The Role of Return Preparedness, Assistance and Networks in Returnees' Reintegration in Origin Countries

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SUMMARY

Across the destination countries of migration, i.e. migrant-receiving countries, in Europe there has been an increasing emphasis on return and reintegration programmes. These programmes particularly target rejected asylum-seekers forced to return, irregular migrants unable to legalise their stay in the migration country and migrants wishing to return of their own volition. Reintegration commonly refers to the processes that unfold after the return of migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons to their country of origin or place of residence as they set about trying to re-establish their lives. However, the reintegration trajectories of assisted and non-assisted returning migrants in different contexts have scarcely been researched. Funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) under a Special Initiative on "Tackling the root causes of displacement and (re-)integrating refugees", BICC has undertaken over the past four years (2019-2022) a qualitative research project entitled "Trajectories of reintegration" designed to tackle this desideratum.

This *Synthesis Report* brings together selected findings of the project's empirical studies in the Western Balkans (Serbia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo), West Africa (Ghana, Senegal, the Gambia) and the Middle East (Iraq). The BICC project team conducted an in-depth, long-term investigation into reintegration trajectories focusing on the perceptions, experiences and strategies of returning migrants. We collected data through in-depth qualitative interviews, life-stories, informal conversations and observations. The interview sample includes returnees who were displaced persons (refugees, rejected asylum-seekers), long-term labour migrants, 'irregular' migrants, student migrants, and circular or seasonal migrants. We conducted semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, including government officials, municipal actors and representatives of local NGOs and development agencies. The project team also cooperated closely with local researchers and research assistants, integrating their feedback into the ongoing research findings. To this end we ran training courses and organised several stakeholder workshops in the countries of research.

Our research findings illustrate that:

\ the standard approach to reintegration processes focuses on social, economic, and psychosocial dimensions. We offer a complementary understanding of reintegration by arguing that reintegration processes often relate to returnees' access to livelihood options, their long-term aspirations and life plans, their sense of belonging to a place and community of return, as well as the political context and governance structures in the origin country;

\ formal return and reintegration assistance schemes have only short-term and partial impacts on reintegration processes by, for instance, easing access to accommodation, offering in-kind or cash assistance and providing legal aid in the first few years of returns, but it is return preparedness—the returnee's willingness and readiness to return—along with the support of social networks that proves to be more impactful on reintegration than the formal assistance given by organisations;

\ returnees see mobility and translocal connectedness as essential livelihood options and part of their trajectories. Thus, returns are likely to be followed by remigration, including circular movements or pendular migration.

Our research suggests that there can be no one-size-fits-all approach for return and reintegration policies and programmes. To ensure that reintegration assistance programmes are evidence-based there must be systematic monitoring to establish what assistance these programmes offer in different contexts and how they are being used. Moreover, as returnees' own mobility and livelihoods are critical to their trajectories, remigration and circular migration should be considered a component of reintegration.

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Project Team

Project Design and Research Process

Motivation

To date, we still have little detailed knowledge of the long-term living conditions of returnees in their regions and countries of origin. Whereas there are a number of evaluations and academic studies addressing the short-term impact of reintegration policies, particularly the assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programmes, we lack the qualitative data needed to address all aspects of reintegration processes, determine the factors influencing these processes and establish how assistance is used in different contexts. Individual and familial motivations, employment and mobility trajectories, and the socio-cultural dimensions of migration have often been underestimated in the analysis. This constitutes an important gap because understanding migrant return from a qualitative and comparative perspective allows us to unpack multiple relational issues involved in programmes and their outcomes. At the same time, little information has been gathered on those people who organise their return by themselves. Moreover, the narrow policy focus on assisted returns and sustainable reintegration has tended to close down awareness of alternatives and possible paradigmatic shifts in understanding multiple facets of reintegration, including the emergence of several mobility patterns, diversification and the construction and use of transnational networks. The overall objective of this project is to contribute to the accumulation of knowledge about reintegration and to consider previously underestimated aspects by providing empirical evidence collected from multiple countries and regions as well as from different returnee types.
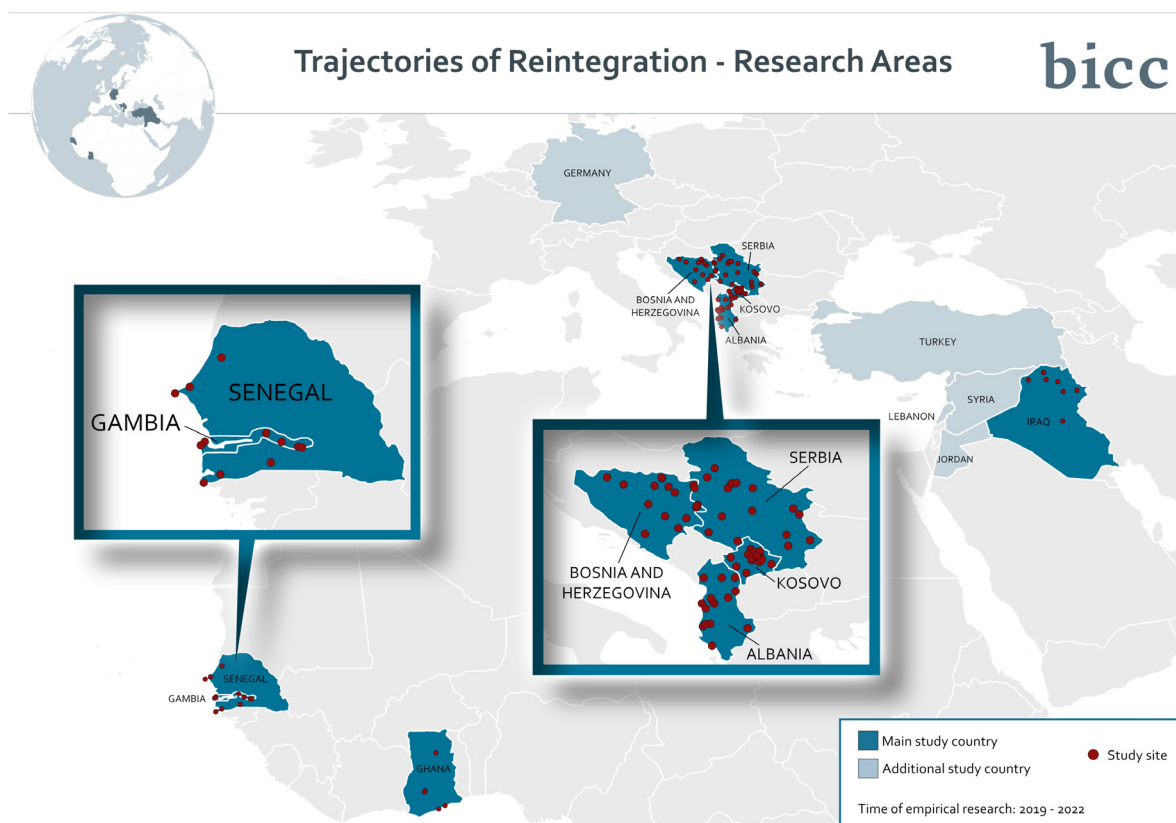
Sources: Natural Earth Data, 2020, HOTOSM, 2021/22

Map layout: Zeynep Mencütek, Jonas Spekker \ BICC, November 2022

Note: The boundaries and names shown and the designation used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by BICC

Research Questions and Approach

How do social and biographical factors influence the reintegration of returnees?

How do the type and duration of assistance influence the reintegration trajectories considering the varied characteristics of individuals?

Which livelihood strategies do returnees apply and how can they be assessed and supported long-term?

The Project conducts a long-term qualitative investigation of the living conditions of returnees,

\ including case studies from three regions (Middle East, Western Balkans, West Africa);

\ taking into account both unassisted (self-organised) and assisted returns; and

\ focusing on returning migrants' perceptions, experiences and strategies.

Methodologically, the project is:

\ *field research-based*: qualitative interviews (in-depth and narrative); focus group and group discussions; (participant) observation; visual documentation and longitudinal research; extensive field research in three regions;

\ *dialogue-oriented*: exchange between displaced persons, migrants and returnees, local residents, decision-makers, experts and representatives of national and international organisations;

\ *participative*: cooperation with local researchers and research assistants, integrate their feedback into the ongoing research, provide training and organise stakeholder workshops in the field;

\ *multi-sited and regional*: following trajectories and tracing translocal networks of displaced persons and migrants.

Data Collection: Interviews with Returnees and Stakeholders

The diverse interview sample covers returnees with different reasons for migration and legal status abroad (refugees, irregular migrants, rejected asylum-seekers, long or short-term labour migrants, internally displaced people (IDPs and returned IDPs). Where possible, some research partners were interviewed multiple times throughout the project period to examine their long-term trajectories. The sample includes returnees who had received some assistance, during or after their return, as well as those who had not been given any assistance. The rationale for this openness in our data collection is two-fold: 1) so as not to fall into the legal and political categories applied to migrants and returnees in the context of immigration and return policies, which pose conceptual problems; 2) to move beyond vulnerability criteria and thus better understand the lessons that can be learned from people who are reintegrating without any assistance.

Figure 1: Distribution of Interviews by Migration Country

Legend: ▨ European countries ▨ Non-European countries
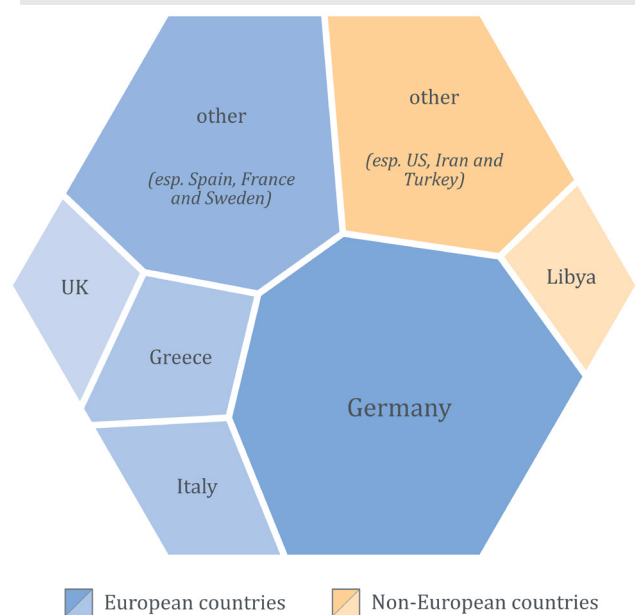
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Source: Own dataset from Reintegration Trajectories project, 2019–2022
Note: The sample includes many returnees with multiple migration experiences (including internal displacement) in one or more neighbouring European and non-European countries.

Regarding geographical scope, the interview sample includes people who returned from neighbouring countries to their country of origin; from transit countries (e.g. Libya, Turkey, Greece, Niger); from European countries (EU and non-EU); from the Americas, and others. Among all the regions left by returnees, the largest number of interviewees in the sample were returned from Germany, followed by those from Italy, Greece and the United Kingdom. For the interviewee sample in the Western African countries, Libya constitutes the main place many migrants had to return from although they had aimed to arrive in a European country. Besides these countries, our interviewee sample covered migrants returned from other European countries like Spain, France and Sweden as well as from non-European countries like the United States, Turkey and Iran. Interviews, background talks and focus groups were conducted with experts in the destination countries, including staff at international NGOs, local community organisations, government agencies and municipalities offering reintegration support, as well as migration policymakers and local experts.

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of interviews by migration country of destination, and Table 1 below details the overall interview dataset by country.

Table 1 : Interview Partners by Country

Interviews	Serbia	BiH	Albania	Kosovo	Iraq	Ghana	Gambia[2]	Senegal[2]
Returnees – claimed to be assisted (incl. AVRR)[1]	36	21	47	50	43	62	nd	nd
Returnees – claimed to be unassisted[1]	47	62	82	42	130	55	nd	nd
Returnees – deported	9	4	9	13	4	10	nd	53
Returnees - total number	83	83	129	92	177	127	42	119
Stakeholders and expert interviews[3]	25	28	20	31	46	24	10	29
Total number of interviewed persons (incl. family members and host population)	*108*	*111*	*nd*	*nd*	*216*	*207*	*91*	*215*

Notes:
[1] There is no clear-cut certainty about the categories, in particular between deportation and assisted since these distinctions often appear as policy categories but do not mean the same things for the migrants themselves and research assistants
[2] In Gambia and Senegal, many migrants did not remember or lacked full knowledge of their type of return or assistance, hence this categorisation did not work there.
[3] Some expert interviews were conducted as group interviews or information exchanges.

Note on representativeness:

Our research aimed at reflecting the varied experiences about return and reintegration, so we tried to diversify the sample as much as possible with regards to age, gender, ethnic/ linguistic belonging, socioeconomic status, education level, and pre- and post-return occupation. Nevertheless, we do not make any claim to having a statistically representatives sample. Interviewees were partly accessed through serendipity, snowballing, collaboration with local researchers, and the support of humanitarian, training, and development organisations and agencies. Beside conducting in-depth interviews and random sampling, we made on-the-spot observations and engaged in talks with bystanders, including family members or friends present during the interview and background talks.

1. What does Return and Reintegration mean?

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines return migration as 'the movement of a person going from a host country back to a country of origin, country of nationality or habitual residence usually after spending a significant period in the host country' (IOM, 2019). Migration scholars conceptualise return migration as 'a part of the wider mobility process in which the migrants engage', as 'one dot in a non-linear course that may include multiple emigrations and return sections as well as remigration, whether to the same destination country or third countries' (Gemi & Triandafyllidou, 2021).

This is one of several definitional approaches to return migration and reintegration that reflect how concepts are multifaceted, heterogeneous and complex.

The ambiguity of the term return is reflected in the interviewees' statements:
'*I am not a returnee, I did not return. I have always continued to live my life the way I wanted*' (RA5, 23.6.19, Shkodra).
'*Yes, I consider myself a returnee. As a matter of fact, I do not know how to describe the term returnee, but I may say that I'm a person who experienced migration differently from one who hasn't been abroad. And that experience gave me more possibilities to start a new life*' (RA32, 2.6.21, Kavajë).
'*In the Kurdish language we do not use the term returnee, and creating an extra term is avoided because of its negative con-notation; it might be perceived negatively to call somebody a returnee*' (interview conducted by our research partner from Dohuk).

Our project defines *returnees or return migrants* as any person who has returned to the country of origin or place of origin and starts to re-establish a life there, regardless of intentions, migration types and degrees of voluntariness in the return process. This definition is used because:

\ many interviewed migrants do not identify themselves as returnees if they define their experience as 'voluntary', attach a negative connotation to the 'returnee' label, or consider it as a specific category only applied to beneficiaries of assisted voluntary return programmes and returns organised in the framework of readmission agreements. Moreover, returnees often find the term 'reintegration' inadequate to define their experiences;

\ some origin countries make their own distinctions about returns in their official terminology. For example, in Kosovo, 'returnees' are understood as people returning from war-induced displacement to neighbouring countries and 'repatriats' as people returning from EU countries, often in the context of readmission agreements. In contrast, Serbian political discourse mainly associates the term 'returnee' with returns 'under the readmission agreement'.

IOM defines *reintegration* as 'a process which enables individuals to re-establish the economic, social and psychosocial relationships needed to maintain life, livelihood and dignity and inclusion in civic life' (IOM, 2022).

However, the findings of this project offer a nuanced understanding of reintegration as:

\ the processes and experiences through which returning migrants re-establish or re-adjust themselves in the economic, social, and psycho-social spheres of their country origin. We also add political reintegration as an additional dimension.

Having achieved sustainable reintegration, returnees are able to make further migration decisions 'a matter of choice, rather than necessity' (IOM, 2022). The terminology of 'sustainability' entails some limitations because it is very policy-centric, dichotomous (sustainable/unsustainable) and linear, excluding other options such as remigration. It would be fair to call these programmes or categories only assisted returns and reintegration assistance schemes since voluntariness can be considered as imposed if there are no actual alternatives.[1]

The term has different meanings for stakeholders in relation to the service context:
'*Many actors in Senegal, Gambia and Ghana regard migration and return as a rite of passage and is something of a feature that has historically marked the region*'. Some, like Senegalese government officials, see return as part of a larger endeavour of the government to remain in touch with the diaspora and to foster its involvement in the development of the country (Rudolf, 2022)

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1 \ For detailed conceptual discussions, see the abstract of Şahin-Mencütek's article entitled 'Conceptual Complexity,' under review at the end of this *Report*. In our dissemination event, conducted in January 2023 in Berlin, our project team was informed by IOM representatives that they no longer use the term of 'voluntary' in their projects and exchanges because of its contested meaning.

2. What are the Dimensions of Reintegration?

Reintegration is a multi-dimensional process, having at least economic, social and psychosocial dimensions, if not more. In line with our empirical findings, we offer a complementary understanding of reintegration dimensions. We first treat all dimensions as closely interlinked. Second, we underline the importance of 1) access to livelihood options, 2) long-term aspirations and trajectories around individual life plans, 3) a sense of belonging, and 4) political context and governance structures in the place of origin for the reintegration experience. Lastly, we argue that the reintegration experience occurs at different paces and to different degrees in each dimension.

This means we approach reintegration dimensions in terms of the migrants' subjective experience of what happens after returning to their country of origin. The experience centres on (re)establishing or (re)adjusting the economic, social, emotional and civic lives of individuals and families as they seek to access livelihood options, equal rights and essential services in their places of return and to maintain a sense of belonging and relationships with the networks/communities of return in line with their agency, positionality and life trajectories.

Our focus in the reintegration process is not only on structural factors (political regimes, migration policies and programmes) but also on the interaction between structure and agency. We understand agency as 'the possible scope of action as a function of (a person's) … own capacities versus desires on the one hand and the external structural factors framing his or her everyday existence on the other' (Grawert & Mielke, 2018, p. 9). Such external factors range from legal, political and economic framework conditions and the security situation to immediate as well as translocal social dynamics, all either constraining or widening the scope of agency (Grawert & Mielke, 2018). The notion of agency allows it to analyse how an individual's status vis-à-vis these external conditions frames—but not determines—aspirations and opportunities over time (Vollmer, 2019). We also use the term of livelihood options to refer to a returnee's access to material goods (housing, income, land, assets, markets, social services, support, aid, and remittances) as well as to reciprocal or other relationships that contribute to making a living by individuals or collectives (mainly families). An individual's aspirations can be understood as people's own life scripts and desires, structured by foreseeable social obligations placed on family members and linked to one's social role(s) as well as to other constraining contextual factors of relevance to the way reintegration trajectories play out.

The Standard Definition of Reintegration and its Dimensions According to IOM

Reintegration is defined as

> *a process which enables individuals to secure and sustain the political, economic, social and psychosocial conditions needed to maintain life, livelihood and dignity in the country and community they return or are returned to, in full respect of their civil, political economic, social and cultural rights. This should include targeted measures that enable returning migrants to have access to justice, social protection, financial services, health care, education, family life, an adequate standard of living, decent work, and protection against discrimination, stigma, arbitrary detention and all forms of violence, and that allows returnees to consider that they are in an environment of personal safety, economic empowerment, inclusion and social cohesion upon return.*

Economic reintegration refers to gaining economic self-sufficiency of returnees. It covers aspects related to *'the source of income, the reliability and adequacy of employment or income generating activity, the debt-to-spending ratio, food security and the self-assessment of economic situation satisfaction'.*

'The social dimension reflects the extent to which returnees have reached social stability within the community" to which they return. It also encompasses an institutional dimension that includes "access to basic services and infrastructures relating to housing, education, justice, health, and other public services'.*

'Psychosocial reintegration is the reinsertion of a returning migrant into personal support networks (friends, relatives, neighbours) and civil society structures (associations, self-help groups and other organisations). This also includes the re-engagement with the values, mores, way of living, language, moral principles, ideology, and traditions of the country of origin's society' (United Nations Network on Migration, 2021, p. 2).

3. Selected Findings

From our analysis across the case studies (Iraq, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia, Ghana, the Gambia and Senegal) we have made ten observations. We shall discuss them in the following sections, adding substance and nuance to each one. It is important to note here that although our data is rich in variety, the sample is not representative (as noted in the data collection section). Furthermore, context matters and can limit generalisability, especially regarding recommendations. Figure 2 illustrates the core of our arguments about the dynamics of reintegration.

Figure 2: Dynamics of Reintegration
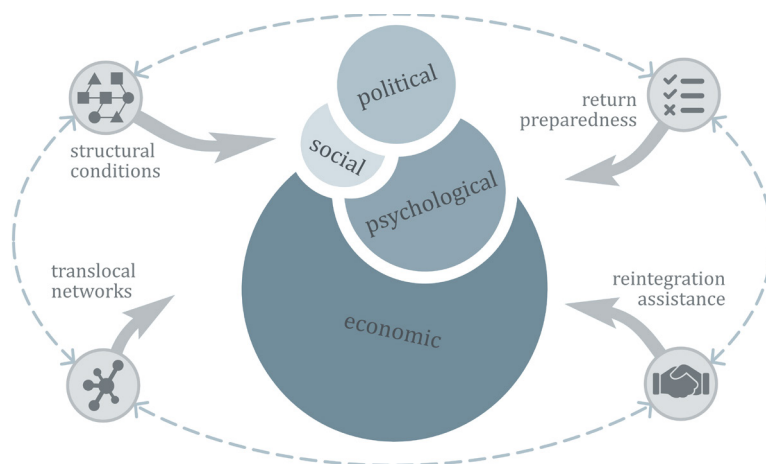
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3.1 Political Context(s) and Governance Matter for Understanding Return and Reintegration Policies, Experiences and Practices

Diverse agendas of destination countries, origin countries, developmental and humanitarian organisations, and local implementing actors drive their institutional policies and programmes on return and reintegration[2]—not the aspirations and long-term needs of returnees themselves.

Destination countries aim to increase the number of departures of immigrants, in particular rejected asylum-seekers and migrants without legal permission to stay (called irregular migrants in the policy terminology). Return policies, above all in the form of readmission agreements and assisted return programmes, have become an important instrument of national, regional (EU level) and international migration governance.

The overemphasis on, and considerable funding for, return and reintegration by the destination countries of Europe and implementing agencies can generate some benefits by meeting returnees' needs in the reintegration process. The involvement in these services of state and non-state agencies in the origin countries is driven by several motivations, such as supporting their returning citizens, easing their reintegration, extracting revenues from external funding, and maintaining good relations with the returning country. Origin country governments may sign readmission agreements, make bilateral return arrangements and cooperate with external development agencies for reintegration assistance. Yet these measures may not fit the mobility aspirations of the people concerned nor align with national political and economic priorities or the needs and trajectories of communities.

2 \ For further discussion on the governance of reintegration across countries and an exchange with academics working on the similar questions, I have proposed that a workshop be held at the IMISCOE 2023 Annual Conference. Please see the workshop proposal at the end of this *Report*.

Origin countries in West Africa, Western Balkans and the Middle East are often less interested in facilitating the returns of migrants. The issue is even more controversial than it is in the destination countries because of mobility dynamics in the origin countries and the implications of returns.

\ These countries and regions have been part of pre-existing and current migration networks. They have a dynamic tradition of voluntary and forced outward migration due to the mix of conflict-induced displacement, political oppression, widespread poverty, and the search for better livelihood opportunities.

\ These countries are often not only countries of origin but simultaneously serve as the countries of destination for forced displacements, asylum migration, irregular migration, labour migration, seasonal work, and trade and transit movements.

\ The preferred destination of many migrants from these countries is, apart from countries in the immediate neighbourhood of their region, above all Western Europe (EU member states, United Kingdom and Switzerland). They have a sizeable diaspora population in Western Europe.

The return issue has crucial political, economic and social implications in the origin countries:

\ There is a high per capita emigration ratio and dependence on remittances in the national economy in a number of countries (except Iraq).

\ Migration is an essential livelihood option
because of structural challenges such as, above all, poverty, low salaries, high unemployment rates, and a lack of production capacity.

\ Migration can also be seen as a political statement, i.e. a reaction to political repression, discrimination, clientelist politics, and corruption, factors that limit the scope for origin country citizens to realise their life aspirations (particularly in Iraq and Albania).

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The origin countries are characterised not only by high migration potential (intentions to migrate) but also transnational connectedness, since there is a strong history of family members and friends previously migrating. Migration is therefore, a pervasive issue in national politics, as well as in the everyday lives of local communities.

Return and reintegration is a field of complex, indeed messy, governance because of the involvement of multiple actors with different authorities and agendas, operating at different levels (regional, national, local, etc.) and through various short-term programmes. This makes it difficult to manage this 'sector', and ensure effective coordination and cooperation among the multiple actors – ranging from the host and home governments to the UN agencies, mainly IOM and UNHCR, and from sub-nation-state actors, such as law enforcement forces and local administrations to national and transnational development agencies, as well as return counsellors and other private or institutional actors. Locally run civil society organisations (CSOs) in the origin countries are also increasingly involved in governing returning migrants as implementers in post-return processes. Moreover, the activities and performance of these multiple organisations are shaped by other national and local governance fields (security, economic, social and political governance).

Circular migration is a typical pattern in Western Africa and Western Balkans, exemplified by temporal and permanent mobility pathways, such as from West Africa to Libya, and from the Balkans (especially Albania, BiH and Serbia) to Germany, Greece, Italy and other countries. A transnational network of livelihoods created through these pathways should not be overlooked when designing return policies because they are an essential part of the resilience strategies of people dealing with economic and social challenges back in their origin country. Regardless of policy interventions, these, often informal, networks will re-emerge or continue to exist as migrants undertake irregular journeys, given that there are no or very limited/selective safe and legal migration options.

3.2 Return Preparedness is Vital to the Smoothness of Return Processes and Reintegration Experiences

It is worthwhile to briefly map the drivers of returns as we lay the ground for discussing preparedness. The most common reasons for returns are related to the legal obstacles, such as the rejection of asylum applications, the lack of any legal opportunity to stay or work in the destination country of migration and the loss of any prospects of gaining a regularised status.
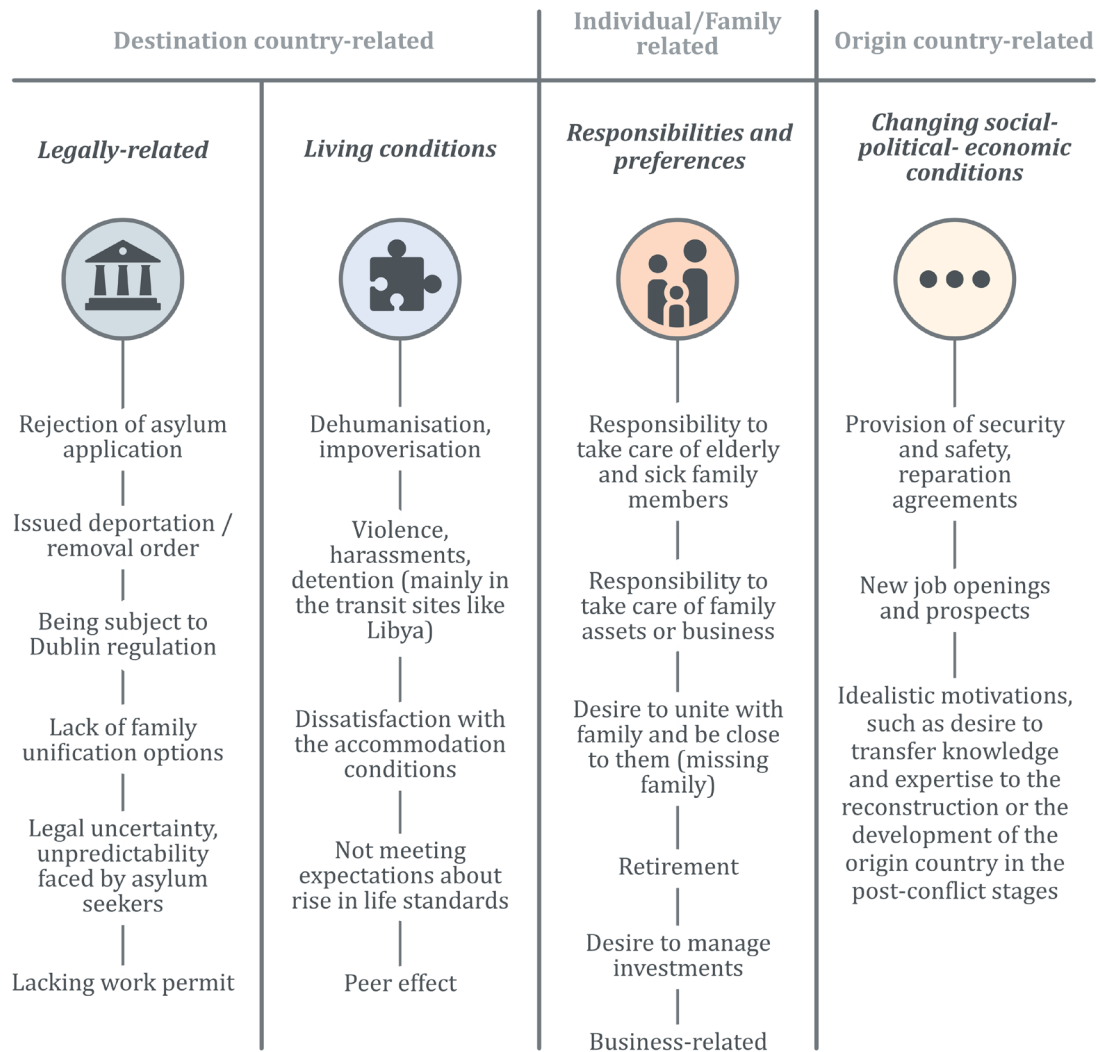
Some migrants also decide to return for purely economic reasons (especially unemployment and underemployment), due to familial responsibilities (e.g. caring of elderly parents or children), and in response to integration difficulties in the host society and its social life. Returns are also motivated by individual aspirations to contribute to the reconstruction of a country of origin, by the realisation that life and conditions in the destination countries is worse than expected, or by health-related reasons.

Return preparedness entails two aspects: individual and institutional return preparedness (Kandilige & Adiku, 2020). Individual preparedness relates to people's willingness and readiness to return, the mobilisation of tangible and intangible resources, and social capital. Institutional preparedness refers to the readiness of state and non-state institutions to assist the arrival and reintegration of unprepared or badly prepared returning migrants, sometimes returning in large numbers, and to the level of coordination among these stakeholders. It also includes the families of returning migrants as potential stakeholders and providers of reintegration assistance.

Returnees may have mixed experiences of return preparedness. Benefiting from assisted voluntary return and reintegration programmes does not indicate that the individuals themselves have prepared for a return. In our sample, most assisted returnees were migrants with low or no aspirations to return and many did not have access to reliable sources of information before return and reintegration.

 The legally mandated returns, such as deportations, are characterised by relatively low levels of individual return preparedness because these migrants have no options to act or decide for themselves. Their experience is often traumatic (see Mencutek, 2022a). The labelling of return assistance schemes as 'voluntary' does not correspond with the returnees' own experiences and perceptions. So-called assisted voluntary returns are hardly based on free choice, on people's mindful and deliberate preparation, indeed on real voluntariness. The rhetorical adherence to 'voluntary returns' leaves returnees ill-prepared to deal with psychological and mental stress and their unwillingness/inability to reintegrate. It is also the case that formal assistance may be a necessary but not sufficient component of smoother reintegration processes if it is not complemented by other elements such as the support of families and other social networks.

Figure 3: Common Reasons of Return

Destination country-related		Individual/Family related	Origin country-related
Legally-related	*Living conditions*	*Responsibilities and preferences*	*Changing social- political- economic conditions*
Rejection of asylum application	Dehumanisation, impoverisation	Responsibility to take care of elderly and sick family members	Provision of security and safety, reparation agreements
Issued deportation / removal order	Violence, harassments, detention (mainly in the transit sites like Libya)	Responsibility to take care of family assets or business	New job openings and prospects
Being subject to Dublin regulation	Dissatisfaction with the accommodation conditions	Desire to unite with family and be close to them (missing family)	Idealistic motivations, such as desire to transfer knowledge and expertise to the reconstruction or the development of the origin country in the post-conflict stages
Lack of family unification options	Not meeting expectations about rise in life standards	Retirement	
Legal uncertainty, unpredictability faced by asylum seekers	Peer effect	Desire to manage investments	
Lacking work permit		Business-related	

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Returns during or after armed conflict present additional challenges to individual and institutional return preparedness due to issues of security, safety and access to housing, land and property rights in the context of conflict on the disputed territories and power-sharing tensions (e.g. returns to Syria, northern Iraq, and Bosnia and Herzegovina).[3]

Migrants with higher socio-economic status, permanent residency status in the destination country, returnees of the guest worker generation, and migrated students are individually better prepared to return, accumulate resources (social and material) and aspire more often to return permanently.

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3 \ For Iraq, see https://www.bicc.de/publications/publicationpage/publication/reintegration-in-northern-iraq-the-time-is-now-for-europe-to-act-1018/. For Syria, see Mencutek, 2022b).

The majority of legally mandated returnees in Balkan countries accepted voluntary return out of fear: '*I had heard from other Albanians who didn't agree to leave voluntarily that the German police went to their house and took everything, confiscated their money*' (RA91, 13.12.21, Nishtulla). Some said they returned '*to save their children from a potentially traumatising experience*' (Vollmer, 2023), and some had been directly pressured into accepting 'voluntary return'. Quite a number of those who eventually got deported were unclear about their situation beforehand and had not consciously decided against an offer of assisted return.

Policy lesson: Destination countries need to provide reliable, correct and fully-fledged information about return processes and conditions in the origin country—both at the institutional and the individual level—to promote return preparedness. To increase the preparedness of organisations assisting reintegration in the origin countries, destination countries need to ensure transparent and comprehensive communication about the different types and conditions of return. The situation of forcibly returned and unprepared migrants often requires different and more intense support. To ensure that this can be provided, local organisations need to be comprehensively informed, prepared and—if required—trained. Also, implementing actors in origin country can benefit from better equipment and coordination to meet the needs of returnees, their families and return communities.

3.3 Most Migrants Return Without going through Formal Return and Reintegration Assistance Programmes

This *Report* addresses the outcomes of IOM-administered assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) as well as national reintegration assistance programmes developed by destination and origin countries. The latter include Reintegration and Emigration for Asylum Seekers in Germany / Government Assisted Reintegration Programme (under the Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI) or the 'Returning to New Opportunities' scheme under the Federal Ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation (BMZ).

Our findings show that:

\ the variety of programme providers means there are no global estimates of return and reintegration assistance flows. It is known that most migrants return without formal assistance, but there are also no reliable figures for comparing migrants returning with or without assistance;

\ many returns occur below the radar of national and international organisations. Non-representative surveys with focus groups in Gambia, Ghana and Senegal have shown that probably less than one out of three cases received any formal assistance;

\ rejected asylum-seekers and those applicants who are unlikely to get asylum seem to form the majority of assistance beneficiaries from Germany (also those from Greece, the United Kingdom and Sweden);

\ beneficiaries learn about the programme in the reception centre, some through friends and other asylum-seekers, and some through the media, while others only find out through their rejection letters.

A brief overview of assisted return and reintegration schemes

IOM coordinated schemes: Assisted voluntary return (AVR) has been a component of European countries' migration management policies for a while. They first started in 1979, but only became popular in the 1990s. They target 'migrants who do not have grounds to remain' and 'migrants who wish to return' (OECD, 2020, p. 10). They have been upgraded to Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes due to the realisation by policymakers that the 'feasibility and legitimacy of return policies and practices depend on the sustainable reintegration of individual returnees'. They are also advocated on the grounds that they

contribute to 'inclusion, development and reduction in migration out of desperation' (Kueschminder, 2017, pp. 107-121). IOM has a long history and extensive experience of implementing AVR-AVRR programmes in all regions of the world.

While the AVR programmes mainly aim to incentivise the return of migrants, especially those staying in the destination country without a legal residence permit or invalid documentation (e.g. undocumented migrants, rejected asylum-seekers), AVRR programmes also aim to support these returnees' reintegration into the country of origin. AVR-AVRR programmes are officially favoured over forced removals in EU policies, being perceived as politically and normatively less controversial and less costly. Diplomatically, they are also preferable because they better 'protect relations with origin countries', and are coherent with development objectives, while meeting national and international obligations (OECD, 2020, p. 10). They seem cost-effective because they save 'costs of detention, escort and other removal measures, but also address public concerns over forced removals, providing a safer and more dignified alternative to such returns' (OECD, 2020, p. 14).

Why did the Beneficiaries Interviewed Apply for or Accept Return and Reintegration Assistance?

\ responding to a lack of acceptable alternatives to returning (i.e. legal requirements due to the rejection of asylum; the threat of an entry ban or implementation of Dublin Regulation);
\ avoiding the distress and indignity of forced removal, often for families with children; ensuring return in an orderly and well-organised manner;
\ abiding by an 'order to leave' and avoiding further legal problems in the destination country;
\ having prior plans to return; benefiting from assistance as a way of decreasing return (cost of migration); wanting to save money.

©Ruth Vollmer \ BICC. Visit to DIMAK office, Kosovo

Destination country coordinated programmes: Some countries, particularly those of destination countries in Europe (Germany, Austria, the United Kingdom[4], Norway and the Netherlands[5]) have also developed their own national/federal return and reintegration assistance programmes. These programmes depend on the respective funding and policy agenda of national governments.[6] They are run by agencies responsible for development and international cooperation[7] or by interior ministries[8]. They are executed in the origin countries by funding national partner organisations, including ministries, labour and employment agencies, advisory centres and branch offices for reintegration and return, and local NGOs. They operate under different donors and funding cycles, with different aims, approaches, structures, target groups and geographical coverage. There are also differing levels of national ownership and coordination, and varying access to transnational information sharing. Box 1 and 2 below give an idea of Germany's return and reintegration arrangements.

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4 \ The United Kingdom has run the Voluntary Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) since 2008; the Assisted Voluntary Return of Irregular Migrants (AVRIM) since 2009, and the Assisted Voluntary Return of Families with Children (AVRFC) since 2010.

5 \ The Return and Emigration Assistance from the Netherlands (REAN) has been active since 1991.

6 \ In Kosovo, the Nuremberg office of the German charity AWO (Workers' Welfare) receives funding from the state of Bavaria.

7 \ The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) set up the Programme 'Returning to new Opportunities / Perspektive Heimat' in 2017, operating in 13 countries, among them Kosovo and Albania.

8 \ In 2007, the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), which works under the auspices of the German Ministry of the Interior (BMI), initiated a multi-stakeholder reintegration project in Kosovo.

Box 1: Examples from German Return and Reintegration Assistance Programmes

Germany's Federal Government introduced the StarthilfePlus return assistance programme in 2017. The StarthilfePlus programme is designed to support—particularly financially—the voluntary return of persons obliged to leave the country as well as persons with very low chances of success in the asylum procedure (Schmitt, Bitterwolf & Baraulina, 2019). The BAMF Research Center and IOM accompany the programme as part of a multi-year scientific research project. The scope of the support given to returnees varies according to nationality and residence status and is structured in stages (Deutscher Bundestag, 2018).
Covering the period 2017-2023, the 'Migration for Development' Programme (PME) is commissioned by German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). It supports vocational training in Germany and advisory services for returnees, making it easier for them to start afresh in their countries of origin. In Germany, the programme works with selected executing organisations to offer returnees vocational training measures. In addition to the services provided by the advisory centres, there are also 'reintegration scouts' who provide information about opportunities available in the countries of origin. Together with national partner institutions, the programme runs advisory centres for jobs, migration and reintegration in twelve countries of origin. These centres are designed to cater not only for returnees from Germany and third countries but also assist internally displaced people and local communities. They provide advice on social and employment prospects in the country in question and offer training courses, vocational skills development and psychosocial support services, so that people can improve their prospects on the job market.[1]

[1] See https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/62318.html

Box 2: Pre-departure Counselling becomes a Popular Tool for Implementing Assisted Return and Reintegration Programmes

The 2021 EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration underlines the importance of pre-return, tailor-made counselling for reintegration. European governments, including Germany, assume that return counselling can play a crucial role for the implementation of "assisted return and reintegration programmes" as counsellors may influence the decision-making of migrants, helping them to familiarise themselves with the opportunities and challenges that await them in an origin country and to receive potential support for re-establishing their lives. Despite ongoing efforts in various federal states (Länder) in Germany, a number of structural problems – not least fragmented legal frameworks, insufficient resources and coordination problems among relevant stakeholders in the migrants' destination and origin countries – are proving an obstacle to high-quality counselling. Also, a closer look at current practices shows that counselling efforts often fail to respond to migrants' individual needs and the complex characteristics of receiving communities. There is also a failure to manage returnee expectations in the process. We observed that many of the unassisted returnees lacked information on support programmes and had no access to, or considered themselves not eligible for, return and reintegration support. There is still lack of consensus about the impact of different counselling models/techniques (e.g. reintegration scouts, decelerating-benefits models, training courses and motivational interview techniques) being used and which are most 'effective' towards what end and for whom. However, the German model of reintegration scouts, which serve as a de-facto link between return counsellors and the GIZ coordinated centres in the origin countries, do seem to complement cooperation and coordination across a fragmented return/reintegration field.

3.4 The Impact of Assistance Programmes on Reintegration Remains Limited

Return and reintegration assistance schemes are helpful in the early periods upon return. Especially for the most vulnerable, assistance upon return may provide support in terms of access to accommodation and income-generating activities as well as assistance with obtaining the valid documents needed to enjoy rights and access to essential public services.

In some contexts, free legal counselling and support with bureaucratic procedures is highly effective, since it is a prerequisite for registering and accessing public services in many cases.

Reintegration programmes benefiting children (e.g. language courses, school support, creation of children-friendly, 'safe' spaces are often found useful.

Although the availability of assistance seems to be insufficient to make people opt for a return, in the case of migrants legally obliged to return or already considering a return, reintegration assistance is perceived by most as 'better than nothing', as an additional benefit and a way to reduce the cost of migration.

Some returnees benefit from return assistance in relation to practicalities of return such as the provision of flight tickets. In some contexts, respondents told us that they did not receive or were not informed about any sort of reintegration assistance (cash, in-kind help, housing assistance, legal counselling, start-up support, psychosocial counselling, mentoring or community engagement).

Vocational training seems to benefit returnees. Returnees have mainly shown interest in schemes offering immediate income-generating options. They prefer training that may lead to start-up jobs and fast engagement in local market activities.

There are several factors limiting the broader and long-term effects of return and reintegration assistance programmes. A common problem concerns the differing approaches and conflicts of interest between destination and origin countries (including local NGO and municipal implementers), which creates policy incoherencies, coordination problems and gaps between objectives and outcomes. The authorities in the origin country are often insufficiently equipped or prepared for reintegrating returnees, mainly due to the deep-seated problems they have with employment, market mechanisms, infrastructures, and social and public services.

The impact of reintegration assistance is highly context-specific, hence the programmes may require adjustment to the context. For concrete recommendations, see two *Policy Briefs* about Iraq and Ghana written by the researchers of this project.

Policy lesson: The lengthy bureaucratic processes involved in reintegration assistance programmes are one of the biggest challenges and sources of frustrations for beneficiaries in some contexts. The high level of formality involved in these programmes disregards the fact that the local context is in many ways so fundamentally different from contexts in the European Union. Making the application process easier could remove a significant barrier for those with no other form of support to return. The continuity of personnel in return and reintegration programmes – in other words, low turnover – is also critical for building trust with returnees and ensuring returnees' access to assistance programmes implemented by local or international NGOs.

Policy lesson: Programme evaluation and monitoring is essential to understand what works and does not work in the field. To ensure that reintegration assistance programmes are evidence-based, systematic monitoring of these programmes is necessary.

Figure 2: Return and Reintegration Assistance Types

Assistance pre/ during return	Economic			Psychosocial	Social	Political and Legal
	basic needs	*livelihoods*	*accomodation*			
Prepatory reintegration training in the destination country	Cash support	Entrepreneurship / start-up support, business plan counselling	Temporary shelter or reception centers	Psychosocial counselling / care	Engagement to combat prejudice against returnees	Legal counselling
Provision of travel documentation and transportation cost (e.g. flight tickets)	Inland transports from airport	Vocational training	Payment of initial rents	Refer unaccompanied children to professional care institutions	Socio-economic orientation courses	Support in applying identity papers and birth certification
	In-kind assistance (food or hygiene packages)	Cash grants, loans, provision of job equipments for businesses	Housing reconstruction assistance		Support measures for children and youth (e.g. daycare)	
	Medical assistance	Job placement, internships			Educational support services (e.g. school enrollment, tutoring, provision of school materials, language courses)	
		Wage subsidies or salary top-ups for highly skilled returnees				

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3.5 Returnees encounter many Structural Challenges that Impede Access to Stable and Adequate Livelihood Options and thus Economic Reintegration

Challenges for economic reintegration are mainly related to the macrostructural factors, including high wage differentials between destination and origin countries, harsh economic conditions, lack of job opportunities, high unemployment rates, lack of proper unemployment benefits, low production capacities, large informal sectors, and exploitation risks in the labour markets of the origin countries. Besides structural factors, discrimination of marginalised groups and minorities might also hamper economic reintegration.

> Multiple structural problems make reintegration almost impossible: A rejected asylum-seeker who returned from Germany in 2016 describes her and her family's situation:
> *We didn't have any money to repair our house, which is badly damaged, nor to pay the bills to reconnect energy and water, which was cut off while we were in Germany because we hadn't paid the bills. I started to work in the same tailoring factory like before I left, on the same salary. But [...] my daughter has health problems, so after some months I had to quit my job and I worked as a cleaning lady for three years. [...]. My husband? One day he works, the other he doesn't, there is no stable income from him. Every month we need money for my daughter's medications that cost a fortune, and often I cannot afford them. There are also the costs for school materials, but the most important thing is to put food on the table* (Vollmer, 2023).

Infrastructural problems are frequently observed in housing, education, health, and social public service fields. Even if the migrant returns and commits to reintegrating, these same drivers of migration can be detrimental to reintegration and incentivise remigration, often out of responsibility for the family.

Post-return livelihood options are also shaped by returnees' assets, including skills, savings, property and migration journey-related debts. The work experience acquired before and during migration plays a significant and positive role in reintegration, particularly in the case of labour migrants and retired persons. Many migrants, even those with high return aspirations, are often unable to find conducive conditions for accumulating human or financial capital. Some find it challenging to transfer resources, including social remittances, into the country-of-origin context.

Reintegration assistance is mainly focused on the economic field. Training and start-up business aid for self-employment as well as job placement measures are popular assistance mechanisms for helping returnees to find livelihood opportunities. Yet they only impact returnees' livelihoods to a slight extent:

\ For training, one difficulty is the lack of prequalification and self-confidence among the most vulnerable returnees. Moreover, training courses are often not conducted in the relevant foreign language or draw on other skills gathered abroad. Regarding short-term training, e.g. for work in the beauty business, respondents often reported a lack of customers/demand after completion of the training.

> One returnee beneficiary who established a business in Fushe, Kosovo, said: *'(The organisation) helped me with 700 euros worth of tools and equipment'; 'At the same time, I had to generate 10,000 euros from my own savings and from friends and relatives to set this business up. To be honest, I expected more from reintegration assistance.' 'I love my work; it is exactly what I want to do. But I'm completely new here, like from Mars, people don't know me, and there are already so many businesses offering similar services in this area'.* He added that for the time being he often sleeps in his business premises to save the drive back and forth and is happy if his balance is zero at the end of the month (interview conducted by Ruth Vollmer).

The loans offered to returnees for starting-up jobs create certain challenges for their beneficiaries. One returnee in Ghana said: *'We took up loans. [But] the business plans have been developed without knowing about the rising prices. Now only those with capital are able to manage' (female migrant, GHMR28, 15.9.2022).* A rather successful entrepreneur in Kumasi, who managed to build up a metal workshop added that he had paid 25% interest, which *"nearly broke my neck, and I will never take up a loan again' (male migrant, GHHR21/MR, 23.9.2022).*

\ Start-up assistance for self-employment was found to be unsustainable for returnee beneficiaries over the long term, except in the cases where beneficiaries had already worked in the same sector before migration, such as in construction, and where they work in more than one job simultaneously. Business start-ups are often short-lived due to inadequate finances, management and marketable skills. When returnees add their own resources and capital to the assistance schemes there is more likelihood of survival and sustainability of the self-employment options.

\ Where job equipment has been given to returnees it is not unusual for it to deteriorate either because of inadequate maintenance or because the beneficiary does not have their own place, has no money to rent anything, and lives too far away from the reintegration assistance service providers.

One returnee from Iraq spoke of only small cash-handouts with short-term effects: *'There was an organisation in Sulemaniya that helped me with US $500 only before I found a job. I forgot the name of the organisation. The money was a little helpful for a month or two for me to go around and look for work, but it was not life-changing. Nevertheless, I welcomed the money and it was very good because I didn't have to ask my family and friends for money. This would have been very shameful for someone who has returned from Europe'* (Mielke, 2023; T9).

Policy lesson: The impact of individual-level economic assistance is mixed or somewhat limited, especially in the mid- to long-run. Strong links with bilateral development cooperation and targeted capacity building for local state institutions to improve inclusive public service provision can enhance any benefits.

Policy lesson: Adverse economic conditions in origin countries invite policymakers to explore new ways of creating sustainable community-based economic development models and longer-term investments, innovative partnerships and individual short-term reintegration assistance models.

3.6 Networks are Vital for all Dimensions of Reintegration

The existence and quality of returnees' networks (e.g. family, peers, friends, neighbours and professional networks) are essential for reintegration because of the absence of formal protection mechanisms and the high levels of economic insecurity in the countries and communities of return. Returnees who find themselves in places where family and business networks have dissolved, e.g. due to forced displacement, or where previous networks have become unavailable to them due to major changes in their life situation (e.g. having divorced or become a victim of trafficking) often experience very challenging reintegration trajectories.

Family-kinship networks are significant providers of reintegration assistance. They play an essential role in the immediate aftermath of return, particularly in terms of finding accommodation and receiving financial and emotional support, where possible, as well as accessing livelihood opportunities, public services and institutions.

The potential contribution of family networks should also be regarded with a degree of caution in view of the limited capacities of families and the reciprocity-based logic at work in kinship relations. According to some interviewees in West Africa, for instance, families were found to be the cause of investment failures, as the remittances sent back home had been mismanaged, lost, used up on daily expenses or spent on supporting the migration of others family members. In the Balkan examples, some interviewees mentioned the incapacity of families to meet the needs of returning family members. Moreover, conflicts among family members may have been the reason for leaving for the first time, present significant obstacles to return, and drive trajectories to remigrate.

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(Trans-)local professional networks seem to foster socio-economic reintegration in specific contexts and sectors. For example, researchers in Gambia encountered various persons who had been working in the security, military or police sector who managed to reintegrate into their networks. In Serbia, some returnees were able to be employed by a foreign company upon return. In general, many highly skilled returnees can economically reintegrate (find a job, engage in entrepreneurial activity, work for international organisations), but the benefits of these jobs often remain below their expectations. Returnees' access to professional networks is often blocked by clientelism and patronage systems.

Returnees' positionality in and access to networks is shaped not only by their own skills, acts and material resources but also by how they are disadvantaged or privileged by different identity factors: gender, age, religion, ethnicity/minority status, political networks, belonging and others:

\ Returns may put an economic strain on the returnee families who have relied on remittances as the primary source of livelihood. Returns may trigger household conflicts or a renegotiating of gender identities, roles and norms, particularly in regions where the reliance on remittances is high, like Western Africa. However, our findings, although not representative, do not indicate significant tensions caused by competition for resources between returnees and non-migrants at the community level.

\ In the case of Roma returnees in the Balkans, discrimination heavily impacts their access to the labour market. Unemployment often accompanies other challenges, such as returning to settlements with below-average infrastructure, characterised mainly by poor housing conditions and inadequate access to water and electricity.

Policy lesson: Development agencies can support the formation and sustainability of trans(local) professional networks through knowledge exchanges, training and capacity building. Such networks might partially contribute to widening the livelihood opportunities at the post-return stage and improve information flows in the pre-return stages.

3.7 Social Aspects of Reintegration and its Impact on Social Change are Ambiguous and Community-specific, while also Intersecting with Economic and Psychological Reintegration

A stigma may be attached to a perceived failed migration in some receiving communities. Such a stigma may be another factor that makes post-return reintegration more challenging. Returnees face the risk of being considered a burden for their families. The economic loss, including debts taken for financing the onward migration, often aggravates the situation.

In Albania and Kosovo, findings illustrate that 'people who did not choose to return' are accepted back by families and their social environment more or less without a comment; those who had a choice and decided to return have a lot of explaining to do, to the extent that some feel harassed by questions as to why they came back, when they will leave again, and what went wrong.

In Iraq, responses towards returned migrants are mixed. How returnees are accepted back into their families and the community depends on the circumstances and framing of the return, i.e. the reasons that are communicated. If, for example, a son has returned to support his mother after the passing of the family head, he is praised for his decency. Since remitting and enabling the survival of whole families from abroad is not a main motivation of migrants from (northern) Iraq, returnees are usually welcomed back at the family level and receive moral and emotional support in any case.

In West Africa, our findings are ambiguous:
Sudden and unplanned returns often cause a considerable loss of respect for returnees among their close relatives. This is mostly because the remittances had substantially improved the lives of extended families back home'. Migration gains prominence as a valid solution strategy to counter a lack of prospects: 'Every family wants to have someone abroad as this heightens the status of family (Rudolf, 2022, p.31)

There is some correlation between migrants' returns and social change in the origin countries. However, unlike the correlation expected by development agencies, migrant returns contribute less than expected. Anghel and Fauser (2019) differentiate between three dimensions through which social change can be traced, namely social hierarchies, collective identities and cultural capital. From this approach we can offer some tentative insights:

'The best way to describe my entire experience is as leaving hell, somehow making it to heaven and then returning to hell, again. That's how I would describe it. [...] There is absolutely no future here, particularly for the children' (Schmitz- Pranghe, 2023).
A single mother who returned to Kosovo through assisted, legally mandated return describes the first phase after return with the following words: *'Very hard to digest to be honest. My life here was a mess, I did not have a safe place to stay. And it was even more difficult for my children, who within a few years abroad had completely adapted to the new environment and did not speak the language here that well'* (RK3, 4.12.21, Pristina).

\ Retired returnees who, having stayed in the country of migration for a long time, tend to experience more upward social mobility upon return than others. For returnees with cyclical migration and often irregular work experiences abroad, their status in the social hierarchies did not substantially change due to migration. In some cases, such as Roma returnees in Serbia, livelihoods remained precarious or even deteriorated after return. Those who experienced an improvement of their socioeconomic position due to possibilities to work abroad or remittances experienced certain rise in the social hierarchy which—however—seems to take place rather within their communities than in the overall society.

\ Regarding the impact of return on collective identities, our data does not allow generalised conclusions. While formal or non-formal diaspora initiatives can be found in many cases, mobilisation for returnee-specific interest is rare. An exception is Bosnia and Herzegovina. Returnee associations that had formed during exile and upon return by returnees themselves have been ascribed a tremendous role for community construction and social capital, facilitating return and reintegration after the war in terms of information exchange, the promotion of returnee right and interests, and operate as partners for the reintegration projects of the international community (Porobič, 2016). Today, local returnee associations are less visible and appear as rather short-lived groups of interest with more-or-less project-based agendas (Schmitz-Pranghe, 2023, p. 23).

\ Regarding social capital, returnees often seem to have rather limited opportunities and lack resources for transferring new attitudes and ideas that might bring changes to businesses and organisations. The transfer of social capital is hindered by structural and individual impediments (e.g. deskilling during migration, blocked access to clientelist networks upon return). In a few cases, returnees at least use names and symbols from the migration country to advertise their new business.

Policy lesson: There is an interlinkage between the economic and social aspects of reintegration. Due to the social pressure, stigma and high expectations on the part of extended family members, returnees are particularly interested in the direct revenue-generating and short-term training offered by some reintegration programmes (particularly in Western Africa). As the return might mean the loss of future remittances for the receiving communities, reintegration assistance should seek to create community-based development programmes.

Policy lesson: While reintegration assistance cannot promptly influence the conditions under which people feel well and belong, the provision of open spaces for meetings, training courses, youth activities and recreation has offered relief for some returnees who otherwise lack opportunities for psychosocial reintegration.

Policy lesson: International students were found to benefit most consistently from their migration experience upon return. More scholarship prograames can help to make this pathway accessible to more students, including otherwise disadvantaged persons. There is also massive potential in transnationally coordinating vocational training programmes.

3.8 Psychological well-being after Return is closely related to Experiences gained in the Return Processes

The psychological implications of legally mandated returns and deportations are immense. Many forced returnees had gone through trauma before, during and after returns. These traumas worsen if returns do not fit with the migrants' own trajectories when they have not been given the opportunity or option to complete migration projects. The level of return preparedness is deficient in forced return processes. Even though individuals or families accept 'voluntary return' schemes due to the lack of other options, they still refer repeatedly to their experience as 'deportation', taking the view that none of their migration-related objectives were realised.

'For four years in a row we were under terrible stress, wondering all the time, worrying if somebody would come to get us, to kick us out' (Schmitz-Pranghe, 2023).

Assisted return of people with mental disorders, chronic illnesses and disabilities, as well as single mothers and the elderly with specific needs, have increasingly been observed in the Balkans according to the practitioners. Families, friends and the local community often provide moral and emotional support to returnees. Only a few respondents in the Balkans mentioned the psychological support provided by local NGOs active in the reintegration field. As for West Africa or Iraq, here too almost no returnee referred to the availability of proper psychological support. This can be attributed both the scarcity of such support schemes and the other overwhelming survival challenges facing migrants, particularly in trying to access livelihood option.

People belonging to groups with no support network and who are perceived as socially different (e.g. LGTBQ+, single mothers and ethnic minority members) reported low levels of belonging to the returned community, lack of well-being and growing disappointment and stress in the readjustment process. Some also encounter social isolation, poverty and abuse (including domestic violence)

A trauma therapist working with returned migrants in Kosovo states: *'The actual deportation is only one small piece in the puzzle that they are dealing with; the much bigger issue is having to accept that their life plans have been turned around by 180 degrees' (KP14, 18.11.21, Mitrovica).* Regarding assisted returns, a reintegration advisor in Pristina states: *'What is most difficult to see is how much they have invested in their migration. The return destroys them. In most cases there is no return intention but an urgent wish to remigrate' (KP4, 8.11.21, Pristina).*

Policy lesson: Implementers should be aware of the traumatising impact of forced returns, particularly deportation, and traumatising events during migration on returning migrants. Indeed, as many return processes are associated with failure, traumatisation is also commonly observed within the group of non-deported.

Policy lesson: Access of returnees to continuous and quality health care services should be given more attention to as a part of the reintegration process. In practice, health care is often only partially free, unavailable, or there are informal obstacles to accessing it in many origin countries. Although service providers are aware of the problem, there is still a need for support for returnees in this sphere.

3.9 The Political Conditions and Governance Structures in an Origin Country shape the Reintegration Experience of Returnees

A sense of safety and security is essential for reintegration. The presence of persisting ethnic divisions, unsolved tensions and armed groups (illegitimate power-holders) make reintegration difficult.

Returnees' access to rights and public services (enjoying citizenship rights), political participation and engagement, and governance performance assessments are essential:

\ Although readmission of persons without valid papers seldom occurs in most contexts, such practices are found in some origin countries. It is not generalisable, but an important finding in the case of Serbia and BiH is that statelessness at the time of deportation and lacking birth certificates and proper ID is a severe challenge for returnees' reintegration, making them extremely vulnerable. These returnees experience legal invisibility and have severe difficulties in accessing basic rights and services in the origin country, such as free public health care, public child support, employment agencies services or municipal assistance. Deportations of returnees lacking identity papers are noticeable in both countries and facilitated by the practice of issuing laissez-passer documents. Kosovo does not, but still has war refugees returning from neighbouring countries who lack documentation.

The institutional barriers to reintegration most referred to are corruption, clientelism and a low level of trust in state institutions of the origin country. Corruption affects not only the livelihood dimension, by obstructing returnees' entrepreneurship, access to employment and access to public services, but also the psychosocial dimension of reintegration. Moreover, corruption often leaves the educated returnees disillusioned after they had initially, upon return, aspired to contribute to the country's socioeconomic and political development. Due to the institutional

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barriers, these groups experience high levels of frustration and often opt for remigration.

In terms of political agency, returnees, particularly those assisted to return, often lack the resources, interest and opportunity to actively engage with national politics or be represented by political parties. Their activities are sometimes limited to voting in elections and participating in the work of some NGOs, mainly transnational efforts to establish solidarity funds and faith-based organisations to support vulnerable people or village/town infrastructural development.

In a few cases, however, acceptance to work in the public sector, as a political advisor or to run in political campaigns are reasons to return where a migrant has the right skills, resources but also networks before and during the migration experience. For example, the mayor of Pristina, Kosovo, had recently returned from the United Kingdom. In Albania, too, some returnees have taken high-ranking political positions.

Though Roma people only make up a small proportion of the population of Serbia and Bosnia they represent an important share of the migrant and returnee population in both countries. This applies especially to those returnees who return in the framework of IOM's AVR programme and those that had been deported under the readmission agreements (see Schmitz-Pranghe, 2023).

Policy lesson: Returnees belonging to certain marginalised groups, such as Roma or certain minorities in West Africa or Iraq, who fear or have already experienced discrimination and rejection by public institutions are often reluctant to approach municipal institutions in the origin countries, which is often the first step to accessing public services. In such cases, NGOs may provide psychosocial assistance or direct returnee beneficiaries to such services. Also they may encourage returnees to apply for support or accompany them on visits to municipal institutions for registration so they can access the available services in education, health and social welfare. As lacking proper IDs and birth certificates can in some cases create insurmountable barriers to accessing public services, this problem must be addressed when designing joint programmes and channelling reintegration funds to the central/local authorities of origin countries.

3.10 'Sustainable' Return and Reintegration often correlate with Opportunities for Circular Migration

Many of the returnees interviewed have aspirations to remigrate to either the first destination county or to another. Involuntary (even if assisted) returns disrupt, slow down or impede immediate migration projects, but they do not necessarily eliminate the aspiration and plans to move on. The length of stay in the origin country after return often depends on how long their savings can last, but also on capabilities to remigrate.

For low and medium-skilled returnees, (irregular) pendular labour migration represents a critical livelihood strategy. Pendular migration refers to short-term back-and-forth movements on a seasonal basis.

Onward mobility, re-emigration and translocal connectedness to employment options abroad constitute powerful resources for access to livelihoods and a vital risk diversification strategy for returnee families.

Pendular migration
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Policy lesson: In terms of the migrants' trajectories, it would be helpful to design policies that allow more mobility and legal pathways for migration. While the need to approach migration more holistically and in line with the Global Compact for Migration is increasingly recognised, for example by German development cooperation, access to mobility and remigration is distributed unequally and often reversely correlated to remigration needs. Facilitating access of potential (re)migrants to legal migration pathways, by fulfilling the criteria and navigating to administrative procedures, supporting circular mobility schemes, investing in skill mobility partnerships and a more balanced approach between sending and receiving countries regarding skilled labour, are all relevant steps in a more holistic agenda on migration.

4. Methodological and Conceptual Challenges for Research

The conceptual complexity of 'voluntary return': Mainly in communication with local researchers and research assistants, it transpired that, based on the individual accounts by the respondents, several returns had been labelled as deportation, despite technically qualifying as 'assisted voluntary return'. The position could be clarified in almost all cases but required a lot of explanation.

Identifying assistance and providers: Return and reintegration assistance provided by the state or organisations in the destination context was perceived either as part of general social welfare or as a return incentive rather than assistance, or as too meagre to count. It was also often difficult to identify who exactly had assisted, as the respondents were more likely to recall names of persons than of organisations. Most assisted returnees could not remember who provided them with information or pre-departure counselling in their destination country.

Research supported by assisting organisations: Staff members of the organisations providing the reintegration assistance facilitated some of the interviews with assisted returnees, which was a great asset in terms of identification and access (logistically and linguistically). However, in some cases (not all) respondents who met independently for a second time would speak more openly about remigration aspirations, for example, and give a different assessment of the impact the assistance had had on their lives/livelihoods.

Expectation management: Despite maximal clarity about the nature of the project, there were instances when respondents had hoped that the purpose of the meeting was to correct perceived injustices and, for example, bring them back to Germany.

Emotionally overwhelmed by memories of return and deportation: During interviews, some respondents recalled how they were treated unjustly or violently. Interviews were immediately interrupted or stopped when such painful issues emerged. In one case, the consent was withdrawn to use the interview data because the respondents perceived migration experiences as too bad to share.

Covid-19-related restrictions and risks during the project: Some interviews in 2020 and 2021 could not be conducted in person. Moreover, the onward mobility of some respondents and disruptions of fieldwork during the Covid lockdowns made it impossible to arrange follow-up interviews. In these cases, interviews were conducted virtually or via phone.

Access to the most vulnerable groups among the returnees is a challenge: This problem was particularly acute in the Balkans. A large share of assistance for newly arriving returnees does benefit members of Roma communities, but they are usually much more reluctant and suspicious when it comes to agreeing on an interview. It is therefore essential to build up trust and gain the cooperation of Roma mediators/coordinators.

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6. Project Publications

6.1 Policy Briefs

bicc \ POLICY BRIEF — 8\2020

Making sure that the emigration of health-care personnel from Albania and BiH works for all: What Germany can do

Clara Schmitz-Pranghe, Nermin Oruč, Katja Mielke, Aida Ibričević

bicc \ POLICY BRIEF — 7\2020

Reintegration in northern Iraq: The time is now for Europe to act

Elke Grawert, Katja Mielke \ BICC
Stefan Pleisnitzer, Sarah Markiewicz, Ahmed Rifat \ Malteser International
Ahmed M. Abdou \ University of Dohuk

bicc \ POLICY BRIEF — 5\2020

Making it work: AVRR programmes and Ghanaian returnees

Ester Serra Mingot, Markus Rudolf \ BICC

6.2 Working Papers

bicc \ WORKING PAPER — 3\2023

Reintegration Trajectories in Contexts of High Mobility

Examples from Albania and Kosovo

Ruth Vollmer \ BICC

bicc \ WORKING PAPER — 2\2023

Finding One's Place in Chaos

Returnees' Reintegration Experiences in Northern Iraq

Katja Mielke \ BICC

bicc \ WORKING PAPER — 1\2023

The Role of Mobility, Networks and Reintegration Assistance after Return

Insights from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia

Clara Schmitz-Pranghe \ BICC

bicc \ WORKING PAPER — 1\2022

Talking at Cross-Purposes?
On Ambiguous Relationships between International Policies on Return and Reintegration and their Local Conceptualisations in Ghana, the Gambia and Senegal

Markus Rudolf \ BICC
Contributors: Doudou Dièye Gueye, Richard Boateng, Ester Serrat Mingot, Harriet Osei-Boakye, Baye Yoro Diedhiou, Malang Dampha, Fatou Sarr, Soriko Mouhamed, Ansou Banora, Karfa Traore, Philip Sabah, Mina Pokuaa Agyemang, Tsawodzi Etornam

6.3 Peer-reviewed Journal Articles and Book Chapters on Return and Reintegration

Serra-Mingot, E., & Rudolf, M. (2022). On the Same Wavelength? Differing Geopolitical Positionalities and Voluntary Return and Reintegration in Ghana. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 1-18.

Abstract: This paper explores the range of experiences of "voluntary" return to Ghana, based on the different positionalities of migrants set against migration and return regimes and broader socioeconomic inequalities. The cases illustrate how geopolitical relations shape migrants' mobilities, highlighting the unequal relations between different actors in the countries of origin and destination; primarily these are the migrants, their relatives, and communities of origin. Conflicting interests and expectations of these actors, as much as differing return policies, create unequal options and expectations of mobility. Migrant journeys, regardless the age, gender, legal status or social class, are always geopolitical journeys. The diverging experiences of return, thus, depend not only on the individual situations, but also on the broader politicised relations and interests between stakeholders in the migration and return processes.

Mielke, K. (2022). Calculated Informality in Governing (Non)return: An Evolutionary Governance Perspective. *Geopolitics*. DOI: 10.1080/14650045.2022.2052854.

Abstract: Afghans' protracted displacement is a geopolitical legacy from the Cold War. Although Pakistan's return policymaking has foreseen the complete voluntary return of Afghans since the end of the Cold War, then as now, about three million Afghans reside in Pakistan. This article advances the notion of calculated informality to dissolve this seeming contradiction. Pakistan's policymakers have excelled in calculated informality by successfully navigating the domestic and geopolitical arena over time based on practices of deregulation and ambiguity. Methodologically, the article applies Evolutionary Governance Theory (EGT) to reconstruct Pakistan's return governance path based on the analysis of legal documents, previous research and secondary literature. EGT reveals the dependencies and layering at work in return governance and points out how the geopolitical positionality of Pakistan has determined its return policymaking. The structured interconnectedness of path-, goal- and interdependencies illustrates rigidities of the governance path and why opacity and ambiguity in return governance persist.
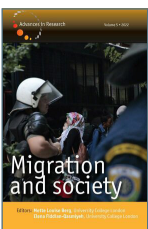
Şahin Mencütek, Z, (2022). The Institutionalisation of "Voluntary" Returns in Turkey. *Migration and Society*, 5, 43-58.

Abstract: The increasing salience and variations of "voluntary" return techniques have not yet been thoroughly investigated in the context of Global South countries, which host the majority of displaced people. As the largest refugee host and transit country, the case of Turkey provides important insights on the role that these instruments and the very notion of "voluntariness" play for migration governance. This article specifically looks at how Turkey develops and implements its own "voluntary return" instruments. The analysis illustrates different ways in which "voluntary" returns are being institutionalised at central state and substate levels across the country. It shows how these national mechanisms are imposed at multiple sites, while also being diffused as practices in everyday interactions with refugees across the country. The arguments I put forward arise from qualitative research that combined mapping of policy papers, national legislation, and interviews with returnees and other relevant stakeholders.

Sahin-Mencütek, Z. (2022). The Geopolitics of Returns: Geopolitical Reasoning and Space-Making in Turkey's Repatriation Regime. *Geopolitics, 27*(3), 1-27.

Abstract: Despite growing interest in the return of rejected asylum-seekers, irregular migrants and refugees, we do not know enough about how geopolitics affects returns governance. This article addresses this knowledge gap by analysing the case of Turkey, exploring how positions in the global migration regime and relations with countries of origin influence return policies. It first argues that Turkey's geopolitical reasoning has led it to design an asylum regime, including repatriation and deportation procedures, centred on temporariness. Second, it contends that Turkey's extraterritorial space-making strategies – namely, military intervention in Syria and humanitarian/development projects in Afghanistan – guide return policies. Examining the Turkish case contributes to our understanding of national returns governance in transit-turned-host countries, which increasingly emphasise repatriation over long-term protection. Finally, the paper contributes more generally to our understanding of the geopolitics of returns by focusing on specific mechanisms that link geopolitical concerns with policy instruments at the state level.

Şahin-Mencütek, Z., & Tsourapas, G. (2023). When Do States Repatriate Refugees? Evidence from the Middle East. *Journal of Global Security Studies, 8*(1), ogac031.

Abstract: Which conditions affect whether a state will choose to repatriate forcibly displaced populations residing within its borders? One of the most pressing issues related to the protracted Syrian refugee situation concerns the future of over 5 million Syrians who sought shelter in neighbouring states. With host countries pursuing disparate strategies on Syrians' return, the existing literature has yet to provide a framework that is able to account for variation in host state policies toward refugee repatriation. In this paper, we expand upon the concept of the refugee rentier state to theorize inductively on the conditions shaping states' policymaking on repatriation. We draw upon multi-sited fieldwork across the three major refugee host states in the Eastern Mediterranean (Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey) to establish that the strategy of a refugee rentier state is driven by the interests of domestic political economy in relation to the costs of hosting refugee populations as well as by the state's geostrategic interests vis-à-vis these refugees' country of origin. Taking a comparative case study approach, we note how a state is more likely to pursue a blackmailing strategy based on threats if it faces high domestic political economy costs and adopts an interventionist policy vis-à-vis the sending state, as in the case of Turkey. Otherwise, it is more likely to pursue a backscratching strategy based on bargains, as in the case of Lebanon and Jordan. We conclude with a discussion on how this framework sheds light on refugee host states' repatriation policies on a global scale.
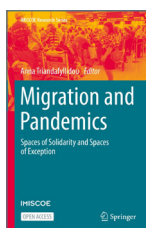
Şahin Mencütek, Z. (2022). Voluntary and Forced Return Migration under a Pandemic Crisis. In Triandafyllidou, A. (Ed.). *Migration and Pandemics: Spaces of Solidarity and Spaces of Exception* (pp. 8185-206). IMISCOE Research Series. Springer.

Abstract: The chapter addresses the following questions: how and to what extent has the pandemic triggered the returns of migrants? What are the diverging characteristics of returning compared to other crisis situations and before pandemic times? How do receiving and sending countries respond to returns? How does the pandemic influence migrants' aspirations about staying and returning? Does the pandemic create different sets of challenges for irregular migrants and regular migrants? An emphasis on returns offers insights to evaluate changing characteristics of migration in 'pandemic times'. It will also contribute to revisiting discussions on dichotomies in the return discourse such as voluntary versus forced, return assistance, and reintegration during and after the pandemic crisis. The chapter is based on desk research and analysis of the scholarly literature, reports, and grey literature from international organisations (particularly the International Organization of Migration, IOM), civil society reports, scientific blogs, and media reports. Data on returns are based on information provided by the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC).

6.4 Article Manuscripts and Proposals under Review

Vollmer, Ruth "'For a better life': Social mobility or continuities of inequality after return to Albania? A network perspective", submitted to a Special Issue on Migration and Development of Central and Eastern European Migration Review (CEEMR)

This article presents an analysis of the potential for social mobility in the context of return migration to Albania applying a social network perspective. Around 100 qualitative interviews with returned migrants were clustered according to the reported economic necessity for migration and including the potential supportive capacities of local and trans-local networks. It is then established that there are significant differences in terms of trans-local connectedness and network effects on migration between the three clusters. Tthe article illustrates how return migrants experience different types of network embeddedness before, during and after their migration(s), which influence their migration decision-making, opportunities abroad, reasons for return as well as post-return reintegration trajectories. It shows that regarding the potential for social mobility, country-of-origin factors, including network embeddedness, are more relevant than migration experience and that social networks play diverse and ambivalent roles.

Keywords: Social mobility, return migration, social networks, inequality, Albania

Vollmer, Ruth and Sahin-Mencütek, Z. "Contested localisation of reintegration governance in Kosovo" submitted to Special issue on entitled Return Migration and Reintegration: Discourses, Policies and Practices, Sozial Politik.

Drawing from the theoretical insights and conceptualisations of multilevel migration governance and the urbanisation of asylum, this article questions the dynamics at play in the reintegration governance in origin countries. Our qualitative research (2021-2022) on Kosovo,1 which focused on the experiences of governing actors and returnees engaging with the reintegration domain, indicates the presence of at least three mechanisms: extraction, experimentation and contested localisation. Extraction helps to explain how serving the returnees' reintegration becomes an opportunity for revenue generation for local authorities and humanitarian NGOs. It relates to material benefits (donor funding) and symbolic benefits (networking, prestige, etc). The extraction can emerge due to the growing budget allocation and policy agenda on return issues at the EU and international levels, which gets scaled down to the national/local level. The second mechanism concerns the substantial amount of experimentation/innovations initiated by donors and international actors and implemented by local partners. These look like experiments attempted to cope with governance challenges, including uncertainties, divergences and complexities in the national and local domains of reintegration. These experimentations, including repetitions, often remain temporal because of their short-term project-based nature and lack of information sharing. Accordingly, contested localisations, the third pattern, become inevitable. Reintegration programs take specific localised forms in the implementation stages and often result in unexpected outcomes. These three mechanisms illustrate the complexity of the institutional cooperation between international, national and local actors within the framework of reintegration assistance and within the framework of migration development interventions. The paper draws from dozens of interviews and talks conducted with experts, policy-makers and other relevant stakeholders, such as organisations working on reintegration in Kosovo in 2021 and 2022, as well as the desk research on returns programs (particularly those of Germany) targeting Kosovo.

Sahin-Mencütek, Z. "Conceptual Complexity about Return Migration of Refugees/Asylum Seekers" submitted to the Journal of African and Asian Studies, Special Issue.

The article examines the scales on which concepts and dichotomies are used in the context of returns of refugees, asylum seekers and 'irregular migrants' returns. The article benefits from multiple data sources. I consult academic sources, including books and journal articles providing empirical and theoretical insights as well as the policy documents prepared by the International Organization of Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) and the European Union (EU). I propose three interlinked arguments. First, labelling – choosing one concept over others – in return migration often takes shape concerning who uses the term (e.g. scholars, policymakers, practitioners, migrants) and in which part of the world. Categorisations and conceptualisations are context-specific and geographically fragmented. The second argument is that return often goes with binaries: voluntary and forced returns, similar to binaries in other migration fields. Despite policy categories reiterating the "voluntary" character of returns, the actual practices rarely confirm that returns are voluntary and often remain in grey zones emerging literature examining the bordering practices shows. Migrants also do not identify the return process as voluntary; they call it returning because they lack any other options. They see it as only a phase in mobility because they often intend to leave the origin country if the conditions become conducive. The third argument is that there are multiple levels where the labelling and binaries are constructed in relation to each other. The identifiable scales include academic level, policy level and migrants themselves. These may interplay, overlap, collide or diverge in the context of refugee return migration, as we observe in other categorisations and conceptualisation in the migration field.

Zeynep Sahin-Mencutek and Esther Meininghaus (BICC), Syrian Refugee Returns, Reintegration Experiences and Risks, submitted to the IMI-N Working Paper Series

This working paper provides an empirically supported background on the possibilities and risks of return and reintegration of refugees to Syria as of Fall 2021/Spring 2022. It is original in that a) it is based on recent qualitative interviews and b) it analyses differences in the situation of refugees who returned to areas formally or de facto controlled by different political and military actors. It differentiates between the experiences of refugees returning to regime-controlled areas mainly in Southern, Central and Western Syria from Lebanon and Jordan as well as those returning from Turkey and Northern Iraq to Northern Syria. It addresses three major challenges to the return of refugees: (1) the lack of security and safety; (2) the humanitarian and socio-economic situation, threatening the survival of returnees; and (3) severe challenges in accessing housing, land, and the property rights. Also, it overviews reasons of returns, official rhetoric of host countries and their ad hoc procedures and practices. As a key message, the paper stresses that, despite an end to warfare in most areas, safe return remains unattainable because the Syrian regime and other military actors continue to pose the most severe threats to the lives and survival of Syrians including returnees.

Zeynep Sahin-Mencutek, Workshop Proposal to the 2023 IMISCOE Annual Conference
Title: Processes of Returnees' Reintegration from a Comparative Perspective

The processes that take place after migrants return to their country of origin or re-establishment their lives are commonly referred to as reintegration. However, there is a scarcity of research to analyse and compare the drivers of reintegration processes in different contexts. We also know little about how the inequalities intersect and intertwine with the reintegration. It seems that inequalities take various forms. On the micro-scale, inequalities are observable in the context of socio-economic differences, ethnic and racial disparities, access to rights and resources (e.g. housing, labour market) and gender. These intersected inequalities have an impact on returnees' engagements with the reintegration schemes, governance arrangements, their trajectories about the reintegration and their propensity to remigrate. This workshop aims to zoom in on the key dynamics of reintegration processes, emphasising the role of inequalities. This is important as: 1) reintegration emerges as a new migration sub-sector and governance field, particularly in the origin countries of returnees; 2) there is considerable policy and practices experimentation, value extraction and localization occur in this "sector" with the involvement of state institutions, donors, supranational, transnational actors, local NGOs, individuals and returnees themselves.

The convenor has already contacted researchers working on reintegration, asking for their main research questions and findings. Their responses signal the growing research agenda on reintegration with a rich thematic focus and extensive geographical coverage. The specific cases and questions that will be covered in the Workshop include: 1) how has the global pandemic changed the livelihoods of returnee Nepali and Filipino temporary migrant workers? 2) how do the returning migrants' economic situation and perspective upon return influence their access and attitudes towards reintegration assistance in the Western Balkans? 3) how do the prevailing conditions of returnees create the patterns for reintegration in the case of Ghana? 4) how can Iraqi returnees re-establish their lives after displacement and migration experiences depends on the interplay of dynamics at the policy-, implementation-, and praxis-levels? 5) how do Ethiopian migrant workers involuntarily repatriated from the Gulf countries experience social and economic reintegration? 6) how does Turkey initiate a return and reintegration dialogue with the Taliban caretaker government in Afghanistan? 7) what are the challenges faced by immigrants who returned to Albania and what is their potential to remigrate or circulate? 8) how has Albanians' work experience as migrants in Greece influenced their decision to return and start a business?

7. Regional Workshops and Policy Exchanges

'Trajectories of (Re)integration', BICC & University of Ghana, Accra, Legon, 24 January 2020

'Re-establishing Life in Iraq after Displacement: From Research and Project Insights to Policy Suggestions', BICC & Malteser International, virtual workshop, 24 June 2020

'Return and Reintegration: best practices and main challenges', BICC virtual expert talk, 11 November 2020

'Challenges of and Prospects for the Reintegration of Returnees – Insights from Research and Practice', BICC & University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia, 3 November 2021

'Reintegration Trajectories in Contexts of High Mobility: Insights from Academia and Practice', BICC & University of Pristina, Pristina, Kosovo, 19.October 2022

'Opportunities and Risks of Migration and Return—Perspectives from Countries of Origin', Dakar, Senegal, 27 October 2022

Parlamentarischer Abend zur BMZ-Initiative 'Zentren für Migration und Entwicklung', BMZ, 8 November 2022

'Trajectories of Reintegration: Contributions from Empirical Research to Policy Making', BICC & BMZ, Berlin, 26 January 2023

'Challenges of and Prospects for the Reintegration of Returnees – Insights from Research and Practice', BICC & University of Dohuk, Dohuk, Iraq, 14 February 2023

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