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POLICY STANCES AND
LEGITIMACY OF RETURNS

**DISCOURSE AND
POLICIES: SILENCING
RETURNEES AND THE NEED
FOR MORE INCLUSIVE
RETURN POLICIES**

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- 4.



6 . GLOSSARY

Crimmigration Approach	A 'crimmigration approach' is a policy approach whereby irregular migrants, including asylum seekers, are criminalised. This approach also extends to legal and illegal attempts to push migrants outside of the territories. This framing of migration refers to the symbolic threat that is illegal crossings of a country's borders. Through punishment and 'push-backs', states aim to discourage transiting migrants, asylum seekers and nationals alike from undertaking irregular journeys to, across and from their territories. ¹
Diaspora	Migrants or descendants of migrants whose identity and sense of belonging, either real or symbolic, have been shaped by their migration experience and background. They maintain links with their homelands, and to each other, based on a shared sense of history, identity, or mutual experiences in the destination country. ²
Discourse	The process of social signification that involves the use of various semiotic modes such as language, image, and sound within a specific sociocultural context. Discourse is considered as one element of social life that is dialectically related to other non-discursive elements, such as time, space, place, and social power. In critical discourse analysis, discourse is operationalized as the patterned use of language that emerges from engagement in social practices. It both reflects and contributes to shaping social practice. ³
Enforced Return	Forced return is a broader term which includes any action having the effect of returning the individual to a State, including expulsion, removal, extradition, rejection at the frontier, extra-territorial interception, and physical return. ⁴
EU+ Countries	Member states of the European Union plus associated countries, including Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein. ⁵
Fairness	The term 'fairness' relates to people's aversion to arrivals by boat may be because they are perceived to have somehow unfairly 'queue-jumped' and avoided the proper resettlement channels. This concept of fairness can also be linked with a desire that migrants 'contribute' to the country they are living in. ⁶
Framing Effect	The term 'framing effect' refers to people's reactions to an issue being mainly a consequence on how information is presented to them; 'positive' frames more attuned to people's preconceived feelings and values are more likely to be accepted than 'negative' ones. Both narratives and frames are useful tools to better understand how

¹ Saskia Bayerl, P. et al., Migration to the EU. A Review of Narratives and Approaches, accessed 06/07/2023.

² IOM (2019), Glossary on Migration, accessed 06/07/2023.

³ Mulderrig, J. et al., (2019), Introducing critical policy discourse analysis, accessed 11/08/2023.

⁴ European Commission - Migration and Home Affairs, Forced Return, accessed 06/07/2023.

⁵ Finding Agreement in Return (2022), Definitions, accessed 06/07/2023.

⁶ Dempster, H. and Hargrave, K. (2017), Understanding public attitudes towards refugees and migrants, accessed 06/07/2023.



people's perspectives and attitudes are formed, and how they can be influenced.⁷

Interdiscursivity	Interdiscursivity refers to the porous nature of discourse, through which it incorporates diverse elements from its broader social context. It allows for the investigation of how changes in discourse can drive social change. For example, the "managerialization" of public services or the "marketization" of political discourse demonstrates how discourse practices from one field infiltrate another, leading to significant transformations. ⁸
Intertextuality	Intertextuality refers to the interplay and interconnectedness between different texts, where the meaning of one text is shaped or influenced by its relationship with other texts.
Migrant	An umbrella term, not defined under international law, reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons. The term includes a number of well-defined legal categories of people, such as migrant workers; persons whose particular types of movements are legally defined, such as smuggled migrants; as well as those whose status or means of movement are not specifically defined under international law, such as international students. ⁹
Migration Narratives	Migration narratives are 'stories' that aim to make sense of the migration experience. They are told by a wide variety of groups, including migrants, host communities, local, national, EU and global policy makers, non-governmental organisations, law enforcement authorities and other first-line practitioners, media, and academics.
Non-EU+ Countries	The countries that are not member states of the European Union nor associated countries (Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein). ¹⁰
Othering	A communicative practice that constructs and treats migrants as different to non-migrants, routinely, in unfavourable ways. ¹¹
Orders of Discourse	Adapted from Foucault, the concept of orders of discourse in CDA refers to the distinctive configuration of styles, discourses, and genres that are regularly employed as part of a social practice. These orders of discourse help structure and regulate social practices, shaping their characteristic features and connecting them to networks of social practices. The analysis of interdiscursivity allows for understanding the links between different social practices and the exercise of power, where dominant practices and their logics, values, and relations may dominate or "colonise" others. ¹²

⁷ Saez, P. and Bryant, J. (2023), Understanding the role of narratives in humanitarian policy change, accessed 06/07/2023.

⁸ Mulderring, J. et al., (2019), Introducing critical policy discourse analysis, accessed 11/08/2023.

⁹ IOM (2019), Glossary on Migration, accessed 06/07/2023.

¹⁰ Finding Agreement in Return (2022), Definitions, accessed 06/07/2023.

¹¹ MINORITIES (2020), Migration Narratives and Othering: Impact on Integration in European Societies, accessed 06/07/2023.

¹² Mulderring, J. et al., (2019), Introducing critical policy discourse analysis, accessed 11/08/2023.



Voluntary Return

The process by which someone that is not allowed to legally stay in a country leaves that country's territory freely and moves to a country where he has the legal permission to stay.¹³

¹³ Finding Agreement in Return (2022), Definitions, accessed 06/07/2023.



7. LIST OF ACRONYMS

AU	African Union
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DMP	Data Management Plan
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
EUCAP	European Union Capacity Building Mission
EUR	Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam
EUTF	European Union Emergency Trust Fund for stability and addressing root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa (EUTF for Africa)
FAiR	Finding Agreement in Return
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
KII	Key Informant Interview
KU	Koç University
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
RQ	Research Question
SH	Samuel Hall
SSI	Semi-Structured Interview
TOR	Terms of Reference
UMIL	Università degli Studi di Milano
WP	Work Package



9. INTRODUCTION

It is the sovereign right of a state to decide who can legally stay, or not, within its territory. Issues arise when states set the rules by which enforced return happen, without due consideration for the human rights of those their decision touches, and without sufficient space for their voices to be heard. The Finding Agreement in Return (FAiR) consortium's overarching goal is to strengthen the governance of return migration in the European Union (EU) and address the legitimacy issues around return migration policies and alternatives. In order to meet this overarching goal, various Work Packages have been developed to address different areas related to migration. To lay the foundation for the consortium, the Working paper on Legitimate Return and Alternatives to Return defined Legitimacy as "A multidimensional concept involving political, legal, and sociological aspects, assessed from the perspectives of various audiences, including intra-state (European citizens and deportable immigrants), inter-state (third states and their officials), and transboundary (returnees, NGOs, civil society organizations)."

As part of FAiR consortium, one of the work packages, namely four (4), has focused on analysing the legitimacy in discourses on returns, from different perspectives – states, media, civil society, and returnees – and specifically from non-European countries. This work package questions narratives that centre on European governments' self-selected design of return policies (Scott 1998) by investigating the role of norms and the meanings of return policies for various stakeholders in return, or country of origin, settings. As part of this initiative, this working paper focuses on how discourses in non-EU countries shape return, readmission, and reintegration policies in EU and non-EU countries. It is situated within a broader literature that challenges ideas about 'developed' and 'developing' nations (Comaroff 2012) by bringing forward an analysis of narratives and discourses on return from non-EU countries that can inform how scholars, states, and other stakeholders understand and approach migration, and return migration more specifically.

This paper is structured on the basis of an analysis of narratives and discourses about return in order to develop new approaches that incorporate narratives from returnees and ensure more inclusive policy processes. These discourses are those the work package names as "counter-discourses" as they reflect perspectives outside of dominant state perspectives. This research on (counter-)discourses and return emphasises the need to recognise and account for counter-narratives from countries of origin, to propose news approaches to policy making that account for a diversity of voices. In this working paper, we also include "silencing as an act of language" and therefore the relationship between silence and discourse.

Starting with an introduction to present the conceptual framework, this paper makes three core arguments: first, we clarify the existence of different narratives and their impact on the legitimacy of migration and return policies. Second, we highlight silencing of migrants as part of existing return migration policies. Third, we propose an alternative way forward to recentre the conversation on return towards more inclusive policies.

1. MIGRATION NARRATIVES AND THEIR IMPACT ON POLICIES

Migration narratives can be categorised into two distinct types: narratives by migrants and narratives about migrants.¹⁴ These narratives play a key role in shaping not only public perception, but also policy-making around migration. Narratives by migrants correspond to personal

¹⁴ Boswell et al. (2021), The Emergence, Uses and Impacts of Narratives on Migration: State of the Art.



testimonies shared by migrants themselves and provide first-hand evidence on motivations, challenges, and experiences behind migration.¹⁵ In contrast, narratives about migrants are developed by media, policymakers, religious actors, and other third parties.¹⁶ Understanding where they *align* or *misalign* is key to analysing the impact of policies in the realm of return, readmission, and reintegration.

The interaction between narratives by migrants and narratives about migrants is complex and often dynamic. Migrant narratives can enrich the broader public narratives by sharing authentic voices, while those dominated by non-migrants can often overshadow migrant experiences. Boswell et al. (2021) points out that migrants have a “very limited voice [...] in narratives about them”.¹⁷ Policymakers often rely on public narratives to address migration-related issues, leading to a prejudicial oversimplification of migration as a phenomenon.¹⁸

Public narratives significantly impact the acceptance of migration policies, including those related to return, readmission, and reintegration, as well as the identification of alternatives to these policies. Migration scholars have identified four migration narratives framing the discourse around migration. These narratives classified by Bayerl et al. (2020)¹⁹ and Hein de Haas (2024)²⁰ are identified below:

- 1) Crisis Narrative or Mass Migration Narrative;
- 2) Xenophobic Narrative or Migration Threat Narrative;
- 3) Solidarity Narrative or Migration Celebration Narrative;
- 4) Victim Narrative or Migrant Victim Narrative.

These narratives contribute to and are based on a dehumanisation process whereby migrants are spoken about but rarely listened to. As emphasised by Hein de Haas (2024), “these powerful narratives are one-sided, misrepresent the true nature of migration, and largely disregard migrant agency”.²¹ These, including the solidarity and victimisation narratives, stem from a colonial perspective that considers migrants as different, inferior, and even passive, while ignoring their existence as equals, with agencies, dreams, and aspirations.²² As a result, these narratives facilitate the design – and subsequent acceptance – of dehumanising policies.

2. NARRATIVE AND DISCOURSE: CONCEPTS

As we are interested in what narratives, relations and representations are produced as part of the discourses, it is important to establish how narratives differ from discourses.²³ Discourse refers to a content and a process, embedded in social relations: it can be defined as language in use, an often intangible mechanism encompassing various forms such as language, images, and sounds as well as the socially constructed meanings, practices, and uses of such communication tools.²⁴ Discourses do not only describe, but they also constitute socio-political realities. Therefore, discourse analysis aims to understand power, dominance, and resistance by examining how

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.12.

¹⁸ Boswell et al. (2011), *The Role of Narratives in Migration Policy-Making: A Research Framework*.

¹⁹ Bayerl et al. (2020), *Migration to the EU. A Review of Narratives and Approaches*.

²⁰ de Haas, H. (2024), *Changing the migration narrative: On the power of discourse, propaganda and truth distortion*. IMI Working Paper No. 181/PACES Project Working Paper No. 3. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam.

²¹ Ibid, p.2.

²² Ben-Arieh, G., & Heins, V. M. (2020), *Criminalisation of kindness: narratives of legality in the European politics of migration containment*.

²³ Dennison, J. (2021), *Narratives: a review of concepts, determinants, effects, and uses in migration research*.

²⁴ van Hulst, M., Metzke, T., Dewulf, A., de Vries, J., van Bommel S., & van Ostaijen, M. (2024), *Discourse, framing and narrative: three ways of doing critical, interpretive policy analysis*, *Critical Policy Studies*



language, images, and sounds are given meanings based on the context and in turn shape this context. On the other hand, alternative discourses contest domination by opening new ways of understanding phenomena.²⁵

In contrast, a narrative is a story describing events involving both human and nonhuman characters in specific temporal and spatial settings, which can assist in understanding the context and act upon it through policy. Contrary to discourses, narratives are tangible: they have a strong factual component, often reflect a lived experience and establish a link between phenomena. While discourses encompass a broader spectrum of ideas, concepts, language and categories that attribute meaning to social and physical occurrences, thus distinguishing between 'normal' and 'abnormal', 'us', and 'them.' Narratives play an increasingly important role in contemporary discourse involving migration policies. However, they also serve as sources of inspiration for the formulation of hypotheses, propaganda, and fake news.²⁶

Political and policy narratives possess an additional dimension beyond other narratives, as they prescribe actions to be taken in the real world based on the inner logic of the narrative. These narratives are aligned with the political imperative of shaping the present or future in light of past causal lessons.²⁷ Boswell et al. (2011) delineate three types of policy narratives in the migration field²⁸, namely narratives that:

1. Articulate the nature of a policy issue, portraying irregular immigration, for instance, as either the exploitation by unscrupulous traffickers or as economic migrants taking advantage of loopholes.
2. Delve into the causes of a problem, offering broader insights for future action, such as explaining the non-integration of migrants as a result of persistent cultural differences.
3. Focus on the effects of existing or proposed policy interventions, asserting, for example, that restricting benefits for asylum seekers leads to a decrease in asylum applications.

In contemporary policy narratives, returnees are frequently seen as agents for development who bring to their countries of origin not only economic capital but also values and attitudes that were gained in 'the developed North'.²⁹ This perception of returnees as drivers of progress fosters a belief in the transformative potential of individuals returning with Western ideas and experiences, which may be prejudicial to their home countries as this neoliberal framing shifts the responsibility for development from the state to individuals, encouraging migrants to bring innovative ideas to their countries of origin. However, returnees frequently face exclusion and criticism both in Europe, where they are perceived as outsiders and in their home countries, where their motivations and loyalties may be questioned.³⁰

Both discourses and narratives are processes that construct meanings of phenomena. The distinction between these two terms lies in their focus: narratives concentrate on the meaning, while discourses take a broader view and focus on the meaning embedded in the context. While the empirical data collected for this working paper centres narratives on return, the ways in which they interact with the wider context and meanings-in-use, through time, space and among actors, enable us to draw conclusions on discourses.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Boswell et al. (2011) in Dennison, J. (2021), Narratives: a review of concepts, determinants, effects, and uses in migration research.

²⁹ van Houte, M. (2014). Returnees for change? Afghan return migrants' identification with the conflict and their potential to be agents of change.

³⁰ Ibid.



3. DECOLONIAL APPROACH TO DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Decolonial studies have emerged in the last two decades as a subcategory of postcolonial studies – i.e., like postcolonial studies, they recognise that coloniality goes beyond settler colonialism, and propose an analysis of societies that gives light to power dynamics. They mobilise the study of representations, and in line with Edward Said's work, recognise that representations are performative and interrelated with power; they are social constructs, embedded in and used for self-other distinctions, hierarchisation, and domination.³¹ Acknowledging that violence is not only physical, as demonstrated by Franz Fanon³², postcolonial scholars look at cultural violence³³ and its facilitating role in increasing structural and physical violence. Finally, they advocate for a reconsideration of colonised spaces and groups, including in knowledge production, bringing in contributions from subaltern studies.^{34,35}

Bridging and building on these different schools and concepts, decolonial scholars have pushed to go beyond postcolonial studies on three levels:³⁶

- Recognising that colonialism is only one expression of coloniality, they look into colonised as well as colonising spaces;
- Knowledge coming from colonised space is equally recognised, bringing life to a pluricentric knowledge production;
- They propose new ways of doing and of producing societies that deconstruct representations and hierarchies while strengthening relations – speaking of decolonising a wide range of fields that include knowledge production.³⁷

This decolonial scope brings light to discourse analysis, not by reinventing a field with which many bridges already exist, but bringing in several learnings, including:

- The call to include a decolonial lens when analysis discourses on specific groups within colonising spaces.
- The focus on the knowledge production ecosystem, in terms of geography and stakeholders, and the impact of power and recognition on this ecosystem.
- The analysis of the impact of discourses on self-other relations, representations, and hierarchies, which in return play a role on the opportunities in terms of policymaking.

Not only does this lens contribute to analyse the interactions and reciprocal impact of power and discourses; it also gives tools and concepts to critically examine and inform the way forward for counter discourses. Indeed, counter discourses are embedded in often similar historical, social and semantic contexts and cultures as dominant discourses are. As such, they reproduce certain elements of dominant discourses, whether intentionally – to increase the acceptance of the narratives they convey – or intentionally – because of the context of production. The decolonial lens contributes to unravel these aspects by looking at four themes that are integrated in the discourse analysis grid for WP4, and reflects the three approaches of critical policy discourse analysis, namely the discourse-historical, dialectical-relational, and sociosemantic approaches³⁸.

³¹ Said, E. W. (1979), *Orientalism*, 1st Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books).

³² Fanon, F. (2004), *The Wretched of the Earth*. (New York: Grove Press).

³³ Galtung, J. (1990), « Cultural Violence ». *Journal of Peace Research* 27, n° 3, p. 291-305.

³⁴ Sharp, J. P. (2009), *Geographies of Postcolonialism : Spaces of Power and Representation* (Los Angeles, Calif. London New Delhi [etc.]: SAGE).

³⁵ Spivak, G. C. (1988), 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, by Nelson, C. and Grossberg, L. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press), p.271–313.

³⁶ Ali, Z. (2017), « Pluriversalisme Décolonial - Présentation Du Numéro de Tumultes ». *Tumultes*, n° 48.

³⁷ Claske, D. (2021), *Subaltern in France : A Decolonial Exploration of Voice, Violence and Racism in Marginalized Social Housing Neighborhoods in Grenoble (France)*. Phd thesis (Université Grenoble Alpes)

³⁸ Mulderrig, J., Montesano Montessori, N., and Farrelly, M. (2019). 'Introducing Critical Policy Discourse Analysis', in *Critical Policy Discourse Analysis*, ed. Mulderrig, J., Montesano Montessori, N., and Farrelly, M. (Edward Elgar Publishing).



These four decolonial lenses are (1) the location of discourse production; (2) the self-other distinction and relation; (3) the space and recognition given to subaltern voices; and (4) the representations and hierarchies referred to and produced.

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

This working paper is the result of data collection, analysis, and reporting conducted by Samuel Hall, Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam (EUR), Koç University (KU), and Università degli Studi di Milano under WP4 Non-EU and Diasporic (Counter-)Discourses. The three main goals of this WP were as follows:

1. Identify main public discourses and counter-discourses on immigration, emigration, and (enforced) return;
2. Assess how discourses and counter-discourses arise and are embedded in public and private discussion;
3. Assess how discourses relate to the position on, and experiences with, policies and outcomes of enforced return among key non-EU+ actors.

To achieve these objectives, research was conducted in-person across three non-EU+ countries: Georgia, Iraq, and Nigeria. The fieldwork locations were Tbilisi (Georgia), Duhok (Iraq), and Abuja and Benin City (Nigeria). These locations were selected for their accessibility in terms of target groups.

Türkiye was also to be included in fieldwork as a non-EU+ country; however, challenges related to lack of access to target groups has severely impeded fieldwork in the country. In Türkiye, the discourse on migration and return policies heavily focuses on third-country nationals residing in Türkiye rather than Turkish citizens returning from abroad. Despite the relatively small number of Turkish returnees, often stemming from individual deportations rather than large-scale operations, their reintegration process remains invisible. Unlike other cases in this research, there appears to be a notable absence of dedicated initiatives or NGOs aimed at supporting Turkish returnees, reflecting a broader silence around their reintegration needs. As a result, the data presented below on Türkiye has been collected through the corpus analysis only.

Critical discourse analysis was composed of qualitative data collection and a corpus analysis. The qualitative data collection involved a desk review conducted throughout the inception and data collection phases, a policy-mapping, key informant interviews (KIIs), semi-structured interviews (SSIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and validation workshops. Over 325 people have been interviewed during data collection.

In addition, a corpus analysis looked at discourses as embedded into a context and relationships, in line with critical discourse analysis. The corpus was analysed through the lens of discursive practices and content, with a collaborative, three-step approach.

The corpus constitution, the selection of a sample of sources representative of existing discourses was the responsibility of national research teams following specific guidelines: (1) documents should represent different type and categories of documents (table 1); (2) documents should speak about return, reintegration and readmission; and (3) given the focus of EU return policy, documents should have been published after 2010 and/or after readmission agreements or negotiations with EU started. The documents were then selected to represent a diversity of authors, sources, and policy stance. They covered multimedia, policy documents, laws and treaties, administrative statements, social movements and social interactions. Different formats of sources were integrated in the corpus, including images and multimedia; however, the non-textual sources were transformed into textual data. For audio sources, transcripts were drafted and integrated into the corpus. For visual sources, an image analysis was conducted with the goal



of transcribing them into texts. Image analysis included semiotic analysis (interpretation of icons and symbols in light of ideas, stereotypes, political ideologies, and historical references) and compositional analysis. Video sources were transcribed using audio and visual approaches. Once the sources were identified, selected and transcribed, the corpus was validated and translated to English for the analysis.

Table 1. Corpus sample per country.

Document Type	Nigeria	Iraq	Georgia	Türkiye
Multimedia	21	23	10	20
Policy Documents	6	7	9	4
Laws & Treaties	3	2	1	3
Administrative Statements	2	3	4	3
Social Movements	6	3	2	3
Social Interactions	5	5	5	0
	43	43	31	33

Narrative and Semantic Analysis: Narratives relevant to the research were pre-identified with national researchers during the corpus constitution phase, and refined during the analysis phase. Sonal software was used to thematically code the documents and conduct a lexicometry analysis (analysis of the words used) per type of documents and theme. This stage involved:

- Analysis of the representation of narratives and sub-narratives in the corpus in each country and overall;
- Analysis of the most used words (20) per narrative and per country, with a focus on similarities and differences;
- Analysis of 50 predefined words that focus on displacement including Return, Readmission and Reintegration programmes (RRR) and policies, in each country and overall.

This analysis led to the identification of narratives on return in each country and overall, the identification of dominant narratives. The lexicometry analysis provided insight into what meaning and language is associated with each narrative, and what potential intertextuality exists. It also helped identify contextual meanings associated with return.

Contextual Text Coding: Building on the research questions, information from the literature review, and information from the data collection, the research team developed a codebook for contextual text coding guided by three approaches:³⁹

- The Discourse-Historical Approach - Historical contextualisation, agency, and argumentation; from the decolonial perspective, this approach informs location of (counter)discourse production, as well as inclusion of subalterns;
- Dialectical-Relational Approach - Social and dialectical conditions in which the source was produced, including interactions, space, and time; from the decolonial perspective, this informs the self-other relation and hierarchies;
- Socio-Semantic Approach - Linguistic and visual modes of communication and meanings, relationship, and representations; from the decolonial perspective, this informs representations.

³⁹ Mulderrig, J., Montesano Montessori, N., and Farrelly, M. (2019), 'Introducing Critical Policy Discourse Analysis', in Critical Policy Discourse Analysis, ed. Mulderrig, J., Montesano Montessori, N., and Farrelly, M. (Edward Elgar Publishing).



Based on these approaches, 73 codes were defined collaboratively and included the following categories: context of production; people's voices; narratives on returnee; condition of return; type of returnees; assistance; references to other texts or narrative; presence and type of visual representation; policies. The contextual text coding allowed the research team to pull quantitative data and identify correlations between variables, including between narratives and other variables. This working paper is based on these results and on hypotheses of factors influencing narratives and policy stance.

5. POLICY MAPPING

The following types of policies were identified throughout the data collection process:

1. **Visa Liberalisation:** policies that simplify the regulations or requirements to access visas, as part of agreements or negotiations between two countries or more; this can go up until establishing a visa-free regime;
2. **Visa or Citizenship Regulations:** national policies or laws that establish the conditions to obtain visas, citizenships and/or passports for the country that establishes the policy;
3. **Forced return:** policies that define the conditions of deportation of migrants who entered illegally and/or no longer have the documentation to stay in the country;
4. **Assisted Return:** policies established by states or third parties to facilitate and sometimes encourage return through the delivery of assistance; they include assisted voluntary return often opposed to forced return;
5. **Assisted Reintegration:** policies established by states or third parties to facilitate returnees' reintegration in their country of origin through the delivery of targeted assistance;
6. **Readmission:** policies facilitating the deportation of irregular migrants to a third country they crossed during their journey, through intergovernmental agreements and procedures;
7. **Labour Migration:** national policies or laws defining the frameworks through which a country manages labour migration and immigration; they can include national strategies as well as regulations on visas and taxes.

Assisted return and assisted reintegration policies are the most represented ones (25 in total, including 3 assisted return, 12 assisted reintegration and 10 policies with both aspects). **This illustrates a focus on assistance in RRR policies rather than on a management system specific to each country.** We also observe differences between countries: visa liberalisation policies exist in Georgia and Türkiye only - in the form of bilateral agreements or discussions with the EU -; assistance policies are quasi-inexistent in Türkiye, while 4 documents focus on readmission (absent from other countries). Forced return policies are absent from the corpus, likely due to the focus on countries of return.

The policy mapping clearly highlights an overrepresentation of foreign agencies as policy-makers. While the focus is put on policies in the countries of return and concerning RRR management in these countries, only 15 out of 44 policy documents listed below come exclusively from the government of the return country. 7 documents are published by both the government of the country of return, and another actor (6 with the EU or a EU member state, and 1 with IOM). In addition, 13 are published by IOM, 6 by the EU or a EU member state, and 4 by another international organisation (NGO or UN). While the limited capacities and resources of the governments in countries of return may be a factor that requires support from external actors, this phenomenon shows the influence of EU member states and international agencies in national migration management.



This influence further increases the disconnect between returnees and policies, as policy-makers are far away from returnees' concerns and needs, and follow foreign agendas; and as the policy-making process is even more opaque and inaccessible to returnees. The influence returnees and returnees' narrative can have in policy-making is thus limited by this process.

10. A TYPOLOGY OF NARRATIVES: HOW PUBLIC DISCUSSION APPROACHES RETURN

1. FOUR CONTEXTS

Before establishing the typology of narratives most relevant to discussing policies and legitimacy of return, it is essential to look at the context from which these narratives emerge. The corpus from Georgia, Iraq, Nigeria, and Türkiye gathered 74 multimedia documents – mainstream and alternative media outlets' articles and news reports, blog posts and social media posts –, 26 policy documents, 9 laws and treaties, 12 administrative statements, 14 social movement publications and 15 social interactions. Among them, 84 documents were published by mainstream or official sources, and 66 from alternative sources. While the methodology and selection criteria were the same across countries, we observe differences that highlight specificities in national discourse on return, and impact the narratives identified.

In **Georgia**, multimedia sources are less present in the corpus, illustrating the lack of public (and media) discussions around return that both Key Informant Interviews and our national research team reported. This contributes to the invisibilisation of returnees that emerged as a key finding of our research, discussed in this paper. In line with this, we noted that many sources do not specifically speak of – or name – return, using the vocabulary of migration in priority. The majority of sources focus on the governmental level, discussing policies and economic development rather than returnees' stories and agency – this emerges from qualitative coding as well as semantic analysis. There are nuances depending on the type of documents. Specifically, alternative sources speak less of policies and humanise returnees; while mainstream and official sources focus indeed on policies and numbers.

While the corpus in **Nigeria** speaks more about returnees, it is to highlight the hardship of migration as part of a strategy by official actors to prevent irregular migration. Thus, while we note a larger focus on the human level with the experience of migration and return, dehumanising narratives and vocabulary are overrepresented, especially in mainstream documents which represent the two third of sources, more than in other corpuses. These documents tend to depersonalise returnees and focus on numbers, assistance, and policy aspects: indeed, assistance and policies are mentioned in almost all documents from the corpus. Despite more presence of individual stories, a similar trend to the corpus in Georgia is observed whereby returnees are at the margins of the conversation compared to policies and assistance.

In **Iraq**, however, only few documents (a third) speak of policies. Qualitative data confirm that policy discussions are less present in the public debate and often restricted to political spheres. While this is again a reflection of the separation between return policies and returnees' voices, in



the case of Iraq, the collected documents give more space to returnees: the corpus focuses on the human and societal level, and a majority of documents relay returnees' stories and/or quotes. This is especially the case of alternative sources, who highlight the transnational nature of the Kurdish identity in particular with a focus on diasporic relationships and contributions of returnees for the country's development.

Türkiye, from the corpus analysis, is the opposite of what we find in Iraq. Documents focus almost exclusively on policies, specifically on the readmission agreement with the EU, and documents that refer to policies do not refer to individual stories. In addition, when such stories are available, they refer to cases of deportations in Europe: Turkish returnees in Türkiye are invisible - confirmed by the absence of the word returnee in the corpus, and by contextual information provided by researchers from Koc University members of the FAiR consortium, who conducted data collection for this research. Observations in Türkiye reveal that the discourse on migration and return policies heavily focuses on third-country nationals residing in Türkiye rather than Turkish citizens returning from abroad. Despite the relatively small number of Turkish returnees, often stemming from individual deportations rather than large-scale operations, their reintegration process remains invisible. The Turkish government's approach to deportations addresses a strategic and diplomatic preference for discretion, particularly concerning the image of the Turkish Republic. While deportations do occur, they are managed quietly to avoid portraying Türkiye as a primary source of irregular immigrants. Due to this sensitivity, the stakeholders hold a cautious approach aimed at mitigating negative perceptions. Thus, the return of Turkish nationals has a noticeable absence of public discourse or invisible support mechanisms for returnees.

All corpuses confirm the disconnect between policy and returnees' voices. There is a dichotomy between the humanisation of returnees, on the one hand, with a focus on human and personal experiences; and on the other hand, separate from it, the policy and legal discussion. We observe a difference between countries, as most documents in Nigeria and Türkiye talk about policies positively or negatively, while Georgia and Iraq have less documents that mention policy and when they do so, it is often documentation emanating from policymakers, thus lacking a diversity of opinions and perspectives.

Nevertheless, the narratives identified in the four countries of focus, can bring an opportunity to reconnect the lived experiences and policy aspects. First, by identifying narratives that come from returnees themselves and can help include returnees in policymaking; and second, by identifying narratives that present opportunities for alternative focus in policy that better respond to the needs and aspirations of returnees.

2. TYPOLOGY OF THE NARRATIVES: A FOCUS ON THE DOMINANT NARRATIVES

While the literature on migration, developed in Europe, identifies four key narratives on migration - crisis, xenophobic, solidarity and victim narrative⁴⁰ -, our corpus analysis shows that narratives in countries of return and from returnees can bring more complexity and nuance. Our research shows seven (7) categories of narratives, each comprising a positive, negative and/or neutral variation as summarised in table 2. The red highlights are the narratives most represented among documents that reflect returnees' individual stories and/or voices. The seven narrative categories are:

- **Assistance narratives** that do not give much space to returnees and focus on policies.

⁴⁰ Bayerl et al. (2020), Migration to the EU. A Review of Narratives and Approaches.



- **Legitimacy narratives** that bring judgement to return, regardless of the experience or impact, tend to include individual accounts of (forced) return, but we also find documents that focus on the legal frameworks.
- **Impact narratives** that include returnees' voices and focus on socioeconomic aspects.
- **National responsibility narratives** that focus on the political level (policy, services, development, and cooperation) and rarely take into account the impact of return on individuals; however they emerge from documents that bring in returnees' voices.
- **Experience narratives** that focus on the impact of migration and return on returnees and reflect individual stories, but they can also be implied by data-based documents through dehumanising processes.
- **Dehumanisation narratives** that are over-represented in policy documents.
- **Transnational narratives** that are over-represented in Iraq and in documents with returnees' voices.

Table 2. Summary table of return narratives' categories.

Category	Positive Variation	Negative Variation	Neutral
Assistance	Assistance is necessary	Assistance is not enough	
Legitimacy	Forced return is fair Return is desirable	Forced return is not fair Return is not acceptable	
Impact	Return is beneficial	Returns create issues locally	
National responsibility	The government of the return country is responsible The context impacts return		
Experience		Return is difficult Migration is dangerous	
Dehumanisation			Returnees are numbers
Transnationalism			Nation extends to the diaspora

The different narratives categorised above are not equally represented in the corpus. We define dominant narratives in a corpus as a narrative that is above the median and average representation of narratives in this corpus. Based on these criteria, Table 3 represents the dominant narratives by country.

Table 3. Dominant narratives in the selected countries.

Narratives	Average	Georgia	Iraq	Nigeria	Türkiye
Assistance is necessary	45.94%	48.39%	41.86%	81.40%	12.12%
Forced return is not fair	26.67%	16.13%	27.91%	23.26%	39.39%
Return is beneficial for the country	23.41%	35.48%	25.58%	32.56%	0.00%
The government is responsible	21.54%	19.35%	18.60%	20.93%	27.27%
Return is difficult	21.34%	25.81%	23.26%	30.23%	6.06%
Forced return is fair	13.99%	16.13%	6.98%	11.63%	21.21%
Returnees are numbers	12.88%	16.13%	2.33%	20.93%	12.12%
Migration is dangerous	10.69%	3.23%	9.30%	30.23%	0.00%
Return is desirable for returnees	10.55%	16.13%	4.65%	9.30%	12.12%
The nation extends to diaspora	7.78%	3.23%	23.26%	4.65%	0.00%
Return is not acceptable	6.85%	6.45%	13.95%	6.98%	0.00%



Assistance is not enough	6.67%	9.68%	2.33%	11.63%	3.03%
The context impacts return	6.49%	9.68%	13.95%	2.33%	0.00%
Returns create issues locally	3.89%	3.23%	9.30%	0.00%	3.03%

Overall, we observe that Nigeria, Iraq and Georgia have similar trends in terms of dominant narratives, while in Türkiye, two of the overall dominant narratives ('return is beneficial' and 'return is difficult') are absent or quasi-absent. These are the two narratives most shared by returnees themselves. Moreover, the common dominant narratives have a different angle in Türkiye, especially the narrative 'forced return is not fair': while it has a human perspective in Georgia, Iraq and Nigeria, it is legally oriented in Türkiye with a focus on political negotiations or human rights. The assistance narrative, although being categorised as dominant in Türkiye, is much less represented compared to other countries. In addition, three other narratives are dominant in Türkiye: 'forced return is fair'; 'returnees are numbers' (also dominance in Nigeria) and 'return is desirable for returnees'.

While the other countries share trends and most dominant narratives, we also observe specificities. **In Georgia, we observe common characteristic with Türkiye:** the narratives 'forced return is fair' (dominant in Türkiye), 'returnees are number' (dominant in Nigeria and Türkiye), and 'return is desirable for returnees' (also dominant in Türkiye), while not being dominant in Georgia, are just below the threshold and could have been considered dominant with another calculation. On the contrary, Iraq has almost no representation of the narrative 'returnees are numbers' (dominant or quasi-dominant in the other countries). Instead, it shed light to a specific dominant narrative 'the nation extends to the diaspora' which is representative of the specific context of the Kurdish minority, associated with a strong diasporic identity and imaginary. Nigeria has a strong overrepresentation of 'assistance is necessary' (81.40% - it is the only narrative represented in more than 50% of a corpus). Nigeria also has two other dominant narratives: 'returnees are numbers' (also dominant or quasi-dominant in Türkiye and Georgia) and 'migration is dangerous'. They reflect the presence of the crisis discourse in Nigeria (see below), over-represented compared to other countries.

In order to reflect these trends, seven narratives were selected from the mapping and analysed in regard to policy stance and policy opportunities. They were selected based on: the category they belong to; their reflection of returnees' voice; their characteristic as dominant in at least one country; and their relevance for policies.

1. FOCUS ON THE SEVEN NARRATIVES MOST RELEVANT TO POLICY

1. Assistance Narrative

Assistance is necessary: this narrative is dominant in Georgia, Iraq and Nigeria and quasi-absent from Türkiye. Across countries, we found a strong correlation between the assistance narrative and the references to policies, especially policies of assisted voluntary return. The corpus analysis also sheds light on the overrepresentation of references to trafficking (Georgia, Nigeria) and irregular migration in all countries. Documents saying that assistance is necessary rarely refer to returnees' stories or quotes, illustrating the disconnect between returnees and policies - with the exception of Nigeria, where IOs and donors mobilise returnees' story to prevent migration. The discourse associated with assistance depends on the objectives and type of assistance - but is always intertwined with policies.



2. Legitimacy Narrative

Forced return is not fair: dominant in Iraq, Nigeria and Türkiye, this narrative is majoritarily conveyed by documents that refer to returnees' stories or quotes in all three countries with focus on the harm associated with deportations, but also on the (il)legitimacy of it. In Nigeria, this narrative is intertwined with social norms that present migration as part of the education and/or as a right. In Türkiye, legal content is over-represented, including discussions on deportations as human rights violations. There is little mention of assistance across the countries and most policies mentioned only refer to forced return policies. This narrative confirms the gap between policies and returnees: it emerges from returnees themselves and only speaks of a certain type of policies.

3. Impact Narrative

Return is beneficial for the country: this narrative, also overrepresented among documents that convey returnee's stories and/or voices, and dominant in Georgia, Iraq and Nigeria, has a human and social as well as an economic dimension. It connects returnees to the country and its socio-economic context contrary to other narratives. While policies and assistance are underrepresented in this narrative, it can be a bridging narrative. In Georgia, it is represented across types of documents and of content, which may signify its presence in multiple circles of society.

4. National Responsibility Narrative

The government is responsible: dominant in all four countries, this narrative holds the governments of return accountable for reintegration services but also for return policies that should be improved. While policies are overrepresented, the perception can be positive, mixed or negative. Returnees' stories and voices are quasi absent from documents with this narrative in Iraq and Türkiye which is confirming the disconnect between policy-making and returnees. However they are strongly overrepresented in Nigeria. This narrative can help reconnect returnees and policy-making, especially as it bridges different types of documents, authors, and contents in all countries, reflecting its importance across different parts of society.

5. Experience Narrative

Return is difficult: this narrative, which focuses on the challenges and risks returnees face, can connect returnees' voices with policy and assistance. In the three countries where it is dominant (Georgia, Iraq and Nigeria), it is overrepresented in documents that have stories and quotes from returnees. In addition, there are signs of intertextuality with assistance in terms of the vocabulary used, which is confirmed in Nigeria as most documents with this narrative also speak of assistance and policies. When policies are mentioned, their perception is increasingly negative compared to other narratives, which may be indicative that accounts of return's hardship increase critics towards policies.

6. Dehumanisation Narrative

Returnees are numbers: this narrative is dominant in Nigeria and Türkiye and is characterised by a dehumanisation of the discussion on return policies, with the absence of returnees' stories and a vocabulary that focuses on numbers and legal aspects. The word returnee is quasi-absent to absent in these documents. On the contrary, policies are overrepresented, whether assisted return policies (Nigeria, where they are perceived positively) or forced return policies (Türkiye, where policy stance is mixed). There is a complete disconnection between the human and policy level associated with this narrative.



7. Transnationalism Narrative

The nation extends to diaspora: this narrative is dominant in Iraq, especially in sources that refer to Kurdistan and the Kurdish diaspora. It reflects the situation of the Kurdish diaspora as a minority that had to develop transnational relationships, and indeed the vocabulary associated with this narrative focuses on identity and belonging, and refers to diasporic imaginaries. Policy discussions are quasi-absent from documents with this narrative, but so are returnees' stories and voices: the narrative focuses on the group / nation level, and neither on the individual nor on the policy level.

Most of these narratives illustrate the disconnect between returnees and policies. Narratives that have a high representation of policies, do not refer to returnees' stories and quotes; on the contrary, two out of the three narratives overrepresented in documents that refer to returnees' stories and quotes, do not speak of policies – and if they do so, are negative towards them. The only narrative that reconciles the individual and policy perspectives is the narrative 'return is difficult'. However, beyond this, narratives that come from returnees themselves can create bridges and opportunities for policy makers to build more inclusive return policies.

Table 4. Summary table of the disconnect between returnees and policies per narrative.

Narrative	Mention of Returnees' Stories	Mention of Policies	Policy Stance
Assistance is necessary	No, except in Nigeria	Yes	Positive
Forced return is not fair	Yes	Rarely	Negative
Return is beneficial	Yes	No	NA
The government is responsible	No, except in Nigeria	Yes	Mixed
Return is difficult	Yes	Yes	Mixed to negative
Returnees are number	No	Yes	Mixed to positive
Nation extends to the diaspora	No	No	NA

3. FROM NARRATIVES TO DISCOURSES

While narratives are already indicative of the correlation between the way returnees are spoken of and/or included in public discussion; and the way policies are developed and perceived; it is essential to zoom out of the narratives and look at how they interact with their environment to create discourses.

Discourses allow us to analyse how socially constructed meanings impact policies. Research on discourses show that they structure social understanding and are a full part of policy-making processes. Dominant discourses on migration in EU countries, categorised as the crisis discourse, xenophobic discourse, solidarity discourse and victim discourse⁴¹, influence both policy-making and social behaviours based on the acceptance or rejection of migrants. They also influence narratives in non-EU countries: the crisis discourse and solidarity discourse in particular are mirrored in the different corpuses – in turn shaping policies and behaviours in these countries, as we will show below. Thus, discourses impact migration as a process and an experience⁴²: because they influence aspirations and interactions before, during and after the journey; and because they shape migration management policies including forced and assisted return policies.

⁴¹ Bayerl et al. (2020), Migration to the EU. A Review of Narratives and Approaches.

⁴² van Dijk, T.A. (2018). Discourse and Migration. In: Zapata-Barrero, R., Yalaz, E. (eds) Qualitative Research in European Migration Studies. IMISCOE Research Series. Springer, Cham.



It is essential to understand discursive dynamics to better understand policy-making processes and identify alternatives, as alternative discourses, too, can have an impact in policies.⁴³

Discourses are defined as the social practice of our language structures, embedding ideas, knowledge and meaning associated with the world – including biases – into daily life.⁴⁴ Analysing discourses requires to look not only at the text, but also at the context of production and dissemination⁴⁵ to identify what Van Hulst et al identify as the textual, contextual and sociological levels.⁴⁶ By analysing the context of production of the narratives in our corpus, their use of words and positionality, we were able to map discourses that reflect meanings associated with narratives (textual level), authors and type of documents (sociological level) and places / time (contextual level).

For instance, in Nigeria, the assistance narrative has a different meaning if it is carried by policy makers and NGOs or by individuals. In the first case, it corresponds to a humanitarian discourse which focuses on assistance and can dehumanise returnees; while in the second case, it is part of a solidarity discourse that recognises their voices, experiences, and challenges. In another example, the co-presence in many texts of the narrative ‘the nation extends to the diaspora’ and ‘return is beneficial’, and the similarity in the type of sources and countries, facilitated the identification of a common discourse (development-transnational discourse) that sees returnees – and diasporas – as a positive opportunity for a country’s development.

Based on this analysis, we identified eight (8) discourses that cover all narratives. The table below maps the discourses identified and their characteristics in terms of authors, countries, and narratives.

Table 5. Summary table of the discourses identified in countries of return.

Discourse	Characteristic of the discourse (meaning and usage)	Most mentioned by	Most mentioned in	Associated narratives
Humanitarian discourse	Focuses on assistance; mainstreamed in NGO and policy-makers discourses.	Policymakers NGOs / UN Media	Overrepresentation in Nigeria Presence in Iraq and Georgia	Assistance narrative
Solidarity discourse	Focuses on the suffering/ experience of returnees. This discourse is mobilised to advocate for more support to returnees through assistance.	Individuals Media Activists	Nigeria, Iraq and Georgia	Assistance narrative Experience narrative
Right-oriented discourse	Focuses on the injustice and violations associated with policies, especially forced return and readmission that deny returnee’s agency. Leads to advocacy to support returnees’ rights.	Individuals Media Activists	Overrepresentation in Türkiye Presence in Iraq and Nigeria	Legitimacy narrative

⁴³ van Hulst, M., Metze, T., Dewulf, A., de Vries, J., van Bommel S., & van Ostaijen, M. (2024), Discourse, framing and narrative: three ways of doing critical, interpretive policy analysis, *Critical Policy Studies*

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Muldering, J. et al., (2019), Introducing critical policy discourse analysis.

⁴⁶ van Hulst, M., Metze, T., Dewulf, A., de Vries, J., van Bommel S., & van Ostaijen, M. (2024), Discourse, framing and narrative: three ways of doing critical, interpretive policy analysis, *Critical Policy Studies*



Development-transnational discourse	Sees the diaspora and returnees as skilled nationals with capacities and desire to contribute to national development. It focuses on returnees' agency and includes diasporic imaginary of return.	Alternative media Individuals Researchers Activists Policy-makers	All countries Overrepresented in Iraq	Impact narrative Legitimacy narrative Transnational narrative
Governmental accountability discourse	Focuses on what the government does and does not in terms of RRR policies and development in general, impacting the attractiveness of return.	Policy-makers Media Individuals Activists Researchers	All countries Overrepresented in Türkiye and Georgia	National responsibility narrative Assistance narrative
Dissuasion discourse	Focuses on the harm of migration and return to dissuade irregular migration.	Media Policy-makers	Nigeria	Experience narrative
Crisis discourse	Represents migrants as numbers and/or criminals in Europe. Returnees' agency is not considered.	Media Policy makers Individuals	Türkiye, Nigeria and Georgia	Dehumanisation narrative Legitimacy narrative
Exclusion-differentiation discourse	Differentiates returnees from the rest of the society; the experience abroad is used by this discourse and leads to exclusion (shame and/or value clash).	Individuals; limited representation in mainstream media (Nigeria)	Iraq and Nigeria	Legitimacy narrative Impact narrative

This process enables us to propose a new categorisation of discourses from the non-EU lens. The comparison allows us to see areas of commonality – the crisis discourse and the solidarity discourse are both present – and areas where the return setting perspective allows us to expand and better understand the experience of return, readmissions and reintegration policies.

It no longer becomes just a matter of xenophobia, for instance, but more broadly and more dangerously about exclusion and differentiation, and about dissuasion, which are carried from the European setting to the origin setting.

Similarly, beyond a victim discourse, the analysis points us to a willingness to shift the understanding towards a more right-oriented, a development-transnational discourse, and a government accountability discourse.

Lastly, the analysis recognises a more prominent place to the humanitarian discourse as a standalone discourse that is predominantly part of the non-EU country setting realities, mainstreamed across NGO and policy discourses, and that needs to also better integrate returnee voices. Together, these eight discourses provide more room for a conversation on returns that is as much about accountability, exchange, inclusion and agency.

11. DISCOURSE AND POLICIES: SILENCING RETURNEES



Discourses are forms of expression that can circulate throughout society consistently⁴⁷ and be publicly accessible. Foucault and Bourdieu established that discourses determine authority relations. In the case of return and readmissions, the power authority is clear between states, institutions, and individuals. Critical discourse analysis, the methodology used for this paper, aims to understand these power relations by analysing what discourses are given importance, which ones are left unsaid, and which are silenced.

This chapter discusses the silencing of returnees in discourse and policy based on the analysis above. Authors have argued that silencing happens based on “social and political judgements of what is acceptable and unacceptable”⁴⁸. This justifies the importance of looking at discourses that dominate, but also what is left out of discourses as silencing also relates to relationships of authority and power. The findings about ‘silencing’ in this analysis push us to reflect on the use of government authority through return policies, without providing space and voices to the more violent or uneasy aspects. Understanding returns as part of a silencing process can help develop more realistic expectations for return policies.

1. SILENCING AND DEHUMANISATION OF RETURNEES IN POLICY DOCUMENTS

The analysis of policy documents and discourses in Table 5 in Georgia, Iraq, Nigeria and Türkiye confirms the disconnect between returnees and policies and demonstrates a quasi-systematic silencing, and further, dehumanisation of returnees. This dehumanisation happens by (1) excluding returnees from policy-making processes, instead centred around European agendas; and (2) focusing on numbers over returnees’ agency. Among 26 policy documents analysed across countries, only 4 referred to the story and/or quote of one or several returnees: return policies ignore returnees, signifying that policymaking processes are influenced by discourses that reject migrants, leading to top-down processes and to the silencing people of concern. Additionally, policy documents stem from processes that reduce returnees to numbers, illustrated by the dominance of a crisis discourse in Georgia, Nigeria and Türkiye - potentially influenced by migration discourses in EU+ countries. This is reflected in policies that focus on the intergovernmental perspective over the human experience, ultimately denying people’s agencies instead of working with it.

1. THE PROCESS OF DEHUMANISATION IN POLICY-MAKING NEEDS TO BE CONTEXTUALISED

In Iraq, an over-politicisation of policy discussions limits the negotiation spaces to the federal government and the EU. Policies are quasi-excluded from the public debate despite affecting the lives of people directly, increasing the disconnect and ultimately exclusion of returnees from policy-making. It drastically reduces returnees’ access to information, support, and even more so to participation in policy-making. This is added to the fact that support is already limited, by the lack of capacities of the government to support returnees, and by the narrow definition of who is considered a returnee in a context of multiple layers of internal and international displacement. The result of this disconnect between policies, capacities and definitions on the one hand; and returnees on the other hand, is a barrier to the adequate reintegration of returnees and contributes to their invisibilisation - while at the same time, returnees are facing challenges including dealing with the trauma they experienced during migration as well as stigma from local

⁴⁷ Thiesmeyer, L. (2003), *Discourse and Silencing: Representation and the Language of Displacement*.

⁴⁸ Ibid



communities. Instead of responding to these specific challenges, return policies are designed based on political agendas that do not consider returnees.

"It's really a bit of a sensitive and political issue. So they don't discuss it that much in the media or inside the government as well, because the government, up to now, they don't have that much capacity to support returnees." (Key Informant, Iraq)

The silencing and dehumanisation process is similar in Türkiye with the focus on political negotiations between Türkiye and the EU. Contrary to Iraq, these negotiations are discussed in public spheres: 8 out of 20 multimedia documents analysed speak about one of several specific policies. However, they are exclusively focusing on the policy level, at the expense of returnees. Out of the 17 documents that refer to one or several policies in our corpus (all types of documents, not only multimedia), none of them relay returnees' voices. Additionally, in all the documents analysed, not one uses the word 'returnee'. This demonstrates the invisibilisation of returnees, impacted by the narrow definition of returnees too as the term mostly defines third country returnees in Türkiye. When returnees are included in policies, it is to be instrumentalised in political negotiations – by both the EU who agrees to start a 'visa liberalisation dialogue' in the exchange of the readmission agreement; and by Türkiye when the government threatens to open their border to pressure the EU. This instrumentalisation is a step further in the dehumanisation of returnees and migrants, treated as pawns for political interest.

In Nigeria, this silencing process occurs both at the levels of policy-makers and of communities. At the community level, returnees disappear behind the stigma associated with migration and return: returnees are perceived as carrying illnesses and, in the case of women, as having engaged in sex work abroad. This leads to their exclusion that further heightens their needs for protection and support. In parallel, policies are often inadequate to the needs of returnees. With the focus on preventing irregular migration, returnees tend to be invisibilised and/or used as part of the dissuasion discourse. As a result, policies tend to depersonalise returnees: indeed, in the corpus, documents that mention policies show an over-representation of the crisis discourse (narrative 'returnees are numbers'). Because of this dehumanisation, policies fall short of considering and responding to returnees' specific needs and fighting stigma. As a result, most reintegration assistance focuses on livelihoods, but does not take into account the psychosocial needs of returnees – a barrier to their sustainable reintegration.

In order to rehumanise the conversation, policy-makers can leverage discourses that are alternative to the crisis discourse and present opportunities to reconnect returnees, policies, and policy-making processes. In particular, policies that align with and build on the solidarity discourse and the development-transnational discourse can help humanise the conversation at several levels. First, the corpus analysis indicates that these discourses are most represented among returnees themselves: instead of ignoring or depersonalising returnees, this would help bring returnees in the conversation. Second, these discourses focus on the experience of migration (including trafficking), return – including of the policies and legal frameworks of return –, and diasporic identity. Returnees' experiences are thus made visible. Finally, these discourses present opportunities for policy-making as they focus on response: the solidarity discourse highlights the different needs of returnees, and the development-transnational discourse highlights the potential of returnees and of the diaspora that can be built on for sustainable reintegration programmes. Thus, putting returnees and their experiences at the centre of the conversation, far from preventing efficient policy, comes with opportunities for more sustainable return policies that are built on the strength of returnees.



2. DISCOURSE AND SILENCING OF RETURNEES AS A FORM OF OPPRESSION

As Thiesmeyer (2003) discusses, silencing is not only a physically coercive act. It is also an act of language involving forms of selection, representation and compliance.⁴⁹ This can be applied to the return context where return systems and discursive systems both filter and represent. Yet, there are also continued resistance and counter-discourses to help shifts in silencing practices within different contexts, which we will discuss in this section.

In the context of return migration, there is a self-imposed silence within the societal discourse on returns, which is influenced by a dynamic relationship surrounding language and silence on returns. This phenomenon manifests differently across the different targeted countries. In Iraq, the discourse of return is characterised as 'chaos' due to competing, incoherent, and often biased narratives. In addition, traditional media outlets often ignore returnees' voices, contributing to their difficulty in being heard. In Georgia, also returnees struggle to be heard; however, recent efforts from government counterparts on this front must be signed. As stated by a key informant:

"Returnees cannot really influence these discourses and representations because these discourses are phrased by other people, not returnees. It is needed that returnees tell their stories" (Key Informant, Georgia)

Key informants have also stated there is a growing awareness within the Georgian government to seek public opinion, including of returnees, on return and reintegration programs, but this effort is still in its early stages. As one interviewee shared, "in the past two or three years, I am hearing more and more about the government asking people [opinions] (...) there was this thematic inquiry from the parliament (...) I was surprised that the parliament wanted to know people's opinions on their concerns related to reintegration programs." Despite these efforts, the same key informant confirmed that several diaspora organisations contacted to participate in this inquiry have not responded – only three diaspora organisations out of 18 have replied. In terms of FGDs, several participants in Georgia revealed that migrants themselves, particularly through social networks, create a significant narrative around the act of migrating rather than returning.

1. ASSISTANCE CONTRIBUTES TO THE SILENCING OF RETURNEES

Our data showed an inverse relationship between support and visibility, whereby assistance, instead of supporting returnees' reintegration, often contributes to their further silencing. Data gathered in Iraq through FGDs has demonstrated a negative relationship between (1) the characterisation of decisions to return (i.e., whether return is voluntary or forced), (2) the assistance provided by the country of origin or EU Member States upon return (i.e., host countries), and (3) the effective presence of returnees in public discourse and media. Specifically, returnees that come back as part of forced or assisted programmes, often empty-handed, suffer negative perception and exclusion that is correlated with their need for assistance. This contributed to their silencing and lack of influence over public discourse and media, while on the contrary, spontaneously returning migrants often come back with influence whereby they are visible in the public sphere, but do not seek assistance. Assistance contributes to the negative portrayal of returnees in need and contributes to their exclusion, which coupled with insufficient support create substantial barriers to reintegration.

Simultaneously, returnees' social exclusion limit their access to assistance. In Nigeria, there is a complex relationship between returnees' will to remain anonymous, due to social stigmatisation,

⁴⁹ Thiesmeyer, L. (2003), *Discourse and Silencing: Representation and the Language of Displacement*.



and the adoption of a 'returnee identity' among individuals who chose to migrate so that they can access assistance and, more broadly, public services. As stated by several returnees in Nigeria, social stigma often pushes them to avoid going back to their place of origin or receiving assistance due to the fear of being judged by the community. Negative narratives and representations significantly impact returnees' return and reintegration processes, leading to silencing and often exclusion, as demonstrated by a key informant:

"If you want to return them [returnees] to their home they will say no, they will rather choose another place where they are not known because many things have been associated with returnees" (Key Informant, Nigeria)

Despite the social stigma, some migrants in Nigeria decide to return deliberately. Several returnees stated that this decision is influenced by the assistance received by other returnees, which enabled them to start successful businesses, and reintegrate, despite discrimination. In contrast, in Benin City, Nigeria, several thousands of migrants experienced forced return. Shaidrova (2022) describes how returnees perform the so-called 'returnee identity' for donors, researchers, and media channels to enable them to (1) access opportunities unavailable to non-returnees and (2) regain respect in the community by achieving a certain social status in the community.⁵⁰ In the above-mentioned example, the concept of 'returnee identity' has evolved to a counter-discourse.

This returnee identity also strengthens the dissuasion discourses that instrumentalises returnees for political goals. According to Shaidrova, returnees in Benin City participate in EU-funded reintegration programmes, where they publicly share experiences on the risks of irregular migration.⁵¹ These interventions often lead to an instrumentalisation of returnees by international actors to curb irregular migration, by positioning returnees as 'ambassadors of regular migration.'⁵²

The migration and development narrative is also characterised by the persistence of Eurocentric colonial perspectives. This portrayal overlooks the challenges faced by countries of origin and perpetuates the idea that the social and cultural capital acquired in Europe is universally applicable. Migrants often internalise this dominant discourse by viewing their home countries as underdeveloped.⁵³ Subsequently, while listening to returnees' experiences can help policymakers grasp the conditions of return better, their accounts do not always reflect an 'objective' reality. As previously stated, returnees' images of themselves may reflect the imagery presented in policy texts.⁵⁴ It is essential to re-center the discussion on return policies around countries of return, stepping away from this euro-centric perspective, in order to better design policies – including assistance – that do not silence returnees.

Various research, including Samuel Hall's,⁵⁵ has revealed that **returnees often face precarious post-return conditions as well as stigmatisation⁵⁶ and exclusion in their local communities.** Focusing on Nigeria, Amanda Bisong (2022)⁵⁷ established four aspects that characterise the precarious and vulnerable situations in which returnees find themselves in: (1) challenges of housing, (2) stigmatisation by the local community and a sense of shame among returnees leading

⁵⁰ Mariia Shaidrova (2022), Performing a 'Returnee' in Benin City, Nigeria.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² The argument of returnees as 'ambassadors of regular migration' was mentioned by several key informants in Nigeria.

⁵³ Sinatti, G. (2013), Return migration as a win-win-win scenario? Visions of return among Senegalese migrants, the state of origin and receiving countries.

⁵⁴ Åkesson, L. and Baaz, M. (2015), Africa's return migrants The new developers?

⁵⁵ Samuel Hall and IOM (2022). Health & Reintegration – Returning to Space but Not to Time: A Life Course Approach to Migrants' Health, Continuity of Care and Impact on Reintegration Outcomes.

⁵⁶ Schuster, L. and Majidi, N. (2014), Deportation Stigma and Re-migration.

⁵⁷ Bisong, A. (2022). Return, Precarity and Vulnerability in West Africa: Evidence from Nigeria. In: Teye, J.K. (eds) Migration in West Africa. IMISCOE Research Series. Springer, Cham.



to barriers to employment, (3) exclusion from social networks and community life, and lastly, (4) financial challenges and, in particular, the inability to repay debts that were taken to fund the migration trajectories. Assistance must better tackle these challenges and take distance from biased assumptions related to a euro-centric view of reintegration, that lead to programmes that invisibilise returnees further.

2. RETURNEE VOICES ARE QUASI-ABSENT FROM DOCUMENTS THAT SPEAK OF ASSISTANCE AND POLICIES

The corpus analysis showed that sources discussing returnee-related policies and assistance lack references to individual experiences. Returnee voices are rarely featured in documents that speak of policies and, when present, they are primarily present in sources that are critical of policies; on the contrary, documents that feature returnees' stories rarely address policies.

This creates a distinct dichotomy between stance on returnees and stance on policies: returnees focus on their experiences, portraying a positive image of returnees, however, they criticise the existent policies. In Georgia, the small sample of seven sources indicate that where returnees' voices are present, they focus on their experience (e.g., return is difficult) and human value and skills (e.g., return is beneficial for the country of return). In addition, they speak more about irregular and forced return. In Iraq, returnees' stories are mostly present in multimedia, and they focus on individual stories and characteristics, by using returnees' names, family relationships, or nationality to designate them. They mostly portray return as not being fair, but also portray return as creating local issues, as being difficult, and yet beneficial. In Nigeria, the 19 documents analysed present a positive perspective on returnees, emphasise the unfairness of forced return and, when it comes to voluntary return, the benefits it has to the country of return, despite the challenges related to reintegration. Additionally, these sources hold the government accountable regarding its responsibility to provide adapted policies for returnees. In Türkiye, out of ten sources with returnees' stories, six have direct quotes from returnees and offer a positive perspective on returnees. There is, however, a strong emphasis on the unfairness of forced return (mentioned in seven sources). The ten sources include images; however, only two of them have a positive connotation in return, while seven portray a negative perspective, and one is neutral. All context thus indicates that returnees and documents presenting a positive image of returnees focus on experience and are critical towards existing policies.

In some contexts, this disconnect is also reflected in public discourse. Data from interviews and focus group discussions conducted in Georgia demonstrates that media channels mostly cover negative stories related to return and reintegration. One of the examples provided by national media channels was a Georgian family that migrated to Austria to receive health services that were unavailable in Georgia; they were deported back to Georgia after a bilateral meeting between Georgian and Austrian government representatives, where the first confirmed the health services were available in Georgia.

Nevertheless, in Georgia as well as in Türkiye and Iraq, the media contributes to silencing returnees. Media coverage focuses on migration, instead of return, and often ignores public discourses.

“The media does not even talk about it [return]. It is always in a negative context that people are leaving, and it does not look like someone arrives back, starts a family, has his/her profession and is fine. There should be more active coverage [on this]” (Returnee, Georgia)

While the discourse on return of Turkish nationals is almost non-existent as discussed previously in this paper, it does not mean that there are no issues concerning the reintegration of Turkish



returnees into society. They are experiencing challenges in their everyday interactions in their communities as they are easily recognised as returnees and stigmatised as people with higher standards of living due to their alleged income made in Europe. Secondly, returnees are worried that their reintegration issues are not even a topic in the eyes of public institutions. They believe that the state, in particular, should focus on these issues and help with their reintegration. Since the state is absent, their reintegration typically happens through informal circles of friends and family, or community organisations of returnees.

Overall, the qualitative data and the corpus analysis reveal a clear gap between returnees' experiences and their materialisation in policies related to return, readmission, and reintegration, resulting in policies that frequently fail to capture this human strand and a disconnect between policies and real-world experiences.

12. OPPORTUNITIES FOR GOVERNMENTS: BRIDGING NARRATIVES AND WAY FORWARD

While existing policies are mostly aligned with discourses that silence and dehumanise returnees as presented above, our research indicates that it is possible to do differently. Discourses that emerge from countries of return - not centred around European perspectives and agendas - and that are shared by returnees themselves, can help identify new ways forward. Two specific discourses emerge that offer another perspective on policies: return is beneficial for the country (transnational-development discourse) and the government of the return country is responsible for returnees (government accountability discourse). These narratives:

1. **Focus on the perspectives of the country of return:** instead of looking at the legitimacy of migration and/or of return, they look at the concrete impact and ways to leverage return's benefits while responding to the needs and challenges of returnees. They step away from the focus on Europe.
2. **Better include returnees' experiences and voices;** this is particularly true for the narrative 'return is beneficial for the country'. They contribute to reconnecting returnees and policies.
3. **Are bridging,** meaning that they are represented across countries, type of documents (multimedia, policy, administrative, legal), and sources (alternative/mainstream); and speak about different types of assistance and policies. This is indicative that they can be found in multiple spaces and spheres in countries of return.

Return is beneficial for the country is one of the two dominant narratives among documents with returnees' stories or voices. Indeed, this narrative shares a positive stance on returnees that say: returnees come back with skills and experiences, and can contribute to social and economic development. There is a focus on what returnees can and want to do, from the perspective of the country and community of return. The narrative is often associated with the transnational narrative and present cases of diasporic return (non-assisted voluntary return) whereby returnees come back spontaneously with a desire to contribute to the homeland. This is the case in Iraq but also in Georgia and Nigeria despite the transnational narrative being quasi-absent. For example, in Georgia, interviews highlighted that the desire to contribute and bring skills learned abroad can be a decisive factor for returnees - there is a generational difference, however, with older generations carrying this narrative more than the youth. The narrative 'return is beneficial



for the country' is thus a narrative that focuses on returnees' agency and positive role for the country.

While this narrative comes from returnees, it is also bridging and mobilised by policymakers for whom it provides positive opportunities. It is represented in 25% to 35% of sources in Georgia, Iraq and Nigeria and covers all types of source, including policy, administrative and legal documents. Assisted return policies are slightly under-represented in documents with this narrative, however, as the focus is more on reintegration policies as well as national development policies that can encourage return. In Nigeria, for instance, the national policy on migration builds on this positive narrative and outlines a strategy to attract and mobilise the skills of Nigerian returnees.⁵⁸ This narrative opens the way to policies that focus on national development and invests in returnees' skills, including through participatory design of public reforms and private sector's mobilisation – rather than considering streamlined assistance that doesn't cater to the multiplicity of returnees' profiles and aspirations.

The government is responsible for returnees as it holds governments of return countries accountable for their policies, including migration management policies and agreements with other countries; governmental assistance (or lack thereof) to returnees; or development strategies that facilitate or hinder return. In Nigeria and Georgia, this narrative is well represented among returnees' themselves. In Georgia, it is associated with a critique of the economic situation of the country that pushes returnees keen to reintegrate to re-migrate. The lack of the government's social policies to support its people is at the centre of this narrative. In Nigeria, however, the picture is more complex, as these documents acknowledge the federal and state governments' collaborative efforts and contribution to return and reintegration assistance. However, in social interactions, returnees are more critical towards existing policies and political dynamics. In Iraq and Türkiye, this narrative is less associated with returnees' stories and voices (not at all in Türkiye), illustrating the bigger disconnect between returnees and political discussions.

This narrative, as the first one, is available in all countries and across documents' type and content. This bridging characteristic, added to the constructive message in terms of policy-making, indicates an opportunity to build policies that take into account the perspective of different groups in the population – from policy makers to local communities to people of concern. It invites national governments to position themselves as a key interlocutor in migration management discussions, and bring to the table their need for more adapted return policies, governmental assistance, and development. This narrative is a strategic level for policy making, but policy-making needs to go beyond the narrative and respond to the needs of people of concern.

1. POLICY STANCES

The Perception of Policies Depends on the Type of Policies and on the Perception of Returnees

Policy stances

The perception of return, reintegration and readmission in general in the corpus, here referred to policy stances, depend on the type of policies, the context and the perception of returnees. The analysis finds an inverse relationship between the perception of policies and the perception of returnees (the negative perception of one goes with the positive perception of the other). Documents with a positive policy stance on policies, dominantly focus on policies that assist return and ignore deportation. While documents with a negative stance on policies, refer more

⁵⁸ Federal Republic of Nigeria (2020), National policy on Labour migration.



to forced return and represent returnees more frequently. In addition, the context impacts policy stance, as indicated in the table below: in Iraq and Georgia, very few sources speak of policies, and those who do are tend to have a positive stance on returnees and return – pointing to the disconnect between return policies and public discourse. This section zooms in on the factors that interact with policy stance across countries.

Table 6. Policy stances on return, reintegration and readmission in the different corpuses.

Policy Stance	Georgia (31 sources)	Iraq (43 sources)	Nigeria (43 sources)	Türkiye (33 sources)
NA	16	29	0	0
Positive	14	9	26	12
Negative	0	0	9	18
Mixed	1	4	7	1
Neutral	0	1	1	2

1. POSITIVE STANCE ON POLICIES GOES WITH POSITIVE STANCE ON ASSISTANCE

Several characteristics interact with policy stance across countries: (1) the type of policies mentioned; (2) the dominant narratives; and (3) the type of documents and sources, including the inclusion of returnees’ stories.

Documents that have a positive stance on policies, speak of policies that assist return and ignore deportation. More specifically, they speak about assisted voluntary return policies; counter-trafficking policies; and assistance, especially from IOM and the government. The corpus analysis indicated an intertextuality between assistance and policies in all countries except Türkiye, intertextuality characterised by the presence of policy semantics in documents with assistance narrative, and of assistance semantics in policy documents; and by the systematic co-presence of variables related to assistance and policies in the corpus. However, this differs in Türkiye where documents with a positive policy stance cover all types of policy, which aligns with the fact that the corpus – and discourses – focus on forced return. The association between assistance and positive policy stance should thus be nuanced, especially as assistance can be criticised in the country of return: in Georgia, our qualitative data collection indicated a growing perception of return assistance as unfair, given the challenges faced by the local community.

Indeed, a positive stance on policies is associated with a positive stance on assistance. This is illustrated in the corpus by the overrepresentation of the narrative ‘assistance is necessary’. In Nigeria, the case study with the largest representation of positive policy stance (60% of documents), this narrative is present in over 80% of sources in total. The same narrative is present in the majority of documents with a positive policy stance in Georgia and Iraq. There is also an overrepresentation of mentions of trafficking, highlighting the needs for assistance, in documents with a positive policy stance in Georgia, Iraq and Nigeria. Similarly, in Nigeria, the positive perception of policies and assistance goes with the heightened awareness of the vulnerabilities that migrants face, confirmed by focus group discussions participants:

“If people cannot come back after being caught in another country, they will be more vulnerable and in more danger, so I think return is important”
(Focus Group Participant, Nigeria)

In Georgia, Iraq and Nigeria, a positive policy stance is thus mostly associated with the humanitarian discourse (narrative ‘assistance is necessary’). In Georgia it also goes with the



governmental accountability discourse. In Türkiye, however, the main discourses with a positive policy stance are the developmental-transnational discourse and the crisis discourse. This comes with the fact that sources in Türkiye rarely speak of assistance and instead, discuss (positively or negatively) the legitimacy of forced return. The role of discourse in policy stance thus needs to be contextualised.

In addition to their references to assistance, documents with a positive stance on policies also share characteristics in terms of the context of production. Indeed, these documents come from official sources and are mostly policy, administrative or legal documents themselves in the four countries of focus. A few mainstream multimedia documents, especially in Nigeria, also have a positive stance of policies. On the contrary, they do not include returnees' stories and/or voices and rather focus on numbers. While this illustrates that returnees rarely speak of policies or assistance in countries like Iraq, it is also indicative of the fact that policies and sources that support them, tend to ignore returnees and give more place to numbers than to human stories, voices, and returnees' agencies.

2. NEGATIVE STANCE ON POLICIES MAKE SPACE FOR RETURNEES' VOICES AND HOLD GOVERNMENTS ACCOUNTABLE

Documents with a negative policy stance - found only in Nigeria and Türkiye - share characteristics on the same aspects, namely (1) the type of policies they speak of; (2) the sources, especially the inclusion and perception of returnees; and (3) the discourses they are associated with. Contrary to documents with a positive policy stance, negative ones speak more about forced return and represent returnees better.

Indeed, **there is a link between a negative policy stance and a focus on forced return policies** over other types of policies in the corpus. In Türkiye, all documents with a negative policy stance speak about forced return. In Nigeria, all types of policies are mentioned but forced return policies are overrepresented compared to the rest of the corpus. This may signify that forced return policies are overall negatively perceived, while assisted return policies are better perceived - although they are not spoken about by the same sources.

Negative policy stances are also correlated with the presence of returnees' stories and voices, and the positive representation of returnees. Documents that are critical of policies better include returnees as humans, recognising their stories as worth being told: all sources with negative policy stance share returnees' stories in Nigeria, and all sources that share returnees' stories in Türkiye have a negative policy stance. These documents mostly come from alternative sources, including social movements, social interactions, and some multimedia sources, confirming that mainstream discourses supporting policies on the one hand, oppose alternative, returnees-led discourses that call for more adapted policies on the other hand. The latter also share a positive image of returnees, highlighting the opposition between the opinion on policy and the opinion on people.

Finally, and in line with constructive criticism against current policies, there is a correlation between negative policy stance and government accountability in return countries. Indeed, the most represented narratives in documents with negative policy stance are 'the government [of the country of return] is responsible for returnees' and 'return is difficult' in Nigeria; and 'forced return is not fair' in Türkiye. Beyond the corpus analysis, the government accountability discourse is overrepresented in the qualitative interviews when speaking about the limits of current policies. In Georgia, for instance, government assistance is criticised for its bureaucracy, inaccessibility and inadaptability: the assistance is time-bounded (provided for those who have been abroad irregularly for more than a year and provided within a year upon the return), limited to irregular



migrants, and not adapted to their skills (business grants while many returnees are computer-illiterate). Holding the government accountable also means identifying opportunities. In Nigeria, while returnees and documents highlight the needs for better policies, the collaborative efforts of the government and strong presence of civil society organisations can be leveraged to build more adapted support, including economic and psychosocial support.

Aligned with the key factors influencing policy stance, namely narratives, type of policies referred to, and presence of returnees' stories and voices, we can identify trends in the relationship between discourses and policy stance - presented in the table below. These trends need to be contextualised: for instance, the development-transnational discourse is rather positive in Türkiye - where it doesn't come from returnees - while being neutral or negative in Iraq and Nigeria where it is dominant among returnees. The only discourse where the presence of returnees' story (and their positive representation) is aligned with a positive policy stance, is the dissuasion discourse for which returnees' stories are often mobilised (or instrumentalised) to prevent irregular migration.

Table 6. Summary table of the, the table below illustrates the relationship between discourses and policy stance.

Discourse	Refers to assistance	Refers to forced return	Refers to returnees' stories	Policy stance
Humanitarian discourse	Yes	No	No	Positive
Solidarity discourse	Yes	Rarely	Yes	Mixed-Negative
Injustice discourse	No	Yes	Yes	Negative
Development-transnational discourse	No	Rarely	Yes	Neutral-mixed
Governmental accountability discourse	Yes	No	Rarely	Mixed-Negative
Dissuasion discourse	Yes	Yes	Yes	Positive
Crisis discourse	Yes	Yes	No	Positive
Exclusion-differentiation discourse	No	No	No	Mixed-Negative

Overall, the analysis of corpus documents highlights correlations between the policy stance and the type of document, policies mentioned, and discourses: mainstream documents that speak (positively) about assistance and assisted return, speak positively about policies, too; while alternative documents that speak mostly of forced return are negative about policies. Additionally, a key factor in policy stance is the presence of returnees' stories and quotes and the representation (positive or negative of returnees). Almost systematically, the presence of returnees' stories lead to a critical policy stance (or no mention of policies at all); on the contrary, documents with a positive stance on policies ignore returnees and share a negative image about them.

This analysis thus shows that existing policies are not only criticised by returnees, but also rely on the silencing and negative representation of returnees. Indeed, we demonstrated that policies are built on a dehumanisation of returnees and their exclusion from policy discussions. This leads to a key question which the next section focuses on: **how can discourses help move away from policies dependent on the negative representations and silencing on returnees, towards policies and policymaking processes that take into account both policy-makers' agendas and returnees' agency?**



13. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS MORE INCLUSIVE RETURN POLICIES

Alternative discourses can help to identify new ways forward centred around the needs of returnees and of the country of return. Specifically, returnees and community members highlight the needs to improve existing policies through (1) more social policies to respond to the needs of returnees; (2) better information to break the disconnect between returnees and policies; and (3) inclusive policy-making practices.

Our research found that **policies are often not adapted to returnees' needs, which not only creates situations of extreme exclusion and poverty, but is also inefficient in terms of migration management:** it can push to the re-migration of returnees who wished to reintegrate; and it reduces the attractiveness of voluntary return. It is essential for countries to invest in returnees, ensuring that their needs are met and that they have opportunities aligned with their specific skills and aspirations. Current assistance does not do so: in Nigeria, for instance, fear of visibility (associated with social stigma) and inadequate assistance strategies fail to address survival needs of most exposed returnees. In parallel, while the government indicates a willingness to improve the support, there is a lack of adequate implementation and monitoring of governmental assistance. In Georgia, research participants indicate that governmental assistance is bureaucratic, limited in its scope, and difficult to access. Return and reintegration assistance needs to better respond to the complex needs of returnees, including in their operational strategies – and government coordination should be prioritised.

There is also a lack of or inadequate information about existing support and policies. While stakeholders use information tools in prevention programmes, they do not put the same means and strategies to ensure that returnees know their rights and assistance they can apply for. This is aligned with the disconnect highlighted in this paper between returnees and policies. In Iraq, out of 18 documents that include returnees' voices, only 4 mention available assistance; assistance is not evoked at all in social interactions. This indicated a lack of knowledge on the available assistance which is highlighted by research participants in Nigeria, too. Key informants point out that returnees from non-EU countries are often not aware of reintegration support, nor of the policies that govern reintegration – limiting their access. It is essential for stakeholders to develop information strategies to ensure that people of concern know what assistance and protection they are entitled to. More generally, communication between policy-makers and returnees needs to be improved so that returnees can be aware not only of the assistance, but of the overall policy and legal framework to their return and reintegration.

In order to design legitimate RRR policies that take into account the strength and agency of returnees, and to improve information and communication lines between policies and returnees, **the research points to a strategic necessity to include returnees in policy-making practices. Indeed, there is a need to reconcile policies and returnees' needs to avoid creating additional vulnerabilities or re-migration:** inclusive policy-making processes can bridge the gap between experience, reality, and policy and contribute to legitimacy. Furthermore, returnees carry constructive narratives which, if taken into account in policy-making, provide opportunities for improved migration management in the long run, with a focus on the country of return. **Policies built from returnees' voices and community discourses can contribute to sustainable approaches to return and reintegration support.** Indeed, the counter-discourses they carry shed light on the diverse motivations that lead to return migration, emphasise on the importance of recognising the agency and autonomy of migrants in shaping their migration decisions, and highlight the



structural constraints and systemic inequalities that influence their experiences. Therefore, they can help design policies that take into account the complexity of the motivation, experience and barriers that play a role in policies' efficiency. By going beyond Eurocentric perceptions and centring around individuals and communities, inclusive policy-making processes will be essential to building sustainable and legitimate solutions to RRR.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Maria de Barros, S. and Resende, V (2023), *Coloniality in Discourse Studies: A Radical Critique*.



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17. ANNEX 1. POLICY MAPPING

Table 7. Policy Mapping for Georgia, Iraq, Nigeria, and Türkiye.

Georgia			
Title	Actor	Year	Type
Visa Free Travel	European Union / Govt. of Georgia	2017	Visa Liberalisation
IOM's AVRR	IOM	2021	Assisted Return / Assisted Reintegration
Supporting Reintegration of the Returned Georgian Migrants Programme	State Commission on Migration Issues	2021	Assisted Reintegration
Migrant Return and Reintegration System Guidebook	European Union & IOM	2017	Assisted Return / Assisted Reintegration
Migration Profile of Georgia	State Commission on Migration Issues	2021	Assisted Return / Assisted Reintegration
Law of Georgia on Labour Migration	Legislative Herald of Georgia (Matsne)	2015	Labour Migration
IOM Georgia Strengthens Municipal Service Hubs Network to Support Returning Migrants	IOM	2024	Assisted Reintegration
Socioeconomic Stability for Georgian Labour Migrant Women	European Union, UNDP, Embassy of Sweden, WECF	2023	Assisted Reintegration
Reintegration Outcomes among Returnees in Georgia	IOM	2021	Assisted Reintegration
Migration Strategy of Georgia 2021-2030	State Commission on Migration Issues	2020	Assisted Return / Assisted Reintegration
Reintegration of Migrants after Return	Caritas	2022	Assisted Reintegration
Supporting the Business Ideas of Migrants Returning to Georgia in the Kakheti Area	IOM	2021	Assisted Reintegration
Reintegration Assistance after Return to Georgia	IOM	2012	Assisted Reintegration
Action Plan for 2021-2030 Migration Strategy of Georgia	State Commission on Migration Issues	2023	Assisted Return / Assisted Reintegration
Manual on Circular Migration Scheme	Policy Manual, Centre for International Migration and Development / GIZ, Anna Goos	2016	Visa Liberalisation / Visa or Citizenship Regulations
Iraq			
Title	Actor	Year	Type
Integrated Location Assessment 5 – An Overview of Return	IOM	2021	Assisted Return
Law No. (46) of 1963 – Iraqi Nationality-Date: 1963	Iraq National Authorities	1963	Visa or Citizenship Regulations
National Strategy for Migration Management in Iraq	Iraq National Authorities	2020	Visa or Citizenship Regulations
Diaspora Engagement Mapping: Iraq	European Union Global Diaspora Facility	2020	Assisted Return / Assisted Reintegration
Sustainable Reintegration in Iraq	European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN)	2021	Assisted Reintegration



Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration of Iraqi Nationals from selected European Countries	IOM	2010	Assisted Return / Assisted Reintegration
Iraq: UNHCR's Preliminary Repatriation and Reintegration Plan	UNHCR	2003	Assisted Return / Assisted Reintegration
Voluntary Return and Sustainable Reintegration in Iraq	German Federal Government	2021	Assisted Return / Assisted Reintegration
Engaging Return Migrants in Information Campaigns in Iraq: Challenges, Reintegration, and Prospects	ICMPD	2024	Assisted Reintegration
Nigeria			
Title	Actor	Year	Type
NAPTIP, ICMPD Unveil 'STEAP Project' to Tackle Human Trafficking in Nigeria	National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Person	2024	Visa or Citizenship Regulations
Edo, Swiss Govt, IOM, Others Partner To Tackle Unemployment, Irregular Migration	Edo State Government	2021	Visa or Citizenship Regulations
EU and IOM Provide Safe and Secure Transit Centre for Returned Nigerian Migrants in Lagos State	IOM Nigeria	2023	Assisted Return
National Policy on Labour Migration	Federal Government of Nigeria	2020	Labour Migration
Nigeria Refugee Commission Collaborates with IOM on Migration Management	Federal Commissioner	2022	Assisted Return / Assisted Reintegration
IOM Nigeria Partners with Google to Train Returnees in Digital Skills	IOM	2019	Assisted Reintegration
Conclusions of the Committee on Migrant Workers on Nigeria's First and Second Periodic Reports	OHCHR	2023	Labour Migration
CCCM, Shelter, and NFI Sector Call for Enhanced Support to Address the Urgent Needs of Displaced Populations in Northeast Nigeria	IOM	2023	Assisted Reintegration
New Project Aims to Scale Up Reintegration Assistance to Returnees in Nigeria	IOM	2019	Assisted Reintegration
IOM Nigeria Joins Authorities to Launch New "Blue Bus" Project to Fight Human Trafficking	IOM, NAPTIP	2021	Visa or Citizenship Regulations
Türkiye			
Title	Actor	Year	Type
Türkiye and the European Union have launched a dialogue on visa liberalisation and signed the Readmission Agreement	EU and Government of Türkiye	2013	Visa Liberalisation
Türkiye's Combat against Irregular Migration	EU and Government of Türkiye	-	Readmission
Press Release Regarding the Conclusions of the EU Justice and Home Affairs Council	EU and Government of Türkiye	2011	Visa Liberalisation
Agreement between the European Union and the Republic of Türkiye on the readmission of persons residing without authorisation	EU and Government of Türkiye	2013	Readmission



5682 Passport Law	Official Gazette	2015	Visa or Citizenship Regulations
Law 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection	Official Gazette	2013	Visa or Citizenship Regulations
EU-Türkiye Statement, 18 March 2016	EU / Türkiye Government	2016	Readmission
Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR)	IOM	-	Assisted Return
Circular by Prime Minister	Official Gazette	2014	Visa or Citizenship Regulations
Minutes (Grand National Assembly of Türkiye)	Grand National Assembly of Türkiye	2014	Readmission