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From:	Presidency
To:	Delegations
Subject:	Presidency discussion paper on promoting voluntary return and reintegration

Delegations will find below the Presidency paper on the above-mentioned topic for the Integration, Migration and Expulsion (IMEX Expulsion) working party meeting to be held on 19 September 2023.

Presidency discussion paper on promoting voluntary return and reintegration

Nowadays, thousands of people facing situations of poverty, social and political instability leave their countries of origin. The migration process can sometimes be extremely dangerous, and migrants can find themselves in a situation of vulnerability, as they can be involved in dangerous situations during their transit. Furthermore, once they arrive, they have to deal with social, economic, and labour obstacles in the host country.

Consequently, with the aim of structuring the European Union's capacity to offer protection to people in need, integrate people who live and work in the EU as well as offering efficient and humane processes to return people who do not or no longer have the right to stay, the European Commission has put forward proposals for the Pact on Migration and Asylum. Intensive work on the Pact at the EU institutions and within Member States continues since its tabling. The Pact highlights the importance of a common EU Return system as an essential component of a global and integrated migration management system, while establishing that both voluntary and forced returns are crucial components of an effective and credible migration policy.

Likewise, the Pact emphasizes the need to consider multiple aspects when measuring the success of a return policy, avoiding focusing only on the figures. Among the aspects to be assessed, one of the most important is the specific situation of the individuals concerned, in order to allow for a humane and dignified return and ensuring sustainable reintegration once they return to their home country.

For all the above-mentioned reasons, in 2021 the European Commission adopted for the first time a specific strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration¹ where internal, external as well as operational aspects of migration and reintegration activities are connected.

¹ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the EU strategy on voluntary return and reintegration, doc. 8153/21+ADD

In addition, the Strategy establishes measures to strengthen the legal and operational framework at the European level as well as in transit countries, by improving the quality of return and reintegration systems and by promoting cooperation initiatives with associated countries.

This recognizes voluntary return as an indispensable part of the comprehensive approach to migration management and as a crucial component of the Union's a safer orderly and dignified common EU system for returns.

Voluntary return provides the returnees with opportunities for reintegration that take more into account their needs, expectations, and perspectives after their arrival.

Furthermore, voluntary return:

- Aims to **ensure dignified, humane, effective, and sustainable return** of persons with no legal right to stay.
- Helps **better address the needs and interests of returnees** through designing return and reintegration support fitted to the individual. This design includes the preparation of pre-return and post-return activities and addresses aspects such as seeking employment in the country of return, as well as any other activity that favours the reestablishment of the practical and strategic links of the returnee with her/his family and community and allows for addressing vulnerabilities. In this context, the role of the voluntary return/reintegration counsellor is essential to ensure the coherence of all actions in the return process.
- Involves **tailored outreach** and dialogue through return counselling, medical and psychological support as well as financial, legal, and logistical assistance for travel.
- Is considered **more cost – effective** than other types of return.
- It is also **more sustainable and long lasting** due to the agency of the person in the return and reintegration processes.

- **Promotes active reintegration:** For a successful return, the collaboration of all the actors involved in the reintegration process is paramount. It includes countries of return (via counselling), origin and transit, as well as institutions, civil society, and social entities of the third sector. Consequently, countries of origin take an active role in designing and carrying out reintegration programs.
- Voluntary Return incorporates the **modality associated with a business initiative** to be developed in the country of origin. This modality, provided support by the countries of origin and with the possibility of referrals to relevant local initiatives, increases the possibilities for reintegration to be effective.

At the forthcoming Integration, Migration and Expulsion (IMEX Expulsion) working party meeting on 19 September 2023, the delegations are invited to exchange their views on promoting voluntary return and reintegration, considering the following elements:

a) **Reintegration as a crucial element of sustainable returns**

Reintegration has proven to facilitate the sustainability of any return process. With the implementation of reintegration programmes, the employment, psychological and social situation of the returnee is taken into account and their needs are addressed in a more personalised manner.

One of the reintegration programmes that ensures higher levels of sustainability is Productive Return. This type of voluntary return is recognized as one of the most effective programmes to ensure a real and sustainable reintegration into society, when supported by the countries of origin and with the possibility of referrals to relevant local initiatives.

Productive Return allows returnees to obtain income so as to financially support themselves and their families, by facilitating their accessibility to the labour market through self-employment.

In addition, productive voluntary return programmes provide learning and training services necessary to start a business in the country of origin or another third country. By starting an economic activity, the inclusion of the entrepreneur in the local society is promoted in a more direct and active way. Also, the involvement of the third country is higher, as the design and implementation of Productive Returns is overseen by the host country, which contributes to the third countries taking the ownership over the reintegration processes.

Given all the benefits of Productive Returns both for the returnees and the host countries, **it is necessary to promote and increase the financing of voluntary returns linked with a business initiative**. In order to achieve this, close cooperation between authorities implementing return and authorities supporting (socio-economic) development of third countries needs to be increased.

b) The promotion of individualized advice and the role of local counterparts

The active role of all actors involved in the return process is essential to guarantee real and effective reintegration.

Although all actors play an essential role, the counterparts in the country of origin carry out essential work in coordinating both the arrival and the reintegration process.

The success of any voluntary return is based on the continuous and individualized support provided by the return counsellor along all the process of return. The counsellor participates in all stages of the process including all pre-return and post-return actions. For all these reasons, it is considered necessary to promote the presence of this figure within the framework of the implementation of voluntary return and reintegration programmes. It is therefore also crucial to further enable communication and exchange between return counsellors in Member States and counsellors in third countries.

c) **The importance of expanding the geographical scope of Frontex Joint Reintegration Services**

Given the continuous increase in the number of people who benefit from the EU voluntary return and reintegration system, reintegration actions, such as those offered by Frontex and its Joint Reintegration Services (JRS), are crucial components guaranteeing a certain quality of reintegration services in third countries.

In this context, it is essential to continue with the expansion of the Frontex JRS geographical scope, devoting special attention to the inclusion of those third countries that are currently readmitting a growing number of returnees.

At the forthcoming IMEX Expulsion working party meeting delegations are invited to answer the following questions:

1. *Does your Member State implement voluntary return and reintegration programmes or programmes associated with a business initiative? If positive, what type of benefits (e.g., monetary, in kind) or counselling are granted within such programmes? Do your authorities consult, engage with and include the country of origin authorities in such process? Do the return counsellors in your Member States and the ones in third countries cooperate?*
2. *Does your Member State use Frontex Joint Reintegration Services? Does the current or upcoming geographical scope of JRS cover your needs? Does your Member State provide counselling to returnees in order to encourage the use of the program?*
3. *What actors (institutions, third sector entities, civil society, etc.) are responsible for implementing reintegration activities in the country of origin? Do you have bilateral agreements with local authorities or entities of origin for these purposes?*