Ann-Louise Rönestål - 0:30

Hello and welcome back to DELMI podden, the DELMI podcast. My name is Ann-Louise Rönestål. This is episode three in our six-part series exploring the theme of return. And today we're delving into the intriguing topic of the diplomacy of return. We'll be unpacking how diplomacy plays a crucial role in return processes. Specifically return from the perspective of the country of origin, of those who do not have the right to legally stay in Sweden. We'll be discussing the strategies and tools needed to achieve better cooperation among various stakeholders involved in these processes. This conversation will be informed by an upcoming report from the AMIF project, Return as international migration policy, at DELMI. Stay tuned as we introduce today's expert guests who will help us navigate this complex and important issue.

Constanza Vera-Larrucea - 1:34

Hello, my name is Constanza Vera-Larrucea and I'm a research coordinator at DELMI.

Iris Luthman - 1:39

Hi, my name is Iris Luthman  and I'm also a research coordinator at DELMI.

Petra Lindh - 1:44

Hi, my name is Petra Lindh. I'm the head of the return coordination unit at the Swedish Migration Agency.

Svetlana Ripler - 1:49

Hello, my name is Svetlana Ripler and I'm the project manager for the ARLO II project. I work for the Immigration Liaison Officers Unit at the Swedish Police Authority.

Mehreteab Mulugeta - 2:01

Good morning, my name is Mehreteab Mulugeta. I am the ambassador of Ethiopia to the Scandinavian countries.

Mariam Orjonikidze - 2:08

Hello, everyone. My name is Mariam Orjonikidze and I'm a first secretary at the Georgian Embassy to Sweden working with trade and limited consular functions.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 2:17

To all of you I say hello and welcome to DELMI podden. We begin the conversation today with the authors behind the report. Constanza, could you start by giving us a brief overview of your study?

Constanza Vera-Larrucea - 2:31

Yes, our study has been funded by the European Union Asylum Migration and Integration Fund. We call our study for Return Migration Diplomacy. And we've been long studying return at DELMI. And in this case, we study the role that diplomatic missions play in this process. So we have a focus on the country of origin and the way they see return and readmission from Sweden.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 2:57

And why is that? Why is that the focus?

Constanza Vera-Larrucea - 2:59

Because they are usually. The report also highlights the issue that host countries, the countries that are sending back people, are the focus of most studies and most policies. And in this case, we thought it would be interesting to take this from the perspective of the countries that are readmitting their citizens. So, our results had to do with the operative part, which is linked to the consular functions of these diplomatic representations, but also with the political challenges associated to return when implementing these decisions to leave. So, we have set some recommendations that underscore the importance of considering the perspective of countries of origin when designing and implementation of return policies. And we consider that it's important to have long-standing and better diplomatic relations. And ensuring, of course, the rights and dignity of the people who are returning to their country of origin.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 4:07

Thank you. And Iris, how many countries were involved in this study?

Iris Luthman - 4:12

So, in total, we reached out to the embassies of 25 different countries with a request to participate in our study. And these countries were primarily selected based on them being among the top 20 nationalities, receiving return decisions from Swedish authorities over the last two decades. But we also chose to include countries where cooperation is generally considered to be either very smooth sailing or complicated. So Cuba, for example, is included in our sample, even though there are in fact very few return cases from Sweden to Cuba. And out of these 25 countries contacted, 16 agreed to participate in our study, which we were very, very pleased with because discussing return and readmission issues can be sensitive. And this is not only because it involves human beings who might have had their dreams of migrating interrupted, but also because it includes states and state interests. So we expected some countries to be cautious about participating. But I think at the end, the diversity of perspectives that we did manage together really provided valuable insights into what facilitates or hinders cooperation on return and readmission issues.

Iris Luthman - 5:31

So we are very, very grateful for those who did choose to share their knowledge and insights with us.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 5:37

Share some insights into the challenges and also the opportunities that you encountered during this process.

Iris Luthman - 5:45

Well, as I mentioned, discussing return and readmission can be sensitive. It's a politically loaded issue, both for countries of origin and for host countries, as you might have been able to pick up from the debates that go on here in Sweden. And of course, for the embassies and consulates, I think we have representatives here who are better suited to answer this question, but they act as gatekeepers. They are supposed to act as mediators between the country of origin, which they represent, and Sweden and Swedish authorities. And this puts them, I think, in a difficult position sometimes, navigating these two wills. And also, which became very evident in our report, they also take the role of representing their citizens very, very seriously. And safeguarding the rights and interests of their nationals in this process is a key issue for many of the embassies that we interviewed. And I think that's one reason why some people were hesitant, or some representations were hesitant to participate, because it's such a loaded issue.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 6:51

But 16 countries participated, that's good. And, Constanza, what impact do you hope this work will have?

Constanza Vera-Larrucea - 6:59

Well, we mostly expect to reach the competent agencies and to show certain problems that cannot be seen on the normal practice when communicating with diplomatic missions, but also that countries of origins feel represented and feel that their way to see the process of readmission is also acknowledged by Swedish authorities. But most of all, to see that there are certain takeaways that cannot be overcome in the short run. So, we need a long-standing strategy when it comes to return.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 7:40

Based on your research, what are the key conclusions about the tools available for facilitating cooperation on return?

Iris Luthman - 7:48

Well, I wonder if Constanza maybe should also answer this question. But as we mentioned, we've looked at both the operative and political tools. So when it comes to the operative side, which is the one I was most involved in writing, we can see the technological solutions play a key part. For example, we have a very successful case with Georgia and the RCMS system, which is an electronic system that facilitates return. And we have a representative from Georgia here who will be able to talk about that in more detail. But also I think about dialogue is key here as well. That's something we saw that we need to be an entry point into the Swedish system and into the Swedish migration agency. A point of contact that the embassy representatives can turn to when they have questions.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 8:40

Constanza, do you have anything to add?

Constanza Vera-Larrucea - 8:42

From a political perspective, it is important to forge deep relations with countries because return never comes isolated from other issues. So if Sweden has a good diplomatic relation to other countries, it will be much smoother to discuss return and readmission. And also it allows for the countries of origin to express what are their needs in order for the returnees have a better integration process.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 9:12

Thank you, Constanza and Iris. We will hear more from you later. And now I will talk to our other guests here in the studio. Petra, let's start with you. Will you tell us about your role in the return unit at the migration agency? What your responsibilities are and what does your work typically involve?

Petra Lindh - 9:35

My role together with my colleagues at the Swedish migration agency is to contribute to efficient and dignified return. The migration agency primarily work is to work with voluntarily returnees. That's people who have had their application for rights of residency in Sweden rejected and are cooperative to a return. The important thing to highlight for us is, however, is that the many people who have had with the Swedish migration agency to do doesn't need our help. Many of the refusal decision leaves the country voluntarily without assistance at all when the application is denied. On the other hand, when you don't want or can or have the opportunity to do it yourself, then my unit can assist to make it possible. A large part of this is to use various tools to verify, to help verify an individual, but also to assist with being able to carry out trips for the sick and elderly and unaccompanied children. And we can also decide about reintegration supports that some of the returnees have the opportunity to seek for.

Petra Lindh - 10:38

It's a broad spectrum for me and my colleagues, but simply it's about making possible for those with a refusal decision to travel out of the country, mainly by obtaining a valid travel document.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 10:48

Svetlana, when it comes to involuntary return, the police take the lead. Can you share how your team operates in this area and outline your responsibilities? And also tell us more about Project ARLO II, which you are leading.

Svetlana Ripler - 11:07

Yes, as I mentioned, I work for the Immigration Liaison and Officers Unit and it belongs to the Return Coordination Section at the Swedish Police. And we cooperate very much, all units in this section. One of the units we cooperate mostly is our Embassy Coordination Unit. My colleagues who are embecilation officers, they have everyday contact with all embassies in Sweden and even the embassies which are outside of Sweden in other countries in Europe. They obtain travel documents, the same what Petra mentioned, that's what we do, but in the cases which are not voluntary. So they are also the ones who act as a centralized contact point towards all foreign missions. And I work for the ARLO II project and ARLO means rapid deployment officers and my unit also has two European Liaison officers,  EURLOS. One of them is in Ethiopia, in Addis, and the second one works in Nairobi, but is also covering Somalia. So our project, we have three rapid deployment officers and the difference is from our European, Liaison officers that their deployments are short ones, three, four weeks up to three months. And our deployments are in the third countries where the Swedish Police Authority and even the Migration Agency, when we ask them, where we need to deploy and place our rapid deployments officers.

Svetlana Ripler - 13:05

And the aim of the project is to improve the cooperation in the third country and to establish these contacts and to learn from each other about the challenges, problems we have, present our complicated, difficult cases, which we cannot solve just being in Sweden.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 13:29

Right. What does that mean to actually go there and meet each other in person?

Svetlana Ripler - 13:34

It means when our rapid deployment officers comes to the third countries, they have the possibility in person to meet the relevant authorities, key persons, and to have this time to explain the correct migration and return process, which we, the responsibilities of all Swedish authorities. And to discuss, to find the way forward with the difficulties which we have with some of the embassies. That's why we also need this project and that's why we started for four and a half years ago. Because our colleagues, they do their best, the embassy-liaison officers, but some of the embassies, it's difficult to reach the result. And some of the cases are too complicated to solve when we even don't have the embassy in Sweden.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 14:39

And Mr. Ambassador, would you describe your role as a representative of a receiving country? How do you collaborate with Sweden in this context? And will you share a concrete example of how diplomacy is used as a tool in managing these situations?

Mehreteab Mulugeta - 14:58

Thank you very much. Well, as you said, we cooperate closely, work together with the Migration Agency, as well as the Swedish police. And, you know, as an embassy representing our countries here, actually, we facilitate the communication between the two governments in regards to migration. As earlier my colleagues here said, there are voluntary returnees and forced returnees. So, we have to facilitate and find the amicable kind of facilitation for this, because usually when it is voluntary, it's easy for us, you know, to facilitate their return, to give travel documents and other activities. But when it is forced return, sometimes it's very sensitive that because they are going involuntarily, most of them, they don't want to return back, so they have to go. And in that regard, you know, it is sometimes sensitive within the community, those who live here, it has some negative effect, you know, especially towards the embassy. Sometimes they want their citizens or their colleagues to stay behind here, not to return.

Mehreteab Mulugeta - 16:11

And sometimes they would like to force or to influence us not to give the travel documents or not to issue the travel documents, so that they can stay behind. At the same time, we have to also to oblige to the laws and regulations of the Swedish government, the processes that they went through. So, we have to find, you know, the proper means or the proper facilitation mechanisms so that these individuals or these citizens return to Ethiopia. But when we return them, you know, we have to look into the sustainability of these people to stay in Ethiopia. Because if they don't see a future by going back to their country, or if they don't think that they will have, you know, some kind of solution or some kind of means to fight the stigma of failure in their country, because sometimes when they return, you know, people expect them to come back either with money, with knowledge, or with experience. So, if they don't bring that kind of issues with them, then they will be most of the time secluded or excluded from their society.

Mehreteab Mulugeta - 17:21

So, we have to look into that and we have to work as a mission here. We have to work with the sending state, like for example here in Sweden, if these people can be resettled back or readmitted and resettled in Ethiopia properly on a sustainable manner. Otherwise, you know, they can try again to come back to this. So, this is our role here in the Embassy. And according to the agreement we signed with the EU, including Sweden in 2018, we facilitate also the ID missions, which come here to identify those people rejected, people here, to identify if they are Ethiopians or not. So, we facilitate the visits and we facilitate the meetings here, working together with the Swedish Migration Agency and the police, as well as as Svetlana said, you know, when their colleagues go to Ethiopia for a visit or for the EURLOs to go there, we facilitate their visas and their establishment there in Ethiopia.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 18:24

And Petra, will you name a country that has a strong cooperative relationship with Sweden?

Petra Lindh - 18:32

I think we have lots of countries that we have a good cooperation with. And you may hear about some today and from the report. But I think the most important part with the countries that we are cooperating with and are good at the cooperation is that it's a contribution between the embassies and the Swedish Migration Agency. The most important part, I think, is that we have maybe a readmission agreement. Otherwise, we will have countries that have good tools or register of their citizens. That's a very important part because when we can identify the person, then we have the opportunity to give them the valid traveling documents.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 19:15

Svetlana, do you agree with Petra based on your experience with ARLO II? What do you consider the most critical success factors?

Svetlana Ripler - 19:25

Yes, I agree with Petra and what we also see when we are visiting and we conduct different, even field and networks visit and deployments, and when we are even hosting delegations that these meetings and this possibility to exchange the challenges and to have time to talk, it helps to develop our relations and to have this understanding for each other difficulties. So, we have many countries, we have really improved the cooperation after our deployments have been conducted. We've been in more than 20 countries and every country is unique and we try to find special solution for every country, what is the best for Swedish authorities and the third country.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 20:21

And Mr. Ambassador, how can a common position be found and collaboration be established between the receiving and the origin countries? What can your country do?

Mehreteab Mulugeta - 20:34

Well, you know, as a developing country, we have some difficulties in the country, in Ethiopia, especially getting employment in peace and security and other factors in the country might affect the people to decide, you know, or might influence the people to decide to immigrate to Europe or other countries. But in this regard, you know, collaboration with mostly the Europeans and other developed countries, you know, by creating economic activities in the country so that the youth, you know, can get some employment projects, you know, to help and increase the development cooperations in the countries like Ethiopia, would very much help and can cooperate with countries like Ethiopia to, you know, sustain those youth to stay in Ethiopia, to stay in Ethiopia working. Or, you know, also we would like to see some collaboration with countries like Sweden and others, you know, to work more on the legal migration, you know, like labor migration, because we have a lot of, like in Ethiopia, we are now more than 225 million.

Mehreteab Mulugeta - 21:45

So, we have a use of almost, you know, 70% of the population. So, if we work on increasing the number of legal migration, you know, you need labor force and everything. So, if we increase that route, then people would be discouraged taking the illegal migration and becoming illegal residents here. So, we can cooperate in this regard as well.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 22:09

And how crucial is diplomacy in the readmission process, do you think?

Mehreteab Mulugeta - 22:13

Well, it is very crucial because, you know, we have to work with the community. For example, if you take Sweden, we have more than 20,000 Ethiopians living here. So, we work with these Ethiopians and whenever they have any issues, they come to us. So, as an embassy, as a representative of their government, you know, we do the work of convincing these people to go back if their asylum or request of residence here is not accepted. So, we do have a lot of influence and we do have a lot of role here in Sweden to work with the community, you know, to convince them to go back. Especially, we are trying to work with them to go back voluntarily, you know, so that in case if they wish to come back sometime after some years, you know, they can have a chance for that. So, we do have a community arrangement here, which works with the embassy. We have a representative for the community in the embassy. We work together with them and closely. So, the role of the diplomacy is very important and we are, as I said, facilitators between the two governments. So, we have to follow the rules and regulations of the host country as well as we have to look to the interest of our citizens as well.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 23:26

And now I want to talk to you, Mrs. Orjonikidze from Georgia Embassy. Will you explain to us the process that takes place when you receive a case involving the execution of a refusal of entry or expulsion decision? And also, according to the report, Georgia is highlighted as a best practice country. What do you think that is? Two questions.

Mariam Orjonikidze - 23:53

Thank you. So, once we already get the case at the Georgian Embassy, then it's get done deal. Basically, I just have to issue a document. Everything has already been decided. I just log in into my system and I get a little red notification which is linked to my citizen portal. I can identify a person and then I issue a document. And I think this is also partially what makes us a successful case. It's, uh, uh, we have a very effective implementation and it goes a bit back. It goes back to our strong bilateral agreement and ties with the EU and the within the Georgia EU cooperation framework. Uh, we have established a robust readmission agreement with the EU and that leads to the effective implementation. It's very easy, very fast. As I said, it's like a back-page based system. I log in, I get notification. It's red. You can't miss it. The first time I was afraid that, oh, what if I miss it? But no, you can't miss it. And then it's just there. And the same day, I then called the Swedish side.

Mariam Orjonikidze - 25:05

Hey, it's ready. And they can proceed with the process. We also have very high institutional capacity. We have built very strong institutional frameworks to manage this migration and readmission process. And I also, within the framework of our visa liberalization with EU that we have since 2017, we had to demonstrate that we had a strong capacity and ability of the readmission of our citizens. And I even have some statistics here with me from the last year, year 2023. And so, for example, from Sweden, there were 43 citizens. We received 33 requests and we approved all of them. So we had a very high approval rate, which also helps. And then we have great international support and collaboration with our European partners. They have helped us to build the necessary infrastructure and make it even better.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 26:14

What do you think other embassies can learn from your example?

Mariam Orjonikidze - 26:19

Oh, that I'll try not to be too arrogant. But I think having very open and clear communication with your partner country is very important. I can say that we have very good communication here with our Swedish partners. Before I was posted in Czech Republic and it was similar. And I think that really helps being in tight contact with your host country.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 26:50

And I asked Mr. Ambassador this question and I will ask you as well. How crucial is diplomacy in their readmission process?

Mariam Orjonikidze - 26:58

I mean, diplomacy was the tool that helped us to get in this, in here in the first place, to have such successful readmission system. The bilateral cooperation, the agreement, the work together that we have done has helped us to make it better. So I guess diplomacy was here the most important tool at play.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 27:24

Thank you.

Mariam Orjonikidze - 27:25

Thank you.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 27:26

Thank you all for participating in this interesting conversation in Delmi podden.

Petra Lindh - 27:32

Thank you very much.

Mehreteab Mulugeta - 27:34

Thank you. Thank you.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 27:36

Okay, and now I want to hear from the report authors again. You have listened to this conversation. How would you summarize the key points? Constanza?

Constanza Vera-Larrucea - 27:47

Many interesting points. Miriam told us the case of Georgia and how a readmission agreement is crucial for the cooperation, but also the technical capacity to be able to deploy the necessary resources for return and readmission. And Mr. Ambassador expressed that it's not always possible to fulfill with certain agreements because of the situation in a certain country. So there are many challenges and I think it's important to have heard their position with respect to the country of origin of returnees.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 28:26

And Iris?

Iris Luthman - 28:28

Yeah, I mean, I have small children and having small children entails spending a lot of time in playgrounds with other parents, chit-chatting. And a couple of weeks back I was talking to a dad about what I was working with. And then he asked me like, I don't get it. Why can't we just return people when they have a failed asylum request? What's the problem? And I think what we've heard today from the Ambassador and from Miriam is that it's not always so easy. You need this capacity and you need to have a sustainable solution for the returnee. So sometimes it's not maybe about. The focus shouldn't be about the return per se, but about capacity building in the countries of origin. And this is a very important key point, I think, that was brought up by the Ambassador very eloquently.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 29:14

And it's also interesting to hear about the good cooperation that some countries. It's just so easy, like Georgia.

Constanza Vera-Larrucea - 29:21

Yes, well, Georgia is considered best practice by the Migration Agency and the Police Authority. And it's because everything is in place. There is a political will, but there are also the technical capacity to fulfill certain tasks related to readmission. Whereas in other cases there is no such capacity and countries cannot offer a sustainable reintegration to returnees. And that makes things even more complicated.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 29:49

And it is, what are the most crucial considerations when managing return processes? Just to wrap this up.

Iris Luthman - 29:56

Wow, that's a hard wrap up.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 29:58

30 seconds.

Iris Luthman - 30:00

No, but I think it's very country based. It's very complex. And I think you need to have that in mind that you're dealing with countries with varying capacity and varying histories. And you have to have that diversity in mind when you're dealing. There's not one silver bullet solution to these issues. And I think that's a key takeaway, really.

Constanza Vera-Larrucea - 30:22

Yes, and also that this goal of effectiveness usually, as Iris said, what happened? Why can't the Swedish government implement all this return decision? And it's not so easy. It's actually quite difficult. And these cases have told us that we should look at the country of origin to understand what the problem is. And to have a goal of effectiveness that is not only defined by the number of people, but also how is this being done and to what context people are returning. That's the only way that return can be sustainable in the long run.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 30:59

And where can additional information be accessed, Iris?

Iris Luthman - 31:04

Well, you will be able to download our report from our website, www.delmi.se, where all our publications can be found.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 31:16

And the DELMI podcast.

Iris Luthman - 31:18

And of course, the DELMI podcast.

Ann-Louise Rönestål - 31:20

Thank you. Well, thank you all for joining us for part three of DELMI's podcast series on return. In September, you will be able to find the report on DELMI's website. And while you are there, don't miss the chance to dive into other research reports on migration and integration and catch up on all the episodes of DELMI podden. And thank you for listening and goodbye.