



Resolution 1742 (2010)¹

Final version

Voluntary return programmes: an effective, humane and cost-effective mechanism for returning irregular migrants

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Parliamentary Assembly has regularly expressed concerns over the need to deal with the number of irregular migrants in Europe. It is estimated that there may be about 10 million irregular migrants living in Europe, with about 500 000 additional irregular migrants entering or whose situation becomes irregular every year. The Assembly recognises that many of these people will have to leave Europe and have a responsibility to do so. Some, however, may not be able to meet this obligation on their own and may need assistance.
2. The return of irregular migrants is an economic, social and political priority for many European states. Two types of return are possible. The first is forced return, which often entails lengthy detention, considerable expense for the state concerned and, for the people and families concerned, suffering and hardship. The second is a much more humane type of return in the form of assisted voluntary return and reintegration, which allows primarily failed asylum seekers and irregular migrants the possibility of returning home in dignity. In certain circumstances, where reintegration assistance is provided, it also ensures a sustainable return and is substantially cheaper than forced return for host countries. In the United Kingdom, for example, a voluntary return, including reintegration assistance, costs only one third as much as a forced return.
3. Assisted voluntary return programmes also have other benefits. For countries of origin they are politically and socially more acceptable. Indeed, many countries of origin refuse, or make it difficult for their own nationals to be returned against the individual's will. In these circumstances assisted voluntary return for a host country may be the only realistic return option. There are also other important spin-off benefits from assisted voluntary return programmes. When reintegration assistance is provided, it contributes to a more sustainable return, limiting the likelihood of the returnee seeking to leave the country of origin on another occasion. It also provides a form of development aid to the country and region concerned, and many returnees who have been supported in setting up small-scale businesses progress well and end up employing others. A person who returns voluntarily also sends a strong message to family, friends and other contacts, that irregular migration is not the dream it is often advertised to be. The returnee can thus be a powerful advocate against irregular migration.
4. The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, in its 20 Guidelines on Forced Returns, adopted in May 2005, has already concluded that "The host state should take measures to promote voluntary returns, which should be preferred to forced returns." Much more emphasis, however, needs to be put on assisted voluntary returns by member states of the Council of Europe. The member states and the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe should continue to promote these schemes.
5. Assisted voluntary returns have now been carried out across the world for almost three decades and more than 1.6 million people have returned to over 160 countries. Member states such as the United Kingdom have helped over 30 000 people return in this way during the period from 1999 to 2009. All experience points to the fact that very few returnees re-migrate, which is an indication of the effectiveness and sustainability of the programmes that have been run.

1. *Assembly debate* on 22 June 2010 (22nd Sitting) (see [Doc. 12277](#), report of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population, rapporteur: Mrs Türköne). *Text adopted by the Assembly* on 22 June 2010 (22nd Sitting). See also [Recommendation 1926 \(2010\)](#).



6. The main international organisation working on the issue of assisted voluntary returns is the International Organization for Migration (IOM). It works closely with governments, other international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society and diaspora. In some countries it is the main implementer of these programmes, in other countries it shares this role with a government office, and in yet other countries it has little involvement. The Assembly welcomes the IOM's contribution to the process of assisted voluntary returns and congratulates it for its achievements in the field.

7. The Assembly notes that in order for an assisted voluntary return programme to be effective it has to be able to reach out to the community concerned and have the trust and confidence of those considering return. It is therefore essential that independent advisers, such as the IOM and civil society partners, including NGOs, be involved.

8. The Assembly notes that assistance must be considered at three stages of the return process. First, it is required at the pre-departure phase, when independent counselling and information on the country and region of origin must be provided and identity documents have to be sorted out. It is also required at the transportation phase, when travel expenses can be met and assistance offered at the airport and other travel points. Thirdly, it is required at the post-arrival stage. If returnees face the same problems they faced when they left their country of origin, they are likely to leave again. It is therefore important that some form of reintegration assistance in kind is offered to returnees – which may include temporary housing, education, vocational training, assistance in setting up small businesses or job placements – and that this reintegration and assistance is monitored.

9. In the light of the important role that assisted voluntary return programmes play in managing irregular migration, the Assembly calls on member states to:

9.1. give much greater priority to promoting assisted voluntary returns, using the good offices of the International Organization for Migration. In doing this, member states are encouraged to:

9.1.1. develop outreach plans for the communities most concerned and develop awareness-raising campaigns promoting assisted voluntary returns, involving the communities and diasporas concerned, and make full use of publicity materials (translated into all appropriate languages), advertising in national and local papers, radio and television;

9.1.2. favour tailored approaches to assisted voluntary return programmes with individual or family plans, providing assistance in the three following areas:

9.1.2.1. pre-departure, when potential returnees can benefit from counselling, receive country/region of origin information and have contact with people in their home towns or localities, thereby allowing them to make an informed decision as to whether voluntary return is the best option for them. They should also be assisted in obtaining travel and identity documents;

9.1.2.2. transportation, where they can be provided with travel tickets and be assisted in their travel, including at points of departure and arrival. Further assistance can be provided depending on their needs, such as if they are vulnerable people with special needs (such as people with medical problems, minors or victims of trafficking);

9.1.2.3. post-arrival, to ensure the return is sustainable. This could include temporary housing, education, vocational training, assistance in setting up small businesses or job placements. This assistance should be monitored and evaluated.

10. Member states are also encouraged to:

10.1. ensure that assisted voluntary return programmes are indeed voluntary, that consent is not obtained from candidates under pressure or blackmail and that returnees have access to independent and impartial actors in the return process to be able to make free and informed decisions. Confidentiality and anonymity should be guaranteed at the beginning of the process; otherwise, potential returnees will not come forward to examine assisted voluntary return as an option;

10.2. ensure that a balance is provided between assistance given in cash and assistance given in kind;

10.3. include the widest possible range of beneficiaries, such as asylum seekers, failed asylum seekers, irregular migrants, people in transit and people who may be held in detention;

10.4. ensure that assisted voluntary return never jeopardises the right of an asylum seeker to claim asylum and protection;

- 10.5. distinguish between assisted voluntary returns for irregular migrants and what can be described as independent return of convicted prisoners from prisons;
- 10.6. take particular account of the needs of vulnerable migrants, in particular:
 - 10.6.1. unaccompanied minors, where the needs and wishes of minors and the opinion of the guardians have to be taken into account. Contacts with family members in the country of origin have to be assured. Minors may have to be accompanied on the return journey and reception in the country of origin has to be organised. This reception must include reintegration assistance together with possible education and other support for the minor, and possible income generation support for the family of the minor;
 - 10.6.2. people with health problems who may require medical assistance during the return process and who will need information on health care availability and institutions following their return, and to ensure that proper medical support is available and accessible in the country of origin;
 - 10.6.3. victims of human trafficking whose vulnerability needs to be taken into account. These people may need to have close contacts with support agencies in their home country and receive psychological, legal or medical support, as well as support in finding a job or continuing their education or training;
- 10.7. encourage independent monitoring of the outcome of assisted voluntary returns and the reintegration of those people concerned, in particular those categorised as vulnerable.
11. Furthermore the Assembly also considers that member states should:
 - 11.1. fund and support fully the IOM in its work on assisted voluntary returns;
 - 11.2. encourage and support NGOs and diasporas to contribute to the process of assisted voluntary return;
 - 11.3. encourage more academic studies on assisted voluntary returns and their effectiveness;
 - 11.4. remove or reduce obstacles to assisted voluntary return programmes, including insufficient reintegration support and penalising re-entry bans, which act as one of the major disincentives for candidates when considering assisted voluntary return programmes.
12. The Assembly invites the European Union to continue to fund assisted voluntary return programmes through programmes such as the European Refugee Fund (phase III), the European Return Fund (2008-13) and the External Border Fund (2007-13), and also to include assistance in future funds.
13. The Assembly encourages the IOM to continue its work on assisted voluntary return, and in particular to provide even greater access to country/region of origin information for potential returnees and information on the return schemes available. The IOM is also encouraged to improve monitoring, including independent monitoring, of reintegration following return, in particular for women and vulnerable people.