

Books & Electronic Media

Return migration: policies and practices in Europe

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There is no permanent European migration scheme equivalent to that in settlement countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the USA. Instead, European countries are concerned about finding a way to enforce temporary migration. This concern first surfaced in the late 1970s, when the foreign workers who came to support the economic growth of the “Trentes Glorieuses” (the roughly 30-year period of economic growth in Europe following the Second World War) did not all return to their home countries, as had been expected. Since then, probably because “there is nothing more permanent than temporary migration”, the issue remains unresolved.

Recently, this issue has increased in importance, for two quite different reasons. First, Europe is experiencing ever-increasing numbers of asylum seekers, the vast majority of whom do not obtain refugee status but nevertheless try to remain. A not insignificant proportion of them are indeed non-expellable but forced return migration is seen as a tool to fight against irregular migration. Second, there is increased awareness about the potential impact of the international mobility of highly skilled workers from less developed countries, a phenomenon which is well known in the health sector. In this regard, some countries emphasize voluntary return migration as a way to lessen the “brain drain”.

Return migration is on the national policy agendas of many European countries who are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). This situation is not necessarily true in the sending countries, however. This book is a welcome addition to the literature in this respect: the more so, since IOM has significant field experience in this area,

with numerous special programmes to assist return migration (currently, for example, to Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia and Montenegro (including Kosovo)).

The book synthesizes the situation in 27 countries, covering the 25 member countries of the European Union (EU), as well as Norway and Switzerland, in terms of their legislations, practices and limits concerning policies enforcing forced returns, or assisting voluntary returns of migrants to their home countries. The executive summary provides an overview of facts and figures.

The experiences in these countries appear to be quite mixed, although some have been implementing assisted voluntary programmes for quite a long time; for example, Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, with Ireland, Norway, Spain, and the United Kingdom beginning to implement similar programmes in 2002. The book reports a total of 20 assisted voluntary programmes operating in 18 countries in Europe, but fails to identify any clear trend over the last ten years or so. Furthermore, despite similar situations in different countries, there is no harmonized EU approach to either involuntary or voluntary return of migrants.

While most countries have specific procedures for deporting migrants whose situation is irregular, involuntary return programmes appear to have a limited impact in many countries, with a significant difference between the number of expulsion orders issued and that of effective removals. The increasing number of readmission agreements signed recently between European and other countries (which sometimes precondition the openness of legal migration routes), as well as those at the EU level to improve follow-up of rejected asylum seekers and “overstayers”, are, however, signs of the willingness of OECD countries to better manage migration flows.

One of the main conclusions of the book is that voluntary and involuntary returns are interlinked and mutually

reinforcing, suggesting that deportation and assisted voluntary programmes are somehow complementary. Nonetheless, the authors conclude that voluntary return is preferable to forced return, and is more cost effective. Timely provision of information to migrants prior to their return is seen as particularly important as is the offer of voluntary return to groups larger than rejected asylum seekers.

The authors also emphasize the need to increase cooperation between migrants’ countries of origin and receiving countries, since return is generally more sustainable when receiving countries endorse additional investments in integration support in the countries of origin. Finally, the book identifies the most important obstacles to a more harmonized approach: the variety of definitions used to describe the problem, and the lack of systematic research to gauge the cost–benefit outcomes of tried return programmes.

Voluntary and involuntary return measures should, however, be viewed in terms of their importance within migration flows. Concretely, according to IOM statistics, assisted voluntary returns account for no more than 10–20% of all returns (and probably even less for involuntary returns). Indeed, the main determinants of return migration (as well as for the increasing mobility of highly skilled migrants), probably go beyond migration policies. This is not to say that a return policy has no role to play, but it is probably only marginal compared with employment opportunities, social assistance or political stability in the origin countries. These considerations go beyond those of this IOM book, but are probably at the core of “brain drain” and “illegal migration”. The cost–benefit analyses presented in the book implicitly support this view, showing that assisted returns cost a lot for a very limited number of people, who may come back. ■

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