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NOTE

From:	The incoming Presidency
To:	Working Party on Integration, Migration and Expulsion (IMEX Expulsion)
Subject:	Presidency discussion paper on promoting voluntary return and reintegration

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Introduction

Within the full application of the Pact on Migration and Asylum as of 12 June 2026, voluntary return and reintegration operations are core components of a comprehensive returns system. The effectiveness of these systems is essential to the integrity of the Pact and contribute to credible migration management.

Under the Returns Regulation, on which an agreement has been recently reached in the interinstitutional negotiations, and the broader EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration, voluntary return is prioritised over forced removal, as it is more expedient, cost-effective and more dignified for the returnee. It also contributes to building public confidence in migration governance, as the gap between return decisions and effective returns remains high, with approximately one out of four persons who receive an order to leave being returned successfully. The gap between return decisions and effective returns places pressure on Member State's resources, immigration services and can also leave third-country nationals in a state of uncertainty and socially vulnerable.

It is recognised that this gap in effective returns relates in large part to a lack of cooperation from many third countries when it comes to readmission, whether with challenges related to identification, the refusal to issue travel documents or their short validity. This is also compounded by internal challenges, for instance, where a third-country national absconds or the existence of complex administrative processes. Where such large and complex operational, administrative and geopolitical constraints exist, the voluntary return channel has become crucial to successfully returning third-country nationals. Voluntary returns is an effective option where forced return is a plausible alternative. A correlation between the visibility of forced returns, such as charters, and an upward trend in those opting for voluntary returns has been evident.

Priority third countries

In relation to **the coordination of operational measures to increase returns to ten common priority third countries for return**¹, as identified in the High Level Network for Return, it is noted that most Member States are registering few voluntary return cases in relation to these priority countries, partly because these countries are predominantly selected based on requirements related to forced returns. However, as further dialogue is pursued in relation to some of these countries and some of these countries fall under (proposals for) restrictive visa measures pursuing Visa Code Article 25a, these should be kept under active review, and consideration should be given to the reintegration methods which could be utilised in relation to these countries, should an increase in voluntary returns commence. Member States should also be aware that the Council identified priority countries with whom readmission cooperation needed to be increased².

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Role of reintegration supports

The success and sustainability of voluntary return depend on the success of the individual reintegration once the person has returned. As part of the Pact on Migration and Asylum, the swifter decision-making process and quick timelines for forced returns, are hoped to encourage greater voluntary returns. New procedures, such as the Return Border Procedure which has a 15-day window for individuals to avail of voluntary return, may result in an increase.

The implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum, along with the impending implementation of the Return Regulation offers an opportunity to reconsider and reevaluate current workstreams in relation to voluntary return and reintegration. In particular, there is an opportunity for Member States to collaborate more closely on the practical application of operational activities. This can be achieved by sharing insights and expertise on holistic elements of the voluntary return and reintegration process in existing fora such Frontex's Working Groups and the EMN-REG. A more harmonised approach across Member States also strengthens credibility in negotiations with third countries in relation to returns.

At the end of 2025, 75.2%³ of returns to a third country were assisted (i.e. included some kind of material or other support for the returnee). Member States vary significantly in the utilisation of assisted returns, with many including some level of assistance in all returns, with others opting for non-assisted returns for the majority of returnees.

The digital platform, the Reintegration Assistance Tool (RIAT) has been an important step in providing an end-to-end overview of the reintegration process.

In addition, services and activities currently being provided in relation to reintegration as part of voluntary and forced returns include direct monetary assistance, psychosocial support, medical assistance, long-term housing and related costs, assistance in setting up a small business, job counselling and assistance with labour market access, as well as legal aid and educational support.

³ [Eurostat – Returns of Irregular Migrants-Quarterly Statistics](#)

There has been a pivot from viewing these supports as merely a post-return measure to instead viewing them as a long-term model with a focus on sustainable reintegration in the country of return. This approach envisions reintegration supports being aligned, with partner countries gradually taking more ownership in a broader context, with national development strategies, and implementing referral mechanisms and strategies.

The availability of these supports is contingent on many factors, such as the third country in question, the contracted reintegration partner and other operational practicalities. Where there is collaboration between these parties and the Member State concerned, a more tailored reintegration support system is possible. There has been a broad consensus in the past that any additional supports being made available should have a focus on decreasing the administrative burden for Member States. Moving towards a more common and harmonised approach to reintegration, among Member States and at EU level, is therefore needed. It would facilitate a more effective, efficient and sustainable reintegration, while reducing administrative burden for Member States.

The growing role of Frontex in voluntary return and reintegration

Frontex is implementing the EU Reintegration Programme (EURP) under its mandate on returns (Article 48 of Regulation (EU) 2019/1896) and in line with the EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration, supporting the EU return policy and with an aim to address the root cause of irregular immigration⁴.

The EURP aims to establish a harmonised EU reintegration programme wherein all Schengen States and Schengen Associated Countries can benefit from Partnership Agreements with reintegration partners concluded by Frontex. In addition, Frontex has set up a dedicated workspace for return counsellors from the Standing Corps and Member States, to find relevant information on return and reintegration in general, aligning procedures, exchanging knowledge and good practices. This serves to promote positive outcomes in the reintegration process through continuous learning, collaboration and access to shared resources across Member States.

⁴ <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/return-and-reintegration/reintegration-assistance/>

A potential area for operational growth in actioning voluntary returns under the Pact on Migration and Asylum is mixed returns; charter flights which comprise of a mix of voluntary returnees and non-voluntary returnees. This has been trialled to some extent by Frontex and provides additional scope to Member States who can opt into these flights with either a mix of both cohorts, or entirely forced or voluntary returns. The coherent and efficient implementation of the Frontex European Reintegration Programme can contribute to achieving sustainable return and reintegration by working with national authorities and local partners.

At the forthcoming IMEX Expulsion working party meeting delegations are invited to share their views on the following questions:

- *What experiences do Member States have in supporting third country nationals and local authorities to ensure the long-term success of returns and sustainable reintegration? How can we further enhance the capacity and responsibilities of national and local authorities and effectively utilise Frontex supports?*
- *How will the implementation of the Returns Regulation impact existing workstreams surrounding Voluntary Returns and Reintegration? What opportunities does this present?*
- *How can Member States ensure a better link between voluntary and forced return to ensure that non-respect of voluntary return is swiftly followed up?*
- *What measures could be taken to ensure more coherence, harmonisation and synergies between national and EU programmes on reintegration and longer-term reintegration efforts?*
