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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL**

The EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration

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COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL

The EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration

Introduction

The **New Pact on Migration and Asylum** presents a comprehensive and integrated approach that brings together all related policy strands to build an effective, long-term and sustainable migration and asylum system. The aim is to structure the EU's capacity to offer protection to people in need, to integrate those living and working in the EU, and to provide effective and humane processes to return people who are not entitled to stay. A common EU system for returns is an essential component of a comprehensive and integrated migration management system. Voluntary and forced returns¹ are both key elements of an effective return policy.

The success of any return policy is often measured by the number of those that actually return to their country of origin. Currently, those figures remain low within the EU, with only about one third of people ordered to leave the EU effectively returning.² To be effective, a **common EU system for returns** must consist of stronger structures inside the EU through a reinforced legal and operational framework for swift and fair return procedures that respect fundamental rights in compliance with the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, and strengthened governance at EU and national level, as proposed in the New Pact on Migration and Asylum. This needs to be combined with more effective cooperation with partner countries on return, readmission and reintegration as outlined in the Commission's recent Communication on "Enhancing cooperation on return and readmission as part of a fair, effective and comprehensive EU migration policy"³. To measure the real success of a return policy, it is nevertheless important to not only consider the return rates but also the situation of the individuals concerned, enabling their return in a dignified manner and taking into account their reintegration prospects once they return to their country of origin.

Combined with the new legal framework put forward in the New Pact, **voluntary return** is a crucial element of the common EU system for returns. Alongside effective **reintegration measures**, voluntary return aims to ensure the humane, effective and sustainable return of irregular migrants. Voluntary return, which is usually considered more cost-effective than forced return, gives returnees real opportunities and takes into account their needs, expectations and prospects once returned. In the framework of a comprehensive partnership, countries of return would also be more inclined to participate and take ownership of the process when the returns are voluntary. These elements build trust in the system, making it more credible and effective.

¹ Voluntary return refers to the assisted or independent return of an individual to a third country based on the free will of the returnee; forced return refers to the enforcement of an obligation to return, notably the physical transportation of the returnee to a third country.

² Out of 491 195 illegally staying third country nationals ordered to return in 2019, 142 320 effectively returned to a third country.

³ COM (2021) 56 final.

An effective and ambitious policy on **reintegration** as a key component of a common EU system for returns can help overcome the socio-economic and psychosocial difficulties migrants face when returning to their community and make their return more sustainable. Reintegration needs to be designed with the involvement of national and local authorities, host local communities and civil society to help give tangible future prospects for the returnee and their local community. An ambitious reintegration policy should both facilitate and benefit from the development of mutually beneficial and comprehensive partnerships with the partner countries that are at the heart of the external dimension of the New Pact. Sustainable reintegration should also contribute to broader development strategies in partner countries to generate development benefits and to address some of the root causes of irregular migration.

This Strategy **promotes voluntary return and reintegration as an integral part of a common EU system for returns**. Over the years, the Commission has supported voluntary return and reintegration through various national schemes and EU-funded projects. However, this is the first time that the Commission presents a strategy on voluntary return and reintegration, which sets out new approaches to the design, promotion and implementation of voluntary return and reintegration. The aim of this strategy is to develop a **more uniform and coordinated approach among Member States** to unlock the full potential of voluntary return and reintegration. It puts forward an approach that fosters coherent action, forges closer links with development initiatives and national strategies in partner countries, reinforces their capacity and fosters their ownership over the return, readmission and reintegration of their nationals. The aim is to **boost the effectiveness and sustainability** of the common EU system for returns for the mutual benefit of the returnees, the EU and the third countries.

This strategy supports the successful implementation of **key components of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum**, notably the clear rules and procedures for return at the border, return sponsorship and the new governance structures, by facilitating swift voluntary returns of rejected asylum seekers at the external borders and by setting up a common framework for voluntary return and reintegration that can facilitate the implementation of solidarity measures.

1. Building on achievements

This new strategy builds on initiatives launched in previous years and on the experience gained in implementing national and joint voluntary return and reintegration programmes as well as EU-funded initiatives in partner countries. Several initiatives are ongoing and are the basis for the development of the coherent framework put forward by this strategy.

The **European Return and Reintegration Network** is an EU-funded network of several Member States and Schengen Associated countries⁴ that facilitates cooperation between migration authorities. The Network has become a key stakeholder in the assisted voluntary return and reintegration process. It provides assistance to returnees by joint contracting of reintegration service providers in the countries of return and by exploring and implementing innovative solutions in cooperation with its members and with third countries. Since it was

⁴ Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland.

set up in mid-2018, the Network (together with its predecessor, the European Reintegration Network), has supported the participating Member States to achieve the successful return and reintegration of nearly 25 000 migrants.

On the basis of its reinforced mandate, the **European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex)** is developing its capacity to support voluntary return and reintegration. In 2020, the Agency started supporting Member States in the area of voluntary returns. Around 18% of the Agency's return operations organised in 2020 were voluntary returns, and this share is increasing. In mid-2022, Frontex will take over the activities of the **European Return and Reintegration Network**. This will ensure that the benefits of the Network are extended equally to all Member States and that Frontex can fulfil its mandate in the area of returns in a fully effective manner, providing seamless support in organising tailored return and reintegration assistance to returnees, notably through providers of reintegration services in third countries. The first **Frontex pilot for individual joint reintegration** support to returnees from the EU will start in May 2021, which paves the way for the full operationalisation of the Agency's mandate on assisted voluntary return and reintegration.

Operational framework for reintegration and development

Since 2015, development budgets have been used to step up efforts to reintegrate returning migrants from Europe and transit countries. **The European Return and Reintegration Network** brought together the national authorities and the Commission under an innovative initiative to explore options to work together more closely and align objectives. The Network created an operational framework advising how to develop practical, on-the-ground ways to work together. It is currently testing the framework with several Member States in Nigeria and Bangladesh.

To improve the quality of return counselling, the Commission has developed in the context of the European Migration Network an **EU framework on return counselling** that provides guidance to Member State organisations in setting up, managing and developing counselling structures in Member States. This framework is a reference for creating or running national return counselling programmes and addresses the challenges of counselling by promoting good practice and giving recommendations. Moreover, together with the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) and Frontex, the European Return and Reintegration Network is developing a **common curriculum for return counsellors**, focusing on the skills and competences that counsellors need. Involving Frontex in designing this curriculum ensures complementarity with the Agency's work to train experts in return policy as members of the standing corps.

The EU and its Member States have identified, at strategic and operational level, the need to work together and develop **joint tools** to support assisted voluntary return and sustainable reintegration. Some of the main tools supporting the implementation of the strategy in practice are already at an advanced stage of development.

The **Reintegration Assistance Tool (RIAT)** facilitates information exchange and referral among return counsellors and providers of reintegration services in a secure digital environment and enables users to monitor assisted voluntary return and reintegration programmes. The Commission has also set up a **Return and Reintegration Assistance**

Inventory (RRAI) that compiles information on the type of assistance (i.e. level and type of cash or in-kind assistance), potential beneficiaries, organisations involved and the stages of the procedure at which support is offered. These tools will enable better coordination at EU and national level, including in the context of return sponsorship, and improve the allocation of funding and promote the sharing of best practices⁵.

The **EU-International Organization for Migration (IOM) Joint Initiative** for Migrant Protection and Reintegration, financed by the EU Trust Fund for Africa, was launched in December 2016. Among other activities, the Joint Initiative has supported assisted voluntary return and sustainable reintegration in the Sahel and Lake Chad Region, Horn of Africa and North Africa, and has contributed to strengthening migration governance structures in third countries. From April 2017 until October 2020, it has provided 93 110 migrants with post-arrival reception assistance and 75 182 with reintegration assistance, supporting 34 646 humanitarian returns from Libya to countries of origin. The Joint Initiative delivered well on returns. On the reintegration side challenges identified include the ownership and capacity of national authorities, the coordination with other actors carrying out similar operations and the quality of monitoring⁶. Future joint reintegration support efforts should be embedded in the comprehensive approach and aligned with the geographical priorities identified in this context.

2. Challenges to address

Despite the achievements made in recent years, there is still potential to maximise the benefits of voluntary return and reintegration. The share of voluntary returns is currently 27% of all departures from the EU. A number of shortcomings hamper the full effectiveness and expansion of the EU's action on voluntary return and reintegration support in the EU, as well as the sustainability of reintegration in third countries.

Fragmentation of approaches. Voluntary return and reintegration support in the EU is fragmented, with different approaches taken by the Member States, lacking the coherence needed for the policy to be effective. This is due to the lack of a joint framework and to Member States engaging in differing levels of cooperation with any given third country.

As a result, although all Member States have national assisted voluntary return and reintegration programmes, they differ markedly. In particular, there are divergences in their scope (e.g. with some covering only rejected asylum seekers), in the procedures and in the level of assistance provided to returnees. This **undermines the trust of returnees and of third countries** in the system and their willingness to engage. Different levels or types of support create tension when returnees compare their situations during joint return operations or when back home, and complicate the provision of complementary reintegration services for origin countries and for providers of reintegration services. This lack of a consistent approach in turn complicates the implementation of and overall cooperation under EU readmission agreements and arrangements. It can also undermine the efforts of partner

⁵ More information on the EU framework on return counselling and the Reintegration Assistance Tool is provided in the Commission staff working document accompanying this Communication.

⁶ See for example the "Learning Lessons from the EUTF" report:

https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/sites/eutf/files/exec_summary_lji_0.pdf and

https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/sites/eutf/files/learning_lessons_from_the_eutf_5.pdf.

countries to develop a coherent approach to the reintegration of returning migrants and create false expectations for partner countries about what the EU can offer. Fragmentation may also encourage and lead to **unauthorised movements of irregular migrants** seeking to choose the national package that better fits their individual interests.

To promote voluntary returns to their full potential, some aspects of the current legal

Cost of return

Voluntary return is generally considered more cost-effective than forced return. Estimating the costs of voluntary return should include the in-cash and in-kind assistance provided to the returnee, the flight and, where relevant, the reintegration package. For forced returns, the cost includes the cost of housing the returnee in the pre-removal detention facility, and the involvement of escorts and other special arrangements before, during and after return. The European Parliamentary Research Service has estimated that forced return costs EUR 3 414 per individual, compared with EUR 560 per voluntary return. The average indicative cost of returns from transit countries is estimated at around EUR 2 500 per person.

framework will also need to be improved. It is clear that the sooner an irregular migrant returns, the higher the likelihood that the return is accepted by the migrant if it is carried out in the context of a fair and effective procedure and the person receives accurate and complete information. However, absconding during the voluntary departure period remains a significant issue, which further hampers returns. **Fast and fair common procedures and rules on asylum and return**, together with better support for voluntary return – including for migrants subject to the return border procedure and subject to administrative detention if appropriate – can increase the uptake of voluntary returns at early stages of the return process.

Insufficient data collection. The statistical information currently available does not provide a complete picture on the use of voluntary return and reintegration in the EU, as Member States have no obligation to report on the breakdown between voluntary and forced

return and on the type of assistance provided to returnees.

Lack of a coherent framework for return counselling and a mechanism to refer returnees to return and reintegration programmes (referrals). Effective return counselling is essential to strengthen the links between the pre-departure and post-arrival phases and to make a success of reintegration. At present, there is no framework in place on counselling or the minimum qualifications and training requirements to provide the service. Several mechanisms are currently used to refer returnees to return and reintegration programmes, leading to fragmentation, loss of information and mismatch between the migrants' skills, needs and ambitions and the support offered. To provide a high quality service, return counsellors need specific **training and access to up-to-date information** on the assistance available to returnees and existing opportunities in the countries of return.

Insufficient coordination among stakeholders. A range of stakeholders and actors are active in the area of voluntary return and reintegration, namely EU national and local authorities, international and civil society organisations, third country authorities at national and local level. These include border and migration authorities, social work and healthcare providers, housing and education authorities, legal aid and non-profit organisations in multiple countries and at different levels. The lack of effective coordination between these

organisations leads to duplications and inefficiencies. For instance, a Member State might support the onward travel of a returnee from the airport of arrival to the town of origin as well as short-term accommodation there, when another EU project already funds that same accommodation, along with medical care. Insufficient synergies with national development strategies in partner countries may affect the effectiveness and sustainability of reintegration programmes. For example, the training provided to returnees needs to take into account possible synergies with on-going development projects and be aligned with national strategies to boost certain sectors. To avoid overlaps or gaps, projects need to be coordinated among Member States and reintegration should be mainstreamed into programming activities.

Lack of sustainability, including due to a lack of ownership and capacity of origin countries. Partner countries generally see reintegration as a positive element of cooperation on readmission. However, because of insufficient capacity, few third countries are able to manage the reintegration process and ensure sufficient coordination with national migration and development strategies. For example, a partner country willing to be involved in providing reintegration services to its returning nationals might lack the governance structure, the staff with the skills needed (including managing donor support and monitoring) and the capacity to provide public services tailored to the specific economic, social and psychosocial needs of returnees. Moreover, local providers of reintegration assistance may lack capacity. As a consequence, reintegration processes may lack in sustainability and be heavily dependent on donors and operational partners, and risk also being fragmented due to a lack of coherence between donor-funded schemes.

Insufficient funding. Voluntary return and reintegration have become major priorities for the EU and its Member States. However, funding allocations mobilised for increasing voluntary returns have not always been able to match all needs and expectations.

The **COVID-19 pandemic** is an additional challenge, as it frustrates the EU's ability to return irregular migrants, limits the capacity of third countries to readmit and reintegrate their nationals, and can reduce the willingness of migrants to return due to the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic in the countries of origin.

3. A strategic approach to voluntary return and reintegration

This strategy acknowledges the value of voluntary return and aims to **increase the number and share of voluntary returns** from Europe and from transit countries, to **improve the quality** of the support and the participation of returnees, and to reinforce the **coherence and governance** of EU action.

The strategy sets out a **new, more coordinated and integrated approach** to the design, promotion and implementation of assisted voluntary return and reintegration schemes and of actions in third countries to build better links with other development initiatives, to build the capacity and ownership of third countries to reintegrate their own nationals, and to make the schemes sustainable. This strategy follows and promotes the overall objectives of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, including the governance structures and the mechanism for cooperation in return and readmission set out in the proposal for a Regulation on Asylum and Migration Management. Moreover, the implementation of this strategy would help render more effective the return **border procedure** proposed in the New Pact, promoting swift

voluntary returns from the EU's external borders, thereby reducing the duration of stay of people in the border procedure, and overall maximising its efficiency. An efficient return border procedure will also facilitate and encourage voluntary returns since people will be available and more willing to cooperate with the authorities. It better equips the EU to react to situations of migratory pressure by facilitating **sponsorship for voluntary returns**, as set out in the proposal for a Regulation for Asylum and Migration Management, with a common framework that reduces fragmentation and steps up cooperation between Member States.

In response to these challenges, the strategy sets out a wide range of measures under **seven pillars**, grouping together the internal, external and operational aspects of voluntary return and reintegration and covering:

1. A more effective legal and operational framework;
2. Effective coordination between all stakeholders;
3. Supporting voluntary return and reintegration of migrants from and between third countries;
4. Effective return counselling and referral;
5. Ensuring quality of support;
6. Fostering sustainability of reintegration support and ownership of partner countries; and
7. Funding for voluntary return and reintegration.

The success of the strategy relies on a **smooth and constructive collaboration** between relevant stakeholders including the European Parliament, Member States, the European Commission, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Frontex, partner countries and a large constellation of providers of voluntary return and reintegration services (e.g. international and civil society organisations, national and local authorities) active in this area.

3.1 A more effective legal and operational framework

While the core elements of this strategy can be implemented on the basis of the current legal framework, its reinforcement is necessary to **fully support a strategic and coherent approach** to voluntary return and reintegration. The Return Directive⁷ prioritises voluntary over forced return, but it does not provide a framework for setting up and running assisted voluntary return programmes or for supporting the reintegration of irregular migrants. International law also lacks rules or obligations for providing such support.⁸

The new legal framework proposed under the New Pact would address these shortcomings and put in place a more consolidated governance based on the Regulation on Asylum and Migration Management⁹. The proposal for a **recast Return Directive**¹⁰ sets a joint basis to

⁷ Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2008 on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals, OJ L 348, 24.12.2008, p. 98.

⁸ Some political declarations, however, stress the importance of voluntary return and reintegration - see for example UN Agenda 2030, Sustainable Development Goals, target 10.7; Global Compact on Migration, objective 21.

⁹ COM(2020) 610 final.

¹⁰ COM(2018) 634 final.

achieve coherence between national programmes on voluntary return and – where necessary – reintegration, and provide better rules for improving migrants’ cooperation and reducing absconding. Furthermore, together with the amended proposal for an **Asylum Procedures Regulation**¹¹, it aims to reduce the length of return procedures and make the return procedures overall more streamlined and effective, while ensuring the respect of the rights of returnees, notably the fundamental right to an effective remedy, at all stages of the return process. This in turn will be beneficial for the implementation of voluntary returns. The ambition and objectives set out in this strategy should be reflected in the ongoing negotiations with the European Parliament and the Council on the New Pact, particularly regarding support for vulnerable persons¹² and counselling. Regarding the Return Directive, the Commission will support reaching a compromise between the co-legislators to ensure that the legal framework fully supports a strategic use for voluntary returns.

The EU legal framework must also ensure the integrity of the EU system and prevent abuses. The proposal for a **revised Eurodac Regulation**¹³ will improve Member States’ capacity to monitor the granting of return and reintegration assistance, and reduce the risk of unauthorised secondary movements encouraged by differing national programmes by introducing new data fields to monitor this information. The Commission will monitor the effective and thorough implementation of return rules, notably through the **Schengen evaluation mechanism**, taking also account of the actions and priorities of this strategy.

Data collection will improve with the **amended Regulation on Migration Statistics**¹⁴, as Member States will start providing data on the type of return and assistance received, notably on voluntary return and reintegration. Furthermore, with the entry into force of the **EU Entry-Exit System**¹⁵ and the operationalisation of the **Schengen information System for return**¹⁶, additional information on the granting of a voluntary departure period and the voluntary return of irregular migrants from the EU will be available. The **amended Eurodac proposal**¹⁷ will complement the picture by registering information on whether voluntary return and reintegration assistance has been granted to irregular migrants. Finally, the Migration Situational Awareness and Analysis (MISAA) reports will also reinforce the operational and situational knowledge on return in the Union. These developments will provide a more reliable and complete overview of the availability, use and effectiveness of

¹¹ COM(2020) 611 final.

¹² According to Article 3(9) of Directive 2008/115/EC, “‘Vulnerable persons’ means minors, unaccompanied minors, disabled people, elderly people, pregnant women, single parents with minor children and persons who have been subjected to torture, rape or other serious forms of psychological, physical or sexual violence”.

¹³ COM(2020) 614 final.

¹⁴ Regulation (EU) 2020/851 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2020 amending Regulation (EC) No 862/2007 on Community statistics on migration and international protection (Text with EEA relevance), OJ L 198, 22.6.2020, p. 1.

¹⁵ Regulation (EU) 2017/2226 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 November 2017 establishing an Entry/Exit System (EES) to register entry and exit data and refusal of entry data of third-country nationals crossing the external borders of the Member States and determining the conditions for access to the EES for law enforcement purposes, and amending the Convention implementing the Schengen Agreement and Regulations (EC) No 767/2008 and (EU) No 1077/2011, OJ L 327, 9.12.2017, p. 20.

¹⁶ Regulation (EU) 2018/1860 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 November 2018 on the use of the Schengen Information System for the return of illegally staying third-country nationals, OJ L 312, 7.12.2018, p. 1.

¹⁷ COM(2020) 614 final.

voluntary return and reintegration assistance in the EU. Collecting all this data in a systematic and coherent way will enhance the credibility of voluntary returns and therefore create an incentive for Member States to rely more on voluntary returns.

The role of Frontex as the operational arm of the common EU system of returns is key to improving the overall effectiveness of the system and to support – with new tools – the practical use of a consolidated EU framework on voluntary return and reintegration. The Agency should support an increasing number of voluntary return operations and reinforce its capacity to provide operational assistance to Member States in all phases of the voluntary return and reintegration process, including on pre-return counselling (e.g. outreach campaigns to migrants), post-arrival support and monitoring the effectiveness of reintegration assistance.

At the same time, Member States' authorities should make more use of all the operational support that Frontex offers. In addition to taking over the activities of the European Return and Reintegration Network, Frontex is developing **joint reintegration services**, which give Member States the flexibility needed to identify support for individual cases, ensure consistency in the content and quality of services, and facilitate 'government-to-government' cooperation on return and reintegration. The rollout of the standing corps, with return experts providing specialised support, will further strengthen the role of the Agency in this area and in implementing this strategy. Setting up a dedicated division within Frontex, led by a Deputy Executive Director, will equip the Agency to fulfil its expanded mandate in the area of return.

The independent Fundamental Rights Officer, supported by monitors working for his/her office, assists Frontex in the implementation of its fundamental rights strategy and promotes the Agency's respect of such rights in all its activities, including return.

The **Return Coordinator** and the **High Level Network for Return**, comprising representatives from Member States, will provide further technical support in bringing together the different strands of the EU return policy including in the field of voluntary return and reintegration, where the Return Coordinator could promote a more coherent approach to reintegration assistance in relation to specific partner countries. The Return Coordinator will cooperate closely with all relevant actors to ensure that actions work together coherently and that the available support is used to the fullest extent possible. The work of the Coordinator and the High Level Network will form an integral part of the governance framework set by the proposal for a Regulation on Asylum and Migration Management.

The way forward

- The **Commission** will work with the **European Parliament** and the **Council** to advance and conclude negotiations on the various elements of the **New Pact**, in particular the Regulation on Asylum and Migration Management, the recast Return Directive, the Asylum Procedures Regulation and the Eurodac Regulation proposals, to further reinforce the return legal framework and support the implementation of this strategy.
- **Member States** should make full use of the operational assistance that **Frontex** can offer in relation to voluntary return and initial reintegration.
- **Frontex** should increase the number of return operations – including voluntary returns – it carries out.

- **Frontex** should appoint as a matter of priority the **Deputy Executive Director** to lead the dedicated Return structure of the Agency.
- **Frontex** should take over the activities carried out under the **European Return and Reintegration Network** by mid-2022.

3.2 Effective coordination between all stakeholders

There is a need to **step up coordination** of existing structures and to link reintegration programmes to wider national strategies and development programmes of partner countries, reducing the risk of duplication and improving the use of resources.

A **wide range of actors and stakeholders** are involved in voluntary return and reintegration processes. The returnees themselves are the most important people in the process, together with, at the receiving end, the countries and local communities of origin. In the EU, in addition to national and local authorities (immigration authorities, police, regions, municipalities), diaspora, local communities and civil society organisations can help promote voluntary return and reintegration and contribute to **reducing the negative perception of return** through engagement with communities of origin. Similarly, outside the EU, a wide range of international and civil society organisations, as well as national authorities and other actors in countries of origin are involved in providing support to returnees. The EU delegations and the representations of Member States in third countries should ensure a joint and coordinated EU approach in terms of programming, implementation and monitoring of reintegration projects.

Building on the experience in partner countries on linking reintegration with development, the Commission, in close cooperation with the High Representative will ensure coordination among all parties involved in the return and reintegration process, including national and local authorities and development actors. These mechanisms should facilitate referral of the returnees to relevant development programmes available in partner countries able to contribute to sustainable reintegration, such as employment creation, education, skills development or social inclusion.

The EU delegations, supported by European Migration Liaison Officers, should contribute to maintaining continuous engagement with their countries' stakeholders, including with a view to building understanding of the local context and priorities, identifying needs for capacity building and coordinating financial and operational support. At the same time, where possible and needed, they will facilitate the exchange of information and the coordination of action among Member States taking a 'Team Europe' approach.

The **Return Coordinator**, together with the High Level Network, will also support the coordination of national authorities on voluntary return and reintegration strategies and programmes, to promote the consistency between national actions and this strategy, and to promote the exchange of best practices among Member States.

The way forward

- Building on the experience in partner countries on linking reintegration with development, the Commission, in close cooperation with the High Representative, will ensure coordination in relevant partner countries among all parties involved in the return and reintegration process.
- The **Return Coordinator** and the **High Level Network for Return** will support efforts to ensure coherence and consistency of Member States' actions on voluntary return and reintegration.

3.3 Supporting voluntary return and reintegration of migrants from and between third countries

The EU has a long tradition of supporting voluntary return and reintegration of migrants from third countries to third countries. This form of assistance can provide an immediate personal relief to the individuals involved, supporting them when confronted with situations of danger and distress, and contributes to the development of the communities and countries to which they return and reintegrate, while at the same time be of interest to partner countries. Such support will continue in parallel with the support for voluntary returns from the Member States and will benefit from the increased sustainability of reintegration and ownership of national authorities in third countries.

African Union – EU – UN Task Force

The African Union - European Union - United Nations Task Force, established in November 2017, led to the launch of a major humanitarian evacuation operation, complemented with reintegration assistance in the country of origin. It has led to over 54 000 voluntary humanitarian returns of migrants from Libya to their home countries facilitated by IOM and African Union Member States.

Among all projects funded by the EU, the **EU-International Organization for Migration (IOM) Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration** is of key importance because it has ensured protection, voluntary return and reintegration assistance to over **100 000 migrants in Libya, Niger and other African countries**, helping them go back to and reintegrate into their countries of origin in Western, Central and Eastern Africa in a sustainable and durable manner. The Joint Initiative has also supported, to a limited extent, the reintegration of migrants returning from the EU, when other EU or Member

States' funds were not available for that purpose.

In addition to the Joint Initiative, the EU, through the Reintegration and Development Assistance in Afghanistan (RADA) and the Bangladesh Sustainable Reintegration and Improved Migration Governance (Prottasha) projects, also implemented by the IOM, has provided assistance for voluntary return and reintegration to Afghan and Bangladeshi returnees going back to their origin country from other third countries of transit and destination, including from Iran and Pakistan. These projects also largely supported the sustainable reintegration of Afghan and Bangladeshi migrants returning home from the EU territory.

Partner countries that are also countries of destination and transit of irregular migration share

similar concerns and interests when it comes to returning irregular migrants and ensuring their sustainable reintegration in countries of origin. Partnerships at regional and multilateral level, as well as with international organisations, will be further explored, including building on the experience of the African Union – EU – United Nations Taskforce on migration in Libya established in November 2017. This innovative trilateral approach, bringing together all relevant stakeholders, has effectively supported voluntary returns from Libya, with an unprecedented political engagement and support by the African Union that has addressed operational and political bottlenecks, such as providing consular assistance in particularly challenging circumstances.

The way forward

- The EU will provide support for voluntary return and reintegration of migrants from third countries of transit and destination to countries of origin, including through further exploration of possible partnerships at regional and multilateral level.

3.4 Effective return counselling and referral

It is important to provide migrants, at the earliest possible stage, with timely, up-to-date and reliable information through in-person or online counselling. The Commission, together with the European Migration Network, will periodically review and update the **EU framework on return counselling** to share up-to-date best practices on setting up and running national structures to provide return counselling.

In addition, the Commission will work with Frontex to develop, as a longer-term objective, a comprehensive return curriculum for practitioners that comprises teaching components on all aspects of return policy and practice. The return curriculum will include, but not be limited to, dedicated modules on voluntary return and reintegration, and it will incorporate existing tools such as the EU framework on return counselling and the **common curriculum for return counsellors**. Where suitable, relevant stakeholders in countries of origin could also provide their input. Frontex will support Member States by deploying

Return counselling in a nutshell

A successful voluntary return process starts with tailored outreach and dialogue between a counsellor and the migrant, during which the migrant receives timely, up-to-date and relevant information on their status and the offer to receive voluntary return support. This dialogue should take place at the earliest possible stage of the migration process, including during asylum procedures if appropriate, for instance for people coming from low-recognition-rate countries. The process should help the migrant plan a safe and dignified return and it should build trust and cooperation between the migrant and the counsellor. The dialogue must take into account the migrant's individual needs and vulnerabilities and address their concerns. Regarding minors in particular, counselling needs to be provided in a child-friendly language and should take into account the specific situation of the minor, ensuring the respect of the best interests of the child. Counselling entails close cooperation and exchange of information between a wide range of authorities at State, municipal and local level, as well as other stakeholders, including asylum authorities. The use of online counselling has increased during the current pandemic and will continue to be useful in providing remote counselling. Online counselling allows reintegration service providers to participate in the counselling sessions and can facilitate follow-up

return experts trained in return counselling as part of the standing corps.

To facilitate access to and the sharing of information on the opportunities available and to facilitate referrals between return counsellors and service providers, better use should be made of the existing information tools, notably the **Return and Reintegration Assistance Inventory** and the **Reintegration Assistance Tool**. Work on these knowledge management tools is needed to streamline the use of the Reintegration Assistance Tool in return counselling and referral, and to facilitate regular updates and analyse the information on the Return and Reintegration Assistance Inventory. This will help with programme monitoring, maximise their use and improve their quality.

The way forward

- **Member States** should engage in early, active and effective outreach to irregular migrants, while taking due account of vulnerabilities, and develop effective return counselling structures (both for in-person and online counselling) following the **EU framework for return counselling**.
- The **European Return and Reintegration Network** should finalise the common curriculum for return counsellors by mid-2022.
- **Frontex** should step up its training on return counselling, notably for standing corps return experts, following the adoption of the common curriculum.
- Member States should regularly and frequently update the **Return and Reintegration Assistance Inventory** and streamline the use of the **Reintegration Assistance Tool** in return counselling and referral processes; the Commission will provide regular training on how to do so.
- The **Commission**, with the support of **Frontex**, should further develop EU-level information tools such as the Return and Reintegration Assistance Inventory and the Reintegration Assistance Tool, including by promoting their **interoperability with national return case management systems**, and ensure appropriate **governance structures** for them.

3.5 Ensuring quality of support

Assistance to voluntary return covers a wide range of pre-return activities that include counselling, medical and psychological support, as well as financial, legal and logistical assistance for travel. This is often provided in combination with post-arrival and reintegration assistance to help the returnee find or create new opportunities in the country of return, including with the involvement of local communities immediately upon arrival and over the longer term.

One-stop-shop reintegration services under national leadership

In Tunisia, the EU Trust Fund for Africa funds socio-economic reintegration and helps set up a Tunisian-led reintegration mechanism. The objective is to strengthen the capacities of the Tunisian authorities to carry out reintegration at central and local level and to reinforce coordination among EU Member States encouraging referral to the national reintegration mechanism.

In Armenia, the European Return and Reintegration Network supports a Referral Centre for Reintegration, set up in cooperation with the national authorities, that provides counselling and referral to services and local and international project, and monitors the implementation of the reintegration plan.

These projects show how, with the necessary institutional support, countries of origin can set up a one-stop-shop for all phases of reintegration through a national referral mechanism to reintegration service providers.

This assistance should be tailor-made, provided upon arrival and take into account individual abilities and specific needs, notably of vulnerable groups. For children, the specific conditions in the country of return need to be considered on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the individual circumstances and the family situation. This would ensure that migrants receive the assistance they need upon arrival and make their return sustainable. The needs of **unaccompanied minors and children in migration** are key political priorities for the EU asylum and migration management system. Providing quality support to children in the context of voluntary returns and reintegration, and taking account of the best interests of the child as a primary consideration, is crucial for allowing them to build a future in the country of origin.

High quality support improves the chances of sustainable reintegration. However, there is a lack of **common quality standards** for designing the content and form of voluntary return and reintegration assistance and for assessing the capacity of providers of reintegration services, which the EU and its Member States rely on, to offer this support

successfully in third countries. This has led to wide discrepancies in the quality, content and consistency of support, depending on the returning Member State, the third country concerned and the provider of reintegration assistance. Moreover, different donors, public authorities, providers of reintegration assistance and local partners often apply different criteria for assessing the success of schemes, which makes it difficult to compare information on reintegration assistance and reduces its value for policy-making.

The lack of common standards, combined with the fragmentation of national programmes, can have **negative consequences for the level of acceptance** of return, by both the irregular migrants and third countries. This affects in particular the joint work carried out by several Member States with Frontex support or in the context of return sponsorship.

In response to these shortcomings, it is key that the work of providers of voluntary return and reintegration assistance meets high standards. The Commission will develop a **quality framework for reintegration service providers**, identifying common standards, which could be supported by EU funding. These standards will cover organisational and project management requirements and conditions for material support. The quality framework will also lay down key performance indicators, including on timeliness, compliance with the standards and level of service, which will improve the collection of more comparable data on reintegration assistance. The framework will take due account of the specific needs faced by

vulnerable groups, such as unaccompanied minors, families, people with disabilities or victims of trafficking in human beings. The framework will also stress the importance of fostering the ownership of partner countries and the development of local reintegration service providers that, having better knowledge of the local situation, may be better placed to work within the local context and be more cost effective. The involvement of partner countries' actors could also support the development of the quality framework.

The quality framework will **increase the credibility of the voluntary return and reintegration schemes** of the EU and its Member States, **support capacity building** of reintegration service providers, **increase and harmonise the quality and content of individual assistance** and **facilitate programme monitoring** and evaluation. Aligning the national approaches more closely and providing joint procedures and rules on the modalities and type of assistance, the quality framework can also support the implementation of return sponsorship and increase acceptance by third countries of joint return activities of the Member States.

The way forward

- The **Commission** will make available a **quality framework for reintegration service providers** based on common quality standards, in cooperation with the Member States, Frontex and the European Return and Reintegration Network by mid-2022, and it will promote its use.
- **Frontex** will apply the quality framework in managing the joint reintegration services provided to returnees who are referred to the Agency by national authorities.

3.6 Fostering sustainability of reintegration support and ownership of partner countries

Cooperation on voluntary return and sustainable reintegration are key aspects of the comprehensive and mutually beneficial migration partnerships that the EU will strengthen under the New Pact with countries of origin and transit. **Countries of origin are the best placed to create economic and social prospects for their nationals**, including returning migrants. However, a variety of reasons can negatively affect their sense of ownership of the reintegration process. Some of these reasons are related to shortcomings with respect to capacity, public services as well as political, legislative and operational frameworks. Referral to public services involved in the reintegration process, such as providers of healthcare, training or education services and employment agencies, might be underdeveloped due to a lack of coordination and to the insufficient quality of the service provided. Insufficient synergies between the work of international actors and the frameworks and initiatives developed by countries of origin, including parallel structures, can also have a negative impact.

Sustainable reintegration

Sustainability is a multi-faceted concept that encompasses the needs and vulnerabilities of the individual, the economic, social and psychosocial reintegration in the community, cost-effectiveness for the donors and the contribution to local development. In addition to supporting individual returnees, the concept of sustainable reintegration has the broader goal of building up the capacity of receiving communities, the private sector and local stakeholders. The aim is to encourage partner countries to take ownership of the process to reintegrate and ultimately return and readmit their own nationals as part of the broader objectives for the country's development and migration management.

The EU will support and promote a **gradual increase in countries of origin's ownership** over the reintegration process in national and local initiatives in partner countries by addressing some of these issues, to ensure sustainability and contextualisation, as well as to increase effectiveness. Where relevant, EU action should also target civil society and the private sector to mobilise their strengths. The EU should support the development of a 'whole-of-government approach' to reintegration, with better planning and increased synergies with national and local development strategies and increased responsiveness of public services to the specific needs of

returnees, while respecting social cohesion needs. Frontex should also provide its support to contribute to strengthening the capacity of partner countries on voluntary return and reintegration, in accordance with its mandate. This will include deploying liaison officers in third countries to assist in the organisation of readmission and reintegration, building local capacity and fostering ownership.

To maximise the impact of reintegration assistance, as part of our international partnerships that are a key component of the New Pact, the EU will **help strengthen government bodies and migration governance structures in third countries and avoid setting up parallel systems** driven by either the donor or the providers of reintegration services. Such support should strengthen the capacity of national and local authorities and of the reintegration service providers within the administration, for example by providing training and supporting the development and implementation of policy and operational frameworks, thus improving sustainability and reducing the dependency on external providers and donor funding. Countries of origin will be encouraged and supported to take on increased responsibilities in the welcoming and orientation of returnees, for example setting up one-stop-shop desks that will facilitate access to public services and coordinate referrals to reintegration and other development projects, with appropriate involvement of the private sector. The involvement of local communities should increase, including by opening up community-based reintegration schemes to locals.

This will also increase **coherence with development programmes** in partner countries supported by the EU or other donors. At strategic level, the partnership dialogue with partner countries will help factor in the strategic priorities in designing and delivering reintegration programmes while, at operational level, better coordination and information management facilitated by the referral and information sharing tools outlined in the strategy will help maximise the use of resources and improve the quality of referrals across all programmes.

Due consideration should be given to the local situation and dynamics to ensure the effectiveness of reintegration support.

The way forward

- The **Commission** will integrate and streamline as much as possible return and reintegration into development programming activities at national and local level in partner countries; referrals to development programmes (such as technical and vocational educational training and job creation actions) should be increased. In this respect, Commission services, the European External Action Service and EU Delegations will cooperate closely with Member States and local service providers of reintegration services.
- The **Commission**, in close cooperation with the High Representative, will support the development and implementation of the legal, policy and operational frameworks for reintegration in partner countries.
- To foster ownership of reintegration by partner countries, the **Commission**, together with all stakeholders, will work in partnership with authorities and local communities of those countries in planning and implementing reintegration programmes.
- The **Commission**, where relevant with the support of **Frontex**, will support the strengthening of third countries' capacity to provide voluntary return and reintegration services.

3.7 Funding for voluntary return and reintegration

Under the multi-annual financial framework 2014-2020, the **EU has been a major actor in** supporting voluntary return and reintegration, complementing and supporting the EU Member States' national efforts. An estimated 75% of the costs of operating assisted voluntary return programmes were borne by EU funding and the rest by national budgets.

In the **new financial cycle 2021-2027**, the EU will strengthen its role, taking into account the priorities set out in this strategy and supporting its implementation within the relevant funds, while ensuring coordination all along the process. With the **Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) for 2021-2027**, the Commission will support Member States' actions promoting the increase in voluntary returns from the EU and will provide funding for assisted voluntary return schemes as well as their initial reintegration in their countries. Moreover, it will ensure financial support for the maintenance and development of the EU-level information tools, such as the Reintegration Assistance Tool and the Return and Reintegration Assistance Inventory, and for capacity building in Member States. Frontex will provide complementary support in this area by means of the pre-return and post-return activities it carries out. Activities funded under the Asylum Migration and Integration Fund and those carried out by Frontex will principally focus on early stages of reintegration support and specific support to individual returnees.

The **Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) - Global Europe** and the **Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) III** will contribute to implementing this strategy, including by assisting migrants and their families in countries of transit or destination outside the EU to voluntarily return and reintegrate back home. Out

of the total budget of EUR 79.5 billion, indicatively 10% of the financial envelope of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument - Global Europe will be dedicated particularly to actions supporting management and governance of migration, forced displacement as well as addressing the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement when they directly target specific challenges related to migration and forced displacement. Working in complementarity with the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, and based on an approach tailored to the national and regional specificities, these funds will also contribute to the reintegration of migrants and their families returning from the EU, in particular through the development of structures and capacities of partner countries and the implementation of support programmes benefitting both returnees and the receiving communities.

In addition, NDICI - Global Europe and IPA III will support the national authorities and actors of the countries of origin to increase their ownership of return and reintegration activities taking place in their territory, including by strengthening their capacity to refer the returnees towards effective reintegration schemes and by helping them to develop an adequate legal and policy framework, as well as the relevant information tools and coordination structures.

These two funding instruments will also support relevant third countries of transit or destination to strengthen their capacity to provide protection and assistance for voluntary return from their territory, taking the needs of the migrants into account, including vulnerability, fundamental rights considerations and the need to provide international protection.

The Commission will take into account the priorities of this strategy in programming its different initiatives on voluntary return and reintegration related to **individual partner countries** and **regions**. The specific partner countries and regions that could benefit from the different forms of support foreseen under the strategy will be identified as part of the programming exercise.

In addition, the Commission will **fund research** on voluntary return and reintegration, to support the implementation of the Strategy and strengthen the evidence base. Expectations about and perceptions of return and reintegration should be further explored, together with an in-depth assessment of the effectiveness and sustainability of reintegration.

The way forward

- The **Commission** will take account of the objectives of this strategy in **Member States' multi-annual programmes** under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund as well as in the programming of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument - Global Europe and the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance III.
- **Member States** should continue supporting the voluntary return and reintegration of migrants returning from their territory through their **national budgets** as well.
- The **Commission** will support **research** in the field of voluntary return and reintegration.

Next steps

Promoting voluntary return and reintegration is a key strategic objective as set out in the New Pact on Migration and Asylum.

The Commission, where relevant, together with the High Representative, the Member States, Frontex, EU delegations, partner countries and the wide range of stakeholders and international organisations involved in migration policy, will work jointly to implement all aspects of this strategy to ensure that EU and national schemes are well designed and coordinated to promote and support effective and humane voluntary return and sustainable reintegration programmes.

Working closely with partner countries will be key to implementing several aspects of the strategy. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum signalled a change of paradigm in the EU's engagement with international partners on migration. To this effect, the Commission in close cooperation with the High Representative will engage with priority countries on return and reintegration as part of comprehensive, balanced, tailor-made and mutually beneficial migration partnerships, broadening and building on the trust already built.

An improved legal framework will further facilitate an effective implementation of this strategy. The Commission will work with the European Parliament and the Council to make progress on advancing and concluding negotiations on the New Pact, including the recast Return Directive. The expanded mandate of Frontex, the rollout of the standing corps and increasing its capacity to support voluntary return and reintegration must be maximised to achieve the objectives of this strategy.

Lastly, the Commission will monitor the implementation of the strategy, notably in the context of the European Migration Network and in regular discussions with the European Parliament and with Member States in the Council.