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**WP7: Exploration and
Analysis of Further Public
and Civic Alternatives to
RR: Case Studies at
Multiple Levels**

Executive Summary

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



Beyond Returns: Dignified and Effective Alternatives to EU Returns and Readmission Policy

Policy Brief

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Executive Summary

Despite years of criticism from civil society, the EU's Returns and Readmissions (R&R) policy remains a central pillar of migration governance. However, the MORE project's comparative analysis demonstrates that enforcement-centred approaches are widely experienced as ineffective in achieving removals, as well as harmful in their consequences to migrants, municipalities, and societies. Across eight examined countries (Belgium, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain, Slovenia, Sweden, and the UK), return policies are associated with prolonged legal insecurity, destitution, deteriorating health, labour exploitation, and social exclusion.

At the same time, alternatives to return are already implemented across Europe and the UK. These include:

- State-led regularisation mechanisms,
- Civil society and municipal inclusion initiatives, and
- Cross-sectoral cooperation models.

This policy brief identifies regularisation as the most comprehensive alternative but emphasises that it must be combined with social inclusion measures and multi-level governance approaches to be effective.

Key Messages

Return-centred policy does not resolve irregularity but often perpetuates it. Regularisation pathways exist and reach large populations but remain selective and temporary. Civil society and municipalities provide essential infrastructure for viable alternatives. Effective solutions are multi-level, relational/mutually connected, and rights-based. The EU therefore already has the necessary building blocks for a systemic shift away from return-oriented governance.

Ineffectiveness and Harm

Return-oriented policies frequently fail to result in actual removals, produce long-term administrative limbo, and generate destitution and exclusion. These outcomes undermine both the migrants' wellbeing and policy effectiveness. Return policies can also reduce migrants' ability to regularize because their frequently poor health, homelessness, and overall marginalisation limit compliance with legal admission criteria.

Policy Misalignment

The MORE project highlights a structural contradiction where migration policy prioritises return, but in practice many migrants remain non-removable and without viable pathways. This creates a population in persistent irregular situations, as well as increased social and economic costs at local level.

Alternatives

Alternatives reduce the workload of public authorities, improve resource allocation, decrease migrant's vulnerability, and increase public security on national and local levels.

CONTEXT: Structural Limits of Return Policies

The MORE project demonstrates a structural contradiction at the core of EU migration governance: while Returns and Readmissions (R&R) policies remain central, they are widely experienced as ineffective in achieving removals as well as harmful in their consequences. Evidence from WP2, WP4, WP5 and WP7 comparative reports shows that return-oriented approaches produce prolonged insecurity, destitution, mental and physical health deterioration, labour exploitation, and social exclusion, while leaving large numbers of migrants in situations of unresolved irregularity.

At the same time, the MORE research documents that alternatives to return already exist across Europe and in the UK. Based on 474 interviews and focus groups with migrants at risk of return, civil society actors, local authorities, policymakers, and enforcement agents, as well as analysis of legal and policy documents in eight countries, WP2, WP4, WP5 and WP7 reports list a wide variety of existing alternatives which encompass state-led, civil society-driven, and cross-sectoral practices. Our research and analysis show that these alternatives can provide legal pathways, access to rights, and improved living conditions.

The WP7 comparative report identifies regularisation as the most comprehensive alternative to the prevalent return-centred policy by the EU and its member states but emphasizes that it is only effective when combined with inclusive social measures and multi-level governance approaches. The most promising solutions are relational and multi-level, linking legal status with access to housing, healthcare, work, education, and social participation, connected with counselling and the provision of understandable information.

ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION: Evidence of Already Existing Alternatives

State-Led Regularisation

Regularisation programmes can reach large populations and have demonstrated large-scale impact, for example:

Greece: ~400,000 (2001) and ~200,000 (2005) regularisations,

Spain: ~460,000 (2000–2001) and ~577,000 (2005), with a new process targeting one million (2026),

Germany: 88,312 temporary permits (2022 law), with 26,986 transitions to more secure status.

These mechanisms are often the only available legal pathway. They are perceived as providing dignity, certainty, and prospects.

Civil Society and Municipal Alternatives

Civil society and local actors enable stability and recovery through a variety of long-term and temporary projects, facilitating later regularization. These include different local and civil society actors that provide housing, healthcare, education, and legal support independent of status. It is important that they mostly act as firewalls against immigration enforcement and function as de facto non-removal mechanisms pausing deportations and offering a re-stabilization for migrants, who can then further pursue regularization. Key effective practices include case management, legal clinics, health access programmes, municipal ID systems, sanctuary-type practices, etc. Such initiatives are essential because they mitigate the harm produced by return policies (e.g., reduce destitution, stabilise migrants' lives) and create conditions necessary for accessing legal pathways.

Cross-Sectoral Models

Hybrid initiatives and approaches combining state actors, municipal authorities, and NGOs seem to be most effective and demonstrate the importance of cooperation across governance levels, although tensions between control-oriented and rights-based logics can limit their effectiveness. Yet despite tensions between control and inclusion logics, cross-sectoral approaches improve access to rights and services and show potential for integrated governance models.

CONSIDERATIONS:

1. Structural Challenges to Current Alternatives

Despite their potential, WP7 comparative report identifies significant limitations to existing alternative ways:

Return-Oriented Policy Dominance

Across countries, migration governance prioritizes detention, deportation, and deterrence. This undermines the existing alternatives and leads to a reversal or abolition of regularisation pathways, criminalization of migration and restrictive policy reforms, thus alternatives are often undermined, reversed, or defunded.

Labour Market Conditionality

Most regularisation pathways are tied to employment and driven by economic demand for low-cost labour, which creates high selectivity, legal precarity, and a framing of “deserving”

vs. “undeserving” migrants. Residence rights become linked to market participation rather than human rights considerations.

Selectivity and Exceptionalism

State driven regularisation programmes are typically temporary, restricted to specific groups, and presented as exceptional rather than structural. This limits their reach and prevents systemic solutions.

Bureaucratic and Implementation Barriers

Documented obstacles include complex and opaque procedures, discretionary decision-making, inconsistent application of rules, and a lack of transparency.

Lack of Information and Legal Counselling

Migrants often lack awareness of available pathways and do not receive (appropriate) guidance from the authorities. This significantly reduces their access to legal alternatives.

Fragility of Civil Society Alternatives

Civil society initiatives in particular are bound to short-term, project-based funding. Due to overall resource limitations, as well as political and legal pressures, these conditions threaten the sustainability of such alternatives.

2. Conditions that Strengthen Alternatives

Several enabling factors have been identified: civil society mobilisation and advocacy, municipal pressure due to local impacts of exclusion, employer demands linked to labour shortages, or legal counselling and strategic litigation. In these cases, local actors play a key role because the consequences of return policies are most visible at the municipal level.

A Relational and Multi-Level Approach

Effective alternatives share a relational logic where migrants appear as participants, not objects of control. A multi-level structure combining legal and social measures is needed. Core policy pillars comprise:

1. Structural regularisation with expanded pathways based on transparent criteria and reduced conditionality and temporariness;
2. Rights-based inclusion guaranteeing access to housing, healthcare, education, and legal support, which are preconditions for accessing legal status;

3. Municipal and civil society support by recognising local actors as central governance partners, and enabling inclusive service provision;
4. Case management and legal empowerment that provide individualised support, expand legal counselling, as well as address bureaucratic barriers; and
5. Safeguarding firewalls, crucially embedded in protected access to services that prevent enforcement-related data sharing.

- Rebalance migration policy away from return-centred approaches.
- Recognise regularisation as a core policy tool, not an exception.
- Establish EU-wide regularisation frameworks for non-removable migrants.
- Support municipal inclusion policies and infrastructures.
- Secure sustainable funding for civil society initiatives.
- Reduce bureaucratic and discretionary barriers.
- Promote legal counselling and access to information.
- Institutionalise multi-level cooperation mechanisms.

MORE Policy Recommendations

European Commission

- 1. Establish an EU Framework for Regularisation:** Develop common principles for regularisation pathways and status for non-removable migrants. There is a strong need to move beyond ad hoc and exceptional schemes.
- 2. Integrate Alternatives into EU Migration Strategy:** Shift emphasis from return to resolution of irregularity and access to rights, as well as embed alternatives within existing policy frameworks.
- 3. Fund and Institutionalise Local and Civil Society Practices:** Provide long-term funding instruments and structural support beyond project cycles. Recognise these actors as essential governance partners.
- 4. Promote Multi-Level Governance Mechanisms:** Create platforms linking EU institutions, Member States, municipalities, and civil society. Support exchange of practices and coordination.

5. Strengthen Legal Counselling Infrastructure: Fund EU-wide access to legal advice and information systems. Address barriers to accessing pathways.

6. Ensure Policy Coherence with Fundamental Rights: Align migration policy with EU law and international human rights obligations.

Member States

1. Expand and Institutionalise Regularisation: Move from temporary, exceptional programmes to permanent and transparent pathways. Additionally, promote national regularisation programmes, as stipulated by the Return Directive 2008/115/EC, Article 6(4), allowing member states discretion in regularization of irregularized migrants for compassionate, humanitarian or other reasons.

2. Reduce Conditionality and Labour Dependence: Decouple legal status from strict employment requirements, address precarity created by market-driven models, and base legal status on the factual presence and multiple dimensions of inclusion.

3. Remove Administrative and Bureaucratic Barriers: Simplify procedures, increase transparency, reduce uneven and unequal discretionary decision-making.

4. Strengthen Access to Information and Legal Support: Ensure migrants receive clear information, as well as free or accessible legal counselling.

5. Support Municipal Inclusion Policies: Enable cities to provide services to people irrespective of their legal status and implement inclusion measures (IDs, registration, services).

6. Ensure Sustainable Funding for Civil Society: Replace short-term funding cycles with stable, long-term support. Recognise the civil society's role in service provision, legal access, and social stability and support civil society actors as valuable stakeholders in their endeavour.

7. Reduce Reliance on Enforcement Measures: Limit detention and coercive return policies. Instead, reallocate resources toward inclusion and regularization.

Conclusion

The MORE project research findings demonstrate that alternatives to return are already functioning across Europe, offering concrete pathways to more effective and humane migration governance. While fragmented and constrained, these approaches show that



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resolving irregularity through inclusion and legal pathways is both feasible and necessary – that migration governance can be reoriented towards solutions that are more effective, socially cohesive, and grounded in human rights.

At the core of these alternatives lies a relational approach:

- Migrants are treated as participants rather than subjects of control;
- Access to rights enables engagement with formal systems;
- Legal status becomes achievable within supportive conditions.

Local authorities and civil society actors have already begun to implement such approaches, illustrating their viability. The key policy challenge is not the absence of alternatives, but their lack of institutionalisation, support, and scaling but also the de-legitimization of such alternatives through anti-migration narratives and criminalisation of migration. A shift towards multi-level, relational, and rights-based governance would align EU migration policy with both its practical realities and normative commitments.

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