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Motivations, experiences and consequences of returns and readmissions policy: revealing and developing effective alternatives

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Motivations, experiences and consequences of returns and readmissions policy: revealing and developing effective alternatives



## Returns and Readmissions on the ground:

### Implementation of the RR policy, its impact, and state agent's assessment and perceptions

#### *Executive Summary*

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Project Number: 101094107

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### Edited by

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**How to cite this publication:** Carles, I., Grevesse, M., & Henneton, V. (2025). *Returns and readmissions on the ground: Implementation of the RR policy, its impact, and state agent's assessment and perceptions (Executive summary)*. MORE Project. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17151767>

### Publication date

August 2025

### Disclaimer

*This document provides a concise summary of the key findings from the policy brief on Return and Readmissions policy across Europe that was conducted in the framework of MORE project. For detailed analysis, evidence, and comprehensive insights, please refer to the full report. The information in this summary should not be considered complete or fully representative of the entire study.*

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## Introduction

The European Union's Return and Readmission policies (RR), particularly those relating to the detention and deportation of migrants, are highly controversial and politically charged issues. They have frequently been analysed by academics and civil society organisations, primarily based on testimonies from NGOs or monitoring bodies. Moreover, these policies are yet to be assessed from the perspective of those responsible for implementing them. This report therefore contributes to understanding RR policies 'from the bottom up', i.e. based on the practices and representations of different actors directly involved in their implementation. This report reviews the experiences and perceptions of state and third-party actors enforcing detention and deportation in Belgium, Germany, Greece, Italy, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the UK. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in all of these countries between October 2024 and March 2025. 13 focus groups gathering 52 agents and 79 individual interviews were conducted, involving a total of 131 implementing agents.

EU return policy has significantly evolved since the 1990s, shifting towards a greater focus on effectiveness at the expense of migrants' rights. Enforcement measures have been prioritised over those aimed at protection, with a particular focus on deportations. This evolution has had a detrimental effect on respect for migrants' fundamental rights, leading to a reduction in procedural protections. Meanwhile, the RR policy has become increasingly embedded in a polarised political discourse that portrays migrants as a threat to national security and social stability. Although political discourse emphasises the need to increase returns, a significant proportion of expulsions cannot be enforced due to humanitarian, legal or technical considerations.

State implementing agents must navigate this dissonant context to act and intervene. They must respond to the dual imperative of increasing the number of deportations while respecting the humanitarian, legal and technical factors that prevent them from being carried out. The term 'implementing agents' is employed to denote individuals who, in the course of their professional duties, engage directly with irregular migrants and who are involved in implementing forced returns and the related enforcement mechanisms, that is primarily detention and deportation.

The aim of this report is to analyse how actors experience the implementation of these policies. Their experiences and perceptions are crucial to understanding how those in direct contact with irregular migrants rationalize and enforce the deportation process, with a view on determining whether there is a gap between policies developed at different levels of government - including the European level - and policies as they are implemented on a daily basis.

The originality of this work lies in its focus on how these agents view the tasks they are asked to perform in what we describe as the *deportation chain*. This process commences at the point at which the expulsion order is issued and culminates with the return and reintegration of the individual into their country of origin or their exit of the chain through regularisation. The system of actors (individual and collective) involved in the deportation chain is composed of multiple agents, such as state and prison custody agents, police officers, border police, deportation centres agents, airlines staff, experts, street-level bureaucrats, and rights monitors. It thus includes national administrations, judges and lawyers, non-governmental organizations, social services, doctors and health services, interpreters.

The roles, responsibilities and discretionary power available to each group varied greatly and each of these implementing agents fulfils a distinct role in the deportation regime. Some played more of a support role, while others had a direct impact on the deportation process. However, all of these agents are characterised by a certain degree of 'discretion', which is defined as the capacity to act autonomously in the execution of their assigned responsibilities (Brodkin, 1997; Lipsky, 2010). Such decisions can cover vital issues, such as access to services and rights, the

assessment of migrants' behaviour, conditions of detention or deportation, and the establishment of categories (e.g. 'good' or 'bad' migrants, 'real' or 'fake' refugees, etc.). Agents' opinions on the tasks that they are asked to perform are varied ranging from approbation to discomfort or even opposition. The underlying causes of these attitudes depend largely on the individual's position within the deportation process. This, in turn, can determine how they implement the law, despite their assertion of limited discretion. We propose to analyse these different experiences and perceptions and to examine how they can influence agents' attitude towards implementation, ranging from compliance to resistance.

## Evidence and analysis

One key finding of this research is the discrepancy between the intentions set out in RR policies and their practical implementation on the ground, highlighting its bureaucratic inefficiencies, legal complexities and ethical dilemmas.

In several countries, the approach to removal and deportation was described as being fragmented, involving multiple actors. Complex administrative procedures and fragmented communication can often lead to extended periods of detention and uncertainty for those detained, which in turn often impacts their mental health. Bureaucratic inefficiency and administrative delays currently pose a significant challenge to the RR system. All of these factors have a profound impact on migrants, frontline staff and public services.

A substantial number of planned deportations are not carried out due to various legal and administrative challenges. As such, the effectiveness of these measures, based primarily on the number of returnees, is highly questionable. There are several reasons why deportation processes often take longer than expected. These include issues with obtaining travel documentation, last-minute legal challenges, and diplomatic barriers. In addition, all the countries studied consider issues such as lack of nationality or documentation, constitutional values and discretionary decisions as grounds for suspending orders. Finally, appeals against return decisions may result in a temporary suspension, though the impact of this varies by country, leading to inconsistencies in how suspensions are enforced.

However, the actual main obstacle to enforcement lies in the fundamental contradiction between deportation and respect for fundamental rights. The countries studied have established various grounds for suspending orders, primarily focusing on circumstances beyond the control of irregularised migrants. One of the most common grounds falls under humanitarian reasons, encompassing medical conditions, family protection, and risks of serious harm, in line with the principle of *non-refoulement*. Having children born in an EU country or mental health issues are legally defined as impediments to expulsion. Family ties often complicate removal cases, particularly when individuals invoke Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which protects the right to family life. As a result, the RR system frequently fails in practice due to humanitarian, legal and procedural challenges.

This highlights the stark contrast between policy priorities and practical realities. It raises issues regarding the need for an RR policy that law enforcement agents find challenging to execute. Such a policy is time-consuming and energy-intensive, and most importantly, it seriously undermines respect for migrants' rights. Implementing agents are directly confronted with this dissonance, which creates a sense of frustration and the feeling that time and energy are being wasted on an ultimately ineffective policy. The bureaucratic regulations in place are inefficient and costly, and return policies generate a high workload. As a result, most agents are dissatisfied with the return policy they have to implement, albeit for different reasons. These differing views appear to depend on their position in the deportation chain.

A first category of enforcement agents are dissatisfied because they feel they encounter many organisational obstacles in implementing the policy. Agents in this category do not tend to question the law they have to enforce. Furthermore, some agents refer to implementation obstacles that they describe as 'annoying', but do not clearly link these to the legal and

technical obligations to which states are subject. They tend to establish distinct subgroups of migrants, with deportation being justified for those involved in delinquency or criminal activity. This creates a dangerous link between crime and migration, which is increasingly used to justify the deportation of homeless people and petty criminals. Irregular migrants often find themselves caught in a downward spiral as a result of restrictive residence policies that limit their ability to secure employment or access social assistance. Moreover, these agents often believe that migrants exploit the rights granted to them, using them as a way to avoid deportation at all costs.

A second category of agents have expressed some discomfort at applying certain provisions, due to a perceived conflict with their ethical principles. Finally, a third category of agents openly contests specific provisions, such as detention. Agents in the second and third categories, who experience discomfort when confronted with specific tasks or even openly contest them, are more inclined to empathise with migrants. They tend to identify with the distress and disorientation that migrants experience when navigating a complex system. They criticise the implementation of RR policies for violating migrants' fundamental rights, citing the conditions surrounding detention and deportation as examples. A key concern they raise in accessing those rights is the difficulty of getting legal representation, which is largely due to a lack of information and a shortage of interpreters.

The humanitarian implications of deportation decisions, particularly concerning family separation and the rights of long-term residents, remain one of the most ethically fraught aspects of RR policy. Many migrants facing deportation have lived in their host countries for decades, started families, and contributed to society. Decisions to deport individuals that result in parents being separated from their children, spouses from their partners, or individuals from the communities in which they have lived since childhood raise serious concerns from the perspective of international human rights frameworks, including Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

The detention of children is also a cause for concern. Even though minors are never separated from their parents and families are usually accommodated in specially designated wings, experiencing detention can be traumatic for children. In other cases, even if children were not themselves detained, the experience of separation from one of their parents could be problematic, raising questions about compliance with the principle of the best interests of the child.

Another key concern raised by various stakeholders is the psychological and social impact that deportation policies have on migrants. Many detainees experience severe distress due to the uncertainty surrounding their immigration status, compounded by prolonged periods of detention. Furthermore, a significant proportion of the migrants in detention had already been subjected to violence and trauma, which can be exacerbated by the conditions in prison. Detention was demonstrated to have a detrimental effect on mental health, due to the absence of explicit information regarding the duration of detention. This absence of clarity engendered a state of general uncertainty among detainees.

Various forms of resistance are employed by migrants who are detained in pre-removal centers, including self-harm and suicide attempts. They are often the last resort available to detainees seeking to be heard in cases of detention and isolation. These physical injuries should primarily raise concerns about distress and mental health. However, the main response to resistance is the use of additional coercive measures during deportations. Self-harm, including suicide attempts, is mainly viewed as a form of resistance that can be countered by medical intervention or physical restraint, such as shackles, security escorts and detention. This further highlights the unsustainability of RR policies, particularly with regard to administrative detention.

Some migrants in alternative-to-detention programmes also experience periods of uncertainty due to their precarious residence status, which is more akin to tolerated residence than recognised rights. This is particularly true with regard to the right to work or social assistance. Concerning migrants who apply for regularisation, they have to navigate complicated

administrative procedures. This can result in a decline in their social and legal mobility, which in turn can lead to a deterioration in their living conditions and access to rights.

Another fundamental issue is the politicisation of deportation policies, as well as public misconceptions surrounding immigration enforcement. Return policies are a highly controversial topic in several European countries. Political events or incidents often result in increasingly restrictive legislation being announced or adopted. However, this approach has had little impact on the actual number of deportations. Conversely, its impact on vulnerable migrant populations, exacerbating the precariousness of their status, is very real. Policies that reduce migrants' protections and rights in an attempt to discourage them from staying, while creating increasingly precarious statuses like such as 'tolerated stay', have been shown to push migrants into a spiral of precariousness and poverty. The ensuing fight for survival is known to fuel a shift towards criminal activity. This gives rise to a vicious cycle that perpetuates the false stereotype of migrants as 'criminals' who refuse to integrate. In reality, it is the absence of a legal status that renders integration unfeasible in practice.

## Policy recommendation

This report has highlighted the ineffectiveness of coercive measures, emphasising the need to explore alternatives to detention and return. Substantial legal reforms and a shift towards more humane and sustainable migration management strategies are therefore required. Such reforms would address the needs of migrants and the operational challenges faced by enforcement agents. Prioritising legal protections, procedural fairness and social inclusion in policy changes is essential to creating a more just and effective RR framework.

Some alternatives to detention also need to be further developed, particularly those based on case management that lead to regularisation. These mechanisms mainly involve a final examination of migrants' situations before removal decisions are made, and some migrants are granted the right to stay as a result. The Belgian 'Reception and Orientation' project, for example, is aimed at homeless migrants who have lived in the country for a long time but have no recognised legal status. This initiative aims to provide accommodation in exchange for their cooperation in finding a long-term solution to their residency status. It is regarded as a substitute for detention, insofar as migrants enter the programme voluntarily and have the option to depart at any time. Several undocumented migrants have already had their status regularised because of the programme. A secondary benefit is that these cases are prioritised for examination by the relevant bodies, which significantly accelerates their processing.

This approach is notable because it significantly reduces the likelihood of migrants being detained and helps them regularise their stay. However, these mechanisms are implemented on a very limited scale. Additionally, for those for whom no resolution has been found, the result is simply an extension of their already unlawful status, accompanied by a loss of rights and the constant threat of deportation.

We therefore recommend extending these measures to as many people in an irregular situation as possible. This would bypass the issue of detention and provide them with the opportunity to regularise their stay. Their current family situation and any vulnerabilities they may have, particularly regarding health, should also be taken into consideration.

Finally, although voluntary return is encouraged in several countries, reintegration programmes do not currently provide sufficient support for it. Therefore, it is necessary to expand and improve these programmes by providing voluntary returnees with increased financial and logistical support to ensure sustainable reintegration. Post-return follow-up mechanisms should also be implemented to monitor their well-being. Finally, it is crucial that voluntary returns are truly voluntary and not undertaken by migrants because they feel pressured to leave 'voluntarily', as the distress experienced by individuals in detention leads them to accept offers to return 'voluntarily' to their country.



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