



POLICY BRIEF

Return and reintegration programs in the non-EU Prague Process states

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September 2022

In the last eighteen months, the number of return and reintegration programs has doubled in Prague Process non-EU participating states.

ABSTRACT

Return and reintegration programs provide travel and post-arrival assistance for migrants returning from a country of temporary residence to a country of origin. These programs are not always commonplace in migration management, with some countries preferring to manage departures and any associated departure assistance under general border security functions. In the last eighteen months, the number of return and reintegration programs has doubled in Prague Process non-EU participating states. High-level responses to migration flows are encouraging neighbouring or like-minded countries to find common ground for cooperation and networking for these programs. Some of these programs have the potential to function as part of a broader regional network. Mapping the existence and functionality of these programs provides a starting point for more specific dialogue and action within the Prague Process and beyond.

There are three clear geographic regions of interest for non-EU return and reintegration programs: Western Balkans, South Caucasus, and Central Asia.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the existence and function of return and reintegration programs in Prague Process non-EU member states. Whereas the existence of return and reintegration programs in EU member states is, as a general statement, more common and established, locating information on these programs across the non-EU Prague Process states varies in difficulty, mainly because some countries have official return and reintegration programs, while others absorb return and reintegration functions into existing enforcement or compliance programs.

Survey responses from 16 Prague Process states form the basis for the findings and recommendations in this paper. The following analysis demonstrates the different styles of return and reintegration programs, why these programs exist, how these programs implement different policy settings and respond to different immigration challenges. The collected information provides evidence for a possible future collaboration amongst willing member states, including policy development, program enhancements, sharing best practices and, potentially, joint operational activities. Even without the latter, there are efficiencies and advantages for sharing policy settings and program design within a network of like-minded member states. For example, identifying return and reintegration development opportunities in the Western Balkans may produce a series of ideas for co-investment, either by national programs or with the assistance of an external donor. The Prague Process also provides an opportunity for targeted discussion amongst its member states on opportunities for broader collaboration, such as shared ownership for specific program functions.

The traditional way of establishing a return and reintegration program is to create a policy and/or legal framework that interacts with program delivery, which has a country form a bilateral agreement with a chosen service partner for program delivery. This is usually performed by individual bilateral agreements, most times employing the services of one or two major service partners. This approach provides individual resources and standalone program capabilities but is an expensive way of establishing services that could be shared across like-minded countries in the same geographic region.

There are three clear geographic regions of interest for non-EU return and reintegration programs: Western Balkans, South Caucasus, and Central Asia. Not all countries in all three regions have an immediate need for program development, but there is an opportunity to assist the formation of cohesive policy settings which may inform any future program development or enhance existing programs. There is potential to establish return migration hubs in each geographic region. These hubs could provide a regional focus on best practices and needs-based policy development.

SURVEY RESPONSES

As part of the preliminary work for this paper, Prague Process states were invited to complete a short survey on the status of return and reintegration assistance programs¹. A separate examination of programs in the Western Balkan region revealed some notable developments by the International Organisation for Migration. Meanwhile, Central Asian countries tend to focus on sending their nationals abroad, rather than on return migration.

1. Member states were asked about the existence of such programs or similar programs, any associated websites and support materials, and applicable guiding policy or legislation. In the absence of a current program, member states were asked to comment on the likelihood of a future program. Results and findings were prepared based on the results received. With 10 out of 17 non-EU participating states responding to the survey, a logical next step may consist in engaging directly with specific member states to complete the information gathering.

Key highlights

- 16 responses received, including 6 EU and 10 non-EU participating states;
- Three non-EU countries advised of current programs (Belarus, Georgia, and Norway), two other countries (Azerbaijan and Armenia) advised of a likely future program supported by IOM;
- All responding EU member states have an established, functioning return and reintegration program;
- Montenegro was the only respondent who self-manages its returns without a formal program;
- Turkey implemented its self-managed national return and reintegration program this year, which may represent an interesting example for other non-EU states;
- Uzbekistan was the only Central Asian country to respond.

Turkey's return migration program is an interesting combination of traditional and progressive elements. Prior to the implementation of the self-managed program, almost all returns (forced or voluntary) were performed via a program managed by national immigration authorities, with a small number of voluntary returns supported via an IOM-managed Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) program. In recent years, Turkey sought to diversify its returns program, and started investing in self-managed program and policy development. Building and implementing a self-managed program provides Turkey with greater control over the capability of its returns program and serves as an example for other Prague Process states who may be jostling with the reality of having state-managed return migration programs co-exist with adjacent functions managed by UN partners.

It is also important to acknowledge the six EU member states who provided responses to this survey. These responses included very good examples of established return and reintegration programs in Austria, Belgium, Germany, and Finland. A welcome surprise was high-quality information providing good insight into the return and reintegration program in Portugal and the substantial policy framework supporting the program in Slovakia. Further engagement with Slovakia is recommended for insight into the modern pressures of forming and implementing a return and reintegration program, its integration into a full-scale migration management system, and the relative success of the individual components.

Previous work on this topic in the second half of 2020 examined the presence or non-presence of return and reintegration programs in all 50 Prague Process member states. One of the clearest observations from the 2020 data was the number of non-EU member states who had no evidence of a national return and reintegration program (14 in total). This could be for a variety of reasons, including small demand for these programs or a preference for unassisted return or forced return. At the time, this was identified as a significant statistic for further analysis and a probable focal point for further dialogue.

However, much has changed in eighteen months. Of these 14 countries, now only six Central Asia countries remain without a return and reintegration program. The most visible difference is the establishment of IOM return and reintegration programs in countries where there were no such programs in 2020.² Western Balkans countries now share a common IOM return and reintegration network, where migrants can contact centralised phone numbers or approach IOM offices in the host country. This trend has also extended to South Caucasus countries, with Armenia and Azerbaijan advising of the likely future establishment of IOM programs. This is a significant development in a short space of time. This territorial presence is important for migration flows in the next five to ten years, continuing to assist perennial onward migration from Turkey and eventual return journeys to Ukraine.

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2. <https://avrr-wb.com/>

Table 1: Data comparison for non-EU member states with 'no program', November 2020–July 2022

Country	November 2020	July 2022	Notes
Albania	No evidence of national program	IOM Western Balkans cluster	https://avrr-wb.com/
Armenia	No evidence of national program	Potential future program with IOM	https://publications.iom.int/books/setting-system-assisted-voluntary-return-and-reintegration-armenia
Azerbaijan	No evidence of national program	Likely future program with IOM	https://migration.gov.az/en/useful_detail/372
Kazakhstan	No evidence of national program	No evidence of national program	
Kosovo	No evidence of national program	IOM Western Balkans cluster	https://avrr-wb.com/
Kyrgyzstan	No evidence of national program	No evidence of national program	
Liechtenstein	No evidence of national program	No evidence of national program	
North Macedonia	No evidence of national program	IOM Western Balkans cluster	https://avrr-wb.com/
Montenegro	No evidence of national program	IOM Western Balkans cluster	https://avrr-wb.com/
Moldova*	No evidence of national program	No evidence of national program	Experiencing significant impact from the war in Ukraine
Tajikistan	No evidence of national program	No evidence of national program	https://www.budapestprocess.org/silkroutesfacility/projects-in-central-asia/181-reintegration-of-returning
Turkmenistan	No evidence of national program	No evidence of national program	
Ukraine*	No evidence of national program	No evidence of national program	Experiencing significant impact from internal displacement
Uzbekistan	No evidence of national program	No evidence of national program	

*Denotes separate classification for these countries due to current environmental forces

INSIGHTS

Return migration is a perennial challenge for government-to-government cooperation, usually with some dispute between sending and receiving countries over the strengths and weaknesses of asylum policy or international protection commitments. Additionally, the reasons for establishing a return and reintegration program are sometimes bundled with a general political commitment to migration management, at a distance from the practicalities of voluntary return programs and efficacious reintegration outcomes. General political commitments are the starting point for policy development and the objectives for operational activities.

In the past, EU member states have pursued an elusive topic of harmonised return migration initiatives, such as policy settings and some operational practices. What emerged is the administrative and mechanical differences between member state programs, demanding a broader definition of harmonisation, focusing on the potential for joint initiatives and shared activities. The change in focus acknowledged the sovereign principles of asylum policy and border management but encouraged shared responsibility for migration events that clearly expanded across multiple member states. The idea of joint initiatives is not a new phenomenon, and recent developments provide the imperative for these conversations to progress beyond traditional migration dialogues and include operational planning.

The *Joint Coordination Platform (JCP)* is a notable development on the topic of migration management, especially for activities outside the Schengen zone. Its tasks include monitoring and controlling the EU external borders as well as migration management initiatives in third countries such as border protection, return migration, people smuggling and asylum procedures. JCP, with the support of ICMPD, proposes the establishment of a regional return mechanism for the Western Balkans, assisting returns to third countries and completing general capacity building activities for return migration. The mechanism is akin to an activity hub for return migration and is a firm step forward for the pursuit of joint efforts and cooperation in this region. It's also a suitable forum for commencing informal collaboration on best practices and shared strategic interest in specific migrant groups or hotspots.

Establishing a return and reintegration network is something available to non-EU states to broaden dialogue and identify opportunities for economies of scale. A recent past example is the European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN)³. Originally formed in 2011, ERRIN was a joint initiative of 16 EU member states and Schengen associated countries providing reintegration assistance in approximately 40 countries of origin. ERRIN called its services *Joint Reintegration Services (JRS)*. JRS is a multi-faceted product providing willing member states with a network to share current practices for return migration, develop meaningful dialogue on common topics, establish quality-of-service principles, and identify potential for common operational partnerships. In practice, JRS provides a centralised reintegration assistance interface for national returns programs, as an alternative to each member state forming its own bilateral agreements for service delivery in the same countries. Each member state still decides how and when a foreign national leaves its borders, then the returnee is introduced to JRS for all post-arrival assistance. In mid-2022, Frontex took responsibility for ERRIN JRS services⁴, arguably in a bid from the European Commission to take a step towards a high-level platform for return and reintegration programs. A connected but separate relationship exists between JCP and JRS. Frontex is a key JCP stakeholder, but its mandate prevents activities in third countries, which suggests implementing JRS via the regional return mechanism with support from ICMPD.

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3. <https://returnnetwork.eu/>

4. ICMPD continues heritage ERRIN projects under the newly formed ICMPD Return and Reintegration Facility <https://returnnetwork.eu/2022/06/07/errin-closing-conference/>

. Of note for non-EU Prague Process states is the commitment to more coordination and integration of voluntary return and reintegration programs, both in Europe and transit countries. In pragmatic terms, this means greater EU investment in return and reintegration programs along known migrant pathways in non-EU countries, an effort to short-circuit migration journeys to EU member states.

Central Asian countries represent a different challenge for migration programs when compared to other non-EU regions, marked by lower or deferred demand for return migration programs. In this region, maximising legitimate forward migration pathways is of higher demand.

JRS is an important element in EU templates for return and reintegration activities and presents a convenient turn-key solution for JCP and Western Balkans countries. Other inspiration, including other ERRIN initiatives, is contained in the *EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration* (the Strategy), such as the links between common quality standards and durable reintegration outcomes, capacity building to increase third country ownership of programs, and transition plans for establishment of reintegration centres in third countries. Of note for non-EU Prague Process states is the commitment to more coordination and integration of voluntary return and reintegration programs, both in Europe and transit countries. In pragmatic terms, this means greater EU investment in return and reintegration programs along known migrant pathways in non-EU countries, an effort to short-circuit migration journeys to EU member states. Additionally, return and reintegration investment in countries of origin now link with development initiatives, which for so long were two disparate modes of activity.

The Strategy provides comprehensive guidance and important principles for establishing and maintaining return and reintegration programs, and this material is also important in dialogue with non-EU member states. Although non-EU migration challenges may not be an exact match to those experienced by EU member states, the program principles remain the same. For example, JRS established a Return and Reintegration Centre in Armenia, in cooperation with Armenian national authorities. The major objective was establishing services owned by national authorities, as opposed to the traditional model of sharing ownership with an external service partner. The centre provided all essential services for Armenian migrants returning from EU countries, including referral to essential local services, counselling, and reintegration planning. Over time, JRS increased the capacity of Armenian authorities to a point where ownership of the centre was transferred. This example is available for implementation in most countries of return, such as establishing similar services in Pakistan and Bangladesh for those nationals returning from the Western Balkans.

Central Asian countries represent a different challenge for migration programs when compared to other non-EU regions, marked by lower or deferred demand for return migration programs. In this region, maximising legitimate forward migration pathways is of higher demand. This means creating programs supporting two groups of migrants: firstly, those migrants seeking legitimate and durable employment in foreign countries and, secondly, exploited labour migrants who are stranded in foreign countries and need assistance returning home. A current project addressing these challenges is a collaboration between Switzerland and IOM, facilitating safe and skilled migration to Russia and Kazakhstan for labour migrants from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan⁵. The project acknowledges underdevelopment for labour migration regulations and proposes developing a series of coordinated mechanisms between government and non-government stakeholders. For individual migrants, there is an increased focus on pre-departure information, systems for improved employability and employment safeguards and access to livelihood assistance upon return home. A project of this scale and scope is necessary to unpack and rewire migration challenges in this region. Government-organised foreign recruitment programs offered to Uzbek nationals, for example, are not popular due to unreliable employment placement and high registration costs. Additionally, there are international programs currently focused broadly on *safe migration in Central Asia*⁶, but mostly focus on informed migration journeys by avoiding migration trafficking. The major need for Uzbek labour migrants is a streamlined and cost-friendly registration process, independently verified employment placements, and the necessary assistance and support mechanisms while working abroad. The absence of these requirements in

5. <https://www.eda.admin.ch/deza/en/home/countries/central-asia.html/content/dezaprojects/SDC/en/2020/7F10669/phase1?oldPagePath=/content/deza/en/home/laender/asia-centrale.html>

6. <https://www.usaid.gov/central-asia-regional/fact-sheets/safe-migration-central-asia>

government-organised programs means Uzbek nationals self-manage requirements for working abroad or seek assistance from private recruitment agencies.

Insight for program enhancements or future Prague Process dialogue can benefit from an initiative implemented by BRAC as part of its safe migration programs⁷. BRAC is the number one non-governmental organisation in the world, providing innovative solutions for a broad range of beneficiaries, largely those experiencing poverty and varying forms of disadvantage. BRAC saw the need to establish an end-to-end program to source and place Bangladeshi nationals in verified employment abroad⁸. Additionally, the program provides return migration assistance for those migrants stranded abroad. This is a compelling example of a regional-specific migration program, showcasing primary elements other than return and reintegration assistance. It is an unlikely silver bullet for challenges faced by labour migrants in Central Asia but is recommended for expanded functions of the current ICMPD Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs)⁹. MRCs provide an information supporting safe migration journeys, including referral to trusted stakeholders for further support with services such as job placement or visa services. Non-EU Prague Process states are likely senders and receivers of labour migrants in need of broader access to services at the start and end of their journeys. This is a primary argument for broadening the service offerings of MRCs in Western Balkans, South Caucasus, and Central Asia. Providing access to necessary work permits, verified employment contracts and livelihood assistance are examples of high-demand services for MRCs to consider for future service offerings.

CONCLUSION

Mapping the existence and capacity of return and reintegration programs in Prague Process non-EU member states is the first step to understanding the utility of these programs. A logical next step is to complete the mapping process, with direct engagement with Prague Process states absent from the survey responses. Once complete, the responses provide a launch pad for more targeted dialogue on the potential appetite for shared initiatives.

A key focal point of continuing analysis is the intersection between relevant policy and program functions in willing member states, particularly asylum policy and return migration policy. Other focal points include the relationship between forced and voluntary return programs, and the involvement of external organisations to assist with operational function. An emerging hypothesis in non-EU member states says some of the programs exist without clear links with overall migration management or a regional response to migration. Without this relationship, the programs become isolated from broader migration objectives and produce less departures. Additionally, the newness of the programs is usually coupled with an uninformed perspective of its eventual capacity and utility, and this is usually the most contentious time for return migration programs. One suggestion is to encourage broader collaboration on key topics such as policy initiatives and operational procedures, primarily through forums such as JCP. Member states with current or emerging return and reintegration programs should prioritise activities of economies-of-scale and collaboration with like-minded neighbours. Standalone initiatives on this topic are expensive and potentially distanced from the benefits of collaboration. Likewise, non-EU member states can benefit from the lessons and experiences on network building within EU member states.

Insight for program enhancements or future Prague Process dialogue can benefit from an initiative implemented by BRAC as part of its safe migration programs.

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7. <http://bpl.brac.net/>

8. BRAC established a national recruitment agency with the primary purpose of disrupting unethical markets, reducing migration costs for workers, reducing fraud and administration burdens for both workers and recruiters, and streamline forward migration pathways. BRAC provides integrated support in all the steps of the process from sourcing, recruiting, assistance with registration for both the job seekers and overseas employers.

9. <https://www.migrantresources.org/>

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Annex 1: Survey responses for return and reintegration programs in Prague Process member states

Country	EU	Program	Notes
Albania	No	No	Albania advised it has no current return and reintegration program but works with IOM Albania to provide return and reintegration assistance for returning nationals. Future migration flows may change the need for such a program.
Armenia	No	No	Armenia advised it does not have a current return and reintegration program but anticipates a future program with the support of IOM.
Austria	Yes	Yes	www.returnfromaustria.at
Azerbaijan	No	No	www.migration.gov.az/ru/useful_detail/376 Azerbaijan advised it does not have a current return and reintegration program but anticipated a future program with the support of IOM. Additionally, Azerbaijan conducted a pilot project for voluntary return (2017-2020), identifying migrant demand and building operational experience.
Belarus	No	Yes	www.iom.by/en/activities/assisted-voluntary-return-and-reintegration Belarus advised its AVRR program has been operational since 2018 with the cooperation of IOM, providing return and reintegration assistance for foreign nationals returning before an expulsion decision.
Belgium	Yes	Yes	retourvolontaire.be
Finland	Yes	Yes	voluntaryreturn.fi
Georgia	No	Yes	www.georgia.iom.int/return-georgia Georgia advised its AVRR program has been operational since 2013 with the cooperation of IOM, providing return and reintegration assistance for foreign national residing in Georgia who do not have the resources to return home.
Germany	Yes	Yes	www.returningfromgermany.de www.startfinder.de
Moldova	No	No	www.particip.gov.md Moldova advised of a program for returning Moldovan citizens.
Montenegro	No	No	Montenegro advised it does not have a current return and reintegration program, and rather chooses to self-manage the voluntary return of foreign nationals. Foreign nationals who apply for voluntary return are managed by the police and provided with a travel document and one-way travel ticket.
Norway	No	Yes	www.udi.no/en/return/
Portugal	Yes	Yes	www.retornovoluntario.pt www.reintegracobrasil.com
Slovakia	Yes	Yes	www.minv.sk/?dokumentypreprijimatela Continuing national program with IOM
Turkey	No	Yes	www.gonullugeredonus.org.tr Turkey advised it has a current return and reintegration program, a self-managed national program. The program co-exists with an IOM assisted AVRR program.
Uzbekistan	No	No	Uzbekistan advised it does not currently have a return and reintegration program, citing reasons related to a decreasing caseload of foreign nationals.

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This publication was produced in the framework of the 'Prague Process: Dialogue, Analyses and Training in Action' initiative, a component of the Migration Partnership Facility with the assistance of the European Union.

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Funded by the European Union

