

more

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



National Summary Report

Experiences, expectations and views of migrants and professionals in the field around *RR and alternative policies*

Case Study: **Belgium**

Authors: Isabelle Carles, Magdalena Grevesse, Victor Henneton

Funded by



Funded by
the European Union

Co-funded by



UK Research
and Innovation

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Project Number: 101094107



Funded by
the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Co-funded by



UK Research
and Innovation

Disclaimer:

This document provides a concise summary of the key findings of **MORE Project WP5 in Belgium**. 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.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18223312

Publication date:

September 2025

PROJECT COORDINATOR



PARTNERS





Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Funded by the European Union

Co-funded by



UK Research and Innovation

Introduction

Civil society actors in Belgium have been waging two battles for several decades: the condemnation of the detention of irregular residents, and the demand for an independent regularisation mechanism based on clear criteria. These efforts are intended to support irregular residents at risk of deportation. However, residence permits are increasingly rarely granted, and the government has stated its intention to increase the number of undocumented migrants returned to their countries of origin.

This report analyses the consequences of return and readmission policies in Belgium, as perceived and experienced by migrants at risk of deportation and the civil society organisations that support them. The aim is to improve understanding of the impact of return policies on the living conditions of migrants in Belgium, and of the support actions developed by civil society for these migrants.

This ethnographic study, which involved 31 migrant support workers and 14 migrants, was conducted in Belgium between December 2024 and June 2025. Of the 31 migrant support workers interviewed, 14 were interviewed individually and 15 were met through 3 focus groups, each gathering around 6 support workers. Interviews with migrants and support workers as well as focus groups were conducted in both the capital, where the main asylum and migration authorities are based, and medium-sized Belgian towns.

Some of the support workers interviewed offer holistic socio-legal support, while others cover certain aspects of daily life, such as health, schooling, work or training. The specific characteristics of these associations, which were identified in advance, enabled us to cover all aspects of the daily lives of immigrants at risk of deportation, from integration into schools to access to training and medical assistance. Particular attention was also paid to the category of migrants served by these organisations (unaccompanied migrant children, former unaccompanied migrant children, irregular residents, precarious migrants, detainees in pre-removal centres, 'Dublinised' migrants, asylum seekers at the border, etc.). We also approached human right associations with visiting rights in detention centres to gather their perceptions and feedback.

PROJECT COORDINATOR



PARTNERS



Evidence and analysis

The findings of this report, which are based on the experiences and perceptions of both civil society and the migrants themselves, show that the living conditions of migrants at risk of deportation are becoming increasingly difficult due to a lack of rights, increased control of undocumented migrants on the territory and reduced opportunities for support.

Undocumented migrants live in extreme precariousness with difficulties in accessing education, employment, housing and healthcare. Language barriers, the digital divide, administrative restrictions and fear of rejection reinforce their isolation.

Children and young people in irregular situations are particularly vulnerable, often excluded from the school system or facing an uncertain future. Many associations are trying to fill these gaps but lack the resources to deal with the complexity of the system. This context weighs heavily on the mental health of those affected.

In a context where undocumented migrants do not have the right to work, most of them find undeclared employment through informal networks, often experiencing exploitation. However, this subject is rarely discussed with social workers or support structures, only being raised when difficulties arise, such as non-payment of wages or accidents at work.

Housing is one of the key issues for irregular migrants. Those applying for regularisation are not provided with support, leaving them in a difficult situation akin to that of rejected asylum seekers, as social services require a legal address, a prerequisite for access to several rights, such as the emergency medical aid card.

Access to health is difficult because of the cumbersome and lengthy application procedure. These difficulties also vary from one municipality to another due to social assistance institutions being saturated in certain regions of the country. The highly nomadic lifestyle of migrants, combined with their difficulty in finding stable accommodation, makes access to healthcare even more difficult, with each commune having its own way of proceeding.



Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Funded by
the European Union

Co-funded by



UK Research
and Innovation

Detention centres are described both by migrant and support workers as places of lawlessness, as the decision to detain is taken by the administrative authority without review by the judiciary. Furthermore, the length of detention is often unknown, which exacerbates the disorientation and confusion experienced by detainees.

The living conditions in detention centres have an impact on the mental health of migrant detainees, many of whom have already experienced extremely traumatic journeys during their migration journey. Due to an overall shortage of psychologists and psychiatrists, social workers and visitors in closed centres are unable to offer psychological follow-up. Violence experienced throughout the migration process can be extremely traumatic and often leads to long-term decompensation, which has a detrimental effect on the mental health of young people. In the context of growing mental health needs, those involved express their concern that psychological care will soon be removed from the emergency medical aid provided to undocumented migrants.

Undocumented migrants are then in a particularly challenging situation, exacerbated by the current hostile political context. Indeed, the new Belgian government intends to adopt measures aimed at tightening return policies, based on increasing the number of forced returns. This intention is reflected in the proposal to increase the number of places in detention centres, as well as in the plan to create specific centres for so-called 'Dublin' migrants, with the aim of speeding up their return to the country of first reception. The presence of Frontex agents, who will be authorised to carry out interceptions at stations and airports and escort migrants in the context of forced returns, are further evidence of the government's resolve as well as the prospect of police being able to carry out home visits to arrest people residing irregularly.

The announcements emanating from the 2025–29 Federal Coalition Agreement, which focus mainly on repression and accelerating return procedures, have consequences on the ground. They create an atmosphere that is not conducive to tolerance towards undocumented migrants and often leads to their criminalization.

In addition, these measures are accompanied by a toughening of living conditions for migrants in Belgium, as evidenced by the announced reduction in emergency medical aid and the gradual phasing out of legal aid.

Against this backdrop, support for undocumented migrants is becoming increasingly limited, particularly due to the reduction in various subsidies. As a result, support

PROJECT COORDINATOR



PARTNERS





Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Funded by the European Union

Co-funded by



UK Research and Innovation

organisations are expressing their discouragement. The new government's stated intention to increase controls on undocumented migrants raise the number of forced returns is creating a climate of fear that is not conducive to tolerance.

Nevertheless, it is these same networks, along with citizens' and undocumented migrants' collectives, that are leading the resistance to return policies and demanding better living conditions, especially about the right to work.

These groups mainly find political support at a local level. Municipalities play a vital role in this respect by supporting the occupation of empty buildings, for example, and by ensuring access to local social and administrative services.

Policy recommendation

The alternatives to detention proposed by the Belgian government, principally the case management offered by the ICAM agents attached to the Immigration Office were viewed differently by the various stakeholders in the non-profit sector. Some are opposed to them, while some migrant support organisations are in favour. Others adopt a more nuanced position, supporting this type of scheme but criticising its implementation under the ICAM programme, which they feel comes too late in the migrant's journey. They advocate for case management to begin as soon as migrants arrive in the country, to explore all possibilities for stabilising their stay, rather than waiting until the end of their journey.

In the field of health, the initiative developed by certain local authorities to improve irregularised migrants' access to healthcare is noteworthy. Some municipalities try to overcome difficulties of access by issuing urgent medical aid cards as soon as administrative residence formalities have been completed. This helps to avoid excessively long delays in cases of medical need.

Concerning housing, it is important to acknowledge the existence of various groups of undocumented migrants who, with the assistance of local councils, occupy and manage squats. These squats serve as a means of providing shelter and support to undocumented migrants. They are also seen as places conducive to organising collective political resistance. Support comes from a network of associations offering activities and information sessions on health, work and education issues.

PROJECT COORDINATOR



PARTNERS

