Return Migration and Reintegration: Discourses, Policies and Practices

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Introduction

Over the last few years, return migration has received growing attention in both academic and political discourse at the international, regional and national levels. This discourse on return migration is often linked to migrants' safety and dignity. It was established during the development process of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), and it helped to unify the position of the various stakeholders involved (Panizzon and Jurt 2023). Even today, it is still being maintained when it comes to supporting member states in implementing the objectives of the GCM (United Nations Network on Migration 2021).

The discourse surrounding the ability to return in safety and dignity has been reflected in various policies, such as for instance in Objective 21 of the GCM, which explicitly calls for states to 'cooperate in facilitating safe and dignified return' (GCM 2018:30f). In addition, at the European level, an increasing number of policies address the issue of return as an element of migration governance. Across the European continent more restrictive migration measures have been implemented with state-induced returns (Koch 2014) being an important part. In this context, state-induced returns are understood as an expression of an 'effective' and 'credible' migration management in which undocumented migrants and rejected asylum seekers return to their countries of origin. Thus, the European Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund set up for the period 2021–2027 explicitly supports approaches to return management. Furthermore, the recent policy interest in return migration also reflects the increase in the regulation of the relationships of the EU with third countries as part of the broader migration management agenda (Cassarino 2016).

The practices of return policies are transnational in nature, involving sending countries, as well as sometimes transit and receiving ones. Return programmes require complex infrastructure and supplementary resources to set up in both sending and receiving countries. Governments, international organisations and European state development agencies have

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expanded their engagement in return-led schemes, such as in assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programmes, which are jointly implemented with partners in migrant origin countries (International Organisation for Migration (IOM) 2018, German Society for International Cooperation 2019). However, return is a highly sensitive issue that is often used as a proxy for deportation and other forms of forced return, even when it is referred to by state and civil-society actors as 'voluntary' (Kalir 2022). In view of the current political shifts to the right in several European countries, and considering that migration pressures towards the continent will most likely persist, it can be assumed that the interest in return will remain high among European states and measures will be intensified (King and Okólski 2018).

At the same time, academic research on return migration has flourished and has become the subject of a growing number of works in different social science disciplines. In very general terms, while quantitative approaches focus predominantly on the determinants and socio-economic impacts on the migrant community of origin, qualitative studies offer perspectives on the intentions and decision-making and the individual experiences of the return process. Even today, return policies still predominantly apply a binary approach to migration as a move from country A to country B and potentially back to country A. Against this interpretation, a growing body of academic literature on international migration shows that migrants develop multi-directional, rather than binary, trajectories (e.g., Van Liempt 2011). As Griffiths, Rogers and Anderson (2013:14) note, 'return, often envisaged as an ending by policymakers is rarely experienced as such by the individual, who may see it more as another beginning' and that 'return' is often not a single, final movement, but a temporary, often repeated journey, more akin to visits and holidays'. In line with this conceptual approach and for the purpose of this issue, we opt for a multifaceted understanding of return mobilities.

The different connotations of return in the existing literature and in policymaking are crucial because the conceptualisation of return migration has implications for the support offered to migrants experiencing return through different forms (cf. deportation or assisted voluntary return). This means that return is not free from politicised relations and interests between stakeholders in the migration and return processes. While some stakeholders have a very narrow understanding of return, mainly encompassing the decision and the act of return itself, other actors' understanding includes the reintegration process after return. Vathi, Russell and Barak (2023) maintain that strategies of all the stakeholders implicated in return and reintegration are closely linked to the geopolitics of migration governance, which is often characterised by power-imbalance and diverging interests. For a long time, EU member states have been 'managing migration' through a reward and retorsion mechanism (Kunz, Lavenex and Panizzon 2011) and through a logic of conditionalities (García Andrade 2018), implying that the EU's political or financial incentives will lead to readmission and a higher number of returns. This is for instance the case with the accession into the EU for the Western Balkans. However, these strategies barely work, since many states of migrant origin are interested in migrants' financial remittances rather than in the return of their citizens. Therefore, it is no surprise that the pressure on the countries of origin to admit returnees is habitually not accompanied by adequate support for their reintegration, especially with regard to psycho-social support for vulnerable returnees (Odermatt and Jurt 2023). A number of studies have shown that the variety of reintegration strategies often follows a series of ineffective ad hoc

measures (Arowolo 2000), and that there is most often a lack of coordination between the different stakeholders, complex and fast-changing external financing mechanisms, and strict accessibility criteria for returnees to receive support (e.g., Gueye, Jurt and Odermatt 2022). Recently, there have been attempts to address these shortcomings, calling for continued cooperation between high-income countries and countries of origin in programme design and implementation. Up until now the effectiveness of these initiatives, however, has remained largely unknown (OECD 2020).

The reintegration process upon return has captured much less research interest than return migration, even if it is now an established concept in migration scholarship. Although the literature on reintegration has recently started to grow, our current understanding of reintegration remains somewhat vague (Marino and Lietaert 2022). Additionally, the meaning attached to reintegration differs significantly between policymakers from the Global North and from the Global South, but also between researchers and returnees. Most studies predominantly focus on return migration patterns and motives rather than on the reintegration process (e.g., Beauchemin 2015, Flahaux and de Haas 2016). When investigating mandated research and return policies, the main emphasis is habitually limited to the economic reintegration of returnees, such as their reintegration into the local and/or national labour markets (Kuschminder 2017). Lastly, the reintegration process has been chiefly studied within the framework of the sustainability of return, which has evolved into the sustainability of reintegration (IOM 2018). It is thus strongly in the realm of international migration governance, since return migration is perceived by policymakers in high-income countries as a reactive approach to reducing the number of undocumented migrants in their countries, whereas a sustainable return is considered a proactive approach to prevent future migration.

Although a rising awareness recognises reintegration as a challenging and highly contextualised process regarding the conditions of return and the social, economic, and political contexts where it takes place (cf. Kuschminder 2017), the more individual aspects of the returnees' reintegration processes have often been overlooked. This is rather surprising, given that return migration is not only a spatial relocation, but a far-reaching social and personal experience. It is one of the aims of this issue to contribute to rectify this shortcoming by addressing the multi-dimensional nature of return migration and reintegration and the contradictions between policies and individual practices in relation to it. We do so by asking the following questions: how do multi-governance return policies apply in the context of return and reintegration in the migrants' countries of origin? In addition, how do return migrants as well as their families and communities make sense of and react to return and reintegration?

The set of papers in this issue explore return migration and reintegration from different angles, based on empirical research from around the world. The contributions can be broadly grouped under two main interrelated themes: (1) structural dimensions of return and reintegration and their sensitivity to regional, national, and local policy dynamics as well as returnees' positionality and (2) returnees' agency, family and community responses. Let us now expand on each of the articles.

Formal Support Structures and the Agency of Migrants

The return migration policy agendas of the countries of the Global North are deeply embedded in the historical socio-cultural and political contexts where the process takes place (Vathi et al. 2023). A rich and though-provoking case study in this regard is provided by the first paper, entitled 'Experimentation and Extraction in Reintegration Governance: The Case of Kosovo', by Ruth Vollmer and Zeynep Sahin-Mencütek. The authors demonstrate that the return and reintegration assistance in Kosovo is strongly linked to the country's historical background. Its post-war return policy is deeply inscribed in the broader context of international-led post-war state-building, and the current geopolitical dynamics, for instance the country's EU accession process, present a complex political background against which return migration is considered in today's policymaking. Drawing on qualitative empirical and desk research, the authors argue that Kosovo's reintegration governance landscape is a site of experimentation and extraction in relation to the policy objectives of destination countries prioritising returns. Extraction occurs as the management of returnee reintegration becomes an opportunity for revenue generation for multiple state, non-state, international and local actors. Experimentation concerns innovations and testing mainly initiated by donors and international actors, then appropriated by local partners. These mechanisms attempt to cope with governance challenges, including uncertainty, complexity, and unexpected results in the field of return and reintegration policies. Using illustrative tables, this paper highlights the complexity of return infrastructure in Kosovo and its donor-driven external financial mechanisms over time and contributes to a better understanding of specific functioning of reintegration governance, modes of practice, and power relations between multiple actors operating at different scales.

Migrants' personal strategies for return migration are a trigger as well as an expression of multi-scale migration governance politics and should thus be understood as a process contingent upon different and, often, incongruous legal, political, and socio-economic elements, as endorsed and employed by the different stakeholders involved (Vathi et al. 2023). The article by Simona Schreier aligns with a strand of scholarly work that looks at migrants' diverse personal strategies to defy deportation and detention to extend their stay in the host country (cf. Kuschminder and Dubow 2023). The author analyses different approaches adopted by Nigerian migrants living in Austria to avoid an impending return against the backdrop of Austria's enhanced return migration regulations introduced during the so-called 'refugee crisis' in 2015 and amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper is especially significant given Nigeria's prominence as an important migrant origin country in Europe. Using the theoretical framework of everyday resistance by Johansson and Vinthagen (2019), the author uncovers the migrants' own perceptions and interpretations of assisted voluntary and forced return policies and implementation. The nuanced ways in which Nigerian migrants navigate the pressures of returning to their home countries, by either not utilising the return infrastructure, such as AVRR, or by being indifferent towards these schemes, contributes to a better understanding of resistance within (potential) return migration processes.

Judith Altrogge takes a closer look at the economic reintegration process by comparing returnees supported by voluntary return and reintegration assistance with those who have experienced deportation. In the public and policy discourse, AVRR programmes are perceived

as a more humane and dignified form of return than deportation, because they offer migrants the opportunity to prepare for their return, and they might increase their agency in their reintegration processes. However, the author demonstrates that this clear-cut distinction of voluntary return and deportation is contested. Drawing on a qualitative sample of returnees from Germany to Gambia, she uses a longitudinal design to capture their reintegration process. The findings show that during the reintegration process, the economic prospects of AVVR-assisted returnees become similar to those of migrants with deportation experience. This alignment during the reintegration process can be explained by changing expectations in terms of their future life perspectives. While returnees with deportation experiences have to reorient themselves and start struggling on their own, often without significant economic prospects, assisted returnees realise the inadequacies of their post-return hopes and economic prospects. Against this background, the role of reintegration assistance is questioned, among others, due to the unfavourable return context of Gambia. Despite this critique, the author stresses that reintegration assistance can contribute to make a small but meaningful difference, especially upon returnees' arrival. Yet, for both groups of returnees their social networks play a crucial role in the positive income prospects in their individually challenging and long reintegration process.

From the analysis of Nigerian migrants' diverse personal strategies to defy deportation and detention in Austria to returnees navigating support in Gambia, we now move to considering a single migrant in South Africa and his struggles of migration and return. The paper by Divane Nzima and Khangelani Moyo draws on data from the life history account of a male Zimbabwean gardener living in South Africa. This article focusses on the lived experiences and difficulties of the migrant in navigating expectations, joblessness, exploitation, and precarious work conditions as an undocumented immigrant. Through rich descriptions, we learn about his resilience and determination to meet his migration goals and how he plans his return to Zimbabwe, where he intends to start a farming project. The authors further explore the agency with which he manages to escape 'the diaspora trap' – an involuntary settlement of migrants in destination countries (Nzima and Moyo 2017). While the authors' theoretical framework of the 'diaspora trap' has been so far mainly applied to high-skilled migrants, the authors extend it in this paper to the situation of a low-skilled migrant. By doing so, they provide valuable insights into the experiences of low-skilled migrants and their strategies for escaping the 'diaspora trap'.

The Role of the Family and Community in Return Migration and Reintegration

The agency of returnees and their family and community responses to their return take centre stage in the following two papers.

Doudou Gueye and Amadou Mballo highlight the important role of the family in the reintegration process of returnees in Gambia, Guinea and Senegal. Families, which include immediate and extended ones, are revealed as powerful units where migration is envisaged as a collective livelihood project (Stark 1991). Extending this approach to the context of return and reintegration, the authors illustrate that a family's consent to return is crucial in the preparation for an impending return and during the journey itself, as well as in the process of reintegration.

Their analysis is based on a multi-sited ethnography undertaken with a heterogenous sample of returnees, including assisted and non-assisted ones as well as independent returnees with financial assets. To capture the impact of the immediate social environment upon returnees' reintegration, interviews with family and community members were conducted. The findings show that a negotiated return with the family facilitates the returnees' reintegration process and can prevent stigmatisation among family members. Moreover, it can positively influence the social positionality of returnees in their respective communities.

In a similar way to the West African context, the role of migrants' families in return and reintegration is also pivotal in the context of Iran. The paper by Sara Hormozinejad offers valuable insights into the motivations behind North-South return migration by examining Iranian migrants' own understanding and perception of return. Informed by social network theory and drawing on semi-structured in-depth interviews with returnees, this article addresses the question of how return migrants perceive and articulate their motivations and decisions to return from countries in the Global North to Iran – with its unfavourable political and economic circumstances – despite their secured status and careers abroad. On the one hand, the results show that family ties act as a driving force behind return, especially when migrants feel a sense of duty towards family members who have remained in Iran and may need their care. On the other hand, the findings illustrate the emotional and practical support provided by families in migrants' multidimensional reintegration processes (e.g., in finding employment). The strength of this article is the authors' attempt to overcome the dichotomous success-failure narrative on return and the exemplary illustrations of return from prosperous countries to an economically adverse context as being much more complex and puzzling than economic push and pull factors grounded in economic models might suggest.

Lastly, the peer-reviewed forum article addresses another highly topical multi-stakeholder migration governance approach, namely refugee resettlement schemes. Besides 'voluntary' return and local integration, resettlement programmes are regarded as one of three 'durable solutions' within the current international refugee protection regime (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2018). As mentioned above, in a similar way to return and reintegration schemes, refugee resettlement demands a multilevel-governance approach: from the UNHCR, which typically undertakes the role of identifying the refugees in refugee camps located in the Global South and referring them for resettlement to countries in the Global North; to the IOM, which organises the refugees' pre-departure and resettlement; and to the national, regional, and local services, nongovernmental organisations, and volunteers responsible for the refugees' integration into the resettlement countries. In this context, Claudia Böhme takes us to Camp Kakuma in Kenya, which houses approximately 200,000 residents from various Eastern African countries. Resettlement – in countries such as the United States or Canada, or in member states of the European Union – has always been one of the most preferred ways to escape the harsh living conditions in the camp. Through face-to-face conversations and online ethnography, the author analyses how resettlement in Germany is presented, discussed, and visualised on social media platforms. She further examines the ways social media have transformed the ideas and imaginings of resettlement amongst the camp residents and concludes that digital representations have had a considerable effect.

Concluding Remarks and Future Research Avenues

The current increase in return policies as a migration management tool is not expected to end soon. Therefore, studies that deconstruct the dominant macro-perspective of international return policy discourse by introducing the migrants' subjective experiences of their return and reintegration will remain important in the future. They can demonstrate the contrasts between the formal agendas of return migration policies and the informal struggles of returnees in their return and reintegration processes. At this point, it seems important to us to stress that while the return of migrants can be leveraged to serve specific European migration policy interests, policies should not follow an 'out of sight, out of mind' approach once the migrants have left European territories. Nor should the European stakeholders involved in reintegration programmes in the migrants' origin countries pursue their sole goal of preventing (re)migration under the guise of reintegration support.

As Odermatt and Jurt (2023) and Altrogge in this issue show, economic reintegration support, for instance in form of a return project, can provide a jump start for returnees to reintegrate socially and reduce the pressure on them to generate an income for their families. Yet, without additional support, long-term economic integration is not guaranteed. Similarly, whereas returnees who benefitted from other forms of assistance (e.g., psycho-social support, qualification trainings, etc.) reported that it helped them to navigate their reintegration upon arrival, they considered their support to be too short and insufficient (Odermatt and Jurt 2023). Hence, it is pivotal that the support landscape offers more sustained support throughout returnees' often lengthy and strenuous process of reintegration. Moreover, to guarantee a 'safe and dignified return and reintegration' as proclaimed by governments and international actors (cf. GCM), the support needs to become more accessible, inclusive, and more tailored to the individual needs of returnees. Such adequate support, however, requires a deeper conceptual understanding of the complex and multidimensional process of reintegration. Hence, there is doubtlessly further scope for longitudinal research on reintegration as a social, temporal and spatial process.

As we have seen in the articles focussing on the support of family members, a negotiated return with the family can pave the way to a smoother reintegration. Yet, the manifold informal support provided by families, friends, and communities in all stages of return and reintegration is precisely an area which has largely escaped the attention of the scientific community so far. Accordingly, more research attention should be paid to the complex interlinkages between informal and formal return and reintegration support, for instance, forms of institutional support that directly or indirectly benefits family and community members.

We hope that this issue will contribute to a deeper and more holistic understanding of the multifaceted aspects of return and reintegration and of the complex transnational and national support models, and that it will stimulate further research and debates on the fast-evolving return and reintegration policies around the globe to improve the lives of return migrants.

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