

EXPERT CONFERENCE ON RETURN AND REINTEGRATION: TAKEAWAYS REPORT

21 April 2026 | Brussels, Belgium

The Expert Conference on Return and Reintegration was organised on 21 April 2026 in Brussels by the [International Centre for Migration Policy Development \(ICMPD\)](#), in the framework of the [Return and Reintegration Facility \(RRF\)](#). In cooperation with Fedasil and the Migration Policy Institute Europe (MPI), the event brought together over 110 practitioners, policymakers, researchers and civil society representatives from EU Member States and Schengen Associated Countries, EU institutions and agencies, international organisations and countries of origin.



The conference marked a milestone in the RRF's first operational cycle (2022 – 2026), taking stock of achievements and preparing for the future. Structured around three panel discussions and four breakout groups, the day generated substantive exchanges on the policy landscape, the evidence base, operational realities and the practical dimensions of digitalisation, vulnerabilities, and Pact implementation. This report synthesises the key insights and recommendations emerging from across the day's discussions.

Return Policy in Europe: Taking Stock and Looking Ahead

The opening policy panel reflected on five years of evolution in EU return policy since the adoption of the EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration. Speakers from the European Commission (DG HOME), Germany, Ireland and the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM) brought together a range of complementary and constructively diverse perspectives.

On the achievements side, panellists pointed to the establishment of the EU Return Coordinator, the expanded mandate of Frontex, the growth in return counselling (with more than half of counselling sessions in 2025 resulting in voluntary return), the proposed EU return Regulation incorporating reintegration components, and the development of legal grounds for data transfer across borders. Germany noted that its uptake of the EU Reintegration Programme (EURP) more than doubled between 2024 and 2025, reflecting growing confidence in shared instruments. Ireland, operating outside many EU migration frameworks, highlighted the RRF as an invaluable bridge – enabling study visits, peer exchange and gradual alignment with EU practices.

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"I firmly put 'Voluntary Return and Reintegration' on the European track. The strategy has been backed up by a strong operational toolbox, and that gives operational coherence."

– European Commission

Several challenges and tensions were also surfaced. PICUM raised concerns about a trend toward criminalisation of humanitarian assistance, increased use of detention and the risk that the proposed EU Return Regulation would expand detention for families with children – in tension with commitments made under the 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM). Questions were raised about the gap between political emphasis on return rates and the evidence on actual effectiveness, with research suggesting that coercive approaches produce poor reintegration outcomes and increased re-migration.

Looking ahead, panellists converged on several priorities for a strengthened European return system:

- Moving toward a common European framework for return, while preserving space for innovative instruments such as the Return and Reintegration Facility (RRF).
- Investing in the Pact's implementation through structured workshops translating the legal framework into operational practice.
- Broadening the definition of voluntary return.
- Strengthening cross-border cooperation on sustainable returns and legal pathways.
- Maintaining planning certainty for Member States, particularly as a new RRF cycle approaches in June 2026.



Building the Evidence Base: What We Know and How We Use It

The evidence-based panel brought together researchers and analysts to examine why the substantial body of knowledge on return and reintegration has not translated more fully into policy and programming improvements.

Three interconnected arguments shaped the discussion. First, the field continues to operate with untested assumptions. The high degree of politicisation, the sensitivity of data, and limited engagement between researchers and policymakers have collectively sustained a gap between what is known and what is acted upon.

"Many researchers don't engage enough with policymakers and practitioners and vice versa. As a result, we're still engaged in a field where many assumptions remain untested."

– Migration Policy Institute Europe

Second, the EU's transactional approach to return diplomacy was challenged as structurally flawed. Evidence from the FAIR research project showed that the "sticks and carrots" model only produces cooperation when incentives are very large – as in Georgia's readmission agreement tied to visa liberalisation. More broadly, partner countries prioritise legal safeguards and the rights of their nationals, a concern that EU negotiating positions frequently underweight, risking both policy failure and bilateral strain.

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"There is a certain misalignment between the proposals that are currently on the table and expectations in partner countries – current EU strategies could put a strain on bilateral relations."

– ICMPD Research

Third, dominant assumptions about reintegration programming were directly contested. The panellists argued that:

- Short-term, project-based reintegration fails to produce sustainable outcomes – evidence from countries including Nigeria shows that two-thirds of reintegration policy documents are authored by the EU or international organisations, not national governments.
- Effective measurement tools (MEAL frameworks) already exist but are underused.
- A shift to bottom-up, locally-owned reintegration – led by local governments, cities and civil society in countries of origin – is both more effective and more consistent with the principle of national ownership.

Positive trends were also noted: a more nuanced understanding of reintegration that goes beyond economic metrics to incorporate psychosocial and community dimensions, and greater recognition of the conditions in countries of origin as determinants of success.

The Return – Reintegration Continuum: Bridging the Structural Divide

A thread running through every session was the persistent fragmentation between return and reintegration as policy and operational domains. The final panel explored this directly, bringing together perspectives from Norway (host country), Egypt (country of origin), IOM (operational frontline) and ICMPD (policy-practice interface).

Norway's experience illustrates that credibility is built through direct engagement and continuity: counselling that begins early, is highly individualised and is grounded in transparency – including honest explanations of legal decisions and asylum denials.

A recent monitoring mission to Ethiopia confirmed that information provided before departure aligned with what returnees actually encountered on the ground.



"Viewing the issue from a local community and country of origin perspective is particularly insightful, as it does not privilege one perspective but seeks to reshape the system as a whole."

– Norway

Egypt's representative argued that sustainable reintegration depends on genuine national ownership grounded in community-level knowledge. Reintegration packages must be localised and designed with and through local communities – not applied as standardised models. Civil society organisations in countries of origin are too often treated as subcontractors rather than embedded local actors, leaving them without viable capacity once external funding ends.

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"While return requires international coordination, sustainable reintegration must be locally driven and supported through adequate financial, technical, and institutional mechanisms."

– Egypt

IOM underscored that dignity is not defined by the length of a process, but by whether it follows the right order – beginning with early identification of vulnerabilities and appropriate safeguards. Medical cases now represent around 13% of returnees, with psychosocial conditions increasingly prevalent, placing significant pressure on counsellors when return timelines outpace vulnerability assessments.

ICMPD framed the discussion within a decade-long structural shift from project delivery toward system-building, with international actors playing an accompanying rather than substituting role. The panel converged on four practical directions: closing case management gaps at post-arrival handoffs; breaking down silo-based operations through collective planning from the outset; ensuring that uncoordinated returns do not shift costs onto communities in countries of origin; and moving from reactive responses to forward-looking joint planning with partner countries.

In the Field: Operational Challenges and Practical Solutions

Group 1 – Strengthening Referral Pathways and Inclusive Public Services for Reintegration

This group focused on the relevance, accessibility and adaptability of reintegration services, and on the sustainability of National Referral Mechanisms (NRMs). Two dimensions were identified as central: public services delivered by national and local authorities, and individual assistance provided by a range of actors. Both must be effectively coordinated through NRMs to ensure coherence and avoid fragmentation. Participants emphasised that reintegration is ultimately the responsibility of countries of origin, and that services must be nationally owned, coordinated across administrations and tailored to different target groups – with parallel systems actively avoided.

The group converged on the need to formalise existing good practices, make services more visible to returnees before departure – including through diaspora networks as information channels – and support a progressive handover to national authorities. This means transferring tools, facilities and responsibilities, moving from co-management arrangements toward full national autonomy, when the country context allows. Pre-departure and post-arrival information management systems and reintegration-related information should be inter-linked, when possible, to ensure sustainability, and accountability, while ensuring data protection safeguards. Iraq (KRG), Cote d'Ivoire and Colombia were presented as examples of national actors taking a clear coordination and ownership role.

Group 2 – Reintegration Support for Persons in Vulnerable Situations

This group examined how vulnerability is identified and addressed across the return and reintegration process. Participants noted that identification frequently happens too late – often only at the moment of return – leaving insufficient time for adequate preparation. Structural gaps persist between EU migration authorities and local social protection systems in countries of origin, compounded by insufficient information transfer due to data protection constraints or the absence of consent-based protocols. Dependence on short-term external funding leaves no sustainable transition pathway to national systems.

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Recommendations centred on moving from project-based to system-based cooperation, formally linking return, reintegration and social protection frameworks. The group called for joint vulnerability management protocols defining roles from identification through to long-term follow-up, greater investment in social service capacity in partner countries, and a shift from standardised reintegration packages to tailored, needs-based approaches. Interoperable case management tools or secure information-sharing channels were identified as a practical enabler of continuity of care.

Group 3 – Pact Implementation: Return Counselling in Accelerated and Border Procedures

With the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum entering into force soon, this group examined how return counselling can be effectively embedded within significantly shortened timeframes. Experiences from Belgium, Ireland and Switzerland illustrated different models for integrating counselling at the earliest stages of the protection procedure – rather than treating return as a post-refusal option. All three models demonstrated the value of specialised counsellors, robust interagency coordination with clearly defined roles, and one-stop-shop service delivery. The psychological dimension was also raised: individuals who have arrived seeking protection may be informed and consider return as an option, a transition requiring both skill and sensitivity.

Key takeaways included the importance of early and continuous return information – integrated into all documentation from the outset – and degressive assistance models that incentivise earlier voluntary decisions. Ireland's digital portal enabling real-time information sharing across legal, medical and vulnerability assessment services was highlighted as a replicable approach. Belgium's experience underscored proximity between coaches and individuals as a foundation for trust. Across all models, participants agreed that accelerated procedures must not come at the cost of thoroughness or individual rights.

Group 4 – Digitalisation in Return and Reintegration: RIAT as a Case Study

This group examined the Reintegration Assistance Tool (RIAT) – the EU's shared digital platform for reintegration case management, jointly managed by DG HOME and the RRF and forming the backbone of the EU Reintegration Programme administered by Frontex. The discussion used RIAT as a lens to explore broader lessons on digitalisation in return and reintegration. Participants noted that shared digital infrastructure does more than process cases: it harmonises practices, creates common standards and enables coordinated action across Member States and reintegration partners.

Five transferable lessons emerged: the importance of structured end-user engagement – through regular panels and feedback mechanisms – to ensure the tool serves practitioners; the need for dedicated support infrastructure covering training, helpdesk and access as the user base scales; careful management of growing system complexity to preserve coherence and avoid a fragmented user experience; and the opportunities presented by AI-assisted development and interoperability with Member State systems, which require robust governance to ensure data security and GDPR compliance. New functionalities such as the Return Preparation Module were cited as examples of user-responsive development.

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Conclusions and Way Forward

The Expert Conference demonstrated both the progress achieved and the work still ahead. The RRF has successfully built a structured, MS-driven operational framework spanning all stages of the return and reintegration continuum – a governance model increasingly seen as a template for coordinated European action. RIAT has become the digital infrastructure of the EU's reintegration architecture. Return counselling is growing in reach and quality. Member State cooperation has deepened.

At the same time, the conference surfaced persistent structural gaps: the continuum remains broken at critical handoff points; the evidence-to-policy link is weak; reintegration is still predominantly externally managed and project-funded; and accelerated procedures under the Pact create new pressure on counselling quality and rights compliance.

Across all sessions, several cross-cutting priorities crystallised for the period ahead:

- Consolidating the return-reintegration continuum as a single governance process, with sustained investment in all stages, from pre-departure counselling to long-term community inclusion.
- Strengthening national ownership of reintegration in countries of origin, gradually moving away from exclusively MS and EU-designed and externally managed programmes toward government-led, nationally embedded systems.
- Closing the evidence-policy gap through structured researcher-practitioner engagement and mainstreaming of existing MEAL frameworks.
- Preparing for Pact implementation with adequate investment in specialised return counselling capacity, interagency coordination and one-stop-shop service models.
- Continuing the development of RIAT and broader digital infrastructure with structured user engagement, interoperability and strong data governance.
- Ensuring that a new RRF cycle from June 2026 provides Member States with the planning certainty, innovative solutions and networking that have defined its value to date.

The conference concluded with a shared sense that the return and reintegration field is at an inflection point – shaped by new legislative frameworks, evolving political contexts, and growing operational maturity. The conversations held on 21 April provided a strong foundation for the next phase of collaborative work.

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