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The Role of European Host Countries in Voluntary Return Migration

A Systematic Review of the Evidence

The Role of European Host Countries in Voluntary Return Migration: A Systematic Review of the Evidence

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Preface

On 23 April 2025, the Swedish Government published the Memorandum "An increased grant upon repatriation" or "*Ett höjt bidrag vid återvandring*". The memorandum proposes a new regulation on repatriation grants for certain foreign nationals, which replaces the current regulation (1984:890). The proposal implies that the size of the repatriation grant provided when a person wishes to leave Sweden to settle permanently in another country will be significantly increased. The proposal is a part of an effort to increase what many policymakers and practitioners have called "voluntary repatriation". This review chooses the term "voluntary return" to describe the return to the country of origin of those having the right to stay in Sweden. But how effective are these grants as incentives for return migration? Is there any scientific evidence about their effect?

This Delmi systematic review outlines the existing literature on different factors associated with voluntary return migration with a focus on the return of migrants with a legal right to stay in Sweden. The review delves on the role of host governments in encouraging and supporting voluntary returns. The systematic review also addresses how the effects of government interventions vary depending on conditions in the host and home countries, and characteristics of the target immigrant population.

This review found very little evidence that European countries' direct attempts to increase return migration – such as travel cost coverage, reintegration support, and financial incentives – increase voluntary return of migrants holding the right to reside and remain in the host country. However, some more indirect factors seem to encourage voluntary return to a larger extent. The preservation of legal status, access to mobility rights (such as dual citizenship or re-entry possibilities) and transnational connections might be more effective as incentives to voluntarily return to the country of origin.

The review shows that immigrants' agency should not be disregarded, as they are the ones making return decisions. Key factors such as conditions in the country of origin, age-related considerations, family ties in Sweden and in the country of origin, gender differences in return possibilities and ethnic minority status all play a critical role in shaping outcomes.

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As is customary in Delmi contexts, the author is responsible for the content, conclusions and recommendations of the systematic overview.

Stockholm, September 2025

Joakim Palme
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Summary

This research overview presents the findings of a systematic review examining literature on the role of European national governments in influencing voluntary return migration of immigrants residing in their country. The review synthesizes existing research to assess the effectiveness of different return migration programs, measures, and structural conditions in European countries when it comes to facilitating voluntary return of immigrants with legal permanent residence. We consider the implications of our findings relevant for Swedish migration policy.

Return migration is a complex and highly contextual process shaped by personal, legal, economic, and political factors. While voluntary return has historically been understood as a human right, recent decades have seen a shift toward policy frameworks that attempt to encourage or pressure return as an aspect of migration control, often blurring the line between voluntary and coerced migration. This complexity is particularly relevant to the Swedish context, where current initiatives seek to promote voluntary return among less integrated migrants holding permanent residence – a group that differs from the populations typically targeted by European countries' return migration policies and programs. Less integrated immigrants with legal residence in Sweden have been shown to be resistant to returning, and to experience downgraded quality of life, health, and economic well-being when they do.

This systematic review of the scientific literature found very limited evidence that European countries' direct attempts to increase return migration – such as travel cost coverage, reintegration support, and financial incentives – lead to significant increases in voluntary return migration. Financial support is necessary to remove barriers to return but is insufficient to motivate return among migrants who are well-integrated in or who maintain strong ties to the European host country. Reintegration assistance, while appreciated, rarely proves sufficient to meet the challenges related to the sustainability of return, especially if support is limited to short-term financial aid without broader social and economic reintegration strategies.

European national governments have influenced return migration more indirectly. Most importantly, the preservation of legal status, access to mobility rights (such as dual citizenship or re-entry possibilities) and transnational connections emerged in this systematic review of the literature as enablers of voluntary return. Migrants were more willing to consider return when they

were not being permanently cut off from the European country where they resided as immigrants. Conversely, experiences of legal precarity, economic marginalization, housing instability, social exclusion, and anti-immigrant political discourse weakened migrants' attachments to their European host countries but did not consistently translate into higher rates of voluntary return.

Furthermore, the findings underscore the importance of addressing the broader context in which migrants make return decisions. Key factors such as conditions in the country of origin, age-related considerations, family ties in Sweden and in the country of origin, gender differences in return possibilities, and ethnic minority status all play a critical role in shaping outcomes.

Based on the evidence, the research overview offers a series of policy recommendations for Sweden. First, preserving mobility rights and promoting circular migration opportunities that can lead to eventual permanent return should be central to voluntary return strategies. Second, high-quality, voluntary, and culturally sensitive counseling and information services are essential to support migrants' decision-making processes. Third, efforts should be made to destigmatize return and frame it positively as a human right, rather than associating it with failure or exclusion. Fourth, financial support should be targeted toward those in genuine economic need and paired with personalized reintegration planning. Fifth, reintegration strategies should recognize and facilitate the maintenance of transnational ties, leveraging existing Swedish outreach structures abroad – such as embassies, Swedish networks and culture groups, and other diaspora organizations – to support continued engagement with Sweden among returnees who desire to maintain their ties. Finally, effective voluntary return programs must be context-sensitive and responsive to individual migrants' circumstances.

In summary, it must first be understood that the research evidence demonstrates that host countries' efforts to significantly increase voluntary return migration of legal residents generally show lackluster results. Host country actions can create conditions that may lead to small or marginal increases in voluntary return, but financial incentives alone will have little impact. The research shows that policies that respect migrants' agency, recognize the importance of mobility rights, and provide sustainable support both before and after return are more likely to facilitate voluntary return migration. Since the impact of measures to facilitate return are likely to be small, Sweden's voluntary return efforts should be based on realistic expectations of what measures can effectively accomplish, grounded in evidence and informed by the complex realities faced by migrants considering return.

Sammanfattning

Denna kunskapsöversikt presenterar resultat från en systematisk genomgång av forskningen om hur statliga återvändningsprogram och policyåtgärder i värdländer i Europa påverkar frivillig återvandring. Översikten syntetiserar den existerande forskning och syftet är att undersöka hur effektiva olika strukturella förutsättningar, åtgärder och återvändningsprogram för att underlätta återvandring bland migranter som har ett permanent uppehållstillstånd i ett europeiskt land.

Återvandring är en komplex process, kontextberoende och påverkas av både legala, politiska, ekonomiska och individbaserade faktorer. Medan återvandring historiskt har betraktats som en mänsklig rättighet har vi under senare decennier sett hur politiken har sökt förmå eller pressa migranter att återvända som en del av en mer restriktiv migrationspolitik. Denna komplexitet är särskilt relevant i Sverige där nuvarande politiska förslag har som syfte att stimulera återvandring hos mindre välintegrerade migranter med permanent uppehållstillstånd – en grupp som skiljer sig andra från de målgrupper som vanligtvis står i fokus när andra länder i Europa utformat återvändningsprogram och gjort andra åtgärder. Forskning visar dock att just denna grupp är mindre benägen att återvända och i de fall de återvänder tenderar deras ekonomi, livskvalitet och hälsa att försämrast.

Denna systematiska översikt av den vetenskapliga litteraturen fann mycket begränsat stöd för att direkta försök att öka återvandringen – såsom att täcka resekostnader, återintegrationsstöd och ekonomiska incitament – leder till någon påtaglig ökning av fenomenet. Ekonomiskt stöd kan vara nödvändigt för att undanröja hinder för återvandring, men otillräckligt för att motivera migranter som är väl integrerade i, eller har starka band till värdlandet att flytta tillbaka. Återintegrationsstöd, även om det är uppskattat av målgruppen, visar sig sällan vara tillräckligt för att möta de utmaningar som finns på längre sikt – särskilt om stödet sker i form av direkt ekonomiskt understöd utan att det utgör en del av olika sociala och ekonomiska återintegrationsstrategier.

I stället har mer indirekta faktorer, såsom rätt till permanent uppehållstillstånd, rätten att behålla dubbla medborgarskap, tillgången till arbete och välfärd, samt möjligheten att upprätthålla transnationella band, större betydelse för beslutet att återvända. Migranter är mer benägna att överväga återvandring när de har rätt att behålla sitt uppehållstillstånd, men däremot minskar viljan att återvända när de förmås att ge upp sina rättigheter i värdlandet. Bredare

strukturella villkor, i kombination med migrantens legala status, ekonomisk trygghet och sociala nätverk, har stor betydelse för återvändningsbesluten. För att förstå vilken effekt som olika återvändningsprogram och policyåtgärder spelar krävs därför insikt i dessa komplexa dynamiker.

Individuella faktorer som kön, ålder, familjesituation och etnisk tillhörighet har betydelse för de beslut som sker om återvandring. Ensamstående män, yngre personer och äldre i pensionsålder tycks i vissa studier mer benägna att återvända, medan familjer och personer med starka band till värdlandet tenderar att stanna kvar. För etniska minoriteter kan upplevd diskriminering i värdlandet vara en drivkraft för återvandring, men samtidigt kan otrygghet eller marginalisering i ursprungslandet utgöra ett hinder.

Beslutet om återvandring påverkas inte enbart av individens situation i värdlandet utan också av levnadsvillkoren i ursprungslandet. Faktorer som säkerhet, politisk stabilitet, möjligheten att återfå förlorad egendom, samt tillgång till sociala nätverk och ekonomiska resurser spelar stor roll. Migranterns motiv för återvandring varierar – från att önskan att lämna ett liv präglad av misslyckad integration till att gå i pension eller bidra till utveckling i ursprungslandet – och dessa motiv påverkar hur förberedda de är på att återintegreras. Migranter som kan bibehålla kontakt med värdlandet efter återvandring, genom till exempel dubbelt medborgarskap eller transnationellt engagemang, har ofta bättre förutsättningar för en hållbar återvandring, vilket också är ett uttalat mål inom EU.

Kunskapsöversikten avslutas med en rad policyrekommendationer för Sverige. För det första betonas vikten att migranten ska kunna behålla sina rättigheter att fritt kunna röra sig mellan ursprungs- och värdlandet samt att så kallad cirkulär migration möjliggörs. För det andra krävs tillgång till professionell och oberoende rådgivning samt sådana informationsinsatser som på ett reellt sätt kan stötta migranterna i beslutsprocessen. För det tredje bör åtgärder vidtas för att bryta stigma kring att återvända till sitt tidigare hemland och istället framhäva det som en mänsklig rättighet, snarare än ett misslyckande. För det fjärde bör ekonomiskt stöd riktas till dem med faktiska ekonomiska behov och kombineras med individuellt anpassade insatser för att möjliggöra återintegration. För det femte bör återintegrationen också omfatta hur man ska upprätthålla olika transnationella band: använda befintliga svenska strukturer i utlandet – såsom ambassader, nätverk och kultur- fööreningar samt diasporaorganisationer – för att stödja fortsatt engagemang med Sverige.

Avslutningsvis: Det kan konstateras att värdländernas insatser att påtagligt öka den frivilliga återvandringen av migranter med uppehållstillstånd visar på högst begränsade framgångar. Olika politiska åtgärder kan skapa sådana förutsättningar som ger vissa effekter på den frivilliga återvandringen, men dessa är oftast små eller marginella och ekonomiska incitament har i sig tämligen liten effekt. Forskningen pekar på att åtgärder som respekterar migranternas rätt att själva välja, tillgodoser behovet av att kunna återvända till värdlandet igen och erbjuder ett långsiktigt och hållbart stöd, både före och efter återvandringen, har större sannolikhet att lyckas. Eftersom effekterna av åtgärder för att underlätta återvandring sannolikt blir begränsade, bör Sveriges insatser bygga på realistiska förväntningar om vad sådana åtgärder faktiskt kan åstadkomma, förankrade i evidens och med insikt om komplexiteten som migranter står inför när de överväger att återvända.

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1. Introduction and Aims

Migration policy has been a cornerstone of public debate in Sweden, as the government strives to encourage voluntary return migration, particularly among those with permanent residence but limited integration in the labor market and Swedish society (Swedish Government Offices 2025). The Swedish government's recent policy focus on enhancing economic incentives for voluntary returns – with a significantly increased lump-sum payment of 350,000 SEK paid in full only when returning immigrants relinquish their residence status in Sweden (Swedish Government Offices 2025) – has raised critical discussions on the factors influencing migrants' decisions to return to their countries of origin or former residence (e.g. Bolander 2024). This dialogue comes in light of the governmental committee's findings in August 2024 (Swedish Government Official Reports 2024), which question the effectiveness of merely increasing economic incentives for voluntary return. It also raises questions of how incentives will be interpreted, how sustainable returns will be ensured, and how the integration process will be affected for immigrants who choose to remain in Sweden.

The committee's review highlighted the need to broaden the scope of research to encompass impacts of European national governments – looking beyond lump sum direct payments and including other economic and non-economic incentives and measures that may shape return migration decisions. Understanding if and how European countries impact voluntary return migration among their immigrant population is essential. The need for evidence-based policy is clear: if Sweden is to support and encourage immigrants to exercise their mobility rights in order to return to their countries of origin, it must first compile, review, and critically examine the existing research on the topic of European host country impacts on return migration. It is imperative to analyze previous research to observe both positive and negative consequences of government incentives to return migration in order to prevent invoking incitements that might even prevent return migration or have unintended negative impacts on immigrants, societal norms and social integration.

This research overview presents the results of a systematic review of the existing literature on factors associated with voluntary return migration, with a focus on the role of European national governments in encouraging and supporting voluntary return among migrants holding permanent residence or citizenship. We describe various interventions related to return migration,

considering both positive and negative consequences of those interventions. We also address how the impacts of European governments on return migration vary depending on conditions in the host and origin countries, and characteristics of the target immigrant populations.

1.1 Theorizing Return

Return migration refers to the process by which migrants move back to their place of origin after a period abroad. Return is a natural part of the migration cycle (King 2013) – and even a right, enshrined in international law (Adelman & Barkan 2011). Return is neither new nor marginal to the migration experience, but a widespread and recurring part of most migrants' lives (Cassarino 2004; King 2000). Yet, the conditions under which return takes place and the meanings it carries for migrants and their contexts vary greatly. Research has long emphasized that return is not a single act but a process, shaped by multiple intersecting factors across time and space – including the legal and political context, access to information, social networks, structural constraints, and the migrant's own resources and aspirations.

There are two main approaches to the study of voluntary return migration (Hagan & Wassink 2020). Economic approaches emphasize returnees' economic assessments of their financial conditions in the host country and their estimated economic situation in the country of origin (see, for example, Hausmann & Nedelkoska 2018; Wahba 2022). This approach has limitations due to its primary focus on financial capital accumulation and economic resource mobilization while underestimating the significance of other aspects of migration decision-making (Hagan and Wassink 2020: 537). Alternatively, the political sociology of return focuses on the rise of forced and voluntary return programs and the corresponding impact of social, institutional, and state factors in return migration prospects and decisions (Hagan & Wassink 2020, King & Kuschminder 2022). This includes recognizing return migrants as active agents who accumulate a variety of resources, both economic and social. Considering the complex interplay of migrants' social ties and their human and economic resources sheds a different light on how states can facilitate or hinder return migration and the successful reintegration of immigrants upon their return (see, for example, Van Houte 2017).

Blending both of these approaches, we theorize return as a multifaceted and dynamic process shaped by a mix of social, economic, structural, and personal factors. When it comes to personal factors, it is crucial to conceptualize return from the perspectives, motivations, and expectations of returnees themselves. Focused on the migrant's perspective, Cerase's (1974) classic typology identified four types of return – return of failure, where migrants come back

after unmet expectations or difficulties abroad; return of conservatism, where migrants return because they never truly intended to settle permanently abroad; return of retirement, typically at the end of a working life abroad and driven by age or declining health; and return of innovation, where migrants return with new skills, capital, and aspirations to contribute to change and development in their origin country – each reflecting distinct motivations and return and reintegration experiences.

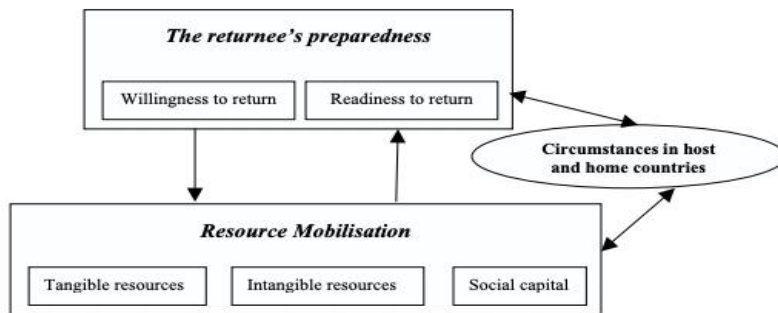
In this review, we consider the voluntary return migration of permanent residents of Sweden. However, the target of the government's return efforts are permanent residents who are less successfully integrated in Swedish society. According to Cerase's typology, the voluntary returns of such individuals are more likely to be "returns of failure" from the perspective of the returnees themselves. Even in cases where they have permanent residence, such returnees often return as a result of economic or psychological pressure, and without having achieved the goals that initially motivated migration (see also Callea 1986). Migrants have often put in a lot of economic resources into their migration journey in hopes of achieving a better life in the host country. Therefore, returning to their country of origin can be seen as a failed investment because the invested resources did not accomplish their intended purpose (Mahar 2023; Caselli 2024; Van Houte 2017).

In other words, voluntary return of less integrated migrants may reflect a lack of options rather than an active choice, and is often associated with low reintegration potential and poor well-being outcomes upon return. According to Cerase, they frequently return without savings, useful skills, or reintegration plans, and may face stigma, marginalization, and limited support systems in the country of origin. For example, research on refugees with legal permanent residence in Sweden who voluntarily returned to Latin American found that the individuals who returned had worse social integration indicators (e.g., neighbor contact, experiencing economic crisis), worse living conditions, and less access to basic goods/services than those who stayed in Sweden (Sundquist 1995).

For this reason, although the return of legal residents may be seen as distinct from the return of those without permanent residence and labeled with distinct terms (for example, in Swedish the term *återvändring* is used to refer to the voluntary return migration of legal residents and *återvändande* refers to the return of people who are denied residence in Sweden and are, therefore, forced to leave), the underlying reality when it comes to the voluntary return of those who are not well-integrated is not necessarily so different. For this reason, the risks of harm following inducing the return of this population should not be overlooked.

Where Cerase's typology offers a psychological and motivational lens to understand why people return, Cassarino (2004) provides a processual and systemic model for how return occurs and under what conditions it can be successful (see Figure 1). At the core of this model is the concept of preparedness, which refers to the degree of planning, resource mobilization, and reintegration capacity that a migrant has accumulated prior to return. This preparedness is influenced by four key dimensions: (1) the voluntariness of return, or the extent to which return is initiated by the migrant rather than external pressure; (2) the availability of resources, such as financial capital, skills, and social networks; (3) the degree of policy and institutional support in both host and origin countries; and (4) the timing and duration of migration, which affect reintegration prospects. By conceptualizing return along a continuum of preparedness rather than as a fixed typology, Cassarino's model allows for a nuanced understanding of how structural constraints and individual choices interact to shape return outcomes.

Figure 1. Cassarino's Model of Return Preparation (reprinted from Cassarino 2004)



According to Cassarino's theory, willingness to return is a crucial determinant of return migration. This research overview emphasizes the return of migrants holding permanent residence or citizenship – a group that will potentially have more willingness to return than those who are denied access to permanent residence. However, the realities of return are often politically charged and uneven (King & Kuschminder 2022), reflecting the gap between international norms and political realities (Adelman and Barkan 2011; Mylonas 2013). In recent decades, the framing of return has shifted: rather than emphasizing return as a human right, policies increasingly focus on encouraging or pressuring migrants to "choose" return as a way to avoid forced deportation, often through assisted return programs (Lietaert 2022; Walker 2019). Critics argue that such programs, despite being labeled "voluntary", often mask forms

of coerced return, functioning as part of broader strategies of migration control (Negishi 2024; Lietaert 2022). This further blurs the distinction between voluntary and forced return, highlighting the key role of host country governments in shaping return migration and its impacts (Negishi 2024).

Grounded in these various approaches, theories, and the existing empirical research on return migration from European countries, this systematic review provides policymakers with a deeper understanding of the broader factors influencing return migration among those with permanent residence.

1.2 Key Terms and Concepts

In the glossary of terms included in this research overview, we set out our working definitions of key concepts and invite the reader to temporarily suspend their own prior understandings of these terms. We do this because the terminology used in the study of return migration varies considerably across time, world region, and practical context (Şahin-Mencütek, 2024; Erdal & Oeppen, 2022). This variation is also found in the terminology prevalent in the research literature and the administrative categories employed in policy – for instance, the distinction in Sweden between *återvändring* and *återvändande*, which creates a sharp boundary between forced and voluntary return that is not recognized in the research literature. Conceptual complexity makes a glossary of terms indispensable, not only to clarify usage within this study but also to make explicit the assumptions embedded in particular word choices. As Şahin-Mencütek (2024: 2131-2134) claims, categories such as voluntary/forced or repatriation/deportation are not neutral descriptors but highly political and context-dependent labels that operate differently in the contexts of policymaking, scholarship, and migrants' lived experiences. Likewise, Erdal and Oeppen (2022: 71-73) argue that the voluntariness of return cannot be captured by a simple dichotomy of voluntary and involuntary and must be assessed in the context in which individual migrants make decisions, including the availability and acceptability of alternatives, as well as the various pressures that shape those choices. Thinking critically about the categories we use to characterize return migration is therefore essential, as they influence how return is managed, legitimized, and experienced.

Systematic Review: A systematic review uses a structured, transparent, and replicable methodology to identify, appraise, and synthesize existing research in order to answer a research question. Systematic reviews follow a predefined protocol for the selection and analysis of studies, attempting to identify, appraise and synthesize all relevant studies. Systematic reviews are particularly valuable for summarizing large bodies of evidence and assessing what works, for whom,

and under what conditions. This review follows a protocol developed according to established guidelines for conducting systematic reviews in the social sciences (Cumpston & Chandler 2022), intending to produce a comprehensive and methodologically sound synthesis of existing knowledge of European host country impacts on voluntary return migration.

Country of origin (origin country) and host country: Countries of origin and host countries play different roles in return migration but are both important actors in the migration system (Waldinger 2015; Hagin and Wassink 2020). The country of origin is the country from which a person originally migrated and to which a migrant returns after residence abroad. The host country refers to the country where migrants reside temporarily or permanently, and from which migrants may eventually depart to return to their previous place of origin or for third countries in the case of onward migration. It is important to designate these different positions as there are some European countries that appear as both host countries and origin countries in the included studies – for example, in some studies Spain is the host country for immigrants from Ecuador, but Spain is also the origin country for EU migration examined in studies included in this systematic review.

Return migration: Return migration is the return to the country of origin after a period abroad. Return migration is an integral component of migratory cycles (King 2013). Recent research estimates that an average of 26–31% of global migration consists of return migration, with increasing return migration rates in recent decades (Azose and Raftery 2019).

Voluntary return: In this systematic review, voluntary return refers to the return migration of individuals with the right to remain. In migration policy practice and research, the term voluntary is used ambiguously. It is used to describe the voluntary return of those with residence permits, but it is also often applied to coerced or forced returns – cases where individuals are denied the right to remain legally and are thus given the choice between living as an irregular migrant with limited rights, detention and deportation, or enrolling in a program for return migration (Erdal & Oeppen 2022:70–71). Research emphasizes that such so-called “voluntary” returns risk violating the legal principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits states from returning or expelling individuals to a country where they face a real risk of serious harm. Furthermore, when the return is induced through coercive environments, such as the threat of prolonged detention, destitution, or other state measures that effectively force individuals to leave (Negishi 2024; Rodenhäuser 2023). However, the term voluntary is also applied to cases where people are pressured or coerced to return despite their own wishes, for example, as a result of experiences of exclusion and discrimination in the host country

or a need to return to care for loved ones in the country of origin. This raises critical questions about the genuine voluntariness of returns (Lietaert 2016; Erdal & Oeppen 2022).

Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) and Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR): AVR and AVRR refer to programs designed to support migrants who agree to return to their country of origin, typically by providing financial assistance and travel logistics. AVR facilitates return, and AVRR extends beyond that to include post-return support for reintegration – the social and economic integration into their origin countries (Lietaert 2016). In some countries these programs are offered only to those who have been denied residence, and in others they are also available to those with legal residence who wish to return.

Sustainable return: The European Union explicitly frames sustainability as a central goal of its return policy, defining sustainable return as a situation in which returnees have reintegrated to the extent that they are less likely to migrate again under irregular circumstances (European Migration Network [EMN], 2023). There are various definitions of sustainability, but it is generally conceived of as the absence of re-migration due to their access to legal rights (e.g. property rights), access to social benefits and social services, and adequate employment opportunities, stable housing, education, and healthcare.

Soft measures and host country conditions: Host countries shape migrants' experiences not only through formal return programs – which we could think of as *hard measures* like structured policies such as assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programs, financial incentives, or legal enforcement mechanisms. In contrast, *soft measures and host country conditions* refer to more indirect, informal, and often unintentional influences that stem from the broader legal, social, and institutional environment in the host country. These include factors such as legal precarity (e.g. temporary or insecure residence permits), barriers to labor market participation, housing instability, limited access to social services, and exclusion, discrimination, or hostile political rhetoric. While soft measures do not directly compel or incentivize return, they can shape migrants' belonging and well-being in the host country, thereby influencing their decision-making around return. Soft measures are embedded in everyday life and often operate in the background, yet they can have profound impacts on the feasibility and attractiveness of remaining in the host country versus returning (Sahin-Mencutek & Triandafyllidou 2025).

1.3 Aims and Research Question

Understanding the impact of European host country governments on voluntary return migration does not only contribute to state of scientific knowledge, it can also inform the design and implementation of approaches to supporting return migration in Sweden and in other contexts where return is emphasized as a policy priority. This systematic review aims to provide this information via a thorough synthesis of existing research on the role of European national governments in encouraging and supporting voluntary returns. We answer three main research questions:

- RQ 1. What voluntary return programs, reintegration support measures, and “soft” incentives have been implemented in European host countries?
- RQ 2. Which of these programs, measures, and incentives have a documented impact on return migration, and what is that impact?
- RQ 3. What contextual factors shape the effectiveness of these programs, measures, and incentives?

These questions focus on European host governments. States are important actors in the migration system (Waldinger 2015), but the role of European host countries in return migration has not been researched systematically (Hagin and Wassink 2020: 546). We argue that host countries shape return migration through their impact on what resources migrants can accumulate to facilitate return migration (e.g. Hagan et al. 2019), their effect on migrants’ readiness for return migration (e.g. Cassarino 2004), and their influence on the types of return most prevalent among returnees (Cesare 1974) through both direct policy and providing “soft” incentives to return that, while not overtly forceful, subtly encourage migrants to leave the host country (Sahin-Mencutek & Triandafyllidou 2024), and their influence on the conditions under which migrants reintegrate after return to the origin country (Lietart 2022).

1.4 Outline

This research overview is organized into four substantive chapters.

Chapter 2 outlines the methodological design and implementation of the systematic review. We describe the data collection procedures, including a description of the systematic review design and its implementation. We then provide an overview of the included studies, summarizing the origin and host countries and study methodology, and migrant characteristics covered in those studies. We also present the analytical strategy used for coding and synthesizing data across the included studies.

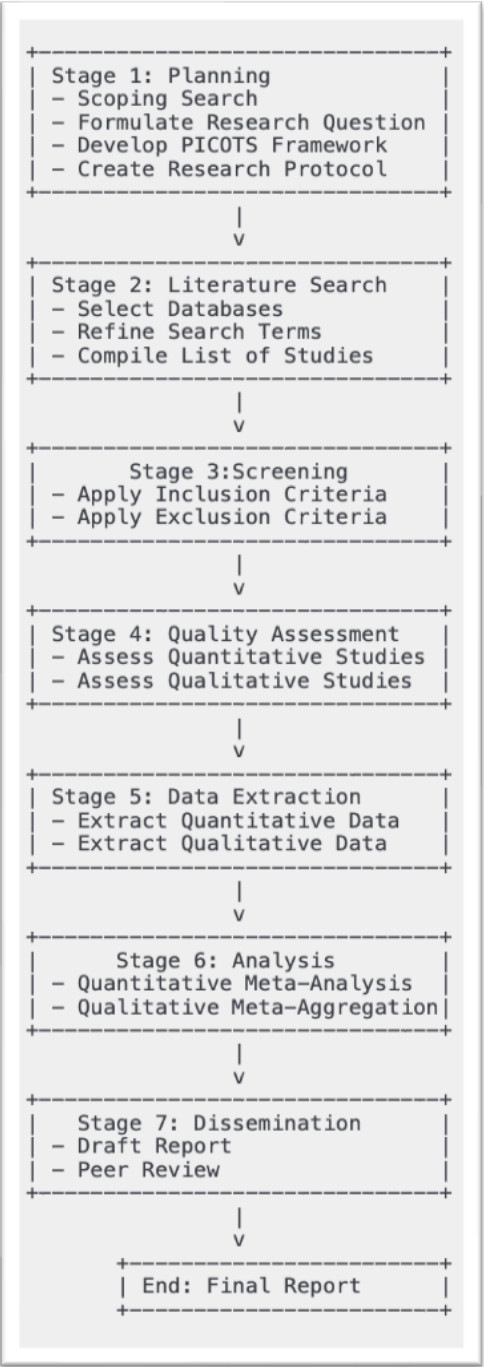
Chapter 3 presents the findings, examining the voluntary return migration landscape by reviewing European host country measures, soft incentives, and broader structural conditions, alongside their observed and perceived impacts. The analysis identifies three categories of host country influences on voluntary return migration: direct economic and reintegration measures, indirect soft incentives, and broader structural conditions. Direct measures include travel cost coverage, lump-sum payments, and reintegration assistance such as small business grants and vocational training. Soft incentives – such as access to legal status, counseling, or the ability to maintain transnational mobility – were often unintended but shaped migrants' perceptions of return feasibility. Structural conditions like legal insecurity, housing precarity, labor market exclusion, and anti-immigrant discourse influenced migrants' integration trajectories. While direct economic measures like travel coverage and reintegration assistance sometimes facilitated return, indirect factors such as legal precarity, discrimination, and exclusion shaped migrants' attachments but did not consistently prompt return. The empirical results show that direct economic measures can facilitate return for financially vulnerable migrants, but they are not sufficient in themselves to ensure sustainable or truly voluntary return. Soft incentives – such as access to documentation, legal rights, and future mobility – alongside broader structural conditions like legal precarity, discrimination, and exclusion, were found to influence migrants' sense of belonging and long-term decision-making, but not their return decisions. The impacts we observed were highly contingent on migrant characteristics, origin country contexts, and transnational ties. These findings are grounded in and largely consistent with prior research highlighting the complexity of return migration and reintegration.

Chapter 4 addresses the policy relevance of the findings. It identifies key policy dilemmas in the area of voluntary return, including the limited effectiveness of traditional financial incentives and return programs, the risk of undermining voluntariness through restrictive measures, and the challenge of supporting sustainable reintegration after return. Drawing on the evidence from the systematic review, the chapter offers recommendations tailored to the Swedish context, where the target population for return support consists of people with legal residence, including legal permanent residence. These recommendations emphasize the importance of preserving migrants' mobility rights, providing accurate and trustworthy counselling services, destigmatizing return, targeting financial support to those in genuine need, and strengthening reintegration planning with a transnational dimension. The chapter aims to guide policymakers in designing voluntary return programs that are practical, impactful, and respectful of migrants' agency with the goal of maximizing the ability of people to exercise their right to return.

2. Methodology and Materials

The review followed a protocol created according to established methods for systematic reviews (Cumpston & Chandler 2022). See Figure 2 for an overview of the research process. We first describe stages 1–5 of the research process, which are concerned with the design and implementation of systematic procedures for data collection. Then we describe stage 6 – the procedures for analyzing the data. The proposed review incorporates a mixed-methods approach, including both quantitative and qualitative studies. This approach facilitates comparison across studies and offers insights into the overall strength of associations between host country interventions and return migration as established in quantitative studies, while also taking account of the common themes and contextual insights that qualitative studies can provide on the role of host governments in return migration. Thus, engagement with both qualitative and quantitative research findings ensures a well-developed understanding of voluntary return migration and provides insight into how different measures can be adapted to different national contexts, supporting the development of policies that will reflect the diverse motivations of migrants and the specific challenges associated with conditions of migration.

Figure 2. Overview of the Research Process



2.1 Data Collection

We located studies to use as data in a systematic review primarily through systematic databases searches.

Scoping Search, PICOTS Framework and Research Protocol

We first conducted a scoping search on return migration to assess the breadth and depth of available literature on the topic. The aim of the scoping search is to help us refine the research question of the systematic review in light of the existing research (Armstrong et al. 2011). We began by entering the broad topic of return migration in the search engine Google Scholar, which has an extensive database of academic sources (Haddaway et al. 2015). The initial unrestricted search on "return migration" yielded over 150,000 hits, demonstrating the vast scope of research on this topic. To refine our focus and clarify the research question, we narrowed the scope of the review. We limited the results to the last twenty years, which reduced the hits to 45,000. Further restricting the scoping search to "Europe" brought it down to 18,300; adding the term "voluntary" narrowed it further to 15,500; then "incentives" to 7,550; and, finally, "government," yielding 7,160 studies. We used this rough estimate of the initial number of studies in the PredicTER (Predicting Time requirements for Evidence Reviews, Haddaway & Westgate 2019) tool that estimates the final number of included studies and work hours required for a systematic review given an estimated number of articles (see Appendix, Figure A1). We determined that this scope is feasible within the time constraints for conducting the study and reporting the findings. We developed the research questions accordingly.

Based on the scoping review and research questions, we created a PICOTS framework (Chalmers et al. 2002) guiding data collection for this systematic review. The framework is as follows:

- P (Population): European countries experiencing in-migration and implementing voluntary return programs, reintegration support measures, and/or "soft" incentives.
- I (Intervention): Measures provided by these European host countries to facilitate voluntary return migration.
- C (Comparison): Comparing impacts of different interventions on return migration.

-
- O (Outcome): Effectiveness of voluntary return migration interventions, measured by the rate of return migration, cost-effectiveness, and successful reintegration in the country of origin.
 - T (Time): Return migration at any point since 1954, coinciding with the entry into force of the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (22 April 1954, Art. 43) (United Nations 1951).
 - S (Setting): Return migration from European host countries.

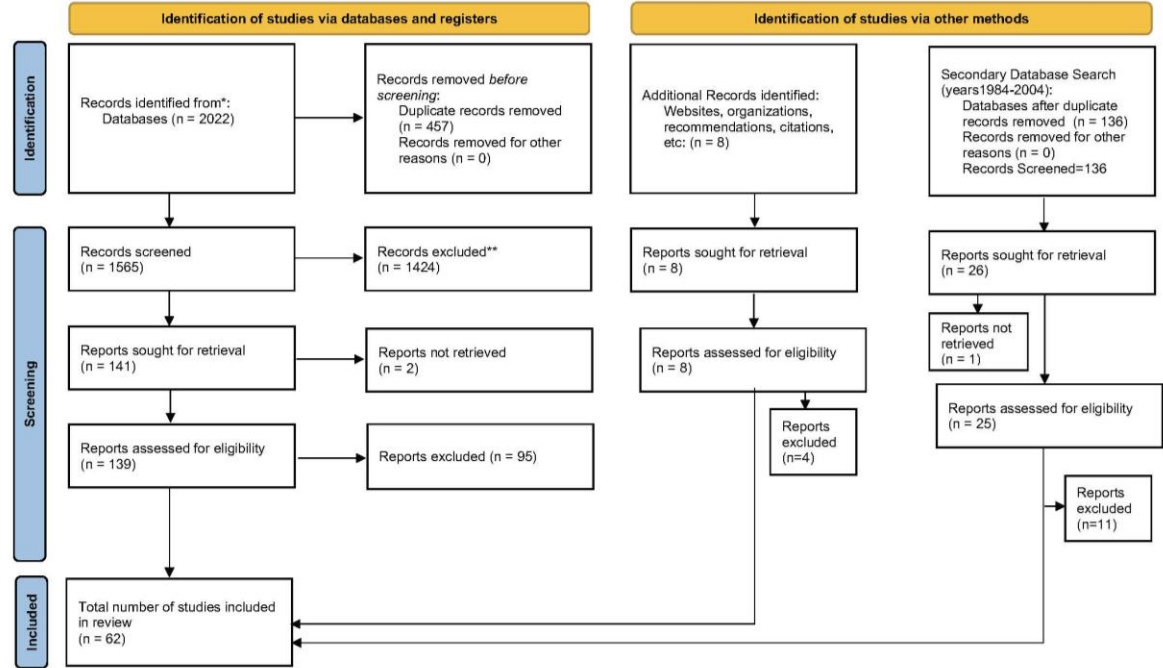
This PICOTS framework focuses the data collection, ensuring that we retrieved studies that will facilitate a good understanding the role of European host countries in shaping return migration, comparing varying levels of support, and assessing outcomes associated with different state interventions. We worked from the PICOTS framework to create a comprehensive research protocol. The original research protocol is in the Appendix, and the following discussion describes how that protocol was implemented and adjusted.

Implementation of Literature Search, Screening, Assessment and Data Extraction

Building on the initial research protocol, the research procedures were adapted iteratively to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant literature published since 2004 and consistent application of inclusion criteria. Following a review of the first draft of this systematic review, we expanded the time frame by an additional 20 years (through 1984) with a secondary review, which is described separately, after the description of the primary review. Altogether, our search, screening, quality assessment, and extraction strategy ultimately resulted in 62 included studies. For an overview, see Figure 3 for the PRISMA flow diagram.

Figure 3. Prisma Flow Diagram

Figure 3. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for new systematic reviews which included searches of databases, registers and other sources



Source: Page MJ, et al. BMJ 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71.

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Databases and Search Strategy

Potential studies were identified through searches conducted across a range of bibliographic and abstract databases. These included both multidisciplinary and social science-specific academic databases, as well as platforms designed to capture grey literature:

- Multidisciplinary databases: JSTOR, Web of Science, Scopus
- Social science databases: ProQuest Central, Sociology Source Ultimate, PsycINFO
- Other sources: DiVA (Digitala Vetenskapliga Arkivet), Google Scholar

The search strategy was structured around three conceptual blocks: (1) measures and incentives, (2) European host countries, and (3) return migration. These blocks were combined to narrow the results to studies meeting all three conceptual criteria. The search syntax was adapted to the requirements of each database. We conducted searches of abstracts in English and Swedish, including research written in other languages but with abstracts available in English and Swedish. We present the list of English search terms here. The list of Swedish terms is available in the Appendix, Table A1.

- Block 1 – Measures and incentives: (migration OR immigration OR emigration) AND (incentives OR programs OR support OR measures OR policy OR assistance)
- Block 2 – European host countries: (EU OR Europe OR Austria OR Belgium OR Bulgaria OR Croatia OR Cyprus OR "Czech Republic" OR Denmark OR Estonia OR Finland OR France OR Germany OR Greece OR Hungary OR Ireland OR Italy OR Latvia OR Lithuania OR Luxembourg OR Malta OR Netherlands OR Poland OR Portugal OR Romania OR Slovakia OR Slovenia OR Spain OR Sweden OR Iceland OR Norway OR Switzerland)
- Block 3 – Return migration: ("return migration" OR "voluntary return" OR "voluntary return migration" OR "outmigration" OR "self-deportation" OR "assisted return migration" OR "repatriation" OR "self-initiated repatriation" OR "non-forced repatriation" OR "voluntary repatriation" OR "homeland return")

Following this search strategy yielded 2022 records across all the databases. The results of the searches were imported into reference management software. The identified studies from each search were combined in a common library, and the library list was cleaned to remove 457 duplicate records. The remaining 1,565 records were screened.

Screening

1,565 studies were screened using inclusion and exclusion criteria based on the research protocol. Each record was screened by a single researcher, who determined based on the title and abstract whether the record should be included or excluded. Quality control and verification were assured through a secondary review of all excluded studies by another member of the research team.

Inclusion Criteria

- Peer-reviewed journals or high-quality grey literature (e.g., policy reports) published within the last 20 years;
- Focused on outcomes of voluntary return migration from European host countries at any point since 1954;
- Empirically addresses host country policies, incentives, conditions, or programs shaping voluntary return outcomes;
- Qualitative or quantitative analysis of empirical data.

Exclusion Criteria

- Does not address return migration outcomes, for example, looks at return intentions instead of return migration;
- Does not address host country policies, incentives, conditions, or programs;
- Addresses only involuntary return or deportation;
- Considers return migration from a non-European host country;
- Published more than 20 years ago, or dealt with return migration before 1954;
- Lacked empirical evidence, including purely theoretical work and policy descriptions without empirical evidence of impacts.

When it comes to this systematic review, the ambiguity around voluntariness described in the glossary is a potential source of bias in the findings of the existing research. If the existing studies of voluntary return migration do not distinguish between coerced “voluntary” return of those without long-term legal residence and uncoerced voluntary return of those with long term legal residence or citizenship, this could lead us to overestimate the actual impact of voluntary return policies and programs. To address this issue, we focus to the greatest extent possible on genuine voluntary returns by disqualifying literature focused solely on returns among those without the legal right to remain. However, we have retained many studies that mix both those with and without legal residence, which means the possibility of bias remains.

Of the 1,565 records screened, 1,424 were ultimately excluded. This left 141 records for retrieval. We were unable to locate the full text of two of these records, while the full text of 139 records was retrieved for further quality assessment and data extraction.

Quality Assessment and Data Extraction

Quality assessment and data extraction were conducted simultaneously using a custom online assessment and extraction form we designed for both qualitative and quantitative studies. Quantitative studies were assessed, and data were extracted using a set of questions combining elements from The Effective Public Health Practice Project (EPHPP) Quality Assessment Tool (Thomas et al. 1998), and The LEGEND: Evidence Appraisal of a Single Study Intervention for Cross-Sectional Studies.¹ These questions captured population characteristics; study design and methods; types of host country measures and incentives; measured return outcomes; reported statistical associations and effect sizes. Qualitative Studies were assessed using a modified version of the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) Checklist for qualitative research (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme 2024). This tool provides a structured approach to examining key aspects of qualitative research, such as the clarity of research aims, methodology appropriateness, recruitment strategy, data collection, ethical considerations, and the rigor of the analysis (Long et al. 2020). The form prompted reviewers to extract information on migrant population characteristics (e.g., legal status, reason for migration, gender), host and origin country conditions, and the impacts of host country policies and soft measures. This standardized assessment and extraction approach ensured consistency, minimized duplication of effort, and produced a structured dataset for subsequent analysis (Büchter et al. 2020).

Each included study was reviewed by two researchers. To reduce potential ordering bias in assessment of the studies, assessment and extraction assignments were sorted differently. One researcher worked with studies in alphabetical order of first author's last name, another in order of study title, and the third in order of publication title. Based on the assessment results, studies were rated as high, moderate, or low quality, and only those assessed as high or moderate quality were retained. In cases of disagreement regarding quality or key findings, a third researcher conducted an independent assessment to reach consensus.

Of the 139 articles subject to quality assessment and data extraction, 95 were excluded and 44 were deemed eligible for inclusion.

¹ <https://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/-/media/cincinnati%20childrens/home/service/j/anderson-center/evidence-based-care/legend/evidenceappraisalform-intervention-crosssection.pdf?la=en>

2.2 Identifying Additional Records

Along with the structured database searches, we identified a small number of additional records ($n = 8$) through other means, including citation tracking, manual searches of relevant organizational websites, recommendations from experts, and references cited in key articles. This process ensured that potentially valuable grey literature and expert-identified studies were incorporated into the evidence base. These supplementary sources were assessed using the same eligibility criteria as database-sourced studies. Of the 8 additional records, 4 were included in the final review, while 4 were excluded.

Taken together the systematic search and the additional records reviewed resulted in a total of 48 included studies.

Secondary Review

In response to feedback on the initial draft of this review presented in a Delmi seminar on May 20th 2025, a secondary review was conducted focusing on literature published between 1984 and 2004, in hopes that this literature would include more studies focused specifically on voluntary return migration of individuals with secure legal residence in the host country. This abbreviated review followed a simplified version of the systematic search protocol used in the primary review. The same search terms were used with the new time frame to search the three databases that contributed the most records to the original search: Google Scholar, Proquest, and Scopus. A total of 136 unique records remained after removal of duplicates. Those 136 records were screened based on title and abstract, leading to 26 reports identified as relevant for full-text retrieval. Of these, one report could not be retrieved, resulting in 25 reports assessed for eligibility. Following quality assessment using the same inclusion criteria and tools as the primary review, 11 reports were excluded, leaving 14 studies included in the final synthesis.

2.3 Data

Of the included studies, 46 were qualitative and 16 were quantitative, with 14 providing direct quantitative tests of the impact of host countries policies. The qualitative studies primarily employed interviews, ethnographic methods, or document analysis, while quantitative studies relied on cross-sectional or longitudinal survey data and administrative records. The studies appeared in a variety of academic journals, including those focused on migration, sociology, public policy, and human rights, as book chapters, or stand-alone books and reports. The included studies are characterized by diverse geographic foci, and

migrant population characteristics, providing a rich foundation for assessing the influence of host country impacts on voluntary return migration. See Appendix Table A2 for a list of the included studies.

The host country contexts discussed in the studies, and the number of studies addressing that host country are presented in Table 1. Some included studies did not specify a single country but instead referred to Europe more broadly, or to multiple European countries. The origin countries or regions of migrant populations studied were more varied, including both European and non-European countries of origin. Several studies referred only to “non-EU” migrants without specifying the country of origin. Altogether, 36 origin countries or regions were explicitly considered in the studies. These countries or regions and the number of studies addressing them are presented in Table 2.

Table 1. Host Countries in the Included Studies

Country	Number of Studies
Austria	2
Belgium	10
Denmark	2
France	8
Germany	13
Greece	4
Ireland	1
Italy	7
Netherlands	9
Norway	3
Spain	6
Sweden	5
Switzerland	3
Turkey	4
Ukraine	1
United Kingdom	12

The studies included in this review reflect a wide range of European host countries and origin countries relevant to voluntary return migration. However, some countries are clearly overrepresented – particularly Western European host countries such as Germany, the United Kingdom, Belgium, and France, and origin countries like Afghanistan, Senegal, and Turkey. This likely reflects where voluntary return programs have been most intensively implemented and studied. At the same time, the review reveals important gaps. Notably, 10 studies consider voluntary return in the Nordic region, including 5 conducted in Sweden. In addition, studies focusing on voluntary return among migrants from East Asia, and parts of Eastern Europe, and to some extent Latin America, are sparse. Likewise, the voluntary returnees represented in many of the included studies may be skewed toward labor migrants. These gaps may limit the direct applicability of findings to the Swedish context and underscore the need for additional country-specific research to inform the design of effective and evidence-based voluntary return policies in Sweden.

Table 2. Origin Countries or Regions in the Included Studies

Country	Number of Studies
Afghanistan	8
Albania	5
Armenia	4
Bangladesh	1
Brazil	1
Bulgaria	1
Caribbean (various)	2
Chile	2
China	1
Congo	2
Czechoslovakia	1
Dominican Republic	1
Ecuador	1
Eritrea	2
Ethiopia	3
Former Yugoslavia	2
Gambia	1
Georgia	4
Ghana	3
Greece	1
Guinea	1
Iran	2
Iraq	4
Italy	1

Country	Number of Studies
Kosovo	3
Kurdistan	2
Morocco	2
Nepal	1
Nigeria	1
Pakistan	4
Romania	1
Russia	1
Senegal	7
Somalia	2
Spain	1
Sri Lanka	3
Sudan	2
Syria	2
Turkey	5
Uruguay	1
Vietnam	1
Senegal	7
Somalia	2
Spain	1
Sri Lanka	3
Sudan	2
Syria	2
Turkey	5
Uruguay	1
Vietnam	1

2.4 Analysis

The initial research protocol called for both quantitative and qualitative data synthesis. For the quantitative component, we planned to conduct a quantitative meta-analysis by calculating pooled effect sizes and confidence intervals across studies to estimate the overall impact of different approaches to encouraging voluntary return migration (Tong & Guo 2022). Ultimately, we did not conduct a quantitative meta-analysis due to significant heterogeneity across the included quantitative studies. Specifically, the studies differed in their operational definitions of return migration outcomes (e.g., return to country of origin vs. general out-migration) and in their study designs and statistical methods. In addition to the challenges posed by the variation in the types of host country measures examined (e.g., legal status, border policy, AVR participation), many studies lacked comparable effect sizes or sufficient statistical detail (e.g., confidence intervals, standard errors) required for inclusion in a pooled analysis. Moreover, outcome variables were often

measured inconsistently or were proxies (such as AVR program participation as a proxy for return) rather than direct measures of return migration. These inconsistencies made it inappropriate to synthesize the studies using meta-analytic techniques. See Appendix, Table A3 for an overview of the quantitative studies from the primary review.

We therefore integrated both quantitative and qualitative studies into a meta-aggregated thematic synthesis using NVivo qualitative data analysis software (Lockwood et al. 2015). This process involved identifying themes and consistent conclusions across both qualitative and quantitative studies, developing synthesized statements, and grouping them into overarching analytical categories to capture the role of European host countries in shaping return migration experiences. We uploaded all included studies and their extracted data into an NVivo project, where each study was linked to a unique case. We also created unique cases classifications for countries of origin and host countries and linked the full text of the studies and the extracted data to each case.

The analysis followed a mixed methods abductive approach, focusing on the merits of both qualitative and quantitative insights (Axinn & Pearce 2006; Creswell & Plano Clark 2007). We began with a theoretical framework based on theories of return migration and expanded and refined that framework with other themes emerging during search, screening, assessment, and data extraction. We further refined our approach to coding as we engaged with the included studies. This abductive approach enabled a dialectical movement between empirical findings and theoretical interpretation, allowing new insights while retaining alignment with the initial research aims (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007).

The analysis followed a structured coding framework based on the coding scheme represented in Figure 4. Major code families included host country measures (economic, administrative, soft incentives), host and origin country conditions, migrant characteristics (e.g., gender, legal status, time in country), and transnationalism and self-determination. Subcodes captured specific phenomena such as discrimination, denial of rights, reintegration support, diaspora networks, and border policies.

Each included study and its associated extracted data were coded by a single researcher. The coded data was then analyzed to answer the research questions. Once coding was completed, we synthesized findings across studies by identifying recurring themes within the codes, generating synthesized statements regarding the contents of the codes, and grouping codes into higher-order analytic categories. We later integrated the studies

from the secondary review into the existing research synthesis, in particular highlighting any new findings or contributions arising in those studies.

Figure 4. Coding Structure



3. Results

3.1 Host Country Impacts on Voluntary Return Migration

In this section, we describe different measures employed by host countries, direct and indirect, as well as the general host country conditions that are found in the literature. The description of the measures is followed by an analysis of their documented impact on return migration.

Host Country Direct Measures

Multiple direct measures implemented by host countries hoping to increase and support return migration are described in the included studies. These measures are presented in Table 3. The ordinary text categories are broader categories, and the italicized text are subcategories of those broader categories. The categories, which are described below, were applied at the most specific level possible.

Table 3. Host Countries Measures to Increase Return Migration

Measures
Economic Measures:
Direct financial payments
Transportation to origin country
Other Measures:
Administrative support
Collaboration with origin country
Emotional support, counseling, mentoring
General reintegration support
Health care expenses
Pension rights
Reintegration support through education
Small Business Grants and other start-up programs

Economic Incentives

Economic incentives are often offered in conjunction with other non-economic measures. Economic measures, in and of themselves, are defined as receiving money with no requirements for how the money is spent, like a return migration benefit. In addition to such benefits, having travel costs to the origin country covered was a common measure employed by host countries. Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Turkey and the United Kingdom

offered to cover travel costs for returnees (Lietaert 2016; Amore 2006; Koser & Kuschminder 2015). Other economic return migration incentives include larger lump sums offered to the migrant after return, like unclaimed unemployment benefits (Akwasi Agyeman 2011) or assistance with rent payments (Reeve et al. 2010). Recurring payments for returning migrants are less common but still present as in the Dutch and French remigration scheme, which provides monthly payments to elderly migrants who return and settle in their origin country (Böcker & Hunter 2017). In other cases, elderly migrants lack economic incentives for return migration because they cannot access social security, like pensions earned in the host country, after returning (Duci et al. 2019; Vathi et al. 2019). Likewise, a lack of collaboration between origin and host country could limit return migrants' access to social benefits provided in their origin countries – this was observed for return migrants to Kosovo who, because they received financial support from the host country, were not eligible for domestic support in Kosovo (Amore 2006).

Reintegration Support

Possibilities for economic support designed to assist return migrants in their reintegration in the country of origin vary considerably between host countries. Some host countries offer only small sums of a few hundred euros, while others offer larger sums (up to €5,000 including in-kind assistance in the form of goods, services, or logistical support – for example, business setup support in the form of equipment or rental subsidies (Diatla & Mbow, 1999)) with long-term reintegration in mind (Koser & Kuschminder 2015). The purpose of the reintegration budgets is to enable returnees to undertake personal projects that promote their socio-economic reintegration upon return. As an example, in the Belgian AVRR program, the reintegration budget could be used for training and schooling, external counseling, housing costs, medical costs and the start-up of a small-scale sustainable income source with additional money granted to returnees wanting to start an income generating business (Lietaert 2016; Lietaert 2019). Several host countries offered reintegration support by offering small business grants to returning migrants (Jurt & Odermatt 2024; Caselli & Marcu 2024; Lietaert 2019; Reeve et al. 2010). According to the studies we reviewed, reintegration support is usually combined with personalized counseling before return, in order to assist the returnee in planning for a sustainable reintegration and long-term income source.

Return and reintegration programs are typically implemented by organizations in the host country that have network connections in the origin country. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is involved in many of the return programs and has a worldwide network that enables collaboration with organizations within the origin country (Kromhout 2011; Reeve et al. 2010;

Robinson & Williams 2015). More direct collaborations with countries of origin have also been established, as in the case of programs focusing on knowledge transfer back to the country of origin and capacity building through working with local organizations (Kuschminder 2022). The British “Explore and Prepare” program gave potential returnees the possibility to visit Kosovo in order to prepare for their return (Amore 2006), and a similar Swedish initiative launched in the late 1990s included organized orientation visits for Bosnian migrants residing in Sweden (Eastmond 2006: 147).

Administrative Support, Information and Training

Administrative support is often offered to facilitate voluntary return migration. Typically carried out by national migration authorities or by non-governmental organizations, administrative support includes initial information about the available support for returning migrants, assistance with obtaining necessary travel documents, flight arrangements and counseling to explore opportunities in the country of origin (Amore 2006; Koser & Kuschminder 2015; Kromhout 2011; Reeve et al. 2010). Vocational training and education are reintegration measures used to make return more appealing and to facilitate successful reintegration in the country of origin. In Germany, this is done by providing short-term training and certification in areas like catering, nursing and technology (Jurt & Odermatt 2024). Similar programs aimed at enhancing skills that would be useful in the origin country have been implemented in other host countries as well (Kromhout 2011; Robinson & Williams 2015).

Counseling and Mentoring

In the included studies, counseling and mentoring were used to facilitate return. This counseling took many forms; sometimes counselors were provided by NGOs working with the state, as part of voluntary return programs (Crane & Lawson 2020; Kromhout 2011; Schweitzer 2022; Reeve 2010) or counseling by municipal workers (Vandervoort 2018; Dånge 2023). In one instance, peer-to-peer intermediation was implemented through migrants who had already returned, as part of an initiative by the EU civil society organization and the IOM (Maâ et al. 2023). In these mediation practices, returnees in Senegal, transit migrants in Morocco, and Senegalese diaspora members in Europe were recruited to share their own migration experiences in order to encourage other migrants to return. In addition to in-person testimonials, these narrated experiences were recorded and shared through TV, radio, social media platforms and billboards.

Impacts of Direct Return Migration Measures

In this section, we will describe the impacts identified in the included studies, pointing out consistency and inconsistency in the findings.

The intentional measures employed by host countries to increase return migration show only limited impact. When it comes to legal residents, return programs and policies often attract those who would have left anyway (Entizinger 1985). This is evident in past research conducted in Sweden. Consistent return migration from Sweden occurred spontaneously throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, increasing during the 1980s although there were no explicit incentives or pressures to return, and despite a policy emphasis on integration and permanent settlement. Even when Sweden began to adopt more active return policies in the 1990s, the actual rates of return were shaped more by migrants' personal decisions and home country conditions (Altamirano 1995: 270–274). Likewise, comparative studies of immigrants from the same region (the Caribbean) in the United Kingdom, where there was policy emphasis on and support for return; and France, where return was not emphasized, showed no clear evidence that migrants in the United Kingdom returned in higher numbers (Byron & Condon 1996).

We conclude from the reviewed research that host countries have very limited ability to encourage voluntary return migration through direct return migration programs and policies. Instead of providing evidence for the effectiveness of direct return measures, what the research suggests is that many of direct measures aimed at facilitating voluntary return are not considered attractive among migrants who have the choice of staying. Measures to facilitate voluntary return possible for those already planning to go, and it can make coerced return more pleasant for those who are out of options. The host country measures, and the evidence of their impact is summarized in Table 4. In the table, we summarize the evidence and lack of evidence of the impact of host country measures, as well as factors that seem to be associated with the consistency or variation in findings regarding those impacts, according to our synthesis of the research.

Table 4. Impacts of Host Country Direct Measures

Host Country Measure	Evidence of Impact	Consistency of Impacts
Measures that include economic components	Some migrants lack the resources to return and reintegrate and are dependent on the economic support (Lietaert 2016; Reeve et al. 2004). Lump sum payments in the form of unemployment benefits were not successful in facilitating return (Akwasí Agyeman 2011). Economic incentives are least effective at facilitating return among low-income and unemployed groups (Koot 1987). Returns prompted by economic incentives often led to regret or difficulties reintegrating (Dustmann 1996). No certain evidence of impact of the transferability of social security on likelihood of return is presented (Duci et al. 2019; Vathi et al. 2019; Böcker & Hunter 2017).	Economic measures are of less importance for more advantaged migrants. For vulnerable migrants the economic measures make return possible but do not incentivize return as it is only seen as a last option. These measures may lead to reintegration problems upon return.
Reintegration support	The reintegration support received was helpful as many migrants had no other resources to reestablish themselves (Reeve et al. 2010). No evidence that reintegration support increased return migration could be found.	Although reintegration support was appreciated, it was not always sufficient for a sustainable reintegration. Many migrants returned to a precarious existence (Lietaert 2019).

Host Country Measure	Evidence of Impact	Consistency of Impacts
Small business grants	Addressed migrants' concerns about earning an income after return and contributed to some migrants' return decision (Lietaert 2019).	Many businesses were not sustainable and migrants without additional resources struggled to set up and maintain their businesses. The measure can be seen as "deceptive support" (Lietaert 2019).
Collaborations with the origin country	No evidence of impact on return migration decisions but can create a more streamlined return process. Collaboration projects do not increase the desire to return (Kuschminder 2022; Eastmond 2006).	Close collaborations between the organizations in the host and origin country facilitating the return made the return procedure smoother (Reeve et al. 2010).
Administrative support	Migrants experienced administrative support as helpful (Lietaert 2019; Reeve et al. 2010).	No evidence of administrative support effecting initial return decisions was found. When workers pressured return, this could result in an opposite effect (Dånge 2023; Kromhout 2011).
Education and training	Training courses are too short to provide useful skills (Jurt & Odermatt 2024). Specific training programs fail since too few signed up (Robinson & Williams 2015; Kromhout 2011).	Migrants who migrate to the host country with the motive of acquiring education and new skills are more likely to return (Flahaux et al. 2014).
Professional counseling or mentoring	Independent NGO counseling built trust and facilitated return discussions; state-led or embedded counseling reduced trust (Schweitzer 2022; Lietaert et al. 2017a).	Mixed impacts; effectiveness depended on whether counselor was believed to be an independent support instead of an extended arm of anti-immigrant state policy.

Host Country Measure	Evidence of Impact	Consistency of Impacts
Counseling or mentoring (peer-to-peer return mediation)	Peer intermediaries struggled with credibility and trust; diaspora-led campaigns were often met with skepticism (Maâ 2023).	Mixed and often negative outcomes; trust issues reduced effectiveness.
Humanitarian care practices	Minor acts of care by NGOs offered support but did not challenge exclusionary migration management (Crane & Lawson 2020; Schweitzer 2022).	Supportive in individual cases but structurally limited in impact.

Economic Measures

As summarized in Table 4, the economic measures show mixed evidence of impacting return migration. The first important thing to point out is that many of the returning migrants in the qualitative studies were financially vulnerable. Getting travel costs covered was therefore essential (Reeve et al. 2010; Lietaert et al. 2014). The lack of means to pay for travel back to the origin country is illustrated in several articles. Take, for example, the following quotation from Lietaert (2016):

“I could not return home earlier, I had no work and no money, how could I pay for my ticket? Then, one time, a person told me that I could go to Caritas if I wanted to return, and gave me the address.”
(Armenian woman, 60 years, Lietaert 2016:122)

Some migrants also needed funds to start their lives back up from scratch after return (Black et al. 2004). Because of migrants’ vulnerability, return programs that only covered travel costs did not provide enough support to manage the challenges faced when returning home (Lietaert et al. 2017c). This is highlighted by a returned migrant:

“I would have come back to a lot of difficulties if I had just been given a flight back to Pakistan then I wouldn’t have had anything in my hands in terms of money. This would have created a lot of problems for me. At least I can live my life properly here.”
(Male, aged 28, returned to a rural area, Reeve et al. 2010:9)

Financial incentives are of less importance for more advantaged migrants. For example, labor migrants with long term residence in Spain who lost their job and were already voluntarily abandoning Spain did not take advantage of lump sum payments in the form of unemployment benefits because, to receive the payment, they were required to give up their residence permit (Akwasi Agyeman 2011). In interviews, these labor migrants reported that the financial support did not outweigh the importance of having a Spanish residence permit (Akwasi Agyeman 2011).

The inability to transfer social benefits, like pensions, has been acknowledged as a factor that deters migrants from returning to their country of origin. In the case of elderly Albanian migrants in Greece, particular circumstances make many migrants only eligible for reduced pensions in either country, not reflecting their actual years of work (Duci et al. 2019). The non-transferability of pensions places elderly migrants in a precarious situation (Duci et al. 2019; Vathi et al. 2019). However, while the lack of ability to transfer social benefits is a deterrence, the evidence on the impact of the ability to transfer benefits is inconsistent. For example, research on the availability of monthly payments to elderly migrants returning from France and the Netherlands found no documented impact on return migration (Böcker & Hunter 2017). However, these findings questioning the impact of benefit transfers should be interpreted in light of the difficulties implementing the transfer of social benefits for certain elderly migrant groups and contexts (Böcker & Hunter 2017). In Sweden, where the social safety net is a central pillar of well-being in old age, this issue is especially crucial. The country's aging population of long-settled migrants, a population that is more likely on average to consider return, may face uncertainty about their entitlements. While the transfer of pensions and social security benefits may be technically possible, administrative complexities and eligibility restrictions might limit access in practice. Among older migrants, concerns about losing access to hard-earned welfare benefits can act as a powerful deterrent for voluntary return migration from Sweden.

Reintegration Support

Reintegration assistance is sometimes offered to returning migrants. Two articles explained the uptake in returns and participation in return programs by the increased economic reintegration support offered to migrants wanting to return (Valenta & Thorshaug 2001; Vandevoort 2018). The reintegration assistance proved to be somewhat of a pull factor that made the option of returning more viable. For some, the reintegration assistance incentivized an immediate return, while others had known about the assistance for a while but wanted to make use of it at what they determined to be the right moment

(Lietaert 2016; Tecca 2024). For migrants whose return decision was dependent on the assistance provided by the host country, the granting of a specific amount before their departure was crucial (Lietaert 2016).

The evidence on reintegration support calls into question the effectiveness of one-size-fits-all models and suggests that Swedish return policy could benefit from greater adaptability to the diverse needs and priorities of returnees with more flexible, individualized use of reintegration budgets can significantly improve migrants' reintegration experiences and overall well-being. The respondents in the articles we examined were positive about the reintegration assistance they received (Reeve et al. 2010), and no sign of reintegration assistance being unhelpful could be found. Several migrants reported that they had no other resources or financial support to re-establish themselves (Reeve et al. 2010). For these migrants with limited financial abilities, the impact of the reintegration assistance was significant for improving returnees' well-being. Although counseling and planning for how the reintegration budget should be spent proved helpful for returning migrants (Lietaert 2016), flexibility in how the reintegration budget could be spent, for example in paying for international school tuition for children, was also greatly appreciated by the returning migrants (Lietaert 2019). A quantitative study also found that increased financial return assistance was associated with a higher likelihood of applying for voluntary return assistance (Leerkes et al. 2017).

Small Business Grants

The small business grants available for returning migrants made some migrants feel hopeful about their future income source while other, more vulnerable migrants, feel nervous and insecure about how to start their business (Lietaert et al. 2017c). Overall, the small business grants provided some support that alleviated migrants' main concerns of earning an income after return (Lietaert 2019). In a longitudinal study of the reintegration support through small business grants, it is highlighted that the support was part of incentivizing the return for some migrants but it proved insufficient for the stated purpose of setting up an income generating business in the long run. Lietaert (2019) therefore suggests that inadequate supports and incentives offered to voluntary returnees could be seen as "deceptive support." Other articles also reiterated that the small business grants were too small to be sustainable in the long run (Lietaert et al. 2014; Reeve et al. 2004; Jurt & Odermatt 2024; Serra-Mingot & Rudolf 2023). The returnees who succeeded in setting up an income generating business all had additional resources beyond the small business grant. The returnees without additional resources were more likely to fail with their business or only create very small and precarious income generating activities (Lietaert 2019). In conclusion, the evidence points

towards that small business grants could incentivize return migration, but that the support did not prove sustainable for migrants with less resources and could therefore be described as having a deceptive quality.

Collaboration Projects, Counseling and Case Management

Collaboration projects between host and origin countries take various forms, including temporary return schemes, orientation visits, partnerships with local reintegration organizations, and administrative support mechanisms designed to facilitate the return process. However, collaboration projects between host and origin countries were not observed to have an impact on return migration. In regard to the temporary return projects and short term “look see” visits that make it possible for migrants to visit or spend a limited time in their country of origin, participants were drawn to the program largely because it was a temporary sojourn in the country of origin (Kuschminder 2022). For the participants, permanent return was not a consideration, even for those who were offered job positions and relocated for a longer period (Kuschminder 2022). Likewise, research on the impacts of temporary “orientation visits” for potential return migrants to Bosnia and Kosovo lacked considerable evidence on the impact on return migration (Amore 2006; Eastmond 2006).

There is however some evidence that collaborations with organizations in the origin country enable a smoother and more sustainable return. When workers at key organizations in host and origin countries were interviewed, the flexible collaboration between the organizations was highly appreciated and was seen to enable effective provision of support to help potential returnees make well-grounded decisions regarding their possible return (Reeve et al. 2010). For example, in Reeve et al. (2010), staff in both Sweden and Pakistan emphasized the value of flexible and ongoing collaboration between IOM offices and local NGOs in the country of return. This cooperation enabled better knowledge transfer about migrant needs, improved coordination around documentation, housing, and reintegration services, and allowed caseworkers to develop realistic and tailored return plans. Administrative support such as quality case management provided to returnees is also described as reducing the bureaucratic and emotional burdens of return and contributing to feelings of reassurance and trust (Reeve et al. 2010):

“She [IOM caseworker] helped me do my application, she helped me a great deal, she gave me reassurance and she explained everything clearly.”

(Male, aged 65, returned to a rural area, Reeve et al. 2010: 5)

“[The caseworker] helped me. Somehow, it made my life easier When you come [to the local partner’s office], your hopes rise again. It is psychological. It’s not even a question of finances, but psychologically you are supported, so that’s very good.”

(Armenian woman, fifty-seven years old, Lietaert 2019: 1228)

The qualitative evidence shows that the simplicity of the administrative support offered through collaboration projects is highly valued and that the administrative support also can act as a sort of emotional support. However, no qualitative evidence points in the direction that the administrative support leads to more returns, just that the return process is perceived as easier on the returnee because of the administrative support (Lietaert 2016).

A quantitative study found that having access to a native counselor – a person originating from their origin country and speaking their language – was statistically significant and positively associated with the probability of enrolling in an AVR program (Leerkes et al. 2017). This evidence taken together suggests that having the administrative support given by someone from their origin country increases the likelihood of taking part in a voluntary return program, and that the support given is appreciated for those who enroll. In two of the articles the administrative support had a more forced quality because caseworkers had an obligation to discuss return migration with certain migrants. This seemed to have no effect or a negative effect on the willingness to return with the migrants becoming frustrated and unmotivated (Dånge 2023; Kromhout 2011).

Efforts to support return through such as counselling and mentorship were shown to have mixed impacts. Counselling could improve trust in the return process when well implemented (Schweitzer 2022; Lietaert et al. 2017c). Qualitative evidence from Austria and Britain shows that when NGO counselors had more independence in implementing assisted voluntary return, they could act as a buffer between migrants and the state (Schweitzer 2022). This led to migrants being more willing to engage in return discussions, largely because they felt greater trust and experienced less pressure compared to state-led counseling settings. Independent NGOs were able to provide better and more well-suited return alternatives and trusted information, including legal and practical options, enabling informed decision-making.

Another study focused on the implementation of “peer to peer” intermediation, implemented by the EU civil society organization and the IOM (Maâ 2023). In these mediation-practices, former return migrants were recruited to assist potential returnees in overcoming their mistrust with return practices. The results from the study were conflicting: native-language speakers or staff with

ties to the country of origin, increased migrants' comfort and trust, but, when the organizational goal to promote return is seen as being directed by institutional mandates, that trust is undermined (Maâ 2023).

While NGOs involved in AVR often provide forms of care, this is typically limited to "minor acts of care", small, meaningful acts within a restrictive system (Crane & Lawson 2020). These minor practices, such as providing empathetic listening and advocacy for individual migrants, may offer short-term support. At the same time, increased state involvement has complicated the humanitarian ethos of many NGOs. This has made it difficult for organizations to avoid the instrumentalization of their work, where humanitarian efforts risk becoming subject for migration control (Crane & Lawson 2020; Schweitzer 2022).

At the same time, evidence from Belgium and the UK suggests that when counselling is embedded in longer-term reintegration frameworks, before and after return, it can support better outcomes. For instance, Belgium's AVRR program includes a comprehensive "return trajectory" that informs migrants of return options at various stages of the asylum process and provides individualized support both before and after return (Lietaert 2016; Vandevooort 2017). Post-return counseling, especially when tailored to returnees' changing needs, has been seen as helpful for strengthening well-being and adaptability in the reintegration process (Lietaert et al. 2017c). Similarly, initiatives like the individual return plans (IRPs) in the UK aimed to provide holistic, needs-based planning, though their implementation was often delayed or incomplete due to operational constraints and migrants' prioritization of departure logistics over reintegration planning (Reeve 2010). However, inadequate development of IRPs and gaps in follow-up support remain common. Often, pre-departure counseling focuses on logistics rather than long-term needs, which delays reintegration assistance and increases returnees' vulnerability upon arrival.

Education and Training

On the other hand, there is no evidence that the incentive of offering education and training leads to more returns. In two qualitative studies, the opportunity for young migrants to partake in training to enhance skills valuable in the origin country was unsuccessful since too few in the target group signed up (Robinson & Williams 2015; Kromhout 2011). The few who did sign up, did it with the objective of acquiring skills useful in the host country (Kromhout 2011). In Germany, where the focus for returnees is put on education and training, both practitioners and returnees expressed that the training courses were too short and insufficient in providing useful skills (Jurt & Odermatt 2024). A qualitative study found that migrants who migrated with the reason of developing new

skills in Europe that are useful in the origin country, have a higher probability of returning than migrants who migrated for other reasons (Flahaux et al. 2014). For these migrants, additional education and skills could motivate return. But these migrants also had that as their motive when migrating, the qualitative studies suggest that migrants who did not have that motive were not incentivized by additional education and training.

Indirect Measures

Several measures identified in the literature can be understood as implicit or unintended drivers of return, in that they were not explicitly formulated as return policies but nonetheless influenced migrants' decisions to return to their country of origin. We term these as indirect measures, conceptualized as non-direct, non-economic, and often unintentional factors that shape return dynamics. These measures typically fall outside formal policy frameworks and are not necessarily recognized as return instruments. Yet they contribute to creating or preventing return by indirectly affecting migrants' sense of inclusion, access to rights, and perceived future prospects in the host and origin countries. The reviewed research suggests that these unintended drivers of return generally prove more influential than direct return incentives, policies and programs (Körner and Mehrländer 1986). The indirect measures are presented in Table 5, main themes in ordinary text, and subthemes in italics.

Table 5. Host Country Indirect Measures

Host Country Indirect Measures
Legal status and documentation
<i>Mobility agreements</i>
<i>Access to host country benefits before return</i>
<i>Gaining skills</i>
Border policy
<i>Strict border controls</i>
Lost Property Restitution
Denial of status and rights
Discrimination
Pension rights

Legal Status

Legal status, which refers to access to settled, stable, permanent residence and eventual citizenship, has a perhaps surprising or counterintuitive impact on return. Having dual citizenship or permanent residence can enable greater transnational mobility, ensuring migrants can travel back to the country of origin without sacrificing their status in the host country should they want to re-migrate (Abaunza 2024; Agyeman 2011; Black et al. 2004; Dånge 2023;

Eastmond; Kuschminder 2022; Lietaert 2016; Van Houte 2017). Permanent residence and citizenship also give access to social security, legal rights and improved socioeconomic status which often led to the ability to acquire more economic and human capital – a common goal motivating migration (Flahaux et al. 2014; Serra-Mingot 2023). Legal status is also associated with onward mobility within Europe (Leerkes et al. 2021). Another legal measure that facilitates voluntary return is the official certification of ancestry or ethnic belonging. In the Czech Republic, one study showed individuals with Czech ancestry from countries like Ukraine can apply for formal recognition as members of the Czech diaspora abroad. This confirmation, issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, enables access to special benefits for returnees, such as accelerated procedures for permanent residency and easier visa access (Jirka 2019). Applicants must provide official documents proving a direct link to Czech ancestors, typically through birth, marriage, or other civil registration documents.

Border Policy

Further, as an unintended incentive, many studies highlight the effect of restrictive or more permissive policies, in relation to border policies, voluntary assistance programs and legal frameworks for mobility, including labor mobility. Restrictiveness of border policies, including for example, stricter procedures for visa applications, stricter procedures for obtaining residence permits including for family reunification, restrictions on entry to the country and increasing deportation and detention (Agyeman 2011; Lietaert 2016). In Austria and The Netherlands, Cooperation With Return (CWR) is used as a stricter policy instrument to guarantee that migrants cooperating with return processes can access the right to social welfare (Rosenberger 2018). The cooperation required of migrants includes providing identification documents, contacting embassies, signing documents, and engaging with return agencies. In some cases, migrants received only a conditional form of legal citizenship, and if the migrant returned to their country of origin for an extended period, they risked losing their legal status (Abaunza 2024; Agyeman 2011).

In contrast to restrictive border policies, more permissive policy environments are observed in contexts governed by regional mobility frameworks. For instance, Switzerland's bilateral agreements with the EU and EFTA countries under the free movement of persons agreement (Akkoyunlu 2013) and similarly, accession to the Schengen Area or free labor movement agreements as an example of more permissive policies (Bazillier 2023; Gundel 2008). More open policies related to voluntary return programs included the option to migrate again in the future (Kuschminder 2022; Abaunza 2024).

Other Indirect Measures

Restitution of lost property, which refers to the process through which returnees reclaim homes, land, or other assets lost during displacement or conflict, were found in two studies (Eastmond 2006; Van Houte 2017). Similarly, gaining work experience and skills in the host country can be a motivation for migrants to return and help with restoration in their origin country, as well as an asset for successful reintegration (Serra-Mingot & Rudolf 2023).

Impacts of Host Country Indirect Measures

In this section, we will describe the impacts of the indirect measures identified in the included studies, pointing out consistency and inconsistency in the findings regarding those impacts.

The reviewed studies show that several indirect measures implemented in European host countries have had a documented impact on return migration outcomes, even when they were not explicitly intended as return policies. These impacts are described below and summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. Impacts of Host Country Indirect Measures on Return Migration

Indirect Measure	Evidence of Impact	Consistency of Impacts
Legal status and documentation	Secure legal status enabled greater autonomy, delayed return, allowed transnational lives; lack of documentation led to avoidance of return (Black et al. 2014; Flahaux 2014; Van Houte 2011; Abaunza 2024).	Consistent impact across multiple contexts; undocumented migrants often delayed or avoided return. Those with secure legal residence were more willing to return.
Gaining skills; Access to host country benefits before return	Legal status improved economic stability and skill accumulation, increasing willingness to return when sufficient resources were obtained (Adda et al. 2021; Caselli 2024; Serra-Mingot 2023).	Consistent finding that economic gains linked to return willingness when conditions felt secure.

Indirect Measure	Evidence of Impact	Consistency of Impacts
Border policy	Free mobility regimes (e.g., Schengen, bilateral agreements) increased return migration; strict regimes reduced return (Bazillier 2023; Akkoyunlu 2013; Flahaux 2017; Beauchemin 2020).	Consistent quantitative evidence linking mobility agreements to higher return rates.
Long-term settlement effects	Longer stays in the host country weakened emotional and social ties to origin country, complicating return (Dänge 2023; Lietaert 2016; Eastmond 2006).	Common finding across countries and migrant groups that prolonged stay, often associated with waiting times for access to permanent residence, reduced attachment to origin country.
Lost property restitution	Property restitution, where implemented, was associated with increased willingness to return among displaced populations, especially where land and home ownership was central to livelihood and identity (Adelman & Barkan 2011; Walker 2019).	Evidence was limited and context-specific; impact stronger where restitution was linked to broader reconciliation or rights-based return frameworks. In other contexts, implementation gaps weakened the impact.

Legal Status and Documentation

Access to legal documentation and the possibility of future mobility were proven to be particularly important for migrants when return involves significant uncertainty in the country of origin. Many undocumented migrants are unwilling to risk returning to a context where their socio-economic prospects may be substantially worse than those in the host country (Agyeman 2011; Beauchemin 2020; Black et al. 2014; Eastmond 2006). For instance, one study found that only 1% of undocumented Congolese migrants across a variety of Western European countries returned home after 10 years, compared to 42% of those with legal status (Flahaux 2014). However, documentation was shown to have different impacts depending on the migrants' country of origin.

In a study in Spain, it was highlighted that dual citizenship allowed some migrants to return to the country of origin temporarily, while those without remained due to legal precarity or family responsibilities – be it a responsibility to send financial support to the country of origin or supporting family in the host country (Abaunza 2024). In the research interviews, migrants emphasized that legal status was less about accessing benefits and more about being able to live a transnational life, as for example having the opportunity to travel freely and reunite with family in both host and origin countries (Abaunza 2024: 207).

Gaining Skills; Access to Host Country Benefits before Return

Acquiring skills and professional experience abroad was consistently shown to positively influence the reintegration prospects of voluntary returnees, but the benefits were often conditional and uneven. Migrants who returned after a successful migration journey, meaning they had gained professional skills, social capital, and in some cases financial resources, were more likely to achieve sustainable reintegration and contribute meaningfully to their country of origin (Caselli 2024). However, reintegration plans were often fragile and required adaptation, as returnees faced uncertainty about origin country conditions, and purely financial support (e.g., from AVRR programs) was usually insufficient without additional resources (Caselli 2024). Several studies highlighted that migrants with higher human and social capital gained in the host country, often from more elite or highly educated backgrounds, were better positioned to reintegrate economically, even though this was sometimes driven by coping mechanisms rather than a strong original intent to return (Van Houte 2017). Finally, migration policies that incentivized human capital accumulation, for example, by tying permanent residency to individual achievement, encouraged migrants to invest in their skills during their time in the host country (Adda et al. 2021). However, when immigration policies limited the expected length of stay or restricted access to legal stability, this negatively affected skill accumulation and thus undermined long-term reintegration prospects (Adda et al. 2021).

Integration measures (e.g., rights, access to citizenship, language/culture support) were seen as important for enabling successful return, including in research conducted in Sweden (Altamirano 1995). Having regular residence status was also shown to improve access to legal employment and education, which increased the capacity for the returnee to gain resources, skills and human capital (Adda et al. 2021; Caselli 2024; Serra-Mingot 2023). When accumulating working skills and economic capital, the willingness to return could be increased as migrants felt they had acquired sufficient means to be able to resettle back in their origin country.

Border Policy

In the included studies, voluntary return migration before one had secure legal status such as citizenship or long-term residency was perceived as a one-way decision that prevented the possibility of re-entry into the host country (Van Houte 2011). As such, migrants often delayed or avoided return until they had acquired legal rights in the host country. This allowed for greater autonomy, including the ability to circulate or migrate again if reintegration in the country of origin was unsuccessful. This was notably true among Ghanaian migrants in Spain, who resisted return until they and their family members obtained permanent residence (Agyeman 2011). Even those preparing to return emphasized their intent to retain residency permits to maintain mobility between Spain and Ghana.

Meanwhile, open border policies and mobility agreements encouraged return migration. Quantitative evidence demonstrates that accession to Schengen increased outmigration by more than 50%, while EU membership led to a 23% rise in returns (Bazillier 2023). Similarly, in Switzerland, bilateral agreements under the free movement of persons policy were associated with higher return rates, particularly to countries with legal mobility arrangements (Akkoyunlu 2013). These findings suggest that the option to return without permanent loss of access to the host country facilitates circular or temporary return migration.

Long-term Settlement Effects

In contexts where migrants faced restrictions or conditionality in retaining legal status, return migration was often delayed or avoided. In many cases, migrants have traveled far and are living in the host country for an extended period in the pursuit of legal status or citizenship – the scale of their investment in the move and settlement in the host country makes it difficult to encourage voluntary return (Black et al. 2004; Flahaux 2014; Kromhout 2011). Over time, prolonged stays in the host country led to a weakening of emotional, cultural, and social ties to the country of origin, which further complicated return decisions and undermined the perceived probability of reintegration (Dånge 2023; Lietaert 2016). Similarly, conditional legal statuses discouraged return when re-entry was not guaranteed, reinforcing the perception that return might permanently close off future opportunities (Kuschminder 2022; Flahaux 2017). These findings indicate that return rates decrease when legal stability is at stake. On the other hand, where legal mobility was preserved, such as under free movement agreements, return migration was found to increase.

For longer term resident migrants, the ability to keep long-term legal residence in the host country creates a feeling of security and safety, which is what many of the studies showed when migrants expressed what they mostly wanted (Black et al. 2004; Eastmond 2006; Van Houte 2017). For example, for Bosnian refugees in Sweden, access to Swedish citizenship made return more manageable by allowing seasonal returns and ongoing ties to Sweden, which were seen as positive and empowering experiences (Eastmond 2006). Overall, legal status is not only a gateway to social rights but a critical enabler of choice, shaping the feasibility, safety, and timing of return.

Lost Property Restitution

Many of the target groups in Sweden could return to post-war settings. Important to note that, although the research is scarce, some studies show that facilitating access to restitution or reparation processes – such as reclaiming lost property or receiving compensation – can support return by strengthening returnees' sense of justice, stability, and belonging. Restoration of lost property was shown to reduce vulnerability during return visits or permanent return by providing housing security and a built-in social context (Eastmond 2006). In addition, it increases attachment to both host and origin societies, helping migrants navigate uncertainty without severing ties to either place (Eastmond 2006). Among Afghan returnees, property ownership facilitated investment in reconstruction, temporary economic activities, and a gradual process of return rather than abrupt repatriation (Van Houte 2017). Host countries can play a role by advocating for and supporting such mechanisms in origin countries, thereby helping to create conditions more conducive to voluntary and sustainable return.

Host Country Conditions

In addition to direct and indirect measures, many of the included studies emphasized other aspects of the European host countries, which we can think of as elements of the structural and affective landscapes where return migration is undertaken or not undertaken. Host country conditions affect migrants' everyday lives and opportunities, shaping their integration and attachment to the host country, and the circumstances under which they make migration decisions.

Our research synthesis observed 6 different themes related to host country conditions:

- encounters with the migration system
- economic conditions and difficulties accessing the labor market
- housing instability and material hardship

-
- social segregation and exclusion
 - anti-immigrant political climate
 - policy change

Encounters with the Migration System

Many studies emphasized migrants' repeated and often disempowering interactions with immigration institutions. Migrants described navigating complex bureaucracies as a seemingly unending and time-consuming process rife with legal uncertainty. For example, in Denmark, a policy paradigm shift prioritized repatriation over integration, creating an institutional framework designed to encourage eventual return and leading to a sense of uncertainty around the future (Dånge 2023). Aleem, a 23-year-old humanitarian migrant from Syria and legal resident of Denmark, described the challenges of navigating the migration system, while still recovering from the trauma of his difficult flight to Europe:

"Well, I make a plan for the future. But it just changes all the time. Right now, I would like to complete my education, so I can start working as a Social and Health Assistant. Then I would like to continue studying to become a doctor. Right now, this is the plan. But I do not know if something will change. If I am allowed to stay in the country and such."

(Aleem, August 2020, Dånge 2023: 661)

In Belgium, extended interactions with the migration system ultimately led to exhaustion which resulted in a sense of desperation. As a study participant from XX declared:

"I have been a long time in Belgium. Eight years, in that way, my young life is damaged. My case is still running here, but I cannot wait anymore, it is a frustrating life."

(Lietaert et al. 2014: 150)

Such institutional encounters could contribute to the development of a sense of injustice among those who felt themselves ill-treated by the migration system (Valenta & Thorshaug 2011: 11), even those who succeed in acquiring permanent residence and citizenship.

Economic Conditions and Difficulties in Accessing the Labor Market

Unemployment and economic marginalization were widespread conditions in the included studies. Even when migrants were granted legal permission to work, many encountered systemic barriers to accessing stable employment,

including language difficulties, discrimination, and non-recognition of foreign credentials (Black et al. 2004; Eastmond 2006; Koser & Kuschminder 2015). One respondent observed that formal permission to work did not mean the opportunity to actually get a job (Lietaert 2016:307). While some of these economic difficulties were persistent and slow-developing, other, more rapid economic shocks were observed in the included studies. Economic crises such as the 2008 financial downturn and the COVID-19 pandemic led to waves of job losses and economic insecurity, particularly among guest workers and those working in informal sectors (Abaunza 2024; Agyeman 2011; Jones 1991; Moreno-Márquez & Álvarez-Román 2017). These forms of economic marginalization – whether structural or crisis-induced – shaped migrants' sense of security and long-term prospects in the host country, with potential impacts of return migration.

Housing Instability and Material Hardship

Hardship in the host country was a persistent element of everyday life discussed in many of the included studies. Migrants often shared their experiences of living in overcrowded, insecure, or inadequate housing. For example, in Spain, one woman described living with eight others in a one-bedroom apartment during the financial crisis, saying, "I couldn't bear it anymore. You felt trapped" (Abaunza 2024: 205). The lack of access to basic utilities – such as electricity and water in informal Roma settlements in France (Anghel 2019:155) – highlighted the extent of material deprivation. In these contexts, material hardship could in some cases lead migrants to consider return because stability and dignity seem unattainable in the host country.

Social Segregation and Exclusion

Migrants' lived experiences were also shaped by persistent social exclusion and limited opportunities for integration. While some policies nominally supported integration, their effects were often constrained or undermined by broader structures of exclusion. Stigmatization and discrimination associated with xenophobia in political discussions or the general society shapes return migration intentions (Abaunza 2024; Anghel 2019; Bolognani et al. 2017; Dänge 2023; Eastmond 2006; Lietaert 2016; Tecca 2024; Vathi 2019; Vandevoort 2018). In Belgium and the United Kingdom, growing anti-immigrant sentiment and Islamophobic rhetoric prompted some migrants to consider return as a way to escape social exclusion (Bolognani et al. 2017; Abaunza 2024; Dänge 2023). Similarly, in Sweden and Italy, migrants facing long-term discrimination and cultural exclusion felt alienated despite years of residence, thus weakening attachment and making return appear more viable (Eastmond 2006; Anghel 2019). Also in Sweden, Bosnian refugees who had access to income support still

struggled to participate in the labor market, with some interpreting reintegration training programs as disconnected from real prospects of employment or belonging. As described by Eastmond (2006:146):

“Four to five years after arrival, the large majority of recent Bosnian refugees in Sweden were still unemployed or caught in the revolving doors of immigrant retraining programmes, relying on various forms of income support...Even if host state income support provided a stable economic base, it did not match the Bosnians’ ideal of ‘normal life’ encompassing both work, sociality, and prospects for advancement.”

The disappointment associated with social exclusion might lead some migrants to view return not necessarily as a preferred choice, but as a more dignified or hopeful alternative to continued marginalization in the host society.

Anti-Immigrant Political Climate

Related to, but distinct from conditions of segregation and exclusion, anti-immigrant political discourse surrounding migration in many European countries further influenced migrants’ sense of exclusion and uncertainty, thus potentially acting as an incentive to return. Right-wing populism, xenophobic rhetoric, and national policies cast migrants as temporary guests and reinforced a sense of non-belonging (Eastmond 2005; Bolognani 2016). Bolognani (2016) shows how Muslim migrants in the UK internalized the message that they are inherently foreign and unassimilable. Koch (2014) and Vandevoordt (2017) highlight how state-led messaging and policy reframed return as part of a broader strategy of migration control instead of a human right, undermining the neutral and supportive role host countries might have in return migration. Lietaert (2016) further notes that rejected asylum seekers in Belgium internalized this messaging, feeling explicitly told that “you don’t belong here”. Anghel (2013) describes how the emphasis on return of Roma populations in France served more to manage the visibility of exclusion than to promote genuine integration or return, effectively legitimizing social segregation.

Policy Change

The political climate of host countries could lead to immigrants not feeling welcomed and unwanted, or as previously mentioned, were not fully given the opportunity to exercise their skills and capabilities in their destination country. For instance, in the United Kingdom and Norway, Pakistani-origin migrants experienced a persistent sense of not fully belonging, which sustained the “discursive possibility of return” even among citizens and long-term residents

(Bolognani 2016). The feeling that they were perceived primarily as migrants, despite legal status or cultural familiarity, led to a form of symbolic exclusion that sometimes made the idea of return more imaginable than the ongoing experience of marginalization. Participants reported a sense of double standards in civic life and integration, particularly in moments of public anxiety following terrorist attacks, where Islamophobia and institutional xenophobia intensified.

In Denmark, similar experiences were observed among young refugees navigating the shift in national policy from integration to repatriation, with residence permits made increasingly temporary (Dänge 2023). This policy shift, combined with a public discourse emphasizing the temporariness of refugee presence, made young immigrants experience mental stress, as they described how it hindered their engagement in education and social life. For example, participants reported struggling to stay motivated to learn Danish or plan for careers when they feared they might be sent back at any time. Other studies confirmed migrants' feelings of exclusion regarding access to health-care, where unintended limitation to the healthcare system as an effect of discriminatory practices led to many migrants feeling unwelcomed and wanting to prioritize their family's safety (Abaunza 2023). Thus, migrants might choose to return, depending on access to healthcare, although the qualitative effect was only shown in 2 of 17 respondents (*ibid*).

Impacts of Host Country Conditions

Structural conditions also clearly shaped migrants' experiences in the host country, but the impact of most host country conditions on actual return migration decisions was not clearly established in the included studies. Across the five thematic categories – migration system encounters, economic hardship, housing instability, social segregation, and anti-immigrant discourse – the review found that these conditions frequently undermined migrants' attachment to and integration in the host country. However, they did not consistently lead to return or participation in voluntary return programs. See Table 7 for an overview of the impacts of conditions in the host country.

Table 7. Impacts of Other Host Country Conditions on Return Migration

Host Country Condition	Evidence of Impact	Consistency of Impacts
Institutional encounters with the migration system	Long-term legal insecurity, difficulties dealing with migration bureaucracy, and repeated permit renewals with long waiting times led some to return, undercut attachment to and integration in host country (Lietaert 2016; Dånge 2023).	Many chose to stay despite difficulties with the migration system (Lietaert 2016). Among some, the sacrifice required and the extended timeline increased their resolve to stay permanently.
Economic conditions and labor market exclusion	Job loss and lack of labor market access triggered 'shock returns' during crises (Abaunza 2024; Moreno-Márquez & Álvarez-Román 2017).	Economic hardship not sufficient in itself to prompt return migration (Koser & Kuschminder 2015).
Housing instability and material hardship	Overcrowding and lack of shelter contributed to feelings of desperation and a desire to return (Abaunza 2024; Vandevordt 2017).	Material hardship did not usually trigger return (Lietaert 2016). Deprived circumstances were tolerated for years.
Social segregation and exclusion	Lack of belonging undercut attachment to and integration in host country (Eastmond 2006).	Social segregation and exclusion were rarely linked to return decisions. Many argued that this was not relevant for return decisions (Black et al. 2004).
Anti-immigrant political climate	State rhetoric and hostile integration environments undercut attachment to and integration in host country (Lietaert 2016; Bolognani 2016; Vandevordt 2017).	Hostile rhetoric acknowledged but not determinative; migrants often weighed against conditions in origin country (Eastmond 2005).

Host Country Condition	Evidence of Impact	Consistency of Impacts
Discrimination; Denial of status and rights	Hostile political discourse fostered feelings of exclusion, sustaining the 'possibility of return' despite legal integration (Bolognani 2016; Dånge 2023).	Feelings of exclusion commonly sustained ideas of return, though not necessarily leading to actual return.

Institutional Encounters with the Migration System

Long-term legal insecurity, repeated permit renewals, and unstable residence status were widely cited as factors that eroded migrants' connection to the host country. However, struggles for legal status did not consistently predict return. Many migrants stayed despite challenges, often driven by hope for the future, a persistence in making good on the investments and sacrifices that they and their families made to migrate, and/or concern about returning to precarious conditions in their origin country (Koser & Kuschminder 2015; Lietaert 2016; Mahar 2023). For some, the long and difficult process of securing status even increased their determination to remain, given the sacrifices they had already made (Valenta & Thorshaug 2011).

Economic Conditions and Labor Market Exclusion

Unemployment, underemployment, and lack of labor market access were often identified as central concerns in the host country. In particular, economic crises contributed to what Abaunza (2024: 198) described as "shock returns" – reactive departures driven by immediate economic necessity. However, such shocks aside, research also suggests that return migration under normal economic circumstances is more common among those who had achieved savings goals that would facilitate their reintegration in the origin country – for example, amassing the resources they needed to buy or build a house (Ohndorf 1986). Furthermore, unemployment and economic crises do not always lead to increased return migration, especially among those with families and those who are already established in host countries (van Amersfoort et al. 1980). Koser and Kuschminder (2015) found that even in cases of prolonged unemployment or lack of income, many migrants chose to stay as a result of the absence of viable prospects in the origin country, combined with a sense of investment in the host country, which meant that economic insecurity was often endured rather than prompting return.

Housing Instability and Material Hardship

Material hardship – especially in the form of overcrowded or unstable housing situations – was described as degrading (Abaunza 2024; Vandevoordt 2017). While such hardship contributed to a broader sense of exclusion, it rarely served as the sole or decisive factor behind return migration. Lietaert (2016) observed that deprived circumstances were often tolerated for years, with migrants adapting to informal arrangements or relying on community networks.

Social Segregation and Exclusion

Studies show that structural discrimination – such as racial profiling – can reduce migrants' expectations of long-term integration and, in some cases, prompt consideration of return even when it is not their preferred option (Lietaert 2016; Vandevoordt 2018; Vathi 2019; Tecca 2024). Problems such as loneliness and a lack of feeling at home could be part of migrants considering return migration in some cases, but not others (Black et al. 2004). Yet for most, these experiences did not directly influence return decisions. As Black et al. (2004) found, migrants often saw segregation and marginalization as unfortunate but unrelated to the question of whether to stay or return. Many expressed a desire to persevere despite exclusion, hoping for eventual improvement or driven by family considerations such as the future opportunities for their children.

Anti-Immigrant Political Climate

The broader political context – including hostile rhetoric, restrictive policy discourse, and public messaging about return – certainly played a role in shaping migrants' perceptions of belonging. In Belgium, Germany, and the UK, migrants internalized state messages that cast them as outsiders or temporary guests, which weakened their sense of inclusion (Lietaert 2016; Bolognani 2016; Vandevoordt 2017). However, according to the included studies, political hostility did not consistently lead to return. As Eastmond (2006) notes, many migrants recognized anti-immigrant sentiment but did not see it as a sufficient reason to leave, especially when compared to the uncertainties or dangers associated with returning. Migrants actively weighed the limitations of host country life against the risks of reintegration elsewhere, often choosing to endure exclusion.

3.2 Contextual Factors Shaping the Impact of Voluntary Return Measures

In this section, we answer the final research question: What contextual factors shape the effectiveness of these non-economic incentives for voluntary return migration?

In answering this question. We considered two factors: origin country conditions and migrant characteristics.

Relevance of Conditions in the Country of Origin

The decision to return is shaped not only by conditions in the host country, but also by the characteristics of the country of origin (Hagin and Wassink 2020). Across the included studies, several key origin country conditions consistently emerged as influential in return migration outcomes. Political instability and insecurity often created significant barriers to return. Economic conditions in the origin country were also central. Access to basic services and infrastructure, as well as the possibility of future mobility or re-migration were also origin country conditions emphasized in the included studies.

Personal and Political Insecurity

Across the reviewed studies, political instability and insecurity in countries of origin consistently emerged as decisive barriers to return migration. Migrants often described their countries of origin as unsafe and unpredictable, even many years after conflicts had officially ended. For example, a research participant from Afghanistan emphasized that the situation remained perilous despite formal claims of the end of conflict and improvement:

“It is quite nice to say for the media and everyone that the Taliban is gone and all is fine. Yet Afghanistan has returned to the situation of 1992: civil war, war lords, chaos and all of those ... We have not seen any changes. The situation has become worse than the Taliban time.”

(Black et al. 2004: 15)

Similarly, concerns about personal safety were widespread. For example, one interview participant who had returned to Pakistan from the United Kingdom reported, “It is very difficult to get resettled here. Since getting here there's been quite a lot of bombs so it's difficult for me...” (Reeve et al. 2010: 10).

In focus groups conducted by Black et al. (2004), Somali migrants reinforced these findings. The research participants overwhelmingly linked their personal safety to the political conditions in the origin country by ranking peace as the

most important factor in their return migration decision-making. As one participant explained:

“Peace, well that is clear. That is the most important thing of all.
[...] If there is peace then it will be safe. If there are political
changes there will be peace and it will be safe, you see?”

(Black et al. 2004: 15)

Quantitative evidence from the included studies further supports these findings, with security concerns consistently cited as a factor shaping return decisions across diverse contexts, including among refugees from Kosovo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Afghanistan (Black et al. 2004; Beauchemin 2020; Issifou & Magris 2017). However, it should be noted that one of the included studies, which focused primarily on economic migrants, did not find origin country conditions to be particularly impactful factors in return migration (Koser & Kuschminder 2015: 8). These varying results highlight that peace and security are not simply desirable conditions but fundamental preconditions for voluntary return particularly among those who left insecure and unstable conditions in the origin country.

Economic Conditions

Economic conditions in migrants' countries of origin were also a major factor influencing decisions about return. As Akkoyunlu & Schlöpfer (2013: 15) conclude, economic conditions are crucial: as a “key explanatory variable for return migration – GDP in the source country – is significant. Return migration occurs to rich countries more often than to poor.” Conversely, high unemployment and fragile economies served as a major deterrent for return. For instance, Agyeman (2011: 154) explained, “Some of the migrants also said the socio-economic situation in Ghana is worse. Therefore, when certain basic necessities such as a house and an income generating activity have not been secured in Ghana, return is not a reasonable solution.”

Economic uncertainty compounded fears about reintegration prospects after return. Among Kosovans considering return, one research participant described the bleak economic landscape:

“Basically now, you go there [Kosovo] you can't do anything.
Because there is no work! Again, there is a major issue, because
we are the people within Europe. I can go there, I can leave the UK,
but then I would return back as an economic migrant, and I don't
want that!”

(Black et al. 2004: 16)

Overall, both qualitative and quantitative findings underscore that stable economic conditions in the country of origin – especially the availability of secure livelihoods – are critical preconditions for voluntary return. When these conditions are absent, many migrants prefer to remain abroad despite significant hardships they may experience in the in the host country.

Furthermore, it is not just economic prospects that matter, economic inequality in the country of origin also plays a role. Higher levels of income inequality in origin countries tend to discourage return, especially among less-skilled migrants. When income inequality is greater at home than in host countries, migrants are typically negatively selected – that is, they come from lower socio-economic strata – and thus have fewer incentives to return, given their limited prospects in the highly unequal society they left in the first place (King & Kuschminder 2020). As noted in one of the included studies,

“An increase in inequality will reduce return migration, because the returns to their lower skills are now even lower in the source country. Only the most skilled group ... will find it optimal to return. Most of the lowest skilled workers will prefer to stay.”

(Akkoyunlu & Schläpfer 2013: 19)

Encouraging, coercing, or forcing return migration under such conditions often reinforces existing socio-economic divisions, leaving vulnerable returnees worse off and complicating broader efforts toward reintegration and development (King & Kuschminder 2022; Lietaert 2016; Beauchemin 2020; Van Houte 2016).

Services and Infrastructure

The quality of infrastructure and basic services in migrants' countries is referenced in the included studies as critical in shaping migrants' perceptions of whether a return home is viable (Caselli and Marcu 2024; Amore 2006; Eastmond 2006; Beauchemin 2020; Agyeman 2011). Across studies, a lack of quality schools, hospitals, reliable utilities, and other fundamental services were cited as a major deterrent to voluntary return, particularly among migrants returning to post-conflict and low-income contexts. In Senegal, Caselli and Marcu (2024) found that reintegration plans often had to be revised due to unexpected deficiencies in infrastructure, including difficulties accessing basic necessities such as water, electricity, and healthcare. Similarly, return migrants in Kosovo highlighted how inadequate health services, educational facilities, and utilities discouraged permanent return migration (Amore 2006).

Attachment to Home

Migrants' emotional ties to the origin country, or conversely their loss of attachment after longer stays abroad, were important factors in many of the included studies (Black et al. 2004; Caselli and Marcu 2024; Eastmond 2006; Van Houte 2017). Feelings of "home" and cultural belonging influenced whether return was considered viable. However, long-term residence abroad diminished emotional connection to the country of origin and difficult conditions in the origin country complicated reintegration efforts. As Van Houte (2017:57) notes, returning "home" can become an ambivalent prospect, as "the discrepancy between the idealized country of origin and the reality of a war-torn society makes it difficult to decide to return." Similarly, Caselli and Marcu (2023: 299) observed that for Senegalese returnees, prolonged separation from cultural roots complicated the emotional transition back home and left them "struggling to reintegrate into their social and family situations," and rising feelings of alienation and disconnection, in which "the country they returned to no longer felt like the country they had left behind."

The Stigma of Return

One common hindrance for return observed in many studies was the stigma associated with return. Returnees often felt as if they were perceived as "failed migrants" upon their return and returning "empty-handed" or in debt frequently led to feelings of shame and disappointment, not only for the returnees but also for their families (Caselli 2024; Maâ et al. 2023; Mahar 2023; Koser & Kuschminder 2015; Van Houte 2017). Migrants feeling stigma around return migration was often a consequence of contextual factors, such as family expectations in the country of origin, sometimes stemming from perceived gender expectations (Caselli 2023; Mahar 2023; Koser & Kuschminder 2015; Serra-Mingot 2022). From one study, the authors described how returnees perceived return, whereas one returnee said: "If you go back to Europe it's shame, if you come back, it's twice the shame." (Koser & Kuschminder 2015). Similarly to the other studies, migrants' expectations of migrating for better prospects in life, can feel shameful when viewed as failure, and therefore many migrants tried to do everything to avoid returning. Family expectations also played a role in many instances where the family had expectations, both economically but also socially (Mahar 2023; Koser & Kuschminder 2015).

In some cases, the stigma was so strong that returnees tried to conceal the nature of their return, claiming they had been deported when they had left voluntarily, or pretending that their return was temporary (Caselli 2023; Mahar 2023). In Germany, Pakistani men reported deliberately framing their return as forced deportation rather than voluntary, in order to maintain a

sense of dignity and masculinity in the eyes of their community. On the other hand, in Afghanistan and among the Afghan diaspora in Europe, it was found that voluntary return was more common among the Afghan elite, many of whom left host countries in Europe due to experiencing racism, discrimination, and a perceived glass ceiling in professional advancement (Van Houte 2016; Serra-Mingot 2023). For these individuals, return was rarely an expression of genuine intent, but rather a coping mechanism driven by unmet aspirations and social exclusion abroad. Yet, upon returning, these individuals often confronted community expectations tied to class and education, which complicated reintegration.

Table 8 synthesizes the main impacts of origin country conditions on the likelihood of return.

Table 8. Impacts of Origin Country Conditions

Origin country Condition	Evidence of Impact	Consistency of Impacts
Personal and political insecurity; Security and political instability	Instability, insecurity, and personal safety concerns deter return (Black et al. 2004; Beauchemin 2020; Issifou & Magris 2017; Reeve et al. 2010).	Consistently identified as critical deterrents to return across conflict-affected countries. Contradictory findings among economic migrants (Koser & Kuschminder 2015).
Economic conditions and inequality	Poor economic conditions, unemployment, and high inequality discourage return; wealthier origin countries attract more returnees (Agyeman 2011; Black et al. 2004; Akkoyunlu & Schlöpfer 2013; King & Kuschminder 2020; Beauchemin 2020; Van Houte 2016).	Economic hardship and inequality broadly identified as significant deterrents, though exceptions noted for migrants with strong personal/family ties to origin country and a family-related need to return.

Origin country Condition	Evidence of Impact	Consistency of Impacts
Services and infrastructure	Lack of schools, hospitals, reliable utilities deter return, especially in post-conflict and low-income contexts (Caselli and Marcu 2024; Amore 2006; Eastmond 2006; Beauchemin 2020; Agyeman 2011).	Consistently cited as major obstacles to sustainable return.
Attachment to home	Long-term stays abroad weaken emotional connection to home (Black et al. 2004; Caselli and Marcu 2024; Eastmond 2006; Van Houte 2017).	Loss of attachment widely reported as complicating reintegration. However it is not a direct trigger for return decision.
Destigmatizing return	Fear of stigma led migrants to avoid return; family expectations intensified shame around return (Caselli 2023; Koser & Kuschminder 2015; Mahar 2023).	Stigma around return found widely across contexts and migrant groups.

Migrant Characteristics

In the reviewed articles the major migrants – potential returnees – characteristics that are taken up are age, gender, family relations, employment status and economic well-being, reasons for initial migration, migration status and human capital. Some of these characteristics are shown to impact return migration behavior or interact with different host country measures. The migrant characteristics and the evidence of impact is summarized in Table 9.

Table 9. Impacts of Migrant Characteristics

Migrant Characteristic	Evidence of impact	Consistency of Impacts
Age	Elderly migrants show a desire to retire in their origin country (Mahar 2023; Van Houte 2017).	The quantitative studies show no consistent pattern of return migrants by age (Koser & Kuschminder 2015; Gundel & Peters 2008; Akkoyunlo & Schläpfer 2013).
Gender	Gender roles and family expectations can make men feel ashamed for returning (Mahar 2023).	Evidence on women's perspective on return migration is lacking (Zlotnik 1990). The quantitative studies show no consistent pattern of return migration by gender (Akkoyunlo & Schläpfer 2013; Flahaux 2017).
Family relations	For many migrants the decision to return is not solely an individual decision but involves the family (Mahar 2023; Abaunza 2024; Koser & Kuschminder 2015; Lietaert 2016).	No clear pattern on how family relations effect return migration can be found. For some, family acts as a push-factor to remain in the host country (Abaunza 2024; Mahar 2023) and for others, as a pull-factor to return (Koser & Kuschminder 2015; Lietaert 2016).
Employment status and economic well-being	Poor economic well-being in the host country pressure migrants to the option of return (Lietaert 2019; Lietaert 2016; Lietaert et al. 2017c). Unemployment increases return migration (Koser & Kuschminder 2015; Gundel & Peters 2008).	Many of the returning migrants are financially vulnerable turning to return as the last option.

Migrant Characteristic	Evidence of impact	Consistency of Impacts
Reasons for initial migration	For migrants who migrated with earning objectives, the decision to return is influenced by the attainment of planned earnings (Maher & Cawley 2016; Mahar 2023).	If earning objectives are not met, migrants can report a feeling of failure upon return (Mahar 2023).
Migration status	Migrants only view AVR programs as attractive after a negative asylum decision (Koser & Kuschminder 2015; Reeve et al. 2010). Rejected asylum seekers are overrepresented in AVR programs (Koser & Kuschminder 2015; Vandevoordt 2018; Leerkes et al. 2017; Reeve et al. 2010).	Some conflicting evidence exists pointing out that undocumented migrants are less likely to return (Flahaux et al. 2014). When residence permits and naturalization is granted return becomes more attractive because mobility is guaranteed (Moreno-Márquez & Álvarez-Román 2017; Akwasi Agyeman 2011).
Human capital	Skilled migrants are more likely to return than unskilled migrants (Bellemare 2007; Gundel & Peters 2008).	When undocumented and rejected asylum seekers are excluded from the analysis, migrants who have more resources feel more comfortable returning home.

Age

In some of the studies, age was a central study factor. This was the case for studies looking at the possibility of return migration and transferability of social protection, like pensions, for elderly migrants (Duci et al. 2019; Eastmond 2006; Vathi et al. 2019). In some qualitative studies, the elderly migrants described a desire to retire in their origin country since they have met their goal of working abroad and are now ready for retirement at home (Mahar 2023; Van Houte 2017). In several of the quantitative studies age was part of the analysis. However, the studies show mixed evidence of the impact of age on return migration. In one study the data on age show no obvious trends for return migration (Koser & Kuschminder 2015). One quantitative

study found that younger migrants and elderly migrants are more likely to leave the country, while migrants in the age groups representing the core labor force (31–50 years) are less likely to leave the country (Gundel & Peters 2008). Another study shows contrasting results with migrant outflows being dominated by ages 20–39 and a low proportion of outmigrants aged above 65 years (Akkoyunlo & Schlöpfer 2013).

Gender

Gender is less extensively studied in the included articles. Only one qualitative article specifically focuses on gender and examines men and their relation to return migration (Mahar 2023). The article concludes that male gender roles and expectations play a crucial role for Pakistani men's return behavior. This reinforces what a previous section discussed: returning home is perceived as a failure and many men feel shame upon their return. Because of this the returning men would rather be seen as deportees than voluntary returnees (Mahar 2023). A more in-depth perspective on women's relation to return migration is lacking in the included articles. One of the quantitative studies show that men are more likely than women to return from Switzerland to a variety of countries (Akkoyunlo & Schlöpfer 2013), while another study showed that women were more likely to return to Senegal from France, Spain and Italy than men (Flahaux 2017).

Family Relations

In the included studies, family relations are seen as important factors for return migration pointing out that it is not solely an individual decision. Yet, no clear direction can be found on how family relations impact return migration. For some migrants the family in the origin country had expectations that the migrant would remain abroad to support the family back home (Abaunza 2024; Mahar 2023) or children expressing that their parents should not return (Moreno-Márquez & Álvarez-Román 2017) hindering return migration. Other respondents reported that reuniting with family was a big pull-factor for returning (Koser & Kuschminder 2015; Lietaert 2016; Lietaert et al. 2017c). Amore, noted on his study that having family in the host country can make it easier to return because they could financially support the returning migrant (Amore 2006). A quantitative study of return migration from Switzerland to a wide variety of countries of origin found that divorce increases the return migration of men, but it decreases return migration for women (Akkoyunlo & Schlöpfer 2013). All this evidence taken together emphasizes the importance of family relations in the return migration process, highlighting that return migration is influenced by personal family dynamics.

Employment Status and Economic Well-Being

The employment status and economic well-being is, in both the qualitative and quantitative studies, an important characteristic for return migration. The qualitative evidence highlights that the absence of employment and economic well-being can drive return migration. The quantitative evidence points in the same direction as one study found that being employed reduces the probability of return migration (Gundel & Peters 2008). Descriptive statistics from another study stated that 90% of migrants returned to Albania due to unemployment in the host country (Vathi et al. 2019). However, for migrants who struggled in the host country, their low level of living conditions often remained after return (Lietaert et al. 2017c).

Reason for Initial Migration

The reason why a person migrated in the first place also affects their return migration behavior. For those who migrated with the goal of working and making money, the decision to return is related to meeting their earnings goal (Maher & Cawley 2016; Mahar 2023). Migrants also reported that they might feel like failures if they return before their financial goal is met (Mahar 2023). Lastly, the initial reasons for migrating are also found to correspond to different reintegration trajectories. Returnees who had migrated for economic reasons were more likely to reintegrate successfully than those who left for other reasons. Similarly, individuals who were economically stable before migrating were better reintegrated upon return compared to those who had faced hardships prior to migration (Koser & Kuschminder 2015). This highlights how economic reasons for migration, as well as economic wellbeing in the host country, affects both return migration and reintegration trajectories.

Migration Status

The most important characteristic determining return migration was found to be migration status. It is important to point out that the included studies examined varying populations. Some studies, for example, excluded rejected asylum seekers, in order to examine solely voluntary return migration (Akkoyunlo & Schlöpfer 2013; Gundel & Peters 2008; Bellemare 2007). Many studies did however include rejected asylum seekers, whose choice in returning can be questioned as voluntary (Schweizer 2022; Rosenberg & Koppes 2018; Sahin-Mencutek & Triandafyllidou 2025; Valenta & Thorshaug 2011; Kuschminder 2022; Lietaert et al. 2017a; Vandevordt 2018; Mahar 2023; Van Houte 2017; Kromhout 2011; Tecca 2024; Lietaert et al. 2017b; Leerkes et al. 2017; Black et al. 2004; Koser & Kuschminder 2015; Lietaert 2016; Reeve et al. 2010; Robinson & Williams 2015).

The qualitative evidence largely points in the same direction; a negative decision in an asylum case is a strong determinant for return (Koser & Kuschminder 2015; Reeve et al. 2010). However, some specific groups do not show the same pattern regarding migration status and return migration. One study showed that undocumented Congolese migrants are less likely to return than documented migrants (Flahaux et al. 2014). In the same vein, when naturalization increased in Spain, the returns to Ecuador also increased, pointing out the importance of mobility for migrants (Moreno-Márquez & Álvarez-Román 2017).

Human Capital

A migrant's human capital, as in skill and education level, is a characteristic that seems to affect return migration behavior. Generally, migrants with more human capital (i.e. highly skilled migrants) are more likely to return than lower skilled migrants (Bellemare 2007; Gundel & Peters 2008). A quantitative study suggests that short term visas increase the probability of outmigration for highly skilled workers whereas a permanent visa substantially lowers the outmigration of highly skilled workers (Bellemare 2007). Another quantitative study finds similar results: highly skilled migrants are 61 per cent more prone to leave Germany. This effect is found to be more pronounced for women than for men (Gundel & Peters 2008). A similar result, that highly skilled migrants are more likely to return, is found in a qualitative study that describes how professionals like doctors, nurses and teachers feel an obligation to return to rebuild their origin country (Amore 2006). One quantitative study investigates how an increase in inequality in the origin country affects the return migration patterns of migrants with different human capital. When the inequality increases only the highly skilled migrants will return, whereas the low skilled migrants will find it optimal to stay in the host country (Akkoyunlo & Schläpfer 2013). The evidence relating to a migrant's human capital shows that highly skilled migrants are more likely to return to their origin country. However, this evidence must be considered together with the sample included in the studies that investigate human capital. These studies (Bellemare 2007; Gundel & Peters 2008; Akkoyunlo & Schläpfer 2013), exclude undocumented migrants and rejected asylum seekers.

More Specific Links between Types of Measures and Particular Characteristics

Some specific links between migrant characteristics and types of measures that have come up in the literature are examined in this section. Return migration measures related to education and training are found to be selective when it comes to the age of the migrant. Due to the high priority placed on economic reintegration in these training programs, elderly migrants are

mostly excluded since they do not have the same prospects in the labor market (Jurt & Odermatt 2024). Similarly, migrants with little or no educational background struggle with setting up business plans to get support through small business grants and face the risk of exclusion from these programs (Jurt & Odermatt 2024). The importance of employment for return was highlighted in the previous section – being unemployed in the host country increases the reported willingness to return. However, the relation between being unemployed and undertaking return migration varies by gender. One quantitative study suggests that this differs between men and women, as being employed is found to reduce the likelihood of return for men by 28% while not being significant for women (Gundel & Peters 2008). The importance of destigmatizing return for men is clearly shown in one study, where the men viewed return migration as a failure (Mahar 2023).

3.3 Transnationalism and Self Determination

As we worked with the literature on voluntary return migration for this systematic review, two interconnected themes emerged as particularly present and influential in existing research: transnationalism and self-determination. Migrants' ability to maintain social, legal, economic, and emotional ties across borders, and their capacity to exercise agency over the timing and conditions of their return, were shown in many studies to profoundly affect both the decision to return and the sustainability of reintegration. Given that host countries play a key role in either supporting or undermining transnationalism and self-determination, we explore these themes in greater depth.

Transnationalism

From our list of included studies, at least 17 of them addressed transnationalism in some way. In the context of return migration, transnationalism refers to the ability of returnees to maintain ongoing cross-border linkages (social, legal, economic, and symbolic ties), with *both* origin and host country after returning to their country of origin. Transnationalism was described as an important part of the migrant's experience, and was reported to be the biggest reason for considering or wanting to return in several studies (Black et al. 2004; Koser & Kuschminder 2015; Lietaert et al. 2017b).

Using Boccagni's (2012) framework, Lietaert et al. (2017b) categorizes transnational ties into:

1. Interpersonal ties (friends/family abroad)
2. Institutional ties (e.g. host country institutions)
3. Symbolic/emotional ties (e.g. habits, identity)

From our literature, several themes within the concept of transnationalism emerged which can relate to this framework.

Family Contacts

A couple studies had examples of the importance for the migrant to be able to keep contact with family and friends during their migration journey, both due to the emotional aspect, but also to ensure that one has access to social and economic support, in order to support the reintegration journey (Caselli 2024; Eastmond 2006). As shown, the success of a migrant's return journey often depends on human and material capital. However, as stated in this quotation, it is as important for the migrant to have a reliable support network.

"Time and again, the matter of whether or not a returnee has social capital proves decisive to the outcome of the reintegration journey (Lietaert & Kuschminder, 2021:145), especially in the very earliest stages following their repatriation, in that friends and family can offer accommodation and financial support, but also emotional support, guidance and advice on starting a business or seeking employment."

(Caselli & Marcu 2024: 298)

Remittances

Another concept for maintaining transnational ties with the origin country is through remittances. In several of the included studies, remittances appear not only as financial support but also as symbolic practice that reaffirm migrants' belonging within transnational family networks (Eastmond 2006; Abaunza 2023). In an ethnographic study, Bosnian returnees' remittances were especially crucial for elderly returnees who relied on regular financial support from their children and relatives abroad to supplement local pensions (Eastmond 2006). The dual function of remittances - as a material capital and relational tool - was shown in one of the quantitative studies, which showed that migrants who send remittances exhibit a higher likelihood of outmigration (Gundel 2008). This suggests that remittance-senders may be actively planning for return, using their financial transfers as a form of capital accumulation to support future reintegration through investments in property, small businesses, or consumption back home.

Host Country Rights and Benefits

From an institutional perspective, having access to host country rights and benefits after return was also a way of maintaining transnational ties. For elderly returnees, keeping their pensions or social security entitlements from the host country, supplemented limited local incomes and helped sustain

return migration (Böcker 2017; Duci 2019; Eastmond 2006). Two studies in Greece and Spain with Albanian respectively Dominican return migrants addressed the importance of keeping healthcare and social protection rights, allowing them to maintain practical and institutional ties that mitigated the vulnerabilities of return and sustained transnational lives (Abaunza 2024; Vathi 2019).

Living Transnationally

The concept of mobility, which has been discussed previously, is often seen as a key to transnationalism. More open border-policies, in particular those put in place by the host country, allows people to move more freely (Bazillier 2023; Kuschminder 2022; Gundel 2008). Several studies emphasized that maintaining a legal right to return to the host country, either through permanent residency or citizenship, was crucial for enabling open-ended or flexible return migration (Agyeman 2011; Eastmond 2006; Abaunza 2023; Reeve 2010; Van Houte 2017).

Diaspora

Diaspora communities were identified in the included studies as key enablers of transnationalism, offering migrants emotional support, access to information, and assistance with reintegration (Maâ 2023; Abaunza 2023). Concerning the symbolic ties through Boccagni's framework (2012), several studies highlight how emotional and symbolic attachments to the host country often persist after return. Migrants often maintained connections through language, cultural practices, media consumption, and identification with host country values, even when institutional or interpersonal ties weakened. These symbolic attachments served as emotional resources that reinforced migrants' identities and coping strategies during reintegration. The literature showed that symbolic capital, such as retaining language skills or preserving a reputation of migration success, can be equally as important as material resources for returnees' wellbeing and social positioning (Lietaert et al. 2017c; Eastmond 2006; Van Houte 2017). In addition, some studies noted that symbolic ties are not always easily sustained post-return. Returnees may experience a gradual decrease of language skills, cultural competencies, or social recognition, leading to a sense of symbolic loss or emotional disconnection (Lietaert 2016; Vathi 2019). Similarly, stigma associated with "failed" migration projects may undermine symbolic and interpersonal ties, complicating reintegration into both the origin and former host societies (Van Houte 2017; Robinson & Williams 2017).

Self-determination

Self-determination – defined as maintaining agency, flexibility, and control over decisions – emerges as critical for migrants considering return. Across studies, migrants resist limits to their autonomy and favor strategies that allow them to navigate return on their own terms. The importance of autonomy and flexibility is a recurring theme across studies. When migrants own decision-making processes are constrained by return migration measures and programs, this can be a source of stress, leading migrants to avoid return opportunities provided by the State (Valenta & Thorshaug 2011). In contrast, some examples showed migrants frequently prefer self-organized returns outside of formal programs, as these allow greater personal control over their own migration experiences (Eastmond 2006). In one study the authors illustrated this:

“In general, the idea of having to officially register to use the program's services and leave the organization of one's return to others was seen as a further loss of power and control over one's life. Respondents who expressed a desire and willingness to return to Kosovo in the future explained that when the time came, they would welcome the opportunity to access various services similar to those of the IOM program to plan their own return, but emphasized their need to retain control over their own decisions and independently determine when and how to return. One of the interviewees made this clear by stating, “I don't want anyone to tell me what to do with my life. Returning to Kosovo is a big dream of mine, but I have to determine it myself when the situation is safe and there are the necessary conditions to return.” (Muhamet, male, over forty years old, married, arrived in 1994, worker).”

(Amore 2006, translated to English)

This highlights the importance for migrants to decide on their own, when and how to return – making the decision their own. Aspirations and the ability to plan for the future are key agentic capacities, but they are often constrained for returnees, despite being crucial for voluntary return (Dänge 2023). Support structures that respect migrants' agency can significantly improve their ability to navigate the return process. Demonstrated in one case in Belgium, social guidance alongside financial support allowed returnees to renegotiate reintegration plans based on the realities they encountered upon return (Lietaert 2016). Rather than being rigid, this flexible support approach recognized returnees' own interpretations of their needs, fostering greater self-determination.

While autonomy is ideal, it is often constrained. Returnees face stigmatization and bear the burden of reintegration with minimal societal support, often having to exert "double and triple efforts" to reestablish themselves (Jurt & Odermatt 2024; Tecca 2024). Migrants' opportunities to aspire and plan are limited by material deprivation and lack of navigational capacities (Dånge 2023; Tecca 2024). Thus, true self-determination remains unevenly distributed, shaped heavily by broader social and economic inequalities, as demonstrated in the following quotations:

"As her self-deportation progressed, there were markers in her journey in which the affective consequences of her decision to return became clear, such as the abrupt turning point when she arrived in the accommodation centre. Significantly, her arrival at the centre marked the precise moment at which Soma moved between the categories of illegalised and legalised. Just as the act of claiming asylum catapults the asylum seeker into a vastly different world of rights, protections, and new uncertainties, so does enrolling in a state-assisted return programme."

(Tecca 2024: 977)

"There is a fine line between facilitating return and encouraging it. Any policy intervention in this area should be designed to allow potential returnees to make their own decisions, rather than encouraging them towards any particular option."

(Koser & Kuschminder 2015: 67)

When it comes to the ability of host countries to facilitate voluntary return migration of those with legal residence, many return policies could be limited by the crucial role that transnationalism and self-determination play in return decisions. For example, in the case of the Belgian AVRR program, returnees had to consent to refund the travel expenses if they returned to Belgium within five years (Lietaert 2016). It is reasonable to assume that sacrificing future mobility will be considered quite a high price to pay for return, ensuring that direct measures supporting return migration that incorporate the loss of residence in the host country will have less impact on actual returns.

4. The Limits of Host Country Influence on Voluntary Return

This chapter presents the main findings of the systematic review, structured around the three research questions guiding the study. It synthesizes the scientific evidence on how host country programs, policies, and broader conditions shape voluntary return migration. To synthesize the findings, the review developed a typology with three key categories of host country influence on return migration. Direct host country measures are intentional measures employed by the host country to increase return migration. Economic measures, administrative support and reintegration support are examples of measures that fall under this category. Soft incentives are non-direct and often unintentional factors that nonetheless influence return migration, like possibilities for cross-border mobility, counseling and social perceptions of return. Lastly, structural and social conditions in the host country like the migration system, access to the labor market and housing instability comprises the third category. Each of these categories play a distinct, as well as interconnected, role in shaping migrants' decisions to return, highlighting the complexity of the voluntary return processes.

4.1 Main Findings

The results highlight that direct host country measures – such as travel cost coverage, reintegration support, and counseling – *can facilitate return for financially vulnerable migrants and those lacking regular residence status*. However, *host countries' voluntary return measures rarely lead to substantial return migration*. Instead, the findings emphasize that voluntary return is shaped by migrants' perceived agency and future mobility opportunities: migrants are more likely to consider return when they have the right to retain residence in the host country and the ability to move freely between countries, rather than when they are pressured to relinquish their residence and rights in the host country. Broader structural conditions in the host country, combined with the migrant's legal status, economic security, and social ties, significantly influence return decisions. Understanding these dynamics is essential for interpreting the effectiveness of host country actions and for supporting truly voluntary and sustainable return migration.

Table 10 provides a summary overview of the main findings, outlining which measures have shown evidence of effectiveness, the ways in which they influence return migration and key contextual considerations that affect their impact.

Table 10. Overview of Effective Host Country Measures for Voluntary Return Migration

Measure, condition or incentive	Impact on return migration	Contextual considerations
Access to legal status and transnational mobility (e.g., dual citizenship, mobility agreements)	Facilitates voluntary and circular return; migrants are more willing to return when future mobility remains possible.	Particularly important for highly skilled, long-term, or transnational migrants; <i>restricted mobility reduces willingness to return voluntarily.</i>
Travel cost coverage	Enables return for financially vulnerable migrants who <i>already have a reason to return</i> and otherwise could not afford return travel.	Most effective among irregular or financially precarious migrants. <i>Not sufficient to motivate return among regular and well-integrated migrants.</i>
Reintegration support (e.g., cash grants, in-kind assistance)	Supports re-establishment in origin country; <i>some limited impact on reintegration outcomes</i> for vulnerable returnees.	<i>Impact strongest when flexible use is allowed;</i> effectiveness limited if origin country conditions are poor or reintegration planning is weak.
Small business grants	Provides economic means for some migrants to sustain livelihoods after return, but <i>limited impact, especially in the long term.</i>	Requires local economic opportunities and additional support; <i>higher failure rates among migrants with fewer resources or weak business environments.</i>
Counseling and personalized return planning	Increases migrants' preparedness for return and <i>enhances positive perceptions of the return process, but no documented impact on return.</i>	<i>Most effective when counseling is independent, trusted, and voluntary.</i> Coercive or bureaucratic counseling reduces effectiveness.

Based on the included studies, we find that the most effective strategy to support return migration is access to secure legal residence and mobility rights. Migrants who retain these rights are more willing to return temporarily or cyclically, viewing return as one step in a longer mobility trajectory and using their ability to access the origin country from the relative safety and security of the host country to develop and maintain origin country ties that can ultimately facilitate return. In contrast, limiting the mobility of migrants through the denial of status, welfare restrictions in the host country, and experiences of discrimination or exclusion contribute to a context of pressure that undermines voluntary return migration. Meanwhile, broader structural conditions – including economic marginalization, housing instability, and social exclusion – weaken migrants' attachments to the host country. In several contexts, an increasingly anti-immigrant political climate exacerbated feelings of exclusion and insecurity. However, only rarely do these conditions prompt return migration.

Other typical host country types of support for return migration have little impact on return migration, even if they can improve the experience of those who are returning, particularly those who are denied the opportunity to remain. Direct measures such as travel cost coverage, financial contributions, and reintegration assistance (including small business grants and vocational training) make return financially possible, but rarely act as independent motivations for voluntary return migration. Furthermore, the included studies show that financial assistance offered by host countries is generally not sufficient on its own to ensure sustainable reintegration of returned migrations. Likewise, the offer of such assistance is unlikely to encourage return among migrants who are well-integrated in the host country. Administrative and logistical support – including help with travel documents, booking, and pre-return counseling – are generally appreciated, but do not independently influence the decision to return. In some cases, when administrative actors apply pressure toward return and link it to a negative depiction of returnees, it can undermine migrants' trust and increase their resistance to participating in host country programs even when they are open to the idea of return.

4.2 Cross-Cutting Mechanisms of Influence

Legal status and mobility emerged as cross-cutting mechanisms that interact with many other factors to enable or constrain return migration. Host country measures, soft incentives, host country conditions and transnationalism all interact with these two important determinants – legal status and mobility – to produce return trajectories. Having secure legal status (e.g. residence permits,

citizenship) provides migrants with a sense of security and transnational mobility (Black et al. 2004; Eastmond 2006; Van Houte 2017) as they can view return as reversible. For migrants without legal status (e.g. rejected asylum seekers) participation in AVR programs are sometimes preferred over deportation (Kromhout 2011; Tecca 2024), while other migrants prefer having an irregular status since that did not hinder their mobility in the same way that participation in AVR programs did (Mahar 2023). The insecure status or restricted mobility frames return as permanent or risky. Policies requiring migrants to renounce legal status (e.g., Spain's unemployment return bonus) deterred return for many, as maintaining legal rights and mobility was prioritized over short-term economic support (Akwasí Agyeman 2011). Only the most vulnerable migrants considered measures that required giving up their right to return to the host country (Lietaert 2019; Lietaert 2016). The ability to move freely between host and origin countries proved to make return migration more attractive and feasible.

4.3 Patterns of Conditional Effectiveness

The effectiveness of host country measures to facilitate voluntary return have been shown to be highly conditional. Rather than having uniform effects across migrant populations, the success or failure of interventions depends on specific factors like how they are implemented, migrant characteristics and host country conditions. Measures that include economic components have been shown to be attractive only for migrants with high financial vulnerability (Reeve et al. 2010; Lietaert et al. 2014). For migrants who are settled and secure, the economic incentives do not outweigh the cost of losing future access to the host country (Akwasí Agyeman 2011). The return and reintegration programs show more favorable outcomes when counseling, planning and support is flexible, independent, trusted and voluntary. This increases migrants' perceived agency and supports more sustainable return outcomes (Lietaert 2016). Where migrants perceive return as coercive or deceptive, return is sometimes opposed (Dånge 2023; Rosenberger 2018).

Our review focuses on different measures that can enable or constrain return migration. However unintended consequences for the host country and migrants left in the host country also need to be taken into consideration. For instance, two of the reviewed studies suggested that a political climate hostile to immigrants, and policies focused on return migration, made it harder for migrants to integrate as they experienced a sense of not fully belonging (Bolognani 2016; Dånge 2023). The feeling of being unwelcome was observed in the studies, but it did not lead to voluntary return. More research is needed to establish exactly how different host country measures can result in unintended

effects for the host country and the migrants who chose to remain in the host country. The governmental committee's findings in August 2024 (Regeringen 2024) pointed out that increasing economic incentives could possibly send anti-immigrant signals that could damage integration and lead to net losses.

4.4 Moderating Factors

Migrant characteristics shape the impacts of return policies. While elderly migrants sometimes express a desire to retire in their countries of origin (Mahar 2023; Van Houte 2017), quantitative studies show mixed patterns, with no consistent link between age and return behavior (Koser & Kuschminder 2015; Gundel & Peters 2008; Akkoyunlu & Schläpfer 2013). Gendered norms also influence return, with studies showing that men may perceive return as failure (Mahar 2023), while evidence on women remains limited and inconsistent (Flahaux 2017; Akkoyunlu & Schläpfer 2013). Family ties play a complex and ambivalent role – sometimes encouraging return for reunification (Lietaert 2016; Koser & Kuschminder 2015), and at other times discouraging it due to obligations to remain abroad (Abaunza 2024; Mahar 2023).

Economic well-being and employment status are among the most consistent factors, with both qualitative and quantitative evidence confirming that poor living conditions, unemployment, and economic crisis often push migrants toward return (Lietaert 2019; Gundel & Peters 2008; Moreno-Márquez & Álvarez-Román 2017). Initial reasons for migration, particularly earning goals, also condition return decisions and reintegration outcomes (Mahar 2023; Maher & Cawley 2016). The most decisive factor, however, is migration status: rejected asylum seekers are consistently overrepresented in AVR programs and more likely to return when no legal alternatives remain (Koser & Kuschminder 2015; Reeve et al. 2010; Leerkes et al. 2017), whereas undocumented migrants and those with naturalized status navigate return differently, depending on their mobility options (Flahaux et al. 2014; Agyeman 2011). Finally, migrants with higher human capital are generally more likely to return voluntarily, especially when return is framed as a contribution to rebuilding the origin country, although such patterns often exclude those in more precarious legal or economic situations (Bellemare 2007; Amore 2006; Gundel & Peters 2008).

Origin country conditions function as moderating factors that shape the feasibility, desirability, and timing of return migration. Political instability and personal insecurity consistently emerged as core deterrents, with peace and safety described as absolute prerequisites for return (Black et al. 2004; Reeve et al. 2010; Beauchemin 2020). Economic conditions were similarly decisive: migrants were more likely to return to countries with stable

economies and employment opportunities, while high unemployment and income inequality discouraged return, particularly for lower skilled migrants (Agyeman 2011; Akkoyunlu & Schlöpfer 2013; King & Kuschminder 2020). Access to essential infrastructure and services – including schools, health-care, safe water, and electricity – was frequently cited as shaping return decisions, especially in low-income or post-conflict contexts (Caselli and Marcu 2024; Amore 2006). Emotional and cultural attachment also influenced return; many long-term migrants reported a diminished sense of belonging after years abroad, complicating the reintegration process (Van Houte 2017; Caselli and Marcu 2024). While not always decisive alone, these origin country factors interact with host country conditions and migrant characteristics to either support or undermine efforts to increase voluntary return, making them essential components of any comprehensive approach to return migration.

5. Policy Relevance

Sweden's current efforts to enhance voluntary return migration, at this point relying primarily on proposals to substantially increase financial incentives for return, reflect a growing policy focus on encouraging migrants to exercise their right to return. This systematic review of the scientific research shows that most interventions have had modest, minimal, or no measurable impact on actual return decisions, and some seem to have actually led to decreased return migration. Many migrants, especially those with long-term residence or family ties in the host country, like the target population for new Swedish's emphasis on voluntary return, do not return to their country of origin – even when offered financial incentives or logistical support.

This modest impact is not necessarily a failure of specific programs but a reflection of a more fundamental mismatch between policy assumptions and migration realities. Many European migration policies were built on the premise that migrant stays would be temporary – whether the migrants were coming as guest workers or on humanitarian grounds. However, return has become less likely, particularly among those who have built stable lives in the host country. Even among groups often targeted for return, such as single men or individuals with shorter stays, return remains relatively rare. Most permanent residents remain in the host country, and when they do leave, many opt for onward migration within Europe rather than return to their country of origin. The evidence also shows no indication of large-scale or spontaneous return patterns.

These findings challenge the expectation that return can be widely promoted through soft or hard policy measures alone. Instead, they suggest the need for more realistic, rights-based, and context-sensitive approaches that acknowledge migrants' long-term settlement and transnational attachments – and focus on supporting those who are genuinely willing and able to return.

This chapter presents policy recommendations grounded in the findings of a systematic review of existing research on host country impacts on voluntary return migration. The recommendations that follow are designed to support Sweden's goal of strengthening voluntary return, while acknowledging that there is little evidence to support the idea that efforts to promote increased return will have a big impact on return. Sweden's current focus on promoting voluntary return among migrants who already possess legal residence differs from the traditional participants in Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) and Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programs, which have

largely targeted irregular migrants and rejected asylum seekers. As a result, Sweden can expect that the conventional AVR/AVRR approaches described in this report – already shown to have limited impact in existing research – will likely have even less effect in the Swedish context. Most migrants with citizenship or long terms residence permits will choose to remain in the host country.

In light of this, the recommendations below are presented in priority order, based on the evidence gathered and analyzed in our systematic review. They emphasize approaches most likely to enhance voluntary return migration among *legal resident migrants*, by addressing the real drivers of return identified in the literature: mobility rights, agency, trust, and sustainable reintegration.

5.1 Preserving Mobility Rights

Research consistently shows that migrants are more willing to consider voluntary return when they retain the right and practical ability to migrate again in the future. Access to dual citizenship, residence permits, or mobility agreements that preserve future re-entry possibilities instead of requiring that they relinquish their Swedish residence will be more effective enablers of voluntary return.

Recommendation:

- Design voluntary return programs that protect future mobility rights wherever possible, allowing for circular migration patterns.
- Avoid framing return as an irrevocable choice; instead, create pathways that maintain migrants' ability to return to Sweden (e.g., for visits with family), or even to take up residence in Sweden again.

5.2 Enhancing Information and Counselling Services

Migrants make better-informed and more sustainable decisions about return when they have access to clear, timely, and trustworthy information about the conditions in the origin country and the return process. counselling that is voluntary, confidential, and culturally competent helps build trust and supports genuine agency in the decision-making process.

Recommendation:

- Strengthen information provision on return options, rights, reintegration support, and conditions in origin countries.
- Ensure that counselling is professional, independent, and free of coercion, focusing on empowering migrants to make informed choices.

5.3 Destigmatizing Return

Return migration can carry significant social stigma, both in the host country and in the country of origin. This stigma can work against return migration. In Sweden, return is rarely discussed as a human right and is instead often linked to failed integration or used as a political tool tied to anti-immigrant discourse or the goal of decreasing the immigrant population.

Recommendation:

- Emphasize that return migration is a human right and create voluntary return programs that emphasize personal agency, opportunity, and continued transnational engagement.
- Avoid associating return migration with failure, exclusion, or migration control.
- Pursue opportunities to destigmatize return in origin countries whenever possible.

5.4 Tailored Financial Support

Financial barriers to return – such as inability to afford travel or re-establish livelihoods – are real and significant, particularly for migrants in vulnerable economic situations. However, financial incentives alone rarely motivate voluntary return among those who are otherwise socially or economically integrated. For this reason, financial incentives should not be Sweden's main mechanism for encouraging voluntary return migration.

Recommendation:

- Offer targeted financial assistance to migrants facing genuine economic hardship limiting their ability to return.
- Combine cash assistance with services such as vocational training, business development support, and psychosocial counseling to strengthen sustainable reintegration.

5.5 Reintegration Planning and Support After Return

Successful reintegration upon return to the origin country is critical to ensuring that voluntary return is sustainable, which, as stated in the glossary, is an EU goal. Return migrants often face economic marginalization and social isolation, undermining the long-term success of return. Research also shows that many returnees seek to maintain ongoing transnational ties to the former host country, including through social networks, educational opportunities, and business connections. Sustainable reintegration, therefore, benefits not only from economic support but also from the ability to maintain meaningful links to Sweden and broader international contexts.

Recommendation:

- Continue to establish partnerships with organizations in migrants' countries of origin to deliver reintegration support, monitor outcomes, and provide pathways for ongoing assistance.
- Support the development of individualized reintegration plans prior to departure, aligned with the migrant's skills, aspirations, transnational ties, and local conditions in the origin country.
- Facilitate continued transnational engagement by making use of existing outreach structures such as Swedish embassies and consulates and Swedish clubs abroad to offer cultural, educational, and networking opportunities for returnees, helping maintain positive ties to Sweden and supporting their reintegration in their origin countries.

5.6 Context-Sensitive Return Migration Support

To promote voluntary return, one has to consider the interplay of different personal circumstances, structural factors, and perceived future prospects affecting a migrant's decision making. This is the reason why more strict migration policies – such as tighter entry requirements or more restrictive asylum rules – do not necessarily encourage voluntary return, especially when migrants face serious risks such as persecution or insecurity in their countries of origin. In many cases, migrants may prefer to remain irregularly rather than return to dangerous or unstable conditions.

Evidence shows that voluntary return programs are more effective when they acknowledge and respond to migrants' very real needs and prospects. Programs that demonstrate genuine concern for the migrant's best interests – and that offer credible, positive pathways for reintegration – are more likely to lead to sustainable voluntary returns.

Recommendation:

- Integrate individual assessments into voluntary return programs, considering key contextual factors such as:
 - Family ties in Sweden and in the origin country,
 - Gender differences (recognizing how return may differently impact men and women's rights, security, and opportunities),
 - Ethnic minority status (acknowledging possible discrimination or marginalization upon return),
 - Region of origin within the origin country (as security and opportunities often vary regionally),
 - Age and associated concerns (e.g., children in family, educational needs for younger returnees, pension rights and healthcare for elderly returnees).
- Tailor information, counseling, and support measures to these individual and group-specific factors, ensuring that return offers realistic prospects for security, livelihood, and dignity in the origin country.

Ultimately, efforts to promote voluntary return migration must account for the real factors and constraints that shape migrants' decisions. When return is pursued through measures that restrict rights or create pressure without addressing legitimate and pressing safety, mobility, and reintegration needs, the result is not dignified voluntary return – but instead leads to increased human suffering – of those forced to return to a place where they will struggle to reintegrate and make a living, and of those who instead feel that they must choose to live under the radar, in legal limbo, or undocumented. Sweden's return policy should instead aim to decrease human suffering and protect the integrity of its values and migration system by investing in pathways that respect the agency of migrants and ensure that the right to return remains a real, viable, and voluntary choice.

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Appendix

Review Protocol

1. Databases

The systematic review will use a selection of bibliographic and abstract databases available through Stockholm University library. These databases include:

- **Databases covering academic journals across discipline:** JSTOR, Web of Science, Scopus
- **Databases specific to the Social Sciences where much of research on return migration is conducted:** ProQuest Social Science Database, Sociological Abstracts, Social Science Abstracts, PsycINFO
- **Google Scholar** will be used to capture grey literature and conference papers not included in traditional academic databases

2. Search Terms

Our list of search terms will be developed based on literature identified in initial scoping searches. Proposed search terms include:

- "Voluntary return migration" AND "EU" AND "non-EU"
- "Return migration" AND "host country programs"
- "Reintegration" AND "non-economic incentives"
- "Return migration" AND "social integration" AND "policy"
- "Assisted return" AND "European Union" AND "non-economic support"

These lists of terms will be expanded based on terms identified in the scoping review. The terms will be combined with Boolean operators to optimize search results across different databases.

3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Once the search is completed, the list of studies will be collated and cleaned to remove duplicates. At that point the studies will be screened based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Studies published in peer-reviewed journals or high-quality grey literature (e.g., policy reports) within the last 20 years.
- Studies focused on voluntary return migration from EU to non-EU countries.
- Research that addresses host country policies and programs including non-economic incentives for voluntary return, such as social integration efforts, diaspora networks, and reintegration programs.
- Both qualitative and quantitative studies.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Studies focused solely on economic incentives for return migration.
- Research solely on involuntary return migration (e.g., deportation).
- Studies outside the scope of EU to non-EU migration or those not examining the role of the host country.
- Studies published more than 20 years ago or without empirical evidence on return migration.

4. Quality Assessment

After the screening process, a systematic quality assessment will be conducted on all studies meeting the inclusion criteria to ensure the reliability of the findings.

- **Quantitative Studies:** The quality of quantitative studies will be assessed using a modified form of the **Effective Public Health Practice Project (EPHPP) Quality Assessment Tool** (Effective Public Health Practice Project 2007). This tool provides a standardized way to evaluate various aspects of the quality of the study, such as selection bias, study design, confounders, blinding, data collection methods, and withdrawals, regardless of the specific study design. Its versatility makes it especially suitable for our review, allowing consistent assessment across diverse types of quantitative research (Armijo-Olivo et al. 2012).
- **Qualitative Studies:** **The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist for qualitative studies will guide the assessment of qualitative studies** (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme 2024). This tool provides a structured approach to examining key aspects of qualitative research, such as the clarity of research aims, methodology appropriateness, recruitment strategy, data collection, ethical considerations, and the rigor of the analysis (Long et al. 2020).

Using these tools, two reviewers will independently assess the quality of each qualitative and quantitative study. In cases of discrepancy, a third reviewer will be consulted to reach a consensus. Studies will be graded as high, moderate, or low quality based on these tools, and only studies rated as high or moderate quality will be included in the final synthesis.

5. Data Extraction

For each included study, we will use **standardized data extraction forms** to ensure consistency (Büchter et al. 2020). The final versions will be online forms that **convert the inputs to a data structure** that will make it possible to easily work with the extracted data in STATA statistical programs and NVIVO qualitative data analysis software.

The data extraction form for quantitative studies gathers key information about study characteristics, the **population, interventions, and outcomes**. It begins by capturing basic study information, followed by the study design type. It prompts for entries regarding details about the non-economic support measures provided by host countries, such as social integration programs, policy support, and diaspora engagement, along with their duration and the level of government or institutional involvement. Outcomes measured include return migration rates and reintegration outcomes like employment and social inclusion. Statistical findings such as effect sizes and correlations are recorded to assess the quantitative impact of interventions. The form also notes key findings regarding the influence of non-economic support on return migration and any policy implications.

The data extraction form for qualitative studies is structured to capture rich, narrative data regarding the role of the state in voluntary return migration. It collects foundational information about each study, including the focus country and the nature of the immigrant population examined. Central to the form is the extraction of **key themes and narratives**, such as the motivations for return, the perceived influence of host country policies, the role of diaspora networks, and participants' experiences with reintegration in the home country. It also looks at how political discourse impacts migrants' perceptions of return. Insights into the effectiveness of non-economic incentives and recommendations for policy improvements are highlighted.

6. Data Synthesis and Analysis

Quantitative Meta-Analysis:

We will use **Stata** for meta-analysis of quantitative studies (Statacorp 2023a). Stata licenses are available through Stockholm University. Using **Stata's meta-analysis commands** (Statacorp 2023b), we will calculate **pooled effect sizes** and confidence intervals for each outcome (Tong & Guo 2022). This will enable us to quantify the overall impact of non-economic incentives on voluntary return decisions across various studies. We will perform **heterogeneity testing** (e.g., I^2 statistic) to assess the variability across studies, which will help determine if a fixed-effect or random-effects model is most appropriate for the analysis. If significant heterogeneity exists, a random-effects model will account for differences in study contexts, such as variations in host-country policies or types of non-economic support provided (Higgins & Thompson 2002). **Subgroup analyses** will also be conducted to explore differences by factors such as conditions in home country and specific types of support (e.g., social vs. policy support) where the data makes this possible.

Stata's meta-analysis tools will also increase our confidence in the results of the meta-analysis by enabling us to assess potential **publication bias** affecting the results of the meta-analysis (Song et al. 2013). Sensitivity analyses will be performed to verify the robustness of our findings, including re-running analyses excluding studies with extreme effect sizes (Pianos et al. 2016).

Qualitative Narrative Analysis:

For the qualitative meta-aggregation in this systematic review, we will follow the **methodological framework for meta-aggregation in qualitative research** (Lockwood et al. 2015). The data extracted from qualitative studies will be uploaded to **NVIVO qualitative data analysis software** (QSR International 2023). There it will be grouped into **preliminary categories**, representing themes that emerge across studies (e.g., "influence of diaspora engagement on attachment to home country," "perceived stigma from host country policies").

Once preliminary categories are identified, we will move to the second level of synthesis by creating synthesized statements. This involves examining each category and **identifying broader, overarching themes** that can represent groups of findings from multiple studies (Lockwood et al. 2015). For instance, if several studies highlight the impact of home country and host country relations in shaping return decisions, these insights will be combined into a synthesized statement reflecting this common observation. Each synthesized statement will summarize the essence of the host country's impact on return migration.

In the final stage, we will formulate the **meta-aggregated findings** by grouping synthesized statements into major themes that address the review's research questions (Lockwood et al. 2015). For example, overarching themes may include "the role of host country policies in facilitating or deterring return" and "impact of host country context on readiness for return." These meta-aggregated findings will be presented with supporting evidence from the included studies.

7. Reporting

In reporting the results of this systematic review in line with **Delmi's expectations**, our report will be accessible and geared towards a diverse readership that includes policymakers, civil society, and the public. We will adhere to the **PRISMA 2020 guidelines** for reporting the results of a systematic review (Page et al. 2021). Consistent with these guidelines, we will present a detailed **flow diagram** to document the progression of studies through identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion phases, offering readers a clear view of how studies were selected. For quantitative meta-analysis, we will report effect sizes and confidence intervals for each outcome, as well as details on statistical heterogeneity, following PRISMA guidelines for synthesis and reporting of results. Any potential risk of bias will be assessed and described, along with the methods used to conduct sensitivity analyses. Results will be organized into structured tables and visualizations, facilitating easy comparison across studies. The qualitative findings will also follow PRISMA standards, with synthesized themes presented alongside quotes from original studies, adding depth and context to the quantitative data. We will also engage in Delmi's outreach activities, such as roundtable discussions and public dissemination seminars, ensuring that our findings are communicated effectively to stakeholders outside academia.

Table A1. Swedish Search Terms

Swedish search term
Block 1 Text: ALL=(migration AND ("incitament" OR "program" OR "stöd" OR "åtgärder" OR "policy" OR "assistans" OR "bidra")) Block 2 Text: ALL= (EU OR Europa) Block 3 Text: ALL= (("frivillig") AND "utvandring" OR "självdeport" OR "återvand*" OR "återvänd" OR "repatrier" OR "hemland")

Table A2 Included Studies

Author	Title	Year
Abaunza, C.M.	Return Migration and Return Intention in Times of Crisis: Dominican Return During the COVI-19 Pandemic	2024
Adda, J.; Dustmann, C.; Görlach, J.-S.	The Dynamics of Return Migration, Human Capital Accumulation, and Wage Assimilation	2021
Akkoyunlu, S.; Schläpfer, J.	The determinants of out-migration from Switzerland	2013
Akwasi Agyeman, E.	Holding on to European residence rights versus the desire to return to origin country: A study of the return intentions and return constraints of Ghanaian migrants in Vic. Migraciones	2011
Altamirano, A.T.	Return migration on the policy agenda in Sweden	1995
Amore, K.	L'opzione "rimpatrio volontario" per i kossovari albanesi rifugiati nel Regno Unite e in Italia.	2006
Anghel, I.-M.	"It's in their blood". The securitization of Roma westward migration in Europe	2019
Bazillier, R.; Magris, F.; Mirza, D.	Labor mobility agreements and exit of migrants: Evidence from Europe	2023
Beauchemin, C.; Flahaux, M.-L.; Schoumaker, B.	Three sub-Saharan migration systems in times of policy restriction.	2020
Bellemare, C.	A life-cycle model of outmigration and economic assimilation of immigrants in Germany	2007
Black, R.; Koser, K.; Munk, K.; Atfield, G.; D'Onofrio, L.; Tiemoko, R.	Understanding voluntary return	2004
Böcker, A.; Hunter, A.	Legislating for transnational ageing: A challenge to the logics of the welfare state	2017

Author	Title	Year
Bolognani, M.; Erdal, M.B.	Return Imaginaries and Political Climate: Comparing Thinking About Return Mobilities Among Pakistani Origin Migrants and Descendants in Norway and the UK	2017
Byron, M.; Condon, S.	A comparative study of Caribbean return migration from Britain and France: Towards a context-dependent explanation	1996
Callea, S.	Different forms, reasons and motivations for return migration of persons who voluntarily decide to return to their countries of origin.	1986
Caselli, M.; Marcu, O.	Pathways to reintegration in Senegal and Nigeria promoted by Italian Assisted Voluntary Return programmes	2024
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Diatla, M.A.; Mbow, N.	Releasing the development potential of return migration: The case of Senegal	1999
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Entzinger, H.	Return Migration in Western Europe: Current policy trends and their implications, in particular for the second generation	1985
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Flahaux, M.-L.; Beauchemin, C.; Schoumaker, B.	From Europe to Africa: Return migration to Senegal and the Democratic Republic of Congo	2014

Author	Title	Year
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Issifou, I.; Magris, F.	Migration outflows and optimal migration policy: Rules versus discretion	2017
Jirka, L.	Nationality and Rationality: Ancestors, 'Diaspora' and the Impact of Ethnic Policy in the Country of Emigration on Ethnic Return Migration from Western Ukraine to the Czech Republic	2019
Jones, P.N.	West Germany's Declining Guestworker Population: Spatial Change and Economic Trends in the 1980s	1990
Jurt, L.; Odermatt, E.	How European integration rationales shape reintegration assistance in Guinea and Senegal	2024
Koot, W.	West Indians in the Netherlands: Prospects of return	1987
Körner, H.; Mehrländer, U.	New migration policies in Europe: The return of labor migrants, remigration promotion and reintegration policies.	1986
Koser, K.; Kuschminder, K.	Comparative research on the assisted voluntary return and reintegration of migrants	2015
Kromhout, M.	Return of Separated Children: The Impact of Dutch Policies	2011
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Leerkes, A.; Hoon, M. de; Damen, R. (medew.)	Blijven vergunninghouders in Nederland?	2019
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Author	Title	Year
Lietaert, I.; Derluyn, I.; Broekaert, E.	Returnees' perspectives on their re-migration processes	2014
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Lietaert, I.; Broekaert, E.; Derluyn, I.	Time heals? A multi-sited, longitudinal case study on the lived experiences of returnees in Armenia	2017
Maâ, A.; Van Dessel, J.; Savio Vammen, I.M.	Can Migrants do the (Border)Work? Conflicting Dynamics and Effects of “Peer-to-peer” Intermediation in North and West Africa	2023
Mahar, U.	Migratory masculinities and vulnerabilities: Temporality and affect in the lives of irregularised Pakistani men	2023
Maher, G.; Cawley, M.	Short-Term Labour Migration: Brazilian Migrants in Ireland	2016
Moreno-Márquez, G.; Álvarez-Román, J.	Empirical evidences of Spain-Ecuador return migration: Discourse, myth or fact?	2017
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Reeve, K.; Robinson, D.; Bashir, N.; Eisenstein, E.	The Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) 2008: A process and impact assessment	2010
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Author	Title	Year
Rosenberger S.; Koppes S.	Claiming control: Cooperation with return as a condition for social benefits in Austria and the Netherlands	2018
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Sundquist, J.; Iglesias, E.; Isacson, A.	Migration and health: A study of Latin American refugees, their exile in Sweden and repatriation	1995
Tecca, V.	The affective economy of 'self-deportation': Materiality, spatiality, temporality	2024
Valenta, M.; Thorshaug, K.	Failed asylum-seekers' responses to arrangements promoting return: Experiences from Norway	2011
van Amersfoort, H.; Muus, P.; Penninx, R.	International Migration, the Economic Crisis and the State: An Analysis of Mediterranean Migration to Western Europe	1984
Van Houte, M.	Return migration to Afghanistan	2017
Vandevoordt, R.	Judgement and Ambivalence in Migration Work: On the (Dis)appearance of Dilemmas in Assisting Voluntary Return.	2018
Vathi, Z.; Duci, V.; Dhembo, E.	Social protection and return migration: Trans-national and trans-temporal developmental gaps in the Albania-Greece migration corridor.	2019

Table A3 Studies including Quantitative Evidence of Host Country Impacts on Return Migration

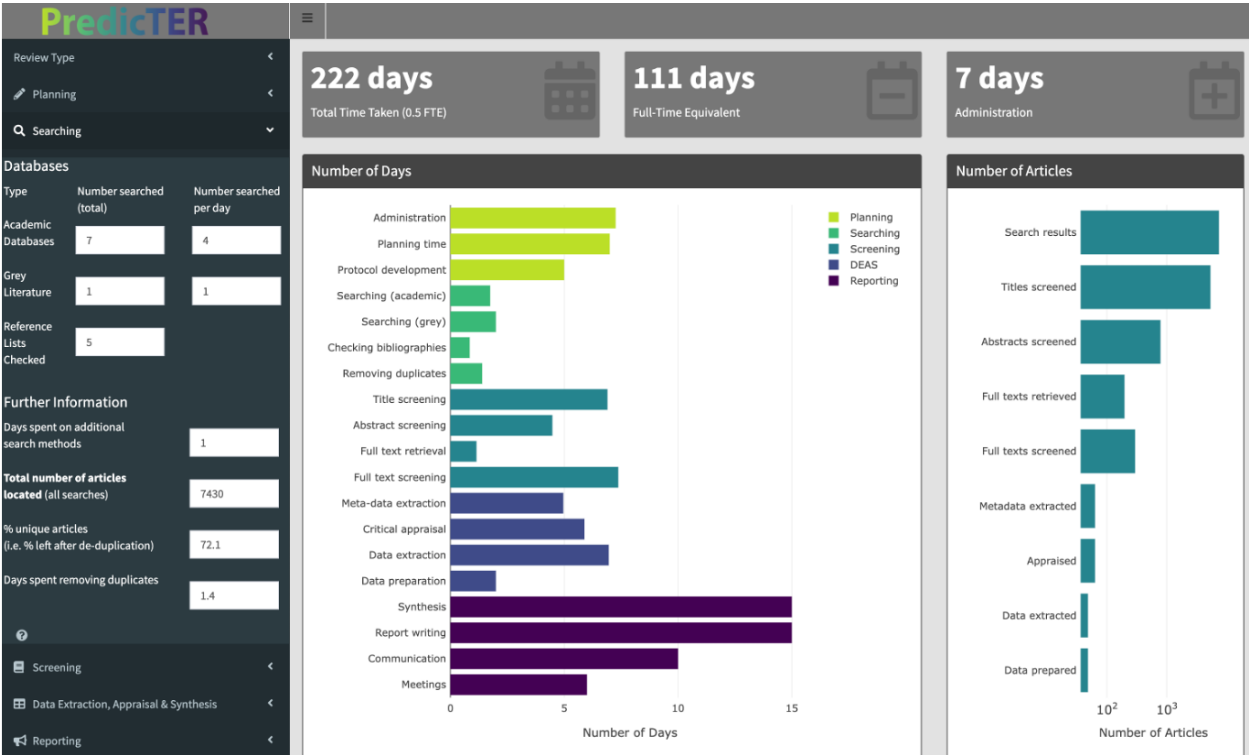
Author	Year	Host country measure	Operationalisation of measure	Return migration outcomes	Study design	Statistical method	Reported outcome
Adda et al.	2021	Meeting different criteria for getting a residence permit	Baseline without restrictions. 3 simulated schemes with residence permits beyond five years granted (I) to immigrants surpassing the 30 th earnings percentile; (II) to immigrants who at least achieve the 30 th percentile of host country human capital; and (III) at random with 30% probability.	Return migration	Longitudinal	Unsure	Percentage of voluntary returns

Author	Year	Host country measure	Operationalisation of measure	Return migration outcomes	Study design	Statistical method	Reported outcome
Akkoyunlu & Schl�pfer	2013	More open border policies	Free movement of persons agreements with Switzerland. No requirements for immigration, except for the ability to live on its own earnings.	Return migration	Longitudinal	Regression model	Return migrants as share of migration stock
Bazillier et al.	2023	More open border policies	Date of entry into EU or Schengen	Out migration	Longitudinal	Random utility model	Percentage change of outmigration
Bellemare	2007	Implementing a maximum duration for stay	Having a permanent visa, or having a short term visa restricting the duration of stay to at most 10 years.	Outmigration (observed and simulated)	Other (economic)	Economic modeling	Outmigration probability

Author	Year	Host country measure	Operationalisation of measure	Return migration outcomes	Study design	Statistical method	Reported outcome
Flahaux	2017	Entry control policies, integration policies and return policies	An ordinal variable assessing the relative change in restrictiveness in a specific policy, such as entry-, stay- and return-policies	Return migration	Longitudinal	Discrete-time event history analysis	Likelihood of return migration
Flahaux et al.	2014	Legal status	Being a documented or undocumented migrant	Return migration	Longitudinal	Event history models	Return migration probability
Gundel & Peters	2008	Free labor movement agreements with Germany	Being part of EU	Return migration	Longitudinal	Cox model	Return migration (hazard ratios)
Koser & Kuschminder	2015	Assisted Voluntary Return programs	To benefit from voluntary return programmes offered by destination country	Return decisions	Descriptive statistics	–	Factors affecting return decisions

Author	Year	Host country measure	Operationalisation of measure	Return migration outcomes	Study design	Statistical method	Reported outcome
Leerkes et al.	2017	Assisted Voluntary Return programs	Return with the help of IOM. Access to a native counselor	AVR use	Longitudinal	Hierarchical logistic regression	Odds ratios of AVR use

Figure A1. Scoping Analysis



List of Previous Publications

Report and Policy Brief 2014:1, *Radikala högerpartier och attityder till invandring i Europa*, Mikael Hjerm and Andrea Bohman.

Report and Policy Brief 2015:1, *Internationell migration och remitteringar i Etiopien*, Lisa Andersson.

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Research Overview 2015:3, *Integrationspolitik och arbetsmarknad*, Patrick Joyce.

Research Overview 2015:4, *Migration och företagens internationalisering*, Andreas Hatzigeorgiou and Magnus Lodefalk.

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Report and Policy Brief 2015:6, *Vem blir medborgare och vad händer sen? Naturalisering i Danmark, Norge och Sverige*, Pieter Bevelander, Jonas Helgertz, Bernt Bratsberg and Anna Tegunimataka.

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Report and Policy Brief 2015:8, *Valet och Vägen: Syriska flyktingar i Sverige*, Emma Jörum Lundgren.

Report and Policy Brief 2015:9, *Arbetskraftsinvandring efter 2008 års reform*, Catharina Calleman (red.) and Petra Herzfeld Olsson (red.).

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Report and Policy Brief 2016:2, *Invandringens arbetsmarknadseffekter*, Mattias Engdahl.

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Report and Policy Brief 2017:7, *Valdeltagande och representation – Om invandring och politisk integration i Sverige*, Pieter Bevelander (red.) and Mikael Spång (red.).

Report and Policy Brief 2017:8, *Responsibility Sharing for Refugees in the Middle East and North Africa*, Susan Martin.

Report and Policy Brief 2017:9, *Reforming the Common European Asylum System*, Bernd Parusel and Jan Schneider.

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Return migration is a complex and highly contextual process shaped by personal, legal, economic, and political factors. Recent decades have seen a shift toward policy frameworks that attempt to encourage or pressure return as an aspect of migration control, often blurring the line between voluntary and coerced migration.

This research overview presents the findings of a systematic review examining literature on the role of European national governments in influencing voluntary return migration of immigrants residing in their country. The overview synthesises existing research assessing the effectiveness of different return migration programmes, measures and structural conditions in European countries in facilitating the voluntary return of immigrants with legal permanent residence.

The Migration Studies Delegation is an independent committee that initiates studies and supplies research results as a basis for future migration policy decisions and contribute to public debate.



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