

REPORT ON EMPIRICALLY
DERIVED QUALITY
CRITERIA FOR PROCESSES
OF IDENTIFICATION AND
TRAVEL DOCUMENTS AND
FOR MEASURING
COLLABORATIVENESS WITH
RETURN POLICIES

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Street-level perspectives on return cooperation and the use of quantitative performance indicators

Introduction

Enforced return, the process of illegalized migrants¹ being compelled to leave their country of residence due to the actions and presence of the state, by means of force, encouragement or persuasion, constitutes an extreme form of exclusion. Despite its widespread usage across the European Union (EU) and elsewhere, the European Commission has problematized the “effectiveness” of policy to achieve enforced returns for several decades now (Cleton & Leerkes 2025). The “effectiveness” of return policy is commonly measured in the so-called “return rate”: a performance indicator that signals the ratio between the number of persons ordered to leave EU territory and those who demonstrably returned (Stutz & Trauner 2022). As with other performance indicators, the return rate allows for the reduction of complexity and for information about organizational processes to be processed easily (Pollitt 2018). While statistical indicators have an intricate relationship to statecraft from the colonial era onwards (Cohn 1996, Scott 1998), New Public Management philosophies professionalized and further institutionalized this need for performance indicators in the Global North from the 1980s onwards (van Dooren et al. 2015). Public administration scholars critique these indicators for lacking accuracy, attempting to quantify what is not easily quantifiable and failing to capture front-line complexity (i.e., Bevan & Hood 2006, Durose 2009, Pollitt 2018). Scholars have extensively documented processes of “gaming” (Bevan & Hood 2006) in operational practice: strategic behavior or manipulations of performance measurement in ways that improve reported outcomes, without in fact improving the quality of the underlying policy, program or process. In their study on school rankings in the US, Espeland and Sauder (2016) for example find processes of “goal displacement” (Merton 1940): education programmes shifting attention from their original, substantive goals to the formal indicators, procedures, or targets intended to measure those goals. They show that as they seek to improve their score and position on rankings, staff involved argue that many of the “improvements” are purely cosmetic and strategic. While high rankings are interpreted by the outside world as “better performance”, these changes in fact say very little about the actual quality of education or student experiences. “Creaming” is another form of gaming, and refers to organizations selecting the easiest, or least costly cases in order to improve their performance (Bevan & Hood 2006). Smith and Lipsky (1993) argue that with the US government contracting social services to nonprofit organizations, the latter started to serve clients who are easiest to help and excluded more difficult cases. This approach maximized their success rates and made them comply with performance requirements, on which the survival of their organizations depended. These examples show that performance indicators are inherently political: they are contingent on the socio-political

¹ Throughout the report, we use the term ‘illegalized’ to highlight the institutional and political processes that render certain immigrants as ‘illegal’, and hence “removable”.



context in which they are set up and include deliberate choices on how to measure whether a policy or program is performing well (Jasanoff 2004, Stone 1988).

Despite these reservations, indicators answer to the call for evidence-based policy, as they allow policy makers to make decisions based on clear, quantitative performance outcomes (Stone 1988, van Dooren et al. 2015). The same is true for the return rate: high rates are interpreted as desirable, while low return rates are seen as problematic and a justification for policy intervention (Cleton & Leerkes 2025, Stutz & Trauner 2022, see also Stone 1988). To a large extent, low return rates are perceived as being the result of an apparent unwillingness on the part of Global South states to “cooperate” on enforced return, by identifying their citizens and delivering the substitute travel documents necessary to effectuate their removal (ibid.). Migrants whose identity and nationality are unknown cannot be issued the necessary documents on which enforced return to another state depends (Ellermann 2010). Van der Leun (2003, 108) therefore aptly notes that “unidentifiable migrants are constitutionally rather invulnerable to expulsion”. The 2015 EU Action Plan on Return (European Commission 2015, 14) for example detailed that

the EU and its Member States need to agree on and adhere to a clear message to countries of origin and transit of irregular migrants about the necessity to cooperate on readmission. The issue of readmission needs to be prioritised and addressed in all relevant contacts at the political level between the EU and third countries with low return rates, as well as in contacts between the Member States and these countries.

As a result, Kefale et al. (2025) describe that the field of return policy is characterized by a “power switch” in international cooperation. While Global North countries often dominate diplomatic and economic interactions, their ability to enforce returns is dependent on policies and decision-making in Global South countries. This shift grants the latter substantial leverage in enforced return cooperation and beyond (see El Qadim 2014; 2018).

An important tool for the EU and its member states to attempt to bring about “cooperation” are readmission agreements and arrangements (Cassarino 2010, Yıldız 2020, see Carrera 2016 for the difference). These consist of appointments between at least two states and outline how they will cooperate on identifying nationals, issuing substitute travel documents, and arranging for their physical return. But despite the widespread usage of these frameworks, evidence suggests that their effects are not straightforward. Analyses by Stutz and Trauner (2022), Maliepaard et al. (2022), Janmyr (2016) and Torres Chedraui et al. (2025) found little to no effects of EU-wide and bilateral cooperation frameworks on return rates. While these findings raise important questions about the effectiveness of readmission agreements as such, we believe that they equally raise questions about relying on the return rate as a performance indicator for interstate cooperation. Existing accounts in the literature signal processes of “gaming” (Bevan & Hood 2006) that deliberately deflate the return rate (Waerp 2025), or qualify the return rate as a “statistical chimera” (Scheel 2025) altogether. Indeed, processes of goal displacement (Merton 1940) can be equally at play in the field of return, since actors on the ground know that they are measured against the number of returns that have demonstrably taken place. This, in turn, might lead them to put their operational efforts into boosting what is measured: the number of returns that have effectively taken place. While this might lead to a higher rate, this does not automatically improve the quality or functioning of return policy as such: neither when it comes to the diligence of return procedures or human rights related safeguards, nor to improving overall relationships with embassies and consulates. Similarly, operators of return policy might put most of their efforts into returning illegalized migrants who have “a higher chance” of being accepted



by their countries of citizenship, and not putting as much effort into others (see also Borrelli et al. 2025). Stutz and Trauner (2022) argue that the return rate reduces complexity (Durose 2009) as the observed number in fact depends on a variety of factors: EU return cooperation, but also the decision-making of illegalized migrants, constraints posed by international law, calculation methods and data reliability. Even with a readmission agreement or other arrangements in place, the return rate can thus be low, and vice versa.

We build upon these insights and hold that the return rate obscures the complexity of interstate cooperation (including its embeddedness in wider diplomatic relations) and, following Power (1997), predominantly creates a symbolic appearance of control (see also Boswell 2015 on asylum targets). Power (ibid.) argues that indicators are often used in (policy) domains where uncertainty and ambiguity are highest: where causality is unclear, outcomes are influenced by multiple factors, success is brought about collectively, and professional judgement and discretion are essential. These criteria, we argue, perfectly apply to interstate return cooperation as well. Instead of pleading for better European return statistics (see Singleton 2016) or proposing new indicators, we aim to bring back complexity in the debate on interstate return cooperation. Our approach builds on two crucial premises. First, we shift view from the politics of negotiating readmission agreements (Roig & Huddleston 2007, Wolff 2014, Cassarino 2014, Stutz 2025) towards the policy implementation stage. It is at the implementation level that collaboration does not only need to be brought about, but also where the practical significance of readmission arrangements and agreements are felt. We ask *how* “street level bureaucrats” (Lipsky 1980) and “street-level diplomats” (Ostrand & Statham 2021) involved in the implementation of return policy *understand* (non-)collaboration on return. What criteria do they use to assess this? And how do they consequently attempt to *bring about* collaboration on return? Second, we hold that both the return rate as an indicator, as well as the literature on return and readmission cooperation is Eurocentric (see also El Qadim 2014, Mouthaan 2019, Cham & Adam 2025, Zanker 2025, Kefale et al. 2025). As enforced return always involves at least two countries, disregarding the perspectives of Global South countries represents a significant barrier to better understanding interstate cooperation and by extension, return outcomes (see also Niemann & Zaun 2023, Zardo & Loschi 2022). We therefore take a relational and interactionist perspective and centre *both* the work of street level bureaucrats and diplomats in the Global North and South. Following the logic of “deportation corridors” (Drotbohm & Hasselberg 2018), our report emphasizes the co-constitutive nature of enforced return practices. We do not only centre perspectives from both ends of the corridor, but in particular highlight the negotiations, resistance and adaptation that takes place in it. We thus question what collaboration on return actually *means* to different street-level officials in practice, how cooperation is contested and brought about, and what the necessary preconditions are to achieve it.

This report relies on 47 interviews collected as part of the ongoing Finding Agreement in Return (FAiR) project, which studies the “effectiveness” and legitimacy of EU’s return and readmission policies and alternatives to return. In the next section, we will first review the literature on enforced return and readmission cooperation, and argue for the need to switch view from their negotiations to their materialization in practice, and from either a Global North or South perspective² to a more dynamic one. Then, we outline our methodology, the data collected, and analytical strategy. We consequently

² In this report, we used the terms “Global North” and “Global South” as synonyms for countries that enforce the return of illegalized migrants, and countries that are requested to “readmit” them. For work that centres enforced return between Global South countries, see a.o. the GAPs project (www.https://www.returnmigration.eu/)



present our results and end with outlining our main conclusions and plea to reconceptualize what cooperation on return looks like, and how its performance is thus measured.

Literature review

In the vast interdisciplinary literature on enforced return and readmission, “cooperation” between countries in the Global North and Global South is subject to intense debate – especially when it concerns the consequences for the alleged “effectiveness” of return policy (Cassarino 2014, Carrera & Allsop 2017). Theoretically, there are two sets of explanations as to why cooperation between countries in the international realm, including on return, would take place (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004): the “external incentive model” and the “social learning perspective”.

The external incentive model, which Boswell (2003) regards as dominant for EU cooperation on migration at large, follows rational choice instrumentalism and starts from the assumption that countries in the Global South experience “costs” when they would allow for the enforced return of their citizens - both domestically and/or internationally. Scholars have pointed to the loss of remittances and other economic costs that return brings (Ellermann 2008, Cassarino 2010, Zanker et al. 2019), a lack of possibilities to provide support to returnees (Zanker et al. 2019) and tensions that this would bring with their relationship with diaspora in the Global North (Mouthaan 2019, Cham & Adam 2025). Because of these purported costs, governments in the Global North would need to offer sufficient “incentives” to offset these. These incentives can either be given in the form of rewards or punishments. The former include allowing for visa facilitation (Trauner & Kruse 2008, Cassarino 2010), engaging in trade agreements (Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik et al., 2023), increase development aid or training provided to immigration services (Roig & Huddleston 2007), or even the prospect of EU accession (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig 2013). This approach underlined the 2011 Global Approach to Migration and Mobility, which was seen as “an attempt to rebalance the EU’s offer to non-EU countries by emphasizing the incentives of potential cooperation” (Hampshire 2016, p. 579). It was further extended in the 2016 Partnership Framework and in several standalone agreements between states, under the header of “Mobility partnerships” (Reslow and Vink 2015, Tittel-Mosser 2018). In practice, to maintain good relationships with third countries, the EU has largely avoided negative incentives and focused on expanding rewards to obtain cooperation (Trauner & Kruse 2008). A notable exception in recent years has been so-called Article 25a of the Revised Visa Code (Nicolosi 2020), which allows the EU to sanction countries that were deemed “uncooperative” on readmission, by harshening visa regulations for their citizens (see also Zanker & Altrogge 2022). Much of this literature follows a realist understanding of “cooperation” and sees the latter as a process of policy coordination between different actors in order for them to realize their objectives (Keohane 1986). It implies a tactical alignment to chase mutual (relative) gains between two parties involved.

While this “external incentive model” follows a logic of instrumentality in bringing about cooperation, a second set of explanations follows a “logic of appropriateness” (March & Olsen 1989). Grounded in sociological institutionalism, the “social learning perspective” assumes that actors are impacted by norms, values, and socially acceptable behavior (Finnemore 1996, Hollifield 2012). Rather than offering external incentives that seek to “persuade” countries to cooperate, this model presumes that salient norms and values drive (non-)cooperation (see Stutz & Trauner 2022 for democracy as one such set of values). Such rule-guided behavior might be an unconscious but also a deliberate process, with actors



seeking to decipher a situation and applying appropriate norms that are in line with their given identities (March & Olsen 1989). Previous studies have noted how readmission cooperation and its domestic support is dependent on the perceived appropriateness of removal, especially in relation to concerns for returnees' rights and dignity (Cassarino 2010, Cham & Adam 2025, Majidi et al. 2025). Others foreground the legacy of colonialism in understanding how modern-day sovereignty between states materializes in (non-)collaboration on return (El Qadim 2018, Zanker & Altrogge 2022, Adam & Cham 2025). Zanker (2025) also highlights how the problematization of (especially irregular) migration in the Global North does not correspond with the necessity of migration for many citizens of West-African countries. With migration and mobility being seen as "a common part of everyday life" (ibid., 23), it is not salient nor politically questioned (see also Mouthaan 2019). While little research thus far has detailed how such normative conflicts tend to be resolved, previous research has documented ways in which European governments have attempted to make readmission arrangements more "appropriate" - either for the negotiating parties or their citizenries. Ways to achieve this include informalizing negotiations (Cassarino 2007), moving away from binding to non-binding agreements (Fernando-Gonzalo 2023) and allowing for a greater sense of flexibility (Cassarino 2010). Simultaneously, "return diplomacy" (Sahin-Mencutek et al. 2025, see also İçduygu and Aksel 2014) and liaison networks (El Qadim 2014, Ostrand & Statham 2021) are mobilized to reach common understanding on the alleged necessity of return, and in that way seek to enhance collaboration. This literature follows a more constructivist understanding of cooperation, highlighting the "communicative practice" (Risse 2000) through which states develop intersubjectively shared understandings rooted in norms, identities and expectations, which engender joint action.

These two theoretical models - the "external incentive model" and the "social learning perspective" - help us to understand the possible conditions under which cooperation on return and readmission takes place. In the report below, we do not *a priori* prescribe the one over the other, but are attentive to how both logics of instrumentality and appropriateness play out in the work of street level officials (see also Mouthaan 2019, Kefale et al. 2025). In our reading, the abovementioned studies are also in need of elaboration in two crucial directions. First, this body of literature has only recently acknowledged that it takes in fact "two to tango", as İçduygu and Aksel (2014) aptly noted already 15 years ago. While this insight spurred a growing body of literature on Global South perspectives and practices on return cooperation, as detailed above, a lot less attention to date has been given to investigating what the "tango" exactly looks like in practice. To our knowledge, only a recent study by Kefale et al. (2025) does so, by centering the norms, interests, and practices of both Ethiopia and Norway. They find that "norm conflict" explains the reluctance of Ethiopia to enhance cooperation on return with Norway: both follow international laws and vouch for migrants' rights, but implement these norms differently. However, the study presents these different norms, interests and practices in a statist manner, and does highlight whether - if at all - actors involved in return cooperation try to negotiate, influence and resist efforts to change the norms and interests that are detailed. In the report below, we will take such an "interactionist" and dynamic approach and investigate how actors involved attempt to "broker" (El Qadim 2018) cooperation on a daily basis. This, secondly, also implies that we take an actor-centered (El Qadim 2018, Mouthaan 2019) and a practice-oriented approach to international cooperation on return (see Côté-Boucher et al. 2014, Kustermans 2016 for the practice turn in IR). Studies into the practices of mid- and lower-level bureaucrats who are tasked with implementing return policy, and establishing cooperation in their everyday practice, are almost absent. The study by Leerkes et al. (2022) is a notable exception to this, as they distill four strategies through which Dutch and Norwegian "street level bureaucrats" seek to establish cooperation with Iranian, Iraqi and Afghan authorities. These include rule creation by referencing existing agreements, offering



reintegration assistance, producing goodwill through relationships and framing, and organizing return in unconventional manners. In the report below, we investigate how actors in both Global North and South countries understand and try to achieve cooperation on return, and how this corresponds to the aforementioned logics of “instrumentality” and “appropriateness”.

Cases, context and methods

Data for this report has been collected as part of the ongoing Finding Agreement in Return (FAiR) project, which investigates the “effectiveness” and legitimacy of return and alternative to return policies in the European Union and Switzerland. The work package on “international bureaucracies and redocumentation procedures” seeks to understand how practical cooperation on return between bureaucracies in Global North and South countries takes shape, with a particular emphasis on identification and travel document assurance. To do this, we follow a multiple-case study design (Stake 2013), in which multiple cases are studied contextually, in depth, and often comparatively, in order to aid theory-building and understand complex social phenomena. This research design fits well with the aforementioned notion of the deportation corridor (Drotbohm and Hasselberg 2018), which signals a relational, dynamic and asymmetrical transnational space in which deportations are negotiated, contested and brought about. The metaphor of the “corridor” denotes that return is a space of transition - physically, relationally and discursively - rather than a single, standalone event. Corridors therefore connect different people, events and actions across space and time, which matches well with our ambition to study cooperation on return from a relational and dynamic perspective.

We purposefully selected five country cases: Nigeria, Iraq, Türkiye, the Netherlands and Switzerland. Selection for the Global South countries has been informed by numerical significance in terms of return orders issued in the European Union and Switzerland, the existence of different readmission agreements and arrangements, expected “willingness” to implement these agreements based on Cassarino’s (2022) inventory, as well as different economic and political realities that these countries are facing. *Nigeria* plays a central role in the EU’s external migration policy. Nigeria was identified as a priority country under the EU’s Migration Partnership Framework in 2016, which aimed to enhance cooperation with countries of origin and transit on return, readmission, and reintegration efforts (European Commission 2016). Since then, the EU and Nigeria have maintained operational cooperation on return, but negotiations on a formal readmission agreement have remained inconclusive due to political and legal sensitivities (Majidi et al. 2025). Switzerland, on the other hand, has a formal readmission agreement with Nigeria, which has been operational since 2012. Domestically, outward migration is widely viewed as a coping mechanism for economic hardship (Zanker et al. 2019). This makes return, particularly in an enforced manner, socially and politically fraught. It results in returnees facing stigma and exclusion, as they are often perceived as having failed or bringing shame on their families (IOM & Samuel Hall 2023). *Iraq* similarly represents a significant partner for the EU when it comes to return cooperation. Interstate cooperation is formally governed by the 2018 “Partnership and Cooperation Agreement”, of which Article 105(e) details cooperation on “the return, under humane and dignified conditions, of persons residing illegally including the promotion of their voluntary return, and the readmission of such persons”. Despite this, Iraq is traditionally perceived in European policy circles as setting barriers towards the readmission of its nationals, leading to increased pressure and diplomatic efforts to resolve the situation in the past few years. This includes the European Commission recommending activating measures associated with the Revised Visa Code Article 25a. Simultaneously, several EU countries have concluded bilateral arrangements with Iraq in



the last years, but these often remain from public view.³ Switzerland too signed a “migration cooperation agreement” with Iraq in 2024, including provisions for operational collaboration on readmission (ECRE 2024). Domestically, the return of Iraqis from Europe is a relatively less salient topic than the return of communities of internally displaced people following the emergence of ISIS across Iraq. Nevertheless, policy actors take a principled stance against forced returns, highlighting the humanitarian and economic costs borne on Iraqi society (Rietig & Walter-Franke 2023). Finally, the significance of cooperation on return and readmission between the EU and *Türkiye* has increased in the past years, particularly as a result of an increase in Turkish citizens present in EU member states and Switzerland without a formal residency status. The legal basis for this cooperation is the 2014 EU-Türkiye Readmission Agreement. While this agreement legally obliges Türkiye to readmit its own nationals and, under certain conditions, third-country nationals and stateless persons who transited through its territory, Türkiye expresses reservations about implementing the provisions related to the latter as long as visa liberalization is not granted (Statewatch 2022). Following Eurostat data, 7910 Turkish nationals were returned from the EU in 2024, which makes them the second most returned nationality in the EU.⁴ Despite the increasing number of Turkish returnees from the EU to Türkiye, Turkish returnees – in particular those subjected to enforcer return measures – do not take space in public discourse in Turkey. Domestically, Turkish returnees are either understood as retired Turkish labour migrants, including former guest workers, or high-skilled migrants from younger generations. Our field research indeed showed that only a small group of activists, lawyers, or individuals who have directly experienced deportation themselves or within their network, were more aware of the enforced return of Turkish nationals (Majidi et al. 2025).

For the Global North countries, we selected two countries that fit what Leerkes and van Houte (2020) call “thick enforcement regimes”: countries that have a strong interest in enforcing return, and a relatively well-developed domestic and international infrastructure to actually enforce return orders. The latter includes bilateral and multilateral readmission agreements, as well as more informal arrangements being in place. This makes them salient cases to investigate how practical cooperation is brought about at the level of policy implementation. Our decision to include one EU and one non-EU country, moreover, also allows us to empirically study the significance of EU-wide incentives (whether positive or negative). Cassarino (2022) details that *Switzerland* has been at the forefront of concluding bilateral agreements with Global South countries, and links these to incentives such as visa facilitation and development aid. It has created a vast framework for readmission, which is believed to centre around “balanced cooperation” and less about pressuring Global South countries into “compliance” - something that was also confirmed in our empirical material. *The Netherlands* too has actively pursued an externalized approach to migration control at large and to return in particular, by concluding bilateral agreements and participating in EU-wide agreements. It positions these bilateral and multilateral partnerships as central to its migration governance strategy, and links readmission clauses to all bilateral engagements that it seeks to conclude. This also includes leveraging development aid, visa facilitation and capacity-building initiatives to secure cooperation (Cassarino 2022, Leerkes et al. 2022). Simultaneously, the Netherlands has actively supported EU-wide less-for-less measures, such as the aforementioned Article 25a of the Revised Visa Code (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken 2023). Both countries deploy vast diplomatic efforts, including the use of liaison

³ See <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/54089/a-thorn-in-the-governments-side-germanys-secret-deportation-deal-with-iraq> for this in the case of Germany and Iraq.

⁴ See https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Enforcement_of_immigration_legislation_statistics#Returns_of_third-country_nationals.



networks, to improve cooperation on return. Domestically, the return of illegalized migrants features high on both countries' political agendas: non-cooperation on return is heavily problematized and limited options for regularization exist. Switzerland provides for a minimum of *Nothilfe* for illegalized migrants, including health insurance, "return camps" and minimum financial assistance (Chimienti & Achermann 2007). In the Netherlands, however, access to shelters and a minimum of financial assistance is largely dependent on whether an illegalized migrants "cooperates" on return. The state actively marginalizes and limits access to social assistance for those who cannot or do not want to do so (Rosenberger & Koppes 2018).

Field research took place between February 2024 - May 2025 and received ethical approval from the Ethics Review Board of Erasmus University Rotterdam (decision number ETH2324-0063).⁵ Data collection was headed by four institutions and research teams: Samuel Hall (Lisa Pfister, Nassim Majidi and Abe Oluwafemi) in Nigeria, ICMPD (Alexis McLean and Christina Houry) in Iraq, Koç University (Müge Dalkıran and Pelin Kılınçarslan) in Türkiye, and Erasmus University Rotterdam (Laura Cleton) in the Netherlands and Switzerland. In Nigeria and Iraq, the research teams relied on the expertise of colleagues with the necessary country expertise and language skills. Across these five countries, the teams conducted 47 interviews with in total 64 street-level officials involved in the practical implementation of enforced return. Given the different institutional set-ups across these countries, interviewees held a wide-range of institutional positions and affiliations, including employees of ministries (often Interior or Foreign Affairs), immigration or return authorities at the national or regional level, EU delegations, embassy staff, liaison officers, police units, civil society organizations (CSOs), and international organizations. The vast majority of interviews took place on-site in Abuja (Nigeria), Baghdad (Iraq), Istanbul and Ankara (Türkiye), the Hague (Netherlands) and across a wide-range of localities in Switzerland as a result of its federal structure.

We leveraged access to our interviewees via the pre-existing networks of the involved institutions, researchers, and colleagues within the FAiR consortium. The consortium brings together researchers from academic, policy, and practitioner backgrounds. These varying affiliations shaped how research access was negotiated and how the project was perceived in different contexts. As has been detailed by others (Kalir et al. 2019), acquiring access posed logistical and bureaucratic challenges across all countries. We started outreach early, up to one year prior to the interviews, as we expected that time would be needed to navigate formal protocols. This turned out to be the case for all countries involved, and included sending official letters to obtain (ministerial) approval, giving general presentations about FAiR's objectives, and having multiple (online) follow-up meetings to clarify research aims and the interview scope. These meetings were helpful in fostering understanding and ensuring that key officials would participate in data collection. Similarly, we made sure to discuss ethics and anonymity well with our participants prior to the interviews. All participants were informed about the aims, scope, and voluntary nature of the research and the FAiR project in general, and gave their consent via signed informed consent forms. Participants were assured of full confidentiality and were offered the option to withdraw at any point. The vast majority of our participants indeed requested anonymity and nondisclosure of (institutional) affiliations. Despite these efforts, some interview requests made were ignored or declined, often citing the necessity to "avoid any risk of undermining good diplomatic collaboration". On three occasions, organizations in the Netherlands and Switzerland declined to speak with us but agreed to answer questions in writing. In Nigeria, Türkiye and Iraq, interviews were sometimes declined, cancelled, rescheduled or moved to an online environment because of last-

⁵ Koç University submitted an additional ethics application specific to the Türkiye fieldwork. This received approval from Koç University's Ethics Committee for Social Sciences (decision number 2024.025.IRB3.008).



minute changes in availability. We discussed issues of access and researcher positionality during our joint meetings, particularly in relation to institutional sensitivities and power asymmetries.

The majority of the interviews were recorded and verbatim transcribed. If permission to record the interview was not granted, we made extensive notes during the interviews and later transformed these to field reports. For data analysis, we adopted an iterative and interpretive approach to identify recurring themes across the interviews (Boyatzis 1998). Each partner conducted a close reading of transcripts to identify patterns relevant to the research questions. Analysis was conducted first within country teams and then collaboratively across the teams, allowing for cross-case comparison and reflection. During joint analytical debrief sessions, we discussed emerging insights, shared observations, and refined our interpretations. This dialogical process enabled us to trace both commonalities and divergences across contexts, paying particular attention to the relational dynamics of return cooperation, the meanings given to cooperation in practice, and strategies on how to acquire it. We will share the outcomes in the next section.

Findings: how collaboration is understood and practiced

In our conversations with street-level officials across Nigeria, Iraq, Türkiye, the Netherlands and Switzerland, it became clear that they approached the topic of (non-)collaboration in a different way than the discussion on the return rate outlined in the introduction to this report would lead us to believe. Indeed, across the different countries, our interviewees spoke about practical cooperation on enforced return in an overall positive yet pragmatic manner, with different rationales being used to assess what collaboration in practice means, and strategies put forward to achieve it. Below, we will first detail how our interviewees understood and evaluated (non-)collaboration on return in their daily work. Then, we discuss strategies that are mobilized to establish cooperation on return.

Making sense of cooperation at the frontline

From the interviews in Switzerland and the Netherlands it became clear that street-level workers are acutely aware of the aforementioned “power switch” in return (Kefale et al. 2025): they are not only dependent on the collaboration of illegalized migrants to disclose information about their identity (see also Cleton & Chauvin 2020) but also on the overall “goodwill” of embassies and consulates, as a Global North official detailed (see also Leerkes et al. 2022). Such “goodwill” is especially important for identification requests that they submit to embassies or in organized identification missions, as well as for requests for obtaining substitute travel documents: the stages of the enforced return procedure where collaboration is needed most (van der Leun 2003, Ellermann 2008). While “goodwill” is something that can be actively established at the level of policy implementation, as explained in the next section, interviewees in the Global North would readily acknowledge the limits of the “tools in their arsenal” and their “operational mandate”. Second, frontline staff highlighted that cooperation on return is intricately connected to wider bilateral relationships that they have with a particular country. Both the Netherlands and Switzerland have made efforts to “mainstream” (Scholten & van Breugel 2017) return in different policy fields - including development aid, “regular” migration management, foreign affairs, and trade. While this broad approach to return could help in bringing



about collaboration in practice, it also brought about limits. As one official mentioned, cooperation on enforced return then also becomes a question of

how important our diplomatic relationship with a country [is] to make repatriation an issue. For most countries, it is not significant enough to say you *must* cooperate. If we would do that, we would undermine our own diplomatic relationship, and there are very few countries where we'd be willing to put that on the line. But that is ultimately a political choice [emphasis in original].

This combination of *dependency on the readmitting country* and the *wider geopolitical constellation* impacting the work of these frontline officials ensured that they spoke about (non-)cooperation in a rather pragmatic manner. We will detail below what this looked like in more detail.

Making sense of cooperation on the “transnational frontline” often starts from potential bilateral or multilateral readmission agreements that are in place with a particular country of origin. Following the academic critiques on the effects of formal readmission arrangements (Carrera 2016, Maliepaard et al. 2022, Stutz & Trauner 2022, Torres Chedraui et al. 2025), interviewees were similarly ambivalent about their usefulness for their daily work. Officials working in Switzerland, the Netherlands and Türkiye regarded these agreements as a “starting point” that “formalizes and structures return cooperation”, as staff from a European embassy in Türkiye explained. Prior to the 2014 EU-Türkiye Readmission Agreement, some member states had already established a Memorandum of Understanding with Türkiye in order to outline return procedures and operational processes. “The formalized frameworks in these agreements enable and safeguard smoother cooperation, as they are grounded in pragmatic interests of both parties involved”, so the embassy staff member argued. For the case of Türkiye, this was seen as especially important as the political context at large, and at times particular societal developments directly impact the operational dimension of enforced return, disrupting processes for an undetermined period of time. A Global North official similarly described clear operational benefits, in their view, of having such a multilateral readmission agreement in place:

sometimes we don't receive any answers from an embassy or ministry on our requests for a long time. And then at some point when another JRC [Joint Return Committee] is scheduled, you suddenly get the answers. Which makes you think: why am I suddenly getting answers now? Because people have been identified... or because a JRC is coming, and because they want to boost their numbers? Which is fine, of course, we will work with that operationally. But we see processing times going down, and that is also what they want to show: that they are cooperating with returns, which also gives them a stronger position in the JRC.

This excerpt shows two potential effects of formal agreements on return outcomes. For the country enforcing return, the number of identified cases is going up, which means that the official can proceed with a previously adjourned procedure. But for the non-EU country in question, the operational arrangements that are part of said readmission agreement (in this case, the JRCs) allows them to signal that they are eager to cooperate on return. Indeed, while the literature tends to highlight that formal readmission agreements are unequivocally in the interest of EU countries (see i.e., Carrera 2016, Stutz & Trauner 2022), our research found that at the operational level, Global South officials also understand these as working “in their benefit”. This is especially true when it comes to safeguarding the rights of their citizens. A Nigerian official indicated that readmission frameworks spell out clear rules for the treatment of returnees, which helps to minimize risks of human rights violations in return processes. Similarly, a representative of a Global South embassy in the Netherlands argued that

the agreement serves the interests of the European Union, but in practice I believe it serves us much more because of the procedures involved. As I said, the person can always disappear in the time it takes us to check their documents if they do not want to return. They can go to Belgium, France, and then the



procedure has to start over. [...] The agreement stipulates that we have to accept readmission, so we are much more involved. We can always say no.

Officials across the Global North and South, however, spoke equally about the downsides of formal readmission agreements. Beyond non-ratification of agreements that have been negotiated, political and operational realities that they work with are often very different from the ones at the time an agreement has been established. This is impacted by broader geopolitical developments (i.e., wars having started, sanctions being imposed), regime change, tensions between Ministries of Interior (who are often in charge of return and population registries) and Foreign Affairs (embassies), and staff turnover, which all ensures that the practical utility of agreements can be diminished. To continuously try to formalize collaboration on readmission, then, one interviewee argued, would also “rob oneself of the flexibility necessary to adapt to the changes that define the broader geostrategic context”. They continued to explain that in some cases, negotiating a formal agreement can also be directly counterproductive:

there are contexts in which we are reluctant to engage in discussion about a return agreement because the actors with which we work in that specific country context would be expanded. [...] If we have a working returns relationship with the Ministry of the Interior, obviously going towards negotiating an international agreement would involve the participation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. And the Ministry of Foreign Affairs may have a blanket rejection of the idea of returns, as we have experienced in the past. So this lack of formalization allows us to achieve our objectives.

Similar concerns were raised in the Nigerian context, where both European delegations and Nigerian officials described formal agreements as “procedurally fragile” and “difficult to implement”. This links to the particular institutional set-up in Nigeria, where different agencies are involved in enforced return, leading none of them to take “ownership” of the topic. A Global North official working in Abuja confirmed this: “competition between agencies, a lack of trust and different mandates creates a lot of confusion on the ground”. This fragmentation becomes particularly problematic in cases that involve the return of victims of trafficking or individuals whose identity need to be cleared first, and cross-agency coordination is especially needed. The procedures outlined in formal agreements, in this specific constellation, “requires documentation to go around all the different ministries”, and lead to delays in the procedure.

Rather than an encompassing mold that shapes return cooperation at the frontline, these agreements thus provide a start at best, but sometimes do not make a difference for day-to-day cooperation, or potentially make it harder, as the situation in Nigeria detailed. Instead, our respondents argued that both technical infrastructure and everyday operational networks enabled through informal relationships are key for cooperation on return to take place. Technical infrastructure was highlighted in interviews with representatives from Türkiye and Nigeria - albeit in contrasting manners. The digitalization of the civil registry system in Türkiye was, according to our respondents, a fundamental prerequisite for cooperation on the identification of Turkish citizens, leading to a minimum of delays. In Nigeria, however, officials detailed that “we should have a well-established system of registration in place, including their face, their pictures, their fingerprints [...] However, this facility is still not in place”, which in practice led to operational difficulties. While IOM and EU-funded development projects in the country have introduced some biometric tools (see also Zanker et al. 2019), these remain project-based and disconnected from a shared national system. Interviewees in the Global North argued that relationships with Global South counterparts always need to be in place, but especially in the absence of digitized civil registries. When speaking with a government official about the identification missions that they organize together with Global South embassies and ministries, they explained that



Ultimately, in the absence of everything else, such as any other documentation or a centralized database, we are relying on the qualitative analysis of the identification delegation. Which obviously... given the fact that we are reliant on that analysis and the goodwill of the delegation to provide that analysis, it reinforces the importance of maintaining productive relations with said country and said members of the delegation.

Indeed, Global North officials were keen to stress the necessity of what they called “productive relationships” for operational collaboration on return. Interestingly, they framed return as a “collaborative venture” and these relationships as serving the multiple interests at play in return. One official spoke about the necessity of “being able to really put yourself in someone else’s shoes. That’s part of the job: it’s not just about pushing everything through from our perspective, but also considering [...] what’s in it for them and how they see the collaboration”. Similarly, their colleague described that they

believe it is important to consider all interests: those of our government, but also those of the foreign national and the authorities you are dealing with. Everyone has their own interests, so we often negotiate, and this means that you have to give and take. This process fully depends on how good your relationship is: if you have good contacts, you can take more, you have more leverage, and more room to maneuver.

Interviewees in Switzerland and the Netherlands thus repeatedly spoke of these three elements needing to be in place for good collaboration to happen: their interests and alignment with return policy goals, the interests of illegalized migrants and the interests of the foreign authorities.

Non-collaboration and the unpopularity of enforced return

In the interviews, street-level officials in Switzerland and the Netherlands spoke at length about suspected reasons for non-collaboration in their interactions with embassy staff and ministry personnel. They made sure to stress that across-the-board collaboration with embassies and ministries goes well, that observed non-collaboration is not always rooted in outright refusal, and that the situation depends very much from country to country, case to case, and from the particular consular or ministerial staff member to staff member.

On the country level, street level officials in the Global North reiterated that return “is of course not a popular topic” in many Global South countries, which in turn significantly impacts their work to implement return orders. When inquiring about their suspected reasons for this, interviewees noted a mix of instrumental and ideational reasons. On the instrumental side, they mentioned well-known economic interests at play (i.e., Leerkes et al. 2022, Ellermann 2008). While this often remains unspoken in exchanges between themselves and representatives in countries of origin, officials in the Netherlands and Switzerland explained that “impacts on the countries tax revenue” and “money sent back home by members of the diaspora” are important factors for countries whose gross domestic product (GDP) is largely dependent on these monetary flows. Operational difficulties, secondly, were also mentioned as suspected reasons for non-collaboration, including a lack of ministerial responsibility for return and resource limitations at embassies (staff or material). This was the case in Nigeria, whose aforementioned fragmented institutional landscape is characterized by limited follow-up to requests, a lack of centralized leadership, and unclear institutional responsibilities. A Global North official working in Abuja confirmed this: “You can write them. You can try to call them. They don’t take the phone. They don’t answer emails”. In practice, this often meant that return cooperation proceeded only when individuals took personal initiative. Similarly, Nigerian interviewees pointed to



the inherent logistical burden of deploying consular staff to conduct identification missions in various locations:

like I said, because of manpower. Every embassy manages its own resources, so maybe [...] it may not be possible for them to go to Frankfurt all the time, you go there maybe once or twice in a month, and then you go to Berlin... It takes a lot from the mission.

Capacity constraints in countries of origin, thirdly, including a lack of jobs and houses were also seen as important in some country contexts - especially volatile ones with ongoing conflict such as Iraq. Finally, security reasons were also mentioned, especially in relation to the return of illegalized migrants who are convicted of crimes in the EU. One official recalled that they dealt with one such cases in the past, originating from the Sahel region:

the regional security situation in the Sahel is of course already very fragile. The government of said country is priding itself on its speculated ability to provide security for the civilian population, that's where it's getting its legitimacy. And consequently, the background of this individual led to the unwillingness of the government to accept the return of essentially a convicted terrorist. That was definitely one of the main concerns: impact on domestic security.

This quote similarly shows the importance of ideational motivations for non-cooperation: this country, in the perspective of the official, felt the need to maintain its reputation as providers of security for its citizens. Being seen as serving the interests of one's citizens equally came up when discussing the relationship between embassies and diaspora. Interviewees in the Netherlands and Switzerland argued that embassies might be reluctant to collaborate on return, as this could lead to discussion and unrest among diaspora and in turn harm the embassies' relationship with them. An interviewed consul in the Global North equally mentioned that they do proactive outreach among their diaspora in so-called "citizen consultation meetings", to, amongst others, clarify their role in return. A second ideational motive lies in damages that the deportation of one's citizens can do to a country's international reputation. This came up in our interviews with officials working in Türkiye. Well before the EU-Türkiye Readmission Agreement, multiple forms of return cooperation between EU member states and Türkiye existed. With the EU-Türkiye Readmission Agreement being adopted, however, domestic backlash in Türkiye erupted, especially focusing on the use of charter flights. The latter make deportation especially visible since they can "catch the eye of reporters", so an official argued. Our interviews in the country made clear that officials are reluctant to cooperate in operations that involve charter flights, as they want to avoid creating the image of Türkiye as "a source of unwanted irregular migrants". Another ideational motive that street level officials mentioned was the conviction of some countries that they should not collaborate on the enforced return of illegalized migrants who have resided for a long time in the EU, simply because EU governments "do not have their act together". Along that same line, some Global North officers detailed that some countries, such as Iran, believe that their citizens should have the possibility to live anywhere in the world. This means that these countries automatically do not cooperate on the forced removal of their citizens. In such cases, establishing cooperation on forced removal is very difficult, especially if this conviction is laid down in legal documents: "try to negotiate against a constitution!", one street-level official exclaimed. One of their colleagues supplemented by explaining that "Iran has, of course, already been subjected to numerous sanctions, and there is not much more that can be done. Some countries are simply not susceptible to such measures."

On the case level, interviewees in the Global North indeed argued that it is not always clear to them why embassies, after being presented with a case file, do not recognize an illegalized migrant as their citizen. After a presentation took place, embassies staff would sometimes explain Global North officials



their reasons for not believing that the presented individual is one of their citizens, but on other occasions, they would not detail the “tricks of the trade”. Interviewees in Iraq and Nigeria explained that presented non-nationals sometimes provide deceitful answers in the identification process. They argued that these individuals might falsely seek to claim citizenship as this could lead them to be relocated to said country in order to fulfill personal migration strategies. This was detailed by our interviewees in particular for some West African returnees who favor relocating to Nigeria over their countries of origin, as well as “Chechens seeking (re)entry to Iraq”. Interviewees in the Global North explained that embassies would sometimes also identify and recognize illegalized migrants as their citizens, but subsequently refuse to issue substitute travel documents. Two case-specific situations repeatedly featured in the interviews in Switzerland and the Netherlands, related to health and criminal record. The first situation dealt with cases where illegalized migrants are dependent on medical care in Europe, for example in the situation of kidney dialysis or cancer treatment. Such situations, according to a Global North official, “can make things very complicated for an embassy, especially if their healthcare system is lacking behind ours”. In practice, this would ensure that return procedures were temporarily halted, and a “long trajectory to try to make return possible” would start - which we will further detail below. Under European data protection regulation rules, EU governments are not allowed to share privacy-sensitive information about health care or criminal proceedings with embassy staff. A Nigerian official highlights that especially the latter is important for Nigeria, because of its potentially destabilizing impact on communities to which the individual returns. They therefore called on Global North countries to open up criminal records as a matter of public safety:

there is a need for us to know the offense of people who have been convicted. So we have it on our own record as well. [...] If you don't know where they are coming from, it is going to affect the society at large.

While the Proposed New Common European System for Returns includes provisions that enable transfer of such information⁶, it is currently up to illegalized migrants themselves whether or not they declare such information to the embassy during a presentation. One Global North official reflected on this process and mentioned that

I sometimes say that it's a kind of game: the migrant who doesn't want to return to their country of origin knows very well what they should and shouldn't say [to the embassy], and what could make the difference between returning and staying. So if an embassy really wants information about criminal records, and we can't provide it to them, and the foreign national says they won't provide it either, then you're basically done, return does not happen. And that can be frustrating. But that's the law, it is what it is.

Other specific individual circumstances, like the existence of meaningful family ties in the country of residence, might also invoke case-by-case negotiations and potentially constitute a reason for non-cooperation on return. Invoking previous violations of the right to family life during return, Iraqi officials detailed during our interviews that returnees' family situation in their country of residence, in combination with their duration of stay, is consistently taken into consideration when processing readmission requests. Global North representatives in Iraq similarly mentioned being aware of this sensitivity and discussing it upfront with their partners in the responsible ministries. Finally, interviews with representatives from both the Global North and South made clear that sometimes, embassies

⁶ See Art 41 of COM(2025) 101 final. European Commission (2025). *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the Union, and repealing Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and the Council, Council Directive 2001/40/EC and Council Decision 2004/191/EC*. Brussels: European Commission.



want to be sure that “all legal remedies are exhausted” in the EU country, including asylum, family and labor visa. Only after confirmation would they then hand out a substitute travel document.

Finally, interviewees clarified that non-cooperation can also be dependent on individuals working within administrations - either at embassies or at ministries responsible for registration systems. In Nigeria, interviewees highlighted that the internal fragmentation and shared responsibility for return, as well as the absence of a functioning “standard operating procedure”, in practice ensures heavy dependence on “precedent and ad hoc fixes by individuals”. In Iraq, a series of recent institutional reforms have led to the emergence of a new coordinated structure for the treatment of readmission requests at the national level, attempting to counter such fragmentation. A “higher committee” has been set up to shape return-related policy and the operational treatment of readmission requests. This process ensures a clear division of roles between agencies and seeks to harmonize practices, notably by training consular staff in various EU member states on the new procedures and internal protocols, especially for identity verification. Still, interviewees in the Global North mention that there might be tensions at play within Global South governments on the necessity and acceptability of return. Swiss and Dutch officials primarily collaborate with embassies and consulates - which are “outposts” of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and need to represent the interests of their citizens abroad. In most countries, however, the Ministry of Interior is responsible for return, readmission and identity verification. Interviewees detailed that with the turnover of embassy staff, and in particular that of consuls, the embassy’s operational cooperation on readmission might also change 180 degrees in case “they do not subscribe to the importance of return for themselves and their citizenry abroad”. Staff turnover in general was often noted as a critical moment, when operational collaboration had to be re-negotiated again.

To sum up, “non-collaboration” on return is seldom straightforward and can take place at the country, case and individual level - and often happens intertwined. Some of the examples described above might suggest that it is clear for street-level officials in the Global North why collaboration (temporarily) halts. While this is indeed sometimes the case (think about the example of Iran), in practice it remains often unclear at first why a particular form of “non-collaboration” is observed. According to an official, this might be done deliberately:

Some countries will never say “we are not cooperating”, because that has consequences. So then you hear things like “we cannot find this person” or “the fingerprints are illegible,” these sorts of things. All kinds of other things are brought up to show that they are in fact willing to cooperate, but that they don't have enough information to actually identify the person. Or they say “We have forwarded it to the central authority and are waiting for a response”. They mention procedural obstacles.

Whether or not to interpret such situations as actual non-cooperation and consequently act upon it, however, is not straightforward. Another Global North officer mentioned that “every country has its own specialties that you learn through your work on individual cases”. Two months of silence for a country embassy that was within their area of expertise, in fact meant a “yes” and the start signal to book a return flight. If, however, the street level official interprets silence as potential non-cooperation, with potential important consequences for return procedures nationally, “it becomes a priority to figure out why a situation has stalled or became blocked and act upon it using the resources we have to rectify the situation”, one of their colleagues detailed. Below, we will outline how this “investigation” goes, and what strategies street level officials consequently mobilize to acquire or re-install collaboration.



Establishing collaboration on enforced return

As mentioned above, it is often not immediately clear to street level officials in the Global North why embassies or ministries are (temporarily) changing their approach to return - especially if cooperation would have worked well in the past. In such situations, after having discussed the situation with their colleagues, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and potentially a liaison officer stationed in the country, pre-established relationships with counterparts in the Global South are the first point into acquiring into the reasons for procedures to become stalled. Street level officials in Switzerland and the Netherlands would carefully maintain and craft relationships with consular staff, members of identification delegations, and ministerial personnel at all times. Part of maintaining these relationships dealt with providing information about their work as staff working on return and readmission, explaining what their organizational approach and philosophy is, and whom to contact in case they have any questions. Swiss and Dutch officials both mentioned to always invite a new consul to their office, and take the time to get to know them and inform them about their work. One official explained:

Our intention is to organize a consular reception once a year, to which we invite all our international contacts to thank them for their cooperation over the past year and express our appreciation. It is formal, but it is also informal. And they do the same for us, on national holidays, for example. But it can also be done on a smaller scale, for example by planning a lunch with an embassy representative and talking to them on a more informal level. Just to chat and get to know each other. We are quite good at talking about business right away, but in most cultures it doesn't work like that. You first have to build a relationship and gain trust, show that you are a reliable discussion partner, and only then can you do business.

Indeed, street-level officials mentioned that they consciously accept invitations for events that they receive from embassies and consulates: whether it means going to a music concert, taking part in a wine degustation, or joining an *iftar* at the consul's home with their family. This is seen as a way to "show interest" and tighten the relationship between themselves and the embassy personnel, both on a professional but also on a "human level". In the interviews, we often discussed the informal nature of these activities and arrangements - something that all interviewees were acutely aware of. They would often characterize it as being "between formal and informal" but always "professional" and "correct". Officials indeed assured us that "ultimately the relationships are very professional. It's not like we go and cold call the embassy whenever we happen to be around or something like that. That is not the nature of the situation".

Next to these "standalone events", street-level officials in the Global North also strove to maintain such close relationships during their operational work - both with embassies and ministries in the Global South. Their approach to this would differ significantly from country to country. Various officials in the Global North mentioned that at the moment they need to pass by the embassy, for whatever reason, they are always invited for coffee or tea and use that moment to chat with the consul, also "about their life here and their daughters problems at school". Our interviews with EU delegations in Türkiye for example made clear that maintaining such personal relationships is key in collaborating with Turkish bureaucracy on a daily basis, as interactions with authorities are often shaped by "informal social norms and cultural expectations". "Before asking anything to be done, you need to have tea or coffee with them [Turkish authorities] first", one of our interviewees explained. Despite this, cooperation with Turkish authorities was characterized overall as "hierarchical and centralized". This top-down approach, with the Presidency for Migration Management being at the centre, delayed procedures at times and caused a rigid operational culture. In this situation, personal relationships were deemed particularly important. A European officer indeed spoke about their strong working relationships with the national police in Ankara as "the real deal".



However, relying on personal rapport can also make cooperation fragile. A European officer working in Nigeria observed that Nigerian personnel at embassies “change all the time,” disrupting previously functional workflows. Especially in such cases of staff turnover or a (temporary) break in relationships, street-level officials in the Global North would attempt to establish direct working relationships at Ministries of Interior and Foreign Affairs in Global South countries. For this, they would always travel to said country and take the time to get to know one another by “drinking lots of tea, and eating a lot of cookies”: activities that are meant to show interest and ensure that their counterparts “know what they can count on you for”. Identification missions, where members of these ministries take part in, equally present opportunities to develop relationships. When a ministerial delegation is visiting the EU, government officials would be equally keen to “organize a formal dinner” or “take them out for a social event on the weekend”. The “exposure that you get to members of the immigration department during the various identification missions”, so an officer argued, ensures that they have “quite stable contacts with mid- to high-levels of the organizational hierarchy and unhindered access to their decision-making apparatus”. In our interviews in Nigeria too, it seemed that officials shared a preference for direct communication when dealing with readmission cases. Officials would argue that diplomatic communication, usually prevalent in intergovernmental discussions, are excessively burdensome and rigid to accommodate the short timeframes typically associated with readmission requests, particularly if the identification is difficult to organize or to conclude. To overcome this, interviewed officials equally sought to keep communication with European colleagues as simple as possible, for example through personal messaging. However, officials in the Global South were not always considered to be necessarily receptive to this shift, as they “prefer to do things the official way”.

Street level officials in the Global North would cautiously mobilize their relationships to find out why and at what stage of the process - identification, issuing substitute travel documents, or practicalities for travel - the process lagged. Subsequently, they attempt to mobilize “tools” in their arsenal to discuss the matter, attempt to resolve it and ensure that the return procedure continues. The ways in which they do so can be classified under the two logics described in our literature review: one that centres on “instrumentality” (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2004, Wunderlich 2012, Lavenex & Schimmelfennig 2013) and one that centres on “appropriateness” (Finnemore & Sikkink 1998, March & Olsen 1989, Risse, 2000). Similar to previous work (Mouthaan 2019, Kefale et al. 2025), we found that both logics were mobilized to acquire cooperation.

The logic of instrumentality presumes that return is costly for countries of origin, and hence, for them to lend their cooperation on it, they would want something “in return” (Boswell 2003, Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2004). This tit-for-tat logic characterizes some of the negotiations on the EU and bilateral level - with linking readmission agreements to visa facilitation, development aid, or trade agreements, also manifested at the level of policy implementation. During the interviews, there was a notable difference in discussing this “transactional approach” depending on whether Switzerland or the Netherlands had a “Migration Partnership” (Reslow 2012) in place or not. If this were not the case, options would be limited to providing trainings that fall within their mandate, including document training (to distinguish “genuine” from “false” ones), “hostmanship courses” that aim to “professionalize” immigration departments⁷, or provide for reintegration projects. One official explained that “of course they [embassies] know that we give these trainings in exchange for cooperation on return of their citizens”, but in case the responsible ministry would want to professionalize their immigration and customs staff, it is a possibility. Yet in the experience of two officials interviewed, these types of activities would often not be of interest enough to Global South

⁷ <https://www.dienstterugkeerenvertrek.nl/actueel/nieuws/2024/03/14/project-amif-cbr>



countries. Instead, the latter are perceived as more interested in development aid, economic projects, or agreements that help to increase “regular” migration in the domain of labour and study. Nigerian officials indeed advocated for the development of visa facilitation mechanisms or targeted recruitment programs for Nigerian workers with EU member states. Having a Mobility Partnership in place thus leads street-level officials in the Global North to have “more tools” at their disposal, as multiple partners (including Foreign Affairs) involved have a mandate to make decisions on these matters.

However, officials were somewhat critical of the effectiveness of this tit-for-tat logic, especially on the longer run. When discussing what exchanges on offering solutions to temporary blocks in return procedures look like, one street-level official explained:

People often go into these discussions with the assumption that one side needs to lose, or one side needs to come off better. And depending on the country that you're dealing with, it's quite clear that they enter into these negotiations with this mindset. [...] For me, it's important that the nature of return is framed as something collaborative and cooperative rather than a zero sum: the more you take, the more I lose, the more I give, the more you win, etc. If one does not recognize the importance of establishing that kind of playing field, then one can very easily get sucked into more transactional, character of return relations. There are certain states with whom this transactional nature has been pursued in order to gain some short-term benefit. But in the long term, in order to establish stable relations, this transactional approach to returns essentially needs to be abandoned in favor of one of transparency and mutual trust”.

While such an instrumental approach is thus utilized by street-level officials, the interviews made clear that most of them believe that return operations equally need to be seen as appropriate. A street-level officer explained that with some countries, this is easier than with others. They explained the case of a formerly colonized country in West Africa, which according to the officer “has an extremely strong sense of self and self-worth”. As a result of this history, they have “this need to be perceived as fulfilling their internationally expected role. So in that sense it's very easy to move away from this transactional and zero-sum interpretation of events. Because one thing that they're very keen to do is avoid generating a reputation for being uncooperative as a consequence of their self-perception more than anything else” (see also Zanker & Altrogge 2022). On occasions when this “refarming” of return as not zero-sum was less evident, street-level officers would emphasize the need for “transparency”, “trust-building” and “taking the other party seriously” as means to achieve this. One officer we spoke to and who is responsible for preparing embassy presentations also referenced the latter, when talking about their preparatory work. They emphasized the importance of “building a strong file” by “collecting facts”: facts that could point to the nationality of an illegalized migrant. “If you come to an embassy with half a file done”, so they explained, “will not bring you anything. If you present your case thoroughly, I think you can achieve a great deal. Because by doing this, they see that you are taking the situation and them seriously, and that you are a good counterpart that takes their perspective seriously”.

Indeed, taking representatives of Global South countries seriously meant, in this instance, to only present an illegalized migrant to the embassy if the street-level officials were sure that the person in question would be their national. But it also meant taking the wellbeing of their citizens seriously. In our interviews with governmental and non-governmental officials in Nigeria and Iraq, concerns for fundamental rights violations of their citizens in deportation procedures were referenced frequently. This includes concrete mentioning of cases of ill-treatment, dispossession, obstruction to effective remedy, questioning of the sincerity of “voluntary return” and suspected pressure applied to their citizens in signing up for the latter. Officers in the Global North were well aware of such sentiments and mentioned that the “dignity” of illegalized migrants was a core topic of concern: operationally and



in maintaining good relationships. In their view, cooperation on return serves to solve a difficult situation for “people who fall between the cracks”, who “never have the opportunity to legalize their stay, who always remain in that hopeless situation due to a lack of opportunities”, so an officer argued. Indeed, they mentioned that the “dignity” of illegalized migrants was a core topic of concern, both operationally and in maintaining good relationships. One official recalled having had a phone call once from a consul who had seen a video of a forced removal

that didn't go so well, with the use of body cuffs and you name it. And he said, ‘Oh, so this is what you do?’ So then I decide to pass by the embassy and explain that it's not a significant percentage of the number of returns we have, but that it does happen. A video like that can completely destroy a relationship, and then it easily takes a year to repair it.

Despite ongoing operational collaboration on enforced return, Nigerian and Iraqi officials took a principled stance against the employment of coercive methods towards their citizens. When discussing the use of body cuffs with police forces in the Netherlands and Switzerland, they too mentioned to be acutely aware of how their actions might impact the perceived appropriateness of return. They emphasized training their staff to act with “dignity” for illegalized migrants, and always minimize harm inflicted during removal operations. In Switzerland, one such police force detailed that especially upon disembarkation in countries of origin, they at times receive comments from immigration officers when the latter inquire about the return operation with their citizens. They cautiously try to minimize this, by not wearing uniforms, allowing deportees to disembark by themselves, and carry their belongings with them.

Another way of attempting to enhance the “appropriateness” of return links is by offering reintegration support and assistance, via the International Organization for Migration (IOM) or the FRONTEX-led reintegration assistance program EURP (European Reintegration Programme) (see also Leerkes et al. 2022). Various street-level officials explained that embassies and ministries often see enforced return as something that is “impossible”, predominantly as a result of the previously described “capacity constraints”. In their discussions, they would often ask about what happens when their citizens return and what the returning government in the Global North could offer to support that. One such officer explained that in such situations they

emphasize that a return is not a loss. We have the EURP, so we do not simply return someone but also offer reintegration assistance, help with getting a job or education, to not send people back without any prospects but with an education. And even if they do not want to take part in a reintegration trajectory, emphasize that they can still do that after return - a limited version, of course, but up to one year after return. We do not let go of them, we continue to provide for reintegration. [...] Embassies think that this is really good, that we do not simply let go of people but give them a future perspective. One that helps to return to one's family with respect.

However, interviews with officials and CSOs in the Global South revealed a different view about what return and reintegration assistance entails in practice. Interviews in Nigeria described return as a process where returnees are “just dumped at the airport,” without adequate prior coordination. A Nigerian official confirmed that “we just hand them over [to a reintegration partner] and that's it”. Reintegration support, where it exists, was described as fragmented, short-term, and detached from local realities. Challenges that returnees in the country commonly face, including debt, stigma, a lack of legal identity and trauma, are routinely overlooked and not addressed by reintegration assistance provided (see also IOM & Samuel Hall 2023). A similar picture emerged in Iraq, where funds and capacities were deemed insufficient by our interview participants to cover the needs of returnees. This was particularly true for psychosocial support, starting with insufficient care given in the EU member



states and had spillover effects for their reintegration back in Iraq. The country's economic instability and the consequent effects on employment and business creation, was similarly detailed as a tremendous challenge to returnees' socio-economic "reintegration". Interviewees detailed that given this situation, they expect returning countries in Europe to develop tailor-made skill development programmes for returnees prior to enforced return. Dynamics in Türkiye were different compared to Nigeria and Iraq. While aforementioned frustration with reintegration assistance was not raised in our interviews, we noted a certain "invisibilisation" of returnee and assistance provided for them, which materialized in limited information shared and difficulties contacting the NGO who was operationally in charge. One of our interviewees linked this to the image that Türkiye wants to portray: publicizing the alleged need for such assistance would "not fit the national image that Türkiye seeks to uphold", that centres around the desire not to have Turkish citizens being seen as "unwanted" and "in need of assistance".

Especially in Nigeria, CSOs who are responsible for the operational implementation of "reintegration support" voiced not only concerns about the assistance as such, but also about their role in deciding the terms for the assistance in the first place. As also detailed elsewhere (Majidi et al. 2025), CSOs felt excluded from both European arrangements and Nigerian policy processes. One CSO representative explained that "we are not part of the agreements. We only get called when the people arrive". Several CSOs expressed frustration not just at EU donor-driven programming but also at the lack of national ownership and government coordination in Nigeria, which leaves them underfunded and overburdened. These dynamics do not merely reflect logistical shortcomings but reveal deeper structural exclusions in return cooperation. CSOs, let alone returnees themselves, are rarely included in the planning, design, or evaluation of reintegration programmes. This "invisibilisation" of return renders their experiences invisible, while bureaucratic procedures treat return as a technical fix rather than a social process (Majidi et al. 2025). Together, they complicate the idea that dignity can be guaranteed through reintegration assistance alone. Instead, they point to a broader failure of shared responsibility, where return is operationalized without genuine inclusion of returnees or the actors closest to them.

Pragmatism and the limits of acquiring cooperation

While the previous section shows that street-level officials in the Global North attempt to acquire cooperation at the level of practice, they readily acknowledged the limited room for maneuver that both they themselves, but also the Netherlands and Switzerland as a whole have. This again ties back to the two factors that we introduced at the start of this empirical section: *dependency on the readmitting country* and the *wider geopolitical constellation* that enforced return operates in. If presenting a strong case to the embassy does not help, or the "tools" available to take away obstacles for return cooperation, then there is very little that street-level officials can do. When discussing the post-return assistance, one officer explained:

look, our options are also limited at some point: you can't sponsor someone for the rest of their life, so we explain what tools we have and how we can help. But often, during the conversation, you notice that if people don't really want to cooperate, they come up with all kinds of arguments as to why not, and why what you are offering is not enough, [...] and that makes it difficult, of course.

Indeed, the "leverage" potential provided by reintegration assistance was commonly seen to be circumscribed and only partially effective in incentivizing collaboration on enforced return. EU officials admitted that reintegration assistance is a relatively rigid instrument as it follows pre-set rules regarding recipient eligibility and amounts, and thereby leave little to no room for case-by-case basis



negotiations. Some development stakeholders in the EU share the impression that demands for increased reintegration assistance by actors in countries of origin lack specificity and clarity to lead to policy change.

At this point, there are roughly two ways forward: let time pass until new individual-case evidence or wider changes in diplomatic relations emerge, and then reinstate forced return procedures, or put (political) pressure on the situation. If the latter were not possible, a street-level official in the Global North explained, they would still try to maintain a productive relationship *operationally* with embassy staff. This strategy has proven itself in the past, so they explain, as they “had invested in the relationship all the time when there was no possibility of organizing forced return. And that proved very useful, because we were able to move forward immediately as soon as things changed”. In some cases, however, political pressure would be put on the embassy and ministry in question. Yet, there were clear tradeoffs in this strategy, as street-level officials would need to deliberate with their colleagues from Foreign Affairs “whether it is worth escalating this case and thereby potentially putting pressure on our bilateral relationship”. A combination of factors determined whether further political pressure was in fact put on a standstill situation. These included the significance of the “caseload” (i.e., number of return orders issued for a particular nationality) and the “makeup” of the caseload. The latter was often tied to illegalized migrants who cause “nuisance” or who have a criminal record”: “people you don’t want on the streets because of their criminal record. In these cases, we give it everything we have, as long as this person leaves our country.”

Conclusion

This report set out to investigate what cooperation on enforced return looks like in practice. We started from the discussion on alleged non-cooperation of Global South countries, which has been at the heart of the EU’s problematization of “low return rates” for at least two decades (Cleton & Leerkes 2025). Our approach to investigating cooperation in practice rests on two pillars. First, the report shifted view from high-level politics of negotiating readmission agreements towards the implementation stage. We sought to investigate how street-level officials understand (non-)collaboration in practice, and what strategies they deploy to bring about cooperation in practice. Second, we took a relational and interactionist approach and centered the work of both street-level officials in a selection of Global North and South countries. This allowed us to detail how deportation practices are always co-constitutive in nature (Drotbohm & Hasselberg 2018). We questioned what collaboration on return means to different officials along the “transnational frontline”, how cooperation was contested and brought about, and what the necessary preconditions are to achieve it.

Relying on written answers and 47 interviews with 64 street level officials across Nigeria, Iraq, Türkiye, the Netherlands and Switzerland, we found that establishing whether and to what extent “cooperation on return” materializes in practice is far from straightforward. Overall, cooperation at the frontline is a pragmatic, relational, and often improvisational process, shaped by a mix of formal agreements, personal networks, and constant negotiation of beliefs and interests. Interviewees in the Global North argued that three elements needed to be in place for collaboration to happen: alignment between their interests in meeting the goals of return policy, the interests of illegalized migrants and the interests of the foreign authorities. Formal readmission agreements often provide for a starting point to engender discussion about this alignment, but are not per se helpful in operational practice. Technical infrastructure and personal relationships were instead seen as necessary prerequisites for



collaboration to take place. Especially the latter are consciously mobilized in case of perceived “non-cooperation”, for reasons of economic, reputational, security or capacity concerns, case-specific obstacles or personnel constraints. “Non-cooperation” often manifests as procedural delays, opacity and decisions that can easily be misinterpreted by Global North officials, rather than outright rejection. As the case of identification procedures exemplified, this ensures that Global North officials are cautious to designate a situation as “non-cooperation” and investigate the situation by mobilizing their personal relationships with embassies and ministries in countries of origin. In attempts to solve the situation, they leverage both a more “instrumental” approach (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig 2013, Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier 2004, Wunderlich, 2012) and a normative one (Finnemore & Sikkink 1998, March & Olsen 1989, Risse, 2000). Whereas the former includes offering training, reintegration assistance, and - if possible through Mobility Partnerships (Reslow 2012) - visa facilitation or development aid, the latter emphasized the need for showing respect, transparency, and dignity in return. Global North officers emphasized the need for offering reintegration assistance and a “genuine concern” for the situation of returnees, yet Global South officials and CSOs were wary about the intentions and effects of these efforts. Forced removal, and especially operations that involve violence, were deemed illegitimate, and reintegration assistance inadequate (or rendered invisible, in the Turkish case).

Ultimately, the report highlights that everyday cooperation on return on the “transnational frontline” is characterized by interdependency (see also Kefale et al. 2025) and bounded by wider geopolitical considerations that reach far beyond the migration policy domain alone. Echoing that it indeed “takes two to tango” (İçduygu & Aksel 2014), we hold that the return rate as a performance indicator reduces the complexity that we observed at the frontline (Stutz & Trauner 2022) and, more importantly, completely disregards not only the dependence on, but also the stakes of Global South countries in enforced return. As shown throughout this report, Global South officials voice serious concerns for their citizens’ dignity and rights, during removal but also after return. Global North officials we spoke to spend a fair share of their time understanding these concerns, acknowledging them and consequently attempting to address these. Yet, they are frequently hindered by the limits of their operational mandate and political priorities, which do not always lie with migration management objectives or foreground “the need to comply with rules and regulations, rather than being entitled to reintegration assistance”.⁸ The return rate both does not reflect the limits posed by such politics within the EU and does not reflect the collaborative venture that enforced return cooperation at the end of the day is. Indeed, return outcomes are influenced by a variety of factors, can only be brought about collaboratively, and professional judgement and discretion by frontline officials is key (Power 1997). Decisions to hang onto the return rate as the prime performance indicator for return policy and collaboration with Global South countries thus underscores the political nature of such measurements, as also persuasively argued by Stone (1988). She details that “there are many possible measures of any phenomenon, and the choice among them depends on the purpose for measuring” (ibid., 183). Choosing to focus performance measurement solely on the number of returns that have taken place is thus a deliberate choice *not* to focus on a plethora of other outcomes, including but not limited to, the number of conversations with illegalized migrants about their possible return, the number of requests for substitute travel documents handled, presentations at embassies that have taken place, pre-return safeguards discussed, and reintegration assistance provided.

In conclusion, we call for a rethinking of the way in which “effectiveness” is measured in return policy in general, and for interstate cooperation on return in particular. This should acknowledge that the

⁸ Personal communication EU Return Coordinator, 4 June 2025.



number of return orders enforced is not the sole or primary way to do so, and that this performance indicator at minimum should be supplemented with qualitative information gathered from frontline implementation. Rethinking how “effectiveness” is measured in a more fundamental manner needs to be informed by the aforementioned interdependency in return, as well as the geopolitical constraints that impact return cooperation in both the Global South *and* North. When it comes to these geopolitical constraints, it includes acknowledgement of wider domestic, bilateral and multilateral interests that are at play in determining cooperation on return. It equally means assessing the desirability of “high return rates” to countries that are conflict ridden, or where reintegration assistance provided cannot reasonably help to establish dignity in return. Indeed, when it comes to interdependency, new performance indicators should account for the different ways in which “success” is defined by partners in the Global North and South. Thinking with Stone (1988) again, this implies pointing our political attention to “other values” than the Eurocentric ones that currently dominate return policy discussions. If the EU and Switzerland are serious about working in a “partnership” with Global South countries on return, the first step would be to collaboratively decide upon *what* a successful partnership in fact looks like.

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