

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

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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.

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. The Swedish Government memorandum "An increased grant upon repatriation" (*Ett höjt bidrag vid återvandring* Ju 2025/00949) proposes a new regulation on voluntary return 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 initiative seeks 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.

Current policies in this complex field call for a review of existing literature. This Policy Brief is based on the Delmi's systematic overview *The Role of European Host Countries in Voluntary Return Migration: A Systematic Review of the Evidence*. The overview was written by Andrea Voyer, Professor in Sociology, Stockholm University, Klara Nelin, Master in Sociology, Stockholm University, and Alice Zethraeus, Master in Sociology, Stockholm University.

The review considered comprehensive coverage of all relevant literature published since 1984. The search, screening, quality assessment and extraction strategy ultimately resulted in the inclusion of 62 studies. The studies tackle return programs and measures in 17 host countries in Europe and 36 origin countries in different parts of the world.

## Studying the impact of voluntary return programs

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).

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 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.

## What is behind the modest results of voluntary return measures?

The modest impact found in the programs analyzed 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.

In summary, the research evidence demonstrates that host countries' efforts to significantly increase voluntary return migration of legal residents

generally show little to no 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 overview 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 is 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.

## Policy recommendations

### 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. In light of these results the recommendations are:

- 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.

### 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.

- 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.

## 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. In view of this result the recommendation is:

- 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.

## 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. For this reason, financial incentives should not be Sweden's main mechanism for encouraging voluntary return migration. Therefore, the authors recommend:

- 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 counselling to strengthen sustainable reintegration.

## Reintegration Planning and Support After Return

Successful reintegration upon return to the origin country is critical to ensuring that voluntary return is sustainable, which 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. This makes necessary:

- 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.

### Context-Sensitive Return Migration Support

To promote voluntary return, one must 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.

The recommendations within return migration support are the following:

- 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, counselling, 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.

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