

Assisted voluntary return schemes

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In recent years, ‘assisted voluntary return’ (AVR) or ‘assisted voluntary return and reintegration’ (AVRR) schemes have spread across Europe and the Western industrialised world – from five in 1995 to 35 in 2011. These schemes, the majority of which are administered by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), facilitate the return of rejected asylum seekers (and also, in some countries, irregular migrants) to their countries of origin. They typically provide return flights, offer cash allowances and in some cases also provide reintegration assistance upon return; they also usually entail a temporary re-entry ban. Such schemes allow for the ‘orderly return’ of unwanted migrants in that they avoid the use of outright coercion.

While AVR is clearly preferable to deportation, NGOs and academics alike have in the past criticised these schemes for being misleadingly labelled and lacking genuine voluntariness. IOM acknowledges that for many individuals the only alternative to AVR may be forced return – and some governments openly admit that the threat of deportation is used to increase participation in AVR schemes.

The UK first established an AVR scheme in 1999. Responsibility for ‘enforced removals’ and ‘voluntary removals’ now lies with the Returns Department of the UK Border Agency’s Immigration Enforcement unit – and both channels are used to increase the overall number of returns per year. Despite AVR being implemented by another actor (currently the NGO Refugee Action), the central

oversight for both types of return measures is thus subsumed under one institutional umbrella.

When comparing voluntary return schemes in different countries in Europe and across the world, it becomes apparent that the UK’s choice of institutional design reflects a broader development. Whereas in countries that established AVR schemes during the 1970s or 1980s (e.g. Germany and Belgium) assisted voluntary returns and enforced returns are administered by separate governmental departments, countries that have established similar schemes more recently (e.g. Canada, Australia and most Eastern European countries) tend to follow the British example and assign oversight responsibilities for both pathways to the same domestic authority.

AVR can constitute a welcome option for migrants wishing to return home but when ‘forced’ and ‘voluntary’ returns are pursued in combination, the notion of voluntariness becomes compromised. It follows that the only way to shield AVR from this and to realise its beneficial potential is to keep it institutionally separate from forced returns. Governments committed to the protection of vulnerable individuals against forced return would be well advised to bear this in mind when establishing new AVR schemes.

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