centralized or decentralized their programmes are: (a) only IOM, (b) state actors + IOM, (c) diverse actors (state + IOM + NGOs), (d) mostly non-state actors.

Implementers

First and most common amongst the EEA countries (N=14) is the most centralized arrangement (a) where the entire assisted return operations are carried out by IOM on behalf of the state. This is particularly the case for countries with relatively small caseloads, typical in Eastern European states, who most likely favour 'all-round services', but also for Scandinavian countries like Finland (17), Sweden (53–54) and Iceland (32).

Second, and often similar, are countries that (b) keep most of the implementing power with their ministry of interior or the responsible subordinate agency and only rely on IOM for operative support (N=5). The best example is France (18–19), where the French Office for Immigration and Integration (OFII) plays a major role in AR operations, and similarly, Norway operates in this manner. Ireland (33) and Poland (44) fall somewhere in between these

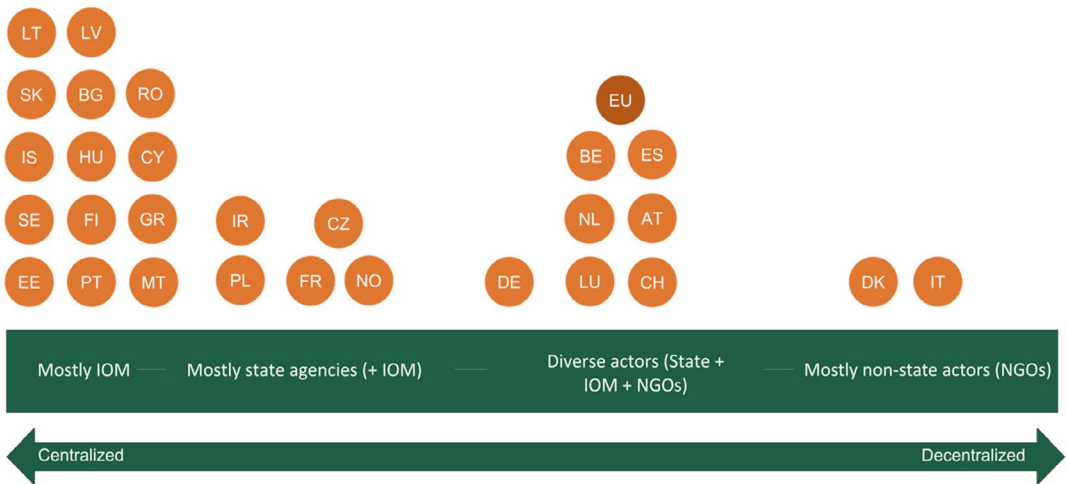


FIGURE 1 AR actor centralization – decentralization continuum (own compilation).

two categories, where IOM implements but is closely aligned with internal affairs authorities that oversee the implementation. Cyprus moved away from state control and awarded more autonomy to IOM in recent years (8).

Third, some countries opt for (c) a multi-stakeholder approach, involving several different state and non-state actors ($N=7$). Most arrangements include the state agency together with IOM organizing the return component, including travel preparations, arranging documentation, booking and paying the flights, while involving implementing partners for specific tasks such as counselling or reintegration support. This can be international NGOs such as Caritas in Belgium (5), national NGOs like the VluchtelingenWerk in the Netherlands (41), a mix thereof such as in Luxembourg (37–38) and Switzerland (55–58), or, like for the Spanish programme *RV Productivo*, specific NGOs operating only in the regions of return (52). Germany, in contrast, relies on its state-owned development agency GIZ to complement IOM reintegration support, putting Germany somewhere on a middle ground in between the second (mostly state agencies) and third category (diverse actors), since GIZ is a state actor in most capacities; however, it needs to be distinguished from migration offices or ministries (24–29).

Finally, there is the model (d) in which most of the implementation is placed with non-state actors. This is the case in Italy, where the state commissions AR activities to various NGOs which apply for this role. In Denmark, most operative capacity lies with the NGO Danish Refugee Council (13–15), which implements various counselling and support activities alongside the Centre against Human Trafficking (CMM) and the Danish Return Agency (13–14) or IOM (15).

EU involvement

Additionally, Frontex manages returns from many EEA countries and reintegration activities in currently 37 destinations. The scope has been gradually expanding since Frontex became involved in AR in late 2019 and took over the activities formerly run under the European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN) in 2022. Regarding return support, Frontex first and foremost provides operational and technical support to the member states. In terms of reintegration support under the European Reintegration Programme (EURP), formerly Joint Return Services (JRS), the procedure is specific. Official counselling centres, recognized by the member states, submit the applications for reintegration support on behalf of the returnee through the centralized application tool RIAT (Frontex, 2024). Frontex then commissions the support to be provided by NGOs operating in the

countries of return, specifically Caritas International Belgium, Women Empowerment, Literacy and Development Organiza (WELDO), IRARA, the European Technology and Training Centre (ETTC), the Life Makers Foundation Egypt, and Micado Migration (60–62). Four of these partners, Caritas, WELDO, ETTC and IRARA, were already part of EURP's predecessor programme ERRIN between 2018 and 2022, while the Life Makers Foundation and Micado Migration joined replaced the Organization of Ibero-American States (OEI). By linking and bundling return operations from different EEA countries, the EU's return efforts, from ERRIN through JRS to EURP, contribute to a centralization of return operations, while mandating the reintegration support to a more decentralized consortium of non-state actors in the countries of return.

Another notable finding is that 60 percent of all ongoing AR initiatives in 2023 received co-funding from the EU's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). This underlines the increasingly European dimension of AR activities (see *Column D*). Reports have suggested that AMIF overemphasizes return operations in the past and, vice-versa, that AMIF's portion of funding for return operations is proportionally higher than, for example, for integration projects (Westerby, 2019). AMIF's agenda is to support an integrated and coordinated approach to return (AMIF, 2024). As such, AMIF funding has a profound effect on the landscape of AR actors as well. It favours uniformity and centralization: AMIF funds for return operations are overwhelmingly (70 percent) awarded to state authorities, while 12 percent are awarded to NGOs and IOM, respectively (Westerby, 2019). IOM as a single actor received the same amount of AMIF funding as all NGOs and civil society actors across the EEA combined.

Counsellors

A particular part of AR implementation is return counselling (see also sections 'Varying levels of support – return or reintegration assistance?' and 'Discussion' for more detail on the role of return counselling). To be comprehensive, the analysis of migration and return counselling across the EEA would warrant its own mapping as it tends to follow a different logic than the implementation of practical AR assistance such as cash assistance or travel arrangements. Return counselling may be either part of a country's AR programme or of its wider migration counselling activities and thus a parallel structure (see Caritas, 2020).

Yet, some notable differences across EEA countries appear. Eighteen programmes explicitly include pre-departure counselling, with counselling services either provided by the main AR implementers or actors mandated by the EEA states. Two – the Netherlands' *Return counselling and connection to specific services* (41) implemented by the NGO Dutch Council for Refugees (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland) alongside the government body Dienst Terugkeer en Vertrek (DT&V) as well as the NGO Danish Refugee Council's *Asylum–Return counselling* (14) – are specific counselling programmes. The more common model, however, is to distribute return counselling to a vast number of diverse migration-related actors across the countries, ranging from state and municipality actors, IOM, to welfare associations and NGOs. This can be observed with varying degrees of centralization in Austria, Germany, Switzerland or the Netherlands (*Columns D & F*; for details refer to Caritas, 2020). In federally organized countries, such as Germany or Switzerland, the federal states may have their own additional regulations.

Target groups – legal status and geography

Legal status and vulnerability

AR programmes also differ according to their target groups (see *Column E*), mostly depending on the legal status or residence permit of the migrants in the host country (see [Figure 2](#)). First, some AR programmes specifically target non-EU citizens with a legal status defined as insecure or 'irregular' by AR-sponsoring countries.

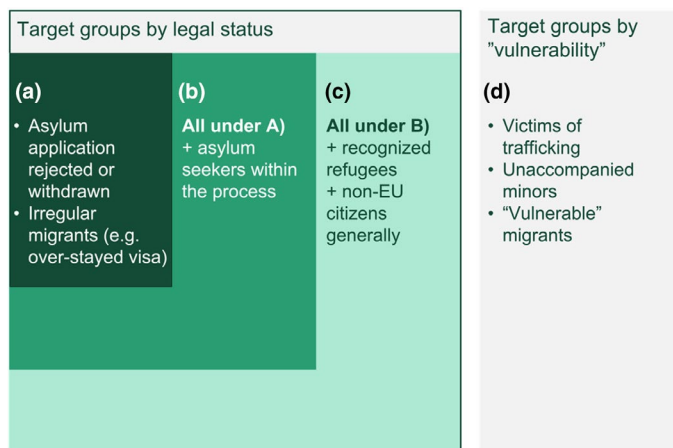


FIGURE 2 Target groups of AR programmes by legal status (own compilation).

This includes migrants without a valid residence permit or an order to leave following a rejected or withdrawn asylum application (category A in Figure 2). Amongst the programmes that differentiate this is Czechia's AVRR programme (E10), *Assisted Voluntary Return und Reintegration* from Finland (E17), or Ireland's AVRR programme (E33).

Second, some programmes explicitly target all asylum seekers, irrespective of whether they were rejected or are still in the asylum application process, alongside migrants without a valid residence permit (category B in Figure 2). This is the most common target group definition, also applied, for example, by the EU' EURP programme implemented by Frontex. Notably, many countries – Czechia, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Portugal – include also vulnerable returnees (category D) in their regular AR programmes alongside individuals grouped in categories A and B due to their residence or legal status.

Arguably, the differentiation between asylum seekers within the process and those who withdrew their claim may be dismissed as a technicality, since asylum seekers who apply for AR will have to withdraw their asylum application in any case. Considering the practice of degressive funding schemes according to when people decide to return in many AR programmes (see section 'Varying levels of support – return or reintegration assistance?' for more detail), however, the timing of the AR application within – or after – the asylum decision plays a very practical role. Also, in terms of promoting AR, tailoring activities to the needs of returnees, as well as the overall framing of AR, more indiscriminatory targeting, as opposed to more specialization, will have an impact.

Third, the AR programmes of Cyprus, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia and Malta, speak to all 'non-EU citizens' or 'third country nationals' without specification (category C in Figure 2). Hungary, Lithuania and Switzerland (in the RAS programme) also explicitly address recognized refugees.

Finally, under the 'vulnerability category' D in Figure 2, several specialized programmes speak to individuals considered particularly vulnerable, for example victims of trafficking (*Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration for Victims of Trafficking and Foreign Citizens in Prostitution* in Sweden (53)), medical cases, or unaccompanied minors (*Assisted return and reintegration for victims of human trafficking and unaccompanied minors* in Denmark (13)). While the residence status of these migrants may vary, they are usually protected by specific legal regimes. Notably, also EU citizens under one of these vulnerability categories may be applicable for assisted return. Considering the freedom of movement within the EEA – most countries being part of the Schengen area – this is a special case on which there is little knowledge (please refer to note¹ at the end of the document).

Targeted countries

Next to legal status, a notable line of differentiation in terms of targeting runs along geographical patterns, that is returns to which countries are supported. First, there are programmes, mostly assisted return schemes (without reintegration support), that are almost universal in their application, offer limited financial support and practical assistance, and only exclude certain high-risk countries (e.g. Afghanistan, Yemen or Syria (as of January 2024)). Examples are the generalist programmes from Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal or Romania.

Second, programmes focussing exclusively on providing reintegration assistance after a return are typically available to returnees to specific countries only. Often, these reintegration programmes complement the broadly applied assisted return programmes. The geographic focus may owe to political considerations of the sponsoring country or the cooperation between sending and receiving countries. Spain, for example, has a strong regional focus on Latin America (E51-E52). The number of countries to which support is available under such reintegration programmes ranges from Austria's highly specialized *RESTART IV* which supports returnees to only three countries – Iran, Somalia and Uzbekistan (E3) – to the broadest German *StarthilfePlus* which includes more than 40 countries (E24-E26). Frontex' partners in the EURP programme provide reintegration assistance to returnees to 37 countries all over the globe (E60).

Third, some programmes, notably the voluminous *REAG/GARP* in Germany (E22-E23) and *Retour Volontaire* from France (E18-E19), provide return assistance without specific geographical restrictions, however, offer additional reintegration support only to returnees to specific countries.

Finally, there is a handful of programmes that are tailored specifically to one country, such as *AVRR Assistance Provided to Chinese Nationals* in Denmark (E15), or the *URA* and *Brückenkomponente* for returnees to Albania from Germany (E27-E28). In the past, a pilot programme jointly implemented by Portugal, Belgium and Ireland was implemented for returnees to Brazil (*Joint Complementary Mechanism for Sustainable Reintegration in Brazil (SURE)*), bringing together the unusual constellation of several AR-sponsoring countries (E46). Spain's *RV Productivo* follows a unique approach, where responsibilities are distributed amongst various NGOs, each with a regional focus on one specific country of return (E52). The consideration of programme stakeholders seems to be about striking a balance between excessive particularization and necessary specification – that is capitalizing on existing local networks and regional expertise.

Varying levels of support – return or reintegration assistance?

Programmes vary not only with regard to who is targeted but also in terms of what support is offered, when and how (Column F). As described in 'Available information – reliable or misleading', differentiating assisted return – ergo the technical, practical and logistical facilitation of the return – and assisted return and reintegration programmes – encompassing not only return logistics but post-return assistance – is necessary. Yet, also with post-return support the timing and length of the support matter (Lietaert, 2022). Including merely a one-off payment of cash or in-kind support upon or briefly after the return, does not qualify as reintegration assistance.

Figure 3 displays AR programmes according to the timing of support (x-axis) and the amount of support a single person can claim (y-axis). The monetary amounts on the y-axis are calculated from what is advertised to potential applicants, thus, provide only estimations of what a single person can hypothetically receive according to publicly displayed information. In reality, the amounts awarded are likely to vary depending on residence status, country of return, timing of return, vulnerabilities or family constellations. Additionally, the colouring indicates whether financial support is granted mostly in cash, in-kind assistance, or through a mix of both. 'In-kind' support here refers to the provision of goods and services instead of cash, limiting the purpose for which returnees can use the grant. Programmes without specified amounts are not included.

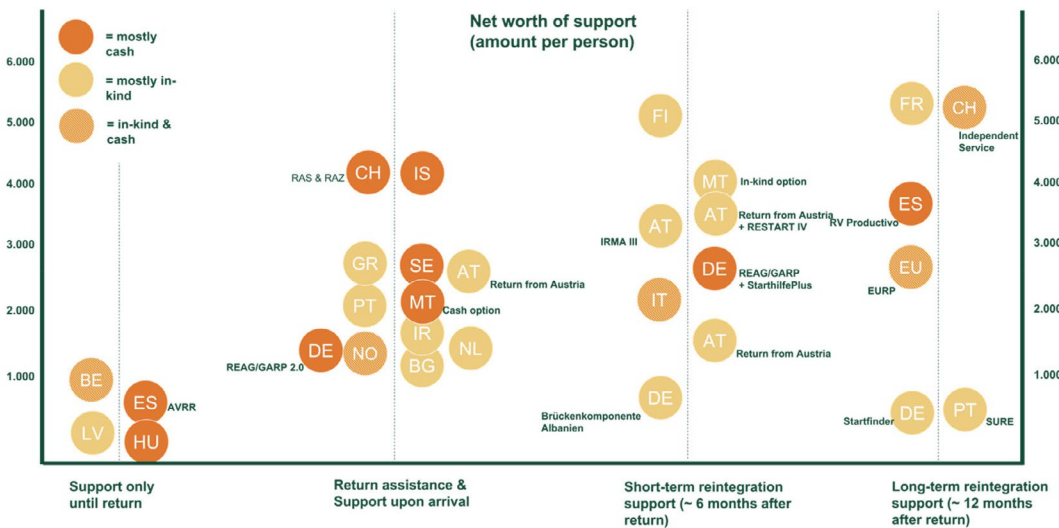


FIGURE 3 Timing and worth of support for AR programmes across the EEA (own compilation). Estimations refer to amounts a single person can claim according to publicly displayed information. The programmes of Slovakia, Poland, Lithuania, Czechia, Estonia, Romania and the German URA programme are omitted from the Figure because no specification of attainable support is provided by the implementers.

The timing on the x-axis includes the broad categories (a) return assistance until the return takes place, (b) return assistance and some form of assistance upon arrival in the country of return, (c) short-term reintegration support (up to 6 months) after the return and (d) long-term reintegration support (at least 1 year after the return). The precise timing of support is likely to vary case by case (whether a programme bullet is placed on the left or right side of the dotted line is random). Assessing when support is granted and how long the implementers plan to stay in touch with the returnees, as displayed in Figure 3, may be more informative in terms of appreciating whether a programme is either a return programme or a return and reintegration programme than the self-labelling of donors and implementers.

The programmes to the left, assisting *only until the return takes place* tend to be limited in the amounts offered as well. Most assisted return programmes are mostly about technical and practical return facilitation and offer a pocket money which may be as low as 50 Euro for returnees from Hungary (F31) but also as high as 950 Euro in Belgium (F5).

Programmes in the two centre categories include some sort of assistance after the return. In many cases, this is limited to a one-off payment *directly upon arrival* in the country of return as high as 2700 up to 4200 Euro per person for returnees from Iceland (F32) or 4000 CHF (approx. 4200 Euro) in Switzerland's RAS and RAZ programme (F56–F57). While these programmes tend to speak of 'reintegration support', such one-time payments do not include a dedicated reintegration plan or perspective. In contrast, in the third category are programmes that extend their support at least *over the first few months after the return*. The amounts of support available in the second and third category do not structurally differ across the two categories but rather between countries and programmes.

The category furthest to the right includes programmes who include a longer-term reintegration plan and follow-up for at least 1 year after the return. Despite the generally positive long-term perspective, programmes in this category differ in the amounts of monetary support they offer as well. Some, like the German add-on programme *Startfinder*, first and foremost offer counselling and job training (F29). Meanwhile, the French programme *Retour Volontaire* offers return support between 300 and 1200 Euro and an additional reintegration support of up to 5000 Euro (F18–F19), the highest financial assistance overall.

Degressive funding schemes

In all cases, the amount of reintegration support depends on some categorization of deservingness, mostly country of origin or household size, but sometimes also individual vulnerability or the timing of return. An important detail here is the 'degressive' nature of some funding schemes according to which people receive less support depending on when they opt for a return. Such a practice is found in the funding guidelines of Finland's (F17), Norway's (F42), or Switzerland's (F56-F58) programmes. In Finland, asylum seekers can receive up to 5300 Euro worth of support when they apply during their asylum process or within 30 days of receiving a rejection. After these 30 days, the amount is reduced to 2000 Euro. In Greece, it additionally matters whether the applicant is based on the mainland or on an island. In the latter case, return assistance is cut by 50 per cent from 1000 Euro to 500 Euro (F30). Contrary, but speaking to the same logic, Germany's REAG/GARP 2.0 programme incentivises departures during or within two months after a finalized asylum procedure by means of a special payment of 500 Euro for persons (F22).

Similarly, many programmes offer varying support to returnees from and to different countries. In *Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration* from Ireland, countries of return are categorized into A, B, C or D with varying levels of support (F33), similarly in Cyprus' *Voluntary Return Programme* (F9) and Iceland's *Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration from Iceland* (F32). In the same vein, the German *StarthilfePlus* groups return destinations under three pillars according to which strongly differing support is granted, from substantial cash support ('2. Starthilfe') to mostly in-kind assistance ('Level-D' and 'Housing-support') (F24-F26).

Counselling

The provision of return counselling as part of AR activities, as touched upon above, is not only important to assure that (potential) returnees have access to reliable information. Looking at whether and for how long returnees can call upon counsellors for information can also be an indicator for whether a programme is rather designed to facilitate returns or also considers the reintegration component. Many programmes, at least eighteen, include counselling *before* return, either by IOM, NGOs, or government bodies (see sections 'Actors involved – centralisation or decentralisation?' and 'Discussion' for more detail). Many of them being labelled return and reintegration programmes, it appears that the reintegration support is limited to paying out additional money upon return but does not include further counselling or care. Only seven programmes explicitly include post-return counselling, namely *AVRR Assistance Provided to Chinese Nationals* from Denmark (F15), *URA, Brückenkomponente Albanien* and *Startfinder* from Germany (F27-F29), *Return counselling and connection to specific services* from the Netherlands (F41), *Voluntary Return and Reintegration Support Program (ARVoRe)* from Portugal (F45) and *Reintegration in the country of origin (Independent Service)* from Switzerland (F55), thus aim for longer-term contact with the returnees. France's *Retour Volontaire* (F18-F19) indicates providing coaching and support for at least one year.

Following the money

Notably, four of the seven programmes offering post-return support are implemented by national actors (as opposed to IOM) with a strong international profile – the Danish Refugee Council, the German development agency GIZ, and the International Social Services Switzerland. The circumstance that these reintegration activities are commissioned to these actors, warrants the question of whether the focus on more return or more reintegration activities within AR programmes corresponds to an involvement of different political donors. Yet, except the German reintegration programme *Startfinder*, which is financed by the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) (D29), the self-funded programme from the Swiss International Social Services (D55) and the Swedish *Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration for Victims of Trafficking and Foreign*

Citizens in Prostitution, which is funded by the Swedish regional anti-trafficking coordinators (D53), there is no apparent pattern in the financing of either return or reintegration oriented programmes. Most AR programmes in this mapping are financed by the various ministries of interior or the subordinate agencies for immigration – and co-funded by the EU's AMIF (see section 'Actors involved – centralisation or decentralisation?' for details).

ACCOUNTABILITY – INTERNAL MONITORING AND EXTERNAL OVERSIGHT

The final differentiation in AR programming in this mapping concerns the transparency of communication and accountability by implementers and donors (see *Column H*). In light of the diversity of AR programmes as well as the diversity and oftentimes legal and social vulnerabilities of 'beneficiaries', (a) rigorous internal monitoring and reporting as well as (b) external scrutiny and evaluation of programmes would be needed to identify protection gaps or best practices (Koser & Kuschminder, 2015). There is little evidence that European AR implementers or donors pay much attention to either.

Regarding internal activity and results monitoring it is striking that only for a handful of programmes detailed and up-to-date monitoring reports are available: IOM Finland released monitoring reports for their administered programmes from Finland (H17) and Sweden (H54) in recent years, as did the donor Fedasil in the case of Belgium (H5). However, there does not appear to be a continuity or routine. IOM Switzerland used to do so for *Reintegration Assistance from Switzerland* until 2018 (H56). In most cases, merely rough statistics on numbers of departures are published such as for the Netherlands (H40), Greece (H30), Denmark (H11), Slovakia (H48) or Latvia (H35), which do not provide meaningful information on rights-based compliance. No activity or monitoring reports for Frontex' EURP operations are available at this point.

The extent of external research and evaluations is thin. Due to a lack of data, access, and funding as well as owing to ethical considerations that scholars face when approaching returnees in their places of return, research on why people chose to return through AR programmes as well as their lives after a return to date remains scarce (e.g. Black et al., 2004; Strand et al., 2016; van Houte et al., 2015; Webber, 2011). IOM extracts and stores substantial amounts of monitoring data from the lives of returnees; however, these data are hardly made available to external researchers who could evaluate AR activities, despite the potential of doing this without further infringements into the privacy of the returnees. Only a few studies, which have been directly commissioned by IOM or donor (Diker et al., 2021; Koser & Kuschminder, 2015), can rely on IOM data. Some more reports were published by IOM's partner Samuel Hall investigating the reintegration outcomes of returnees to Senegal, Guinea and Morocco (Majidi et al., 2023) or Afghanistan in particular (Samuel Hall, 2014; Save the Children & Samuel Hall, 2018). In other cases, IOM or the donor take it upon themselves to evaluate their AR programmes, resulting for example in a large-scale longitudinal study amongst beneficiaries of the German *StarthilfePlus* that IOM Germany and the donor, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), jointly conducted (Kothe et al., 2023; Schmitt et al., 2019) (H24-H26). A notable example is set by the German development agency GIZ which has charged external academic institutions such as the University Mainz (Olivier-Mensah et al., 2020) or the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (Şahin-Mencütek, 2023) with research on its reintegration programme *Startfinder* at different occasions (H29).

Despite this slowly cumulating knowledge, empirical data and scientifically rigorous evidence on returnees' decision-making, experiences with the various AR programmes or lives after return remain acutely scarce across all European AR programmes and countries.

DISCUSSION

The mapping at hand illuminates a vast and diverse European AR landscape, particularly in terms of which actors are involved and who they target. Moreover, the amounts and labelling of support as either return or return and

reintegration vary. Most categories of the mapping serve a descriptive purpose and do not define whether it is per se right or wrong to be one or the other. Instead, the mapping identifies patterns and repeated practices. Appreciating these commonalities as well as specificities can be important for two reasons: first, it allows researchers to relate a wider array of programmes to existing (critical) literature on return and AR and thus draw general conclusions on European AR practices. Second, it can help to identify common practices and programme features for which there is not yet sufficient scholarly knowledge.

For instance, the matter of actor centralization. On the one hand, more decentralized programmes may have more internal checks and balances but, on the other hand, may result in greater incoherence and inequality between returnees from and to different countries. To date, too little is known about how exactly returning with, for example, IOM, a small regional NGO, or a programme implemented by Frontex, shapes the experiences of returnees before and during the return, as well as the prospects of participation and reintegration after return. What we know is that the experiences of returnees differ depending on the context of their return (e.g. Olivier-Mensah et al., 2020; Strand et al., 2016) and that actors' 'agendas, values and priorities' matter for how they implement AR (Lietaert, 2022, p.115). In this light, recent research by Marino et al. is highly valuable, which weighs the advantages of IOM's involvement in AR (Marino et al., 2023) against IOM's problematic exploitation of returnees as messengers for a political agenda against irregularized migration (Marino et al., 2024).

An inspiration is the available comparative research on the role of different actors in return counselling and the effects of fragmentation across countries (Cleton & Schweitzer, 2021) and even within countries (Feneberg, 2019). These studies question the increasingly ambivalent role of return counsellors in providing returnees with necessary information while at the same time ensuring their compliance with the donors' migration policies (Cleton & Schweitzer, 2021; Feneberg, 2019; Sinnige et al., 2023; Vandevordt, 2018). Illustrating how AR actors, even non-state actors, operate between support and control is important for understanding the perpetuation of the European AR system (Lietaert, 2022; Marino et al., 2023).

A broader question that this mapping alone cannot answer is the question of whether, and under which circumstances, AR may be a decent option for returnees - and what 'decent' would mean under different circumstances. Future research on this question may, however, take the considerations about (a) targeting and (b) the offered support as starting points. The (a) targeting of migrants with different residence statuses and vulnerabilities coincides with returnees' freedom of choice and their ability to prepare for the return. For rejected asylum seekers and others facing an order to leave, for example, the option of adequately preparing is impaired by time and mental pressure. Research shows that AR is rarely a pre-considered option in the migration and life aspirations of migrants but almost always a last resort (Majidi et al., 2023, p.563). Conceptually speaking, this indicates low return preparedness and an inability to choose the timing of return, which, in turn, is known to hamper returnees' reintegration prospects (Şahin-Mencütek, 2023). Moreover, the targeting of people with a liminal legal residence status risks blurring the very concept of voluntariness. Webber (2011, p.104) aptly contends that repatriation cannot be labelled 'voluntary' when the alternative is destitution. Finally, several scholars argue that the vast proliferation of AR programmes and the targeting of ever more migrant groups may lead to a new political reality where the dichotomy between deportations and assisted returns dissipates and so-called 'soft deportations' – assisted returns without the alternative to remain – become the return norm (Leerkes et al., 2017). Fine and Walters (2022) elaborate that IOM's overly positive framing of AR rebrands not only voluntary returns, but de facto also deportations and forced returns positively. Linking this to the role of different actors, future research could address to what extent this 'deportation twist' is furthered, for example by the growing role of Frontex in the European Commission's return strategy (European Commission, 2021; Frontex, 2024), which may make the line between voluntary returns and deportations rather fluid (Paasche, 2021; PICUM, 2021). At the same time, it is noteworthy that Frontex is relying on the same implementing partners as the ERRIN programme before. The involvement of civil society actors may, as discussed above, have positive effects for returnees, however, may have an overall eroding effect on migrant protection and reinforce mobility injustice.

Research delving deeper into what (b) adequate support for return and sustainable reintegration could look like can build on the observations made in the sections ‘Available information – reliable or misleading?’ and ‘Varying levels of support – return or reintegration assistance?’. The mapping indicates that the self-labelling of programmes – that is whether they are return or return and reintegration programmes – and the reality of support offered often do not match. Moreover, there is still a scarcity of research on what support, within which timeframe and socio-economic return context, would truly help returnees with reintegrating (Lietaert, 2022, p. 110). IOM defines sustainable reintegration as achieved ‘when returnees have reached levels of *economic* self-sufficiency, *social* stability, and *psychosocial* well-being that make their further migration decisions a matter of choice, rather than necessity’ (IOM, 2019b). However, many AR programmes only rely on one-off payments before return or directly upon return (see Figure 3). In other words, the focus appears to be on the economic components of returning while the equally important social and psychosocial factors – social recognition, attachments and belonging in the return country (e.g. Fransen & Bilgili, 2018; Kuschminder, 2017b) – are sidelined. Promising attempts at addressing the social and psychosocial reintegration of returnees *after* return, such as returnee mentoring programmes piloted by IOM (see Majidi et al., 2023), remain the exception.

Moreover, the differential support structures and targeting of migrant groups across European countries may guide research on the political motives behind AR. Differentiations of ‘support-worthiness’ often do not seem to consider vulnerability or personal situations, but rather prioritize timely returns to certain politically relevant countries. Such tactical elements nurture the impression that states increasingly use AR as a political tool to incentivise the return of certain ‘unauthorised’ migrants rather than support genuinely voluntary returns (Black et al., 2011). In the same vein, degressive funding schemes suggest that AR programmes are, at least in part, a continuation of the trend towards more discipline and control mechanisms rather than care and support structures in AR described in earlier works (Marino et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

Pursuing the objective set out at the beginning of this study – to map the assisted return landscape in the EEA area – five literature-derived questions structure the presentation of the 45 identified AR programmes: whether the publicly accessible information provided by donors and implementers appears clear and reliable, who the donors and implementers are, who the programmes target, what support they offer, and whether internal and external knowledge production on the effects of the programmes is warranted.

Our investigations reveal a rather incoherent and opaque patchwork of AR initiatives, characterized by a diverse array of actors, programme structures and support provisions. Moreover, European AR programmes cast a wide net across legal categories and statuses, encompassing individuals legally residing in EU member states such as asylum seekers, victims of human trafficking or forced prostitution from EU countries or individuals from non-EU countries under an obligation to leave. In this light, the relative scarcity of independent comparative studies on AR programmes from and to different countries as well as their impact on migrants’ pre-, intra- and post-return experiences is critical. The mapping also suggests that donors and implementers do little to address the accountability gap, for example, by improving their activity, results and compliance monitoring. Additionally, few donors or implementers foster the collection of comparative evidence on protection standards, levels of beneficiary well-being and reintegration outcomes of the various European programmes through external research.

Despite critical voices from scholars and human rights agencies, lamenting the disciplining objective of AR and its deficiency in supporting the returnees’ interests, the European Commission is set on increasing ‘the number and share of voluntary returns from Europe and from transit countries’ (European Commission, 2021, p.6). This suggests that the coming years may witness an even greater expansion of EU-funded AR activities from the EEA, but also from non-European countries, following current EU-funded initiatives in Turkey,² on the Balkans,³ or under the EU-IOM Joint Initiative. Against this background, it is recommended that measures are implemented to

enhance the accountability to (potential) returnees as well as to improve transparency and knowledge production on AR programmes within the EEA.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author expresses sincerest gratitude to Dr. Ramona Rischke and Dr. Zeynep Yanaşmayan as well as the Migration Department at DeZIM-Institute for their valuable and appreciated feedback on the manuscript. The paper at hand resulted from research conducted in the project 'Return aspirations and the life course of refugees in Germany' at the German Center for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM), funded by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ). Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/imig.70032>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The collected and curated data and information on the AVR(R) programmes in the European Economic Area (EEA) is made available as an Appendix S1 to the publication. To receive the data sheet in an editable format, please contact the author.

ORCID

Lukas M. Fuchs  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6180-1376>

Endnotes

¹ Assisted returns of citizens of the EEA are rare, making up only around 1 per cent of IOM assisted returns (IOM, 2023a). Still, 537 EEA citizens were supported by IOM to return in 2022, mostly to Romania (364), Slovakia (40) and Bulgaria (30). Of those, 165 individuals were supported to return from within the EEA. Considering the freedom of movement within the EEA, this indicates a level of economic or personal vulnerability. Overall, 52 returnees were identified as victims of trafficking, 13 as needing health related support, and 5 as unaccompanied minors. There is, to the best of the author's knowledge no dedicated empirical or academic knowledge on AR of EEA citizens.

² E.g. the programme *Supporting the Implementation and further Strengthening of Turkey's National Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration System (NAVRR)* funded by Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands (65), or the UK-funded project *Establishment of Assisted Voluntary Return Coordination Centres in Türkiye*, both implemented by ICMPD (66).

³ On the Western Balkans the MiRa programme, financed by EU, Germany, Denmark and Austria, is implemented by various regional IOM offices.

REFERENCES

- AMIF – Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). (2024) *Call for Proposals 2021-2027 for the Submission of Project Applications for Funding from the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) of the AMIF Managing Authority Federal Office for Migration and Refugees*. Available from: <https://www.eu-migrationsfonds.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/EN/Foerderung/foerderaufruf.html?nn=1235902> [Accessed: May 5, 2025].
- BAMF – Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge. (2020) *40 Jahre REAG: Mehr als 700.000 Rückkehrende unterstützt*. Nürnberg: Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (BAMF). Available from: <https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/2020/20200206-bamf-40-jahre-reag.html?nn=282388> [Accessed: May 5, 2025].

- Battistella, G. (2018) Return migration: a conceptual and policy framework. In: Appleby, J.K. & Donald, K. (Eds.) *International migration policy report: perspectives on the content and implementation of the global compact for safe, orderly, and regular migration*. New York: Scalabrini Migration Study Center, pp. 3–14.
- Biehler, N., Koch, A. & Meier, A. (2021) *Risiken und Nebenwirkungen deutscher und europäischer Rückkehrpolitik. Ein außen-, sicherheits-, und entwicklungspolitischer Beipackzettel*. SWP-Studie, 12. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. Berlin: Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik Und Sicherheit.
- Black, R., Collyer, M. & Somerville, W. (2011) *Pay-to-go schemes and other noncoercive return Programmes: is scale possible?* Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.
- Black, R., Koser, K., Monk, K., Atfield, G., D'Onofrio, L. & Tiemoko, R. (2004) *Understanding voluntary return*, Home Office Report 50/04. London: Home Office.
- Caritas. (2020) *A European counselling perspective on region-specific return and reintegration*. Available from: https://epub.ub.uni-muenchen.de/74551/1/Transnational_Exchange_Final_report.pdf [Accessed: May 5, 2025].
- Caselli, M., Kadio, A. & Rizzo, C. (2022) Assisted voluntary return & reintegration policies and programmes in four EU countries: France, Germany, Italy and Spain. *Italian Sociological Review*, 12(2), 409–434.
- Cassarino, J.P. (2004) Theorising return migration: the conceptual approach to return migrants revisited. *International Journal on Multicultural Societies*, 6(2), 253–279.
- Cleton, L. & Schweitzer, R. (2021) 'Our aim is to assist migrants in making a well-informed decision': how return counselors in Austria and The Netherlands manage the aspirations of unwanted non-citizens. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47(17), 3846–3863.
- Constant, A. (2020) Time-space dynamics of return and circular migration: theories and evidence. *CESifo working paper*, No. 8053. Center for Economic Studies and Ifo Institute. Available from: https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/215055/1/cesifo1_wp8053.pdf [Accessed: May 5, 2025].
- Czaika, M. & de Haas, H. (2013) The effectiveness of immigration policies. *Population and Development Review*, 39(3), 487–508.
- Deutscher Bundestag. (2023) Antwort der Bundesregierung auf die Kleine Anfrage der Abgeordneten Clara Bünger, Nicole Gohlke, Anke Domscheit-Berg, weiterer Abgeordneter und der Fraktion DIE LINKE - Drucksache 20/5372. Available from: <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/20/057/2005795.pdf> [Accessed: May 5, 2025].
- Diker, E., Röder, S., Khalaf, M., Merkle, O., Andersson, L. & Fransen, S. (2021) *Comparative reintegration outcomes between forced and voluntary return and through a gender perspective*. Geneva: EU-IOM Knowledge Management Hub.
- European Commission. (2021) *The EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration. Communication from the commission to the European Parliament and the council*, COM(2021) 120 final. Brussels: European Commission.
- Eurostat. (2023) *Returns of irregular migrants – quarterly statistics*. Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Returns_of_irregular_migrants_-_quarterly_statistics-Non-EU_citizens_ordered_to_leave [Accessed: May 5, 2025].
- Feneberg, V. (2019) Ich zwinge niemanden, freiwillig zurück zu gehen. Die institutionelle Umsetzung der Politik der geförderten Rückkehr durch staatliche und nicht-staatliche Akteure. *Zeitschrift Für Flüchtlingsforschung*, 3(1), 8–43.
- Fine, S. & Walters, W. (2022) No place like home? The International Organization for Migration and the new political imaginary of deportation. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(13), 3060–3077.
- Flahaux, M.L. (2021) Reintegrating after return: conceptualisation and empirical evidence from the life course of Senegalese and Congolese migrants. *International Migration*, 59(2), 148–166.
- Fransen, S. & Bilgili, Ö. (2018) Who reintegrates? The constituents of reintegration of displaced populations. *Population, Space and Place*, 24(6), 1–13.
- Frontex. (2022) *Risk analysis for 2022/2023*. Warsaw.
- Frontex. (2024) *Return operations*. Available from: <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/return-and-reintegration/return-operations/return-operations> [Accessed: May 5, 2025].
- Gemi, E. & Triandafyllidou, A. (2021) *Rethinking migration and return in southeastern Europe: Albanian mobilities to and from Italy and Greece*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Gökulp Aras, N.E. (2021) The European Union's externalisation policy in the field of migration and asylum: Turkey as a case study. *Global Migration: Consequences and Responses Working Papers*, 2021/76.
- IOM – International Organization for Migration. (2002) *IOM assisted voluntary return programmes in the Europe*. Geneva: International Organization for Migration (IOM).
- IOM – International Organization for Migration. (2009) *Assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) in the EU*. Geneva: International Organization for Migration (IOM).
- IOM – International Organization for Migration. (2018) *Assisted voluntary return and reintegration. 2017 Key Highlights*. Geneva: International Organization for Migration (IOM).
- IOM – International Organization for Migration. (2019a) *Glossary on migration (international migration law, No. 34)*. Geneva: International Organization for Migration (IOM).

- IOM – International Organization for Migration. (2019b) *Reintegration handbook. Practical guidance on the design, implementation and monitoring of reintegration assistance*. Geneva: International Organization for Migration (IOM).
- IOM – International Organization for Migration. (2023a) *Return and reintegration key highlights 2022*. Geneva: International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva.
- IOM – International Organization for Migration. (2023b) *Migration management. Facts and figures*. Geneva: International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva.
- Kalir, B. (2017) Between “voluntary” return Programmes and soft deportation: sending vulnerable migrants in Spain back “home”. In: Vathi, Z. & King, R. (Eds.) *Return migration and psychosocial wellbeing*. London: Routledge, pp. 56–71.
- King, R. (1986) *Return migration and regional economic problems*. London: Croom Helm.
- King, R. & Kuschminder, K. (Eds.). (2022) *Handbook of return migration*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Koser, K. & Kuschminder, K. (2015) *Comparative research on the assisted voluntary return and reintegration of migrants*. Geneva: IOM.
- Kothe, C., Otte, L., Reischl, D., Uluköylü, Ş., Baraulina, T. & Clevers, F. (2023) *Das Leben nach der Rückkehr: Langfristige Reintegration nach der geförderten Ausreise aus Deutschland. Begleitstudie II zum Bundesprogramm StarthilfePlus*. Forschungsbericht 42. Nürnberg: Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge.
- Kuschminder, K. (2017a) Interrogating the relationship between remigration and sustainable return. *International Migration*, 55(6), 107–121.
- Kuschminder, K. (2017b) *Reintegration strategies: conceptualizing how return migrants reintegrate*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kuschminder, K. (2017c) *Taking stock of assisted voluntary return from Europe: decision making, reintegration and sustainable return – time for a paradigm shift*. EUI working paper RSCAS No. 2017/31, European University Institute Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, San Domenico di Fiesole.
- Leerkes, A., van Os, R. & Boersema, E. (2017) What drives ‘soft deportation’? Understanding the rise in assisted voluntary return among rejected asylum seekers in The Netherlands. *Population, Space and Place*, 23(8), 1–11.
- Lietaert, I. (2019) The usefulness of reintegration support: the dual perspectives of returnees and caseworkers. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 49(5), 1216–1233.
- Lietaert, I. (2022) Critical reflections on assisted return programmes and practices. In: King, R. & Kuschminder, K. (Eds.) *Handbook of return migration*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing. pp. 108–121.
- Majidi, N., Oeppen, C., Kasavan, C. & Barratt, S. (2023) Re-balancing the reintegration process and the potential of mentoring for returnees: evidence from Senegal, Guinea and Morocco. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 24(2), 563–583.
- Marino, R. (2023) *Re-making it here: returnees and non-state actors in the (European) externalisation of return migration management in The Gambia*. Doctoral dissertation, Ghent University.
- Marino, R., Mannersuo, A., Francisco, I. & Lietaert, I. (2023) At the crossroads between care and control: a cross-country comparison of assisted return. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 36(3), 337–358.
- Marino, R., Schapendonk, J. & Lietaert, I. (2024) The moral economy of voice within IOM's awareness-raising industry: Gambian returnees and migrants as messengers. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 50(6), 1355–1370.
- Niemann, A. & Zaun, N. (2023) Introduction: EU external migration policy and EU migration governance: introduction. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(12), 2965–2985.
- Olivier-Mensah, C., Duscha, A., Stier, J., Feneberg, V., Jung, L., Meier, B. et al. (2020) *Developing lifeworld oriented perspectives for return migration. Needs, vulnerabilities and support of refugees in Germany*. Mainz: Johannes Gutenberg University.
- Paasche, E. (2021) *The rise of Frontex in the EU's new strategy on assisted return*. Faculty of Law Blogs/University of Oxford. Available from: <https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2021/05/rise-frontex-eus> [Accessed: May 5, 2025].
- Parella, S. & Petroff, A. (2019) Return intentions of Bolivian migrants during the Spanish economic crisis: the interplay of macro-meso and micro factors. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 20, 291–305.
- PICUM. (2021) *The EU strategy on returns: between the devil and the deep blue sea*. PICUM Blog. Available from: <https://picum.org/blog/eu-strategy-returns/> [Accessed: May 5, 2025].
- Refugee.info. (2024) AVRR overview. Available from: <https://italy.refugee.info/en-us/articles/5388918072343> [Accessed: May 5, 2025]
- Şahin-Mencütek, Z. (2023) *The role of return preparedness, assistance and networks in returnees' reintegration in origin countries (BICC synthesis report)*. Bonn: Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC) gGmbH.
- Salihi, R. (2020) ‘Assisted’ and ‘voluntary’ return to Afghanistan? *ISS working paper*, 676.
- Samuel Hall. (2014) *Evaluating IOM's return and reintegration activities for returnees and other displaced populations*. Kabul: International Organization for Migration (IOM).
- Save the Children, & Samuel Hall. (2018) *From Europe to Afghanistan. Experiences of Child Returnees*. Sweden: Save the Children.

- Schmitt, M., Bitterwolf, M. & Baraulina, T. (2019) *Geförderte Rückkehr aus Deutschland: Motive und Reintegration. Eine Begleitstudie zum Bundesprogramm StarthilfePlus*. Forschungsbericht 34. Nürnberg: Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge.
- Sinnige, M., Cleton, L. & Leerkes, A. (2025) Determinants of enforced return: a quantitative analysis of the Spectrum of (in) voluntariness among rejected asylum seekers in The Netherlands. *Population, Space and Place*, 31(2), e2886.
- Sinnige, M., van Houte, M. & Leerkes, A. (2023) Talking about return. Governmental caseworkers' regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive strategies during "return conversations" with irregularised migrants. *International Migration*, 61(1), 288–303.
- Slominski, P. & Trauner, F. (2018) How do member states return unwanted migrants? The strategic (non-) use of 'Europe' during the migration crisis. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 56(1), 101–118.
- Strand, A., Nepstad Bendixsen, S., Liden, H., Paasche, E. & Aalen, L. (2016) *Programmernes for assisted return to Afghanistan, Iraqi Kurdistan, Ethiopia and Kosovo: a comparative evaluation of effectiveness and outcomes*. Oslo: CMI Report.
- van Houte, M., Siegel, M. & Davids, T. (2015) Return to Afghanistan: migration as reinforcement of socio-economic stratification. *Population, Space and Place*, 21(8), 692–703.
- Vandevoordt, R. (2017) Between humanitarian assistance and migration management: on civil actors' role in voluntary return from Belgium. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 43(11), 1907–1922.
- Vandevoordt, R. (2018) Judgement and ambivalence in migration work: on the (dis) appearance of dilemmas in assisting voluntary return. *Sociology*, 52(2), 282–297.
- Webber, F. (2011) How voluntary are voluntary returns? *Race & Class*, 52(4), 98–107.
- Westerby, R. (2019) *Follow the money II: assessing the use of EU asylum, migration and integration fund (AMIF) funding at the national level 2014–2018*. Report for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE).

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

How to cite this article: Fuchs, L.M. (2025) Assisted return programmes across Europe – Mapping an increasingly obscure landscape. *International Migration*, 63, e70032. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.70032>