

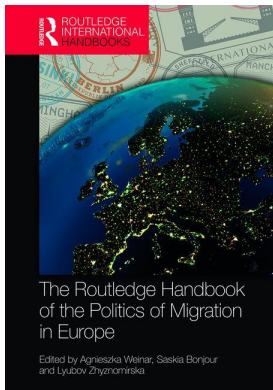
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20

RETURN AND READMISSION POLICY IN EUROPE

Understanding negotiation and implementation dynamics

Florian Trauner

Introduction

This chapter investigates the field of return and readmission policy in Europe. Removing an individual from a given territory is one of the most severe forms of exclusion from a society and community. It brings up questions of proportionality, rights and efficiency. A better understanding of the dynamics is therefore of relevance not only for academic circles but also for societies at large.

Indeed, return and readmission policy has become a developing field of research within migration studies. This is not only due to the human rights' issues at stake within each forcible return procedure. It has also been caused by the academic interest in the dynamics of including return and readmission in the European integration process. The question of who can stay in a territory and who is compelled to leave has traditionally been a prerogative of state governments. In Europe, however, these issues have become embedded in the European Union's (EU) multi-governance structures. The EU's activities range from the harmonisation of migration enforcement laws, the negotiation of EU readmission agreements to the operational support and conduct of return procedures through Frontex, its border management agency.

Scholars have followed and investigated these developments. Some of the key research questions in the field have been: Why and to what extent do states cooperate on the return of irregular migrants and rejected asylum seekers, in particular within the EU's multi-governance structure? What are the practices of return and the implementation dynamics of readmission agreements? And what is the impact of forcible return on the individual concerned, in particular on a returnee's human rights, dignity and social standing? The objective of this chapter is to provide a robust overview of these research strands.

Return and readmission as a field of research

Return and readmission policy is a controversial field (Rosenberger and Trauner, 2014). This starts with the language applied in political and academic debates. While policy-makers prefer to use terms such as 'return', 'removal' and 'expulsion', social scientists often frame it as a 'deportation', in particular in the Anglo-Saxon world (Gibney, 2008b). As a term, deportation is less used in continental Europe. In German-speaking countries, the term is still associated with

the 'Jewish deportations' conducted by Nazi Germany during WWII (Gibney and Hansen, 2003, p. 7).

The use of terminology is not the aspect in which academics and policy-makers have different perspectives. The differences also concern substantive issues. The EU – similar to the understanding and practice of the US and most other Western states – draws a distinction between 'voluntary' and 'enforced returns'. The distinction concerns the level of cooperation of the person ordered to leave. 'Removal' implies the 'enforcement of the obligation to return, namely the physical transportation out of the Member State' (Article 3 of Directive 2008/115/EC of 16 December 2008). The EU tends to favour voluntary over forced returns. Indeed, many EU member states now have lower numbers of forced returns than in the 1990s. By contrast, 'assisted voluntary returns' and other forms of removals (such as Dublin transfers of asylum seekers within the EU) have increased (Rosenberger and Trauner, 2014).

In the world of academia, these differences are often less accentuated. Peutz and de Genova define deportation as the 'compulsory removal of "aliens" from the physical, juridical, and social space of the state' (Peutz and De Genova, 2010, p. 1). According to such a definition, the (technical) procedure of return is of secondary importance. What is important is the element of 'compulsiveness' in terms of leaving a territory. In 'assisted voluntary return' programmes, for instance, most migrants participate because they have received an expulsion order. They therefore lack the element of 'voluntariness' (Webber, 2011) and may fall within the categorisation of 'deportations' put forward by Peutz and de Genova.

By investigating the dynamics in the US, Kanstroom (2007) suggests that a deportation policy pursues two major objectives, namely 'extended border controls' and 'post-entry social control'. The first refers to an often-heard argument: any migration policy would risk its credibility and legitimacy if an individual who enters a given state either irregularly or based on fake protection claims cannot be removed. In the field of asylum, the (expansive) asylum verification procedures receive legitimisation by referring to the option of returning all those whose claims were found unjustified (Phuong, 2005). The second objective mentioned by Kanstroom refers primarily to non-nationals who commit a crime and are no longer permitted to remain in a country.

Return policy has gained importance for state authorities. There has been a 'deportation turn' in the management of migration across the Western hemisphere (Gibney, 2008b). The 'quest for border-based national security' (Drotbohm, 2013, p. 1) and the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 have contributed substantially to this development. Until the 1990s, deportations have been mostly used in situations of wars or a perceived crisis (Bloch and Schuster, 2005). By now, they have become a standard tool for dealing with unwanted and irregular migration both within and outside Europe. Under the Obama administration, for instance, the US authorities have deported record levels of irregular migrants. In 2016, US President Obama's last year in office, a total of 490,954 removals and returns were conducted (Homeland Security, 2016). It is a declared objective of the Trump administration to increase this number. While the Obama administration focused on deporting convicted criminals, recent border crossers and persons perceived as security threats, the Trump administration has defined 'practically every deportable person a deportation priority' (*New York Times*, 2017). Deportation has become a central, if not *the* key issue of today's migration management in many Western countries.

Negotiating return and readmission in Europe

Return and readmission entered the field of inter-state relations in the early nineteenth century. Prussia first signed such agreements with other German States in 1818 and 1819 (Coleman,

2009, p. 12). The focus at that time was on the return of own-state nationals. The 1851 Treaty of Gotha, for instance, included an obligation to take back ‘those individuals who are still their nationals’ (quoted in Hailbronner, 1997, p. 6). After WWII, bilateral agreements proliferated within Europe governing the admission (and non-admission) of persons at borders. They typically included also readmission clauses for own-state nationals (Hailbronner, 1997, p. 6).

With the fall of the Iron Curtain and the increased salience – and securitisation (Huysmans, 2000) – of migration within Europe, return and readmission issues gradually moved from a bilateral to a European level. ‘Justice and home affairs’ became part of the accession conditionality for the (then) candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Not only were the Eastern Europeans supposed to have a functioning and smooth return cooperation with the EU-15, they were also transformed into ‘Safe Third Countries’ with enhanced responsibilities for receiving and dealing with asylum seekers from outside Europe (Lavenex, 1999; Grabbe, 2002; Borissova, 2003). Within the EU’s Dublin regime, asylum seekers may be sent back to the first EU country of entry.

The advent of an ‘EU return and readmission policy’ coincided with the Treaty of Amsterdam (1999). It provided the EU with legal competences in the field of migration. From the EU’s point of view, an added value of EU readmission agreements (compared to bilateral agreements) is that they bring together the (negotiation) capabilities of different EU actors and member states. Also, the EU agreements create a legal obligation not only for the return of own-state nationals but also for third-country nationals (persons that do not have the nationality of either of the signatory parties). All EU readmission agreements include a clause on the return of third-country nationals (TCNs) and stateless persons – an article that has proven controversial in the negotiations (Schieffer, 2003; Roig and Huddelston, 2007).

While formally based on reciprocity, the EU tends to benefit more from a readmission agreement. Most returns take place from the EU to the partner countries. An important question has therefore been as to how to make a partner state accept an EU readmission agreement. Linking visa facilitation with readmission has become a dominant pattern of cooperation in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe (Trauner and Kruse, 2008a; Hernández i Sagrera, 2010; Dedja, 2012). Visa facilitation gave the EU a leverage to complete the negotiations on readmission and demand related reforms in the justice and home affairs’ section. Facilitated travel opportunities were of high importance for Eastern Partnership countries, notably in view of the extension of the EU and Schengen eastwards (Trauner and Kruse, 2008a). It has also been of high salience for Turkey, which has long demanded full visa liberalisation from the EU in exchange for cooperation on migrants’ return (Bürgin, 2013; İçduygu and Aksel, 2014; Wolff, 2014). Most of the EU’s 17 readmission agreements have been signed with Eastern and South-eastern neighbours (see Table 20.1).

The EU has struggled to complete negotiations on readmission agreements with Southern neighbours and African states (Cassarino, 2009; El Quadim, 2014; Trauner, 2014; Wolff, 2014). These states have refrained from accepting EU readmission agreements due to high domestic salience of the return issue and EU incentives perceived as insufficient. In this region, member states cooperate primarily in informal ways and based on non-standard bilateral readmission agreements (see next section, also Cassarino, 2007; Panizzon, 2011; El Quadim, 2014). The EU has increasingly applied a similar pattern of cooperation. Instead of insisting on the conclusion of formal EU readmission agreements, the EU has created more informal and less committing migration frameworks that may include cooperation on return (under headings such as ‘Mobility Partnerships’ and ‘Common Agenda on Migration and Mobility’) (Cassarino, 2018).

The 2015 refugee crisis has accelerated this development. According to the Commission (2016b: 7), ‘paramount priority is to achieve fast and operational returns, and not necessarily

Table 20.1 EU readmission agreements (as of January 2017)

	Negotiating mandate		Agreements signed
	Readmission agreement	Visa facilitation agreement	
Albania	November 2002	November 2006	November 2007
Bosnia and Herzegovina	November 2006	November 2006	November 2007
Serbia	November 2006	November 2006	November 2007
Montenegro	November 2006	November 2006	November 2007
Macedonia	November 2006	November 2006	November 2007
Belarus	February 2011	February 2011	
Ukraine	February 2002	November 2005	June 2007
Moldova	December 2006	December 2006	October 2007
Georgia	November 2008	November 2008	November 2010
Armenia	December 2011	December 2011	December 2013
Azerbaijan	December 2011	December 2011	November 2013
Russia	September 2000	July 2004	May 2006
Turkey	November 2002	February 2011	December 2013*
Cape Verde	June 2009	October 2012	October 2013
Hong Kong	April 2004		March 2004
Macao	April 2001		June 2004
Pakistan	September 2000		December 2012
Sri Lanka	September 2000		May 2005

Note

* Only readmission agreement was signed. Its implementation has been linked to the Turkish Visa Liberalisation Process.

formal readmission agreements’. The ‘EU–Turkey Statement’ of March 2016 allowing for the return of migrants irrespective of their legal status has been increasingly presented as a prototype for a new EU relation with countries of migrants’ origin and transit. The EU instruments, tools and leverage should be brought together in so-called ‘comprehensive partnerships’ (or ‘compacts’) (European Commission, 2016a: 6) and used to incentivise third countries for migration control and ‘management’. While the priority countries for the compacts are in Africa and the Middle East, the EU has concluded a range of new migration and return deals with other countries too. An example has been the ‘Joint Way Forward’ document signed with Afghanistan in October 2016. It is not a formal readmission agreement but triggers a more intensified cooperation on return including the construction of a ‘dedicated terminal for return in Kabul airport’ (European External Action Service, 2016).

Implementing return and readmission policy

It is a challenge to gather sound data on migration (Singelton, 2016). The field of return and readmission is no exception. According to Eurostat (2016), 533,395 TCNs were ordered to leave in 2015. The Frontex Risk Analysis suggests a different number by putting the number of return decisions at 286,725 for the same year (Frontex, 2016, p. 34). Frontex maintains that 175,220 returns took place in the EU in 2015. This means that around 60 per cent of the removal orders were actually implemented (European Commission, 2015, p. 2). The gap

Table 20.2 Gap between return decisions and effective returns

	2012	2013	2014	2015
Return Decisions	269,949	224,305	251,990	286,725
Effective Returns	158,955	160,418	161,309	175,220
Efficiency ratio	58%	72%	64%	61%

Source: Frontex (2016: 70); Table first published in Slominski and Trauner (2017).

between removal orders and actual returns has long existed and has been framed as ‘non-deportability’ (Paoletti, 2010) or a ‘deportation gap’ (Rosenberger and Küffner, 2016).

It has been a reoccurring complaint of EU institutions that the return rate would be too low. These demands have increased in frequency in recent years. There is a widespread feeling that many of the migrants entering Europe during the 2015/2016 refugee crisis do not qualify for international protection and should be removed. Here is an assessment by the European Commission:

With around 2.6 million asylum applications in 2015/2016 alone, and considering that the first instance recognition rate stands at 57% in the first three quarters of 2016, Member States may have more than 1 million people to return once their asylum applications have been processed.

(European Commission, 2017, p. 2)

The EU has adopted different new rules and measures to achieve a higher ‘efficiency’ post-refugee crisis. These include the creation of a dedicated EU Return Office within the ‘European Border and Coast Guard Agency’ (the agency’s abbreviation is still ‘Frontex’), a stronger exchange of information on the apprehension, identification and monitoring of irregular migrants and more money for voluntary return packages. The reformed Frontex agency has now the power of initiating and leading EU return operations, and no longer only ‘assisting’ member states. Around €820 million are devoted for the support of return operations and assisted voluntary returns (European Commission, 2017, pp. 11–12). The EU also agreed on a uniform ‘European travel document for the return of illegally staying third-country nationals’ (Regulation (EU) 2016/1953) and works towards systematically inserting entry bans and return decisions in the EU’s Schengen Information System (SIS) (Council of the European Union, 2015, p. 8).

Why is there a gap between return decisions and effective returns? A readmission agreement is a precondition for inter-state cooperation but it does not automatically imply a functioning return cooperation. There can be some practical impediments. Third countries often refrain from cooperation on a return request due to missing documentation or an uncertain/contested identity of the irregular migrant. Many return decisions are judicially challenged, often referring to the EU’s Return Directive (Directive 2008/115/EC of 16 December 2008) as the main set of rules governing return procedures in the EU (Acosta Arcarazo and Geddes, 2014; Peers, 2015). There is also a difference within the member states in terms of how much emphasis is put on the implementation of return decision. Based on data from the period 2003–2013, Finotelli (2018) shows that the executed expulsions of the Spanish police never went over 28 per cent of the expulsion orders filled in the same year, with a similar situation in Italy. This is a lower average compared to Northern member states.

Also, a return decision has often been contested in spontaneously created (grassroots) protests that perceive the deportation of a migrant well integrated in a local community as unjust (Rosenberger and Winkler, 2014). It plays a role if the bureaucracies charged with return are insulated from political influence (Ellermann, 2005, 2009). Even in the presence of a formal readmission agreement, the actual level of return may depend on mid-level bureaucratic practices of cooperation and brokering. By investigating the implementation of the French forced return policy in Morocco, for instance, Nora el Quadim (2014) suggested that the Franco-Moroccan cooperation often hinged on issue-specific bargains, for instance on a French immigration liaison officer offering technical advice and training in exchange for more operational cooperation on return.

A related body of literature has investigated the role of individual actors, such as the International Organisation for Migration within the implementation of the EU–Russian readmission agreement (Korneev, 2014), or looked at the implementation of EU readmission agreements more generally (Billet, 2010). The implementation study conducted by Carrera (2016) points to the challenges of identifying potential returnees. The identification processes are often linked to and impeded by rule of law guarantees formalised in EU citizenship and migration law and the Charter of Fundamental Rights. As Carrera (2016, p. 4) points out,

They relate to effective remedies against removal decisions, proportionality tests and fundamental rights standards in cases of humanitarian considerations or other personal and family reasons, which, irrespective of the individual’s identity, *de jure* or *de facto* make her/him ‘non-removable’ or non-expellable from a given country of residence.

The author cautions against focusing only on operational effectiveness in readmission policies (understood as higher return rates) and highlights the rights of individuals subject to a return procedure.

The implications of a return procedure for the migrant concerned

A readmission procedure involves three actors: the state that requests a return procedure, the state that is requested to readmit, and the migrant to be readmitted. By default, the interests of these actors are different. While the first two define the legal framework of readmission, the returnee is given the role a mere ‘object’ (Trauner and Kruse, 2008b, p. 9). Research focusing on the individuals subject to a return procedure faces substantial ethnic and methodological challenges. These people constitute a ‘vulnerable group’ for any researcher. It is often difficult to trace and investigate their path, experience and behaviour. Still, there has been a growing body of literature focusing on the behaviour of returnees and the impact of a return process on their social standing and reintegration, respectively.

Applying a sociological perspective, Leerkes (2016) explores under which conditions immigrant detainees, most of whom wait for a deportation procedure, cooperate with state authorities. The author highlights that a perceived legitimacy of the migration rules (e.g. has the case been evaluated in a sincere manner?) enhances the migrants’ compliance with these rules. The author found only limited evidence that immigrants increase their willingness to leave a country due to deterrence. Related works have looked at how questions of contested and unclear identity and identification impact the lives of rejected asylum seekers. Griffiths (2012) points to the risks and implications of criminalisation and exceptional measures such as indefinite incarceration to make them ‘deportable’ (for another critical study on detention and deportation, see Schuster, 2005).

While a first body of research therefore concerns the situation and behaviour of migrants awaiting or potentially subject to a deportation procedure, another looks at the post-deportation phase. The viability of an expulsion procedure is believed to depend on the capacity of a receiving country to reintegrate the returnee and on individual livelihood options (e.g. Gibney, 2008a; Schuster and Majidi, 2013). By looking at the EU–Albanian cooperation on readmission, Kruse (2006) differentiates between own-state nationals and third-country nationals that are being returned. After return, Albanian irregular migrants would rarely return to their home places that are often in the countryside but move to bigger towns. Growing internal migration and urbanisation is one consequence, and it often goes hand in hand with further attempts to re-emigrate. While the ‘return of its own nationals is a complex issue that brings about a lot of challenges for Albanian authorities’ (Kruse, 2006, p. 132), the return of third-country nationals is even more demanding in terms of administrative and organisational infrastructure as well as wider societal questions of reception and integration.

The fact that a return procedure often does not imply an ‘end’ to a person’s migratory experience has also been emphasised by Schuster and Majidi (2013). By looking at the experience of deported Afghans, they suggest three reasons why many of them sought to re-emigrate: ‘the impossibility of repaying debts incurred by migration, the existence of transnational and local ties, the shame of failure, and the perceptions of “contamination”’ (Schuster and Majidi, 2013, p. 221). Afghan returnees, who have entered the United Kingdom as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and were returned after they reached the age of 18, were at the centre of a study by Gladwell *et al.* (2016). The study highlights mental health difficulties, questions of insecurity (partly linked to the original asylum claims) and problems of re-establishing or building family and social ties. ‘Seeking more settled futures for themselves, young returnees articulated their desire to leave Afghanistan again, in spite of the risks of the journey’ (Gladwell *et al.*, 2016, p. 7).

Some scholars have looked at what happens to migrants stranded on their way to the EU or rejected/returned directly at the EU external border. In this context, Morocco is a particularly relevant case, notably to the ‘hot returns’ or ‘pushback operations’ allegedly conducted by Spain at the borders of Ceuta and Melilla (Carrera *et al.*, 2016). Migrants in Morocco are often blocked for years and struggle to get alone. ‘The “model” of border surveillance and control ... comes at a considerable human cost for migrants, creating a situation of vulnerability, insecurity and human rights violations’ (Carrera *et al.*, 2016, p. 10). The risk of human rights violations due to ill-regulated returns or ‘wild refoulements’ has been highlighted in North and West Africa more generally (Trauner and Deimel, 2013).

Conclusions

This chapter has explored return and readmission policy as a field of research. The area is contested and sensitive from a human rights’ perspective. Terminologies and definitions differ between policy circles and academia.

A first strand of research has dealt with power asymmetries and the negotiations on return and readmission. The EU and member states have sought to incentivise countries of migrants’ origin and transit with visa facilitation/liberalisation, financial assistance and closer political relations. With Southern neighbours and African states, the EU has not yet managed to conclude formal readmission agreements. Member states have primarily cooperated with bilateral, informal and non-standard agreements with this group of third countries. The EU as a whole has recently also embarked on *informalising* return cooperation to achieve higher return rates and reduce the public salience of the return issue (e.g. Cassarino, 2018).

A second body of scholarly work has looked at the dynamics of implementing return cooperation and readmission agreements. There has been a considerable interest in investigating the reasons for the ‘gap’ between the number of expulsion orders and effectuated returns. Researchers highlighted dynamics relating to litigation, ‘grassroots protests’ at a local level, bureaucratic insulation and administrative processes (such as the identification of migrants). A final research area has been the impact of a return procedure on the migrants themselves. Some research projects have traced the post-deportation experiences and integration of migrants. Successful reintegration is seen to depend on (structural and individual) livelihood options. If those are not present, people often re-emigrate which may make deportations an instrument of questionable efficiency for curbing irregular migration in a long-term (Carrera and Allsopp, 2018).

In brief, the academic knowledge on return and readmission has deepened in recent years. Researchers may build upon this knowledge and continue to investigate return policies and politics including the EU’s changing relations with countries of migrants’ origin and transit. An avenue for future research is also to embark on more comparative regional studies, for instance to what extent European policy-makers ‘learn’ and ‘borrow’ ideas from Australia’s offshore proceeding regimes or what are converging and diverging patterns of the American and European return policies.

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